

# Response to C.E. Larson

*by Alexander Riley*

**A**s a sociologist who has spent a good deal of my academic career criticizing my discipline, and whose first work in sociology involved sorting through the thought of Émile Durkheim, I was quite interested in C. E. Larson's recent take ("Sociology from the Outside") on the discipline and on Durkheim's contribution to it.

I begin with where we agree. Larson would appear to be correct that the CLEP Sociology exam is a bad joke at best, at least as far as I was able to discern by searching for practice questions online. I admit I cannot remember ever thinking about the CLEP exam in any concentrated way prior to reading Larson, but I have two observations about it and how it reflects on the discipline of sociology. Firstly, as Larson indicates, any reasonably bright undergraduate student should have no trouble passing it with little or no preparation. Secondly (Larson does not note this, and, given his admitted lack of knowledge of sociology, it is not odd that he did not pick up on it), the test actually has very little to do with sociology as a discipline, at least not with that discipline in its most rigorous and serious form.

Here is a sample CLEP "sociology" question I found:

"Maria is an extremely hard worker. She has not been promoted or experienced wage increases. Meanwhile, her white male coworkers are promoted and given hefty bonuses. She is experiencing...

- a) Affirmative action
- b) Reverse racism
- c) Glass ceiling
- d) Ethnic cleansing
- e) "Looking-glass self"

There is absolutely no sociology involved in answering this question. The only vague connection to the discipline it has is the final possible answer (e), which is a theoretical term from the work of Charles Horton Cooley, an important figure in American sociology at its birth in the early twentieth century. But one does not even need to have ever seen that term from Cooley in order to "correctly" answer the question, which obviously comes from the ideological language of feminism. That political ideology has nothing whatsoever to do with the scientific study of

society, which is what sociology is. Or at least that is what sociology was envisioned as by its founders, who included a certain Frenchman named Émile Durkheim.

Every one of the sample questions I found from the CLEP exam were to do either with basics of modern social life that any competent member of American society is expected to know, or the language of progressive political criticism of existing social conditions, or some combination of both. The latter focus of these questions is consistent with the far-left tilt of American sociology today. I applaud and agree with Larson's criticisms of the CLEP exam. He would have done well to stop his article at the observation that contemporary sociology (insofar as contemporary academic sociologists have had something to do with coming up with CLEP questions, which I imagine must be true) has, regrettably, become too focused on progressive political advocacy, and that it has largely jettisoned any commitment to scientific investigation of human social life. Some of us inside the discipline have been writing on this topic for years.

Alas, Larson goes on to invoke Durkheim's 1896 study of suicide—long considered a classic in the discipline—and to impugn it as basically of a piece with the content in the CLEP Sociology exams. Durkheim, he claims, produced nothing more than “psychological insider” theories, by which I take Larson to mean theories seen (unreasonably) as reliable only by those already invest-

ed in the discipline and distant from substantive science. This is too much. Durkheim's work on this topic and others he explored provide inspiring examples of the scientific promise of early sociology that has unfortunately now mostly been abandoned by the people who currently occupy academic positions as sociologists.

The question raised by Larson regarding Durkheim's study of suicide is about causal argument in the social sciences. Larson notes that randomized control trials are the gold standard in scientific investigation of cause, but he also rightly alludes to the barriers in the social sciences to the widespread use of this method of research. The literature on the epistemological bases of knowledge of human behavior reveals serious debates about whether we will ever be able to fully distinguish correlation and cause in human affairs. Human individuals are entities of significantly more complexity than atoms or chemical reagents. Even those who are full material determinists with respect to human behavior recognize how far we are from the amount of data about effects on that behavior required to fully understand it causally.

Larson is correct that Durkheim's book, which dates from the last decade of the nineteenth century, does not fully meet contemporary standards of scientific demonstration of cause. The same thing has, incidentally, long been noted of, for example, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which was written only a few decades before Durkheim's study,

and which postulated a whole theory of evolution without any knowledge of the entity (DNA) that actually evolves. Yet few accuse Darwin of the total intellectual failure and uselessness of which Larson accuses Durkheim. Instead, we recognize how much of value is still contained in that early and necessarily limited effort to establish a scientific regime of knowledge on the biological world.

Larson wonders why sociologists sometimes want to talk, for example, about the multiple causal forces driving social inequality, instead of focusing on *the one cause*. Some of this has to do with the tremendous difficulty disentangling the role that, for example, existing social structures, on the one hand, and cultural beliefs, on the other, play in driving certain people into certain positions in the social hierarchy. But it is also true that the vast majority of sociological inquiry into the causes of human action—including Durkheim’s—is hampered by the failure to include essential human organismal facts in the pursuit of causal arguments about our behaviors. We would need a thoroughly biosocial science to do this, and we would need to integrate the logic of natural selection and the fields of genomics, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology into our sociological arguments.

Some efforts are being made along these lines in some social science disciplines, or subdisciplines, but the situation is more dire elsewhere. Along with numerous others in my discipline,

I have written about this huge problem with respect specifically to the discipline of sociology. Larson does not speak to this need for a fully biosocial science if we want to pursue cause in the human world more fully, but it is the much more important argument underneath his that points in the same critical direction he does.

Whatever its limitations, seen in its context—literally at the moment in France when this same Durkheim is creating the first academic journal of sociology—*Suicide* is a remarkable effort to establish the emerging discipline as a science in the making. Contrary to what Larson argues, Durkheim makes clear causal arguments regarding propensity to suicide. The chapter in *Suicide* that treats religion’s effect on what Durkheim calls “egoistic suicide” is quite clear about the causal mechanisms and about at least some of the empirical ways we might go about operationalizing them, again, in a methodological situation informed and limited by the moment in history when the book was written.

As Larson notes, Durkheim describes a kind of social force that he calls social integration which has, within a certain range, a reductive effect on propensity to suicide. It is not only too little social integration that can be problematic. In another chapter of the book, Durkheim argues that too much integration can produce higher propensity to another sub-type of suicide that he names “altruistic suicide.” Larson believes that Durkheim does no

work to define and operationalize this concept of social integration. But this is not so. He argues that, with respect to religion, integration often takes the empirical form of providing traditional solutions to the existential problems facing humankind. Larson correctly observes that Durkheim's task here is to differentiate Protestants and Catholics in some empirical, behavioral manner in order to demonstrate cause in suicide propensity. Durkheim endeavors to do just this. (He does just the same for the other variety of egoistic suicide he describes, which involves the differential effect of marriage and divorce on males and females, but I am trying to keep this response shorter than Larson's article, so I cannot get into those details here).

Durkheim first explains why integration matters for suicide generally. As fundamentally social beings, humans benefit from a certain amount of protection from life's difficulties that comes from integrating them into social networks of emotional care and shared ways of life and collective understandings of existential difficulties. We have long known that extreme isolation from human relations is indicative of suicide risk, but Durkheim argues that even more moderate differences in propensity to suicide might be discernible along lines demarcated by various levels of integration in specific human communities.

Religious communities typically do at least some work to bring members inside a protective cocoon of shared concern and belief, but they do not

all do the same amount of that work. Durkheim homes in on the aspects of religious belief and practice that tend to distinguish Protestants from Catholics. The former permit believers greater "freedom of inquiry," while in the latter adherents are submitted to traditional and authoritative frameworks of understanding of the faith. In the simplified way in which the modern West blathers about "freedom" as always and everywhere a great benefit to humankind, it becomes difficult to understand Durkheim's argument that here, restrictions on individual freedom (which in this sphere leave the individual alone to resolve problems many or most are not well equipped to take on as individuals) in the interest of shared collective and ritually reinforced solutions to difficult problems are a source of protection against the anxieties and depression that can lead to self-destruction.

It is true that Durkheim has no data showing in empirical terms the differential roles for the individual in the two kinds of Christianity beyond broad understanding of the theological differences in the two, so his argument here is necessarily more speculative than we would expect from a contemporary social scientist who, unlike Durkheim, has access to reams of survey and ethnographic data on religious practices. But to say he fails to take on causality at all is just unsustainable if one has carefully read the text.

Incidentally, elsewhere in his work on religion, in his final study (1912) on *The Elementary Forms of Religious*

*Life*, Durkheim did far more to show how collective religious belief and ritual bring members of groups into close communal relations and to demonstrate with much ethnographic data how the emotional lives of individuals are positively affected by this mode of social integration. Again, Durkheim was building a sociology that did not yet exist in his time, so it would be an odd thing to entirely dismiss his work as scientifically vacuous just because it does not meet the standards that today we rightly expect of more contemporary work. The logic of science is easily observable in his thought.

Larson guesses (he admits it is a guess, since he does not know the discipline well enough to state it conclusively) correctly that too much contemporary sociology has abandoned science altogether. In this, it has abandoned Durkheim too, and Larson might well take another and more careful look at the great French founder of the discipline in order to see how that is so.

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