

“Sociologue engagée” : a contribution to a debate on “can comparative historical sociology save the world?”

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Although I entered academia through political philosophy and Marxism, I chose sociology as my field of research because I thought that political theory was too remote and did not make enough of a difference. I am all for “free inquiry” and research that is independent of “social impact” concerns but my commitment to social change trumps all. I would rather create knowledge that provides alternatives to the ambient utilitarianism, individualism, and psychological/economistic babble of our times than do just about anything else. It still keeps my blood flowing. I made this particular choice when I was twenty years old and it still works for me.

This choice has taken several forms over the last fifteen years. First and foremost, in 2002 I took the lead of the Successful Societies Program, which I co-direct with political scientist Peter A. Hall, and which is funded by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. This program has focused on the various dimensions by which one can assess collective well-being, ranging from recognition and social inclusion (how does it work, really?) to the social incorporation of immigrants and low infant mortality. Our first book, *Successful Societies: How Culture and Institutions Affect Health* (2009) aimed explicitly to engage epidemiologists in order to get them to consider broader social dynamics (including cultural repertoires) that influence health outcomes, and the health gradient in particular. Our second book, *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era* (2012) pursued a similar goal, but focused precisely on the challenges that come with neoliberalism, such as the dominance of market

fundamentalism and the privatization of risk. This book considered how institutions and cultural repertoires can provide buffers and scaffoldings to human capabilities in the specific context of this neoliberal era. We demonstrated our argument with (often comparative) case studies written by social scientists from a range of disciplines (including political philosopher Will Kymlicka, sociologists Peter Evans, Ann Swidler, and Ron Levi, historian William Sewell, Jr., political scientist Jane Jenson, and others).

It is in the context of these Successful Societies projects that I started work in 2006 on a massive comparative study of how members of stigmatized groups respond to ethnoracial exclusion. This coauthored book, titled *Getting Respect: Dealing with Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel*, is to be released in August by Princeton University Press - the other authors are Graziella Moraes Silva, Jessica Welburn, Joshua Guetzkow, Nissim Mizrahi, Hanna Herzog, and Elisa Reis. This book considers how African Americans, Black Brazilians, and three Israeli groups (Arab Palestinians, Ethiopian Jews, and Mizrahim) experience ethnoracial discrimination and respond to it. After developing a very detailed analysis of variations across groups (What is the most frequent type of incident mentioned by each group? Who confronts most? Which group promotes individualist versus collectivist response?), we explain these variations by how the cultural repertoires that prevail across contexts empower some responses rather than others. We also consider groupness, i.e., the extent to which our four hundred plus interviewees understand the incidents as having to do with their ethnoracial membership or with other dimensions of their identity (e.g., being stigmatized as lower class). We find quite contrasted patterns, with two relatively strongly bounded groups (Arab Palestinians and African Americans) and two more weakly bounded

groups (Black Brazilians and Mizrahim). One of the contributions of this book is to provide a sociological analysis of how ordinary people fight for recognition and how various social policies, ideologies, and interventions can facilitate more inclusion and broader definitions of cultural membership (which we view as important measures of societal success). As such, this book is both a contribution to scholarship and an intervention in how to change the world, i.e., how to activate levers for greater agency for citizens who are not actively involved in politics or in social movements. In my view, the production of knowledge for the purpose of change is unconceivable without an effort to understand social reality from the perspective of rigorous and systematic empirical analysis of social dynamics. You have to get it right if you are going to be effective, even if the reality you unearth is not to your liking.

I want to return to our books *Successful Societies* and *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*. These two interdisciplinary books did make a difference and captured the imagination of some scholars ranging from experts on the quality of government (such as Bo Rothstein) to scholars interested in human flourishing (such as Bryan Turner and Philip Gorski) and related questions. Another measure of the influence of our ideas is that the Australian Sociological Association will hold its 2016 annual meeting around the theme “Cities and Successful Societies,” that the 2016 meetings of the Council for European studies has “resilience” as a theme, and that the 2014 meetings of the German sociological association focused on crisis and social resilience.

In the United States, our agenda also attracted the attention of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as it was launching its new funding program on “Cultures of Health.” Together with fellow comparativist Mabel Berezin, I was

invited to co-edit a special issue of the journal *Social Science & Medicine* (almost forthcoming as of this writing) with the vice president of research of the Foundation on the topic of “Solidarity and Health Cultures.” This issue features essays on mutuality, mobilization, and messaging from fellow cultural sociologists and social movement experts Christopher Bail, Abigail Saguy, Michael Schudson, Steven Epstein, Irene

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Bloemraad, and others. Our goal is to stimulate novel conversations in the field of health by bringing to it “new” ideas such as narratives, scripts, repertoires, and institutions (see also Lamont and Small 2008). Will this project make a difference? Probably, if the Foundation embraces a more multilayered understanding of the causal paths that feed collective well-being, as an alternative to a dominant individualist approach focused on choices and incentives. And this thinking in turn can affect funding priorities. So in small ways, I do feel that I am saving the world one small step at a time. I do this both as a comparativist and as a plain old generalist.

This ameliorist aspiration of my scholarship also comes to light in my mentoring. I have been working with a number of graduate students who are bringing the analytical constructs of cultural sociology into fields that

have thin views of culture or are still operating with the Parsonsian view of norms and values. Although these students more often than not are working on domestic issues, they do contribute to a reformulation of questions that matter. For instance, in a paper titled “How Judges Think about Racial Disparities: Situational Decision-Making in the Criminal Justice System” (forthcoming in *Criminology*), Matthew Clair and Alix Winter analyze interview and ethnographic data on the beliefs of state court officials concerning criminal justice processing and jury selection. Caitlin Daniel studies the interaction between low income parents’ economic resources and their ideas about food. She recently published a much noted paper in *Social Science & Medicine* on why parents defer to their children’s preferences. Also, Monica Bell’s paper “Situational Trust: How Disadvantaged Mothers Reconceive Legal Cynicism” reveals specific ways that poor African-American mothers - often depicted as either disdainful of police or as manipulators who unfairly call the police on their relationship partners and children - understand and strategize around criminal justice in the age of heavy policing. This article, which received a number of awards is forthcoming in the *Law & Society Review*.

As argued and shown by medical anthropologist Iain Wilkinson and Arthur Kleinman in his recent book *A Passion for Society: How We Think about Human Suffering*, our discipline has always experienced pendulum swings between critical detachment and abstraction on the one hand, and a desire to change the world on the other. Both dispositions are equally necessary in my view. Bad scholarship too often comes out of the over-politicization of academia. Yet, how can we maintain the attitude of the detached scholar as right-wing populism is spreading fast and furious in the United States as well as in Europe? Most of us became social scientists as

we were moved by a variable mix of intellectual passion and moral conviction. We respond to this vocation by focusing our attention on what truly matters most to us, and by looking where we can find self-realization and satisfaction. While I do not claim that this approach is ideal or should be emulated by others, buried inside of me remains the view that academics should empower social change and contribute to collective well-being by all means necessary. To not do so is to abdicate in the face of inequality and human suffering and to indulge ourselves in the comfort of our privileges, including the increasingly luxurious freedom of speech and thought. This is not all about us, after all...

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