In Defence of Sociology
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*Essays, Interpretations and Rejoinders*

ANTHONY GIDDENS

Polity Press
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Preface

The articles included here first appeared in a diversity of different contexts and at diverse dates. In selecting the pieces I have been guided by two main criteria. I have chosen articles which in some way or another reflect the title of the book – they contribute to elucidating what I take to be the central position of sociology in the social sciences as a whole. But I have also tried to respond to the many enquiries I had about essays that had gone out of print and have included those most in demand among people who have written to me. I have incorporated several long and substantial essays as well as a selection of shorter writings.
In Defence of Sociology

There's something about sociology that raises hackles other academic subjects fail to reach. Economics may be the dismal science, full of obscure terms few can understand and seemingly irrelevant to the practical tasks of day-to-day life. Yet sociology is often indicted on all counts—diffuse and lacking a coherent subject-matter, as well as being jargon-ridden. What do you get when you cross a sociologist with a member of the Mafia? An offer you can't understand.

What is it with sociology? Why is it so irritating to so many? Some sociologists might answer: ignorance; others: fear. Why fear? Well, because they like to think of their subject as a dangerous and discomfiting one. Sociology, they are prone to say, tends to subvert: it challenges our assumptions about ourselves as individuals and about the wider social contexts in which we live. It has a direct connection with political radicalism. In the 1960s, the discipline seemed to many to live up to this firebrand reputation.

In truth, however, even in the 1960s and early 1970s sociology wasn't intrinsically associated with the left, let alone with revolutionaries. It came in for a great deal of criticism from Marxists of various persuasions who, far from regarding the subject as subversive, saw it as the very epitome of the bourgeois order they found so distasteful.

In some aspects and situations of its development sociology has in fact a long history of being bound up with the political right. Max Weber, commonly regarded as one of its classical founders,
inclined more to the right than to the left and was savagely critical of the self-proclaimed revolutionaries of his time. Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels both flirted with Italian fascism towards the end of their lives. Most sociologists have probably been liberals by temperament and political inclination: this was true of Emile Durkheim and in later generations of R.K. Merton, Talcott Parsons, Erving Goffman and Ralf Dahrendorf among many other prominent sociological thinkers.

Sociology has currently been going through a hard time in the very country where it has long been most well developed, the US. A prominent American sociologist, Irving Louis Horowitz, recently published a book entitled The Decomposition of Sociology, a work which he reports was ‘more a matter of pain rather than pride to have felt the need to write’. The discipline, he argues, has gone sour. Three sociology departments, including a distinguished one, at Washington University, St Louis – where Horowitz himself once worked – have recently been closed down. Yale University houses the oldest sociology department in the United States: its resources have just been cut by almost half.

Undergraduate student numbers in sociology in the US have fallen substantially over the two decades since the 1970s – from a record high of 36,000 students in 1973 to below 15,000 in 1994. According to Horowitz, however, the travails of sociology aren’t just expressed in declining student appeal. They are to do with the parlous intellectual state of the discipline. Sociology, he says, might not in the past have been linked to an overall political standpoint, but since the 1960s it has increasingly become so. The subject has become the home of the discontented, a gathering of groups with special agendas, from the proponents of gay rights to liberation theology. Sociology is decomposing because it has come to be just what its critics always saw it as, a pseudo-science; and because there has been an outflow of respectable, empirically-oriented social scientists into other, more narrowly defined areas – such as urban planning, demography, criminology or jurisprudence. The deterioration of sociology doesn’t imply the disintegration of social research, which is still flourishing in many domains; but much of such research has degenerated into pure empiricism, no longer guided by worthwhile theoretical perspectives. What has disappeared is the capacity of sociology to provide a unifying centre for the diverse branches of social research.
In Defence of Sociology

Shutting down of the sociology departments at Washington University and elsewhere has provoked a heated debate in the US – to which Horowitz’s is one among a variety of contributions. William Julius Wilson, well-known for his writings on the urban poor, has argued that sociology has become too detached from issues on the public agenda and should focus its concerns on matters of practical policy. After all, as he says, there’s hardly a dearth of social problems for sociologists to study, with the cities falling into ruin, divisions between white and black as rigid as they ever were and violent crime a commonplace.

Is sociology in the doldrums? And if so, is this in some sense a peculiarly American phenomenon or something that applies worldwide? Or was sociology perhaps always the rag-tail affair its critics have long proclaimed it to be?

Let’s deal first of all with the old chestnut that sociology doesn’t have a proper field of investigation. The truth of the matter is that the field of study of sociology, as understood by the bulk of its practitioners, is no more, but no less, clearly defined than that of any other academic area. Consider, for example, history. That discipline has an obvious subject-matter, it would seem – the past. But the past embraces everything! No clear or bounded field of study here, and history is every bit as riven by methodological disputes about its true nature as sociology has ever been.

Sociology is a generalizing discipline that concerns itself above all with modernity – with the character and dynamics of modern or industrialized societies. It shares many of its methodological strategies – and problems – not only with history but with the whole gamut of the social sciences. The more empirical issues it deals with are very real. Of all the social sciences, sociology bears most directly on the issues that concern us in our everyday lives – the development of modern urbanism, crime and punishment, gender, the family, religion, social and economic power.

Given that sociological research and thinking are more or less indispensable in contemporary society, it is difficult to make sense of the criticism that it is unenlightening – that it is common sense wrapped up in somewhat unattractive jargon. Although specific pieces of research could always be questioned, no one could argue that there is no point in carrying out, say, comparative studies of the incidence of divorce in different countries. Sociologists engage in all sorts of research which, once one has
some awareness of them, would prove interesting, and be thought important, by most reasonably neutral observers.

There is, however, another, more subtle reason why sociology may appear quite often to proclaim what is obvious to common sense. This is that social research doesn’t, and can’t, remain separate from the social world it describes. Social research forms so much a part of our consciousness today that we take it for granted. All of us depend upon such research for what we regard as common sense – as ‘what everyone knows’. Everyone knows, for example, that divorce rates are high in today’s society; yet such ‘obvious knowledge’, of course, depends upon regular social research, whether it happens to be carried out by government researchers or academic sociologists.

It is therefore to some degree the fate of sociology to be taken as less original and less central to our social existence than actually it is. Not only empirical research but sociological theorizing and sociological concepts can become so much part of our everyday repertoire as to appear as ‘just common sense’. Many people, for instance, now ask whether a leader has charisma, discuss moral panics or talk of someone’s social status – all notions that originated in sociological discourse.

These considerations, obviously, don’t help with the issue of whether sociology as an academic discipline is in a state of sorry decline or even dissolution since its heyday in the 1960s, if that period was indeed its apogee. Things have changed in sociology over the past thirty years, but not all for the worse. For one thing, the centre of power has shifted. American sociology used to dominate world sociology, but it does so no longer. Especially so far as sociological theorizing is concerned, the centre of gravity has shifted elsewhere, particularly to Europe. The major sociological thinkers now are over here rather than over there, authors like Pierre Bourdieu, Niklas Luhmann or Ulrich Beck.

Sociology in the US appears to have become over-professionalized, with research groups concentrating on their own patch, having little knowledge of, or interest in, anyone else’s. Everyone in American sociology has a ‘field’ and whatever the sociologist’s speciality happens to be effectively defines that identity. Quantophrenia is rife in American sociology departments. For many if you can’t count it, it doesn’t count; the result, to say the least, can be a certain lack of creativity.
There’s a good deal of justification for William Julius Wilson’s advice to sociologists to engage in research immediately relevant to public policy issues and to participate forcefully in the wide debates their work may arouse. After all, many questions raised in the political arena are sociological – questions to do, for instance, with welfare, crime or the family. Sociological work is relevant, not just to their formulation as particular types of policy question, but to grasping the likely consequences of whatever policies might be initiated in relation to them.

Reconnecting sociology to a public policy-making agenda wouldn’t address the other issues raised about the so-called decline of sociology. What of the disaggregation of sociology, of which Horowitz makes so much? Is it a discipline without a common conceptual core, in danger of breaking up into unconnected specialities? And have the most innovative authors moved elsewhere? Most important of all, perhaps, has it lost its cutting edge?

If one compares sociology to economics, it has to be conceded that sociology is much more internally diverse. In economics there exists a variety of different schools of thought and theoretical approaches, but the neo-classical view tends to dominate almost everywhere and forms the basic stuff of virtually all introductory texts. Sociology isn’t to the same degree in the thrall of a single conceptual system. However, this surely should be seen more as a strength than a weakness. I don’t believe such diversity has produced complete disarray, but instead gives voice to the pluralism that must exist when one studies something as complex and controversial as human social behaviour and institutions.

Is there any evidence that talented scholars who might once have been attracted to working in sociology have now migrated elsewhere? There’s no doubt that in the 1960s some were drawn into sociology because they saw it, if not offering a route to revolution, as trendy and new; and it doesn’t have that reputation any longer. But most such individuals probably weren’t interested in a career within the confines of the academy. More relevant are factors that have affected the academic world as a whole, not sociology in particular. Many talented people who might once have gone into academic life probably won’t do so today, because academic salaries have fallen sharply in relative terms over the last two decades and working conditions have deteriorated.
Yet a good case could actually be made for saying that British sociology is doing better than in previous generations. Compare, for instance, the fortunes of sociology in Britain over recent years with those of anthropology. In the early postwar period, this country boasted anthropologists of worldwide reputation; no crop of comparably distinguished sociological authors was to be found at that time.

Now things are more or less reversed. There are few, if any, anthropologists of the current generation who can match the achievements of the preceding one. British sociology, however, can offer a clutch of individuals with a worldwide reputation, such as John Goldthorpe, Steven Lukes, Stuart Hall, Michèle Barrett, Ray Pahl, Janet Wolff and Michael Mann.

Moreover, in sheer statistical terms, sociology is not in decline in this country in the way it has been in the US. A-level sociology is extremely popular and flourishing rather than shrinking. University admissions in sociology are, at worst, stable in relation to other subjects.

Everything in the sociological garden isn’t rosy – although was it ever? Funding for social research has dropped off sharply since the early 1970s; there isn’t the scale of empirical work there once was. But it would be difficult to argue that sociology is off the pace intellectually, especially if one broadens the angle again and moves back to a more international perspective. Most of the debates that grab the intellectual headlines today, across the social sciences, and even the humanities, carry a strong sociological input. Sociological authors have pioneered discussions of postmodernism, the post-industrial or information society, globalization, the transformation of everyday life, gender and sexuality, the changing nature of work and the family, the ‘underclass’ and ethnicity.

You might still ask: what do all these changes add up to? Here there is a lot of sociological work to be done. Some of that work has to be investigatory or empirical, but some must be theoretical. More than any other intellectual endeavour, sociological reflection is central to grasping the social forces remaking our lives today. Social life has become episodic, fragmentary and dogged with new uncertainties, which it must be the business of creative sociological thought to help us understand. William Julius Wilson’s argument is certainly important: sociologists
should focus their attention on the practical and policy-making implications of the changes currently transforming social life. Yet sociology would indeed become dreary, and quite possibly disaggregated, if it didn’t also concern itself with the big issues.

Sociology should rehone its cutting edge, as neo-liberalism disappears into the distance along with orthodox socialism. Some questions to which we need new answers have a perennial quality, while others are dramatically new. Tackling both of these, as in previous times, calls for a healthy dose of what C. Wright Mills famously called the sociological imagination. Sociologists, don’t despair! You still have a world to win, or at least interpret.
In the social sciences today, as in the social world itself, we face a new agenda. The end not just of a century but of a millennium: something which has no content, and which is wholly arbitrary – a date on a calendar – has such a power of reification that it holds us in thrall. *Fin de siècle* has become widely identified with feelings of disorientation and malaise, to such a degree that one might wonder whether all the talk of endings, such as the end of modernity, or the end of history, simply reflects them. No doubt to some degree such is the case. Yet it is certainly not the whole story. We are in a period of evident transition – and the ‘we’ here refers not only to the West but to the world as a whole.

In this discussion I speak of the emergence of a post-traditional society. This phrase might at first glance seem odd. Modernity, almost by definition, always stood in opposition to tradition; hasn’t modern society long been ‘post-traditional’? It has not, at least in the way in which I propose to speak of the ‘post-traditional society’ here. For most of its history, modernity has rebuilt tradition as it has dissolved it. Within Western societies, the persistence and recreation of tradition was central to the legitimation of power, to the sense in which the state was able to impose itself upon relatively passive ‘subjects’. For tradition placed in stasis some core aspects of social life – not least the family and sexual identity – which were left largely untouched so far as ‘radicalizing Enlightenment’ was concerned.¹

Most important, the continuing influence of tradition within modernity remained obscure so long as ‘modern’ meant
‘Western’. Modernity has been forced to ‘come to its senses’ today, as a result of its generalization across the world. No longer the unexamined basis of Western hegemony over other cultures, the precepts and social forms of modernity stand open to scrutiny.

**The orders of transformation**

The new agenda for social science concerns two directly connected domains of transformation. Each corresponds to processes of change which, while they have their origins with the first development of modernity, have become particularly acute in the current era. On the one hand there is the extensional spread of modern institutions, universalized via globalizing processes. On the other, but immediately bound up with the first, are processes of intentional change, which can be referred to as the radicalizing of modernity. These are processes of *evacuation*, the disinterring and problematizing of tradition.

Few people anywhere in the world can any longer be unaware of the fact that their local activities are influenced, and sometimes even determined, by remote events or agencies. The phenomenon is easily indexed, at least on a crude level. Thus, for example, capitalism has for centuries had strong tendencies to expand, for reasons documented by Marx and many others. Over the period since World War I, however, and particularly over the past forty years or so, the pattern of expansionism has begun to alter. It has become much more decentred as well as more all-enveloping. The overall movement is towards much greater interdependence. On the sheerly economic level world production has increased dramatically, albeit with various fluctuations and downturns; and world trade, a better indicator of interconnectedness, has grown even more. ‘Invisible trade’, in services and finance, has increased most of all.

Less evident is the reverse side of the coin. The day-to-day actions of an individual today are globally consequential. My decision to purchase a particular item of clothing, for example, or
a specific type of foodstuff, has manifold global implications. It not only affects the livelihood of someone living on the other side of the world but may contribute to a process of ecological decay which itself has potential consequences for the whole of humanity. This extraordinary, and still accelerating, connectedness between everyday decisions and global outcomes, together with its reverse, the influence of global orders over individual life, form the key subject-matter of the new agenda. The connections involved are often very close. Intermediate collectivities and groupings of all sorts, including the state, do not disappear as a result; but they do tend to become reorganized or reshaped.

To the Enlightenment thinkers, and many of their successors, it appeared that increasing information about the social and natural worlds would bring increasing control over them. For many, such control was the key to human happiness; the more, as collective humanity, we are in a position actively to make history, the more we can guide history towards our ideals. Even more pessimistic observers connected knowledge and control. Max Weber’s ‘steel-hard cage’ – in which he thought humanity was condemned to live for the foreseeable future – is a prison-house of technical knowledge; we are all, to alter the metaphor, to be small cogs in the gigantic machine of technical and bureaucratic reason. Yet neither image comes close to capturing the world of high modernity, which is much more open and contingent than any such image suggests – and is so precisely because of, not in spite of, the knowledge that we have accumulated about ourselves and about the material environment. It is a world where opportunity and danger are balanced in equal measure.

The more we try to colonize the future, the more it is likely to spring surprises upon us. This is why the notion of risk, so central to the endeavours of modernity, moves through two stages. First of all it seems no more than part of an essential calculus, a means of sealing off boundaries as the future is invaded. In this form risk is a statistical part of the operations of insurance companies; the very precision of such risk calculations seems to signal success in bringing the future under control.

This is risk in a world where much remains as ‘given’, including external nature and those forms of social life coordinated by tradition. As nature becomes permeated, and even ‘ended’, by
human socialization, and tradition is dissolved, new types of incalculability emerge. Consider, for example, global warming. Many experts consider that global warming is occurring, and they may be right. The hypothesis is disputed by some, however, and it has even been suggested that the real trend, if there is one at all, is in the opposite direction, towards the cooling of the global climate. Probably the most that can be said with some surety is that we cannot be certain that global warming is not occurring. Yet such a conditional conclusion will yield not a precise calculation of risks but rather an array of ‘scenarios’ – whose plausibility will be influenced, among other things, by how many people become convinced of the thesis of global warming and take action on that basis. In the social world, where institutional reflexivity has become a central constituent, the complexity of ‘scenarios’ is even more marked.

On the global level, therefore, modernity has become experimental. We are all, willy-nilly, caught up in a grand experiment, which is at the one time our doing – as human agents – yet to an imponderable degree outside of our control. It is not an experiment in the laboratory sense, because we do not govern the outcomes within fixed parameters – it is more like a dangerous adventure, in which each of us has to participate whether we like it or not.

The grand experiment of modernity, fraught with global hazards, is not at all what the progenitors of Enlightenment had in mind when they spoke of the importance of contesting tradition. The social world has become largely organized in a conscious way, and nature fashioned in a human image, but these circumstances, at least in some domains, have created greater uncertainties, of a very consequential kind, than ever existed before.

The global experiment of modernity intersects with, and influences, as it is influenced by, the penetration of modern institutions into the tissue of day-to-day life. Not just the local community, but intimate features of personal life and the self, become intertwined with relations of indefinite time-space extension. We are all also caught up in everyday experiments whose outcomes, in a generic sense, are as open as those affecting humanity as a whole. Everyday experiments reflect the changing role of tradition and, as is also true of the global level, should be seen in the context of the displacement and reappropriation of...
expertise, under the impact of the intrusiveness of abstract systems. Technology, in the general meaning of ‘technique’, plays the leading role here, in the shape both of material technology and of specialized social expertise.

Everyday experiments concern some very fundamental issues to do with self and identity, but they also involve a multiplicity of changes and adaptations in daily life. Some such changes are lovingly documented in Nicholson Baker’s novel The Mezzanine. The book deals with no more than a few moments in the day of a person who actively reflects, in detail, upon the minutiae of his life’s surroundings and his reactions to them. A paraphernalia of intrusion, adjustment and readjustment is revealed, linked to a dimly perceived backdrop of larger global agencies.

Take the example of the ice-cube tray:

The ice-cube tray deserves a historic note. At first these were aluminium barges inset with a grid of slats linked to a handle like a parking brake – a bad solution; you had to run the grid under warm water before the ice would let go of the metal. I remember seeing these used, but never used them myself. And then suddenly there were plastic and rubber ‘trays’, really moulds, of several designs – some producing very small cubes, others producing large squared-off cubes and bathtub-buttoned cubes. There were subtleties that one came to understand over time: for instance, the little notches designed into the inner walls that separated one cell from another allowed the water level to equalise itself: this meant that you could fill the tray by running the cells quickly under the tap, feeling as if you were playing the harmonica, or you could turn the faucet on very slightly, so that a thin silent stream of water fell in a line from the tap, and hold the tray at an angle, allowing the water to enter a single cell and well from there into adjoining cells one by one, gradually filling the entire tray. The intercellular notches were helpful after the tray was frozen, too; when you had twisted it to force the cubes, you could selectively pull out one cube at a time by hooking a fingernail under the frozen projection that had formed in a notch. If you couldn’t catch the edge of a notch-stump because the cell had not been filled to above the notch level, you might have to mask all the cubes except one with your hands and turn the tray over, so that the single cube you needed fell out. Or you could twist all the cubes free and then, as if the tray were a frying pan and you were flipping a pancake, toss them. The cubes would hop as one above their individual homes about a quarter of an inch, and most
would fall back into place; but some, the loosest, would loft higher and often land irregularly, leaving one graspable end sticking up – these you used for your drink.  

What is at issue here is not just, or even primarily, technology, but more profound processes of the reformation of daily life. Tradition here would appear to play no part whatever any more; but this view would be mistaken, as we shall see.

**Insulting the meat**

Among the !Kung San of the Kalahari desert, when a hunter returns from a successful hunt his kill is disparaged by the rest of the community, no matter how bountiful it may be. Meat brought in by hunters is always shared throughout the group, but rather than being greeted with glee, a successful hunt is treated with indifference or scorn. The hunter himself is also supposed to show modesty as regards his skills and to understate his achievements. One of the !Kung comments:

Say that a man has been hunting, he must not come home and announce like a braggart, ‘I have killed a big one in the bush!’ He must first sit down in silence until I or someone else comes up to his fire and asks, ‘What did you see today?’ He replies quietly, ‘Ah, I’m no good for hunting. I saw nothing at all... maybe just a tiny one’. Then I smile to myself because I know he has killed something big.

The twin themes of deprecation and modesty are continued when the party goes out to fetch and divide up the kill the next day. Getting back to the village, the members of the carrying group loudly comment upon the ineptness of the hunter and their disappointment with him:

You mean you have dragged us all the way out here to make us cart home your pile of bones? Oh, if I had known it was this thin I wouldn’t have come. People, to think I gave up a nice day in the shade for this. At home we may be hungry, but at least we have nice cool water to drink.
The exchange is a ritual one, and follows established prescriptions; it is closely connected to other forms of ritual interchange in !Kung society. Insulting the meat seems at first sight the perfect candidate for explanation in terms of latent functions. It is a slice of tradition which fuels those interpretations of ‘traditional cultures’ which understand ‘tradition’ in terms of functional conceptions of solidarity. If such notions were valid, tradition could be seen essentially as unthinking ritual, necessary to the cohesion of simpler societies. Yet this idea will not work. There is certainly a ‘functional’ angle to insulting the meat: although it also leads to conflicts, it can be seen as a means of sustaining egalitarianism in !Kung (male) community. The ritualized disparagement is a counter to arrogance and therefore to the sort of stratification that might develop if the best hunters were honoured or rewarded.

Yet this ‘functional’ element does not in fact operate in a mechanical way (nor could it); the !Kung are well aware of what is going on. Thus, as a !Kung healer pointed out to the visiting anthropologist, when a man makes many kills, he is liable to think of himself as a chief, and see the rest of the group as his inferiors. This is unacceptable; ‘so we always speak of his meat as worthless. In this way we cool his heart and make him gentle.’

Tradition is about ritual and has connections with social solidarity, but it is not the mechanical following of precepts accepted in an unquestioning way.

To grasp what it means to live in a post-traditional order we have to consider two questions: what tradition actually is and what are the generic characteristics of a ‘traditional society’. Both notions have for the most part been used as unexamined concepts – in sociology because of the fact that they have been foils for the prime concern with modernity; and in anthropology because one of the main implications of the idea of tradition, repetition, has so often been merged with cohesiveness. Tradition, as it were, is the glue that holds premodern social orders together; but once one rejects functionalism it is no longer clear what makes the glue stick. There is no necessary connection between repetition and social cohesion at all, and the repetitive character of tradition is something which has to be explained, not just assumed.

Repetition means time – some would say that it is time – and tradition is somehow involved with the control of time. Tradition,
it might be said, is an orientation to the past, such that the past
has a heavy influence, or, more accurately put, is made to have a
heavy influence, over the present. Yet clearly, in a certain sense
at any rate, tradition is also about the future, since established
practices are used as a way of organizing future time. The future
is shaped without the need to carve it out as a separate territory.
Repetition, in a way that needs to be examined, reaches out to
return the future to the past, while drawing on the past also to
reconstruct the future.

Traditions, Edward Shils says, are always changing, but there
is *something* about the notion of tradition which presumes
endurance; if it is traditional, a belief or practice has an integrity
and continuity which resists the buffeting of change. Traditions
have an organic character: they develop and mature, or weaken
and ‘die’. The integrity or *authenticity* of a tradition, therefore, is
more important in defining it as tradition than how long it lasts. It
is notable that only in societies with writing – which have actually
become thereby less ‘traditional’ – do we usually have any *evidence* that elements of tradition have endured over very long
periods. Anthropologists have virtually always seen oral cultures
as highly traditional, but in the nature of the case have no way of
confirming that the ‘traditional practices’ they observe have
existed over even several generations; no one knows, for
instance, for how long the !Kung practice of insulting the meat
might have been in place.

I shall understand ‘tradition’ in the following way. Tradition, I
shall say, is bound up with memory, specifically what Maurice
Halbwachs terms ‘collective memory’; involves ritual; is con-
ected with what I shall call a *formulaic notion of truth*; has
‘guardians’; and, unlike custom, has binding force which has a
combined moral and emotional content.

Memory, like tradition – in some sense or another – is about
organizing the past in relation to the present. We might think,
Halbwachs says, that such conservation simply results from the
existence of unconscious psychic states. There are traces register-
ed in the brain which make it possible for these states to be
called to consciousness. From this point of view, ‘the past falls
into ruin’, but ‘only vanishes in appearance’, because it continues
to exist in the unconscious.
Halbwachs rejects such an idea; the past is not preserved but continuously reconstructed on the basis of the present. Such reconstruction is partially individual, but more fundamentally it is social or collective. In fleshing out this argument, Halbwachs offers an interesting analysis of dreams. Dreams are in effect what meaning would be like without its organizing social frameworks – composed of disconnected fragments and bizarre sequences. Images remain as ‘raw materials’ that enter into eccentric combinations with one another.

Memory is thus an active, social process, which cannot merely be identified with recall. We continually reproduce memories of past happenings or states, and these repetitions confer continuity upon experience. If in oral cultures older people are the repository (and also often the guardians) of traditions, it is not only because they absorbed them at an earlier point than others but because they have the leisure to identify the details of these traditions in interaction with others of their age and teach them to the young. Tradition, therefore, we may say, is an organizing medium of collective memory. There can no more be a private tradition than there could be a private language. The ‘integrity’ of tradition derives not from the simple fact of persistence over time but from the continuous ‘work’ of interpretation that is carried out to identify the strands which bind present to past.

Tradition usually involves ritual. Why? The ritual aspects of tradition might be thought to be simply part of its ‘mindless’, automaton-like character. But if the ideas I have suggested so far are correct, tradition is necessarily active and interpretative. Ritual, one can propose, is integral to the social frameworks which confer integrity upon traditions; ritual is a practical means of ensuring preservation. Collective memory, as Halbwachs insists, is geared to social practices. We can see how this is so if we consider not just the contrast between memory and dreaming but the ‘in-between’ activity of day-dreaming or reverie. Day-dreaming means that an individual relaxes from the demands of day-to-day life, allowing the mind to wander. By contrast continuity of practice – itself actively organized – is what connects the thread of today’s activities with those of yesterday, and of yesteryear. Ritual firmly connects the continual reconstruction of the past with practical enactment, and can be seen to do so.
Ritual enmeshes tradition in practice, but it is important to see that it also tends to be separated more or less clearly from the pragmatic tasks of everyday activity. Insulting the meat is a ritualized procedure, and understood to be so by the participants. A ritual insult is different from a real insult because it lacks denotative meaning; it is a ‘non-expressive’ use of language. This ‘isolating’ consequence of ritual is crucial because it helps give ritual beliefs, practices and objects a temporal autonomy which more mundane endeavours may lack.

Like all other aspects of tradition, ritual has to be interpreted; but such interpretation is not normally in the hands of the lay individual. Here we have to establish a connection between tradition’s guardians and the truths such traditions contain or disclose. Tradition involves ‘formulaic truth’, to which only certain persons have full access. Formulaic truth depends not upon referential properties of language but rather upon their opposite; ritual language is performative, and may sometimes contain words or practices that the speakers or listeners can barely understand. Ritual idiom is a mechanism of truth because, not in spite, of its formulaic nature. Ritual speech is speech which it makes no sense to disagree with or contradict – and hence contains a powerful means of reducing the possibility of dissent. This is surely central to its compelling quality.

Formulaic truth is an attribution of causal efficacy to ritual; truth criteria are applied to events caused, not to the propositional content of statements. Guardians, be they elders, healers, magicians or religious functionaries, have the importance they do in tradition because they are believed to be the agents, or the essential mediators, of its causal powers. They are dealers in mystery, but their arcane skills come more from their involvement with the causal power of tradition than from their mastery of any body of secret or esoteric knowledge. Among the !Kung the elders are the main guardians of the traditions of the group. Insulting the meat may be ‘rationally understood’ in terms of its consequences for the collectivity, but it derives its persuasive power from its connections to other rituals and beliefs which either the elders or the religious specialists control.

The guardians of tradition might seem equivalent to experts in modern societies – the purveyors of the abstract systems whose impact upon daily life Nicholson Baker chronicles. The difference
between the two, however, is clear-cut. Guardians are not experts, and the arcane qualities to which they have access for the most part are not communicable to the outsider. As Pascal Boyer puts it, ‘a traditional specialist isn’t someone who has an adequate picture of some reality in his or her mind, but someone whose utterances can be, in some contexts, directly determined by the reality in question.’

Status in the traditional order, rather than ‘competence’, is the prime characteristic of the guardian. The knowledge and skills possessed by the expert might appear mysterious to the layperson; but anyone could in principle acquire that knowledge and those skills were she or he to set out to do so.

Finally, all traditions have a normative or moral content, which gives them a binding character. Their moral nature is closely bound up with the interpretative processes by means of which past and present are aligned. Tradition represents not only what ‘is’ done in a society but what ‘should be’ done. It does not follow from this, of course, that the normative components of tradition are necessarily spelled out. Mostly they are not: they are interpreted within the activities or directives of the guardians. Tradition has the hold it does, it can be inferred, because its moral character offers a measure of ontological security to those who adhere to it. Its psychic underpinnings are affective. There are ordinarily deep emotional investments in tradition, although these are indirect rather than direct; they come from the mechanisms of anxiety-control that traditional modes of action and belief provide.

So much for an initial conceptualizing of tradition. The question of what a ‘traditional society’ is remains unresolved. I do not intend to deal with it at any length here, although I shall come back to it later. A traditional society, inevitably, is one where tradition as specified above has a dominant role; but this will hardly do in and of itself. Tradition, one can say, has most salience when it is not understood as such. Most smaller cultures, it seems, do not have a specific word for ‘tradition’ and it is not hard to see why: tradition is too pervasive to be distinguished from other forms of attitude or conduct. Such a situation tends to be particularly characteristic of oral cultures. A distinctive feature of oral culture, obviously, is that communications cannot be made without an identifiable speaker; this circumstance plainly lends
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itself to formulaic versions of truth. The advent of writing creates hermeneutics: ‘interpretation’, which is first of all largely scriptural, takes on a new meaning. Tradition comes to be known as something distinctive and as potentially plural. All premodern civilizations, however, remained thoroughly shot through with tradition of one kind or another.

If we ask the question, ‘in what ways have modern societies become de-traditionalized?’, the most obvious way of providing an answer would be to look at specific forms of symbol and ritual and consider how far they still form ‘traditions’. However, I shall defer answering such a question until later, and for the moment shall reorient the discussion in quite a different way. Tradition is repetition, and presumes a kind of truth antithetical to ordinary ‘rational enquiry’ – in these respects it shares something with the psychology of compulsion.

Repetition as neurosis: the issue of addiction

The question of compulsiveness lies at the origin of modern psychotherapy. Here is how one self-help book of practical therapy begins. ‘This is a recording’, it says, speaking of an individual’s life-experiences – in our present activities we are constantly (in a largely unconscious way) recapitulating the past. The influence of past over present is above all an emotional one, a matter of ‘feelings’.

Reasons can exist in two ‘places’ at the same time. You can be physically present with someone in the here and now, but your mind can be miles and years removed. One of our problems in relationships is that ‘something’ removes us from the present and we are not with whom we were with.

These recorded experiences and the feelings associated with them are available for replay today in as vivid a form as when they happened, and they provide much of the data that determine the nature of today’s transactions. Events in the present can replicate an old experience and we not only remember how we felt, but we feel the same way. We not only remember the past, we relive it. We are there! Much of what we relive we don’t remember.16
Compulsiveness in its broadest sense is an inability to escape from the past. The individual, who believes himself or herself to be autonomous, acts out a surreptitious fate. Concepts of fate have always been closely allied with tradition and it is not surprising to find that Freud was preoccupied with fate. ‘The Oedipus Rex’, he observes,

is a tragedy of fate. Its tragic effect depends upon the conflict between the all-powerful will of the gods and the vain efforts of human beings threatened with disaster. Resignation to the divine will, and the perception of one’s unimportance, are the lessons which the deeply moved spectator is supposed to learn from the play.

‘The oracle has placed the same curse on us’, he continues, but in our case it is possible to escape. From Freud onwards, the dilemma of the modern condition has been widely seen as overcoming the ‘programming’ built into our early lives.

Freud of course was much concerned with dreams, ‘the royal road to the unconscious’. Freud’s theory of dreams may or may not be valid in its own terms, but it is worthwhile considering its relation to the ideas of Halbwachs. For both Halbwachs and Freud dreams are memories with the social context of action removed. Let me now historicize this view. The period at which Freud wrote was one at which traditions in everyday life were beginning to creak and strain under the impact of modernity. Tradition provided the stabilizing frameworks which integrated memory traces into a coherent memory. As tradition dissolves, one can speculate, ‘trace memory’ is left more nakedly exposed, as well as more problematic in respect of the construction of identity and the meaning of social norms. From then onwards, the reconstruction which tradition provided of the past becomes a more distinctively individual responsibility – and even exigency.

As a good medical specialist, Freud set out to cure neuroses; what he actually discovered, however, was the emotional under-tow of disintegrating traditional culture. The emotional life of modern civilization was essentially written out of Enlightenment philosophy, and was alien to those scientific and technological endeavours that were so central to the coruscating effects of modernity. Science, and more generally ‘reason’, were to replace
the supposedly unthinking precepts of tradition and custom. And so, in a sense, it proved to be: cognitive outlooks were indeed very substantially and dramatically recast. The emotional cast of tradition, however, was left more or less untouched.¹⁸

Freud’s thought, of course, is open to being understood in Enlightenment terms. From this point of view, Freud’s importance was that he discovered a psychological ‘track of development’ comparable to that of the social institutions of modernity. The ‘dogmaties’ of the unconscious could be dissolved and replaced by veridical self-awareness; in Freud’s celebrated, perhaps notorious, phrase, ‘where id was ego shall be’. Some, more suspicious of the claims of Enlightenment, see Freud in a quite contrasting way. Freud shows us, they say, that modern civilization can never overcome those dark forces which lurk in the unconscious. Freud’s own line of intellectual development in fact seems to veer from the first view towards the second over the progression of his career.

Yet perhaps neither of these perspectives is the most effective way of looking at things. Freud was dealing with a social, not only a psychological, order; he was concerned with a social universe of belief and action at the point at which, in matters directly affecting self-identity, tradition was beginning to turn into compulsion. Compulsion, rather than the unconscious as such, turned out to be the other side of the ‘cognitive revolution’ of modernity.

Freud’s concrete investigations and therapeutic involvements – unlike most of his writings – concentrated upon the emotional problems of women, as mediated through the body. Yet the hidden compulsiveness of modernity was also manifest – although in a different way – in the public domain. What is Weber’s discussion of the Protestant ethic if not an analysis of the obsessional nature of modernity? The emotional travails of women, of course, have no place in Weber’s study – nor do the private or sexual lives of the purveyors of the entrepreneurial spirit. It is as if these things have no bearing upon the demeanour or motivation of the industrialist: a conceptual schism which reflected a real division in the lives of men and women.

Weber’s work deals quite explicitly with the transition from tradition to modernity, although he does not put it in quite those terms. Religious beliefs and practices, like other traditional activities, tend to fuse morality and emotion. They have, as