

Back for the Future: a study of yesterday's pioneers of social theory with today's big social issues

This series of chapters introduces the big hitting founders of sociology and social theory by framing their work in the context of today's big ideas and issues like happiness, rationality, cognitive bias and decision-psychology, the social power of the internet, economic organisation, bureaucracy, oligarchial power, pop-culture and management. The reader will get an introduction to sociology; the ideas that founded and grounded 'society' through Durkheim, Marx and Weber; many curiosity pieces and data on some of today's big issues; plus some historical references that informed early social enquiry.

Introduction

The ways that we understand social relations and the organisation of society has a lineage of insights and theories stretching back to the founding theorists of sociology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx. The test of this series of chapters was to see how far their ideas felt relevant to today's society and the issues we face. The reader is the best judge of this but the writer found revisiting these stellar writers refreshing and insightful. These chapters introduce the writers, their ideas and the context of their time plus references are made to many other sociological ideas, themes and terms. So this series is both a refreshing read with new insights and interpretations for both the seasoned scholar and the reader wanting an introductory text to sociology. Several sections touch on the related disciplines of social psychology, anthropology, economics and management.

Big topics such as the origins of capitalism, the world happiness debate and the power of the internet are given treatments from different perspectives. Plus the reader gets a look at some lighter topics like the power of pop and even a little fun puzzle to do - the relevance of which will become clear. The series is designed to be read either in normal sequence or in chapters and bite-sized chunks. Several texts referred to in footnotes throughout are also recommended as longer and broader sociology readers.

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What's the point of sociology and who does it?

“Sociology is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects”¹

Sociology tells us what society is like and how it works. The above quote suggests that sociology is a science as was the views of one of its founders Max Weber. It is partly a science studying the conscious, agency-orientated human being in relation to his or her fellow human being, social world and environment. It seeks to understand meaning through systematic analysis. Sociology is not the same as the more 'knowable' phenomena of the natural sciences such as biology or physics as it is concerned with people, their actions and their habits. People are guided by social norms, structures and values at every level, every day - from the micro-level of everyday interaction at work, leisure or home through to the macro-level of complex social institutions and systems such as the internet, marriage, the workplace or international trade. Sociological enquiry enables us to uncover how social exchange and behaviour operates and why and how social relationships change over time.

Intentional social observation and study is, today, frequently done by people who are not academics in Universities and often not called sociologists. Health workers, teachers, governments, researchers and marketers in business 'do' sociology. They do sociology when they systematically evaluate society and its constituent parts. Unlike a professional sociologist they may attempt to influence macro and micro-level behaviour, change or policy. For instance advertisers and media-companies assess how people culturally influence one another and therefore why we might make certain purchases. A second example might be teachers and educationalists where they are forming and re-forming the education system and experience. Their influence upon human socialisation is significant, as social norms are learned through the profound life-course event of the school years.

Public sociology², critical (theoretical) sociology, professional sociology and policy sociology involve many people exploring and explaining social action. In recent times 'public sociology' - discourse with many 'publics' in group conversation about the future of society - has become a more broadly deployed approach to social theory and action. Publics here are, for instance, patients and clients of service providers, specific customer groups and the general public.

In all its forms sociology's systematic analysis and synthesis of social systems, institutions and relations, and of what it is to be human with other humans, gives the subject a separate and unique purpose. Sociology is not about what we are (biology or chemistry) or what makes us tick (psychology) or how we organise our material affairs (economics). It is about how we collectively organise, influence, learn, control, coerce, converge or diverge and how social institutions emerge, sustain or change. Incorrectly sociology has been tarnished with

¹ Weber, Max (1947) *'Theory of Economic and Social Organisation'* translated by Henderson and Parsons

² Burawoy, M. (2004) *'For Public Sociology: 2004 Presidential Address'* American Sociological review, 70: 4-28 explained the rise of public participation in sociology

a reputation for telling us what is good for us. In fact the social science tells us *how* things are and *why* things are as they are. The question of how things *should be* or *what needs to be done* is a matter for a separate process of political and moral discourse.³

So if you are trying to figuring out, as a for instance, *what* makes one society or social group happier than another; *how* organisations function; or *why* caring staff can be running an uncaring hospital sociological enquiry helps figure out the answers.

The chapters ahead do two things. Firstly the three founding figures in sociology are introduced, their work is described and the context of the time is explained with some historical reference points and events. Secondly some key current topics, issues and social phenomena are discussed such as organisation and management, behavioural psychology, the happiness debate and the sociology of the internet to name but a few. Each chapter maps current issues with the founding principles and insights of the three writers.

These chapters are introductory pieces on some colossus writers and they give a flavour of some of their ideas. These chapters also have some interesting insights and topic links for the experienced scholar. We start with Emile Durkheim.

³ See Giddens, A, and Sutton, P (2013) '*Sociology*' Chapter 1. Page 25 onward explains what sociology is for.

Durkheim – The Collective Phenomenon Discovered

“...the beast among us is a poor approximation of the highly socialised beings who constitute societies”⁴

Introduction:

This Durkheim quote introduces the idea that it is through *socialisation* and the repeated and varied exposure of individuals to social norms, values, signals and behaviours that civilised beings are formed who function fully in the world.

This chapter takes the reader through the torrid historical antecedents to Durkheim’s ‘invention’ of comparative sociology; the identification of *anomie* and *solidarity*; and his development of ideas on power and society. The chapter has separate features on modern social issues – the internet; sexual politics; the happiness debate; and even the power of pop-music – with some footnotes on what Durkheim might have said about some of these matters.

The Context:

It is late 19th century and turn of the 20th century France. There are major social upheavals and consequences to industrialisation. The population has risen steadily and a new partly urbanised and poor social class has grown in number. France is recovering from war⁵ and the country has rising suicide rates. The nation is shaken by financial and political scandal - the financial scandal of the century in the shape of the *Panama Scandals* - and the political scandal of the century with the much publicised *Dreyfus Affair* (see the box below).

Durkheim’s mission was to put his academic insight to the task of understanding and conquering an apparent moral crisis. The circular metaphysical ponderings of philosophy; the gloomy inward journey of psychoanalysis; and the limits of economics spurred Durkheim into a different disciplinary approach. He was to uncover and systematically explain the power of social forces in shaping society - for good or ill.

The Ideas:

Emile Durkheim took sociology into a disciplinary method all of its own. He observed the individualist weakness of the psychology discipline and the circulatory twists and turns of philosophy. Instead he wanted to deploy a different method; a *social physics*⁶ approach in order to understand the nature and dynamics of society. He was one of the first to

⁴ Pope, Whitney *‘Key Sociological Thinkers’* (2008) second edition Chapter 3 on Emile Durkheim

⁵ The France-Prussian or Franco-German war of 1870/71

⁶ An early term sometimes used for sociology and social theory that did not stick due to some academic rivalries over the term

systematically show how social forces overcome individual forces and that these forces direct, coerce, contain, control and socialise the individual.

The power of *social forces* may seem pretty obvious today but not necessarily so in the late 19th century. Religiously-driven moral coda drove the social sphere and maintained a continuity of moral life and the rules of social behaviour. Engineering and science drove the industrial and economic sphere. The doctrine of *positivism* was enthusiastically applied to the social world by Durkheim via Auguste Comte. He developed the notion of a *science of society*.

The Big Scandals at the turn of 20th century France:

The Panama Scandals involved government ministers and members taking payments to hide the losses of the Panama Canal Company. Close to 1 billion francs were lost, and this was thought to be the largest financial scandal of the 19th century. In 1889 the company was wound up after several years of cover ups and bribes that kept the scale of losses secret. Some 800,000 French citizens sustained losses in the debacle and France was rocked politically and economically by the political scandal and the enormous bankruptcy.

The Dreyfus affair was a much celebrated, long running and complex legal and political affair. Captain Richard Dreyfus was imprisoned for leaking military secrets to the German embassy in Paris. He was imprisoned for life and military leaders suppressed evidence regarding the real culprit. The affair was a long running public battle between the anti- Dreyfus and pro-Dreyfus camps and it divided France. It was well also well known due to the dramatic trial for treason of the author Emile Zola following his equally famous article revealing the affair entitled *J'Accuse* in the *L'Aurore* newspaper. The affair has been much studied for its complex twists and turns as regards cover-up, ethical behaviour, anti-semitism, freedom of expression, and what was probably one of the first cases of what we now call *whistle-blowing*. Zola was convicted for libel and fled briefly to England to avoid imprisonment. Dreyfus was eventually pardoned 1906 after the affair had run and run since 1894.

Durkheim owed an intellectual debt to fellow Frenchman Comte's positivist doctrine half a century before. It enabled him to develop, as he put it *the science of society* and social physics further. Comte and Durkheim asserted the view that science and rationality can deploy observation, experiment and comparison to social life, as science does to natural phenomenon. The social world can be observed to be organised and dynamic; it can even be actually, practically and intentionally organised in such a way that maximises social cohesion and combats the threat of inequality brought about by industrialisation. This was Comte's world-view.

Durkheim thought that social life functions through the continuing operation of a complex system. The parts of the system work together to produce stability. This *functionalist* approach says that the job of sociology is to study the relationships between different parts of the social system that enable society to function. Together different sub-systems enable the main system to work as a whole. This organic, body-system metaphor is just as seductive today as it was then. These systems theories and metaphors are prevalent in everything from maths and biology to business and healthcare. This is partly because the idea of (functional) 'system' gives us the comforting idea of *fixity* and *predictability* rather than the more unsettling states of *contingency*⁷ and *randomness*. Also seductive is the idea of mapping or reproducing in social life the certain knowledge, continuity and reliability that define complex systems such as the planet, the human/mammalian body, a plant or evolutionary reproduction.

Research and study on the 'real-world' issues of the time – on religion, the division of labour and suicide as examples – honed the sociological approach of Durkheim and presented to him the notion of *social facts*. These are rules of action and institutions that constrain or channel human behaviour like the family, organised religion or marriage.

He was concerned with what binds society together - *social solidarity*. Solidarity is still a powerful and specific concept in French culture today, and has influence in many other cultures. It conjures up the idea of consensus and social cohesion in rough times⁸ and periods of great social change. The term does not fully translate into English but 'a state where social bonds and interdependency hold people together' will do. In Durkheim's time rapid and deep-seated change in people's living and working lives were taking place due to industrial revolution and the establishment of a post-agrarian model of societal organisation. The solidarity idea was further conceptualised between the mechanical and the organic.

Mechanical solidarity describes a pre-industrialised, pastoral, agrarian society. Most people do the same things and live in close proximity. They have the same values and influences and believe the same things. Distinctions between work, family, kinship and society are blurred and distinctly over-lapping if not non-existent. Moral rules are firm and rarely transgressed; collective consciousness is concrete; and law is repressive in response to the rarity and shock of any transgression.

Organic solidarity, by contrast, involves people doing different things to earn a living – i.e. a high division of labour. People's working lives become separate from one another and work becomes more separate from the rest of life. People are dependent upon one another for goods and services as, individually, they are producing one small link in the chain. Durkheim was taken by the seemingly paradoxical idea that in a more diverse society people could

⁷ Later, sociological ideas such as contingency theory would emphasise the lack of fixity and predictability in human endeavour and social relationships thus challenging the functionalist school of sociological thinking.

⁸ Solidarity used as a term, for instance, by the revolutionary workers movement in Poland in the 1980s *Solidarność*, and as the term for the giving of income from the not so fortunate to the even less fortunate by the *Emmaus* movement. Emmaus is a movement of social businesses that provide homes for homeless people, work for its resident 'companions', and recycling, re-use and restoration services for the community. It originated in France and spread to 15 plus other countries with about 32 centres in the UK at present.

become more solidified due to their many inter-dependencies; people in the modern age drawn together because of difference rather than sameness. Many of these interdependencies were not necessarily very visible or part of the daily lived experience. To Durkheim, as well as to many other observers at the time, the driving problem was: would society hold together?

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries industrialisation brought with it a profound re-patterning of how people lived, worked, met, married and conducted their lives. Durkheim was optimistic about the stronger bonds of inter-dependence and collective purpose and the extent to which society could hold together. This sociology rings out to today's problems of how society holds together in the face of an ideological *individualism* that is pre-eminently celebrated and encouraged as the model of all human action.

Rapid societal change however brings with it the risk of **Anomie** - the opposite of solidarity. Durkheim conceptualised anomie as a state of normlessness where social norms that bind people together become weaker, or at the very least weaker for some. Common bonds, when strained or cut, leave the individual at sea and confused, for instance in the cases of divorce, extreme debt or a move away from localised roots and familiarity. These were all acute concerns of the early modern period. Social isolation leaves the egoistic⁹ individual less able to function and benefit from the mutual exchange of ideas, resources, love or care. At the 'anomie' extreme is the mortal sin - as it was seen at the time - and monstrous taboo of suicide.

*Suicide*¹⁰ was a ground-breaking study in 1897. This was not only because it revealed the social influences and differences in society as regards people who were more likely or less likely to take their own lives. Even more it broke ground because it revealed, through systematic research, the *social influences* aside from psychological influences upon human action. In the case of *Suicide* socially constructed differences and similarities were revealed through studying the specifics of suicide rates and the contextual circumstances of different social groups. The study unearthed more suicides amongst men than women; more amongst the wealthy than the poor; more amongst single people than married people; and more amongst Protestants than Catholics.

In the last half of the 19th century the plight of the urban poor, fears about social fractures and desperate poverty in cities concerned artists, industrialists and politicians too as this slight early painting below depicts¹¹. 1850 to 1900 saw a process of unprecedented economic and social change. Watts' painting at the beginning of this period illustrates a casualty of change that later Durkheim explained.

⁹ Not to be confused with today's 'egotistic' idea

¹⁰ Durkheim, E., 1952 (1897) *'Suicide: A Study in Sociology'*

¹¹ This painting and many others can be viewed at the Watts Gallery <http://www.wattsgallery.org.uk/watts-gallery>

***Found Drowned* by George Watts, 1850**



Found Drowned depicted the horror of unexplained death on a huge canvas by the very popular painter George Watts. The plight of poverty and failing cities exercised the minds of artists and politicians as well as academics like Durkheim. In this case Watts bravely broke some artistic conventions and taboos of the times by depicting desperate isolation and poverty on three huge canvasses of which this is one. It is, in turns, beautiful, disturbing and curious and it includes the mysterious motif of the gold chain in the woman's left hand. The work can be seen in the Watts Gallery, Compton, Surrey.



Durkheim's comparative studies for *Suicide* concluded that people who were more socially integrated were less likely to commit suicide in part due to their conduct being more socially regulated. Such forces of social regulation, integration and solidarity affected and directed many other areas of human action. Durkheim was uncovering the social forces and 'social physics' that prompt action and inaction in people above and beyond choices driven by personal cognition, motivation or what we now understand as personal *well-being* and *mental health* (then mental ill-health was described as, madness, hysteria or lunacy). Durkheim also studied religion and its social process and was one of the first to do so in a systematic and rigorous way from a social science rather than theological viewpoint. He

concluded that religion was society worshipping itself – the ‘*collective effervescence*’ of society celebrating its congruity and functionality. Belief and value was vested in the symbols, rites, rituals and totems of religion. These brought about social order through normative adherence to rules and norms. Organised religion consistently reminded people of these *social norms*. Durkheim was not making any agnostic or atheistic point but instead allowing us to view the *latent*¹² social provision of institutions above and beyond their stated, intended or immediately obvious purpose. Here Durkheim observed organised religion as the most important institution for organising, proselytising and maintaining social norms over and above religion’s manifest spiritual function.

Social ‘facts’ –

For instance Durkheim observed crime and deviance as ‘*social facts*’. Crime and deviance he saw as not only inevitable outcomes of social agency¹³ but necessary to societal functioning. At the time people in society were becoming less constrained and limited by traditional convention than were their forbears or at least some were. Social taboos and conduct boundaries were being broken for instance in personal and sexual freedoms or moral behaviour and patriarchal honour as the *Dreyfus scandal* in the box above demonstrates.

Deviance fulfils two important functions. Firstly it has an *adaptive* function¹⁴ it introduces new behaviours, challenges or goals into society. These may be challenged in the first instance and will provoke challenge and re-assertion of social rights and wrongs. Over time however some deviant behaviour can become normalised. Secondly, deviance paradoxically facilitates *boundary maintenance* between good and bad behaviours. Transgressing the boundaries of right and wrong can have a solidifying effect upon the commitment of the ‘moral majority’ to clarify social norms and what determine what constitutes legitimate and desirable behaviour. If you like we understand the universality of what is ‘good’ and ‘right’ in part through the exceptionalism of what is ‘bad’. In the historical moment deviance solidifies the good and the desirable; over time social ‘goods’ change and evolve.

Durkheim’s paradigm-making social studies and identification of a concept of social facts and dynamic social life was influential and long lasting creating a *functionalist* school of thought in sociology. Functionalist theory sees social institutions in terms of the functions that they perform and contribution that they make to the continuity and stability of society. Functionalism also says that social life transcends the life of the individual; social life ‘operates’ at a separate level to the individual whilst not necessarily negating the agency and transformative power of the individual. Durkheim’s work tended towards identifying the things that drew society together and the constraints placed upon individual agency rather than the constituency of what might divide or create disharmony. His work has been criticised for implying an innate and purposive character to society as if was a specific phenomenon, ‘thing-like’ with its own needs.

¹² Later sociological study would unearth the latent, un-intended and un-stated social functions of social institutions

¹³ ‘Agency’ meaning the capacity for people to act as they chose and see fit. It was not a term much in use at this time.

¹⁴ See Giddens, A. and Sutton, P. (2013) ‘*Sociology*’ 7th edition, pages 922-965

Today's issues

1) Does Happiness Matter?



In all probability every culture, in every time and every place would identify happiness as important to human life if not the most important thing. This seems like an obvious, common-sense statement. However where can we see happiness and well-being aspirations targeted in social policy or in the organisation of economic, social and geo-political systems¹⁵? Money and material comforts make a difference to happiness but they are not the whole story.

Happiness and well-being goals are seen by many as better metrics than conventional economic measurements that are so frequently used as the proxy measures for happiness, social good and progress. Economic measurement has a continuing decline in 'meaning'. Economic measures such as GDP or GNP provide less and less reliability or validity as measures of worth, materiality, progress or 'goodness'. The early 21st century has been marked already by a banking crisis, the Great Recession, collapsing economies in Greece, Spain, Ireland and large chunks of the middle-east, stagnant economic productivity in the USA and the UK and the future being heavily mortgaged with exorbitant national debt. Excessive consumption with its itinerant natural resource depletion and waste production are building up a planetary crisis. Governments in the rich world are more and more concerned with fiscal tightening and austerity and therefore even more possessed by economic measurement as the measure of whether or not 'progress' is being achieved. These factors continue to provoke cries of a crisis in capitalism. At the same time many relatively wealthy countries are not necessarily proving to be the happier ones.

Measurement of happiness and well-being includes innovative work led by the Earth Institute and the academic leadership of Jeffrey Sachs and Richard Layard. Here are some highlights from their first Global Happiness survey commissioned by the UN.

¹⁵ Bhutan is one such place where a national happiness index is used to guide government policy

The Seven Causes of Happiness¹⁶:

1. Income	5. Health
2. Work	6. Personal Freedom
3. Family (and close relationships)	7. Personal Values
4. Community and Friends	

What makes people across the world happy?¹⁷

- Political freedom, strong social networks and an absence of corruption are together more important than income in explaining well-being differences between the top and bottom countries.
- Happier countries tend to be richer countries. But more important for happiness than income are social factors like the strength of social support, the absence of corruption and the degree of personal freedom.
- Over time as living standards have risen, happiness has increased in some countries, but not in others (like for example, the United States). On average, the world has become a little happier in the last 30 years (by 0.14 times the standard deviation of happiness around the world).
- Unemployment causes as much unhappiness as bereavement or separation. At work, job security and good relationships do more for job satisfaction than high pay and convenient hours.
- Behaving well makes people happier.
- Mental health is the biggest single factor affecting happiness in any country. Yet only a quarter of mentally ill people get treatment for their condition in advanced countries and fewer in poorer countries.
- Stable family life and enduring marriages are important for the happiness of parents and children.
- In advanced countries, women are happier than men, while the position in poorer countries is mixed.
- At the individual level, good mental and physical health, someone to count on, job security and stable families are crucial.

¹⁶ *Happiness Lessons from a New Science*, Richard Layard, 2010

¹⁷ Earth Institute, Columbia University (2012) *World Happiness Report* commissioned by the United Nations

So who are the happiest nations?:

Northern Europeans are the happiest in the world whilst the countries of the sub-Saharan countries are the least happy¹⁸. Denmark tops the list of the happiest closely followed by Norway, Finland and the Netherlands.

END OF SAMPLE

¹⁸ *Ibid* 11