Introduction to the Background and Historical Perspective of Sociology

Sociology is the scientific study of human social life, groups and societies.

What makes it different from just knowing about people? In sociology you look beyond the acts of individual people and to study the social context in order to understand why the individual people behave as they do.

In fact, beneath all social science lies the question: Why do we do what we do?

Man’s search for knowledge of his position in the universe has focused on various methods and locations throughout history:
Classical Foundations:

1) Mythology and superstition - Classical era; pantheon of gods, myths in explanation of natural phenomenon, etc.

2) Highly organized religion - The Christian era / Reformation / Counter Reformation; God organized everything, knows everything, does everything, directs everything. Through God all necessary knowledge can be attained and all understanding achieved.

~ coupled with and followed by ~

3) Divinely inspired rule and guidance - The king ruling by divine mandate; English “dieu et mon droit”

The Enlightenment / Counter-Enlightenment:

4) Reason and Philosophy - The Enlightenment / Counter-Enlightenment; an understanding of the mind of man and man’s relationship to other men as well as the universe provides the foundation for knowledge of position.
The Modern Age - Marked by societies’ ability to produce more than can be consumed. And by dependence on:

5) Science - through which science man’s position can finally be ascertained; with the help of science man can conquer and control his world, meet all his needs and attain all to which he aspires.

What did modern age actually accomplish? Enormous social changes but greatest achievements can be summarized in two categories:

a) Medical science: Improved life expectancy and reduced infant mortality;
   - population explosion and greater potential for global problems

b) Industrial Science: Greater than ever production capabilities. For first time man capable of producing more than is consumed

THROUGH THESE ERAS THE SEARCH FOR SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE POSITION OF MANKIND NOT TOTALLY SUCCESSFUL THROUGH:

- RELIGION: FAILURE

- ENLIGHTENMENT AND COUNTERENLIGHTENMENT:
FAILURE, BUT SERVED AS STEPPING STONE FOR SCIENCE

- MARGINAL SUCCESS THROUGH SCIENCE

BUT: Time now to devote intellectual abilities toward scientific examination of processes of human interaction

EMPHASIS ON CRITICAL THINKING !!!

-- NEVER ACCEPT ANY OBSERVATION AT FACE VALUE

-- QUESTION ALL SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

-- REQUIRE MULTIPLE SOURCES OF DATA

-- TEST DATA THROUGH REPEATED OBSERVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

The Post-Modern Age

6) Scientific processes prevail as outlined in a) and b) but the new impact of globalization requires broader perspectives and understandings;
With excess production industrialized world has potential to explore other avenues. Question is:

**How will they be explored / exploited?**

a) coffee culture  
b) clothing  
c) media - movies, music, etc.  
d) sports industry - Michael Jordan book

Broad discussion of each era with successes and failures of each outlined.

Throughout all these eras the search has been for certainty of position.

By mid-nineteenth century, as science progressed, there was hope for ultimate success of the search through organized scientific study of man’s position in society.

Founder -- French philosopher (late product of enlightenment) Auguste Comte: described the emergence of social systems from agrarian,
monarchical rule; viewed it as a science assisting in universal progress. As part of the enlightenment, individual self-determination became possible without the tutelage (guidance) of a king, lord, etc. Discuss the decline of agrarian systems (agriculture) and the rise of larger urban areas came, in part, with the industrial revolution. Sociology, the new science, would help people find their way and place in society.

Early sociologists include Emile Durkheim (French) and Herbert Spencer (English), both of whom contributed to theory and methods. Durkheim’s suicide study was first statistical analysis of human behavior.

Classical Theories:

1) Conflict - Marx

2) Functionalism - Durkheim, Spencer, Sumner
3) Symbolic Interactionism - Weber (German Historicism) to Mead and Cooley

**Recent Perspectives:**

1) Exchange - Homans (social behavior based on economics; tends toward Symbolic Interactionism)

2) Ethnomethodology - Garfinkel, also Denzin, Clough (descriptive work and writing)

3) Critical - Marcus, Habermas, Horkheim, Adorno (trying to figure out why Conflict Theory as espoused by Marx failed and what modern alternatives might be)

Qualitative Approaches (based on notion that natural sciences can't tell the whole story of man and his society, deeper study and understanding is needed) and
Quantitative Approaches (based on notion that all behavior can be reduced to scientific data subject to statistical analysis) and The Four (4) Sociological Methods:

1) Historical/Secondary - learning about society by studying the past; i.e. studying social classes based on the documentation of an event like the sinking of the Titanic; - TITANIC STORY

2) Survey Research - we've all been surveyed! Questions are asked and the answers are compiled into statistical summaries that give a picture of what is liked, not liked / needed, not needed / will sell, won't sell, etc. - DISCUSS CENSUS

3) Participant Observation - watch the people and see what they do; for example, in a bar, at a rodeo, at a football game; how do they interact with each other? - DISCUSS “SURVIVOR” AND “BIG BROTHER” EVEN THOUGH THEY SUCK SOCIOLOGICALLY

4) Experimental Design - Plan, in advance, a scenario to test something. Set up a situation that can be repeated for multiple subjects so that you can
determine how a group will respond to a particular thing. Tests are, to at least some degree, part of experimental design. The classroom is the lab where things are to be learned, the test determines if the classroom experiment has worked and you have learned anything. - DISCUSS

STANLEY MILGRAM YALE SHOCK EXPERIMENT / 25-30% PUSH BEYOND LIMIT

Good modern Sociology is a synthesis of ideas:

Berger: Things are not always what they seem to be and require deeper study and understanding; a passion for understanding is required to be a successful sociologist

Mills: Sociologists are craftsmen and cultural workmen; a sociological imagination is required to clear the fog from societal uneasiness and indifference

Goffman: We are what we are perceived to be, how we present ourselves; our control over our self presentation is essential. How we are perceived by others in our society may be more important than who we really are.
Cameron: How do we know what we know? Hard science dependent on testable data and objective measurement (operationists), or verstehen (intuitive understanding). Points: Sociology is a single discipline; there is no "royal" road to theory; there are no quick solutions; simple statements are often useful.

But, as stated in opening, underneath lies the question: Why do we do what we do?

Remember the following terms

1) Nature - we were biologically constructed to function in certain ways

2) Nurture - we were trained by society, or parents, or others to function in certain ways;

John Cuber did extensive work in the nature vs. nurture area and determined that we are all subject to what is know as the Unique Individual Experience - - not everyone has the same things happen to them as they proceed through
life and we are all molded by all the unique things that happen to us on an individual basis.