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Obstinate Observations on Sociological Saving

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It can perhaps not surprise many an American sociologist today that my writing of this brief missive does not take place without some trepidation. Unless the march of the sociological profession over this past short decade has blinded even more than it has silenced me, readers will recall my publically voiced objections to the politicization of our discipline under the guise of the benign label of so-called public sociology (see Deflem 2005 for the gist of my position, and Deflem 2013 for a historical account). Whatever else the outcome of my interventions may have been, I must begin by noting that it brought about a disturbing measure of ridicule, especially in the once reasonably flourishing sociological blogosphere, even from those who should be colleagues.¹

Changing the World

The question if comparative historical sociologists should save the world assumes that sociologists in general can as well as should save the world and that there is a world that needs to be saved. Let me forego the notion that there is anything special about comparative historical sociologists which sociologists at large, i.e., those professionals with other declared specialty interests, would also not share. Besides, as Durkheim was the first to remind us, all sociology is by definition comparative (Durkheim 1908; see Deflem 2007).

At the same time, it has to be understood that the very word 'world' assumes a distinctly comparative focus, including an outlook that is also international and/or global. From such a perspective, I agree that it is constructive, if not downright necessary and inevitable, for

comparative historical sociology to ask big questions (Prasad 2015). A sociology focused on narrow questions that can be answered with great technical precision is as useless as one that is highly politicized. Yet, under the conditions of a comparative-historical sociology focused on the big issues that move the world, I would suspect that the location of the researcher is even more important and that, therefore, the danger of an imperialist attitude of comprehension can be added on to the arrogance embedded in a sociology that seeks to be more than sociology can be.

Sociology cannot be legitimately involved in challenging let alone changing the world. As I argued before (Deflem 2004), sociology is a science and as such should be involved in analyzing variation in reality in the social world. Among the special characteristics of sociology as a social science is the fact that social issues are deeply normative as well. It is for that reason precisely that a detached attitude is needed to engage in analyzing the patterns and dynamics of the social. No justice without truth. Truth-seeking in sociology should also not be selectively focused on some issues rather than others because of some political expediency, but ought to be solely rooted entirely in theoretical necessity. Challenging the world in any way shape or form apart from analysis inevitably leads us beyond the province of social science. This modest attitude is also part of the project of the Enlightenment as we know it since Kant. Doing more than sociology legitimately can do is not only irrational, but offensive as well to the many participants of public debates on social and political issues. Sociology might be useful to such debates, but such communications ought to be conducted with all due care and should always be guided by the notion that no matter of truth will readily be articulated in a singular position on any matter of justice.

I earlier also argued (Deflem 2005) that almost

everybody today is, or at least appears to be, a public and activist sociologist interested in challenging and saving the world. Worse yet, I suggested, “opposition is not tolerated and not accepted” among these advocates, and that the strategy is to “pathologize the enemy while simultaneously idealizing the self” (pp. 3, 4). I am hopeful that my participation in this debate might be a sign that there is hope, at least in this one minor respect.

The Challenge of Sociology

Turning to the more specific question before me now, I begin by noting that doing sociology itself is interventionist in and of itself. Such is the nature of social inquiry and of communicating thereon in the public sphere, whether through publishing or teaching. Sociology is always a praxis that exists in the world or at least a part thereof (a part that nowadays indeed, if not wholly borderless, is surely much less bound by borders than ever before). All sociology is therefore also not only comparative and historical but public as well. The very roots of the science of sociology, ever since a Belgian scholar forced the introduction of that neologism, are part of the evolving project of modernity.

But as the question if sociologists should save the world as it is posed here is surely to be understood more ambitiously than a recognition of the praxis of sociology itself, my answer is at least as old as Max Weber’s and Emile Durkheim’s, and hopefully just as sound. I need not engage here in an undergraduate level exposition on value-neutrality, but do point out that my concerns remain entirely in opposition to an activist-oriented sociology, while I would whole-heartedly embrace any gains that can be made towards the development of sociological activism. The latter, however, is by definition not within the province of sociology but must remain among the responsibilities and rights of the

participants in various public squares themselves.

Whether sociologists want to change the world in various ways or not, the point is to analyze it. It is therefore also that sociologists as sociologists should not be engaged in any form of world-saving activities. Doing sociology alone requires enough effort as it is and ought

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to be the only necessary challenge we can legitimately take on. To the extent that sociologists also relate to the world, more generally, as citizens, inhabitants, political animals, and societal actors of any and all kinds (as I think they should and, besides, inevitably do), they can no longer claim the authority of their professional identity. Besides, would it help if they did? Definitely not today given the rather low public esteem of sociology as a profession. Although I would still argue that the standing of sociology is a matter secondary to the more basic debate on the nature and objectives of sociology (Deflem 2005), the reality nonetheless is that today's sociologists interested in affecting policy or contributing to change have done themselves a tremendous disservice, on purely instrumental grounds of effectiveness alone, by their drift towards politics, activism, and whatever other forms of

non-scholarly engagement they waded into. In any case, it would be a poor choice, on instrumental grounds alone, to become a sociologist if saving the world is what one has in mind.

Sociological Boundaries

The question if sociologists can save the world is perhaps not answerable at the present time because throughout the course of the history of the discipline there have not been enough moments of some consequence when a sizeable part of the sociological profession tried to engage in such saving. To be sure, the 11th thesis on Feuerbach was written in 1845, but its influence in sociology did not occur until the 1970s, and even then in mostly programmatic terms and not for long either (Manza and McCarthy 2011). The revenge of the crisis sociologists that began in the late 1990s and took on public form at least from 2004 onwards (Deflem 2013) has not fundamentally altered the inconsequential nature of this fashionable position. Otherwise, it would make no sense to even still have to debate the question today as surely the direction in the profession has otherwise been almost wholly one-sided towards the adoption of the stance that sociology both can and should save the world. Of note in this respect, I must point out that I was invited to this debate and agreed to participate even though I am no longer a member of the ASA (and, more regrettably, therefore also not of this and some of the other great sections in the organization).

The identification of sociologists today in can-save terms, once reserved for a few marginals of the profession or the odd disconnected celebrity intellectual, is clear, by example, from the presentations of sociological selves in our online world, where scholarship and activism neatly co-exist. The same disposition is also revealed from the presumptuous attitude organized American sociology displayed when

the ASA passed various resolutions and took related actions on distinctly political issues, not on normative grounds, but on the basis of wholly unfounded assertions of fact, such as the fabricated incontrovertibility of the consequences of same-sex marriage. The generally favorable response to this at once normative and market-driven redirection of sociology is manifested in the number of memberships in the organization, attendance at the annual meetings, and various other gains in popularity.

But even bracketing for now the question of its professional desirability and scholarly possibility, there is little indication, as far as I know, that the can-save-the-world movement has actually accomplished anything even remotely resembling that which is aspired to. It is perhaps not just to be explained away as another folly on my part to note that the can-save sociologists have not even been able to save me. The reasons for the inability of today's world-saving sociology to fulfill its own ambitions are both logical as well as sociological and therefore need further examination than can be offered in the context of this essay. Yet, perhaps it is more than an authority argument to note that the late Lewis Coser once wrote that even when it was assumed that those in positions of power could be influenced by social scientists calling attention to certain social concerns and problems, "it would be an indulgence in unwarranted Comtean optimism to assume that such enlightenment will at all times be sufficient to alert them." (Coser 1966, p. 13). Neither subjective disposition of desire nor strategic location in the occupational structure will alter this situation. But what Coser could not realize is that such optimism nowadays is widely shared. Today everyone's a Comte. And nobody but a few (Smith 2014) are laughing at this religious project and the ridiculousness of its details.

Save Sociology

Among my efforts to counter the advent of public sociology, which has inspired much of what I have written here (even though those efforts failed), I used to maintain a website called "Save Sociology."² It is no coincidence that my saving objectives differed radically from the one proposed in Dr. Prasad's question, as indeed my contention was and remains that it is sociology that needs to be saved. My earlier statements on sociology as a scholarly praxis will have clarified the core of this argument. In the meantime, however, I must make an additional claim to also argue that many a contemporary sociologist would have to be saved as well. At any rate, what the public should be able to expect is not necessarily a world safe from sociology but, at the very least, a world safe from sociologists who, as the born-again priests of humanity, think they can and should save the world.

Notes

1. See Jeremy Freese's blog post, May 3, 2006, "scylla and charybdiss," http://jeremyfreese.blogspot.com/2006/05/scylla-and-charybdiss_03.html. The post contains a link to another blog post from the pseudonymous "Total Drek," who introduces a 'Mathieu Deflem Drinking Game.' Since deleted, the post is still available through the Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070509120015/http://totaldrek.blogspot.com/2006/05/oh-hell-with-it.html>.
2. "Save Sociology" website: www.savesociology.org. I maintained the site actively from 2004 until 2006, and have provided only some occasional updates since.

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Weber on Wall Street: Reflections on the "Policy Relevance" of Comparative Historical Sociology

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Can comparative historical sociology save the world? I must admit I accepted Monica Prasad's invitation to reflect on this question for *Trajectories* with some trepidation. The question is so deceptively simple that I wondered how it would be possible to say something that: a) hasn't already been said (with Marx and Weber having both famously entered the fray, albeit on opposing sides of the issue); b) isn't completely obvious (*of course, we can save the world, or we should at least try!*); and c) avoids the opprobrium of my fellow sociologists to the extent that I diverge from the expected answer (*what do you mean, we can't save the world? Nihilist!*). It seemed an impossible task.

And yet, as I mulled it over, I was compelled to take on this assignment precisely because I

realized I'd already been thinking about Prasad's question for most of my professional life, even if indirectly. Like so many others, my initial attraction to sociology was in part a product of the same social justice concerns that I now see burning in the faces of my undergraduates, and my gravitation towards comparative historical sociology in particular was a reflection of my naïve (I'm tipping my hand here) belief that understanding the larger historical forces that shaped our world would provide tools for reconstructing that world. As I became socialized to professional academia in graduate school, the concerns that initially motivated my study of sociology gradually fell away, but they never disappeared entirely, and it was a foregone conclusion that my dissertation would in some way engage larger, public concerns.

My dissertation (and later book) examined the financialization of the U.S. economy in the decades since the 1970s. Suffice to say, this seemed an extremely policy-relevant topic. In fact, I have a hard time thinking of any topic that comparative historical sociologists have written on in recent years that appears more relevant to policy; and the policy salience of my subject matter only increased over the period I was writing first the dissertation and then the book (the Enron fraud was still reverberating as I finished the dissertation in 2003, and the final drafting of the book manuscript coincided with the mortgage crisis of 2008-2009). It may then be surprising that my answer to Prasad's question is a qualified "no." The qualifications I have to offer are of two kinds: First, my "no" refers specifically to the question of developing research that aims to be "policy relevant" in the sense of directly influencing policy outcomes. I will suggest that comparative historical work may possibly "save the world" in other, broader interpretations of that phrase (likely broader than intended by Prasad, however). Second, I do not intend to suggest that comparative