NOTES ON CHAPTER TWO

Page 19

What is the social?
An instructive guide on the meaning of the social is: David Frisby and Derek Sayer, *Society* (Routledge, 1986).


The classic source for discussing social facts is Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*.

Page 20
The phrase ‘doing things together’ comes from the book by Howard S. Becker (1928–) of that title and published by University of Chicago Press.
Becker’s website can be found at HOWIE’S WEB PAGE
[http://home.earthlink.net/~hsbecker/](http://home.earthlink.net/~hsbecker/)

‘The Robinson Crusoe problem’ is after the famous novel by Daniel Defoe. You can download the entire unabridged texts of both of Defoe’s great Robinson Crusoe novels. *Robinson Crusoe* is one of the world’s most popular adventure novels. Daniel Defoe’s classic tale of shipwreck and survival on an uninhabited island is based on a true story. The real Robinson Crusoe was a Scotsman named Alexander Selkirk (or Selcraig). See: Dead Men Tell No Tales: [http://www.deadmentellnotales.com/onlinetexts/robinson/crusoe.shtml](http://www.deadmentellnotales.com/onlinetexts/robinson/crusoe.shtml)

Feral children
Many studies of feral children, left living in isolation and then discovered later, show that they simply cannot then function as social beings. Some classic cases here are Victor, the Wild Boy of Averyon and Kasper Hauser, and hundreds of others are documented on the following website:
[http://www.feralchildren.com](http://www.feralchildren.com)

Page 21
The symbolic interactionist approach is associated initially with the ideas of George Mead and stresses the formation of the self through processes of interaction. The history and foundations of symbolic interactionism involve looking at works of James, Cooley, Meade and Meade’s influence on Herbert Blumer and others in their studies of the self.

The Classical Studies include:

James, William [1890], *Psychology*.
Mead, George Herbert [1934], *Mind, Self, and Society*.
Blumer, Herbert [1969], *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*.
Sociology: The Basics

Cooley, Charles Horton [1962], *On Self and Social Organization.*
Strauss, Anselm [1959], *Mirrors and Masks.*

See also:
da Silva, Filipe Carreira [2007], *G. H. Mead.*

General readings on Symbolic Interactionism:

My own work has been shaped by this tradition and you might be interested in some of it here:

For more on symbolic interactionism (SI) in general, see the society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction:
http://www.espach.salford.ac.uk/ssi/

For more discussion of James, Cooley and Mead, examine the entries in Stanford at:
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/

SI is based on pragmatism – a movement in American philosophy which began in the 1870s with the Metaphysical Club. Read about the history of pragmatism and get introductions to pragmatism and pragmatists. See: The Pragmatism Cybrary: http://www.pragmatism.org/

Semiotics

**Page 28**


**Page 29**

**Sociological theory**

There are many useful volumes to guide the new student through sociological theory. Two useful starting points are:


Other useful texts include:


**The tropes of theory**

One way for the beginner to start thinking about theory and analysing the patterns of societies is through its imagery, tropes and metaphors. This is far from a common way of entering theory but I think it will help as a starting point. A trope is a figure of speech which uses a word or phrase in a way other than what is considered its literal or normal forms – turning it into something else. Key examples are metaphors (juxtaposing disparate things with a similar characteristic: e.g. seeing rape as the war between the sexes), irony (implying the opposite of the standard meaning, such as describing a bad situation as "good times."), allegory (a sustained ‘story’ metaphor as in Plato’s ‘the cave’ in *The Republic*, or C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*), metonymy (where any item is not called by its own name, but by the name of something intimately associated with it) and synecdoche (where a part of something is used to refer to the whole: e.g. The White House is commonly used to represent the federal government of the United States). Generally, behind every major social theory, there is a trope, an image, a frame, a metaphor which suggests a way of seeing the social world. Of course, every way of seeing is a way of not seeing ... metaphors suggest patterns of social life, but they are not mutually exclusive. And often they can be mixed up. Different metaphors may well help
us to see the world in different ways, and combinations of them may help to broaden our own sociological imaginations and visions.

All of social life depends upon language, and part of the sociological soul requires an awareness of the language used to describe society. Much this language is metaphorical.

Society’s intelligible order, then, is often seen through the eyes of something else. I have already likened society to a prison and we have also already seen it as a drama. But we can also analyse society as an evolving human body (the organic trope), as a stage play (dramaturgy), as a machine, as a discourse (with its own semiotic code), as a war (conflict theory), as a system of law and rules, as a market place, as a game, as play.

(As we will see in Chapter 3) recent studies of sociology adopt even more striking imagery: they speak in terms of cyberspace society, global society (Nederveen Pieterse), liquid society (Zygmunt Bauman), informational society (Manuel Castells) and risk society (Ulrich Bech). And others, as we have seen, who see society primarily as a system of inequalities, speak of it as the unequal society, the patriarchal society, the racialized society, the post-colonial society. We can also take something in society that exists and think through it – see one pattern as perhaps an exemplar of many patterns (as McDonalds, Disneyland, etc.).

Thinking in sociology is to raise a wide range of possible languages. Society is seen as intelligible order through a language of something else. The question to pose is whether such a new language opens your eyes to new ways of thinking about and understanding the nature of social life. If it doesn’t, I will be surprised. These are, after all, ways of thinking that have inspired generations of social thinkers earlier.


**Page 29 continued**

‘[E]very way of seeing is also always a way of not seeing’. This nice phrase comes from Kenneth Burke, a literary critic; ‘The limits of our language are often the limits of our visions’ ... is a simplification of Wittgenstein’s ‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.’ Wittgenstein published only one book in his lifetime, the Logico- _Tractatus Philosophicus_. It is a short book written in an unusual style. There are no paragraphs. Many sections, which are numbered, consist of a single sentence. The exception to this style is the preface, which reads:

> Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it – or at least similar thoughts. – So it is not a textbook. – Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it. The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence. Thus the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense. I do not wish to judge how far my efforts coincide with those of other
philosophers. Indeed, what I have written here makes no claim to novelty in detail, and the reason why I give no sources is that it is a matter of indifference to me whether the thoughts that I have had have been anticipated by someone else.

A key statement in this preface is that he is seeking to draw a limit to thought. That does not mean to create restrictions for thinking. Instead Wittgenstein is setting out to show that by mapping the possibilities and impossibilities of thought, we can describe the limits of reality. After all, if we cannot think it then it cannot be – in our world at least. That is, for something to exist in the world (in actuality or imagination), it must be potentially thinkable by us, otherwise it could never register on our minds at all.

Page 31

Social bonding

There is a long tradition in sociology which looks at social bonding. The search for community, for instance, has been a major theme of much sociological writing – from abstract searches for the meaning of the idea of community (variously ideal, rural, urban, ‘imagined’, and now ‘virtual’) to the empirical description of actual communities (known as the community studies research tradition) from small-town America (Middletown [1929] being the classic) to suggestions of the full range of communities from small and intense to large (see Frankenberg’s classic review in his Communities in Britain [1966]). Central to much is the idea of identity, of how people locate themselves in and identify with different communities and bonds.

Of great current interest to sociologists is the rise of the new ways in which social bonds, social ties and identities develop not just in traditional forms such as families and communities of place, but also the attachments made through social movements and the internet – new social networks take on mechanisms for new social bonds and identities ...

See:

Zygmunt Baumann, Community (Polity, 2000) and Gerard Delanty, Community (Routledge, 2003 ).
Robert Bellah, The Habits of the Heart (University of California Press, 1992) is a prime contemporary example.
More recently it is found in writing about social capital and is well discussed by John Field, Social Capital (Routledge, 2nd edn 2008).

Page 32

Functionalism

Functionalism dominated for a hundred years but fashion in sociology means that it is rarely written about today and few sociologists now claim to be functionalists. Nevertheless, it remains a key way of grasping the world implicitly and is worth understanding. A key foundational text remains: Talcott Parsons, The Social System (orig. 1951; Routledge, rev. edn 1991).

Niklas Luhmann is a major contemporary thinker but is usually seen as a neo-functionalist. His work is reviewed in Christian Borsch’s Niklas Luhmann (Routledge, 2010).

© Ken Plummer
Emeritus Professor, Sociology Department, University of Essex,
Conflict images


Page 35

Erving Goffman (1922–82) has been called the most influential ‘micro-sociologist’ of the twentieth century. His key work is *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), subsequently published as a Penguin book which is still widely available today. He went on to examine the underlife of people living in hospitals, concentration camps, prisons and what he calls ‘total institutions’, in *Asylums* (Penguin, 1961).

See also:


A more advanced treatment and development of Goffman’s ideas can be found in: Randall Collins *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), where he develops the idea of interaction ritual chain.

There is also Performance Theory: a good general guide to this is:


Discourses and Foucault

The key texts of Foucault are mentioned in the table. Three general commentaries are:


Cultures

I like the idea of culture as a ‘tool box’.


The original paper to suggest that culture can be seen as a tool kit is by Ann Swidler and can be downloaded from:


More complex ideas of culture can be found in a consideration of multiculturalism:
Sociology: The Basics


**Religion**

The website Adherents tries to keep a tally on religious membership across the world. A TV programme in 2009 showed some eighty different cultures of religion alive and well in the world: see: BBC TV Religion website, Around the World in 80 Faiths – and much of it can be found on Google videos: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/80faiths/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/80faiths/).

**Page 40**

When I searched in 2009, I found the full versions of Chaplin’s *Modern Times* and Lang’s *Metropolis* downloadable on YouTube. For many years I used to show the opening sequence of *Metropolis* in my sociology courses and it is always dramatic.
