

Sociology is discomforting

Sociology undergraduate, Harry Crumless on his sociological journey so far...

A little over three years ago, I went to an open day at Goldsmiths. At a taster session with one of the department heads, sociology was described as the art of “questioning everything”. I didn’t end up at Goldsmiths; instead I chose LSE, but this description of the discipline has stuck with me.



In my final year at school, I took criminology, as anything to do with the social sciences just *clicked* with my way of thinking. My teacher was fantastic and really encouraged me to dig deeper and understand the way that society operates. One of the key ways to do this was to reconsider everything that I’d ever thought I knew about crime. In fact, even the term ‘crime’ had to be put in scare quotes and problematised in order to open it up and explore what it actually means. That final year of school acted as a taster for what was to come at LSE.

I didn’t really have any idea of what I might be taught or introduced to at LSE. In the first week we had a lunch with the academics from the department. To say I was terrified would be hyperbolic, but I just didn’t know what to say to any of them, as I was a newbie, very much aware of the fact that this was my first day of school, so to speak. I spoke to one academic and asked him what he taught, his response was along the lines of ‘cities and urbanisation.’ I didn’t quite know how to respond to this. The idea that you could study cities was very new to me. Hindsight is 50/50 vision, but I can now see that this is a fascinating area of study, and one of the ways that sociology can help us ‘question everything’. If I remember correctly, at that time I made my excuses and meandered closer to the sandwiches.

Very quickly, we were forced to battle through a selection of works by Durkheim, Weber and Marx. An arduous task that I have now pushed to the back of my mind. The whole point of this was to consider the concepts and ideas that they had written about a hundred years ago, and try and apply them to society today. At that time, we were two years into austerity-ridden Britain, and the Occupy protests had ended a only few months before, so Marx’ theory of alienation and class strife were hardly difficult to contextualise.

There’s a certain level of discomfort that sociology evokes in you – or imposes on you, depending on the way you want to see it. Suddenly you have to go from ‘I’m Harry, I’m an individual and choose the way I live my life’, to, ‘I’m Harry, I’m part of a class-ridden society, have gender-norms imposed on me on a daily basis, and don’t quite know how to solve this.’ Suki Ali’s first lecture on gender debunked just about every myth that I had taken as fact. Similarly, a lecture by Fran Tonkiss highlighted the ludicrous idiosyncrasies of the British class system, that are so deeply engrained in our every action.

By about January of Lent term I felt that we lived in an impossible world, where you couldn’t even get a coffee without considering the exploitation and alienation that had gone into that Americano – or if the company you were buying the coffee from was paying any tax, but I digress.

The purpose of this blog-post is to consider ‘why sociology?’, so I will get a bit more to the point with that. Sociology has not only afforded me a different perspective on society, it has allowed me to forge my own way of thinking, and my own *sociological approach*. Over the past two years I have been able to carry out research on a vast range of topics. I’ll start with the slightly more conventional ones. As a group, we looked into student employment and wellbeing at LSE. This Easter I carried out a comparative study of two gay couples after the legalisation of same-sex

marriage. Now, to the less conventional ones. In second year, I spent a large chunk of Michaelmas term researching public toilets in London. And, finally, my dissertation, titled 'The Symbolic Nature of the Curtain' explored the way in which the notion of *class* is constructed within British Airways. Safe to say, I will never board a flight again without first considering which 'class' I have been labelled.

Excuse the cliché, but without the tools that Sociology equips you with, there's a whole side to the world we live in that is shut off. After three years of studying at LSE, I would definitely opt to do it all again. Yes, there are times where I would like to walk into a coffee shop without any of the politics; or use a public toilet without considering the way in which the space has been constructed so we self-regulate our behaviour. But, it certainly makes conversation more interesting.

From the people I've met who study sociology, it is a discipline that suits those who always want to reject the first answer they're given. If everyone in the world spent a year studying sociology, we'd be in a much better shape.

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