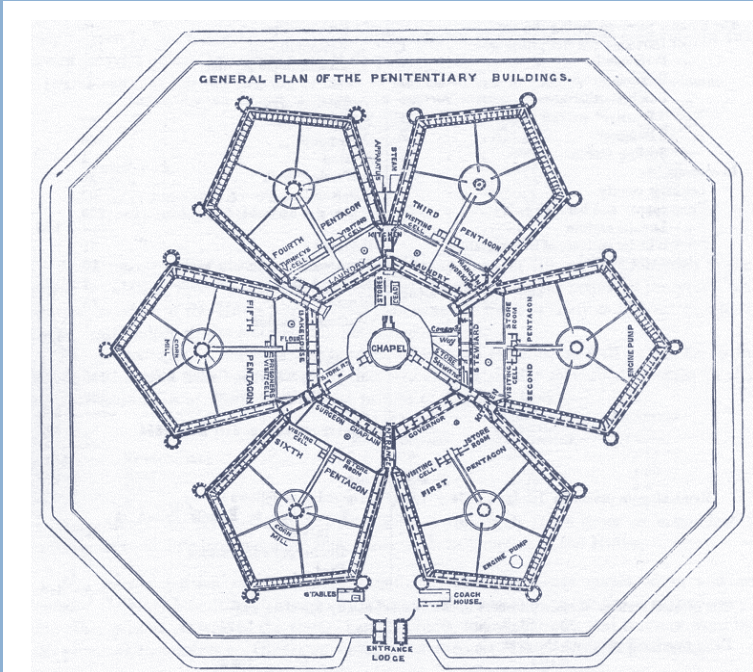


# the panopticon

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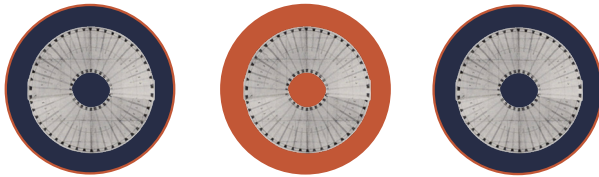
july 2020



a student sociological journal

# Hi. welcome

To the Panopticon, volume 1



## What is The Panopticon?

Well, it all starts with Foucault

Designed in the 18th century, the panopticon was a structurally unique prison that Foucault used as a metaphor to describe the contemporary relationship between power and control.

Following in Foucault's footsteps, The Panopticon has been developed as Edinburgh's first student-led, student-developed sociological journal. Bringing a fresh, mixed-media take to Sociology, this journal seeks to provide budding sociologists with a platform to write, debate, and celebrate. Now more than ever, the value of Sociology needs to be shared amongst young people.

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## **A note from the editors**

Hi, and welcome to the first ever edition of The Panopticon! We are Isabel and Sophie, The Panopticon's creators. When the Sociology Society was revived in 2019, we - with the support of our amazing co-committee - decided to create a brand new student sociology journal. Working since November, our mission has been to showcase student academic writing in a way that is readable, enjoyable and (most importantly) accessible - something we felt was missing from the existing student writing opportunities at Edinburgh. New issues will be published each semester, and we are keen to get as wide a range of students involved as possible.

### **Why sociology?**

As Sociology students, it often feels that no one actually knows what Sociology is. The textbook definition - 'the study of society' - fails to encapsulate the depth and detail of what we study. So, the theme for this first issue is: why does Sociology matter to you? We have given this prompt to our fabulous student writers who have written original pieces on a wide range of topics about why Sociology matters to them.

## *A statement on content*

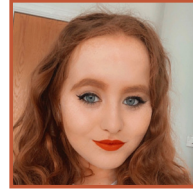
We feel it very important to discuss the social and political context in which this issue is being launched, as well as the content within it. The first edition of *The Panopticon* has been in the works since November 2019, and the focus has been an introduction to Sociology, without a particular emphasis on racism, colonialism, intersectionality, or any of the other important social issues currently taking center stage. We thought long and hard about publishing this issue, but ultimately decided it would be beneficial to honour the hard work of our writers, as well as to begin growing *The Panopticon's* following in anticipation of our upcoming "Summer of Change" issue, which will focus entirely on the events of these last few months. The core of Sociology is about disrupting and de-naturalizing hegemonic systems of power, and we will be using *The Panopticon's* platform to amplify voices of change as we head into the fall semester. The sociological imagination is an valuable tool for young activists, and we hope that through the launch of this journal we can get more students involved with this important field of thought.

# MEET THE EDITORS



**Isabel Coleman**  
Co-Editor

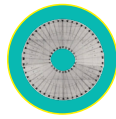
Hi! I'm Isabel, a fourth year Sociology with QM student and one of the founders of the Panopticon. When a group of us got together last year to revive the Sociology Society, I felt strongly about creating a platform for students to explore sociological writing. My time studying sociology at Edinburgh over the last three years has been instrumental in shaping my beliefs and understanding of the world. I could never have foreseen the perspective that this important subject has given me, and I am always struck by how undervalued and underexplored Sociology is among young people. We are undoubtedly living in a tumultuous, unprecedented time. Things can seem crazy and confusing, but with uncertainty comes great excitement and opportunity, and sociology has helped me to tackle the social world with the perfect balance of confidence and critical thinking. I am eager to expose more of my friends and fellow students to Sociology, because it holds a transformative power that few subjects possess. At its core, Sociology seeks to de-naturalise hegemonic systems of power and privilege, and I struggle to think of anything more timely. We are incredibly lucky to be living through a global social moment, and the sociological imagination will be crucial as we continue to push the boundaries of activism and transformation. With this new platform, I hope to engage with a range of intersectional voices and stories, and to publish sociology in an accessible and interesting way.



**Sophie Butcher**  
Co-Editor

I guess the main reason why Sociology matters to me is that it allows you to take a step back when looking at the world and understands at a deeper level why things are the way they are. To illustrate this I'm going to talk about something near and dear to me - pubs. Boris Johnson's decision to reopen pubs as early as he did can be explained using the sociological imagination. First, pubs are seen as quintessentially British - we have projected our national identity onto them so reopening them with such a 'Super Saturday' fanfare was a form of virtue signalling to this notion of 'Britishness'. Second, the decision to reopen them above specifically beauty salons is arguably reflective of gendered power dynamics. The beauty industry's customers, workers, and business owners are disproportionately female and lack political influence - when their concerns were vocalised in Parliament male Tory MPs (including Boris himself) saw it as a trivial matter - with some even laughing. Meanwhile, pubs are an established political interest; Wetherspoons' CEO Tim Martin (with his laddish but nationalist bravado) has had the ear of influential Conservative politicians since the 2016 Brexit referendum. Sociology allows us to see one seemingly menial political decision as the product of something much bigger. So, Sociology matters to me because it lets you understand why certain things happen to certain people. The 'study of society' is needed most in a time like this when it feels like the very existence of society is under threat.

# THE SOCIOLOGY SOCIETY



After walking around the Freshers Fair and realising that Sociology was one of the few subjects without a society, a keen group of students decided to revive the dearly missed Sociology Society.

**They realised that a space for Sociology students to socialise and engage with their subject was missing.**

So, at the beginning of the last academic year, they decided to make this a reality, and SocSoc (as it is affectionately known to its members) was reborn. Beyond developing The Panopticon, SocSoc seeks to create an open and engaging space for Sociology students to come together and create a lasting community.

**To get involved with SocSoc, check out our Facebook or Instagram pages for upcoming events!**

## **THE COMMITTEE:**

**President:** Natasha Kinsman

**Secretary:** Hazel Harrop

**Treasurer:** Cristina Garcia Smith

**Marketing:** Megan King & Claire Askes

**Academic Events:** Gemma Volpicelli

**Social Secretary:** Jackie Ransley

**Joint-Honour Officer :** Julia Johnson

**First-Year Rep:** Asyanadiva Fazrary

**Post-grad Rep:** Can Tao

**Journal Editors:** Isabel Coleman & Sophie Butcher

# An interview with **JONATHAN HEARN**

We sat down with the Head of Sociology at the University to chat all things social science and why the subject is important to him.

*So, Jonathan Hearn, why does sociology matter to you?*

Well, I think Sociology matters to me because it is a useful tool in how we look at the world. It allows us to de-individualise it and take a step back to see it as a whole.

*You were a Social Anthropologist before you were a Sociologist. How do you think the two are linked and how does this inform your work as a Sociologist?*

I've always been very much a 'school' [of Social and Political Sciences] person, as when I first joined I was half Politics and half Sociology. And I think I have a broad view. But I think it definitely affects my view as a Sociologist because I'm a stranger in this land as it were. My empirical research is heavily based on ethnographies but I do a lot of historical research too. But increasingly, Sociologists do ethnographies as well. It also has to do with being interested in that long term historical perspective. The way Anthropology was traditionally taught in the United States where I took courses in Archaeology and Biological Evolution (long term topics) as well as Cultural Anthropology.

*What do you think Sociology has to offer, particularly to young people, in this increasingly chaotic world?*

On some level, I think what Sociology has to say remains the same. I think it gives us a way to think about the way that society is constantly changing - society is a permanent thing and you need to get to know it by how it is changed by events. I think that's important.



It's definitely the case that people are a product of their time and generation. Sociology (hopefully) gives some sense that no matter how bad things get, if things are always changing all of the time then things can also get better. A lot of academics, not just Sociologists, will say that as you go along and see people have great new ideas, you often think "didn't someone have that idea 20 years ago?" as things go into and out of fashion and someone repackages the same ideas. Things often aren't new but the same things going backwards and forwards.

*To you, what is the most sociologically interesting place in Edinburgh and why?*

The trickiness about answering this question is that there's no one place that's representative of the whole - so what do you choose? I think a good walk down Leith Walk. Start from the top at the City Centre then down to Leith. I think it's one of those walks that can give you a changing sense of the city, changing prosperity, cooler and more expensive things at the top then becomes more run-down and more modest. So I think you can get a good understanding of the relationship between Edinburgh and Leith as well as the transition and I think that's an interesting sociological walk. Also, the growth of student housing on Leith Walk reflects how student numbers at the University have doubled in about 10 years or so. It means that suddenly both the University's student housing and that provided by various private companies for students has certainly impacted all over the city in changing neighbourhoods - and that is certainly sociologically interesting.

What you see in Edinburgh, you really have to understand how two things: the University and The Edinburgh Festival, are major drivers in economic interests in the city. And because they're the two big things they have such a complex relationship with each other. For the time I've been here, the University has offered up more and more space to The Festival over the years. And that has a lot to do with the way cities have changed: from the way people cluster to manufacture characteristic products of the region to places that are about bringing people in to spend money and then they go away. Edinburgh is a prime example of the modern city. It's part of why it's expensive and successful.

## Going beyond the surface: What sociology means to me

*iona mcvicar*

Sociology as a discipline is, in my opinion, one of the most varied subjects you can study at university. There is a study for every single social phenomenon you can imagine.

The British tradition of queuing? Look at: Goffman's *Microstudies of Public Order*: 1972. What about lift/elevator etiquette? Try: Asch's conformity experiments: 1951 (and then search sociology elevator experiment into YouTube for a bit of fun!). The sociology of the pull door that looks like it should be a push? Check! Norman's work: *The Design of Everyday Things*, is there to sympathise with your plight. But beyond these potentially gimmicky sociological studies lies so much variety and depth. It allows us to explore and understand the social world we have lived in and created for ourselves.

### I imagine it like looking at the ocean.

From the surface, the water is blue, and often flat, plain, and endless. This represents our society, and the way I saw it before I began my studies of Sociology two years ago. Sure, it was pretty to look at, and it seemed harmonious most of the time, with the odd storm creating some turmoil (like the 2011 London riots, current coronavirus crisis, or gender discrimination); but, mostly the ocean was calm and sometimes even seemed uninteresting.

Studying sociology is like diving headfirst into that water, and deciding to keep swimming downwards, marvelling over and over again at what lies beneath, at what you uncover.

These past two years have opened my eyes to the macro- and micro- structures that shape our world locally, nationally and globally, both in person and online. Sociology takes the world that we know and think we understand - but asks how things have become the way they are. What if they had happened differently? What underlying ideas and processes shape us every day; often without us even knowing?

Take the **internet**, for example. The internet is something that we all use. Even right now, this journal is an online publication so you all must be using the internet to access this! The internet seems simple enough in first thought - a tool for communication and consumerism. But countless groups use the internet in hundreds of different ways. The internet can be a welcome way to express yourself. For example, if you are part of the LGBTQ+ community and are worried about perception in your "real" life if you came out, the internet can be a true safe haven.

Friends can be made, and you can truly be yourself, especially with the addition of anonymity to keep your “real” and online lives separate.

**Anonymity** is also an interesting nuance of the internet and can be studied using research carried out many years before the internet was born. Research done by Watson in 1971 shows that when the tribal armies wore masks or painted their bodies, rendering themselves anonymous, 90% of them kill, torture and mutilate their enemies. However, only 12.5% of warriors who did not change their appearance behaved so aggressively.

This trend of anonymity causing antagonistic behaviour like trolling is very relevant on the internet today. Contemporary scholars have shown it is easier to engage in harmful behaviour against other people when you are anonymous, whether you are scrolling through Twitter or part of an Amazonian tribe.

Speaking of Amazon, the internet is not only a place of communication, but one of commerce. However, not all commerce on the internet takes place on large shopping platforms like Amazon. The darknet is home to criminals and the black market, which is used for the sale of illicit goods, content, and services. Academics at Edinburgh are currently pioneering research on the darknet to understand the different social norms that come with engaging in illicit behaviour online (for more information, check out Angus Bancroft's new book, *The Darknet and Smarter Crime*).

Sociology uncovers so much depth behind our everyday actions - which makes it tremendously interesting to explore. But it is also necessary if you want to enact any change in this world. **Sociology can be revolutionary.** If we can understand many of the things we take for granted as social constructs, it shows they were constructed by someone at some point. We can therefore deconstruct them if we acknowledge they are not ‘natural’. This is particularly useful in terms of race or gender difference – if these are socially constructed, we can all work at deconstructing them, to make the world a more equal and fair place. Sociology also covers discourse on climate change and its perception, on social activism and protest, and countless other topical issues, often to the advantage of those who are trying to make a change for the better.

The world is full of rules - both **written** and **unwritten**. And while we navigate our lives relatively seamlessly, we play a large role in following, making and breaking social conventions, and challenging norms. Although I still have little experience with deep sea diving, I believe I could make a good guess on how it feels. Going from only seeing a still surface of the water, to seeing all of the different parts of the ocean acting together in a coherent ecosystem. To me, this accurately explains how Sociology has opened my eyes. I hope this journal, and all of the people who read it, share in my fascination, and I am very excited to be part of something which shares my passion for uncovering the secrets of our society.

## System change, consumerism, and discarded face masks:

Why Covid-19 is not going to magically solve the climate crisis.

*Eliška Suchochlebová*

“**C**oronavirus could trigger the biggest fall in carbon emissions since World War Two.” “Himalayas are visible from India for the first time in 30 years.” “The planet is healing itself” We have all seen these or similar headlines in the media during the past few months. They all talk about how Covid-19 is at least good for the planet, if not for anything else. Greenhouse gas emissions are dropping, there are fewer cars in the streets, people are only buying essentials and supporting small, local shops. It is very tempting to search for the positives, especially when everything is difficult and depressing. But is it really worth it if it requires distorting reality to fit our need to see a silver lining?

I think it should be okay to admit that there is no silver lining in this situation, not in the long term at least. Yes, the sky may be clearer now, but as soon as restrictions on travel are gone, it is almost certainly going to be filled with planes again. Sociology for me is about seeing the bigger picture, about looking past the seemingly obvious answers in search for the truth. We might not always like what we find, but I would rather be well-informed than blissfully ignorant. I don't buy this narrative of Covid-19 being good for the environment. I strongly believe that our cur-

-rent environmental problems stem from bad systems (social, political, and economic) that have been in place for decades and that we need to make systemic changes to achieve a truly sustainable future. **The coronavirus is not going to do that for us.**

Let's look at some of the effects that Covid-19 has had on the environment that appear to be positive, and whether they might persist after the pandemic is over. Air pollution has improved a lot, especially in the most affected areas, due to people travelling less both long distance by plane and short distance by car. I think that we have learned a lot during the pandemic about the possibility to do things including work remotely from home and communicate across international borders without needing to travel. On the other hand, it seems to me that virtually everyone is sick of Zoom at this point and just wants things to go back to “normal”, or the way they were before the pandemic. If it takes a lot to change individual behaviours then it takes even more to change the way the whole society functions.

People might not be going shopping in person as much but that doesn't mean that our consumerist mindset and lifestyle has disappeared. Online purchases have increased around the world and with them

comes a growing carbon footprint associated with everything from the production process and transportation to unsustainable packaging. Consumerism is not gone, it only took on a different form, adapted to the current situation. Covid-19 is not “treating” the causes of the climate crisis. It is merely temporarily changing the way they manifest or temporarily diminishing them. The actual work that needs to be done to save the environment has not gone anywhere.

Even in the short term, Covid-19 has had at least as many negative effects on the environment as positive ones. Activism has largely had to move online, climate summits are being postponed, the climate crisis is not getting as much coverage in the media because it doesn't seem as urgent as the pandemic. And while no one is paying attention, harmful pieces of legislation are being passed all over the world that lower emission standards, temporarily suspend environmental regulations, scale back on surveillance that helps protect the Amazon from deforestation, or financially support the highest polluting industries and companies. Mitigation measures that are being implemented as a result of the pandemic often aren't environmentally sustainable either. Protective equipment such as face masks, gowns, and gloves are made from single use plastic, and they are being produced, used, and discarded in huge volumes around the globe. Forget plastic straws, face masks are

going to become a a new substantial source of single-use plastic waste that will fill up landfill sites and clutter up our oceans.

It is very unlikely that short term improvements in the state of the environment (air quality, for example) are going to persist after Covid-19 and the restrictive measures associated with it are gone. The political and economic systems that made the climate crisis happen are so deeply ingrained in our society that a temporary pause caused by the pandemic will likely become insignificant in the longer term. Big corporations, supported by politically influential actors, are going to do everything their power and influence buys them to return to the status quo of a pre-Covid world. Systemic change is needed, and it is possible, but it is not going to just magically happen thanks to Covid-19 grounding flights or reducing commuter traffic. Furthermore, when it takes thousands of people dying and the economy tanking to see a drop in levels of pollution and GHG emissions, we are not doing it right. We need a just, sustainable transition, one that is not at the expense of regular people suffering or losing their livelihoods. We need to restructure the world economy and hold those who deserve it responsible. Most importantly, we need to not treat the deaths of hundreds of thousands like a silver bullet to ending the ongoing climate crisis.

# Introducing Donald's

# Corner



## THAT'S RIGHT!

Edinburgh Sociology icon Donald MacKenzie is here to answer your questions about Sociology. He's learnt a thing or two in his 40-year career so this is your opportunity to ask him anything! (Email your questions to [edipanoptic@gmail.com](mailto:edipanoptic@gmail.com) for your question to be featured in our next issue).

### WHY DOES SOCIOLOGY MATTER TO YOU?

Sociology has been a wonderful subject, because it enables you to range widely across different topics. You get to eavesdrop on other people's lives, so to speak. Each of us has only one life, and it enriches that life to discover how others, often very different from you, live their lives.

### WHO IS THE MOST MEMORABLE PERSON THAT YOU HAVE MET?

It's very hard to single out any one person, but older people are often the most interesting to talk to because of how much they have experienced. The oldest person I have met was the mathematician and Marxist Dirk Struik. When I last met him, in 1997, he was 103. In his youth, he was a member of a group in the Communist Party of the Netherlands that Lenin attacked in his pamphlet, *Left-Wing Communism*. Knowing someone who Lenin had attacked was like meeting a time traveller.

### WHAT IS THE MOST INTERESTING RECENT SOCIOLOGICAL PAPER THAT YOU HAVE READ?

Most of my work at the moment is in economic sociology, and people in that field are fascinated by the way in which market calculation interweaves with other forms of reasoning, including moral reasoning. The most recent paper I've read, just this morning, is Barbara Kiviat, 'The Moral Limits of Predictive Practices: The Case of Credit-Based Insurance Scores', *American Sociological Review* 84 (2019): 1134-1158. It turns out that people's credit ratings are a pretty good predictor of how safe a driver they are, but people are also deeply uncomfortable with the idea that your insurance premium should depend on your credit score.

# A SOCIOLOGICAL PLAYLIST

**Tunes for when your degree is  
giving you all the feels**

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**"I WANT TO BREAK FREE"**  
(from the capitalist enclosure)  
**Queen**

**COMMON PEOPLE**  
(an insight into the immobility of social class)  
**Pulp**

**"THE LESS I KNOW THE BETTER"**  
( = me reading the news in 2020)  
**Tame Impala**

**"SUDDENLY I SEE"**  
(the power of intersectional thinking)  
**KT Tunstall**

**"THIS IS AMERICA"**  
**Childish Gambino**

**"IMAGINE"**  
(a world without colonial hegemony)  
**John Lennon**

**"YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN"**  
(about the duality of online personas and its link to homophobic trolling)  
**Taylor Swift**

**"SOCIAL CUES"**  
(how to smarten up and lose the microaggressions)  
**Cage the Elephant**

## Aaaa..avocado mania!

— A sociological starter to food and taste

*demin li*



During my first Tesco shop at Edinburgh, for some reason ‘avocado’ was on my list. Yet, this was not out of natural preference for this green, buttery fruit— as a matter of fact, despite my constant effort to incorporate avocados into my daily diet, I have never succeeded in embracing its strange taste and texture. But I know I will keep on cultivating that taste, until one day I can force myself to accept it.

In the northern part of mainland China where I was born and raised, the popular taste for fruit is distinct and noticeable. People tend to prefer either fruit that is sweet, juicy, or has a distinctive flavour (like strawberries and kiwis). It is hard to imagine that avocados, which could not be more different from these categories, would gain any public affection when this iron law of taste has virtually penetrated every Chinese family, including mine.

**But it did.**

According to statistics from Chinese Customs, over the past decade, imports of avocados have risen from 2 tonnes in 2010 to 43,900 tonnes in 2018. Most of these shipments come from South America and are poured into mega-city fruit markets, onto dinner tables of middle-class families and into an increasing number of trendy restaurants and cafes. This change of taste was especially visible to me when my middle-class parents (both over 50 years old and loyal followers of Chinese traditional cuisine) merrily brought home a huge box of unripe avocados bearing the words “Exotic King of Fruits” and tried to recruit me into their “healthy eating project”. Though that enthusiasm did not last when the three of us agreed “it tastes like soap”, I have now realized that the underlying meaning of this might have gone far beyond the notion of ‘healthy eating’. As the age-old saying goes: you are what you eat; the tastes which we freely choose can often surprisingly reveal a lot about ourselves.

Strictly speaking, my determination to make myself like avocados reflects broader social patterns I can observe in contemporary China. For example, the pattern between the generations in my family is quite typical: my grandparents were manual workers with little education and



much financial hardship; my parents grasped their chance and became comparatively economically secure. Yet it is with their financial support that my generation has become the first to enjoy cultural affluence. We have been fortunate to be able to access opportunities like proper higher education and international mobility. As such, we can “go global”—and that’s when the unconventional and exotic taste for avocados comes in.

As a “cultured” member of the extended family, I possess greater cultural than economical capital — I continuously find myself distinguished from the more traditional, “Chinese” side of the table. As I recall, during one family dinner after the purchase of that box of avocado, my younger cousin and I, were asked to share our knowledge and taste for it which we have “learned in the university and from abroad” with the rest of the table:

**i.** the literal translation of avocado into Chinese as “Niu-You-Guo” (butter-fruit), an exotic name since butter is rarely used in local cooking;

**ii.** the exoticness of avocado in terms geographical origin, history, and especially its unique veg-like qualities which distinguishes it from “sweet and juicy Chinese fruits”;

**iii.** how to know when it’s ripe; ways

to remove the core without damaging the pulp, and ‘correct’ ways of serving it— with salad, as sauce or on a toast - unlike the “wash-peel-eat” method used for most Chinese fruits.

The example above encourages us to reconsider the sociological implications of food and taste— how a particular eating practice can move beyond its physical functions to represent something higher and often less obvious. In his *Social Critique of a Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu made it clear that the preference for exoticness and originality over sensual enjoyment among the French teachers— the representative of high cultural capital and rather modest economic capital—is due to an attempt of “ascetic consumption in all areas” (Bourdieu, 32). Cultural distinction is achieved, through knowledge about foreign food culture and its practices, through the exclusionary ability to embrace an unconventional taste, and through the tendency towards gastronomical snobbery.

However, cultural distinction emerges more inside the family only because it is usually the one place where difference in economic status tends to be less visible. If my taste for avocado is projected onto the broader social context, the economic aspect of distinction is made between the new-middle-class (usually referred to as “Xiao-zi”, the petty-bourgeoisie) and the working class. Still drawing on Bourdieu, different choices for fruits

might characterise social class divisions: the satisfaction of the working class pursuing the pleasure of sweetness, and the refined, restrained taste of the new-middle-class pursuing ceremonial enjoyment and healthy diet (Bourdieu, 38).

But fruit itself does not compose a necessary element for human nutrition intake. For working class families dominated by the taste of necessity—rice, plain vegetables and occasionally meat— the practice of “having fruits” is purely functional: for the enjoyment of natural sweetness. Hence, people spare no effort in maximizing the “sweet and juicy” fruity taste. This makes most tropical fruits (mango, banana, passion fruit) and temperate fruits (apple, pear, peach) ideal for their consumption, aimed at providing appealing taste, colour, and aroma at a relatively cheap price.

On the contrary, new-middle-class taste is manifested in rejecting fruity satisfaction in the primary and immediate sense: the “popular” narrative defining sweetness as unhealthy and plenty as vulgar. More costly and less sweet fruits often appear, usually served in limited portions in addition to daily meals, with emphasis on beauty, ceremony, and health at the expense of function. For instance, in an online recipe which I found, avocado were cut into measured shapes, blended with match colours and served with plain seasoning in order to appear exotic,

original and aesthetically refined. In addition, the nutritious qualities of avocado— low sugar and rich antioxidant— fall precisely into Chinese new-middle-class’ concern about physical beauty and health, i.e. the prevention of high blood pressure, high blood sugar and weight gain. Combined with targeted marketing, the ability of appreciating the taste of avocados for its aesthetic or health qualities, has constituted another aspect of class-based distinction.

The article above has mixed my personal experience with avocado and sociology of food theories provided mainly by Pierre Bourdieu, who takes taste as an embodiment of economic and cultural class habitus. For those who are interested in exploring more about the sociological approach to food and taste, a bit of light reading in Bourdieu will always be a good start.

# What is Sociology?

lucy hodgeon

Sociology teaches us to lean into ambiguity.

This is why it matters, now more than ever. With the rest of the world scrambling for answers, sociology instead instructs us to ask questions.

It allows us to look at panic buying and ask, is this rational choice theory manifest? Does self-interest truly champion over compassion?

Or, the Actor-Network theorists query, could there be something inherent in the design and production of toilet paper? Could that explain why we are so enamoured by those elusive white rolls?

What of capitalism, the ghosts of Marx and Engels whisper – how is capitalism being challenged by the pandemic? Are the means of production escaping its grasp or, with WFH leniency appearing to be a fantasy, is capitalism stronger than ever? Is it commodifying this global health emergency?

How is this affecting our everyday life, Foucault asks. Are we subjecting ourselves and others to intensified surveillance, as many of the prevention measures dictate? How are we channeling this into making ourselves, our bodies, our very beings even more productive?

And how is this productivity tied to social class? As Bourdieu reminds us, only those with the relevant social, cultural, and technological habitus can thrive in this position – are the rest merely surviving? How will this impact them after?

What about gender, the feminists cry – how is this implicated in all this? Why are states framing their medical responses in hypermasculine, militarised rhetoric? Why has it become a war – and how does this shape our perceptions of eventual ‘victory’?

And race - what about race? How is race being invoked in variable and contradictory ways in nationalist discourse? How is this morphing power relations?

Sociology is a tradition founded on questions. It thrives on open debate and ever-shifting consensus.

In the current situation, sociology does not balk at confusion and uncertainty. Instead, Sociology reminds us that this is a continuum of everyday life.

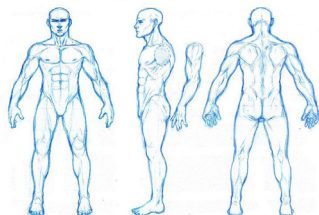
Sociology equips us to lean into the ambiguity. It instructs us to accept the chaos, to look it straight in the eye, and ask it what it means.

And by asking questions rather than scrambling for answers, sociology allows us to derive some semblance of understanding.

## Imitation: are humans actually autonomous?

*lara kratzer*

We've all been there; you are not hungry, your friend is, so you both eat. But why do we do this? Are we not said to be autonomous beings capable of making our own decisions? It has been discovered that when seeing others eat, the parts of the observer's brain that would usually be active when eating are being stimulated. Thus, naturally, we imitate the behaviour of those that eat in front of us - slowly but surely reaching for the hummus. Imitation is not only a natural thing to do when we see others eat, but actually, it is one of the core elements of what makes us human. We learn by imitating others - 'there is nothing in human behaviour that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation' (Garrels, 2011). If we stopped imitating, then all forms of culture would simply cease to exist. Therefore, we are going to look at what imitation really is, beyond the obvious "monkey see, monkey do". We will be outlining how imitation is a bare necessity in the establishment of social order and behaviour,



as well as its role in desire.

In order to maintain social order, a sense of predictability to human life is required. Imitation magnifies and creates such predictability as it relies on 'mass behaviour'. Social order is a widely used, broadly defined concept in Sociology that refers to how social factors work together to create some uniformity and efficiency in the way society works. As explained by Garrels (2011), "social order is a self-fulfilling prophecy that aids in the construction of a functioning society" (Garrels, 2011).

Take the example of **money**; it has got no intrinsic value, yet it is one of the most treasured concepts in society. We value pieces of paper, or even simply numbers stored in a non-existing place, transferable by a piece of plastic, mobilising the numbers from one non-existing place to another. Evidently, money's worth is determined by communal imagination, in which imitation plays a crucial part. When a group of people acknowledge the existence of money, other people are likely to imitate their use of money. Imitation, in this sense, is the repeating of a particular set of behaviour and thought, accepting a valueless object or concept to become of value as a result of 'mass behaviour'. Leading to the question,

are humans actually autonomous? Consider the above-stated concept of money, where the item has no intrinsic value, yet all humans oblige to its dominance, allowing it to rule all social interactions, to the point where it determines over life or death. Can we still say that we have any self-determination at all? More to the point, in much of social life, the correctness of something is determined by how many people choose to accept it.

Fashion choice is a good example to further clarify this argument; in the 2000s, low-rise Jeans were fashionable, but now, the 'correctness' of low-rise Jeans diminished drastically because fewer people choose to wear them. The fashion trend has changed as a result of top designer brands (such as Gucci), designing new, higher-waisted jeans, causing ordinary shops to follow their suit, forcing low-rise out of fashion. Hence, shops imitated a 'trendsetter', causing people to follow the trend, buying whatever seemed to be in fashion at the time, until a new style would take over. Resultantly, it becomes evident that 'monkey see, monkey do' is a concept closely related to human behaviour and social order. Hence, humans might not be as autonomous as we might like to think.

Imitation is not simply a part of human behaviour, but it could possibly, unconsciously, be the base of all behaviour and actions. Imitation is the core element to human learning throughout the life course; becoming one of the most "ubiquitous, organi[s]ing and unconscious characteristics of human social relations" (Garrels, 2011). Trade (1904) actually went as far as to compare imitation to a state of hypnosis, where all behaviour and social order becomes an execution of demand and action. He makes an excellent point when formulating the idea that we are all possessed by the illusion that our ideas are spontaneous, although they have by the large been suggested to us by others. All ideas stem from previous suggestions; human 'choice' is simply conforming to what others have insinuated in a subtle enough way so as to make one think that it is one's own choice. Thus, humans are not as autonomous as most would like to think.

**Desire** is yet another concept in which mimicking can be exemplified to play an extremely crucial role, questioning the true autonomy of humans. Rene Girard (2015) came up with the idea of the 'triangular model of humanity', involving a subject, a model and a desired object. Finalising his claim by arguing that human desires stem from or are mediated by what is

found desirable by others in our social world (Garrels, 2011). Consider a new iPhone or a popular brand of clothes: the more people own it, the more people want it. We don't immediately desire a given object, but rather we feel a sudden autonomous motivation or curiosity towards it. Girad's triangular model perceived that mimicking is mutually reinforcing, meaning that people encourage each other's desires by desiring the object themselves.

What begins with mimetic desire can often result in mimetic rivalry, when both parties compete over the same desired object. In order to explain this concept a little better, here is a personal example;

*when my three-year-older brother and I were younger, he wanted to switch from skiing to snowboarding.*

As soon as he mentioned it, I obviously wanted it too, I mean I couldn't let him have something that I didn't have, right? My mother agreed to allow us to start snowboarding once we had finished all the skiing courses, or we reached the age of 12. A rivalry started between my brother and me, and since he was already 11 it was clear who would start snowboarding first; motivating me to work harder, so I could skip some levels, which I did. I started snowboarding at 9, just a few months after my brother. This was a blow to him already,

as I managed to start at a younger age than him. Ultimately, I won my first snowboarding race, and he lost his. He never stood on a snowboard again. This is a perfect example for mimetic rivalry, as I never actually wanted to start snowboarding before he had mentioned the idea, and as a little sister I couldn't let him have something that I didn't.

What else are siblings for? The incident above is also a good showcase for how little autonomy my choice to start snowboarding actually had. The idea was planted in my conscience by my brother, which has then led me to desire it more than anything else at the time. Hence, our choices and desires are not strongly grounded in autonomy.

Overall, humans are not quite as autonomous as the predominant view of Western Philosophy has traditionally considered them to be. Recent research on imitation has opened up new ways of thinking about what it means to be human, and why we behave in the ways that we do. Therefore, imitation is one of the most underlying human trades, diminishing the extent to which they can be said to be autonomous.



**THE POSITIVES  
OF DEATH  
ANXIETY IN A  
PANDEMIC**



**faye armitage**

**The coronavirus pandemic has made many of us far more aware of our impermanence.**

Turn on the news, and we see photographs of ice rinks turned into morgues in the US, the emotional strain experienced by key workers, and ever-increasing body counts.

**We have come to realise that all of us are vulnerable.**

And this vulnerability may be something we have chosen to push to the fringe of our consciousness; to try and deny for as long as possible. But, once the fragility of life becomes a personal truth as opposed to something that just happens to others, I think that we become more mindful of the little things - including our relationships.

You've probably noticed people smiling more at one another on the street, waving as you cross the road to try and keep your two metre distance. Maybe you've been setting up Zoom calls with people you have not spoken to or seen for months. Or perhaps you phone your grandmother four times a week, which is much more often than you would ever see her in real life.

You cook together and eat together with your flatmates from all across the country, replicating the intimacy you get from eating with them.

*In the midst of the pandemic, I feel like many of us have come to the realisation that the clock is ticking on both our opportunities and our relationships.*

This is not a new concept. There is a long and deep history of humans making the fragility of life salient as a way of better appreciating what they have. Medieval monks kept human skulls on their death to help them to reflect on their mortality. Vanitas, the symbolic works of art common to the 17th-century, showed the transience of life and the certainty of death. Often, they contrasted symbols of wealth and life with symbols of ephemerality and death, such as a gold pocket watch left ticking next to a wilting bouquet of flowers. Through allowing death to seep into our consciousness, you could argue that a deeper appreciation of life is created and encouraged.

Existential crises are perilous times, but also opportunities for transformation and growth. And this certainly rings true to our current circumstances. Confronting the reality of death allows it to be accepted; learning to appreciate the fragility of life and the meanings that life holds. You may feel anxious about your death, the death of a loved one, or even the death of your favourite celebrity, and I want to stress that this is fine, and natural. It is hard to come to terms with the end of life. But death anxiety can be conceived to be a fundamentally positive experience. We are forced to face our finitude; but also our personal responsibility to live here and now as passionately, lovingly, creatively, courageously, and meaningfully as we can while we are still able. Death anxiety is a direct manifestation of natural, instinctual struggles for survival. It is the grappling of events, thoughts and experiences that threaten to destroy our very being.

But death is problematised and avoided. It is constructed as the ultimate evil, our greatest enemy. It is something to be disdained, shunned, resisted and conquered. And at the moment, coronavirus is epitomising the very evil, suffering and death that we have gone to such lengths to avoid.

*It is important to not forget the positives that death awareness can provide in the age of coronavirus.*



I have mentioned how we become more mindful of our relationships with one other, our connectedness, and the fragility of such relationships. Take the uncertainty you may feel in your stride, come to fully love, appreciate and commit to life. These are frightening times, but allow yourself to acknowledge your fears and turn them into something much more fruitful.

## THESE TIMES WILL PASS

### RESOURCES FOR THE DEATH-INCLINED AMONGST YOU:

#### **ASK A MORTICIAN**

LA-based mortician and death positive advocate Caitlin Doughty delves into all everything weird and wonderful about death on her YouTube channel. Expect videos about coffin births, mummified royalty, corpse eating shrimp in New Orleans and 10 reasons why you should have a home funeral.

#### **DYING IN DIGNITY**

An organisation aiming to ve everyone the right to a 'good death' through assisted dying, campaigning for change to legislation allowing for terminally ill adults to die with dignity. Their poll showed that almost 90% of people in Scotland questioned support assisted dying becoming law.

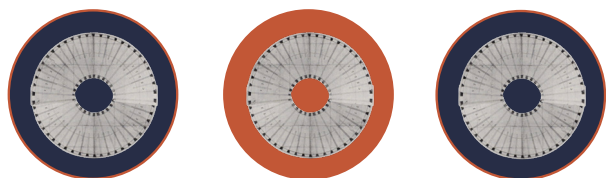
#### **DEATH CAFE**

Basically, you go to one of their events, eat cake, drink tea, and talk about death. Anyone is welcome and you are able to talk as much or as little as you wish. If you go on their website they'll have more information, and you can join any virtual Cafe to engage in death conversation.

#### **THE ORDER OF GOOD DEATH**

This is an organisation set up by Caitlyn Doughty and other funeral industry professionals, academics and artists to explore the ways of bringing death awareness to the fore of a death phobic culture. They have a blog, have written books, and hold events and classes all with the aim of making death a part of your life.

# *THANKS FOR READING*



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