**Assess the Extent to which sociology could be seen as a science (33 marks)**

Science by its definition is the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world. It aims to make sense of the world around us, and is seen as different from other bodies of knowledge such as science, religion and philosophy. This is mainly due to its five components. These are as follows. Empirical means we can count and measure information and testable is defined as experiments being able to be repeated and retested, therefore seen as more reliable. The theoretical means science seeks out causal relationships and doesn’t rely on descriptions but also to explain. Cumulative means it builds on previous knowledge and moves our understanding of the world forwards. Lastly, the objective details that personal feelings, prejudices etc have no place in science. It basically has to be unbiased. It is debated as to whether sociology fits into this definition, with strong divides in the for and against.

Sociology is often referred to as a social science, placed in the same category as politics and economics. It is still not regarded as a natural science such as chemistry or physics, which involve explanations and reason. However, one argument presented as to why sociology is a science comes from Positivists, and the reason given is due to the methods used. Positivists use quantitative data and methods such as questionnaires in order to distinguish any trends, patterns or correlations in an investigation. By adopting the methods of natural sciences they establish sociology as a real science. Comte, who invented the term sociology, argued that it should be based on the methodology of the natural sciences. This would then result in a positive science of society which would in turn reveal the invariable laws. This is the approach that positivists take. However, there comes a difficulty with applying these measures to the subject. In science the aim is to achieve the same and correct answer each time the experiment is done, and this shows reliability and validity in whatever claims that are trying to be made. If an anomaly appears steps are taken to single out why this happened and then more often than not corrected. On the other hand, within the realms of sociology it would be extremely hard to work out a right or wrong answer. Also, the experiment cannot be redone as the variables cannot be controlled, whereas in a laboratory everything can be repeated as needed. Interpretivists contribute to these criticisms, highlighting that human beings are conscious actors. They cannot be governed by external forces nor measured by chosen variables. In short, human behaviour cannot be studied in the same way as the natural world and therefore scientific analysis cannot be suitable. Trying to measure sociology through the ways of natural sciences creates difficult problems, as although it provides a guideline in which to conduct experiments, people and society cannot be treated as objects and therefore cannot be measured as such.

Durkheim saw this flaw, and argued that social facts, customs, belief systems, and social institutions should be considered as things or objects. He also claimed to have discovered cause and effect relationships between these social facts. For instance, in his study of suicides he found correlations between social facts and suicides. However, the Interpretivists criticism is still very much relevant. These ‘social facts’ and people themselves have too many variables and internal/external influences to be measured scientifically. Therefore, even though sociology takes a scientific approach, the results cannot be measured or proved scientifically. This in turn, means it cannot be scientific.

With regards to proving scientific theories, Popper believed that instead of trying to verify theories, science operated through a process of falsification. In other words, they try to prove the theories wrong instead of true. If the theory fails to be proved wrong then it shows that the theory has been rigorously tested. He believes that sociology would fare better if this approach was adopted, as what has been contributed to the subject before is not easily testable or capable of standing up to the falsification analysis. He instead believes in the inductive approach, where theories should come from evidence and date. The theory should not be made up first and data then be used to test it as sociology does it now through the deductive approach. Popper believes that sociology has the potential to become more scientific if it corrects this issue. However, he seems to ignore the fact that even when this is corrected there will still be other problems.

Kuhn takes a similar approach to Popper, claiming that if sociology can accept one paradigm then it can be scientific. He argues that ‘normal science’ operates within an accepted framework of concepts and procedures, or in other words, a paradigm. This scientific paradigm is rarely questioned. It is also only replaced when in depth analysis and research is done to disprove it, and then it will be changed by a new paradigm. Sociology differentiates itself from this, as there is competition between various theories that are constantly being challenged. In Kuhn’s view, sociology doesn’t have a shared paradigm and therefore by its definition is not scientific.

Realists disagree, they believe that sociology fits well into their open systems definition, and therefore by its definition it has to be scientific. They argue that events in the natural and social world are produced by underlying structures and mechanisms. Sayer separated open and closed systems by definition. He claimed that in open systems the variables cannot be controlled and in a closed system they can be. As said before, sociology fits into an open system. He also says that human behaviour operates within structures, therefore there can be some degree of scientific measurement. Also, according to realists both science and sociology involve underlying structures and processes. For instance, we cannot see social class but we recognise its effects. Therefore, when looking at surface definitions, sociology is just as much a science as science itself.

Feminists criticise science, claiming that it is seen as ‘malestream knowledge’ entirely based on male perceptions and understandings. This results in the further oppression of women in an already patriarchal society, and is therefore critical of adopting a scientific approach in sociology. Yet it should be noted that this is more of a criticism of science itself, and does not give any indication as to whether society is actually a science or not. Therefore it is not an entirely relevant point for this argument. Postmodernists also argue that knowledge itself is relative to the world of those who seek it. Science has set itself up as an expert knowledge which is now outdated. But once again, this point gives no weight to the argument of sociology as a science.

Overall, there is a large split between for and against. Realists and positivists argue that by its definition and the theories used it is a science, yet Interpretivists and others put the extremely valid point across that people and society cannot be measured like objects. And therefore not scientifically. Although Durkheim put across the theory of social facts, there are too many external and internal forces that create an indefinite number of variables that are extremely difficult to be measured. Even though this can be attempted through scientific methods as positivists do, it cannot be an exact science. Sociology seems to be more of an impersonation of science. The fact that these problems exist in the first place shows that it is too flawed as a science to be categorised in the same way as a subject like physics. In conclusion, although valuable, sociology cannot be considered an exact or a natural science. It can only be seen as having scientific qualities.