



Uncritical sociology: Canadian sociology at the crossroads?

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Sociology is increasingly seen as being at a crossroads shaped by an increase in political polarization and the rise of an unprecedented wave of social justice movements. It also wrestles with conservative backlash linked to populist movements and the discipline increasingly deployed as an epithet. At the same time sociology manages pressures from universities on departments to attract students to offset lost government funding and demands to train students with applied social science and analytic skills that are in high demand. These trends led the Department of Sociology at York University to host a panel on these issues during the 2023 annual Canadian Sociology Association meetings (CSA, 2023). As a participant in the panel, and drawing on my experience as a Chair of a U15 Sociology department, as a former President of the Canadian Sociology Association, as a former Associate Dean of Research, as a former Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Leader, and as a Professor of Sociology who has practised in the discipline for close to 20 years, I argued that increasingly the contemporary crossroads of Canadian Sociology is defined by three “uncritical” sociological practices.

The first is uncritical empiricism, which is characterized by the pursuit of careerism disguised under the mask of professionalism, data mining, and formulaic outputs devoid of context and effort to have a broad impact. The second is uncritical topical studies, where instead of focusing on the underlying mechanisms that drive issues and solve social problems, the focus is on the manifest topics at the cost of richer and deeper analysis. The third is uncritical critical sociology. It is a form of sociological practice that is characterized by value-laden approaches that may identify problems but fail to consider solutions to those problems. It is also an approach that prizes conclusions and outcomes over the messy work of puzzling through underlying processes, thinking reflexivity, and recognizing changing patterns in societies. Each of these uncritical sociologies defines a crossroad for the discipline, at least in Canada, that will determine its relevance and social impact.

A DISCIPLINE CONTINUALLY AT A CROSSROADS

Since its inception, Sociology has been a discipline at a crossroads. This is because it is a relatively new discipline and is young even among the social sciences. For example, if you think of some

of the early luminaries that helped found the discipline, such as Emile Durkheim (1952 [1897]), they were trying to distinguish sociology from psychology and other social sciences such as economics or anthropology. If we look at Max Weber as another founder of the discipline, he wrestled with sociology's place between science and politics, leaning towards a value-neutral social science (Burawoy, 2016). From its very beginning sociology has been trying to both distinguish itself from other disciplines and define how it should be practiced.

If we look at sociology in the 1950s and its transition through the 1960s, the discipline remained at a crossroads. Take, for instance, the charged critique that C Wright Mills offered against Talcott Parson's work in the *Sociological Imagination* and other places labelling him a conservative apologist as well as lambasting him for being a grand theorist or accusing him of fetishizing abstract concepts over using plain language (Staubmann, 2021). He even went as far as saying "[O]ne could translate the 555 pages of [Parson's] *The Social System* into about 150 pages of straightforward English. The result would not be very impressive" (Mills, 2000).

Far less examined, but yet another example, are concerns raised by Robert Merton (1972) in the 1970s. He warned that "As the society becomes polarized, so do the contending claims to truth." He was worried that younger scholars, many of whom were part of the New Left, were too enamoured with social justice and value-laden positions. He worried that this would come at the cost of social science that is more robust against challenges than conclusions based on moral principles and ideology.

When we look to the 2000s we see a number of sociologists expressing concerns over the discipline and where it was, and still is, headed. Many of them reflect issues raised at earlier crossroads. Take for instance Robert Brym's (2003) concern over a perceived decline of the Canadian Sociology Association as one example. Another can be seen in Neil McLaughlin's (2005) "impossible science" article in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology* offering reflexive insight into potential crisis points in Anglo-Canadian Sociology. He foresaw trends that are sharper and clearer today and he was astute in recognizing that trends, like earlier crossroads, were shaped by generational change.

The same year, Burawoy (2005) advocated for a "public sociology." He observed that the discipline can be mapped into four types of practice: professional, critical, policy, and public. He felt that the crossroads of the discipline was to have more applied and public impact, much in the same line of earlier critiques. He recognized that the health of the discipline is one that can and should be practised in everyday life. That is something Pierre Bourdieu also recognized when he argued that sociology is a martial art (Bourdieu in Carles, 2002) that can be used to navigate the world and empower people. Burawoy recognized that the discipline was not a singular practice, but one that could be practiced in different ways.

During the same period, Buechler (2008) observed that the discipline can be defined by near universal support for "critical" thinking but feared that the concept of "critical" had become "so vacuous and diffuse" that it has become of little use to anyone. We are now in a moment where the critical position is the dominant position. However, how can one be critical if "critical" is the dominant position?

If you look at the Canadian Review of Sociology over the last few decades, we can find a wide deployment of the term across almost every area of sociology. If we look at job ads or department labels we find the same, with examples such as Critical Health Studies, Critical Legal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, and you-name-it-critical studies over the last few years.

The observation of the ubiquity of "critical" is also made by Hammersley (2005) who goes on to question the limits to criticism. He argues that criticism is not always a good thing. He contends that for the New Left and later postmodernism, criticism moved from challenging the validity of claims with a shared understanding of evidence to focusing on opposing one another and

rebutting claims. Although this is a slight difference, it is an important one. This is the difference between a science and an opinion. As Weber recognized, it is the difference between science and politics.

If sociologists are not self-reflexive in the dominance of the critical frame, and if they are not self-reflexive on what gains and changes have been made as a result of it, the discipline is not critical at all. Instead, it is uncritical.

Likewise, if the discipline cannot engage a common space with a set of “facts” and accepted evidence, that those who hold opposing views accept, we have an uncritical doctrine and not a discipline. This was a point that Jurgen Habermas tried to get across in his advocacy of critical thought. He believed that debate is needed for a healthy and strong society. Siloed echo chambers over debate are uncritical.

Just as ubiquitous as the term critical has become, uncritical is a lens that seems to characterize its dominance and at the same time also helps describe trends in different sociological practices today. To this end, I will argue that the current crossroads is defined by three deployments of uncritical sociology: being uncritically empirical, uncritically topical, and uncritically critical.

UNCRITICALLY EMPIRICAL

Uncritical empiricism can be characterized by the pursuit of careerism disguised under the mask of professionalism, data mining, and formulaic outputs devoid of context or broad impact. Some might call this “normal science” or “normal sociology” and this was the very kind of sociology that Mills and Burawoy were concerned about.

Generational change is correlated with a strong push towards professionalization of sociology. In part, the trend has been driven by Gen X sociologists who entered the academic labour market during a period of austerity and cuts. It was a period that relied increasingly on student tuition to make up for fledgling government support. It meant that the number of available tenure-track positions dwindled and the number of earned doctorates in sociology outpaced jobs. In the Canadian context, this also occurred at the same time as the muzzling of scientists and the fallout of the “commit sociology” remarks made by former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. In many ways, during this period, the discipline was increasingly labelled a farce and dangerous and departments were closed around the world (Ramos, 2017). Early Career sociologists during the 1990s and 2000s faced a bleak labour market and during the 2010s, sociologists faced a hostile questioning of the relevance of the discipline. That experience shaped how the next generations of sociologists (Millennial, Z, and now Alpha) have been trained.

With professionalization came the rise of PROSEMs (or professional development seminars) that have largely been imported from the US and which have been embraced by Gen X sociologists. PROSEMs usually focus on building CVs, how to fit different formats commonly embraced by peer-reviewers, and other aspects of building a career over exploring new ideas, making mistakes, and taking risks. PROSEMs largely reflect the fears and worries of Gen X Associate Professors, and increasingly Full Professors, who now shape departments and the discipline. There is an obsession with production and counting outputs over thinking about and uncovering underlying insights and mechanisms.

Increasingly, pressure has been placed on graduate, and even undergraduate, students to build their CVs through a higher number of presentations or publications over taking time to develop ideas. At the same time, cuts to provincial funding have meant less funding or stagnant funding for graduate students. In a number of provinces, there has also been pressure to get students to

complete their graduate degrees in shorter periods of time. Some examples of this phenomenon are course-based Masters programs over thesis-based, one-year over two-year Masters, article-based PhDs over monographs, and pressure to get doctoral students to complete in four years. Speed is prized over taking time to learn the history of the discipline and the history of social trends and policies. More, not less, is seen as better. Faster, not slower, is seen as the key to success.

The explosion of venues to publish work, and predatory journals that are more and more difficult to distinguish from legitimate venues, have also meant more production and more output. Many early career applicants to tenure track positions come out of their doctoral studies with CVs that have the number of publications that would have once been seen by Associate Professors among the Babyboom generation. Gen X and Millennial professors, who can correct the unsustainability of this form of careerism, feel like they are caught in a prisoner's dilemma in suggesting change. They continue the neurosis of the "publish or perish" model of scholarship for fear that their students may not get jobs if they pursue more realistic research training and models. What is being neglected is a more sustainable "slow science" (see Stenger, 2018; Berg & Seeber, 2016; McCabe, 2012) that prizes quality over quantity and deliberation and reflection over outputs.

In the name of professionalization, this form of sociology embraces so-called empiricism and methods. In part, because they offer convenient templates for presentation and publication. Templates allow for quicker production of outputs. They are also seen as less politically charged and seen as potentially having broader policy and applied impact. Uncritical empiricism has set formats that lead to a colouring-by-numbers type of sociology. Factitiously it can be described as a Bourdieu (or you pick the theorist) sandwich. There is a "so what intro," insert a couple of pages of theory, report results that are statistically significant, and then insert a few pages of theory. Bourdieu at the beginning and end and results that confirm the expected hypotheses. There is a whole literature on the publication biases against counter-findings (see Franco et al., 2014; Gerber & Malhotra, 2008).

Uncritical empiricism looks for statistically significant relations in full models over thinking about what is and is not measured and it misses thinking about how mechanisms shape underlying relations. It tends to miss opportunities to explain how people understand what happens and the problems they face. Instead, uncritical empiricism pragmatically finds the theories that support its data including different variables and expectations over testing theories with its data. The problem is not sociology's alone, it is a wider problem across the social sciences. It is a problem that led the American Statistical Association (2016) to release a statement on p-values. It warns that "[t]he p-value was never intended to be a substitute for scientific reasoning" and noted that its goal in issuing the statement was to "steer research into a 'post $p < 0.05$ era.'" It issued the statement because it observed a proliferation of p-hacking and data dredging where papers made bold conclusions based on flimsy statistical grounds. Researchers too often focus on statistical significance instead of thinking about other important considerations such as the underlying construction of measures, the magnitude of effects, the implications of the shapes of distributions, and the implications of the methods used to examine data.

A consequence of uncritical empiricism and the focus on set methods is that it offers little space for the discipline to incorporate new methods. For example, space for those that are non-parametric, that are non-causal, or those that adopt orientations that appeal to non-professional audiences and communities. Increasingly, the discipline will need to also wrestle with data science and generative Artificial Intelligence and new forms of data that will come from them. Otherwise, sociologists will continue to yield ground to other social sciences (see Myles, 2003) and the researchers doing the most cutting-edge work will gravitate to venues and disciplines outside of sociology.

Uncritical empiricism makes the discipline risk-averse, shying away from playing with topics and issues that do not conveniently fit “professional” and “empirical” templates. The concern with uncritical empiricism is the focus on outputs devoid of context and ideas and practices that fall outside of “normal” sociology. These were the very concerns raised by the likes of Mills as he challenged Parsonian sociology.

UNCRITICALLY TOPICAL

Another observation is the rise of an uncritical focus on topics, issues, or cases over more robust mechanisms and underlying patterns. This can be seen with the rise of “studies” concentrations within sociology departments. For example, the rise of gender studies, socio-legal studies, or different versions of social justice studies to illustrate the point. Often such “studies” focuses are developed as “critical” x, y, or z studies.

Given that sociology aims to understand social issues and offer insights into how social relations affect them, it is natural for sociology to focus on topics, specific issues, cases, or what some might call social problems. The bread and butter of the discipline, since its inception, has been to understand changing social patterns. If one looks at the CSA research clusters, ASA sections, or ISA research committees almost all of them are defined by topics and issues rather than sociological concepts, theories, approaches, practices, or methods.

In many ways it makes sense for sociology’s research clusters, sections, or research committees to be defined by social issues or problems as sociology can be applied to them. However, it also points to a potential for problems such as crime, gender or other issues to define sociology rather than the other way around: sociology being deployed to understand the issues. Much like uncritical empiricism, there is a tendency to find the sociology that fits the problem rather than seeing how the discipline can change understandings of that very problem.

Much like uncritical empiricism, austerity has shaped the focus on topics and areas in sociology towards those that are popular and which will draw students. The push to grow topical sociology has been pragmatic. For example, there has been a push to develop courses that appeal to the rising number of women pursuing social science degrees or for sociology departments to fall to the “CSI effect” (Podlas, 2017). The latter has meant the growth of criminology and legal studies. The rise of crime drama series in popular culture has been linked to increased enrolments in courses focusing on those topics even through crime rates in North America, and Canada in particular, have been generally decreasing. After George Floyd’s murder, interest in social justice increased as well as interest around anti-Black racism and decolonization. As universities experienced decreasing government funding (Smith-Carrier, 2020) as well as shrinking domestic enrolments in Canada (Usher, 2022) and the US (Nadworny, 2022), which are more acutely faced by the social sciences and humanities (Nietzel, 2022), there has been a push by universities, faculties and departments to offer courses that get “bums in seats” – that have high enrolments. The consequence is more course offerings on crime-related topics and the discipline being driven by student clients rather than social or scientific needs.

As a consequence of focusing on high enrolment, important and ontologically changing problems are missed. How many sociology departments have strong concentrations on environmental issues, on artificial intelligence, on data science, on decolonization, or on population ageing? Sociology departments are neglecting many issues that are significantly reshaping societies around the world in the 21st century.

The growth in topical or area studies and the focus on cases has been quick and has often outstripped the labour supply of those with degrees to offer courses. Increasingly topical studies concentrations and courses in sociology are offered by a growing pool of young and/or precarious instructors. This often comes at the cost of the material being taught.

Material is increasingly devoid of broader context and is increasingly hyper-focused. The discipline is increasingly swayed by prevailing social and political trends, often chasing them, rather than analyzing them or offering assessment of them. It also means the discipline has moved away from its once-dominant areas of strength (Myles, 2003). In departments that have been able to secure permanent positions as areas grow, there is increasing pressure from faculty within concentrations to create not only areas in departments but to create new and separate programs and eventually even form new departments. This can be seen across Canada with a number of criminology departments splitting off from existing sociology departments.

The concern with uncritical topical sociology is that it loses the full power the discipline has to offer in understanding social issues. Instead of unearthing underlying mechanisms to challenge popular understandings, the focus on topics or cases promotes looking at issues in silos. This promotes examining issues a-historically and through a non-disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary lens.

Unlike the fetishization of concepts, jargon, or methodological templates that come with uncritical empirical studies, uncritical topical sociology fetishizes the problem at the cost of identifying mechanisms or developing robust tools that can be applied across topics and cases. It comes at the cost of clear disciplinary insights and at the cost of building disciplines.

The concern with uncritical topical sociology is that it pursues issues that are popular but which may not be sustainable as issue interest ebbs and flows on topics. Relatedly, important issues that need to be addressed may be missed as a result of the myopic concentration on what is trending. At the same time, opportunities to gain disciplinary insights are lost.

UNCRITICALLY CRITICAL

Yet another observation is that there has been a surge of uncritical critical sociology in the last couple of decades. It is a form of sociological practice that prizes the “critical” and is characterized by value-laden approaches that may identify problems but fail to consider solutions to those problems. It is an approach that prizes conclusions and outcomes over the messy work of identifying underlying processes, engaging in reflexivity, and recognizing changing patterns in societies.

This approach is one that has emerged in part as a reaction against the “normal” science or “normal” sociology that can be found with uncritically empirical work. It is a form of sociological practice that emerged with the thinkers from the Frankfurt School, the New Left, the Birmingham School, and the feminist tradition. It emerged amid a backdrop of generational change in the 1960s and again in the 1990s. It is one that is likewise tied to decolonial movements and the growth of sociology departments. It is a form of sociological practice that has become the dominant practice in the 2000s and 2010s.

It is a form of sociological practice that values advocacy and opposition to injustice. It is one that accepts the tenants of standpoint theory (see Hill Collins, 1997; or Heckman, 1997), the arguments of intersectionality (see Crenshaw, 2017), and the ideas behind positionality. Uncritical critical sociology recognizes that the personal is political and experiences are irrefutable accepted facts of sociological investigations. The approach challenges power and pushes for social change.

Like uncritically topical sociology, because this form of sociology tends to be positioned in opposition to power, it tends to be hyper-focused on cases to the point that it can exoticize them. It tends to engage subdominant groups and subdominant positions, ignoring those that are dominant. To put it crassly, as Alexander Liazos (1972) noted in his famous *Social Problems* article, sociologists tend to study “nuts, sluts, and perverts” over those who hold power. Although he focused on the sociology of deviance, the point is made and can be applied more broadly across the discipline. To use less charged, and more contemporary language: the discipline tends to study down, not up.

Sociologists can learn from anthropologist Laura Nader (1972) who advocated for the value of studying up. She recognized that doing so can help gain a better understanding of “common sense” or agreed-upon knowledge. It can also help challenge biases that creep into observation and analysis when looking from one perspective or position alone. Studying up can help sociologists understand why Conservatives use the discipline as a trope, such as with the famous “commit sociology” comment, or what sentiment has sparked the widespread closing of departments around the world (see Ramos, 2017). Studying up can expose why many are quick to dismiss the discipline’s valuable findings.

Because of the tendency to study down, uncritical critical sociology can fall into a trap of practising a sociology that applies only to specific cases. It is a sociology that cannot be taken up by those in positions of power or those who hold opposing or challenging views. This is a consequence of the slippery slope of standpoint perspectives which accept that all lived experiences are valid evidence. Accepting this assumption makes it difficult to aggregate experiences. Likewise, the tendency to study down also fosters the widely adhered belief that sociologists are morally obligated to help the groups they study. This makes it difficult to challenge claims because all experience is seen as true and if that is the case it cannot be denied or shown wrong. It also means that groups studied curate information rather than letting the data speak for itself. These trends lead to a value-laden construction and use of evidence. In order to debate or to convince those with opposing views, however, agreed-upon facts and evidence are essential. Without debate, and only opposition, we lose critical engagement and instead are left with ideology or moral advocacy. We are left with uncritical critical sociology.

Uncritically critical sociology also tends to be a-historical and loses sight of contextual changes. This is linked to a focus on immediate standpoints and generational change. The discipline is likewise permeable with many practitioners obtaining doctorates from a wide number of loosely related fields such as criminology, gender studies, race and ethnic studies, or social and political thought to name but some examples. Often uncritically critical sociology loses sight of significant social change that can be seen since the 1960s and then again since the 1990s. It often ignores demographic and policy shifts that change the need for advocacy on different social problems. It often fails to recognize gains made .

Like uncritically empirical sociology, uncritically critical sociology also relies on templates and formulaic methods. This form of sociology tends to be linked to qualitative approaches or participatory action approaches. It tends to advance positions of change and development of new theoretical concepts. It prizes cases and those from subdominant positions. Too often this form of sociology cherry-picks evidence to suit arguments over presenting counter-evidence that may demand a change of position. Its conclusions tend to be oppositional and tend to call out injustices at the cost of pointing out limitations in the research and qualifications that would offer more robust conclusions aligned to evidence. The template of this form of sociological practice rarely engages long-standing trends, it avoids various policy contexts, and it often neglects offering tangible remedies to the injustices it identifies. It focuses on being critical which is often defined as pursuing social justice and challenging power. Wacquant (2014) warned the “logic of the trial” is

the sworn enemy of sociological reasoning because it is focused on judgements of culpability over the strength of the evidence presented.

The uncritically critical form of sociology is also becoming increasingly dominant in journals, in research that is funded, in courses offered, and in students that are developed. It has become the dominant form of sociology in Canada and around most of the world – save for the US. Take pause and ask the last time a sociology journal published an article that took a conservative, or for that matter centrist, position that strayed from templates that have been used since at least the 1960s, or that challenged advocacy claims by marginal groups by investigating or disputing how common evidence is interpreted.

As already noted, the word “critical” has become ubiquitous in sociology (Buechler, 2008) and it leads to the question: critical of what? Also as already noted (Hammersley, 2005) when debate on shared evidence is lost, critique is opposition and not critique. Put differently: it becomes uncritically critical.

WHAT TO MAKE OF THIS ALL? LET’S KEEP MUDDLING ON!

Let me wrap up, with some quick points of consideration that emerge from the observations I have shared. Hopefully, it will spark discussion of sociology at the current crossroads:

First, sociology from its inception has been at a crossroads and has been embroiled in debate over how it is different from other disciplines, whether it should be value-neutral or value-laden, and whether it is critical and what is meant by it as a consequence. The discipline is continually at a crossroads.

Second, many of sociology’s crossroads are defined by generational change and significant political-historical change. It is important to acknowledge that with new people entering the discipline comes innovation and change. However, at the same time, it is important to also take stock of its past too.

Third, changes in the discipline are linked to the austerity of the last 40 years and are arguably caught in the populism and anti-elitism of the current movement. It has been shaped by neoliberalism and now is challenged by neo-fascism.

Fourth, it is important to engage social issues, but it is also important for a discipline to not be defined by them. The search for mechanisms, processes, and evidence that all can engage is what makes a discipline.

Fifth, each of the uncritical sociologies discussed is part of the current crossroads for the discipline, at least in Canada, and those trends will determine sociology’s relevance and social impact for years to come. Gen X and increasingly Millennial Professors have much opportunity to navigate the current crossroads and offer course corrections around each form of uncritical sociology.

Last, a healthy discipline is one that has room for many forms of practice. It is one that recognizes that the weaknesses of one form of practice are the strengths of another. So long as the differences in practice offer room to engage one another and not become silos, the disciple has much to contribute. A healthy discipline demands that we, to use the words of Neil McLaughlin in his “Impossible Science” article, “keep muddling on.”

But to do so means moving away from ubiquitous tropes like “critical” to looking for common ground to weigh the validity of claims, evidence, and arguments. To create tools that can be applied across cases. And to create insights that are of use irrespective of moral or political beliefs. That is, to truly build a practice of sociology that helps people better navigate and engage the world they live in.

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