Why are There Pirates in the Supermarket?

James Arvanitakis

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This book is about studying contemporary society—a fascinating challenge because we are studying something we are actually part of. It is also a difficult challenge because societies are ever changing—sometimes slowly and sometimes very quickly. Even as I sit and write these words, some of the things I talk about may appear to be ‘old news’ when you read them.

There is no ‘one way’ to study society; to understand how societies function, operate and change we need to examine a broad range of theories and theorists.

This chapter sets out some of the parameters of our investigation into contemporary society and everyday life, and outlines the general direction we are going to take in this book. We start by considering pirates in a Sydney supermarket and end by eating a $25 burger!

KEY TERMS

Cultural studies: An academic discipline that investigates the symbolic meanings and cultural practices of our everyday experiences.

Culture: Encompasses the rules and processes of everyday life and includes the symbolic and learned aspects of human society, such as language, custom and convention.

Epistemology: The theory of knowledge and how we learn what we know.

Ontology: The way we see the world: how we classify things, people and other entities around us.

Socialisation: The process of transmission of culture from one generation to the next; the ongoing social processes by which we learn the norms, customs and values of our society.

Society: A social system made up of many smaller parts that share a culture; these smaller parts include both formal institutions [such as schools, hospitals and government] and informal social groups [such as families].

Sociology: The study of society. In order to study society, we must look at the interactions within the society of people [both as part of groups and as individuals] and both informal and formal institutions [such as schools, hospitals and government].
Welcome to this book!

This book is an attempt to help us understand and analyse how our contemporary society operates. How do we begin such a book? Maybe with something that happened to me a little while ago.

I was having friends over for dinner and I was planning to bake a risotto. I was looking for the recipe and could not find it. I knew exactly where it was meant to be—on the back of the risotto packet—but it was not there. So I went back to the supermarket to find the recipe.

The catch, however, was that I already had more risotto than I needed and did not want to buy another packet. So I took a pen and paper and, after locating the right brand, sat cross-legged in the aisle and began to copy the recipe.

There I was, a university professor sitting in a corner of a supermarket aisle in my ‘weekend clothes’ with a pen and paper and a large packet of risotto on my lap writing down the recipe and the steps to follow. (I did try to take a photo with my phone but it was not clear.) I had not really thought about how my actions would be perceived until I noticed some strange glances from my fellow shoppers, so I started writing quickly so I could get out of there.

It is at this point that the day really started getting strange. A group of five pirates walked in to the supermarket—three men and two women. Granted, they may not have been real pirates, but they were dressed as pirates—eye patch and all. One of the women looked at me and asked what I was doing. After explaining that I was copying a recipe, she asked what I was cooking. The exchange that followed went something like this:

James: ‘I am baking a risotto.’
Female pirate: ‘That sounds nice … how do you do that?’
James: ‘It sounds more impressive than it is, but I can explain if you really want me to.’
Female pirate: ‘Do you often sit in the middle of a supermarket and write down recipes?’
James: ‘Do you often dress like a pirate?’
Female pirate: ‘Hey, anyone who is sitting in the middle of a supermarket copying a recipe is in no position to judge what is strange.’
James: ‘I never said anything about it being strange … I was asking a simple question.’

What we need to ask when trying to understand our society is: How ‘normal’ is such an exchange? Do we consider it strange that someone sits in the middle of a supermarket and writes down a recipe? Do we consider it strange that someone living in contemporary Sydney dresses like a pirate? (And no, it was not Halloween, although it may have been International Talk Like A Pirate Day.)
Also, consider this: How often in everyday life do we talk to strangers in such a random way?

If you do think these events are strange, ask yourself: ‘Why?’ Did anyone ever tell you that people should not write recipes in the middle of a supermarket or dress like a pirate? The answer is probably ‘no’. We learn that there are rules in society that we should follow; they are never explained to us or written down, but we learn them. This is the process of socialisation (which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter).

These rules are invisible, are all around us, and in many ways are essential to the smooth running of our society. Some are about manners and behaviour; others are about learning what is considered ‘normal’ and ‘natural’; and there are even some about our desires and hopes. Some are explained to us, while we learn others by observing and no one really tells us why we do them. The law enforces some, while others are enforced just as heavily by the weight of the opinion of those around us.

If you think about it, there are millions of people living in cities all over the world and most of us get along. The question is: How does this happen?

It is deciphering all this—which is a type of ‘code’—that is fundamental to understanding our contemporary society. If we can understand these rules, we can understand how our society is organised.

The journey we are about to take in investigating our contemporary society is going to be fun—yes, I said fun—because unlike most books you will read in this area of study, we are not simply looking at theorists and applying their ideas to case studies. Instead, we will be looking at our everyday lives and experiences and seeing which theorists are relevant to us. In this way you will be encouraged to reflect upon your experiences and draw on a wide range of theories to see what is relevant; that is, to unpack the world around you, and not simply investigate something that is happening ‘some place else’. You may find some of these theorists incredibly interesting, many of them relevant and others not so much. Such positions are fine as long as you critically reflect on the issues we discuss and then decide—for as you will see, there are no right or wrong answers.

FIGURE 1.1 THERE ARE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE LIVING IN CITIES ALL OVER THE WORLD AND MOST OF US GET ALONG. THE QUESTION IS: HOW DOES THIS HAPPEN?

In investigating our contemporary society we will draw on theorists from two broad schools of thought: sociology and cultural studies. The study of society is called ‘sociology’ and those who study it are referred to as ‘sociologists’ (see Chapter 2). Sociologists began analysing societies by looking at substantial
changes to the social order that occurred through political and industrial revolutions (this is discussed in detail in Chapter 5).

The Industrial Revolution began in the late eighteenth century and changed the way a significant portion of the world operated. For example, this was the first time in history that societies became centred around large urban hubs. People headed for the cities, leaving the rural homes that had been in their family for generations—sometimes this was by choice; sometimes it was because they were forced off their land. In the cities they met, interacted and began families with people they may have never encountered before the Industrial Revolution occurred.

During the Industrial Revolution, capitalism became the key organising principle of society, science emerged as the primary source of knowledge (replacing religion and superstition), and the concept of social progress emerged. Political revolutions in France and America changed the relationship between the rulers and the ruled in ways that reverberated across the world. The changes brought about by such revolutions highlighted how societies can change both slowly and quickly. Furthermore, these revolutions changed the structures of societies, the role of the individual, and the relationships that existed within societies. These three dimensions—social structures, the individual and relationships—must each be considered when we attempt to define exactly what society is (this is something we will return to in Chapter 3).

We will also draw on many theorists from cultural studies. This is an academic discipline that investigates the symbolic meanings and cultural practices of our everyday experiences. While sociology looks at social change across entire societies, cultural studies looks at ordinary people. Early historians were concerned mainly with the lives of the elite, but cultural studies emerged when theorists became interested in the interactions that ordinary people have. By looking at everyday life, it is possible to gain insights into how our society is arranged, understand why we accept certain things and do not revolt, and realise why we are happy or unhappy.

As noted, one of the challenges of studying contemporary society is that sometimes things change slowly—so slowly and subtly that we often do not even recognise the change. At other times, there is rapid change. As change happens, we can no longer take everyday interactions for granted: what was once accepted as normal may now seem strange.

One example is the decline in letters delivered to our homes. For hundreds of years, this was an accepted—and indeed the most popular—form of communication. The massive impact of the internet, however, has meant that many post offices today rarely deliver letters, as email, social media and mobile technology have become the preferred media of communication. This change started slowly and people barely noticed it was happening; then it gained momentum, especially as smartphones become more widely available.

At one stage, everyone thought that post offices would disappear, but the internet provided an unexpected boon: online shopping has made parcel delivery an incredibly popular service! This too started slowly, but has now become significant.
HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT HOW MILLIONS OF PEOPLE LIVING TOGETHER TEND TO GET ALONG?

Over the last few centuries, particularly since the Industrial Revolution, massive urban centres have emerged, and, for the first time in history, more people live in cities than in rural environments. Tokyo, for example, has a population of over 13 million people.

This creates tensions, right?

Every week in the media, we see a violent incident. Sometimes these incidents are between individuals or small groups of people. All too often, we see them in the form of domestic violence directed towards women and children, now one of the leading causes of death and injury to women aged under 45 years in Australia—a heartbreaking statistic indeed (Malone & Phillips 2014). In such situations, we often look at the perpetrator and victim as individuals and wonder what happened.

There are also violent events where society seems to break down. We have seen the Cronulla Riots (2003), the Palm Island Riots (2004), and the tension that emerged in Sydney following the siege of a café when a lone gunman claimed links to terrorist organisations and murdered innocent people (2014).

When considering these events, the question that most of us ask is: ‘Why and how did this happen?’ However, many others ask a very different—but just as important—question: ‘Why did this not happen before?’ Or, as mentioned above: ‘In large cities with so many people living in cramped environments, tensions emerge; so why does this not continually happen?’

In our contemporary society we frequently see such violent events. They occur not only in Australia, but also overseas. When we see them in ‘foreign’ places, we may be shocked but we often ignore the implications of the violence because we assume there has been some social breakdown that we do not understand. And when such events occur close to home, we are often left searching for simple answers to complicated issues. One of the aims of this book is to decipher many of these issues.

While we do see violent events, Australian society tends to function very well. In fact, while violent events attract the bulk of the media’s attention, most days are pretty boring and little happens, even with 25 million of us living in this country!

Moreover, we also see many examples of kindness and empathy, and great efforts to make society function peacefully and justly. For example, in organisations such as Oxfam, Amnesty International and the Edmund Rice Centre, and anti-domestic violence campaigns such as White Ribbon, we see many people—both paid and volunteers—devote their lives to the promotion of a more just society. Such people work for causes including reconciliation, and the fight against poverty, misrepresentation, unfair trade relationships, discrimination and exploitation.

We even see situations where there is violence and hatred side by side with examples of peace and harmony. Sometimes this may even occur around
the same issue. For example, while many support the mandatory detention of refugees, others protest and believe that it is an assault on people’s human rights. I have attended protests in support of refugees and seen a wide variety of people, including those from Afghanistan and parts of the Middle East, Anglo-Australians, people of Jewish background, priests, nuns and many others.

So, while some are concerned about many different cultures changing Australia and form anti-immigration organisations to stop this from happening, others work for harmony and celebrate difference.

It is by considering such issues that we can find the key to unlocking the ‘mysteries’ of contemporary society and understanding our experiences in everyday life.

Here are some other experiences of ‘the everyday’ that provide insights into our society: Why and how are different roles assigned to males and females? How do nations such as Australia emerge? Why do people protest? Why are you not allowed to vote until you are 18? How can we wear shoes when we know that those very shoes were produced by child labour? Where does racism come from and why does it persist? How can we live in a very wealthy society but demand to lock up genuine refugees because we fear them? Why do we give flowers?

To answer these questions, we need to look at society as a whole, as well as the lives of the many individuals. And this is a challenge, as individuals have their own motivations and desires (see Box 1.1)—answering the questions becomes even more complex when you consider that no two people are the same!

**BOX 1.1**

**SOCIETY IS MADE UP OF COMPLEX INDIVIDUALS**

One of the challenges of studying our ‘society’ and ‘culture’ is that they are made up of many individuals, and we are unique even though we have much in common.

If this was a classical economics textbook, one of the first things we would examine is the concept that every one of us is a ‘rational’ and ‘self-interested’ being. A central argument I learnt when I studied economics was that each of us is driven to maximise utility, or satisfaction derived from transactions. We all have unlimited wants, the claim goes, yet the world has limited resources. We therefore make economic decisions based on self-interest in order to maximise our utility, or ‘get the most’ out of these limited resources. There are many more innovative studies surrounding contemporary economics, including alternative behavioural economics and ‘happiness economics’, because the classical economists limited their understanding to how humans maximise economic utility.

This is why we turn to the study of society and culture, which allows us to see individuals as more complex beings. Individuals are not influenced only by economic needs, and do not make only economic decisions. We are also guided by cultural background, socialisation,
personal experiences, family, friends, television, music, books and so on.

One example is giving someone a bunch of flowers—something that some people do often, and others rarely or maybe never.

If we look at giving flowers ‘rationally’, we see an act of gifting useless, dying organic matter—for that is all flowers are once they have been cut at their stems.

Giving flowers, however, is rich with cultural and social meanings—from love and sympathy to saying sorry. Rationality does not necessarily play a part, even though choosing which flowers to give, whether to pick them, steal them or buy them, and what size, colour and type of flower all play a part. The flowers that say ‘I love you’ to mum on Mother’s Day are different to the flowers given on Valentine’s Day.

So when we think about giving flowers, the last thing we say to ourselves is: ‘This is maximising my economic utility.’

Because we are not always rational, because we are all different, and because our priorities are constantly changing, the study of society becomes much more complicated (and more interesting).

FIGURE 1.2 WHY DO WE GIVE USELESS, DYING ORGANIC MATTER?

BUT WE DO BEHAVE RATIONALLY ... RIGHT?

A good friend of mine, who is a medical doctor, always used to argue against me when I explained to her that we rarely act ‘rationally’ and are often more likely to be irrational. Her position was that medical doctors are trained in such a way that their rational decision-making skills rise above any emotions—irrational or otherwise.

However, I finally got her to agree with me. How? I showed her research on the decision-making skills of doctors. The research showed that doctors can misdiagnose patients not just because of the difficulty of putting a name to symptoms, but also because of ‘social factors’.

In a 2007 study, Jerome Groopman found there are three social factors that influence a doctor’s diagnosis. The first factor is the patients the doctor has seen before he or she sees you: if five people come into the surgery before you and they each have the flu, the doctor is likely to conclude that you have the flu, even if you show only one of the symptoms.

The second is based on the way you look. If you look fit and are young, the doctor is likely to dismiss certain diseases immediately even if you have the symptoms for those diseases.
The third factor is that doctors make decisions based on how much they like you. The example cited in the research is of one doctor who liked his patient and did not want to cause him any more discomfort than was necessary. As a result, he decided not to do one extra test that meant he missed a key element in appropriately diagnosing the patient. The patient got sicker and it took another doctor to discover why. The patient eventually recovered, but it was the fact that he was a friend of the doctor that almost led to disaster.

So, even in the most scientific and rational professions, (irrational) social factors play a part. This is something we should never forget when investigating contemporary society.

We are not born rational or irrational: we are complex social creatures. As such, who we are is not pre-determined; in fact determinism is a concept that has long been dismissed (see Box 1.2).

**AVOID DETERMINISM WHEN STUDYING SOCIETY**

Another challenge of studying society is that people do not behave in a pre-determined way; that is, we are not like machines pre-programmed to behave in certain ways based on our background.

For example, I have a friend, Charlotte, from Hong Kong who studied in Australia. Because she is Chinese, she told me that people often expected her to be good at maths—a subject area she hates and is terrible at!

This supposed innate tendency to be good at maths sounds silly when you think about it, but it is indicative of an issue that we should take seriously.

The idea that someone has inherent traits—be they violent, academic or sporting—has a long history and has been termed ‘biological determinism’. Biological determinism suggests that all human nature is inherited and all human attributes are fixed. Biological determinists disregard or deny the effects of environmental variables or the agency of the individual. Such a viewpoint leads to the idea that criminals cannot be reformed—they are, in effect, ‘born that way’. By this reasoning, I am an academic, not because I have studied hard and persisted in obtaining multiple degrees despite setbacks, but because I am somehow genetically programmed for this job like some sort of robot!

Biological determinism, if we take it to its logical conclusion, removes human agency from human responsibility. All blame for failure (or credit for success) is exclusively placed on your genes. According to biological determinism, we have no free will—we only have genetics.
WHAT IS SOCIETY?

I keep on mentioning the word ‘society’ as though we all know what it means, but what exactly is it?

We will have a detailed discussion of society in Chapter 3, but for now consider this: society is a social system that is made up of many smaller parts, including formal institutions (such as schools, hospitals and government) and informal social groups (such as families). Society encompasses both these parts and the way that they are put together and organised. Hence, society is made up of organisations and the many social relations between people and different groups (Jureidini, Kenny & Poole 2003, p. 16). This is a very brief introduction, however—as we will see in Chapter 3, understanding and studying society is an incredibly wide area.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

We now have a brief overview of the meaning of society, so let's turn to culture. When we hear the word ‘culture’, we often take it as meaning ‘high culture’; that is, we think of the opera or the ballet for example. Or we may think of culture as a formal dimension of belonging to a nationality, such as Australian culture (although what that could be is anyone’s guess). We will return to this latter aspect in Chapter 10, where we discuss national identity.

For the purposes of understanding culture in our present context, we should think of it as being broader and encompassing the rules and processes of everyday life. It is with this type of definition in mind that the authors of the Dictionary of Sociology (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1994, p. 98) describe culture as ‘the symbolic and learned, non-biological aspects of human society, including language, custom and convention, by which human behaviour can be distinguished from other primates’; that is, culture determines how our societies are organised, maintained and how they change. Consequently, much of the way we act is, as least in part, culturally determined. While there are many things that seem ‘natural’ in our everyday lives, they are actually determined by our cultural norms. Think of how babies are given pink or blue clothing depending on their gender. Why does this occur? This is a concept we will return to throughout this book.

One of history’s most influential sociologists, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), argued that every culture makes assumptions about fundamental phenomena. These assumptions set the frame through which we experience the world and are often experienced as the absolute and unquestioned truth. They can include issues about what is ‘good’ and celebrated in our society, and what is ‘bad’ and frowned upon.

More recently, a famous and somewhat controversial cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard (1983), stated that cultures are based on a system of signs.
Baudrillard argued that these ‘signs’ are unconsciously learnt and give meaning to our world. Culture is seen as a world of signs and symbols (or, in Baudrillard’s words, ‘signifiers’). From this perspective, culture is not only a lived phenomenon, but also a sensory one; that is, we learn to make our cultural experiences part of our senses—explaining why we may ‘feel’ patriotic at the beginning of a football game when the national anthem is sung!

For Baudrillard, human society is a culturally constructed world of symbols. We humans learn and respond to these symbols in ways that are considered to be culturally appropriate. These are the cultural codes of a society that create a sense of order in a chaotic world.

SOCIALISATION

This brings us to the concept of ‘socialisation’, which is the transmission of culture from one generation to the next. This is the way that we humans learn the patterns of behaviour, experiences and identities particular to each of our cultures.

For example, think of how we are socialised to greet people and respect personal space. This is something that no one explains to us formally; rather, we learn how to behave over time—we watch, observe and react. When you meet someone, think about how closely you stand to them and the rules that you follow.

According to one of Australia’s influential sociologists, Robert Van Krieken (et al. 2005), socialisation is a learning process that begins at birth and continues until death. But while those around influence us, we also do the influencing; that is, we ‘socialise’ others to behave in a certain way.

Socialisation occurs on many different levels—including the way we speak, the buying of gifts and how we act (such as not chewing with our mouths open).

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

If we combine the concept of culture and how we learn it through the process of socialisation, then we can come to the conclusion that culture in large part determines the type of person we become. According to Van Krieken and colleagues (2005) our identity is the constellation of characteristics that we may regard as part of our ‘self’, including the way we present ourselves to others.

For example, our Australian culture places some prestige on being an academic, although this is tempered by the fact that you cannot act as if you are important, or you will be dismissed as arrogant. So my identity is balanced between me thinking: ‘I am an academic and must act with a certain level of responsibility and according to the rules of academia’, combined with my not wanting to be seen as being full of self-importance.

But the ‘cultural prism’ that shapes our identity is not limited to what we do; it is also influenced by our notions of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so
on—all concepts we will return to in coming chapters. And there can also be a dark side of having cultural practices that only we understand. This can be seen when we look upon non-members of our culture as being threats, or not as sophisticated as we are.

**BOX 1.3**

**ONTOMOLOGY**

In the study of sociology, there are always terms that mystify many of us—and one such term is ‘ontology’. It is a word that you will come across in sociology and cultural studies, and it refers to the ‘science of being’.

The study of ontology is a branch of philosophy that looks at different kinds of objects and their structures and properties, as well as how we relate to these objects in our everyday lives. The simplest way to think of this is to remember that ontology refers to the way we see the world: how we classify things, people and other entities around us.

This means that different fields of research and study have their own ontology that is defined by various factors, such as the key theorists and the history of where the field comes from. For example, as we have seen, sociologists look at individuals very differently from the way that economists do (see Box 1.1). Economists believe we are rational decision makers bent on maximising our utility; while sociologists believe we are influenced by many factors (in addition to maximising our utility), such as compassion, fear and concern.

One of the best ways to win an argument is to attempt to understand and recognise the ontology of other ontologies, or the different ways of looking at the world that exist. There are various ontological fields of research such as law, medicine, engineering, economics and music.

Understanding the way that other fields of study see the world is not only about winning arguments, but also about accepting other people’s views. For example, my parents grew up in a rural part of Greece and see the world very differently to me. It is not just their opinions that are different; it is also how they actually perceive the world around them. We are very different—but we get along when I try and understand their ontology.

**SUBJECTIVITY**

‘Subjectivity’ is another of those words we come across in sociology that has a specific meaning in a sociological context and is important to understand when studying contemporary societies. Subjectivity refers to a specific person’s (or a subject’s) perspective—their knowledge, beliefs, feelings and emotions, desires and principles. It is important that we contrast this meaning with the way the term is used in everyday language, where it refers to someone’s opinions that have no real justification.