The Myth of Culture

The Myth of Culture: Why We Need a Genuine Natural Science of Societies

by

Nigel Barber

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To: Trudy Callaghan

For many kinds of help and support

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INTRODUCTION

Yes, it may seem crazy to declare that culture is a "myth." I am not claiming that the Parthenon is a hoax or that when your cousin knits a cable stitch he is looming the wind. The many different connotations of the word "culture" certainly mean *something* in common parlance. Yet, in the rarified domain of scientific theory, the explanatory fabric of cultural determinism is as threadless as the Emperor's new clothes in the celebrated Hans Christian Andersen fairytale. Considered *as a scientific explanation*, culture is indeed as big a hoax as Piltdown Man. The difference is that it is perpetrated unconsciously, and without malice, by well-meaning and intelligent people.

Our understanding of human societies is in its very early infancy, I argue. Scientists neither comprehend what is important to investigate nor how to set about the job. Few serious thinkers would dispute that premise given that the social sciences are centuries younger than the physical and natural sciences. If the hard sciences are dated to the Italian Renaissance, that would mean they are about five whereas the social sciences recently passed their first birthday (in centuries). Young sciences are error prone in the sense of making broad conceptual mistakes that hamper their progress. One pervasive initial error is to imagine that phenomena are responsible for themselves. Prior to Newton, the apple fell because it wanted to: it was described as having an affinity for the ground.

Such pre-Newtonian explanations are considered "metaphysical" as dealing with the first principles of philosophy. As sciences mature, they remove the explanation out of the phenomenon being studied and place it in external phenomena. Newton realized that the movement of the apple in response to the earth's gravitation was no different in principle from the circulation of the moon in its earthly orbit, or the earth's own annual trajectory about the sun. Gravitation is largely irrelevant to the social sciences, of course, but we also have access to another grand theory that helps us to explain behavioral phenomena in terms of a few simple universal ideas. That is the theory of evolution by natural selection.

Just as Newton advanced our understanding of gravitation by recognizing causes outside of the moving object, progress in the behavioral sciences can be made by looking for environmental causes for the actions of individuals, and hence of entire populations. Such environmental factors supplant earlier moralistic interpretations.

In the realm of natural science, there is no point in attributing criminal behavior to the evil disposition of the criminal, for instance. No one wishes to excuse bad behavior, of course. The point is that attributing criminal actions to bad character is scientifically worthless. It is empty and circular because we might not even have identified the person as evil had they not committed their crimes.

Moralistic explanations of crime from that perspective are no better than saying that the apple fell because it wanted to. Yet, we are surrounded by such tautological explanations every day. We are told that young people have sex before marriage due to declining moral values, that workers slack off on account of a declining work ethic, that people are obese because they are "addicted" to food. Such "values" interpretations are the stock in trade of religious demagogues but they are not peculiar to religious conservatives. Values resurface in the writings of social scientists subtly repackaged into more religiously muted terms such as "norms" and "mores" that have a greater semblance of scientific plausibility. Yet, they suffer from the same basic problems of circularity and scientific emptiness as I illustrate in detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

Social scientists need to abandon moralistic interpretations that just do not work and therefore cannot contribute to building societies that are fairer and more effective. This book debunks the flawed and ineffectual social science that wastes endless money on college campuses and proposes that we can do better by opening our minds to a natural-science approach.

Social scientists must turn their backs on culture as a scientific explanation. That is easy to say but it can be accomplished only by proposing a viable scientific agenda to replace the current empire of cultural determinism. We need to establish objective, scientifically viable, explanations for differences among societies, and for the historical changes that bring them about.

Nailing down the contextual influences on human behavior is not easy. That is why it has taken social scientists so long to grasp why societies differ in their habits and preoccupations. Environmental influences on behavior are intrinsically very complex. There are at least three different environments to consider: the ancestral environment that shaped us as a species; the developmental environment that affected who we are by modifying the anatomy and function of our brains, and the current context in which we deploy the accumulated resources of what we have inherited biologically from our ancestors and acquired during our lifetimes to fulfill needs that are directed at survival, social success, and reproduction. The over-arching assumption of an evolutionary perspective on human societies is that the *mechanisms* underlying societal differences must tend to increase biological

success or else they would have been taken out by natural selection.

The beauty of an evolutionary approach is that we do not require a comprehensive understanding of the mind-blowing complexity of brain development or neurophysiology. (That is just as well considering that our current information about brain function, despite many breakthrough accomplishments, is still not equal to solving basic problems such as how memories are stored). All that is really required is a demonstration that some pattern of behavior is (a) predictably sensitive to environmental variation and (b) tends to contribute to survival or reproductive success.

Mammals inhabiting cold climates have thicker fur, and larger body size, relative to related animals in temperate climates, for instance. This helps them conserve heat and it matters little whether this is due to mutant genes affecting body size and fur density or merely reflects the developmental stimulus of low temperatures on infant hair follicles or food intake. Of course, the same goal may be accomplished by digging a den to mitigate harsh winter conditions, as the mother polar bear does. If a mammal happens to be denuded of fur, as humans are, the problem can be solved by knitting warm sweaters preferably with cable stitches.

From this perspective, an exclusive focus on genes as the architect of body and behavior, so beloved of population biologists and "sociobiologists" makes little sense. Genes are as much servants as masters in the process of biological development. Merely by reading a stimulating book, I turn on genes in brain cells that are instrumental in forming new synapses in the brain, for instance. We now understand that the brain is an extremely plastic organ that changes throughout our lives so that highly educated people become more intelligent as a consequence (and even benefit from greater longevity due to delayed brain senescence).

This is not to minimize the role of (cell nucleus) genes as the primary mechanism of biological inheritance. Yet, we do not need to establish specific genetic mechanisms to study adaptation. For, if we did, it would also be essential to understand the biochemistry of the maternal egg cell that provides the environment that shapes gene expression from the moment of fertilization on. Cutting through the complexity of biological mechanisms, the concept of adaptation merely claims that the phenotype (or functional aspect of the organism) is shaped by the environment in ways that are generally conducive to survival and reproductive success (although they cannot pan out in every single instance).

Adaptation in the natural world is normally assessed in terms of the lock-and-key match between an organism and the way that it makes its living. A hummingbird that feeds from flowers with a deep calyx, such as the scimitar, evolves a longer bill than species that feed from shallower flowers. It is *as*

though the bills were designed to exploit the flowers but there is no design as such, just the mechanical process of natural selection operating over many generations.

The scimitar hummingbird has a longer beak proportional to its body size than any other bird and this adaptation allows it to suck nectar from deep flowers. Such species-wide adaptations begin as individual variation in bill size, of course, and ancestral scimitars with shorter bills were taken out by natural selection because their average reproductive success, or biological fitness, was correspondingly reduced.

At an individual level, one can see adaptation at work not just by how the organism addresses species-typical challenges but also by a capacity to change in suitable ways in response to the challenge posed by the *current* environment. Wolves in one ecology may concentrate on capturing voles but in another they may cooperate to bring down a large animal such as an elk or moose. Such flexibility is absolutely characteristic of all animals capable of complex learning and is not peculiar to human beings.

Indeed, pack-hunting mammals often rely heavily on social learning not just for prey choice but also for information on where and when to hunt as well as the specific techniques used in prey capture whether individual or cooperative. Even comparatively asocial hunters such as tigers are completely dependent on their mothers for learning how to hunt correctly. The great advantage of this system is that it allows for more subtle adaptations to the characteristics of local ecologies. Based on her experiences, the mother likely acquires a treasure trove of information about good places to hunt that she can transmit directly to the cubs. We can expect to find slight differences in the hunting behaviors of local populations as they respond flexibly to varied prey possibilities, the intensity of competition, the characteristics of vegetation cover, and so forth. Social learning thus allows animals to respond adaptively to the varied opportunities of their environments *within a generation* instead of waiting possibly thousands of generations for similar changes to occur through gene-based evolution.

Humans also benefit from opportunistic exploitation of the varied resources in different locations. Our ancestors quickly passed from hunting and gathering to farming (at least in terms of evolutionary time), for instance. It is likely that they did so because of the pressure they themselves had exerted on their prey animals due to ever more effective hunting technologies that drove the prey to extinction. As with other social mammals, the fact that people in different societies experience such different conditions means that any adaptationist approach that focuses purely on species-typical adaptations is wholly inadequate.

Applying evolutionary thinking to modern human societies assumes that

we respond in biologically meaningful ways to varied social circumstances. In general terms, there is little reasonable doubt that this over-arching assumption must be correct. To take a fairly simple instance, one would expect that people brought up in comparatively risky conditions should be more wary and suspicious as wariness helps the individual to avoid harm and to survive. Indeed, animal experiments have established that early stressors have precisely this effect on the developing brains of mammals. The same is true of human beings. Those who are raised in the relatively stressful circumstance of poverty in our society are mush more vulnerable to anxiety as adults, for instance. Striking evidence for this is to be found in the fact that poverty is a risk factor for virtually every form of anxiety-related disorder including heart disease, hypertension, depression, and drug addictions – all of which take years off the average life expectancy.

If there is a predictable lock-and-key type match between the psychology and behavior of socioeconomic groups and their varied challenges, might not the same be true of other demographic groups, including entire countries. It is certainly difficult to compare nations based on their level of affluence because an income of $10 per day in Vietnam or Bangladesh has different implications than the same income in Ireland, for instance. The cost of living just varies too much as does the level of participation in the monetary economy (as opposed to being self-sufficient in food, shelter and other basic needs).

Instead of focusing solely on economics, I have chosen to investigate the impact of varied marriage markets and other factors. One finds that countries experiencing a scarcity of marriageable men have more liberated sexual behavior. They are also more violent and less happy. Individuals thus adjust to their varied national circumstances consistent with the over-arching assumption of adaptive flexibility. Admittedly, experts in evolutionary theory often argue that the process of adaptation relates to fitness consequences over long periods of time in the dim and distant *past* more than in the present. That is a false dichotomy. Indeed, the flexibility of humans to varied modern conditions of wealth and social status rests partly upon ancient mechanisms of flexible brain development. Similarly, one can argue that the mechanisms through which we adapt to varied social conditions, such as through social learning, are evolutionarily ancient.

Thinking about *societal* differences as based on adaptation of *individuals* to the varying contexts of psychological development and adult life might seem like a radically new way of looking at the world. Yet, it is precisely the perspective adopted by behavioral ecologists including human behavioral ecologists. This approach is what you get when you strip out two related presuppositions underlying most of the contemporary social sciences, namely

human uniqueness and cultural determinism.

Throughout this book, I make the case that cultural determinism is lame science on a par with the use of earlier metaphysical pseudo explanation in physics and chemistry. Much of the case for human uniqueness rests on the flawed assumption that observational learning is important only for our species. To the contrary, female collared flycatchers and other species (possibly including humans) prefer to mate with an individual who is attractive to other females. Migratory geese also learn their migration routes by traveling with elders: if denied this experience, populations will fail to migrate correctly and get wiped out in a single generation.

I pioneered the use of evolutionary concepts, to provide an objective explanation for why *societies* differ and change (as opposed to the more individual-level focus of behavioral ecologists). To this end, I have developed a new science of societies that has a formal, but simple, set of interlocked assumptions. It is known as Evolutionary Social Science. This novel approach is bound to be controversial and it may indeed have errors and blind spots.

The biggest limitation of evolutionary social science is that it either excludes, or appears to exclude, many of the topics that social scientists in the humanist tradition see as pivotal. In particular, it focuses on objective outcomes and steers clear of subjective interpretations except to the degree that these can be linked to measurable outcomes. For example, I justify the study of national happiness because it is so strongly tied to objectively measurable outcomes of health and longevity. Learning why people in some countries are so much happier than in others is thus of great practical importance. It is also a project for which evolutionary concepts provide considerable illumination.

Anyone proposing a natural-science approach to human societies can expect a tidal wave of skepticism. It has been attempted so often before and come to so little, whether one is talking about Comte's criticism of metaphysical explanation, Skinner's Utopian psychology, or the genetic determinism of early sociobiology to name a few. Many writers in the social sciences are social constructionists arguing that how some event affects us is determined largely by the meaning we attribute to it that is itself a product of learning, indoctrination, and shared experiences. Such processes, they argue, are largely unavailable to objective analysis. Any presumption that complex human societies can be parsed using scientific method is dismissed as "scientism," a term that denotes fallacious and Procrustean shallowness and pretension.

The scientific approach to human societies is clearly limited in what it may accomplish. Science can never fully explain what fans get out of a rock

concert, although it can certainly draw general conclusions about what the typical profile of an attendee is and what their stated motives are for showing up. Such limitations are real but they do not undermine the value or usefulness of a scientific approach to human societies. To begin with, evolutionary social science draws on useful insights from animal behavior. Thus, we can conclude that polygamous mating provides heritable disease resistance for human females as it does for birds whereas religious endorsement of polygamy is more or less irrelevant.

This instance merely underlines the fact that the real drivers of social phenomena may be very different from what they are perceived to be. For the past century, social scientists have insisted that you must be an insider to really understand what is going on within a society. This is rather like claiming that you have to be insane to understand the meaning of insanity. Yet, the mentally ill are the *last* people to correctly grasp the distinction between reality and hallucination. In the same way, members of a society could be uniquely ill-equipped to understand why they behave as they do. Thus religions around the world entertain shared delusions that are recognized as such by devotees of rival religions. Moreover, the delusions are qualitatively indistinguishable from those of the insane, except that they happen to be shared with others.

Insiders are often singularly lacking in insight about the objective causes of their actions. Of the many possible explanations that citizens of a polygamous country might offer for practicing this system of marriage, heritable parasite resistance was never mentioned. Yet it seems to be one of the most important factors based on comparative research.

In addition to their conspicuous failure to grasp major factors driving their societies, insiders are often conspicuously wrong in the explanations that they *do* offer. In the old days, single parenthood was attributed to immorality and vice. Today it is put down to more positive factors such as sexual liberation and female reproductive choice. In general though, single parenthood is explainable in terms of the economics of child raising and the marriage market – external factors that have nothing to do with moralistic influences whether of a positive or a negative spin.

Linking the form of human marriage, or the breeding systems of birds to heritable parasite resistance is certainly interesting but its usefulness is far from obvious. One might question whether evolutionary social science is of any practical value. Yet this problem is not peculiar to evolutionary analysis of human societies: it is typical of all scientific endeavors. In the long run, the most useful discoveries, such as the structure of DNA, are not achieved with practical applications in mind but rather in the spirit of pursuing a gripping crossword puzzle.

Knowing that the usefulness of some discovery cannot be foreseen, we give, or ought to give scientists a license to pursue their curiosity in much the same way that we grant fiction writers license to describe people and events that do not actually exist. It is in our rational self interest to do so because the most gripping theoretical science is often the most practical in the long run. We would never have made it to the moon if we had not had the benefit of theoretical equations quantifying gravitation from Newton on and space travel provided an intellectual seed that grew into the electronic age in which we live today.

I believe that evolutionary social science already has some fairly direct and important practical implications in the fields of health and happiness. If vulnerability to stress-related illnesses is fundamentally related to an evolutionary history of adaptations for social competition, then we are a long way forward in understanding the social and economic importance of reducing social competition and income inequality. Of course, we would never want everyone to earn exactly the same income as this would rob our economies of a useful incentive for hard work, professionalism, and industriousness. That said, a country in which all citizens – including those at the bottom of the income ladder – have some prospect of economic advancement is going to be not only healthier and happier, but also more economically efficient in terms of producing the best quality of life for the entire population. Conversely, a society in which the number of hopelessly poor and disenfranchised people is increasing demands gargantuan public expenditures on both health care and criminal incarceration facilities without either improving health or reducing crime. An evolutionary approach encourages us to think of everyone as having essentially the same needs that must be met as the price of living in a safe and prosperous society.

Whatever the practical applications of a modern evolutionary approach to societies, this book suggests that a genuine scientific perspective provides practical as well as theoretical advantages over the pseudoscientific approaches that proliferated over the past century. In taking this uncompromising approach to the sincere efforts of a vast number of dedicated scholars, one runs the risk of seeming arrogant, or unreasonable, or both. Yet the number of bad ideas in the social sciences is not attributable to any shortcomings of social scientists as a group. Really there are just two reasons that the promise of an evolutionary approach has been delayed so long.

The first reason is that the problem is so complex. Having thought about it for much of my waking life over the past two decades, I feel that I have just begun to scratch the surface. The second reason is that the necessary theoretical tools have just recently become available. Many earlier attempts to "Darwinize" the social sciences failed because the proponents knew little

about the mechanisms of natural selection, or knew little about human societies and psychological development.

Evolutionary thought has developed markedly from the organ-centered approach to adaptation of Darwin himself (the giraffe's neck, the eye), to the gene-centered perspective ("genes for altruism"), to the current view in which genes recede into the causal background and the focus is much more on the developmental mechanisms through which individuals fit in with their local ecologies (dangerous early environments increase adult wariness).

Along with increasing recognition of the very great complexity of behavioral adaptation, evolutionists have come to recognize that natural selection works at many different levels. It may select a species-typical action pattern such as web construction by a funnel spider. Instead of selecting overt behavior, it may act via the developmental and psychological mechanisms of which behavior is a function. These include a capacity for social learning that is shared by all social animals and is not just peculiar to humans as many cultural determinists rashly claim.

An evolved capacity for social learning greatly enlarges the ways that animals become adapted to their way of life (or ecological niche). It also helps us to understand variation among human societies. Pursuing these notions to their logical conclusion opens the door to a genuine natural science of societies.

CHAPTER ONE

TEAPOTS IN HEAVEN, PHLOGISTON ON EARTH

Arch atheist Bertrand Russell (1997) liked to spoof religion. He replaced the Deity with a china teapot floating in outer space. The teapot metaphor also works for the concept of "culture" that is used to "explain" everything about our species that seems beyond the reach of science. Natural science has its own problems with illusory explanations, of course. Before discovering oxygen, scientists imagined that combustion was due to a mysterious principle of fire lurking in all flammable objects. Scientists ultimately wake up to their delusions though. Religious people, and cultural determinists, make a virtue of cherishing theirs.

So What Is Wrong With Culture?

It makes me want to shout! Instead, let me sketch out some of the more pernicious aspects of using the word "culture" in any sentence aimed at increasing scientific knowledge or understanding. Perhaps the biggest problem with culture is that it has no precise meaning. On the face of it, this rules out any possibility that it could have a scientific meaning.

Extending from what happens in Petrie dishes to what goes on in art galleries, the concept of culture is so over-used that it is almost entirely devoid of exact meaning, much less a precise scientific one. Our notions of meaning are, to some extent, dependent on our ideas about the function of language. According to Wittgenstein and Ogden (2003), the meaning of a word is constrained by the contexts in which it is used. Precise words have precise usage. When the surgeon says *Scalpel*! she is not going to be happy with just any cutting tool such as a scissors or box cutter. At the time when the skin has been disinfected in preparation for incision, a surgeon might happen to say, "scallops" instead of "scalpel" if, for instance, she happened to be distracted by the thought of which hors d'oeuvre she had enjoyed on the previous evening. Yet, you can be fairly sure that she would have gotten a scalpel rather than scallops, if Wittgenstein's theory of language is to be believed. The context cries out for a scalpel and it is almost impossible to

imagine any conditions under which "scallops" uttered there would yield an order of shellfish.

When the word "culture" is used in lieu of a scientific explanation, it is an absolutely unpardonable breach of scientific precision (with minor exceptions for microbiology). This is not merely a slip of the tongue, or a category error. We are not mistaking scalpels for scallops, or scissors. It is an absolute slide into linguistic nihilism where the surgeon abdicates all responsibility for precise communication and says, "give me the thingy."

No matter, you might say, if the operating theater assistants know the routine, realize what she wants and gives her the scalpel, all is well. Science does not work like that, however. Readers of scientific papers do not have all the answers. If they are satisfied with a social science that accounts for some bizarre pattern of human social behavior with the assurance that, "it is cultural," they should be quite happy to go under the knife of a surgeon who is wont to say, "Give me the thingy." By now, it should be obvious why I want to shout. Some mediocre scholars have prospered by saying, "Culture! Cultural! Culture-bound! Culturally relative! Uniquely human! Cultural explanation" and other such riffs. They have parlayed the variations of thinginess into secure academic jobs.

The academy provides a context for people who are supposed to understand human behavior. What they say when challenged on some point — as by a student in a sociology lecture hall — becomes the received answer. After all, it is certainly the appropriate context for credible explanations to be produced. Alas, the answers that sociology students receive to reasonable questions, such as, "Why did the divorce rate rise in the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century?" are likely to be pure thingy. The culture of the rural tradition is going to be colliding with the culture of the urban masses. Glad I asked!

Is belief in culture really so unanimous? Unfortunately, yes. As Kevin Laland and Gillian Brown (2002 248) say in *Sense and Nonsense.*

> For most social scientists, "culture" is a given. The notion that much of the variation in the behaviour [sic] of humans is brought about by their being exposed to divergent cultures is so widespread and intuitive that it appears beyond dispute.

"Beyond dispute" should worry readers of "The Emperor's New Clothes," a fairytale concerned with mass delusion. In making the case that the academic social sciences have key elements of the emperor's new clothes, one runs the risk of being called arrogant. When one claims that a lot of people are acting in a deluded way, it can be put down to pure conceit on the part of the debunker. Yet, conceit aside, it *is* possible for most of the people

to be fooled most of the time. Just read Bertrand Russell's (1997) analysis of religion for a clear logical proof of this point coming from a mathematician and philosopher.

Cultural Determinism and the Emperor's New Clothes

Just as the Emperor and his mendacious tailors had very strong motives for promoting the delusion of his super-fine clothing, so there is a similar compelling reason for the public to believe in the social sciences. They just paid for them! Moreover, social scientists are very clever about concealing the deficiencies in their academic work.

Like skilled tailors, they deploy the fancy stitch work of arcane academic lore. Statistics can be practiced as a black art that deliberately obscures truth instead of revealing it, for instance. The pointless practice of building regression equations in the text of non-mathematical papers is a case in point. If the reader understands the procedure, they can build the equation for themselves. If they don't, there is nothing more off-putting than a passage of dense equations. Why *do* they clutter up the pages of every empirical paper in sociology but get left out in psychology where the same statistical techniques are customarily used? I have no idea but humbly suggest that unnecessarily written-out equations fulfill the role of the fancy needlework that the thieving tailors used to sell their invisible fabric to the gullible Emperor.

Then there is the artful presentation of different statistical models that permit contradictory conclusions. The hypothesis was supported, and contradicted, at the same time by the same data! Lies, damned lies, and statistics! As if this were not enough, we discover that social scientists are in bed with philosophers of the post-modernist variety who are sworn enemies of science.

However social scientists pantomime the practice of science, whenever they feel that their livelihood (dare one say racket?) is threatened by outsiders, they are ready to jump into the trenches. If academic social science were a mafia movie, they would be going to the mattresses for their guns in every other scene! This hair-trigger sensitivity was revealed in a surprising way by the Sociobiology debates of the late 1970's. In a rather dull and voluminous animal behavior text, biologist E. O. Wilson (1975) of Harvard University incited an academic tempest by including a chapter devoted to humans, along with many explicit claims that the humanities ought to be rolled over into the natural sciences given that we are all products of the same process of evolution by natural selection.

Biology Invades!

What makes the controversy so striking is not just its virulence but the banal and inept nature of Wilson's case. Other than a simple-minded genetic determinism more appropriate to the study of ants (Wilson's specialty), no credible scientific program was provided for using evolutionary theory to bring psychology, sociology, anthropology, even ethics, under the umbrella of biology. It was a Trojan horse that had no soldiers inside. Instead of dragging it into their city, the social scientists expended all of their available firepower in demolishing it. Given its flimsy construction this was not difficult but it seemed to keep them happy at the time and allowed them to crow over their victory for decades to come.

The sociobiology debates are an intriguing example of how exercised the humanities establishment can get over the most mundane of challenges to the academic disciplinary system. The disciplines are an essential component of the way that colleges are organized as income-generating businesses and the key to academic livelihoods. Like people in other occupations, academics can be expected to fight for their livelihoods, however shaky the intellectual edifice they labor within. Hence the vigorous rearguard action against sociobiology conceived as an invader from the foreign discipline of biology.

Success at repelling foreign enemies does not mean that all is well. When the Chinese were busy constructing their Great Wall to keep out invading armies, the joke went round that the wall was really intended to keep the Chinese in. By analogy, it seems that sociology is decaying from the inside because it is not making scientific progress and not helping us to redress serious social problems of which it claims expertise. Its fate provides a fair warning for the other social sciences.

The Downfall of Sociology

Students are perceptive enough to avoid committing their professional lives to a discipline that is seen as largely irrelevant in the real world. Over the past few decades, at a time of soaring enrollments in psychology courses (thanks to increased emotional problems and a booming demand for clinical workers), sociology departments have lost many of their disciplinary majors. Many have been forced to close, or been incorporated into multidisciplinary social sciences departments. They have been Balkanized.

According to data published by the U.S. Department of Education (2006), the number of people receiving bachelor's degrees in sociology plummeted from about 31,000 in 1970 to just 16,000 in 1990. Although numbers recovered in the 1990s, they are still off from their peak in the

1970's despite the fact that bachelor's degrees are up by more than a half during this period. Moreover, degrees in psychology *doubled* between 1980 and 2004, increasing from about 42,000 to 82,000, according to data published in the U.S. Statistical Abstract (2007).

Sociologists clearly recognize the problem that threatens their livelihoods. According to William R. Anderson (2000 77), a sociologist at Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi:

> A quick consideration of the recent decade reveals the implosion of sociology. Several sociology departments have been merged with those from other disciplines, and as the number of undergraduate sociology majors has declined, some have been eliminated. The discipline's research openly assumes an ideological tone palatable to only the most liberal of scholars or ignorant of laymen. Clearly, the discipline Auguste Comte once set at the apex of the sciences is in a free-fall and his grandiose vision that it be the queen of the sciences and savior of the world now mocks these hopes in its decline into the periphery of social sciences alone.

Why the decline? Many excuses have been offered. We are told that students are no longer so interested in social justice as they were in the 1979s, or that there is more demand for degrees that are less theoretical and more likely to yield decent jobs. This means that applied disciplines from criminal justice to clinical psychology have had no trouble peeling away majors from sociology departments. Of course there has also been a lurch to the political right in the U.S. so that even college students today are a lot more conservative than they used to be. Yet, one cannot help feeling that the real problem is that the discipline has not been an effective advocate for itself. In addition to promulgating an ideology that is unpalatable to most, it has not made the case that it can solve social problems in the way that clinical psychology is widely believed to help *individuals* solve personal problems.

To paraphrase the student perspective: It is all very well to bitch and moan about poverty and discrimination if you can lay the scientific groundwork to ameliorate these problems. During the century and more of its existence as a discipline, sociology has not only failed to address fundamental problems of poverty and inequality. One could argue that it has had few *practical effects* apart from sending an army of social workers out among the urban poor and destitute to commiserate with them on their sad state of affairs and to remind them that the moral responsibility for their downfall is not their own unwise actions but the unequal distribution of inherited wealth and political power in the modern world. In other words, in addition to their other practical problems, the poverty-stricken have to bear the psychological burden of being an oppressed minority. They are victims

and the evil that crushes them is too powerful for their meager resources. Thank you sociology!

Whether people get to be homeless on account of oppression is hardly the issue. Whether true or false, this perspective does not offer a promising agenda for change. In fact, if you wanted to design a program more likely to irritate the powerful and the "oppressed" alike, you could hardly improve on the moral prescription devised by academic sociologists in their secure academic niche whose frighteningly inadequate and impractical ideas are used to train the ranks of middle-class social workers whose salaries derive, in part, from taxation on the working poor.

By pursuing a moral agenda, sociology cannot pretend to scientific objectivity. As a result, it cannot identify the objective causes of social problems. Being ignorant of the real drivers of poverty, crime, and discrimination, etc., it is powerless to remedy them.

The pivotal problem of sociology and the other social sciences (including anthropology, economics, and social psychology) is cultural determinism. This begins with an uncritical belief in culture as an autonomous entity that is separable from its practical context and works outside the mechanism of natural science. It is maintained by a striking deficiency in empirical reality testing that is the heart's blood of real science.

What Does "Culture" Mean – Really?!

Oft quoted with approval, Durkheim's (1962/1895) belief that social facts require a societal explanation is really a commitment to circular explanation. It is as though Durkheim were saying: "I know full well that the laws of science require that complex phenomena be explained by breaking them up into simpler components. In this case, I am suspending the usual laws of scientific reality and insisting that the complex facts of human societies cannot be reduced to simpler levels of analysis and must be considered irreducibly complex and explainable only in terms of each other." Astute readers will notice that a piece of creationist jargon has been slipped into Durkheim's mouth. This is no accident. Durkheim's fallacious claim is more an article of religious faith than a scientific principle.

Durkheim is not alone in his ideas about how best to broach human societies. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973/2000 89) writing in our own day provides a definition of culture that is reasonably reflective of current ideas in cultural determinism:

> … A system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about

and attitudes toward life.

Although Geertz's definition might be disputed by other cultural determinists, it is fairly good at capturing what most scholars mean by culture with all of its frustrating nebulousness. According to Geertz, culture is "inherited," which means that it "perpetuates" itself. It is also "symbolic" which, on the face of it, would appear to rule out anything purely functional or practically useful. Still, the overwhelming implicit theme in Geertz's definition is causal circularity. Culture both gives people their knowledge about life and allows them to "develop" it. We are clearly within the enchanted realm of circular causation: social facts explain other social facts. That problem surfaces time and again in social theories that focus on symbolism and meaning, including recent work by leading sociologists, of which (much) more later.

Returning to Durkheim, if we explain social facts in terms of other social facts we are not going to get much farther than a dog chasing its own tail. Peaks in the suicide rate, for instance, are often attributed to the emergence of suicide as a prevalent theme in fiction, an early example being Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Von Goethe and Pike 2005) that is credited with the untimely dispatch of many a fragile young German romantic. By the same token, we are accustomed to hearing that the violent outbursts of young contemporaries are caused by violent representations on television or in video games. Explaining one such social fact in terms of another turns out to be the feeblest of science because it cannot unearth underlying causal mechanisms and is forever stuck reporting correlations between phenomena that could be meaningful, or purely accidental. If a young person was found to have taken a lethal poison while sitting with an open copy of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, that would not mean that the melancholy tome had driven her over the edge. In a more socially-integrated age when appearances mattered more than they do today, it is possible that the suicide victim detested Goethe and merely used the book as a prop to provide romantic color to an otherwise meaningless act of self-destruction.

More seriously, the facile attribution of causal influence to correlated events (that is now widespread in the social sciences) is a big mistake for two good reasons. First it impedes the search for true causal influences. One might ask what was happening in Germany (or in Europe more generally) to make *The Sorrows of Young Werther* so appealing in its day. What was the third variable possibly underlying the correlation between the content of fiction and suicidal actions? Second, lacking roots in scientific causation, a Durkheim-type explanation is not superior to the astrological correlation that monarchs of old used to foretell key events during their reign. Why do most

readers of *The Sorrows of Young Werther not* kill themselves? In neglecting such counter evidence, cultural determinists court superstition rather than science.

Durkheim's approach to social science remains influential today due to the perceived failure of positivism that had promoted a more rigorous scientific agenda in human affairs. Early positivism got nowhere because it lacked the tools to implement a science of human societies. Thanks to recent developments in evolutionary biology and neuroscience, we are in a far stronger position to initiate a natural-science (evolutionary) approach to human societies.

Durkheim was not the only impediment to a natural science of societies. Modern thinkers are obsessed with indeterminacy in quantum physics. The loopy logic of subatomic particles is supposed to pose a threat to all scientific determinism. After all, if reductionism was not even working for physics, why bother trying to implement it in sociology? In the social sciences, indeterminacy takes the form of cultural relativism.

Cultural Relativism

Stemming from anthropology, cultural relativism is the notion that a human society is so complex it can be understood properly only by an insider. From a philosophical perspective, saying that our scientific understanding of how a society works must be shaped by our experiences within it is logically similar to subatomic indeterminacy. Either way, the notion that the same laws of scientific causation apply everywhere in the universe would have to be dead as the dodo.

Such relativist arguments can be added to the myriad of philosophical objections that were leveled at scientific positivism. They include such chestnuts as the problem of negotiating between the subjective world of the senses through which empirical scientific data are received and the objective realm of scientific knowledge. Although philosophers feel entitled to take such problems seriously, they are of minimal practical importance. After all, by the time a person has mastered a language at around the age of five years, they have done pretty much all of the negotiating between subjective and objective realms that they will ever need. Once you accept communication through spoken language using shared referents to external realities, it is a short step to doing the same in written language and incorporating a host of scientific symbols and conventions of academic publication.

Although indeterminacy is often presented as the last straw for positivism, it need not be. The problem of indeterminacy on a subatomic scale is not such a problem for universal laws as commonly supposed. Indeed, the