**What is Society?**

A society is a group of individuals involved in persistent social interaction, or a large social group sharing the same space or social territory, typically subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations. Societies are characterized by patterns of relationships (social relations) between individuals who share a distinctive culture and institutions; a given society may be described as the sum total of such relationships among its constituent of members. In the social sciences, a larger society often exhibits stratification or dominance patterns in subgroups.

Societies construct patterns of behavior by deeming certain actions or speech as acceptable or unacceptable. These patterns of behavior within a given society are known as societal norms. Societies, and their norms, undergo gradual and perpetual changes.

Insofar as it is collaborative, a society can enable its members to benefit in ways that would otherwise be difficult on an individual basis; both individual and social (common) benefits can thus be distinguished, or in many cases found to overlap. A society can also consist of like-minded people governed by their own norms and values within a dominant, larger society. This is sometimes referred to as a subculture, a term used extensively within criminology.

More broadly, and especially within structural thought, a society may be illustrated as an economic, social, industrial or cultural infrastructure, made up of, yet distinct from, a varied collection of individuals. In this regard society can mean the objective relationships people have with the material world and with other people, rather than "other people" beyond the individual and their familiar social environment.

**Etymology and usage**

The term "society" came from the Latin word societas, which in turn was derived from the noun socius ("comrade, friend ally"; adjectival form socialis) used to describe a bond or interaction between parties that are friendly, or at least civil. Without an article, the term can refer to the entirety of humanity (also: "society in general", "society at large", etc.), although those who are unfriendly or uncivil to the remainder of society in this sense may be deemed to be "antisocial". However, the Scottish economist, Adam Smith taught instead that a society "may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility without any mutual love or affection, if only they refrain from doing injury to each other."

Used in the sense of an association, a society is a body of individuals outlined by the bounds of functional interdependence, possibly comprising characteristics such as national or cultural identity, social solidarity, language, or hierarchical structure.

**In sociology**

Sociologist Peter L. Berger defines society as "...a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts upon its producers." According to him, society was created by humans, but this creation turns back and creates or molds humans every day.

Sociologist Gerhard Lenski differentiates societies based on their level of technology, communication, and economy: (1) hunters and gatherers, (2) simple agricultural, (3) advanced agricultural, (4) industrial, and (5) special (e.g. fishing societies or maritime societies).[5] This is similar to the system earlier developed by anthropologists Morton H. Fried, a conflict theorist, and Elman Service, an integration theorist, who have produced a system of classification for societies in all human cultures based on the evolution of social inequality and the role of the state. This system of classification contains four categories:

* Hunter-gatherer bands (categorization of duties and responsibilities). Then came the agricultural society.
* Tribal societies in which there are some limited instances of social rank and prestige.
* Stratified structures led by chieftains.
* Civilizations, with complex social hierarchies and organized, institutional governments.

In addition to this there are:

* Humanity, humankind, upon which rest all the elements of society, including society's beliefs.
* Virtual society, a society based on online identity, which is evolving in the information age.

Over time, some cultures have progressed toward more complex forms of organization and control. This cultural evolution has a profound effect on patterns of community. Hunter-gatherer tribes settled around seasonal food stocks to become agrarian villages. Villages grew to become towns and cities. Cities turned into city-states and nation-states.

Many societies distribute largess at the behest of some individual or some larger group of people. This type of generosity can be seen in all known cultures; typically, prestige accrues to the generous individual or group. Conversely, members of a society may also shun or scapegoat any members of the society who violate its norms. Mechanisms such as gift-giving, joking relationships and scapegoating, which may be seen in various types of human groupings, tend to be institutionalized within a society. Social evolution as a phenomenon carries with it certain elements that could be detrimental to the population it serves.

Some societies bestow status on an individual or group of people when that individual or group performs an admired or desired action. This type of recognition is bestowed in the form of a name, title, manner of dress, or monetary reward. In many societies, adult male or female status is subject to a ritual or process of this type. Altruistic action in the interests of the larger group is seen in virtually all societies. The phenomena of community action, shunning, scapegoating, generosity, shared risk, and reward are common to many forms of society.

**Types**

Societies are social groups that differ according to subsistence strategies, the ways that humans use technology to provide needs for themselves. Although humans have established many types of societies throughout history, anthropologists tend to classify different societies according to the degree to which different groups within a society have unequal access to advantages such as resources, prestige, or power. Virtually all societies have developed some degree of inequality among their people through the process of social stratification, the division of members of a society into levels with unequal wealth, prestige, or power. Sociologists place societies in three broad categories: pre-industrial, industrial, and postindustrial.

**Pre-industrial**

In a pre-industrial society, food production, which is carried out through the use of human and animal labor, is the main economic activity. These societies can be subdivided according to their level of technology and their method of producing food. These subdivisions are hunting and gathering, pastoral, horticultural, agricultural, and feudal.

**Hunting and gathering**

The main form of food production in such societies is the daily collection of wild plants and the hunting of wild animals. Hunter-gatherers move around constantly in search of food. As a result, they do not build permanent villages or create a wide variety of artifacts, and usually only form small groups such as bands and tribes. However, some hunting and gathering societies in areas with abundant resources (such as people of tlingit) lived in larger groups and formed complex hierarchical social structures such as chiefdom. The need for mobility also limits the size of these societies. They generally consist of fewer than 60 people and rarely exceed 100. Statuses within the tribe are relatively equal, and decisions are reached through general agreement. The ties that bind the tribe are more complex than those of the bands. Leadership is personal—charismatic—and used for special purposes only in tribal society. There are no political offices containing real power, and a chief is merely a person of influence, a sort of adviser; therefore, tribal consolidations for collective action are not governmental. The family forms the main social unit, with most members being related by birth or marriage. This type of organization requires the family to carry out most social functions, including production and education.

**Pastoral**

Pastoralism is a slightly more efficient form of subsistence. Rather than searching for food on a daily basis, members of a pastoral society rely on domesticated herd animals to meet their food needs. Pastoralists live a nomadic life, moving their herds from one pasture to another. Because their food supply is far more reliable, pastoral societies can support larger populations. Since there are food surpluses, fewer people are needed to produce food. As a result, the division of labor (the specialization by individuals or groups in the performance of specific economic activities) becomes more complex. For example, some people become craft workers, producing tools, weapons, and jewelry, among other items of value. The production of goods encourages trade. This trade helps to create inequality, as some families acquire more goods than others do. These families often gain power through their increased wealth. The passing on of property from one generation to another helps to centralize wealth and power. Over time emerge hereditary chieftainships, the typical form of government in pastoral societies.

**Horticultural**

Fruits and vegetables grown in garden plots that have been cleared from the jungle or forest provide the main source of food in a horticultural society. These societies have a level of technology and complexity similar to pastoral societies. Some horticultural groups use the slash-and-burn method to raise crops. The wild vegetation is cut and burned, and ashes are used as fertilizers. Horticulturists use human labor and simple tools to cultivate the land for one or more seasons. When the land becomes barren, horticulturists clear a new plot and leave the old plot to revert to its natural state. They may return to the original land several years later and begin the process again. By rotating their garden plots, horticulturists can stay in one area for a fairly long period of time. This allows them to build semi-permanent or permanent villages. The size of a village's population depends on the amount of land available for farming; thus villages can range from as few as 30 people to as many as 2000.

As with pastoral societies, surplus food leads to a more complex division of labor. Specialized roles in horticultural societies include craftspeople, shamans (religious leaders), and traders. This role specialization allows people to create a wide variety of artifacts. As in pastoral societies, surplus food can lead to inequalities in wealth and power within horticultural political systems, developed because of the settled nature of horticultural life.

**Agrarian**

Agrarian societies use agricultural technological advances to cultivate crops over a large area. Sociologists use the phrase agricultural revolution to refer to the technological changes that occurred as long as 8,500 years ago that led to cultivating crops and raising farm animals. Increases in food supplies then led to larger populations than in earlier communities. This meant a greater surplus, which resulted in towns that became centers of trade supporting various rulers, educators, craftspeople, merchants, and religious leaders who did not have to worry about locating nourishment.

Greater degrees of social stratification appeared in agrarian societies. For example, women previously had higher social status because they shared labor more equally with men. In hunting and gathering societies, women even gathered more food than men. However, as food stores improved and women took on lesser roles in providing food for the family, they increasingly became subordinate to men. As villages and towns expanded into neighboring areas, conflicts with other communities inevitably occurred. Farmers provided warriors with food in exchange for protection against invasion by enemies. A system of rulers with high social status also appeared. This nobility organized warriors to protect the society from invasion. In this way, the nobility managed to extract goods from "lesser" members of society.

**Feudal**

Feudalism was a form of society based on ownership of land. Unlike today's farmers, vassals under feudalism were bound to cultivating their lord's land. In exchange for military protection, the lords exploited the peasants into providing food, crops, crafts, homage, and other services to the landowner. The estates of the realm system of feudalism was often multigenerational; the families of peasants may have cultivated their lord's land for generations.

**Industrial**

Between the 15th and 16th centuries, a new economic system emerged that began to replace feudalism. Capitalism is marked by open competition in a free market, in which the means of production are privately owned. Europe's exploration of the Americas served as one impetus for the development of capitalism. The introduction of foreign metals, silks, and spices stimulated great commercial activity in European societies.

Industrial societies rely heavily on machines powered by fuels for the production of goods. This produced further dramatic increases in efficiency. The increased efficiency of production of the industrial revolution produced an even greater surplus than before. Now the surplus was not just agricultural goods, but also manufactured goods. This larger surplus caused all of the changes discussed earlier in the domestication revolution to become even more pronounced.

Once again, the population boomed. Increased productivity made more goods available to everyone. However, inequality became even greater than before. The breakup of agricultural-based feudal societies caused many people to leave the land and seek employment in cities. This created a great surplus of labor and gave capitalists plenty of laborers who could be hired for extremely low wages.

**Post-industrial**

Post-industrial societies are societies dominated by information, services, and high technology more than the production of goods. Advanced industrial societies are now seeing a shift toward an increase in service sectors over manufacturing and production. The United States is the first country to have over half of its work force employed in service industries. Service industries include government, research, education, health, sales, law, and banking.