**MINISTERY OF EDUCATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS**

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**REFERAT:**

**«SOCIETY AS A SYSTEM»**

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**Approaches to understanding the society**

The concept ***society*** has its origin in the Latin *societas*, or *a friendly association with others* so it refers to associations of individuals, to group relations. But the definition “the society is a group of interrelated individuals” can not be fully correct because society may be understood as

1) a particular community of people living in a country or region, and having shared customs, laws, and organizations, for instance, English society or American society;

2) people who are fashionable, wealthy, and influential, regarded as a distinct social group, for instance, high society;

3) an organization or club set up for a particular purpose or activity, for instance, a society of fishermen;

4) a situation of being in the company of other people, for instance, I like his company.

Being polysemantic, the word “society” has a number of definitions. Long ago E. Durkheim stated that “every entity of individuals who are involved in continuous contact forms a society”. Following his tradition, social sciences use the term “society”for the body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live.

More abstractly, the society is defined as a network of relationships between social entities. But even within sociology itself there exist various definitions of the concept as there are various approaches to understanding the society. The basic approaches are a narrow sociological and broad philosophic ones.

Within a narrow sociological perspective the society is understood as:

* a particular group of people who are linked together for communication and a paricular purpose like joint performance of some activities;
* a definite stage in historic development of a country, for instance, capitalist society;
* a system of interactions between people that has its structure and institutions.

It should be noted that a society is not equal to a country or state although they have much in common.

*Country* is a part of the globe that has definite territorial fronties and possesses state sovereignity.

*State* is political organization of the given country including a particular type of power (monarchy or republic), bodies and structure of ruling (government, Parliament).

*Society* is social organization of the given country based on social structure. Countries are studied by geography, states – by politology, societies – by sociology.

It’s easier to present a society within the framework of certain state fronties, for instance, Belarusian society coincides with Belarus as the country and state. The same concerns British, French or American society, but the territorial or state criterion is not always rightful as there is no such phenomenon as the society of Luxembourg.

Each society is characterized by some attributes but researchers do not agree about their number. For instance, in 1967 an American sociologist ***Robert Marsh*** suggested the following attributes of the society:

* constant territory, for instance, France in its state bounderies;
* reproduction of the population due to native child-bearing mainly, and migration plays an insignificant role;
* highly developed culture;
* political independence which means that society is not part of another system, for instance, colonial societies like Indian couldn’t be considered as such before India obtained independence.

This classification was regarded as incomplete by its author himself; some of its criteria are debated, say that of a highly developed culture. It can’t be applied to such countries as the USA where representatives of various religious and ethnic groups live, so the USA is by right called a “melting pot”. There are no common values and ideals shared by the whole population, and existence of such diasporas as the Italian or Jewish ones with their own norms, traditions, customs and native language is a good proof.

It’s a common knowledge that the Jews who migrated from the former USSR don’t speak English although they use some casual expressions. In reality, American culture is an aggrerate of subcultures bound into a whole by political and legislative powers.

The other debated criterion is that of political independence. An argument against is that ancient ethnoses with highly developed culture like Armenia, Georgia that lived on the territory of the USSR had no political indpendence but existed as Union republics.

An extended list of the society’s attributes was given by another American sociologist ***Edward Shils*** (1910-1995):

* association is not part of a larger system;
* marriages are made between members of the given association;
* association is physically replenished mainly with children of its recognized representatives;
* association exists within its own territory;
* it has its own name and history;
* it possesses its own system of ruling;
* its existence is longer than the average duration of life of its members;
* it is linked with a common system of values (customs, traditions, norms, laws, rules etc.) called culture.

The given criteria prove that both modern states with the population of hundreds of millions of citizens and ancient tribes that occupied the territory of a district in a contemporary city can comply with them. Each of them has its own blood-kinship system (entering into marriage and receiving new members), territory, name, culture, history, system of ruling and it’s not part of another association.

However, in recent years a philosophic perspective to think of the society as a big, interacting system has become most shared. According to the general theory of systems, in the physical universe everything is arranged into systems that are themselves components of a more extended system, like the earth as part of a solar system that forms a part of a galactic system, which in turn belongs to a cluster of galaxies.

The other examples of a system are a set of three PCs (local network) or the British Empire. A human body is also a system as it is made up of cells which make up tissues which in turn make up different organs as parts of functionally defined subsystems such as circulatory, reproductive etc.

Social systems demonstrate analogous structural characteristics where humans are considered components of social systems such as banks or universities which are in turn components of the system of banking or education as parts of the economic or cultural spheres of the society.

And if, for instance, a person’s heart gets sick, the whole human organism becomes out of order. By analogy, if the country’s economy is in recession, the whole system including politics, culture, education and other spheres begins suffering.

Any system is characterized by integrity, structure, functions, equilibrium, open character, dynamics, self-organization, self-reproduction, self-regulation and evolution. A society thought of as a system is not an exeption as it is created by its members to meet the needs of living by joint efforts at that time and in that place. For achieving those needs the society should have structure and processes. Its integrity is realized through a number of functions such as reproduction of the population, order and security etc.

Differentiation of social functions is accompanied by establishing various social structures such as economic, political, religious and other institutions filled up with people possessing the required qualities.

For instance, a mother who doesn’t work because she looks after her children can’t be a member of an economic structure but she is a member of the institution of the family.

The society is self-regulated to ensure support and constant reproduction of social relationships. Another analogue with a human body can be used: every day a body should reproduce enough amount of blood with the necessary quality so that the whole organism be healthy, otherwise poor blood quality can lead to leukemia, a cancer disease.

If any infection comes to blood, its self-regulating mechanism starts working to liquidate the infection either by itself or in combination with medicines. As for the society, due to self-regulation, it can constantly reproduce social quality of its structures and social qualities of individuals and groups engaged in their functioning.

In turn, the society has internal mechanisms of including new structures into an existing system of interrelations in order to adapt such structures to the forms and ways of the functioning of the societal system.

It means that newly created institutions, organizations and the like, symbolizing the open character of the society, should function according to the existing social norms and rules so that the society be stable and maintain equilibrium.

Thus, ***society*** is a systematic organization of social interactions and social relationships that ensure meeting of all basic needs of its members, a stable, self-regulated and self-reproductive one. The society as a super-system is viewed as an entity of social systems (individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and communities bound by social ties, interactions and relations) which serve as its structural elements.

**Typologies of societies**

There are a lot of typologies of human society which differ from each other by what criterion is used to define its type. For instance, the typology may make use of availability of a *written language*. According to this criterion all societies are divided into those without a written language (they can communicate with words but don’t know how to fix them in signs) and those with a written language, or societies that invented the alphabet and can fix words in material signs (letters) on paper, in books etc.

Other typologies may be based on the criterion of a *dominating religion* (Christian society) or *language* (English speaking society).

Social scientists Gerhard and George Lenskis identified four human societies according to their *primary means of subsistence*: hunter-gatherer societies, nomadic pastoral societies, horticulturalist or simple farming societies, and intensive agricultural societies, also called civilizations.

Some theorists add industrial and post-industrial societies. Marx identified five societies by their *mode of production*: primitive communal society, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and communism.

In social sciences typologies suggested by E. Durkheim and F. Toennis are also often mentioned. Both theorists suggested two types of societies that served a reason to call their typologies “dichotomies”.

For instance, E. Durkheim identifies traditional (military) and industrial societies applying the criterion of social solidarity.

Mechanical solidarity is typical for traditional or archaic society, because people as members of the society are undeveloped and similar to each other. The society is bound because its members are not differentiated.

Organic solidarity is given rise due to the division of public labour; it is based not on similarity but on differentiation of people as it suggests development of the personality. Due to division of labour an individual realizes his dependence on the society.

In his dichotomy suggested in 1887 ***Ferdinandt*** ***Toennis*** (1855-1936) introduced *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to differentiate between traditional and modern societies. American researcher Neil Smelser found out five distinctions between the concepts:

1. *Gemeinschaft* which is based on a feeling of togetherness, stimulates people’s desire to live according to the communal principles, for instance, at harvester peasants help each other free of charge. *Gesellschaft* is based on people’s rational realization of individual interests, its example is a state where individuals interact in impersonal situations and pay money for particular goods and services.

2. In the sphere of social control *Gemeinschaft* gives priority to traditional beliefs, customs and non-written laws while *Gesellschaft* is a society based on formal law.

3. As for division of labour, *Gemeinschaft* is characterized by limited specialization based on kinship ties, i.e. husbands, wives and children perform particular jobs in the household. *Gesellschaft* is characterized by specialization of professional roles and their separation from family roles.

4. In *Gemeinschaft* culture is formed on religious values while in *Gesellschaft* – on secular ones.

5. In *Gemeinschaft* the main institutions are the family, neighborhood and community while in *Gesellschaft* such are large groupings and associations, for example business circles, government, political parties etc.

Both dichotomies were criticized for their oversimplification. First, societies like *Gemeinschaft* also differ from each other, for instance, Japanese feudalism differs from German feudalism and they both differ from other non-industrial societies.

Besides, in every modern society the elements of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*are mixed up, it means that the latter cannot disappear to anywhere.

Second, such dichotomies consider the society as a stable integrated whole leaving aside a probability of contradictions and conflicts which are to some extent typical of any society.

Having made use of all typologies, a contemporary American sociologist Daniel Bell worked out some synthesizing model. He identifies three types of human society: *non-industrial*, or traditional, *industrial* and *post-industrial*, or modern. In non-industrial society the determining factor of its development is agriculture, in industrial – industry and in post-industrial – information (theoretic knowledge).

The other famous triads are a conception of *pre-modern, modern* and *post-modern* societies suggested by S. Crook and S. Lash; a theory of *pre-economic, economic* and *post-economic* societies suggested by a Russian theorist V.L. Inozemtsev, a theory of the *first, second* and *third waves* of civilization suggested by O. Toffler etc.

**Theories of the society’s origin**

There are a lot of theories of the society’s origin; some of them are rather disputable. For instance, in “spontaneous” sociology one can distinguish three hypotheses:

1) a **natural** one which is based on the proposition that labour made man and turned a crowd to a cultural entity of producers;

2) a **divine** theory says that God made man and bequeathed him the material world and moral law;

3) a **cosmic** theory states that some from another planet made man and manipulated human development to achieve their laboratory purposes. But these theories can’t explain the essence of the socio-genetic mechanism which is necessary to create a social organization.

Of modern scientific theories of the society’s origin the distinguished ones are instrumental, sexual, gender, cratic and semantic conceptions.

**Instrumental conception** assigns a primary importance to man’s ability to make a quick comprehension and consideration that resulted in inventing specialized instruments to satisfy man’s needs. Man invented specialized labour tools – instruments. By increasing labour efficiency with tools people came to consolidation of the system of labour division and to widening of economic differentiations. A social organization emerged and started developing.

**Sexual conception** is based on man’s physiological characteristics such as the ability to reproduce posterity (i.e. babies) all the year round. It results in spontaneous, non-controlled way of natural reproduction that might be dangerous for survival of the community. Fixing control over birth rates is linked with formation of families and emergence of norms regulating sexual and other relations between members of the community.

**Gender conception** takes into account the distribution of social roles among genders. As women possess a biological monopoly for gender reproduction, men make an artificial counterbalance in the form of male monopoly to establish order. The theorists of feminism believe that at the moment an agreement on how to distribute women is reached by men, a social organization as a community with certain rules of living together emerges.

**Cratic conception** rests on the general theory of systems and deducts emergence of the society from development of the governing subsystem. People are differentiated by their strength and intellect that’s why some individuals manage to capture the role of a leader who can keep the community’s important resources under control. In due time leaders begin to form and consolidate the system of rules to respect leaders, transfer power, distribute privileges among other members of the community etc. resulting in emergence of a social organization. Its basis is made up with norms keeping and maintaining the relations of inequality.

***Semantic conception***is built on development of communicative means within a human group. Group interaction can be achieved with the help of the language. Working out definitions and symbols, coming to an agreement on rules of understanding the language signs, making a more active use of the language, people start communication. It results in emergence of the system of arranged or agreed upon collective interactions and particular group functions, thus the society is formed.

**BASIC CONCEPTS**

***Country*** – a part of the globe that has definite territorial fronties and possesses state sovereignity.

***Cratic conception*** – a conception which deducts emergence of the society from development of the governing subsystem.

***Gender conception***– a conception which takes into account the distribution of social roles among genders.

***Instrumental conception***– a theory that assigns a primary importance to man’s ability to make a quick comprehension and consideration that resulted in inventing specialized instruments to satisfy man’s needs.

***Semantic conception***– a theory built on development of communicative means within a human group.

***Sexual conception***– a conception based on man’s physiological characteristics such as his ability to reproduce posterity all the year round.

***Society*** – a group of interrelated individuals; every entity of individuals who are involved in continuous contact (by E. Durkheim); social organization of the given country based on social structure; a systematic organization of social interactions and social relations that ensure meeting of all basic needs of its members, a stable, self-regulated and self-reproductive one (philosophic approach).

***State*** – political organization of the country including a particular type of power (monarchy or republic), bodies and structure of ruling (government, Parliament).

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