



FROM THE TRENCHES: TEACHING SOCIOLOGY?

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Sociology is taught as social reform – identifying the problems of the world; and therefore, it has become mired in relativism. Students are given “case studies” that deal with this or that issue, with the intent of providing a “correct attitude” about society.

These attitudes pass as [sociological education](#), which can be summarized in this way: Society is made up of oppressors and victims; and it is the job of the educated (“socially aware”) person to identify and condemn the oppressor and valorize the victim.

This may be laudable, but it is not education – and it is certainly not sociology, despite the focus of most textbooks.

A fundamental question, therefore, arises: what is the point of teaching sociology? The answer is a variation on a familiar theme – sociology is, in the end, social reform, the fixing of society. Do we need such reform?

Sadly, these fixes tend to be simplistic, if not downright naïve – the world changes as a result of complex ideas; never because of raised awareness. Raising awareness about cancer has not led to a cure; not even massive funding has helped.

Here is the crux of the problem – sociology is seen to be two contradictory things. First, those who teach it professionally [perceive it to be a science](#). Those outside the profession see it as [anything but science](#) – [because everything is sociology](#).

Mathematicians may hold varying and conflicting notions about the reality of numbers, but when asked to teach students, there is an immediate “common ground” – students must know the basic and fundamental ideas or principles of mathematics.

What is the common ground of sociology? There is none; there is just varying and conflicting perspectives (endless meta-theory).

Science does not teach perspectives – it teaches principles, ideas. Once students understand ideas – and make them their own – only then can they start thinking with them. If there are no ideas – there can be no thought; hence, the need for attitudes.

Possessing attitudes is not education – it is a deeply disturbing form of conformity; a conformity that passes for enlightenment, but is nothing other than personal feelings – and outside of feelings there is only ignorance.

Education fails miserably if it cannot allow an individual to transcend the confines of individual preference. The only way to do that, of course, is to intellectually equip the student to enter the world with ideas, not with attitudes.

But, for some reason, sociology cannot express its own "common ground." One has only to look at the countless "Introduction to Sociology" textbooks in the marketplace. Typically, these textbooks seek to "stand apart" by some schtick that will make "the material" either "relevant," or "engaging." In other words, how to make sociology teachable?

The assumption is that education can be had via some sort of catchy, marketable trick, which will hook the student into learning something, anything, which can then be described as "sociology."

Unfortunately, very few people now understand the fact (yes, the fact) that education – and reading – is hard work. It has nothing to do with enjoyment (that used to be called entertainment). Education is difficult work, which is why it is valuable.

Further, when typical sociology textbooks are analyzed (need we say, scientifically), not for content but for approach (or pedagogical usefulness), a consistent methodology emerges.

They invariably set out to define the many "systems" that are seen to hinder or even oppress the individual. Then these "systems" are rigorously critiqued through the lens of diverse (and at times contradictory) theoretical stances (always postmodernist in inclination).

And the result is a hodge-podge of meta-theory that provides to the student neither a clear understanding of sociology as a discipline with precise and marked parameters, nor a firm grasp of the nature of society or societies.

For example, trying to find a simple (yes, simple) definition of "culture" becomes an exercise in frustration. All these textbooks offer is endless examples of culture, followed by tedious ramblings in dead-end areas, like "cultural studies" and "media studies."

And what does the student take away from all this? Who knows? Empiricism, the science behind sociology, is nowhere in sight.

The second problem with teaching sociology in our time is the fact that science has been abandoned in favor of relativism. And this has meant a loss of objectivity.

Sociology is now rife with a partisan mentality, which suggests that only those inside can properly study and explicate the forces at play in society.

Thus, for example, ethnicity can only properly be studied and explained by ethnic minorities. Anyone trying to study or comment on ethnicity from the badly labeled "dominant group" is simply someone trying to maintain existing power-structures that favor his/her dominance.

In this way education becomes social action. And yet we all know that the world is far greater in complexity than this one-dimensional attitude.

Certainly, it is the nature of all societies to include and exclude, which may be examined by ideas, such as, class, anomie, family, institutions, crime, roles, hierarchy, labeling, and socialization. These ideas have existed for as long as human beings have chosen to live together.

But can our students clearly and simply define these ideas? Have these ideas become part of their thinking? Do they understand the empirical basis of these ideas? Can they use these ideas to rise above the malaise of our civilization – relativism?

Sociology once more needs to teach from the common ground of empiricism. It must abandon relativism, which has effectively sabotaged the Humanities and social sciences.

Students no longer look for an education. But then education also used to mean knowing the basis of your goodness.

Who knows what goodness is, say the relativists? Despite that, the majority of human beings on this planet still want to be good.

Science does not need to be relevant, or engaging, or interesting (we only have to keep mathematics in mind).

Now that sociology has wandered away from its own discipline, as it tries to be all things to all people, it can only promote agendas, whether political or personal, and therefore it will rightly disappear. Who needs more attitude.

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The [photo](#) shows, "Après l'office à l'église de la Sainte-Trinité," painted in 1900, by Jean Béraud.

