

# Saving Sociology

## by Brendan Dooley

*How to Think Better About Social Justice: Why Good Sociology Matters*, Bradley Campbell, Routledge, 2024, pp. 122, \$42.39 paperback.

Since its inception, with the grand(iose) visions of Saint Simon and Auguste Comte, sociology has been enthralled by social planning. According to the scripture of the discipline, if granted enough power and data, central planners can design a society that will manifest utopia. Although socialism and sociology are not synonymous, they often rhyme. With his latest title Bradley Campbell delivers a dose of sobriety to curb the intoxicating delusion. Borrowing a sobriquet from economics, *How to Think Better About Social Justice: Why Good Sociology Matters* is a tough love attempt to make sociology a dismal science again through cogently accounting for all the ways in which its professional praxis has not served it well.

The contribution joins a cottage industry of sociological dissent. Irving Louis Horowitz opened with *The Deconstruction of Sociology* in 1993. With unrelenting prose, he laid down a seething indictment of sociology's suborning its analytics to elevate a doctri-

naire, leftist ideology. More recently, Christian Smith's *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* reads less as a crackling broadside than a satire of a clerisy of witch hunters out to enforce strict conformity. The casus belli for Smith's war against groupthink was an inquisition that targeted his former graduate student, Mark Regnerus. His budding career was held in abeyance while tribunals were convened to adjudicate the matter of his authoring of a nearly published peer-reviewed study that threatened prevailing pieties on the effects on child outcomes of same-sex marriages. As the latest voice in the chorus, Campbell joins with less a tone of bitterness than one of regret; think: disappointed father.

Two aspects of his academic profile mark him as an ideal messenger for such an apologia. First, Campbell dissertated under the direction of famed sociologist Donald Black at the University of Virginia. While certainly a part of the sociological conversation, the Blackian paradigm of "Pure Sociology"

bears a few unambiguous distinctions from its mainstream peers, like its insistence on erasing *every* psychological construct from sociology's approach. Among a list of other divergences from mainstream sociology, this conclusively separates the approach on key epistemological issues. As a proponent of such a worldview (see *The Geometry of Genocide*) he is of sociology but not beholden to its dominant ethos.

Secondly, the success of *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*—co-authored with Jason Manning—showed a sociologist capable of confronting controversial subject matter in an unflinching, dispassionate manner. The thesis of the work drew from the sociological understanding of how honor cultures defend against affronts. Imperiled minority groups are acutely sensitive to slights against the image of themselves they wish to project. One common salve against this threat to self-perception is to adorn the cause in the language of victimhood. This strategy serves to rally sympathy from the public against bullying. Irrespective of the political identity of activists, such rhetoric is commonly used to great effect on college campuses. If that commitment to following the analytic formula in plainly opining on tempestuous campus politics put the co-authors crosswise of politically correct nostrums, so much the worse for those misbegotten ideas.

That combination of competency and fortitude pays dividends in the prolonged meditation on the summon bonum of all of sociology: social jus-

tice. The imagery that permeates the present review is intentionally spiritually centered. Although the pun is not intended, social justice traces its origins to another S. J. The first chapter captures the efforts of the Society of Jesus (more commonly, Jesuits), who defined their Catholic mission around “collective action aimed at transforming social institutions and structures in order to achieve the common good” (8). From the outset, the primary thesis is clear. To its detriment, sociology has largely surrendered its scientific mission in favor of an emergent (religious) zeal for transforming the world around it.

*How to Think Better About Social Justice* is a sustained effort to exorcise this temptation. There is unease in reading the work throughout, as it is haunted by a litany of examples and arguments reminding the reader of the effects of poorly conceived counsel. To turn an aphorism of Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman, the value of the advice that policy makers are providing should not be assessed according to the fervor of the conviction with which it is offered, but on the degree to which analysis captures the underlying reality. A quick review of the chapter headings clearly conveys the urgency in which Campbell's corrective is delivered.

1. Learn About the World Before Changing It: Why We Need Sociology
2. Acknowledge Uncertainty: Learning from Multiple Theories

3. Don't Treat Ideology as Science: The Problem with Critical Theory
4. Distinguish Between Facts and Values: The Limits of Sociology
5. Be Willing to Make Tradeoffs: Dealing with Warring Gods
6. Make Room for Opposition: The Reality of Pluralism
7. Accept Imperfection: The False Promise of Utopia
8. Embrace Humility: A Case for Classical Liberalism

The listings are bold and declarative because this is an attempt to warn sociology that it is on a wayward path; its paladins are currently guided more by passion than thoughtful reflection.

Following the second chapter's rendering of several theoretical approaches that populate sociological discourse (e.g. Marxist/conflict, phenomenology, motivational, rational choice, opportunity, and functionalism) a more precise articulation of the issue is framed. A substantive mass of sociology has become subsumed by a pursuit of *critical* social justice. There is a fealty to a Marxist gestalt. Against this sentiment, chapter three moves the message forward through affirming that sociology is indeed a science. Consistent with that identity it does best when dedicating itself to the complicated task of designing theories that rely on objective definitions that are testable and valid. That advice is punctuated with examples of wildly fashionable ideas such as the alleged link between the Super Bowl and domestic violence reports, microaggression research, and the ef-

fectiveness of trigger warnings all merit profound skepticism based on tests of their claims.

The ubiquity of postmodernism requires our author to address its cynical claim that ideology invariably manages to legitimize itself under the guise of "objective" science. Because this argument is so influential in academe it represents an existential threat. For this reason, the response that is granted in chapter four is the cornerstone of the project. To meet the challenge Campbell offers a three-point refutation. The response takes aim at the still popular argument of Philip Gorski (2013) in *Society*, where he contends that values and facts are inseparable.

Invoking Donald Black's (2013) refutation, Campbell makes the case that a value-free science is clearly more than a mirage meant to mask a power display. Namely, Gorski's argument is built on three common sources of confusion. First, internal (What topics to study?) and external (Is capital punishment moral?) characteristics are often conflated. The former is clearly under the purview of science and the latter is a normative question. Second, value-freeness and objectivity are often misidentified; any statement that is not a value statement is a value-free statement. Third, sociological statements should not be mistaken for reactions to those statements of fact. Ultimately, when all the evidence is stacked up Hume's observation endures. Protestations of activist-scholars aside, by dint of implacable logic we cannot conjure an ought from an is.

The three subsequent chapters press ahead, largely by explaining the folly of unmoderated critical social justice in action. There are conceptual problems with collective action intended to advance the common good, especially when that ambition is untethered to a realistic evaluation of the facts. Fittingly, chapter five advises a dismal orientation by reminding sociology of the first rule of economics. To wit, there are no perfect solutions, only tradeoffs.

Beginning with an exposition of Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* and its account of six moral intuitions, Campbell hypothesizes a world in which we opt to focus on the unrivaled importance of only one. The policy examples of police abolition and the musings of Ibram X. Kendi on making America "anti-racist" are augmented by Kurt Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron" and Veronica Roth's novel *Divergent* to demonstrate that too much of a good thing (i.e. social justice) produces iatrogenic effects. Yes, equality and equity are important. But are we willing to surrender enough power to the state to achieve that and are we okay with actively suppressing the expression of talent to do so?

Chapter six opens with an observation that the essential barrier to social justice is (channeling Sartre) other people. If ideology is the medium of debate then dissent on defining the "common good" can only be neutralized through incivility or indoctrination. The penultimate chapter (seven) surveys history for the dogmatic true believers who insist

that utopia remains a viable option. The litany of failed experiments recounted in its pages is presaged by Durkheim's famous thought experiment on functionalism. Even a society of saints will be compelled to elevate venial sins to the stature of criminality, all to ensure a manageable contrast between deviants and conformists. In sum, manifesting a monomaniacal vision does grave harm (pun intended). Satisfying the exigencies of our collective existence requires that we accept trade-offs or face the consequences that reality always and unforgivingly foists upon our unchecked utopianism.

The message to this point in the book has been prophetic. Campbell is forecasting eventual intellectual demise, should the discipline fail to reject the false idol of unrequited social justice and accept science as a vocation. As disappointed fathers (and evangelizers) are wont to do, the chastisement ends with some warm advice. The concluding chapter (eight) ends with a call to embrace humility. Classical liberalism is the means through which to allow empirical claims to be evaluated. This is neither the narrow version of Libertarianism or the broader capital L Liberal values one might immediately think of. Although the term is not invoked directly, the chapter makes the case for Enlightenment values, conventionally understood. Consistent with championing unpopular suggestions, our author wages the battle for nuance in the ensuing debate by rebuffing contemporaneous attempts to undermine

Western values from the critical social justice, activist Left (Marxists, “anti-racists,” and feminist scholars) and the Right (National Conservatives inspired by Patrick Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed*).

However, if one were forced to define the orientation of the work in political terms it has the twang of Neo-Conservatism. Like the founders of that tradition (e.g. Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Daniel Patrick Moynihan) there is a blow to the ego in discovering that our sociological dreams are all too often mugged by empirical reality. Campbell’s admonition is that if we are honest about wanting to achieve social justice, we had better use science to reveal better rules to live by—and to heed the results it yields regardless of whether it flatters our vanity.

While describing the reading of *How to Think Better About Social Justice* as reminiscent of a textbook typically suggests condescension in academia, here it is meant as a supreme compliment. The installment is simultaneously an autopsy on an all too frequently moribund social science and an exemplar of what sociology, properly construed, ought to aspire to. The sub rosa intent in the offering of the work implies an intent to replace the deadening conformity of sociology, with its secular religious appeal (complete with rituals, gods, and telos), for a value-free inquiry to explore the complicated questions inherent in communal living. The work can genuinely and profitably be assigned alongside the typical fare of introductory sociol-

ogy texts. The substantive contribution makes a nice contrast, as it will offer a relief to show the left-leaning ideology of sociology. Campbell’s message is that there are alternative approaches that are every bit as valid in addressing the concerns of the discipline and of social justice as the conventional option.

The reading is engaging throughout. The chapters are brief but punchy; and the writing educated but not pedantic, offering hope that undergraduates will read for class. Much of that peerless virtue is attributable to the array of authors and examples that fill the pages. A basic understanding of the subject matter is offered but the discussion is quickly elevated to expand the scope of our imagination. Beyond the usual suspects (Marx, Weber, and Durkheim) and the others mentioned elsewhere in the review there are introductions to the work of other luminaries who are chronically excluded in sociology: F. A. Hayek, James Davison Hunter, Mancur Olson, Thomas Sowell, and Francis Fukuyama. While the grim reality of a 45 to 1 left to right faculty disparity in sociology does not augur well for a book endorsing classical liberalism, Campbell does his best to inspire future generations through serving as happy warrior.

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