

The industrial revolution began in Britain in the late eighteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, the old order was collapsing “under the twin blows of industrialism and revolutionary democracy” (Nisbet, 1966: 21). Mechanical industry was growing, and thousands of people were migrating to cities to work in the new factories. People once rooted in the land and social communities where they farmed found themselves crowded into cities. The traditional authority of the church, the village, and the family were being undermined by impersonal factory and city life.

Capitalism also grew in Western Europe in the nineteenth century. This meant that relatively few people owned the means of production—such as factories—while many others had to sell their labor to those owners. At the same time, relatively impersonal financial markets began to expand. The modern epoch was also marked by the development of administrative state power, which involved increasing concentrations of information and armed power (Giddens, 1987: 27).

Finally, there was enormous population growth worldwide in this period, due to longer life expectancy and major decreases in child death rates. These massive social changes lent new urgency to the development of the social sciences, as early sociological thinkers struggled with the vast implications of economic, social and political revolutions. All the major figures in the early years of sociology thought about the “great transformation” from simple, preliterate societies to massive, complex, industrial societies.