



Dawson, M. (2018) 'Sociology Exists': the importance of the history of sociology and the role of origin myths. Sociological Review: Blog, 13 Nov.

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Deposited on: 15 November 2018

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‘Sociology Exists’: The Importance of the History of Sociology and the Role of Origin Myths

At a meeting of the Sociological Society in 1904 a paper entitled ‘Sociology and the Social Sciences’ written by Émile Durkheim and Paul Fauconnet was read out by Bernard Bosanquet in the authors’ absence. Later [published](#) in *The Sociological Papers* (the forerunner to *The Sociological Review*) the paper explored the relation of sociology to other social sciences and discussed the need for sociologists to maintain a holistic view of society and avoid excessive specialisation. However, it was also a critique of the tendency, common to sociology then and now, towards an obsessive discussion concerning what sociology is or ought to be (Philip Abrams [famously claimed](#) the three volumes of the *Papers* contained 61 definitions of ‘sociology’). While not opposed to defining sociology, indeed that is one goal of their paper, Durkheim and Fauconnet were critical of the ‘unprofitable gymnastics’ of trying to do so as a mere mental exercise. Instead, defining sociology is inevitably a *historical* question, since:

Sociology exists; it has a history displaying its nature; there is, therefore, no place for efforts to imagine what it is. We can observe it. Though no good purpose is served in disputing in abstracto what the science ought to be, there is on the contrary a real interest in becoming acquainted with the course of its development, in giving an account of the various elements whence it resulted, and of the parts they occupy respectively in the whole structure

I am often reminded of this quote whenever I read attempts to define sociology and its purpose. The tendency Durkheim and Fauconnet identified has not lessened in the years since, sociologists continue to spend a lot of time discussing what sociology is and ought to be, as the recent [THE piece](#) on the ‘state of sociology’ and its [many responses](#) indicate. What is remarkable in such exercises is the role history plays. Initially it seems history plays no role, many such exercises express seemingly ahistorical intellectual and/or political claims concerning sociology. Indeed, in some cases this is true. For a discipline that likes to think of itself as having an empirical concern, it is shocking how often scholars will eschew looking at the data of what sociology has been when defining what it is/should be. However, in some cases, a closer reading tends to reveal two claims concerning the history of sociology.

The first claim is that sociology emerged as a reflection of the common values of the society in which it found itself. This story contains a wide variety of different outcomes including: the suggestion sociology was tied to a project and outlook of imperialism, an ‘ethno-sociology of metropolitan society’ to use [Connell’s term](#); the idea it was linked to reformist currents; and suggestions of sociology being driven by an idea of human progress and consensus. These stories then suggest some sort of rupture during the second half of the 20th, or into the early 21st, Century as more radical perspectives and/or the postcolonial critique, enter sociology. In [Burawoy’s wording](#), we have the ‘scissors movement’ in sociology as it becomes an increasingly left-wing discipline in opposition to the dominant right-wing neoliberal order. For some, this is a welcome corrective to a discipline which for too long was tied to the established order, for others a problematic reflection of ‘grievance studies’ and the politicisation of intellectual enquiry. The past is a foreign country which we should either avoid or visit again.

The second claim is that sociology was initially a radical critique of society, in some cases it is suggested one with a [‘close connection’](#) to socialism. While this can be linked to Marxism, it isn’t essential; for example, stories concerning sociology’s emergence outside academia in

non-Marxist movements often rely upon such a claim. This story then has its own version of the rupture where, come the institutionalisation of sociology within the comfy confines of academia it increasingly moves in a conservative direction. The ‘Durksonian’ consensus, as [Bauman](#) once put it, encouraged a view of the sociologist as an impartial scientist who is able to ‘sell his knowledge to spread a disease just as freely as he can to fight it’ in [Gouldner’s words](#). In some readings, this hesitancy continues into the current day, where the pressures of REF, impact, academic neoliberalism and precarity encourage even more conservatism on the part of sociologists. It is not uncommon for [Becker’s Whose Side are We On](#) to be invoked in this story, encouraging scholars to reclaim their link to the underdog; often ignoring that this paper was criticised at the time by [Gouldner](#) and others for its reinforcement of the conservative consensus.

Whichever of these stories is chosen, they are then used to justify an image of what sociology should be, either via a historical reckoning with the problematic past or in a return to a glorious past which holds the potential for sociology to revitalise itself. I would like to suggest that each story works as an ‘origin myth’. Each contains some element of truth, but their emphasis on a simple linear progressing defining the history of sociology is inevitably an overemphasis on one element of the story. Like all origin myths, the value of the story is not one of accuracy, but how it is used to justify the speaker’s own claim for what should be. The myths help to uphold sometimes simplistic dualistic conceptions: sociology is either a discipline concerned with consensus and social order *or* a radical critique of injustice depending on the speaker’s preference.

I would suggest however that reliance on either myth leaves us much poorer as a discipline, and, problematically, will require us to define some work which does not fit the story as ‘not sociology’. Instead, I would advocate a close awareness of sociology’s history which recognises its complex and contradictory nature. This would lead us away from a linear story concerning what sociology innately ‘is’ and towards a recognition that sociology has been, is, and most likely will continue to be an innately pluralistic discipline with competing conceptions of its key concerns.

This pluralistic story inevitably involves highlighting contradictory tendencies within the same period of sociology’s history. For example, it is true that British sociology had close links to the [eugenics movement](#) during its early years. But, it is also true that the eugenics movement contained a [‘reformist’ branch](#) which emphasised the environment, rather than hereditary traits, as the key causal factor which, while hardly free of criticism, was central to the formation of the welfare state. It is true that the [first sociology classes at the LSE](#) advertised themselves as especially useful for ‘civil servants destined for the tropical portions of the empire’, yet it is also true early British sociology was defined by [support of and opposition to](#) the imperial project. Looking more globally, it is true that in some places, such as [South Africa](#), state policy encouraged sociology to become an oppositional movement, but it also true that in some places, such as [Sweden](#) or [Ireland](#), a mix of an allegiance with the state and/or pressure from the church encouraged support of the status quo. It is true that sociology, especially in America, has marginalised some voices, such as [Du Bois](#), due to their race, yet it is also true that sociology was in many places seen as a racialised discipline, such as in France where, with Durkheim as its figurehead, it was dismissed as a [‘Jewish science’](#) and an attempt to ‘speak Hebrew into the social being’. It is true that sociology has been combined with [rational action theory](#), just as it has with [postcolonialism](#).

In short, through these and many other examples we see how an awareness of sociology's history leads us to be critical about essentialised claims concerning what sociology has, is and could be. I would suggest, at least in Britain, we are currently experiencing a period of renewed scholarly interest in the history of discipline, with many excellent recent studies too large in number to list here. Hopefully, such interest encourages us all to realise that, to return to Durkheim and Fauconnet, sociology exists; it has a history we can take inspiration from *and* be critical of, often at the same time. This historical record encourages us to be critical of origin myths used to justify positions in the here and now, but rather to reckon with the many things sociology has been. This may lead to greater recognition of the pluralised, rather than dualistic, ways of doing sociology in the current day.

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