

Volodymyr Paniotto

Sociology in Jokes

An Entertaining Introduction

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Volodymyr Paniotto

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Preface

I don't know if anyone reads forewords. I usually look in the preface if there are any questions when reading the book or after reading it. I have sent out the first draft of the manuscript to several colleagues and friends and already there are questions. That is why I am still writing the preface.

From 2011 to 2015, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS)¹ published a newsletter magazine, *KIIS Review*, and I kept a humor page there (these magazines are available on our website). That is when the idea for this book was born.

The point is that many anecdotes describe social processes very precisely and succinctly. For example, one can talk for a long time about social groups, norms and values, rules of admission to a group, the notions of "we" and "they", and the patterns of transition from one social group to another. If a person has moved from one social group to another, then in the new group, they will be suspected of loyalty to the old group, and they must be "holier than papa", proving loyalty to the new group; they must also demonstrate a negative attitude to the group from which they came. Instead of all this, we can tell a simple anecdote about a crocodile who ate a fisherman, put on his hat and started fishing. Another crocodile swam by; he peeked out of the water and asked, "Well, is it biting?". The crocodile in the hat, with a scornful look, replied: "Swim, swim, green shit!"

From time to time, I wrote down anecdotes that could illustrate some sociological concepts or notions and finally decided to write this book. Unfortunately, I discovered that the collected anecdotes are very unevenly distributed among sociological topics, and it will not be possible to replace a systematic presentation of the basics of sociology with anecdotes. Therefore, I have chosen some topics that show the specificity of the sociological approach to the analysis of society.

1 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology is a polling company that my friend Valeriy Khmelko and I created in 1992 and which I still run today

"What is it that you have," friends say, "you have almost no anecdotes for one chapter and dozens for another? And the comments are somehow unevenly distributed". What can I say? Either I collected anecdotes carelessly, or my scientific interests influenced it, or the people who create anecdotes have one picture of the world, and sociologists have another. However, I guess that does not matter. The main thing I want to show is that sociology is interesting and fun. Anecdotes should be used more actively; it is like big data using sociology for creative texts—they have no authorship, they do not cost to create, and they spontaneously arise and spread.

This book was published first in Ukrainian, and I would like to express my gratitude to Ellen Chalyuk for her help in preparing the English edition of the book.

Part 1.
Fundamentals of Sociology

1. What Does Sociology Study?

Maybe I talk too much to journalists and politicians, but I have the impression that by sociology, everyone understands only public opinion. It is also very annoying when people say, "I have done sociology here" (meaning, ordered a sociological survey) or, "a new sociology has arrived," or "I have read sociology here". Other sciences are more fortunate – after reading that the Poincaré problem has been solved, no one will say, "I have read new mathematics" or "I have read physics". Meanwhile, at large sociological congresses, there are more than a hundred sections, and only one is devoted to public opinion. Many people do not know anything about 99% of sociological research issues.

A formal definition can be given. "Sociology is a science that studies society, social relations, social interaction and culture". Nevertheless, it will not become clearer because you need to know what social relations, social interaction, etc., are.

Usually, science has a fundamental part, an applied part and a specific practical application. For example, there is theoretical physics that develops fundamental problems, there are different kinds of applied physics that study applied problems, and there are engineers who use the science of physics to, say, design or repair televisions. Similarly, sociology, as a basic science, explains social phenomena and collects and generalizes information about them (typical problems are social structure, social change, and social inequality). As an applied science, sociology allows predicting and managing social phenomena, in particular, these include ratings of politicians, which are studied through population surveys. There are also political technologists, marketers, and social workers who use the results of sociological research to solve some specific tasks – achieving victory in the electoral struggle, promoting goods on the market, helping vulnerable groups, etc.

Typical questions that have given rise to sociology as a science that attempts to answer them:

Why do people worship different gods?

Why can the lifestyles of different groups differ significantly from each other?

What motivates some people to violate social norms and rules of behavior and others to adhere to these norms and rules?

Why are some people rich while others are poor?

What motivates one group to go to war against another?

What keeps society from disintegrating?

Why are all societies constantly changing? And so on.

In the sphere of social cognition, the scientific method began to be applied much later than in the sphere of cognition of nature. In addition, social systems are much more complex than other living systems, just as living systems are much more complex than non-living systems.

The social sciences, like the natural sciences, are involved in the scientific method, which consists of drawing conclusions based on a careful, systematic analysis of facts. Moreover, these facts can be verified by other researchers. If they do the same research, they should get the same results.

On the other hand, unscientific explanations of events that come only out of so-called common sense or everyday consciousness are based on faith, opinions, and perceptions. The ancient Romans, for example, believed that every day Helios drove the sun across the sky in his chariot, although none of them actually saw it. This is not to say that common sense cannot make correct explanations and predictions. It can and often does. The problem is that, without using the methods of science, there is no way to determine when common sense makes correct conclusions. In the social sphere, even today, many common sense notions are, in fact, myths. Sociology textbooks often cite such examples.

Opinion (overwhelming): members of the lower social classes are more likely to commit crimes than members of the upper class.

Facts: Reliable fact-checking in the United States and Western Europe shows that the percentage of those who commit crimes in the upper social class is the same as in the lower classes. However, the poor are more likely than the rich to commit certain types of crime

(for example, petty theft is much more common than grand fraud), and they are also more likely to be arrested and convicted.

An example from family life.

Public opinion: Victims of domestic violence are predominantly women, who are killed by their sexual partners.

Fact: Men also often become victims. For example, of those killed by their partners worldwide in 2020, 58% were women and 42% were men². Although men are usually stronger, women are more likely to resort to dangerous weapons such as kitchen knives.

Public perception: Americans believe that doctors can correctly diagnose most of the patients who see them.

Fact: Surveys of physicians show that in more than half of patients, doctors cannot identify the disease, but they do not want to admit it to their patients.

These are just some examples of the differences between perceptions that are based on the ground of 'common sense' or everyday consciousness and scientific studies of social life.

Unfortunately, the perception of sociological facts is different from the perception of research results in other fields of science. Nowadays, you do not meet people who reject Newton's or Einstein's theories on the basis of their common sense, but this happens all the time with regard to the results of sociological research. Any publication of data from research companies is criticized on the grounds that the results seem implausible to some people and that they do not correspond to their perceptions. These perceptions themselves are formed on the basis of their experiences in their social circle, in their interactions with like-minded people on Facebook and in the 'desirability shift'. The outcome they like (based on their policy preferences) seems plausible, and the one they do not

2 Killings of women and girls by their intimate partner or other family members. Global estimates 2020. — DATA MATTERS 3, 11/2021. Report by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021. — 34 p. UN_BriefFem_251121.pdf (unodc.org), https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/crim/UN_BriefFem_251121.pdf

like seems highly suspect. Therefore, sociologists are accused of having their data bought by the customer or of incorrectly formulating questions (the arrogance of such ‘experts’ in sociology is astonishing).

Understanding the society in which we live enables us to understand ourselves more fully. The American sociologist Wright Mills called this component of knowledge "the sociological imagination" – the ability to see our lives, concerns, problems, and hopes and their connections to the broad social and historical context in which we live. By studying sociology, we better understand how society is organized, who has power, what beliefs guide our behavior, and how our society came to be the way it is.

* * *

A little boy asks his father: *"Daddy, what is biology?"*

– *"Well ... How can I explain it to you in a simpler way? For example, you look like me. That's biology.*

– *"And 'sociology' is what?" My son won't stop.*

– *"That's. Hmmm ... My neighbor's son also looks like me. That's sociology!"*

By the way, separating biology from sociology is sometimes not as easy as in this anecdote. Much scientific research has been done to understand, for example, which human characteristics are determined by biological heredity and which are determined by the process of socialization and upbringing (see Section 6, Socialization).

* * *

95% of phone conversations are idle chatter, according to the FSB's sociological service³.

The authors of this anecdote from the Russian Internet hint at the specificity of the FSB's goals and the search for very specific information. However, tapping phones to identify opposition sentiments is not sociological research. The main difference is that

3 FSB—the Federal Security Service of Russia—is the main legal successor to the KGB of the USSR

sociologists study the phenomenon, not specific people, and give recommendations not on specific people but on what to do to solve certain problems. Information about each person's answers is strictly confidential; personal data is kept separate from the answers and is never shared with customers. Interestingly, even Nazi sociologists during World War II, who analyzed letters from soldiers at the front, destroyed the envelopes so that their customers would not be tempted to find out who wrote such unreliable things.

* * *

A sociologist rebukes his wife.

– *“Why did you hurt my mom? Why do you talk first and think later?”*

– *“How will I know what I'm thinking until I say it? You're doing the same thing, aren't you?”*

– *“Why is that?”*

– *“I asked you last week why population polls are conducted. And you said that public opinion polls are done so that the public knows what they think.”*

"Population surveys are conducted so that the population knows what it thinks" is paradoxically true. In principle, many sociologists, primarily academic sociologists, work not for a specific customer but for society as a whole.

We (KIIS) once had a project—“Mirror of Society.” The idea was to conduct regular surveys representative of the Ukrainian population. During this research (unlike ‘ordinary’ sociological surveys), we asked not about what sociologists are interested in but about what the population is interested in. Therefore, during the survey, we asked what people would like to know about other people and what they would ask respondents about if they were conducting the survey themselves. As a result of analyzing the results of this survey, we find out what questions citizens are most interested in and ask these questions during the next survey. Thus, in each next survey, we get answers to the questions posed by respondents the previous day. The results of the survey must be presented in the mass media (for example, in any of the popular Ukrainian TV channels). Thus, the citizens of Ukraine, with our help and with the help of mass media, asked themselves questions

and answered them themselves; it was like a sociological MIRROR OF SOCIETY.

This anecdote is an example of the work that electoral sociology does. Without data from sociologists, it is virtually impossible to assess the situation and take action.

* * *

Husband asks his wife: *"Honey, have you ever cheated on me?"*

– *"Yes, darling. Three times."*

– *"Well, when?"*

– *"Remember when you wanted to start your own business, no bank wanted to give you a loan, and then suddenly, the president of the bank agreed?"*

– *"Yeah, I remember. Thank you, you helped us get rich. But when was the second time?"*

– *"Remember, you were seriously ill, and no one wanted to operate on you. And then all of a sudden, the chief of surgery himself performed the surgery?"*

– *"Yes, I remember. Thank you, my dear, you saved my life, I'm very grateful to you. But when was the third time?"*

– *"Do you remember that according to the results of sociological research it turned out that you lacked 36 votes from men between 40 and 60 years old?"*

* * *

At a symposium, an American professor asked a Russian colleague:

– *"Does it happen to you that you treat for one disease, but the postmortem shows a completely different one?"*

– *"No, of course not. What we treat for is what they die from."*

This is an illustration of the fact that American doctors often cannot make the right diagnosis, but in post-Soviet countries, this supposedly does not happen.

2. Main Theoretical Directions in Modern Sociology

A. Functionalism

The structural-functionalist or simply functionalist approach was formulated mainly on the ideas of Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the functionalist theories of Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) and his disciples became the center of attention in American sociology. In the 1980s, interest in the works of Parsons and other functionalists arose again (in the works of Habermas, Alekzander, Sciuli, Gerstein and others).

Functionalists view society as a kind of system, a combination of parts that make up a whole. Functionalists are trying to do two things: to establish links between parts of society and society as a whole and to establish the connections of each part of society with the others.

Institutions such as family, religion, economy, state, and education are among the most important parts of every society. For example, the main functions of the family are reproduction, socialization, support of children, and self-realization of its members. At the same time, changes in one institution of society create an impact on other institutions and society as a whole. For example, when women were encouraged to work in the economy, they married later and had fewer children. In turn, this led to fewer school-age children and schools in some areas closed. Because of this, the United States military noted a shortage of military personnel to serve in the army in the 1990s.

B. Conflictionism or conflict theory

From the point of view of conflictionism, society looks like an arena of struggles for privileges, prestige, and power, and social groups look like those that resort to coercion – hidden or unconcealed – in order to preserve their advantages. Conflictionist concepts are largely based on the ideas of Karl Marx. I think the ideas of

Marxism are best known to readers. Both functionalism and conflictionism (Marxism in particular) are macrosociological approaches. A significant complement to these macrosociological approaches is microsociological approaches. The main one is the interactionist approach.

C. *Interactionism*

In addition to those questions addressed in macrosociological concepts, sociologists are concerned with quite a few other questions. For example, "How do individuals and society relate to each other? How can people create, preserve, and change society and, at the same time, be shaped by that society? And how do individuals influence each other? Such questions are the focus of the interactionist approach, also called symbolic interactionism. Its main architect is the famous American sociologist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Interactionists argue that our social world is a constructed reality. Society does not exist "out there"; it is constantly being created and reproduced from moment to moment in the processes of our actions with each other. We give it a name: "Ukraine," "France," "United States." And we interact with it as an object.

From an interactionist point of view, societies arise because of this (that we interact with something as an object). We make them real. This also applies to small groups, organizations, and communities. We interact with them as objects on a daily basis. At the same time, each person's everyday interactions with others make them a social being with a certain personality.

* * *

A lecturer in a collective farm⁴ club gives a lecture on Marxism. From the audience, a woman asks: "*Tell me, please, is Marxism a science?*".

Then, an older woman beats the lecturer with the answer, "*Manyka, what a fool you are! If it were a science, they would have tried it on rats first.*"

4 Collective farm (Kolgosp—short for collective farm in Ukrainian) is a form of agricultural enterprise in the territory of the Soviet Union.

The anecdotes I have come across are all about conflictionism, namely, Marxism. In the former Soviet Union, Marxism turned into a dogmatic doctrine resembling religion. This ideology was hammered into everyone at school, at the institute, and in Marxism-Leninism classes at companies. For example, at the mathematics department of Shevchenko University in Kyiv, which I graduated from in 1970, for the first two years, they studied the history of the Communist Party in great detail; then, in the third year, dialectical materialism and historical materialism, and in the fourth year, scientific communism. That was for mathematicians. Moreover, what to say of humanitarian specialties! Here, for example, in the memoirs about the famous pianist Goldenweiser, a professor at the Moscow Conservatory, it is told how an elderly professor was accused of not being in class to study the basics of Marxism-Leninism. Goldenweiser replied: "I myself will soon meet Karl Marx, and he will explain everything well to me." Or here's another:

* * *

– *“Rabinovich, why weren't you at the last Marxism-Leninism class?”*

– *“Oh my goodness, I didn't realize it was the last one. If I had known, I would have loved to attend!”*

Marxism-Leninism has ‘annoyed’ everyone so much that it has given rise to many jokes. The second reason is the failure to build a successful society based on this theory. Meanwhile, conflictionism (and Marxism) can explain some social phenomena that are not explained by other approaches. It seems that Marxism is now more popular in the USA than in the former USSR.

* * *

– *“What did Germany inherit from Marx?”*

The East replies: *“The Communist Manifesto, the West says, capital.”*

* * *

– *What is the difference between math and Marxism?*

– *In math, something is given, and something is required to be proven, while in Marxism, everything is proven, and nothing is given.*

* * *

- *What is scarcity from a Marxist point of view?*
- *It is an objective reality, not given to us by feelings.*

* * *

Karl Marx returns to the Earth and comes to Moscow television with a request to allow him to speak. He is refused: "*We already have many programs about Marx every day*".

Marx insists, asking for permission to say at least a few words. Finally, he concedes but is allowed to say only one single phrase. Marx goes to the microphone and says: "*Proletarians of all countries, forgive me!*"

Unfortunately, I have not found anecdotes dealing with functionalism and interactionism. Maybe the reader will find some.