Introduction

Although all disciplines at one time or the other experience disagreement about the fundamental problems of their subject matter and, therefore, worry about their intellectual status, perhaps no other discipline has been subjected to such a barrage of critical self-examination and criticisms, sometimes amounting to ridicule or derision, as much as sociology has been almost since its inception. Indeed, so unrelenting, and so harsh, have been many of the criticisms of sociology’s status as a discipline that many would-be students would wonder if it is worthwhile pursuing a programme of instruction in this field of study.

In 2002, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, former President, Federal Republic of Nigeria, said that neither Sociology nor Mass Communication should be taught in the country’s universities. The implication of this is really immense coming from someone who headed the state which controlled the purse strings, who was the Visitor to the country’s federal universities and who had established
a university of his own. As Mkandawire (1977:16) has observed, in Africa “[N]o single social force has affected the social sciences (especially sociology) as profoundly as the state”.

While Obasanjo’s action and opinion could be considered as exemplifying the reaction of those in power who equate sociology with socialism, and the criticisms of their actions and policies as intolerable dissent or subversion, the same cannot be said of the more common and fashionable criticisms from within the ranks of sociologists as well as from non-sociologists, including the informed and the not-so-informed about the discipline.

Of the many criticisms often levelled against the discipline, the following appear to be more frequent and more salient:

1. pretension to being a science;
2. apparent fragmentation/disintegration due to lack of a consensus on theoretical objectives, methods and standard criteria of excellence;
3. lack of a core body of knowledge and/or subject matter distinct from other disciplines interested in the study of man in/and society;
4. Imperialistic/parasitic tendencies resulting from (2) and (3) above.
5. lack of relevance either because of its originating in a different socio-cultural context and/or its distance from empirical realities;
6. Because of the lack of relevance, inability to point to any invention or discovery, of say, a law or a principle, that can be used to explain/understand human/societal behaviour cross-spatially and cross-temporally.

These criticisms are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive and while they appear to be weighty or serious, the paper will argue that some are overstated while others, to put it mildly, overlook developments in the discipline of sociology as well as in other disciplines and mankind’s intellectual advance.

I. Sociology as a scientific discipline

There is no doubt that the “founding fathers” of sociology aspired to develop and bequeath to the world a discipline as scientific as any
other at the time of its inception. This aspiration could not have been otherwise given the following reasons:

First, many of the pioneers had themselves been trained in various fields in the sciences. For instance, Pareto studied mathematics and physics before taking an engineering course (Aron, 1970); although Spencer lacked a formal education, his early interest was in mechanics and he was at a time the “chief engineer of the London and Birmingham Railroad” (Barnes, 1948:82); Lester Frank Ward’s formal career was in paleobotany; Ferdinand Tonnies attended the Gymnasium, highly reputed for training in the sciences, before going to the University of Jena, among others, where he studied philosophy and philosophy; Comte also attended L’Ecole Polytechnic reported to be “the most prestigious scientific institution in the world” at the time, took advanced courses in mathematics which he also taught at the Lycee de Montpellier (Ashby and Orenstein, 2005:46); George Herbert Mead had his early education at the Oberlin College where the curriculum focussed on the classics, rhetoric, philosophy, mathematics and introductory botany and chemistry courses (ibid, 388). Finally, although Karl Marx and Max Weber studied philosophy and jurisprudence, respectively, they both attended the University of Berlin in which was based most of the famous science and philosophy professors in Europe at the time.

Beyond the foregoing there was the intellectual environment at the time and the popularity of the sciences, especially physics, chemistry and biology. Many discoveries had been made, many laws had been formulated, with increasing mathematical exactitude and sophistication, and, above all, many products had been manufactured as a result of the findings/discoveries of the scientists. These products contributed to the increasing level of material well-being of the people and the estimation of the sciences and the scientists in people’s minds, although the natural sciences themselves had achieved differing degrees of exactitude and success. Above all, the natural sciences had established new standards of scientific discourse and new methods of acquiring or producing testable and reliable knowledge, unlike the theological, metaphysical and philosophical bases of knowledge acquisition which had existed before.
Thus, as Aron (1970:2) has observed, Durkheim, Pareto and Weber (and one may add, all the founding fathers) all wanted to be scientists because “in their age, as much or more so than in ours, the sciences seemed… to provide the model for precise thinking, successful thinking, one might even say the only model for valid thinking”.

Therefore, the physical or natural science model became the model of choice for the would-be social scientists. The major dimensions of this model included the following;

1. “Widely shared assumptions about the law-governed nature of phenomena and the appropriateness of deterministic causal explanations” (Scott, 2012:9). This implies the conception of the aim of science as the discovery of laws that have universal application such as Newton’s law of gravitation expressed as \( F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2} \) (i.e. every particle of matter attracts every other particle of matter with a force proportional to the product of their masses divided by the square of the distance between them). Or Einstein’s universally applicable equation expressed as \( E = mc^2 \) (i.e. the energy of a mass is equal to the product of that mass and the square of its velocity);

2. the equation of the methods of science with science itself with the implication that to be scientific, a discipline must embrace positivism and meet the requirement of systematic observation of things as they appear to the senses (i.e. empiricism), testability of hypotheses/propositions (experimental method) and the supremacy of deductive-nomological or causal explanations.

3. The equation of science with technology i.e. the assumption that since knowledge of the physical sciences had brought about improvement in man’s condition of living, by way of analogy, social scientific knowledge should provide solutions to social problems.
These are some of the dimensions of the physical science model adopted by the new discipline and the bases, among others, for evaluating its status as a science. And, evaluated on these bases, sociology has been declared to be less of a science than the physical sciences it has been trying to emulate. The reasons for this include the following: no law or principle has been discovered “that is applicable temporally across social contexts” (Keith, 2005); spurious causality characterises most sociological explanations (Hutton and Cohen, 1975); many “fundamental propositions are not easily, or at all, testable (ibid); there is lack of disciplinary coherence, no theoretical unity and no simple analytical perspective (Collins, 1990), etc.

However, while some of these observations are overstated, others ignore past and present developments in both the physical and the social sciences. First, it is not altogether true that sociology has not formulated or discovered any universally applicable law. For instance, in Exchange Theory, there is the law-like proposition which states that there is a certain proportionality in the value of the behaviour A gives B and the value of B’s behaviour to A in return. This is applicable not only to interpersonal but also to inter-group and international relations.

- Marxism indicates that every known society of any size is stratified, that there is a universal process of competition in every society, that this competition lies at the basis of discrimination and victimization and that class is the most important determinant of mobility, fertility, residential distinctions, childbearing and child rearing practices, in short, particular life experiences;
- Studies of social mobility show that the expected actions of others have constraints on people’s behaviour;
- Sociological studies of organisations indicate that there is a universal tendency towards oligarchy in every voluntary association and that in all societies, there is a tendency towards goal displacement in all bureaucratic organisations;
- Some more general studies show that the degree of isolation of a group determines the extent of its radicalism in terms of political choice;
The degree of social regulation and integration of a group determines the amount of suicide the group experiences;

The size of a group determines the subjective probability that the individual’s contribution to the production of a collective good will have noticeable effect;

The prices or costs of alternatives (goods, services, relationships, etc) are determined by the approval or disapproval of social conditions (e.g. laws, norms, technology, income, etc); and finally,

In every society the classification, selection, distribution, transmission and evaluation of knowledge is a reflection of the distribution of power and the principles of social control.

While these are certainly not laws expressed mathematically as in the sciences, they are empirically derived generalizations which have contributed immensely to the understanding as well as prediction of human and societal behaviour.

However, the lack of mathematically formulated laws does not make sociology a non-science. As Fletcher (1970:45) has noted, “to be scientific is not the same as to be ‘exact’ i.e. to achieve mathematical calculability. Attempting (by sociology) to be as exact as mathematics is like participating in a spurious competitive charade” Also according to Hoover and Donovan (2004) science is neither technology nor a specific body of knowledge but “a mode of inquiry” which “has to do with the way questions are formulated and answered, it is a set of rules and forms for inquiry” (p.4), “the art of reality testing, of taking ideas and confronting them with observable evidence drawn from the phenomena to which they relate” (p11).

Hence, the scientific status of sociology has to be seen in relation to the subject matter of the discipline. Following Max Weber, many people have argued that the subject matter of sociology is unlike that of physics or any other physical/natural science. Sociology studies people not as physical bodies but as social beings i.e. emphasis is on their social relations and the recognition of their actions as purposive and subjectively meaningful (Lessnoff, 1974). The explanation of human actions and society, therefore, has to take account of their intentionality i.e. their motives, goals, beliefs, emotions (ibid; Rydegren, 2011;) as well as their past history which is very much a
part of their present situation (Benn and Peters, 1973). As Gell-Mann, a noble-winning physicist is reported to have said, “imagine how hard physics would be if particles could think” (in Angle, nd) or worse, if they could communicate.

This distinction between the physical and the social sciences, between the study of the in-organic and the organic, led Weber to advocate Verstehen-interpretive understanding – as a prelude to a scientific explanation of human and societal behaviour. It has also been the source of the debate between the realist and the nominalist ontological/epistemological orientations and the implication of the debate for what sociologists study, how they study it, what constitutes appropriate kind of data, the correct kind of analysis as well as interpretation of results. Thus, from its inception, the discipline has accommodated conflicting elements: the objectivists and the subjectivists; those who favour quantification and those who frown at it; those who focus on agency and those who focus on structure; the macro and the micro-sociologists; the methodological individualists and the methodological localists (Little, 2007) and, those who favour thick description against those who concentrate on theoretical objectives. This has been the source of the apparent fragmentation of the discipline.

With regard to “spurious causality”, the problem of establishing causality has been a problem plaguing all the sciences as the collection of papers in “Causality in the Sciences” clearly demonstrate (Ilari, Russo and Williamson (eds), (2011). This explains why since the turn of the 20th century

…. Research scientists have for a long time taken great pains to eradicate causal talk from their research papers and to talk instead of associations, correlations, risk factors and other ephemeral properties of data (Ilari, Russo and Williamson (eds), 2011:3)

Indeed, the meaning of the concept of “cause” has changed from a deterministic i.e. necessary and sufficient, to a non-deterministic notion in which the cause may be necessary but not sufficient. This is particularly so in the medical and the social sciences where mechanistic explanations are becoming increasingly
important because of the difficulty of establishing causal regularities
due to the lengthy causal chain linking the elements involved in
bringing about a social event or outcome. In these cases, “the
conception of causal regularities can fail to provide sufficient
explanatory traction, whereas the notion of mechanism permits a
more certain grasp of the principal relations involved” (Demeulenare
(ed) 2011:12).

II. Fragmentation of the Discipline

Whether described as fragmentation (Denzin, 1977), disintegration
(Strinchcombe, 1944) or decomposition (Horowitz, 1993), the
apparent lack of unity in sociological discourse has been of concern
to many. Randall Collins once observed that sociologists “have lost
all coherence as a discipline; we are breaking up into a conglomerate
of specialities, each going its own way and with none too high regard
for each other” (Collins, 1990:311). For Stinchcombe, sociology has
become a disintegrated discipline with a dim future because of the
wide variety of substantive subject matters and the strong boundary
around each speciality, the lack of consensus on methods and “on
what the science consists of” (p.288) and the lack of a standard
criteria of evaluation and excellence.

For Horowitz, sociology has become decomposed into “a
repository of discontent, a gathering of individuals who have special
agenda, … (without) a common democratic culture or a universal
scientific base…” (p12). Many new disciplines e.g. criminology,
penology, social policy planning, demography, etc, – “that were
formerly part of its canonical offerings” (p18) have sprung up, each
defining itself over against sociology. In sum, sociology has become
“a residue of what it once was. Its core is no longer theories of
society patiently built up from empirical investigation; instead, it
consists of crude caricatures of society” (-17). Although the analysis
and conclusions vary, the issue from the three writers’ point of view
is the emergence, and possible separation, of sub disciplines from
within sociology.

However, while it is true that several sub disciplines have
sprung out of sociology and that there is, consequently, a lack of
consensus on theories and methods, the issue, it seems to me, is
overstated. First, as Merton (1968) has shown, there is a “dynamic
interdependence between science, as an ongoing social activity
giving rise to cultural and civilizational products, and the environing social structure” (p.585). Changes in society bring about changes in the theoretical work that describe and analyse the changes as well as the central focus of the discipline and the research interests of its practitioners (Coleman, 1992). Military, economic, political and practical considerations turn the attention of scientists to new fields. For instance, the need to acquire knowledge of the biological activity of inland waters gave rise to limnology, a synthetic science originating from biology, botany and zoology. Also, concern with post-harvest production problems gave rise to food science and later to food technology. As Kuhn (1970) and Weber have respectively shown, the discovery of anomalies in science and the processes of intellectualization and rationalization which have been going on for centuries have had the consequence of the emergence of new theories, paradigms and specialities and subspecialties. As changes have occurred in society, sociology has ventured into areas that would, ordinarily, be considered outside of its purview; for example, sports, economic behaviour, relations of power and influence, relations between the individual and the state, etc. But as Massey (1999) has argued, disciplines are best defined not by exclusion but by interrelations to one another. There are few areas beyond a discipline’s purview and these areas are better defined in terms of angle of approach rather than of subject matter.

Secondly, it is not certain that there is, or that there has been one single method in the natural or physical sciences themselves. As Barry Barnes (1974) has stated, belief in the real existence of a universal ‘scientific method’ is the product of constant idealization; it cannot be sustained in the face of concrete accounts of the diversity of science (p.45).

Not only is there no general methodology for science, there is also no “full specification of how scientific knowledge claims are to be evaluated” and “scientists themselves do not possess any shared single set of conventions, whether for procedure or evaluation” (p.46). Indeed, only among members of a simple speciality can one find consensus on standards of judgement (p.60), a point also made by Kuhn (op.cit).

Given the foregoing, the accusation of imperialism, parasitism, methodological disunity, lack of consensus on standards
of evaluation, etc, can be laid to rest for these are not peculiar to sociology but common to all the sciences, physical and social. Indeed, this may well be the “optimum state of affairs” for as Stinchcombe concluded, “the advance of knowledge goes on with many different methods, many different theories and…. theoretical objectives” (op.cit, p.290-291) thereby making sociology the most interesting and the most exciting of all the social sciences (also Scott and Marshall, 2005).

III. Lack of Relevance

While the preceding charges levelled against sociology can be regarded as epistemic i.e. having to do with improving the discipline’s knowledge claims and its status as a science, the charge concerning relevance is largely more political or ideological.

Sociology’s relevance has been questioned by different groups – politically radical western sociologists, non-western sociologists and feminists, to name a few. For feminists, gender inequality lies at the centre of all human behaviour and social organisation, a fact to which sociological theory and research have allegedly paid scant attention; for radical western sociologists, the discipline’s vision since its inception has been to provide support for the rise and continuing operation of bourgeois society i.e. providing legitimacy and the practical knowledge needed by the institutions of capitalism to continue to exercise control and dominance over the people (Nicolaus in Colfax and Roach (eds), (1970) chapter 2); for non-western scholars, criticisms range from the western origin of the discipline (Diof, 1993), imposition of concepts and disjuncture between the externally formulated concepts and non-western reality (Alatas, 2011), inability to understand and adequately explain the workings of the society and to induce change (Nzimiro, 1977), to the subordinated or dependent nature of local i.e. non-western sociologies on western sociology (Keim, 2011) etc.

The following quotations serve to illustrate the tone and strength of some of the criticisms. For Smith (1971:28)

Sociology in the United States received much of its incentive and impetus from its efforts to salvage capitalism. Its classical heritage partially consists of supplying theoretical schemes to combat the external and internal threats which arose from time to
time as capitalism was undergoing dramatic changes; sociology has endeavoured to bring tranquillity and stability to the turbulence and chaos surrounding the development of capitalism (ibid).

For Diof (1993) “western sociology, which reflects the wisdom of the dominant ideology and culture of the advanced industrial nations, in fact reproduces the features in its study of third world societies” (p304), the “value-free conception of positivist sociology that dominates the discipline has paid very little attention to the sociological relevance of research themes” (ibid, 307).

For Nzimiro (1977); “Sociology, the science which encompasses other social sciences, the science borne out of the crisis of the post-revolutionary period in France, with its humanistic philosophy for change, was transformed by the C20th theorists… into a conformist, reformist discipline, finding its inspirations in the bedrooms of the members of the reactionary establishment (p.42). Our sociology is devoid of commitment to change. It is sterile in content and morbid in analysis” (p.55).

While radical criticism of sociology in the west, particularly the United States, emanated from the civil rights movement of the sixties, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the war in Vietnam and, externally, the upheaval in France in 1968, the other criticisms resulted from critical examination of the applicability of structural functionalism and, particularly, modernization theory to third world development in the immediate post-independence period.

However, despite the differences in origin, a common theme seems to run through the criticisms, that is, the inherent conservatism of sociology and, therefore, its aligning with the interests of the oppressor – the capitalists in the west and their representative individuals and institutions in the post-colonial society – in order to perpetuate the existing situation or, at worst, to ensure that only minimum incremental changes are effected in the status quos and that these changes, in the case of the post-colonial society, accord with western values and notion of development i.e. westernization.

The solution, according to the critics, includes the following:

1. Taking the part of, and empowering, the oppressed i.e. the worker, the minority, the peasant, women, natives and other subaltern groups (Alatas, 2001);
2. Critical study of received theories and concepts and generation of new ones using local philosophies, historical experiences and cultural practices as sources of inspiration and insights (ibid);

3. Indigenisation of the social sciences i.e. the search for concepts and theories “which can express the uniqueness of particular cultures” (Albrow, 1987:9).

4. Conducting socially relevant researches so as to generate “a social empirical basis of facts on one’s own social environment”. This will help to produce theoretically relevant approaches and thus reduce the dependent orientation towards western sociology (Keim, 2011).

In spite of the frequency and the passion with which these arguments are made, they contain a number of flaws. First, western sociology is not monolithic or homogenous. As alluded to earlier, sociology, since its inception, has accommodated different currents (and continue to do so), none of which encompasses or explicates phenomena in their totality and none of which is privileged or inherently superior. Although described by Nisbet (1967) as a conservative and hostile reaction to the great industrial and political transformations that were taking place at the time, Sociology, as a science per se, is neither conservative nor radical, but is inherently controversial because of the competing perspectives and differing interpretations that it accommodates. Like all other sciences, it has objective procedures for comparing theories and for providing empirical and logical arguments i.e. for establishing and evaluating the credibility of its assertions, regardless of whether it uses the deductive or the inductive approach. And these procedures have become more rigorous with new developments in computation, including software, data collection and analyses techniques and concept-indicator link (Layder, 2005).

Secondly, the argument about cultural relativity i.e. differences between western and non-western societies, is overdrawn and has increasingly become unsustainable. While it is true that societies differ in terms of their historical experiences which in turn explain differences in their traditions, and institutional forms, “there is a core set of human goals and beliefs that may generally be
assumed in attempting to reconstruct actions in particular circumstances” (Little, 1998:71). Besides, the historical experiences of the non-western world indicate the acquisition, in admittedly varying degrees, of the characteristics of the societies in which western sociological theories and concepts were developed. As Frank (1973:41), a strong critic of modernization theory has noted, “the entire social fabric of the underdeveloped countries has long since been penetrated and transformed by, and integrated into, the world embracing system of which it is an integral part”. Also, as Abaza and Stautyh (1988:360) have observed, “we live in a global world that has already shaped and transformed traditional structures and values”. This, of course, does not imply that western and non-western societies are now identical. What it does signify is the need to study each society sociologically i.e. against the background of our accumulated knowledge of human behaviour and social structures universally and through a historical and comparative approach which seeks to understand “how general and specific determinants interact in particular and concrete situations” (Palma, 1978:909). In other words, societies can be classified and compared in terms of selected features considered significant for the kind of knowledge sought. It is only in this way that generalizations can be arrived at, not on the basis of the assumption that each society exists ‘sui generis’.

In sum, various sociological theories and concepts can be used to study and explain behavioural and institutional patterns in different societies provided that established procedures are followed to ensure that data are collected, analysed and interpreted in such a way as to remove deliberate biases and distortions.

IV. The Absence of a Core

According to Stinchcombe (op.cit) “part of the problem in sociology elementary instruction is that since sociologists do not agree about what their science consists of, they do not agree about what would be important to educate people about in the introductory course even if the students were headed for advanced training” (p.288). Indeed, a review of introductory texts on sociology will reveal considerable differences in which topics are included and which are excluded. In addition to the standard fare on family, work, sociological theory and social stratification, some (e.g. Rose, 1965) would include such
topics as the individual personality and social setting, social control, social institutions and groups, social and cultural change; some (e.g. Bilton, et al, 1981) would include gender division in society, power and politics, belief systems, deviance; some (e.g. Olusanya and Olurode, (eds) 1988) would include bureaucracy, urban sociology, social change; while more recent ones (e.g. Macionis and Plumer 2005) would include globalisation, global inequalities and poverty, science, cyberspace and the risk society, etc.

Not only are there differences in what is included and excluded, there are also differences in the definition of sociology. The following serve to illustrate:

i) Sociology is often defined as the scientific study of human social life (Horton and Hunt, 1984:25).

ii) Sociology is, very simply, the systematic study of social behaviour and human groups (Schaefer, 2006:3).

iii) “Sociology is the science of interaction among people and of the effects of this interaction on human behaviour” (Rose, 1965:3).

iv) The scientific study of human social behaviour, sociology studies the processes and patterns of individual and group interaction, the form of organisation of social groups, the relationships among them, and group influences on individual behaviour (Theordson and Theordson, 1969:401).

v) Sociology is the systematic study of the functioning, organisation, development, and types of human societies… (distinguished from other social sciences by) an avowedly holistic perspective in social analysis, a commitment to analysis which studies the interrelation of social parts” (Collins Internet-Linked Dictionary of Sociology, 2005:588- 589).

vi) Sociology is a science of human companionship, fellowship, association, interaction” (Wilmot, 1985:9).

vii) Sociology is the study of a category of social facts which “consists of ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him… these ways of thinking and acting constitute the proper domain of sociology” (Durkheim, 1966:3 - 4).

viii) Sociology is that science which aim at the interpretative understanding (Verstehen) of social behaviour in order to gain

There is no doubt that what is included or excluded as well as the different definitions reflect (a) the complexity of the subject matter of sociology and, therefore, the formidable task of determining what is important; (b) the different perspectives brought to bear on the subject by the various scholars; and, (c) the changing nature of the society and, therefore, the corresponding developments in the discipline in terms of research, methodology, knowledge interests and policy concerns.

Stripped to their essences, however, the various definitions and topics depict a core, a “what it is all about”, that characterises sociology and sets it apart from other social sciences; this is the study of society. Right from the enlightenment period through the time of the Scottish moralists – Hume, Ferguson, Smith, Hutcheson, etc (Schneider, ed, 1967) to the time of the “founding fathers” and the present, the core of sociology has been and remains, a continuing attempt to understand how society works, that is, its structure and functioning and changes therein over time.

Whether described as social system, social formation, group, companionship, etc, the essence of all sociological studies has been an understanding of forms and patterns of behaviour exhibited by people, the relationships between people, the institutional order, that is, “the world of patterned, organised and symbolically-templated ways of doing things” (Jenkins, 2000:10) and the fundamental conditions that account for persistence and/or change in the patterns of behaviour, relationships and institutions. This was the vision of the founding fathers who, in spite of their differences, were preoccupied with comprehensively understanding the movement from gemeinschaft to gesellschaft, mechanical to organic solidarity, feudalism to capitalism, predominantly traditional to predominantly rational or instrumental action, and the institutional arrangements and behavioural accompaniments of the two types of society. Thus, following Scott and Marshall (2005), three general objects of sociological interest can be identified. These are:

1. Social structure which consists of diverse social fields (the economy, the family system, the political structure, law, etc).
These structures exist independently of individual and can be studied from a Parsonian or Marxist perspective;
2. Collective representations, a la Durkheim i.e. “meanings and ways of cognitively organising the world…” and
3. Meaningful social action, in the tradition of Max Weber (p626).

In sum, the boundary of sociology and its distinctive characteristic is the holistic conception of, and approach to, the “social” in human life, that is the overall or macro-level pattern of culture, institutions and political economy and the micro-level social interactions and individual behaviour that shape and are shaped by the overall pattern.

V. The Centrality of Organizations

The foregoing indicates the centrality of the study of organisations and inter-organisational relations in sociological discourse. This is in line with the sociology of Durkheim, Marx and Weber. While Durkheim was concerned with the institutional arrangements underlying social cohesion, Weber focussed attention on “the capacity of the (emerging) modern organisations to shape the institutional landscape” (Reed, 1992:XV), Marx focussed on the relationships between classes within changing productive and institutional structures.

As Coleman (1993) as demonstrated, stages in the transformation of society are often mirrored by changes in the foci of sociological theory and research. Arguably, the deep drivers of the modern society of the 21st century – whether described as postmodern, post-industrial, late capitalist – are globalisation and the nation-state. The activities of both of these and the reactions that they generate have resulted in the proliferation of complex organisations of various sort - , the state, multinational, international, quasi-autonomous governmental, labour unions, political parties, civil society and social movement organisations. Indeed, organisations have become ubiquitous, they pervade human social life. As Abha and Anil Chaturvedi have observed:

Each aspect of an individual’s life is influenced, if not determined, by a
specialised organisation be it with respect to education, health, recreation, the creative arts or livelihood. All infrastructural support that allows the citizen to cope with his daily life, such as food, water, transport, shelter, hygiene, health or energy comes through organisations (in Abha Chaturvedi and Anil Chaturvedi, eds, 1995:1).

Not only do organisations influence/shape individual lives, “they also function as agents through which nation-states and societies translate their aspirations” (ibid) as well as exercise considerable political and economic powers across national boundaries. Indeed, organisations have become so pervasive that the understanding of any society today requires an understanding of its organisations.

Complex organisations now control the allocation and use of resources – time, energy, authority, materials, money, land and have thus become the crucial mechanisms for the maintenance or change of social systems. Organisations engage in the production of goods and services as well as regulatory functions. Their success or failure, therefore, impacts strongly on the satisfaction of human needs. Also, organisations contribute to the pollution and degradation of the environment, the erosion of the prerogatives and responsibilities of political authority, the concentration of power and consequent undermining of democracy, and, the degradation of work, alienation and widespread social discontent.

Thus, the field of organisation study provides a fertile ground for a critical examination of many of the practical and policy issues confronting modern society as well as many of the epistemic problems in sociology. For instance, organisations are structural elements within the total structure in which they exist. The study of the processes of development and change of organisational forms can be a gateway to the understanding of development within the total social formation. Also, organisations formulate and enforce rules but there are always the contentious issues of whose rules they are, whose interests they serve and how are they legitimated?

Thus, the contradictions and social cleavages within society – gender, class, hierarchical structure of power and authority, relation
of dependence and exploitation – are best demonstrated within organisations, the arena within which they are played out and the study of which can generate relevant intervention policies to deal with the problems. Furthermore, organisations provide both incentives as well as constraints to action and, therefore, a platform for the understanding of the relationship between agency and structure. Finally, the study of organisations and inter-organisational relations provide a fertile ground for testing the proposition of current theories such as exchange, action frame of reference, conflict, negotiated order, etc, with a view to determining/improving their predictive and explanatory power or developing more appropriate theories.

VI. Summary and Conclusion

We have attempted in the preceding pages to address some of the major and frequent criticisms often levelled against the discipline of sociology. We have argued that while some of the criticisms are overdrawn, others ignore developments in both sociology and the natural sciences against which it is often evaluated. The lack of theoretical and methodological unity, spurious causality, lack of a uniform standard of evaluation and of making knowledge claims, etc, are not peculiar to sociology but common to all the sciences. Given its increasingly rigorous and verifiable procedures for establishing and evaluating the credibility of its assertions, amongst other characteristics, sociology has much claim to being a science as any other science.

Furthermore, the continuing relevance of sociology is not in doubt. Although the foci of theoretical and research interests will continue to change as society changes, understanding and explaining how society works shall remain the domain of the discipline. Presently, given the proliferation of organisations in the modern society of the 21st century, the focus of sociology should be on trying to understand and explain how the organisations in a society interrelate and the consequences of this interrelationship for the life of man in society. A practical consequence of this understanding would be how to design organisations that, in their interrelationships, work best for the satisfaction of man’s needs.
References


Angle, J. (n.d) A. Mathematical Sociologist’s Tribute to Comte: Sociology as Science.


