

Sociology as Dangerous or Farce?

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MOST CANADIAN SOCIOLOGISTS ARE NOW familiar with the phrase “commit sociology.” It is a put-down of the discipline (Conway 2013) that gained national attention several years ago when Justin Trudeau, who was then the leader of the Opposition, responded to an interviewer’s question about terrorism on national television. He argued that people should not rush to knee-jerk conclusions or actions, but instead should pause to investigate terrorism’s “root causes.” When a bomb plot to blow up a passenger train was foiled weeks later, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper took Trudeau to task for his earlier comment, asserting that “this is not the time to commit sociology.” A year later, Harper made a similar comment to justify rejecting an inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women (see also Introduction to this themed section). In both instances, Harper advocated an authoritative and ideological approach to maintain order and identify and punish the culpable, rather than reflection and analysis.

The use of sociology as a scapegoat to push back against evidence-based decision making and as a justification for tough and immediate responses to *threat* extends far beyond Canada. Shortly after the 2015 Paris Attacks, for example, those seeking social justice and calm in the face of draconian state-level response also cautioned for the need to look at broader underlying causes of terrorism, rather than branding entire groups of people terrorists. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls responded defiantly in the Senate by noting, “J’en ai assez de ceux qui cherchent en permanence des excuses et des explications culturelles ou sociologiques à ce qu’il s’est passé.” He also repeated his remarks before members of Parliament, lamenting, “Aucune excuse ne doit être cherchée, aucune excuse sociale, sociologique et culturelle” (Faure, Dumas, and Vécrin 2016).

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It would appear that in both Canada and France, some political leaders label sociology as a farce—a discipline not to be taken seriously in developing policy decisions. In response, sociologists in both countries came to the defense of their discipline (see Conway 2013; Faure et al. 2016; Kaye and Béland 2014), noting that sociology’s ability to investigate the mechanisms of the world’s most pressing problems is what makes it such an important tool.

In other contexts, sociology and its practitioners have faced an even harsher backlash to the point of even costing some their lives. For instance, the repressive Pinochet regime in 1970s Chile closed sociology departments and persecuted sociologists because they were deemed “leftist agitators.” Similar measures were taken in the 2000s by the Uribe regime in Colombia, whose Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad intelligence agency murdered Alfredo Correa de Andreis, a sociologist and human rights activist (Guardian 2004). Threats against sociologists in that country continue today. Committing sociology can be dangerous.

Why is sociology dismissed as dangerous or farce by some in power? Part of the answer likely lies in the *sociological imagination* and its focus on uncovering latent and less obvious patterns. Sociology challenges commonly held assumptions and does so with evidence that often is not self-evident and with specialized language distant from everyday usage.

The answer is also partly due to the turn to a value-laden practice advocated by many sociologists since the 1960s, which, in turn, led many to feel that the discipline is prone to “political correctness” and predetermined conclusions. Philippe Val, journalist, comedian, and cofounder of Charlie Hebdo, argues that this trend has led to the development of “sociologisme” or irrefutable arguments and concepts based on moral judgments, rather than argument and evidence.

Concepts such as “neoliberalism,” “socially constructed,” or “critical” have lost their original explanatory power and are now labels bandied about by practitioners of the discipline, used as jargon against many of today’s most pressing problems. What do they explain? What do they change? What do they do for those who are not practitioners of the discipline? Do they close or open debate? How does sociology move past accusations of sociologisme? These are pressing questions for the discipline and its practitioners because the world currently needs more sociology, not less.

The first step forward is to recognize that sociology needs more diversity—not just in terms of the people practicing it—but also in its theories, ideas, and practices. Sociology can benefit from being less afraid of using insights from other disciplines, less averse to conservative voices, and its practitioners can embrace rather than avoid the most experimental qualitative methods or sophisticated quantitative methods instead of positing that they do not *fit* the mold of what sociology is expected to be.

A second step is to recognize opportunities for sociological intervention. A major site currently in need of intervention is reconciliation with

Indigenous peoples; another is attending to changing norms around gender and sexuality. In the coming years, sociologists will also need to grapple with the rise and impact of artificial intelligence and robotics.

Relatedly, the third step is to appreciate what has changed across societies and to focus on emerging social problems rather than being stuck in what the discipline knows. The sociology of yesterday cannot be the sociology of today. If sociologists want to be a force to be reckoned with, they must truly *commit sociology*.

To do this, sociologists will need to work more at engaging broader publics, including those who disagree with the discipline. To be effective, sociologists have to be more open to engaging the rapidly changing world and working outside of the discipline's cannon; they will have to be more humble about the limits of their own knowledge, more respectful of those with whom they disagree, and more open to being surprised by their conclusions.

References

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