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PETER BRAHAM



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# Key Concepts in Sociology

PETER BRAHAM



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## about the author



**Peter Braham** lectured in sociology at the Open University for many years. He made major contributions to a number of Open University courses: *Patterns of Inequality*; *Ethnic Minorities and Community relations*; *Mass Communication and Society*; *An Introduction to Sociology*; *'Race', Education and Society*; *Understanding Modern Societies*; *Implementing New Technologies*; *An Introduction to Information Technology*; *Culture, Media and Identities*; *Studying Family and Community History: 19th and 20th Centuries*; and *Sociology and Society*. He co-edited *Discrimination and Disadvantage in Employment: the Experience of Black Workers* (1981); *Media, Knowledge and Power* (1986); *Racism and Antiracism* (1992); *Political and Economic Forms of Modernity* (1992); *Social Differences and Divisions* (2002); *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture* (2003). His main research interests have been in migration and settlement, child immigration and family reunification, and he has been the UK partner on several international research projects in these areas.



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***For Susan***  
*With love*



# introduction

*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines *sociology* as the ‘science or study of the origin, history, and constitution of society’. The word sociology is an amalgam of the Latin *socius*, meaning companion (or associate), and the Greek *logus* or *ology*, meaning study or study of – and so a literal meaning of sociology can be rendered as ‘the study of companionship’. The first public use of the word ‘sociology’ appeared in Auguste Comte’s *Positive Philosophy* (1830–1842), which held that *positivism* provided the scientific means of illuminating the laws of social change in society. It has often been said that the chief reason for the emergence of sociology was an attempt to comprehend the huge social upheavals produced by the transition from traditional, rural society to modern, industrial society. The work of the classical sociologists, such as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Ferdinand Tönnies, in the last years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century was largely concerned with exploring the processes that created this modern world.

It took a considerable time for sociology to be accepted as a valid subject in academia. For example, a year after Durkheim was appointed to a Lectureship in Social Science and Education at the University of Bordeaux in 1887 he established *L’Année Sociologique* – the first social science journal in France. However, when he was appointed to a Professorship at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1906, his title was Professor in the Science of Education – though in 1913 this post was retitled as Professor in the Science of Education and Sociology.

The study of sociology was the newest (or last) of the social sciences to establish itself in the English-speaking world. In the USA, though sociology was first taught under that name at the University of Kansas in 1890 and the first academic department of sociology was established in the University of Chicago in 1892, the great expansion of sociology occurred in the USA in the mid-twentieth century. The American Sociological Association (ASA) has described the discipline of sociology in the following way:

Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob; from organized crime to religious cults; from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture; and from the sociology of work to the sociology of sports. Sociology provides many distinctive perspectives on the world, generating new ideas and critiquing the old. The field also offers a range of research techniques that can be applied to virtually any aspect of social life: street crime and delinquency, corporate downsizing, how people express emotions, welfare or education reform, how families differ and flourish, or problems of peace and war. ([www.asanet.org/](http://www.asanet.org/))

Although sociology was first taught in Britain at the London School of Economics in 1904, the establishment of sociology departments in British

universities was predominantly a phenomenon of the 1960s and during this period sociology became a major discipline in British universities. It may be because the late 1960s was also a time of student unrest that there were many who saw the study of sociology as a significant contributory factor in precipitating this unrest. In any event, as Peter Worsley (appointed as the first Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester in 1964) commented some years later:

Some fear the dispassionate examination of society; they think that things may come to light which are better left hidden or unexplained. Sociology is meant to make people (especially students) 'radical' or 'critical'... [consequently] many think of sociology as an academic synonym for socialism [though as Worsley added, in the then Communist countries, sociology had been banned for decades as 'bourgeois ideology']. (1977: 19)

The entry for *Sociology* in the *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* explained that the difficulty of defining the subject was best conveyed by declaring that the easiest way to have constructed it would be to do nothing except simply cross-reference *every* other entry within its more than 700 pages. Resisting this temptation, the entry set out three different (though not mutually exclusive) views of what should be the proper subject matter of sociology. Firstly, that primacy should be given to *social structure*, in the sense that there are patterns of relationships between individuals and groups that will exist over and above the individuals located at a certain juncture within these structures – for example, within the *family*. Secondly, that our collective meanings will exist prior to the birth of individuals who are then socialised into them – a position adopted, for instance, in *discourse* analysis. Thirdly, that the proper focus of sociology is on meaningful social action between groups and individuals – for example, in face-to-face encounters or in making *rational choices*.

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens has provided an especially engaging introduction to the sociological perspective and its subject matter, which is well designed to help produce convincing answers to fundamental questions that you might ask yourself and – just as important – that you might well be asked by others, such as 'What is sociology?' and 'Why study sociology?'

Learning sociology means taking a step back from our own personal interpretations of the world, to look at the social influences which shape our lives. Sociology does not deny or diminish the reality of individual experience. Rather, we obtain a richer awareness of our own individual characteristics, and those of others, by developing a sensitivity towards the wider universe of social activity in which we are all involved ... Sociology is the study of human life, groups and societies. It is a dazzling and compelling exercise, having as its subject-matter our own behaviour as social beings. The scope of sociology is extremely wide, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals in the street up to the investigation of global social processes. (Giddens, 1989: 5, 7–8)

One significant problem you will surely encounter in studying sociology is that in your every-day life you will use many of its concepts, even before you set out to consider them from a sociological perspective (think here of *bureaucracy, community, culture, family, society*). A vital task facing the sociologist is then to present, or rather *re-present*, what is generally familiar or taken-for-granted as unfamiliar or strange, though as John Macionis and Ken Plummer (2008: 4) put it, contrary to the popular view that sociology is merely common sense, it often strains against common sense. And yet a sociological response is often seen as unwelcome or unnecessary:

... most of us think about society and social life without having had any schooling in how to think about society and social life. Indeed, the dominant culture seems to hold dear the belief that we do not require any schooling. We are part of social life – so this belief runs – and so we must quite obviously possess all the understanding required. Intimately connected to this attitude is a positive resistance to any suggestion that sociologists – ‘experts’ in looking at society – may have something to teach ordinary people. (Stones, 1998: 1)

In its discussion of ‘What is Sociology?’ the British Sociological Association (BSA) has made the point that if you become a sociology student you will not be provided with quick answers about matters such as *deviance, class* or *globalisation*, but what you will be equipped with is the means to think about these issues and thereby will be able to look at the world in new ways ([www.britsoc.co.uk](http://www.britsoc.co.uk)). Similarly, *Key Concepts in Sociology* will have succeeded in its purpose if it enables you to *think* about the concepts that it contains and, consequently, to look at the world anew, but to do so in a sociological way. Its chief aims are to provide you with a guide to many of the central areas and issues in sociology that is readily understandable, wide-ranging and thorough in its treatment, and to highlight different perspectives and positions. Each of the 38 substantive entries (two of which are ‘double entries’) is designed to explain a concept, assess its emergence and significance, and identify key sources and authorities, as well as recognise different emphases and approaches and provide further reading.

The choice of entries has, rightly and necessarily, taken account of the ways in which the focus of sociology has changed in recent times. Some of these changes in what is sometimes called ‘the sociological gaze’ may best be depicted as responses to phenomena such as *globalisation* or transformations in communication – what Peter Worsley (in his Preface to the second edition of *Introducing Sociology* when explaining why it was in some respects significantly different from the first edition) referred to as ‘changes in the real world’. Other changes, for example, the increasing attention that has come to be given to *culture*, new approaches to studying the role of women in society – encouraged by *feminism* – and new ways of treating questions of *identity*, in addition to reflecting changes in the ‘real world’, might equally be regarded as having been generated ‘internally’, as sociologists come to pursue new interests or as they modify the way existing interests are treated.

On one hand, many of the entries in *Key Concepts in Sociology* would have been exactly those that sociologists would have expected to find had this book been produced decades ago – for example *Capitalism*, *Equality* and *Family*. On the other hand, the inclusion of other entries might have come as something of a surprise to earlier generations of sociologists – possibly this applies to *Discourse* and *Feminism*, but very likely this also applies to *Orientalism*, *Social Exclusion*, *Postmodernity* and *Everyday Life*.

It is worth noting that while the Index to the second edition of Worsley's *Introducing Sociology* contained multiple entries for *Alienation*, *Family* and *Bureaucracy*, it had no entries at all for *Discourse*, *Feminism*, *Orientalism*, *Social Exclusion*, *Postmodern* (or *Postmodernity*) or *Everyday Life*. As Nicholas Abercrombie et al. stated in their Preface to *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, sociology is an 'evolving discipline', and consequently he and his colleagues felt obliged to provide entries on both contemporary issues (provided that, in their words, 'these are perceived to be important and durable'), while also giving due recognition to the 'classical sociological tradition' (2000: vii). Likewise, entries in *Key Concepts in Sociology* include both what might be regarded as 'classic' sociological concepts, such as *Class*, *Bureaucracy* and *Conflict*, as well as entries on subjects that have become increasingly prominent in sociology in the last decade or two, such as *The Body*, *Celebrity* and *Risk*. Here, it is necessary to state that the understanding of recent developments in sociology may well be better appreciated through understanding what has gone before – indeed, there is much to be learned from concepts that are now seen to be of less importance in sociology than once was the case.

# alienation

Weber's phrase *Enzauberung der Welt*, generally translated as 'the disenchantment of the world', gives weight to the claim that, with few exceptions, sociologists tend to take a pessimistic view of modern life, and it can be argued that *alienation* was a 'core component' in this regard. Weigert discerned two aspects of alienation: the sense of being a stranger in your own life and the sense that something important has been lost as a result of the structure and operation of modern life. He illustrated the alienating character of modern life by referring, first, to Weber's view of life in an era of bureaucratic rationalisation as existing within an 'iron cage', where those who failed to see the bars enclosing them were trapped even more hopelessly than the rest, and then to those who depicted modern life as a machine (and also wondered if machines worked for us, or whether we worked for machines) (Weigert, 1981: 291–293).

According to Williams (1976), the word 'alienation' presents some difficulty because, in addition to its common usage in general contexts, it has specific, yet disputed meanings in a range of disciplines. The term 'alienation' comes from the Latin *alienus* (meaning other, estranged, hostile). It refers to separation from one's essential nature, disconnection from the world, a society or a place. It has been used to describe, amongst other things, estrangement from God, a breakdown between the individual and some political authority, and the transfer (whether voluntary or not) of something of value from one individual to another, but is most often employed to describe a state of estrangement within modern society.

The first systematic discussion of alienation is found in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (even though he did not actually use the term itself) in which man is depicted as being estranged from his original nature. For instance, in 1755, in *The Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau discussed the condition whereby in a developed society, systems of law and morality would deprive individuals of having any part in setting the parameters of liberty, thus alienating them from their potential selves. And later, in *The Social Contract* (1998 [1762]), he also discussed the consequences of yielding individual rights to the community in the construction of society, as well as how society might be reconstructed to enable individuals to participate in the setting of boundaries.

The concept of alienation is most closely associated with Karl Marx, who had originally used the term to refer to the giving up of human powers to the gods. In this, Marx was influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach (1957 [1841]), who had argued that while religion was alienating insofar as it resulted in humanly created values being seen as the work of separate divine beings, hope remained once humans realised that the values ascribed to deities were capable of realisation on earth, rather than being deferred to an afterlife (Giddens, 1989: 458).

Marx concluded, however, that alienation was not the result of some human essence having been ascribed to a god. Rather, it was a social and historical



phenomenon particularly associated with the material conditions of existence, and consequently Marx later used the term to refer to the alienation of workers from the product of their labour. According to Turner (citing Löwith), it is important to understand that in respect of their perceptions of the negative features of bourgeois society, there is 'a significant similarity and connection' between Marx's concept of the alienation of workers from the experience and product of their work (as division, specialisation and separation) and Weber's concept of rationalisation (as disenchantment, specialisation and powerlessness) (Turner, 1999: 3, 52, 82; Löwith, 1954; 1982).

The concept of alienation is usually associated with Marx's early works, and particularly with *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) and *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 1970 [1854-1856]). However, Löwith insisted that alienation was no youthful aberration on Marx's part, but should be seen to integrate Marx's early writings on the anthropological condition of humanity and his later writings on economic processes (Löwith, 1954; see also Turner, 1999: 59). In Marx's early writings the alienation from nature that characterises tribal society gives way to a different sort of alienation in societies where the material world has been mastered. His position was that alienation was an objective condition which resulted from oppression in a social structure: alienation under the social and economic relations of capitalism produced an alienated proletariat who were separated from the product of their labour. As Williams summarised Marx's argument:

In class-society [man] is alienated from his essential nature by specific forms of alienation in the division of labour, private property and the capitalist mode of production in which the worker loses both the product of his labour and his sense of his own productive activity, following the expropriation of both by capital. The world man has made confronts him as a stranger and enemy having power over him who has transferred his power to it. (Williams, 1976: 35)

More specifically, Marx argued that in capitalist society the objects that workers produce appear to them as extraneous entities. For example, industrial workers would have little control over their tasks and, in the main, would contribute only a tiny part to the finished product. Work was therefore not the satisfying of a need, but a depersonalised activity and merely a means to satisfying other needs of food, clothing and shelter. Marx distinguished several elements of alienation: workers were alienated from the product of their labour, which was appropriated by capitalists; they were alienated from work itself, seeing their reward only in activities outside work and never in the work itself, and so feeling free only when eating, drinking and procreating; they were alienated because work was mere drudgery that robbed them not just of a loss of meaning and pride in their work, but also of a sense of self and the potential for creativity that were essential to being human; and they were alienated from their fellow workers, which thereby dislocated any sense of community. In Marx's view, it was the system of production that determined life in capitalism and this was an alienated and exploitative world where the worker was:

... at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary ... Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague. (Marx, 1959 [1848]: 73)

According to Smith, the further significance of the argument that for the great majority work was an alienating experience in which the worker performed as an automaton was that this linked a person's identity or nature to the means adopted to satisfy material needs – and this, he argued, was profoundly influential within the human sciences (Smith, 1997: 438).

If, for Marx, factory work alienated workers from their human potential through drudgery, its repetitive nature and dehumanizing effect, he nevertheless described and foresaw a future non-alienated existence in a communist society. Here, no-one would need to be confined to a single sphere of activity, and could instead strive to become accomplished in any branch of activity they desired. In his famous evocation in *The German Ideology*, an individual might choose

... to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (Quoted in Tucker, 1972: 124)

According to Abercrombie et al., since Marx, alienation has lost much of 'its original sociological meaning' and has been employed to describe a wide range of phenomena – including

... separation from, and discontent with society; feelings that there is a moral breakdown in society; feelings of powerlessness in the face of the solidity of social institutions; the impersonal and dehumanized nature of large-scale and bureaucratic social organizations. (Abercrombie et al., 2000a: 12)

Various accounts have been given of alienation in philosophy and social psychology, as well as from within the Marxist tradition. For example, in *The Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel described how relationships were increasingly mediated through money and gave an account of alienation which seemed to owe much to Marx's account in *Das Capital*. According to Simmel, where the division of labour prevails,

... the person can no longer find himself expressed in his work; its form becomes dissimilar to the subjective mind and appears as only as a highly specialized part of our being that is indifferent to the total unity of man. (1990 [1907]: 455, quoted in Connor, 1996: 343)

Writing from a Marxist perspective, Herbert Marcuse (1964) examined leisure, which he depicted in unflattering terms. According to Marcuse, though capitalism had the technological capacity to satisfy most people's needs, once these needs

were satiated there would be a crisis of production as there would be no need to produce more or people would refrain from consuming further production. Capitalism thus demanded that needs were never satisfied or that fresh needs were always being created. Marcuse argued that capitalism must therefore promote false needs and desires to oblige people to work more to be able to buy more, instead of permitting them to work less to be able to *do* more. Thus, for him, work *and* leisure were alienated insofar as they served the false necessity of a consumer culture (Slater, 1998b: 400).

Slater also noted that for other writers, such as Henri Lefebvre, in addition to the alienation of their experience of work, the essence of humanity – their activity – had been (further) reduced in leisure to the triviality of hobbies such as gardening and constructing model railways. From this viewpoint, it may be said that under capitalism leisure is merely unpaid time in which one rests prior to the next day's labour (Slater, 1998b: 400). Lefebvre discerned new forms of alienation beyond those identified by Marx, arguing that not only had the system of production under capitalism caused alienation, but also every aspect of life had been emptied of meaning or significance:

Rather than resolving alienation, consumption is part of the misrecognition of their alienated state by modern consumers. (Shields, 2001: 227)

However, Shields argued that, in transforming alienation into the key concept of an entire critique of modern life, Lefebvre had oversimplified Marx's differentiation between 'many different types of estrangement and dispossession' so that all its forms are 'synonyms of a social-psychological type alienation' (Shields, 2001: 228).

Subsequent attention has been less concerned with the impact of the social structural aspects of capitalism that were central to Marx's analysis of alienation and has focused more on individual experiences and attitudes. Two main approaches may be distinguished here. The first of these focuses on the subjective aspects of alienation associated with different types of work in modern industry. In part, this reflects the low level of skill attached to many jobs. For example, in a survey of manual jobs in an English town, it was found that in all but the very highest jobs, the level of skill required was minimal, and that 87 per cent of those surveyed exercised less skill at work than they would have done by driving to work (Blackburn and Mann, 1979: 280).

Robert Blauner (1964) argued that alienation was limited in craft production, where work was meaningful and rewarding as workers tackled 'whole' tasks, had responsibility, and could socialise with colleagues as they worked. By contrast, alienation was at its highest in mass production, on Fordist assembly lines, where workers had no say in the pace of production and tasks were divided and fragmented (see also Walker and Guest, 1952). Blauner argued that

In this extreme situation, a depersonalized worker, estranged from himself and larger collectives, goes through the motions of work in the regimented milieu of the conveyor belt for the sole purpose of earning his bread. (Quoted in Marshall, 1998a: 14)

However, according to Anthony Giddens, most recent sociological studies of alienation have focused on workers' feelings and attitudes, rather than on the 'objective nature of the work situation'. For example, he cited *Work in America*, a report produced by the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare, that found many work settings involved

Dull, repetitive, seemingly meaningless tasks, offering little challenge or autonomy ... [thereby] causing discontent among workers at all occupational levels. (1973, quoted in Giddens, 1989: 487)

The second approach, exemplified by Melvin Seeman's (1959) article in the *American Sociological Review*, which drew on Durkheim, Marx and others, focused on the meaning of alienation, which he considered to be a concept 'so central' in sociology. Seeman identified five alternative meanings of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement. Powerlessness was the idea of alienation as originated in the Marxian view of work under capitalism; meaninglessness referred to the individual's sense of understanding of the events in which they were engaged; normlessness was derived from Émile Durkheim's concept of *anomie* and referred to a situation where social norms had broken down or were ineffective; isolation referred to the situation of those (such as intellectuals) who placed little value on the goals and beliefs that tended to be highly valued in a society; and self-estrangement referred to separation from an ideal human condition, exemplified by loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in one's work (Seeman, 1959: 783–790).

Writing in the mid-1970s, Williams argued that

It is clear from the present extent and intensity of the use of alienation that there is widespread and important experience which in ... varying ways, the word and its varying specific concepts offer to describe and interpret. There has been some impatience with its difficulties, and a tendency to reject it as merely fashionable. But it seems better to face the difficulties of the word and through them the difficulties which its extraordinary history and variation of usage indicate and record. In its evidence of extensive feeling of a division between man and society, it is a crucial element in a very general structure of meanings. (Williams, 1976: 36)

According to Holton (1996: 29), Marx's concept of alienation was highly influential in the continuing development of social theory in the twentieth century. But it has been argued by Abercrombie et al. (2000a) that the concept of alienation was used less often in recent sociology and they also noted that many Marxist sociologists believed Marx had abandoned it in his later work in favour of exploitation, while many non-Marxists held that it had become 'too indeterminate' to be of use.

**See also:** *Anomie, Bureaucracy, Consumption*

## FURTHER READING

Marx's use of the concept of alienation can be found in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844). Lefebvre's *The Sociology of Marx* (1982) provides a good introduction to the importance that Marx gives to alienation, and by putting Marx's work on alienation at the core of his book Lefebvre takes issue with the widely-held, but simplistic, view that Marxist sociological thinking is only concerned with class. Blauner's *Alienation and Freedom: The Factory Worker and his Industry* (1964) includes both abstract analysis of the concept of alienation and empirical data about the experiences and outlook of blue-collar workers in various work settings in the USA.

## anomie

Auguste Comte, the inventor of the term 'sociology', was much concerned with the preservation of social harmony and cohesion, a concern shared by later sociologists, such as Durkheim and Simmel. From the perspective of Durkheim and others, the dramatic pace of change in modern society – notably, an increasing division of labour, accelerating urbanisation, the spread of rationalisation and bureaucracy, and growing individualism – diminished and threatened to destroy traditional values and ways of living, thus undermining social solidarity, social cohesion and social control. In other words, the major trends that had produced so many of the achievements of modern society might be seen at the same time to contribute to many of its problems, by leaving society without any agreement on the rules of social interaction. As Chinoy put it:

The *anomie* to which ... [these problems] give rise leads to extensive personal breakdown – suicide and mental illness – and to various forms of deviant behaviour such as crime, delinquency, drug addiction and alcoholism. (1967: 483)

*Anomie* (or *anomy*), which comes from the Greek *anomia* and *anomos* (without law, mores, traditions), has been used to refer to different things at different times, reflecting the particular concerns of various epochs and cultures: in Plato's writings it meant anarchy and intemperance; in the Old Testament, sin and wickedness; and Durkheim used it to signify a human condition of insatiability (Orrù, 1987). Durkheim's position was that the lack of moral guidance in modern society might cause it to disintegrate, as increasingly isolated and materialistic individuals pursued their own needs without considering the interests of society.

Following Durkheim, anomie has been employed in sociology principally to describe a phenomenon resulting from fast-changing social conditions in which a lack or weakening of normative rules, moral guidance and moral values offers an insufficient constraint on freedom of action and may therefore lead to social breakdown or disintegration. The argument was that this left the individual without a secure grasp of social reality and that this was often associated with feelings of normlessness, meaningless and isolation (as portrayed in Albert Camus' (1942) novel *The Stranger*, whose central character exists in a state of apathy and boredom) – for which reason anomie is often compared with the concept of alienation.

According to Durkheim, modernisation brings about a more complex division of labour, involving the interdependence of highly specialised and differentiated institutions and activities:

It is known, indeed, that the more work is specialized, the higher the yield. The resources put at our disposal are more abundant and also of better quality ... Industry produces more, and its products are nearer perfect. Now man has need of all of these things. It would seem, then, that he must be so much happier as he possesses more, and, consequently, that he may be naturally incited to look for them. (Durkheim, 1966 [1893]: 233–234)

Durkheim argued that if this growing differentiation and specialisation was too fast for the development of moral regulation and not accompanied by consensus about norms, society would become deregulated and fragmented rather than interdependent. And if there was an absence of social control and little that would bind its inhabitants together in a common culture, the result would be the atomisation of individuals, egoistic competition between them and, thus, anomie.

Durkheim had argued that society was 'something beyond us and something in ourselves' (1953: 55) and nowhere is this better illustrated than in his concept of anomie, for this combines an understanding of social action at the level of the individual with action at the level of the society. In order to demonstrate that in times of great social change social solidarity was vulnerable and social pathology tended to increase, he needed some specific indicators of anomie. In *The Division of Labour*, he had identified 'anomic' suicide – which reflected the transitional state of the economic order and was therefore more frequent among those employed in industry and commerce (where change was greatest) than among those working in (more settled) agricultural occupations (Giddens, 1978: 45–46).

It has been said that Durkheim (1970 [1897]) made a brilliant choice in seeking to illuminate the relation between society and the individual by studying suicide. Rather than explaining why one person committed suicide and another did not, he focused on the variations in suicide rates between groups, within a group at different times, and between those in different social positions, and by taking what appeared to be a supremely individual act and showing that it was a social phenomenon, he is said to have met psychology on its own ground.

Durkheim noted that suicide rates were lowest in Catholic countries, highest in Protestant countries, and in countries with mixed populations of Catholics and Protestants they stood between these two poles. He also noted that unmarried individuals had higher suicide rates than those who were married, and that among married couples the more children in the family the lower was the suicide rate of the parents. He therefore maintained that suicide was a matter of social solidarity: Catholic communities were more strongly integrated than Protestant communities, married individuals were more strongly integrated into stable social relationships than single persons, and large families had more binding social ties than small families or childless couples.

Durkheim argued that the critical factor behind the rise in suicide rates was the radical disruption that instability in material conditions and economic fluctuations caused when the moral codes that usually regulated behaviour lost their influence and that suicide could not be attributed to poverty; hence, suicide rates rose not only during economic depressions, but also during economic booms. He made a similar point about the impact of sudden changes in the social situation of particular individuals, such as divorce or widowhood: higher suicide rates resulted because the old rules of life were no longer applicable and any new rules had had insufficient time to develop.

Though it has subsequently emerged that there were problems with the data on which Durkheim depended (for instance, at that time coroners' records were not always reliable or consistent), his insistence on the part played by social causes in what seems to be the ultimate individual act remains valid. For many, *Suicide* remains a classic sociological study, interrelating theory and data in an exemplary fashion by validating the thesis that suicide was the product of integration and regulation, and that where regulation was low a state of *anomie* existed and, consequently, suicide rates rose (Pope, 1998: 50–52).

Durkheim's concept of anomie was later adapted by Merton to produce a theory of deviant behaviour in American society, and this became one of criminology's foundational concepts and exerted great influence on those researching delinquent subcultures. Merton linked all forms of deviance directly to the social structure and, in particular, to ideas about social mobility that prevail in a society. Whereas Durkheim saw anomie as resulting from an absence of norms, for Merton anomie resulted from a conflict of norms between the 'American Dream' that promoted striving for success and the legitimate means available to secure that success. Merton's focus was less on changes in the social structure and more on the way those variously located in the social structure reacted to disjunctions between means and goals.

In 1938 Merton set out his position in an influential paper in the *American Sociological Review* and later on in an equally influential book (Merton, 1968 [1949]). His thesis attracted a large body of theoretical and empirical work in the 1950s and 1960s and various versions of his work were said to be the most cited works in sociology in this period (Gagnon, 1999: 257). Merton's argument was that: