

The Society and People: A Sociological Enquiry from Classical to Modern Perspectives



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Abstract



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This paper explores the evolving relationship between society and people across historical epochs, theoretical frameworks, institutional structures, and contemporary challenges. Drawing on classical sociology (Durkheim, Weber, Marx), modern perspectives (intersectionality, post-structuralism, digital sociology), and comparative case studies (India, Europe, United States), it argues that society and people are mutually constitutive forces. Society provides the structures—family, education, religion, economy, and state—that organize collective life, while people embody agency, creativity, and resistance, continually reshaping those structures. Historical analysis traces the shift from kinship-based communities to industrial and globalized societies, while contemporary challenges such as globalization, digital technologies, climate change, and identity politics highlight the complexity of this interplay. Case studies illustrate how diverse contexts negotiate tradition, diversity, and inequality, underscoring the importance of intersectional perspectives and thick description. The conclusion synthesizes these findings, projecting future trajectories in which society and people must navigate global crises, technological transformations, and struggles for justice. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that to study society and people is to study the very fabric of human existence, in all its complexity and dynamism.

Introduction

The relationship between society and people has long been central to sociological thought. Society is often defined as the organized patterns of relationships, institutions, and collective norms that provide the framework within which individuals live, act, and imagine their futures. People, conversely, embody agency, creativity, and resistance, continually reshaping social structures. This dialectic—between structure and agency—has animated debates from classical sociology to contemporary digital studies.

Durkheim (1893/1997) emphasized society as a moral order, binding individuals through collective conscience. Weber (1922/1978) highlighted the rationalization of social life, where people navigate bureaucratic systems. Marx (1867/1976) foregrounded class struggle, situating people within material relations of production. These foundational perspectives continue to inform modern debates on globalization, identity, and inequality.

The study of society and people is not merely theoretical; it is deeply historical. From kinship-based communities in antiquity to the complex bureaucracies of modern nation-states, the interplay between collective structures and individual lives has shaped human experience. The

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Enlightenment introduced notions of individual rights, while industrialization transformed social organization through urbanization and wage labour. Today, digital technologies and global networks redefine the boundaries of society and the possibilities of individual agency.

This paper seeks to explore the evolving relationship between society and people across historical epochs, theoretical frameworks, and contemporary challenges. By integrating classical theory with intersectional and digital perspectives, it aims to provide a comprehensive account of how collective structures and individual lives co-constitute one another. The analysis will proceed through a review of theoretical frameworks, historical trajectories, institutional structures, contemporary challenges, and comparative case studies. Ultimately, the paper argues that society and people are not separate entities but mutually constitutive forces, shaping and reshaping one another in dynamic processes of continuity and change.

Theoretical Frameworks

Classical Sociology

Émile Durkheim

Durkheim's work emphasized society as a moral order, binding individuals through shared norms and values. His concept of mechanical solidarity (based on similarity) and organic solidarity (based on interdependence) illustrates how societies evolve with complexity (Durkheim, 1893/1997). Durkheim also highlighted the role of collective rituals in reinforcing social cohesion, arguing that even seemingly individual acts, such as suicide, are shaped by social forces (Durkheim, 1897/1951).

Contribution: Society is not reducible to individuals; it exists as a *sui generis* reality that shapes people's actions.

Max Weber

Weber's analysis of rationalization and bureaucracy revealed how modern societies increasingly rely on formal rules and impersonal systems. His typology of authority—traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal—illustrates how people legitimize collective structures (Weber, 1922/1978). Weber's notion of *Verstehen* (interpretive understanding) emphasized the importance of grasping subjective meaning, bridging the gap between individual agency and structural analysis.

Contribution: People's actions are meaningful, but those meanings are embedded within rationalized social structures.

Karl Marx

Marx's historical materialism situated people within relations of production, emphasizing how economic structures shape consciousness and conflict. His concept of alienation described how workers become estranged from their labor, products, and fellow humans under capitalism (Marx, 1867/1976). Class struggle, for Marx, was the engine of historical change, highlighting how people collectively challenge exploitative structures.

Contribution: Society is structured by material relations, but people's collective action can

transform those structures.

Georg Simmel

Often overlooked, Simmel analysed the micro-interactions that constitute society. His concept of sociation emphasized how people create society through everyday interactions, while society provides the framework for those interactions (Simmel, 1908/1950). His analysis of urban life highlighted how anonymity and overstimulation shape individual experience in modern cities.

Contribution: Society and people are mutually constitutive at the level of interaction.

Modern and Contemporary Perspectives

Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw)

Intersectionality highlights how overlapping systems of oppression—race, gender, class—shape individual experiences within society (Crenshaw, 1989). It challenges universalist frameworks by emphasizing the complexity of identity.

Contribution: People's experiences are embedded in multiple, intersecting structures of power.

Michel Foucault

Foucault emphasized the role of discourse and power in shaping subjectivity. His concept of biopower illustrates how societies regulate populations through subtle mechanisms of surveillance and normalization (Foucault, 1977).

Contribution: Society is not only institutional but discursive, producing people's identities through regimes of truth.

Anthony Giddens

Giddens' structuration theory bridges the divide between agency and structure. He argued that social structures both constrain and enable human action, while people reproduce those structures through their practices (Giddens, 1984).

Contribution: Society and people exist in a recursive relationship, continually shaping one another.

Pierre Bourdieu

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital illustrate how people's dispositions are shaped by social structures, yet also enable agency. His analysis of cultural capital highlights how education reproduces inequality (Bourdieu, 1977).

Contribution: People embody society in their dispositions, reproducing and transforming structures through practice.

Judith Butler

Butler's theory of performativity emphasizes how identities (e.g., gender) are not fixed but enacted through repeated practices (Butler, 1990). Society provides the norms, but people reproduce or resist them through performance.

Contribution: People's identities are socially constructed yet open to transformation.

Ulrich Beck

Beck's concept of the risk society highlights how modernity produces global risks (e.g., climate

change, nuclear disaster) that transcend national boundaries (Beck, 1992).

Contribution: Society is increasingly defined by collective risks, demanding new forms of responsibility.

Shoshana Zuboff

Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism illustrates how digital platforms commodify people's data, reshaping society through algorithmic governance (Zuboff, 2019).

Contribution: Digital society redefines the relationship between people and collective structures, raising questions of autonomy and control.

Comparative Frameworks

Collectivism vs. Individualism (Geert Hofstede)

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory contrasts societies that prioritize collective harmony with those that emphasize individual autonomy (Hofstede, 2001).

Contribution: Cultural values shape the balance between society and people.

Agency vs. Structure Debate

The long-standing debate in sociology—whether people's actions are determined by structures or whether they exercise free agency—remains central. Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977) attempt to reconcile this tension.

Contribution: Society and people must be understood as interdependent, not oppositional.

Postcolonial Perspectives

Scholars such as Edward Said (1978) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) highlight how colonial structures shape identities and knowledge. People in postcolonial societies negotiate hybrid identities, challenging dominant narratives.

Contribution: Power relations historically shape society, while people resist and reinterpret those legacies.

Historical Trajectories

Ancient Societies and Kinship Structures

In antiquity, society was primarily organized around kinship, clan, and tribe. People's identities were inseparable from collective belonging. Anthropological studies of early communities highlight how social norms were enforced through ritual, myth, and oral tradition (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). Kinship determined rights, obligations, and social roles, embedding individuals within networks of reciprocity. The collective was not an abstract entity but a lived reality, shaping every aspect of existence.

City-states such as Athens and Sparta introduced new forms of collective organization. In Athens, the polis embodied the idea of citizenship, where people participated in governance and deliberation (Ober, 1989). Sparta, conversely, emphasized militaristic collectivism, subordinating individual desires to the needs of the state. These contrasting models illustrate how societies negotiated the balance between collective order and individual agency.

Medieval Institutions and Religious Authority

Hierarchical structures and religious authority characterized the medieval period. Feudalism

organized society through obligations between lords and vassals, embedding people within rigid social strata (Bloch, 1961). The Church functioned as both spiritual and political authority, shaping collective norms and individual conduct. People's identities were defined by their place in the hierarchy and their relationship to divine order.

Yet even within these constraints, agency persisted. Peasant revolts, heretical movements, and guild organizations reflected people's capacity to challenge or reshape collective structures. The medieval period thus exemplifies the tension between institutional authority and popular resistance.

Enlightenment and the Rise of Individual Rights

The Enlightenment marked a profound shift in the relationship between society and people. Philosophers such as Rousseau (1762/1997) and Locke (1689/1988) emphasized individual rights, autonomy, and the social contract. Society was reconceptualized as a collective agreement among free individuals, rather than a divinely ordained hierarchy. This intellectual transformation laid the foundation for modern democracy and human rights.

The rise of print culture and public spheres (Habermas, 1962/1989) enabled people to participate in collective deliberation, challenging traditional authority. The Enlightenment thus redefined society as a space of rational discourse, where individuals could shape collective norms through reason and debate.

Industrialization and Urbanization

The Industrial Revolution transformed social organization through urbanization, wage labor, and technological innovation. People migrated from rural communities to cities, reshaping the fabric of society. Marx (1867/1976) analysed how industrial capitalism alienated workers from their labor, while Engels (1845/1973) documented the harsh conditions of urban life.

Industrialization also produced new forms of collective identity. Labor unions, socialist movements, and suffrage campaigns reflected people's efforts to reshape society in response to exploitation and inequality. At the same time, industrial societies introduced bureaucratic institutions and nation-states, consolidating collective structures on unprecedented scales.

Modernity and Globalization

The twentieth century witnessed the rise of mass society, characterized by bureaucratic institutions, nation-states, and global networks. People's identities were increasingly mediated by media, education, and consumer culture (Baudrillard, 1981). Wars, revolutions, and decolonization reshaped societies, highlighting the dynamic interplay between collective structures and individual agency.

Globalization intensified these dynamics, connecting societies through trade, migration, and communication. People navigated transnational identities, balancing local belonging with global citizenship. The relationship between society and people became increasingly complex, mediated by institutions, technologies, and cultural flows.

Institutions and Social Organization

Family

The family has long been regarded as the foundational institution of society. It is the primary site of socialization, where people learn norms, values, and roles. Parsons (1955) emphasized the family's role in stabilizing adult personalities and transmitting cultural values. Feminist critiques, however, highlight how family structures can reproduce gender inequality (hooks, 1984). Intersectional perspectives further reveal how race, class, and sexuality shape family experiences, challenging universalist assumptions.

In contemporary societies, family forms have diversified. Single-parent households, same-sex partnerships, and transnational families reflect changing social norms and global mobility. These transformations illustrate how people actively reshape the institution of family, negotiating between tradition and innovation.

Education

Education functions as both a mechanism of social reproduction and a site of individual empowerment. Durkheim (1922/1956) viewed education as essential for transmitting collective values and preparing individuals for social roles. Bourdieu (1977) argued that education reproduces social inequality through cultural capital, privileging dominant groups. Yet education also provides opportunities for mobility, enabling people to challenge structural constraints.

In the digital age, education is increasingly mediated by technology. Online platforms, MOOCs, and algorithmic learning systems redefine how knowledge is transmitted. People navigate new forms of educational access and inequality, raising questions about the democratization of learning.

Religion

Religion has historically functioned as a central institution, providing moral frameworks and collective identity. Durkheim (1912/1995) emphasized religion's role in reinforcing social solidarity through rituals and symbols. Weber (1905/2002) analyzed how religious ethics, such as the Protestant ethic, shaped economic behaviour and social organization.

Contemporary societies witness both secularization and religious revival. People negotiate diverse religious identities, often within pluralistic contexts. Religion continues to shape collective norms, while individuals reinterpret traditions to align with personal beliefs. The interplay between institutional authority and individual spirituality exemplifies the dynamic relationship between society and people.

Economy

The economy structures material relations, shaping how people produce, distribute, and consume resources. Marx (1867/1976) highlighted how capitalist economies exploit labour, situating people within class relations. Polanyi (1944/2001) emphasized the embeddedness of economic activity within social institutions, challenging the notion of markets as autonomous.

Globalization has transformed economic institutions, connecting societies through trade, finance, and digital platforms. People navigate precarious labour markets, gig economies, and transnational flows of capital. Economic inequality underscores the tension between collective prosperity and individual struggle, raising questions of justice and redistribution.

State and Governance

The state functions as the central institution of political authority, regulating society through law, policy, and coercion. Weber (1922/1978) defined the state as the entity claiming monopoly over legitimate violence. Foucault (1977) emphasized how governance extends beyond coercion to disciplinary practices, shaping people's conduct through subtle mechanisms of control.

Democratic institutions enable people to participate in governance, shaping collective norms through representation and deliberation. Yet authoritarian regimes highlight how states can suppress agency, subordinating people to institutional power. Contemporary debates on surveillance, digital governance, and algorithmic regulation illustrate how states adapt to technological transformations, redefining the relationship between society and people.

Contemporary Challenges

Globalization and Migration

Globalization has intensified the interconnectedness of societies, reshaping how people experience identity, belonging, and mobility. Economic integration, transnational corporations, and global supply chains have created a world where local communities are deeply affected by distant events (Held & McGrew, 2007). Migration exemplifies this dynamic: people move across borders for work, education, or refuge, creating multicultural societies and hybrid identities.

While globalization fosters opportunities, it also produces inequalities. Wealth is concentrated in certain regions, while others face exploitation or marginalization. People navigate these disparities by forming diasporic communities, transnational networks, and global solidarities. The challenge lies in balancing collective integration with respect for local cultures and individual rights.

Digital Society and Algorithmic Governance

The rise of digital technologies has transformed the relationship between society and people. Social media platforms, search engines, and algorithmic systems mediate communication, identity, and governance. Scholars such as Zuboff (2019) describe this as “surveillance capitalism,” where people's data becomes the raw material for economic and political control.

Digital society raises questions of agency: do people shape technology, or does technology shape people? Algorithms influence what individuals see, think, and consume, subtly structuring collective norms. At the same time, digital platforms empower people to mobilize, resist, and create new forms of community. Movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter illustrate how digital networks amplify voices, challenging institutional power.

Climate Change and Collective Responsibility

Climate change represents a global challenge that underscores the interdependence of society and people. Rising temperatures, extreme weather, and ecological degradation affect communities worldwide, demanding collective responses. Beck (1992) described this as a “risk society,” where modernity produces global risks that transcend national boundaries.

People's actions—consumption, energy use, activism—directly shape collective outcomes. Yet responsibility is unevenly distributed: industrialized societies contribute disproportionately to

emissions, while vulnerable populations bear the brunt of consequences. The challenge lies in fostering collective responsibility while recognizing individual agency. Climate activism, indigenous movements, and youth mobilization highlight how people can reshape societal priorities toward sustainability.

Identity Politics and Representation

Contemporary societies grapple with questions of identity, representation, and recognition. Movements for racial justice, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and indigenous sovereignty emphasize the importance of acknowledging diverse experiences within collective structures. Fraser (1997) distinguishes between redistribution (economic justice) and recognition (cultural justice), highlighting the dual dimensions of inequality.

Identity politics reflects people's demand for visibility and agency within society. Yet it also raises tensions: how can collective solidarity be maintained amid diverse identities? Intersectional frameworks (Crenshaw, 1989) provide tools for analyzing overlapping oppressions, ensuring that people are not reduced to singular categories. The challenge is to build inclusive societies that respect difference while fostering common bonds.

The Pandemic as a Contemporary Lens

The COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies how global crises reshape the relationship between society and people. Public health measures—lockdowns, vaccinations, digital tracking—highlighted the tension between collective safety and individual freedom. People navigated new forms of sociality, relying on digital platforms for work, education, and community. The pandemic underscored the fragility of social institutions and the resilience of human agency, offering lessons for future challenges.

Case Studies

India: Tradition and Transformation

India offers a vivid example of how society and people negotiate between tradition and modernity. Historically, caste has structured social organization, embedding individuals within hierarchical networks of kinship and occupation (Bayly, 1999). While caste persists, people continually challenge and reinterpret its boundaries, particularly through social movements and affirmative action policies.

Religion also plays a central role. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and other traditions shape collective norms, while individuals navigate plural identities. The rise of democratic institutions after independence in 1947 enabled people to participate in governance, reshaping society through electoral politics. Yet challenges remain: economic inequality, gender disparities, and communal tensions highlight the ongoing negotiation between collective structures and individual agency.

Digital technologies further transform Indian society. Social media platforms amplify voices across caste and class divides, enabling people to mobilize for rights and recognition. At the same time, digital inequality underscores the persistence of structural barriers, reminding us that access to technology is unevenly distributed.

Europe: Welfare States and Diversity

European societies exemplify the interplay between collective institutions and individual rights. The welfare state, developed in the twentieth century, reflects collective responsibility for health, education, and social security (Esping-Andersen, 1990). People benefit from these institutions, which mitigate inequality and foster social solidarity.

Yet Europe also grapples with diversity and migration. The influx of refugees and migrants challenges traditional notions of national identity, prompting debates on multiculturalism and integration. People negotiate hybrid identities, balancing local belonging with transnational citizenship. Intersectional perspectives highlight how race, religion, and gender shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

The European Union represents a unique collective structure, transcending nation-states to create supranational governance. People participate in this project through democratic institutions, yet tensions persist between national sovereignty and collective integration. The Brexit referendum exemplifies how individuals and societies negotiate these competing priorities.

United States: Individualism and Inequality

The United States is often characterized by its emphasis on individualism. Tocqueville (1835/2000) observed how American democracy fostered a culture of self-reliance and civic participation. People are encouraged to pursue personal freedom and opportunity, shaping society through entrepreneurialism and activism.

Yet inequality remains a defining feature. Race, class, and gender intersect to produce disparities in wealth, education, and health (Wilson, 1987). Social movements—from civil rights to Black Lives Matter—reflect people's efforts to challenge structural injustice and reshape collective norms. The tension between individual freedom and collective responsibility is particularly evident in debates over healthcare, gun control, and climate policy.

Digital technologies amplify these dynamics. Social media platforms enable people to mobilize rapidly, yet also foster polarization and misinformation. The United States exemplifies how digital society can both empower and destabilize collective structures.

Intersectional Perspectives

Across these case studies, intersectionality provides a lens for analyzing how overlapping systems of oppression shape experiences. In India, caste intersects with gender and class; in Europe, race and religion intersect with migration; in the United States, race and class intersect with individualism. People's identities are complex, embedded within multiple structures that shape opportunities and constraints.

Thick Description of Cultural Practices

Ethnographic accounts provide thick description of how people live within society. In India, rituals such as weddings and festivals illustrate how collective traditions shape individual lives. In Europe, practices of welfare provision—such as healthcare systems—illustrate collective responsibility. In the United States, civic activism and protest movements exemplify how individuals mobilize to reshape society. These cultural practices highlight the dynamic interplay

between collective structures and human agency.

Conclusion

The relationship between society and people is not static but dynamic, continually reshaped across historical epochs, theoretical frameworks, institutional structures, and contemporary challenges. From kinship-based communities in antiquity to the complexities of digital globalization, the interplay between collective structures and individual agency has defined human experience. Society provides the framework of norms, institutions, and collective identities, while people embody creativity, resistance, and transformation. Together, they co-constitute one another in processes of continuity and change.

Classical sociology emphasized the tension between structure and agency. Durkheim highlighted society's binding moral order, Weber analyzed rationalization and bureaucracy, and Marx foregrounded class struggle. Modern perspectives expanded these insights, introducing intersectionality, post-structuralism, and digital sociology. These frameworks underscore that society and people cannot be understood in isolation; they are mutually constitutive forces.

Historical trajectories reveal how this relationship evolves. Ancient kinship structures embedded individuals within collective networks, medieval hierarchies subordinated people to religious authority, and the Enlightenment redefined society as a contract among free individuals. Industrialization transformed social organization through urbanization and wage labor, while globalization connected societies across borders. Each epoch illustrates how collective structures shape individual lives, and how people, in turn, reshape society.

Institutions mediate this relationship. Family, education, religion, economy, and the state provide structures that organize collective life while shaping individual identities. Yet people continually reinterpret and challenge these institutions, negotiating between tradition and innovation. Contemporary challenges—globalization, digital society, climate change, and identity politics—further complicate this interplay, demanding new forms of collective responsibility and individual agency.

Case studies from India, Europe, and the United States illustrate the diversity of this relationship. In India, caste and religion structure society, yet people mobilize to challenge inequality. In Europe, welfare states embody collective responsibility, while migration reshapes identities. In the United States, individualism coexists with structural inequality, highlighting the tension between freedom and justice. Intersectional perspectives reveal how overlapping systems of oppression shape experiences, while thick description of cultural practices illustrates the lived reality of society and people.

Looking forward, the future trajectories of society and people will be shaped by global crises, technological transformations, and struggles for justice. Climate change demands collective responsibility, digital technologies redefine agency, and identity politics challenge societies to build inclusive communities. The pandemic has underscored the fragility of institutions and the resilience of human agency, offering lessons for navigating uncertainty.

Ultimately, society and people are not separate entities but interdependent forces. Society

provides the structures within which people live, while people continually reshape those structures through action, resistance, and creativity. This dialectic is the essence of sociological inquiry, reminding us that human life is both collective and individual, structured and free, constrained and transformative. To study society and people is to study the very fabric of human existence, in all its complexity, diversity, and dynamism.

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Data availability

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Statement

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