



“Social Sciences and the Education of the Social Justice Movement”

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Abstract

Social Sciences at many universities and colleges across North America and Europe have played a key role in researching, analyzing and developing discourses about marginalized groups. These marginalized groups are part of the categorization and labels of ‘race and ethnicity’, ‘class’, ‘gender and sex’, ‘sexual orientation’, and ‘ableism’ primarily. Putting scholastic research about these marginalized groups into practice by scholars of the Social Sciences since the mid-1980s onward have resulted in making the life experiences of these groups’ individuals a touch-stone marker of academic validity. Sociology is a major contributor to the Social Justice Movement that has taken academia to the streets, homes, bedrooms, workplaces to understand, include, and most specifically construct context for the voices, everyday-lived experiences and demands of the marginalized segments of populations in North America, Europe, and elsewhere. Has Sociology fulfilled its initial intentions of finding explanations to social inequalities of the marginalized groups? How has it fostered theories, concepts, and methodologies which are now adopted by everyday vocabularies, practices, and even government regulations? This paper aims to explore roots of social justice and the Social Justice Movement in the initial objectives of Sociology.

Keywords: *Sociology, social justice, Durkheim, Weber, education*

1. Introduction

The modern concept of *social justice* emerged in the wake of industrialization and the resulting conflicts between labourers and capitalists across Western Europe in the mid-1800s. Ever since then, social science scholars have studied the power to resources, goods, services and profits in society, and subsequently adopted social justice to refer to the distribution of material rewards and benefits, such as, housing, wages, medical care and the like. In France, Auguste Comte (1789-1857) outlined the parameters of a new scientific study for societies, he called *sociologie*, which was energized by ideologies of *social justice*, that is, the principle of equality for all before the law. Sociologists today work from Comte’s foundational ideas to investigate inequalities in society in such areas as class, gender, race, sexual orientation, ableism and more. These tenets have gained public claim through the Social Justice Movement during the past forty years. Presently, the two most popularized topics of the Social Justice Movement are Black Lives Matter in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in America in May 2020, and Transgender Rights Movement incepted in 1992 by the American activist, Lesley Feinberg.

I argue that Sociology is a major contributor to the Social Justice Movement which has grown out of the 1960’s protest movements of decolonization, civil rights, women’s equality, gay rights, anti-war and more and linked with theories of post-modernity. As a result of these social movements and theories by the 1980s academic concepts and ideologies had gone into actual practice on the streets, homes, bedrooms, workplaces and in the public sphere in general to understand, include, and most specifically construct context for the voices, everyday-lived experiences and demands of the marginalized segments of populations in North America, Europe, and elsewhere. These groups are part of the project of categorization through labels of ‘race and ethnicity’, ‘class’, ‘gender and sex’, ‘sexual orientation’, and ‘ableism’ primarily (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). As I teach these topics in my Sociology classes each year I notice that more and more students come with a set of ‘truth claims’ about these subjects and are less interested in taking away nuanced aspects of knowledge and practice. This experience makes me ask whether Sociology can offer anymore momentum for the education about social justice?

1.2 Sociology and social justice

From its beginnings Sociology has had a dual commitment to fight against social *injustice* in society while operating as a legitimate academic discipline.

Genuine social justice originates in philosophy that advocates a fairer society. Immanuel Kant’s 1798 essay, “The Conflict of the Faculties,” describes the initial crisis of the modern university and offers a strategy for overcoming it. He imagines the origin of the university as the founding of a distinct, parallel



society that retains a certain authority over itself while it reflects the structures of society in general. Within it, the role of philosophers is to counsel others in matters pertaining to truth. The community model Kant is suggesting is one where the internal conflicts within the university spill over into relations with the public. Thus, his model of the university is one where peaceful conflict can influence the general public.

1.3 Durkheim and Weber

Two of the earliest sociologists, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber were deeply influenced by Kant's philosophy. They initiated paths for Sociology to become a genuine context for the promotion of social justice. Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) is often cited for his text *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (1957) based on his lectures between 1890-1912 that encapsulate his theories about *social justice*. I forgo this work in favour of illuminating his early efforts of building Sociology into a legitimate discipline; as he wrote, "Sociology is, then, not an auxiliary of any other science; it is itself a distinct and autonomous science" (Brinton & Nee, 2001: 11). From 1887 to 1902 he taught at the Université de Bourdeaux, under the title of *Chargé d'un Cours de Science Sociale et de Pédagogie* (Poggi, 2000, Brinton & Nee, 2001; Fournier, 2013). He set out to find a framework for "his sociological problematic: the idea of social laws and of the interdependence of social facts ... the concept of society as a whole or organism, the notion of 'society's consciousness', the critique of linear and teleological evolutionism, the idea of social constraint" (Fournier, 2013:105). For his teacher-training students he emphasized the idea of 'social bonds' that hold society together; the baseline structure of communities. As Fournier explains, Durkheim saw his role of both making himself "useful by providing an introduction to social science for students ...and, at the level of the population as a whole, by educating public opinion" (106).

For promoting Sociology as a tool to educate, in his first lecture Durkheim outlines a practical element of his discipline to call for awareness towards the re-establishment of communal bonds:

Our society must regain awareness of its organic unity. The individual must develop a sense for this social mass which envelops and penetrates him; he must sense it always near and active. And this sentiment must always rule his contact ... I believe that Sociology, more than any other science, is in a position to restore these ideas. It is Sociology which will make the individual understand what society is, how it completes him, and how little he really is when reduced to his own forces alone.

(Durkheim, 1978[1888]: 69)

Durkheim emphasizes the usefulness of Sociology to examine and analyze "problems [the students] regularly encountered in their work" including class differences, culture, representations, reasoning and moral education (Fournier, 2013: 108-9). By embellishing his lectures with statistical data, ethnographic sources and historical discourses, Durkheim had set the tone for the "sociological problematic" to uncover "society's consciousness" as a 'social fact'¹(Fournier, 2013: 105). While Durkheim outlined a pedagogical framework in Sociology for internal theories to be put to use in external practices which would enable social justice for all, his contemporary in Germany, Max Weber (1864-1920) promoted that Sociology should follow the principles of "methodological individualism" (Boudon, 1995: 221).

For Weber, Sociology differs from morally charged discourses about politics, arts, science and the individual's involvement in these in the larger society. Sociologists ought to analyze elements of society through the principle of *Wertfreiheit*, that is, value-freedom. Value-freedom grants the kind of objectivity necessary for empirical investigations and academic discourses. Thomas Kemple (2014) explains Weber's concept of value-freedom as "*the art of speaking sociologically*" which is motivated by the criteria of "value-relevance [*Wertbeziehung*]" of recognizing the "standards of public importance, cultural significance, and scientific interest" that are all shaped by both academia and persons involved in formulating discourses (2014: 30, italics in original). Weber developed a related methodological concept, called *Verstehen*, or *Understanding*. *Verstehen* is to be applied for investigating historical ties and stories and for the observation of social phenomena to induce *meaning-making*. It is a mode of interpretation without judgement. These theoretical methodologies then enable Weber to examine the taken-for-granted

¹ 'social facts' are traditionally elaborated ways of acting, feeling, and expressing one's self based on our collective conscience and representations, thus imbued by authoritative rules, maxims and practices, eg. norms, institutions (religious or secular). Individuals are socialized to internalize and practice 'social facts' through their upbringing and interactions with social agents within society.



meanings in everyday life armed with epistemological tools to cross-check for validity on a scientific basis. The application of *Verstehen* and value-freedom does not assert that sociologists should be ethically neutral, morally indifferent, or apolitical. Rather that sociologist must demarcate for themselves and by others' freedom from "ideological pressures, cultural prejudices, and political influences in order to be able to exercise their freedom for the independent scrutiny of inconvenient facts, conflicting viewpoints, and counterfactual speculations" so as to evoke the need to communicative understanding between scholars and the public (Kemple, 2014: 45).

Weber in his Sociology lectures often reminded his students, to take note of the "harsh social and cultural realities of their time that render decisions about one's personal calling" (in Kemple, 2014: 49). In his "Politics as a Vocation" lecture series, he argues:

Age is not the decisive factor here. What matters is a trained ruthlessness in peering into the realities of life, and the ability to withstand them and measure up to them inwardly (1919: 91).

There is an element of detachment of Weber's self-conscious social actor from the networks of the real and imagined dimensions of everyday lived experience, something that Durkheim would conceptualize as a 'social fact'. Weber argued that value-freedom used by sociologists ought to remain within the scientific domain, however, scholars have a duty to be politically progressive (Sharlin, 1974: 352). This is what I see in Weber's 'value-freedom' as a concept of intellectual maturity, which can respond to every new generation's demand for opening themselves to other ways of being, thinking, acting, and speaking. Comparably, Durkheim believed that the science of Sociology served a moral and practical function in the reform of society.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, I ought to ask, what should education be? At present, it is the Social Justice Movement which is occupying both university and public discourse formation and practices by blurring boundaries, the power of language, cultural relativism, and the loss of the individual and the universal (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020: 31). I propose to seek alternative ways of thinking against the massive pressure to conform to academic concepts about social justice and to public narratives of the Social Justice Movement.

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