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Dialog on the Foundations of Sociological Theory

Alaina Iacobucci

University of Colorado

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Once upon a sociological time, Karl Marx looked up from his large stack of writings and let out a sigh. His hand was tired from incessant writing, but he still felt the grand social theorizing burning to pour forth. What a dilemma! But as is often the case with people who radiate brilliance, Marx came up with a solution: why not go teach that new kid Durkheim a thing or two? Smiling to himself (were he capable of smiling, but I imagine here more of a grimace), Marx pulled out his non-contemporary cell phone and shot Durkheim a text:

“Yo Derpheim, let’s grab a beer. I’ve got some ideas I want to bounce off you.”

“Sure thing. The heart must illuminate itself, right? Beer can help with that.”

Half an hour later, at the pub, Marx was full force monologuing about alienation. “Of course everyone is dissatisfied. It’s alienation! It’s not anything to do with individual psyche, this is just what happens when we can no longer hold onto the fruits of our labor. Listen, in a time when I could leave my house, chop down a tree, bring home the wood, build myself a chair, and keep that chair, my work had meaning. I had meaning! I would be able to see, feel, sit on something which I had given value by creating. Feudalism was pretty nice. But then industrialization came along and now everybody’s just working in factories, and all of the value that their labor has is rendered invisible. There’s alienation from the product, since we don’t control what we make and we don’t get to keep it, and alienation from the process of labor, too – all we do is routinized, repetitive action that we have no choice but to perform. Sure, it’s translated into cold, hard cash, but that’s a problem, because our work should really be the expression of ourselves, for ourselves, and now it’s just for the owners of the means of production. How are we supposed to give ourselves meaning in this kind of existence? I’m

telling you, that's alienation from species-being, right there. And all that surplus value we're producing is going toward maintaining the class hierarchy. It's depressing. But even though we're all in this position together, we still see each other as competition, and therefore we're alienated from each other, too. Do you feel that in your soul? I mean, we don't even have souls anymore, so what a silly question, really." (Tucker 1978)

"I'mma let you finish, but we're not suffering from alienation, dude. Yeah, I feel that depression in the blackness of the void where my heart should be, but it's not because of work. Also, what are you even talking about? You don't work in a factory, and I see those stacks of your own writing that you carry around with you constantly. Nobody can even sit near us because of how much paper you brought with you. You have a problem. But what I mean is, you're not alienated, because look at all of these fruits of your labor right here with us! You can see them, feel them, sit on them if you want to. But you're still mad, right? Life still sucks? Yeah. Because of anomie. Normlessness, man! Nobody knows what the hell they should do in times like these. It's not the transition to Capitalism that was the big historical shift we need to talk about, although my pal Weber did a pretty good job of explaining why Capitalism took off the way that it did, since he actually addressed the Protestantism thing. I mean, you're right that nobody connects with each other anymore, but it's not the factories' fault, it's because of those damn Protestants and their whole "individual relationship with God" thing. Have fun with God, people – he's not gonna be the one to support you when everything goes to shit. He's always testing you! Seeing how much adversity you can handle! Close-knit communities help people slog through that. They make you dinner, they let you come meet their pets, they let you turn in assignments late, and then you're less likely to think death is the answer to just how shitty life is!"

(Durkheim 1951) But enough about the individual level, because it's pointless to talk about that since we're basically just ants anyway."

"Thank God, I was sick of hearing about the individual level," interjected Marx, who was clearly growing irritated with listening rather than speaking.

"Right?" said Durkheim, unwilling to give up the floor. "So what I'm saying is, we're all such individualists now, so when society suffers from normlessness – say during a financial crisis, when everybody's flipping their shit – the suicide rate goes up. It's a pattern. We've seen it time and time again, and unlike you, I actually went and found some real live numbers to back up my argument. (Durkheim 1951) And when things are happening in big patterns, maybe it's time to consider that we don't just act according to our own individual psyches! Maybe we're influenced by society! Maybe we're pushed by social forces into patterns of behavior! It's classic sociological theory. And I'm going to write that down so that people can fucking look it up."

"You're really arguing that Protestantism is the problem? That people were better off with Catholicism and the Church dictating their behavior and their interpretation of the Bible? Bro. Religion is the opiate of the masses. We need to get rid of that shit. Sure, it can make people feel better in the moment, but it's just sedating them! People need to get angry. They need to rise up! Throw off false consciousness! Maybe that's your problem. Are you falsely conscious, Emile? Cause I don't hear you saying a lot about class, when really, that's the entire story. I mean, it's okay, I get it, Capitalism is sneaky that way, in making the owners of the means of production so far removed from our daily experiences that we don't realize that they're benefiting so much at the expense of the workers. But I'm telling you, just like I'm going to tell the whole world, this oppression is real and it is happening, and once people throw off that false consciousness and gain a little bit of class consciousness, revolution will be inevitable. The

proletariat will rise up, and we'll get rid of the ideas of property and everyone will be equal at all times! It'll be great!" (Tucker 1978)

"I think you've had too much beer," quipped an equally intoxicated Durkheim. "People don't just have agency like that. You can't just throw off social forces or demolish social institutions once you're aware of them. They're more solid than that. In fact, we should consider them to be objects. Social facts, if you will. Take this cash thing that you're so obsessed with. Objectively, they're bits of paper with drawings on them and we go around handing them to other people and people give us things in return. Strange when you really think about it. They're like Thing Vouchers. But we have collectively agreed that they have a certain meaning and thus, we have imbued them with that meaning, and now, here we are with the social fact of cash. This bit of paper can get you more things than this other bit of paper. We can't all of a sudden, as a group, go, 'Oh, hey, isn't this silly that we work our little butts off for pieces of paper that can be exchanged for material objects? Let's just not anymore!' (Durkheim 1982) What you're asking for with your revolution pet project is absurd, dude. Freaking absurd."

"I'm not arguing that concepts aren't socially produced and that people don't learn from society how to think and what they should value. I was the one to turn Hegel on his head, man. But things don't have to be how they are! We can change them if we work collectively!" A drunken Marx banged his fist on the table, startling several other patrons and getting the attention of the massive and intimidating barkeep.

"Societies are how they are because they function that way. They're like organisms. Everything they have, they have to keep them alive. This class difference thing keep society function. They keep the societal body alive. You can't just go ripping out organs!" yelled Durkheim, practically spitting in exaggerated French rage.

“Shut up, Talcott,” sniggered Marx. At this, Durkheim stood up in a huff, knocking over his stool and grabbing Marx by the front of his coat.

“Okay, gentlemen, it’s time for you to pay and leave,” said the barkeep, who had silently materialized behind them.

Marx, remembering his bar fighting days in his youth, and realizing that, at this age, he probably would not be able to recover from such an undertaking, took a deep breath to calm himself. “Send the bill to Friedrich.”