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Q2(a)

Sociology is the product of European enlightenment and renaissance. Critically examine this statement

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- **State the claim:** sociology arose with European Enlightenment and Renaissance ideas of reason, science and the individual
- **Show what is true in the claim:** Comte, Saint-Simon, the dual revolutions, secular explanation
- **Critically examine limits:** non-European thought, colonial encounter, religion, and later global sociology
- Keep a balanced critical examination

Revision summary

The Renaissance and Enlightenment made society an object of this-worldly reason.

The French and industrial revolutions supplied the classic problems of order and change.

Comte, **Marx**, **Durkheim** and **Weber** institutionalised European sociology.

The statement is only a half-truth if it ignores Ibn Khaldun and other older social thought.

Colonial encounter and later **Southern Theory** show that Europe was not the only workshop.

Indian sociology had to name caste and colonial capitalism beyond the Enlightenment citizen.

Introduction

The statement says that sociology is a child of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. There is a strong historical case for this. The Renaissance recovered a this-worldly interest in human affairs. The Enlightenment asked that society be explained by reason and evidence rather than by sacred tradition alone. The French and industrial revolutions then made order and change into urgent problems. A critical examination must grant this origin story and then show what it leaves out.

Body

What the statement gets right

Niccolo **Machiavelli** and later Renaissance humanists treated politics as a human craft. Enlightenment writers such as Montesquieu compared governments and climates. The Scottish moralists, including Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, wrote about commercial society, sympathy and the division of labour. Auguste Comte, after Saint-Simon, named sociology and offered a law of three stages from theology to positive science. **Karl Marx** wrote

in the wake of industrial capitalism and Hegelian philosophy. **Emile Durkheim's** science of social facts, and **Max Weber's** study of rationalisation, are unthinkable without a European crisis of church, market and state. R. W. Connell and others still accept that the canonical textbooks were written in this setting. The **dual revolution** that Eric Hobsbawm described, political in France and industrial in Britain, produced the classic questions of class, bureaucracy, anomie and the city.

What a critical examination must add

The Renaissance and Enlightenment were not the only sources of social thought. Ibn Khaldun had already written a science of social organisation and group feeling. Indian, Chinese and Islamic traditions reasoned about kingship, caste, law and ethics. The European canon itself was formed in a colonial world. **Marx** wrote on India and Ireland. **Weber** compared world religions. Anthropology grew from the imperial encounter. To say that sociology is only a European product is to confuse the institutional birth of a university discipline with the whole history of thinking about society.

Feminist and postcolonial critics, including Raewyn Connell's **Southern Theory**, argue that the metropolitan canon treated the colony as data and Europe as theory. Indian sociology after G. S. Ghurye, D. P. Mukerji and A. R. Desai had to study caste, village and colonial capitalism, which the Enlightenment pair of individual and citizen did not fully name. Religion did not simply die as Comte expected. The Enlightenment also had exclusions of women, the poor and the colonised.

A fair critical examination therefore holds two sentences together. The professional discipline called sociology was organised in Europe under the signs of reason, science and the modern state. Its problems, methods and later global practice cannot be reduced to that one origin. The statement is a useful half-truth.

What the examination answer should still grant

The syllabus still needs the European story in some detail. Saint-Simon's industrialism, Comte's hierarchy of the sciences, and the moral statistics of Quetelet prepared **Durkheim's** suicide tables. The Scottish Enlightenment's account of commercial society prepared **Marx's** and **Weber's** questions about markets. Renaissance humanism made the human city a legitimate object of writing. None of that is cancelled by pointing to Ibn Khaldun. What is cancelled is the boast that only Europe could think society. Indian university sociology, from Bombay and Lucknow, used the European toolkit on caste, village, joint family and colonial class. D. P. Mukerji asked for a sociology that knew Indian tradition as a living process. That is how a critical examination ends: origin in Europe as an institution, continuation as a global craft that must name non-European structures.

Flow diagram

Renaissance humanism -> Enlightenment reason
Enlightenment reason -> Comte Marx Durkheim Weber
Colonial encounter -> Comte Marx Durkheim Weber
Non-European social thought -> Sociology as global practice

Conclusion

Sociology as a named academic discipline did grow from European Renaissance and Enlightenment currents, and from the shock of industrial and political revolution. A critical view adds non-European social thought, the colonial context of the canon, and later work that decentres Europe. The statement should be examined, not swallowed whole.

Facts & figures

Comte's positive science

A European Enlightenment heir who named sociology and sought laws of social development.

Dual revolution

Hobsbawm's pairing of the French political revolution and the British industrial revolution as the setting of classical sociology.

Southern Theory

Connell's argument that the metropolitan canon treated the rest of the world as data rather than as theory-producing.

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