

Deontology for Sociologists

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Do we, as sociologists, have a professional deontology - that is, a specific moral commitment? When sociology consolidated both as a science and as an academic specialty, its practitioners were concerned that the natural scientists would not take them seriously. Comte and Durkheim, especially, insisted that Sociology adopt a strict methodology, as similar to the natural sciences as possible, taking much care to correctly study the social causes of phenomena. It instigated an intellectual movement and a perspective that functionalist sociologists continued to profess, namely that sociologists should remain distant from social phenomena and that sociologists not be influenced by their personal values. But the first sociologists were not like this, Saint Simon and similar others were a mixture of pamphleteers and rationalists that criticized the institutions of the Ancient Regime, intending on using their inquiries precisely in order to destroy the religious and charismatic legitimations, postulating instead a social rationality based on citizen rights and democracy.

In the history of functionalist sociology, especially the type that was adopted by the Parsonians, there lurks a conservative institution, favorable to the consolidation of the *status quo*. For functionalists, capitalist democracy, as it exists in America, is an ideal that only needs minor adjustments. Of course they repudiated Marx, who had explained that society is forged out of conflicts for power and privilege and that it was a necessary part of change, giving arguments to those that engage in these conflicts. This tradition of criticism has nevertheless persisted, with, for example, C. Wright Mills and the late works of Pierre Bourdieu.

The question becomes salient again when we are faced with another conservative paradigm - namely; the wise and tireless rationality of the market, which is really a subterfuge used to call capitalism by another name. As if it were even truly a free market not dominated by the most powerful, skillful frauds like the financiers and public prosecutors! Thomas Frank, in his recent book: "One Market under God" has skillfully explained the deceits of the market explanation that many economists and not so few sociologists have swallowed with remarkable ease. This model is based on the principle of "trickle down economics," meaning that governments ought to give money and freedom to the rich, which, in some mysterious way - the theology of the market, according to Frank - will eventually reach the poor. The 2005 Report of the Population Reference Bureau shows, among other statistics on comparative wealth, that half the world population survive with less than two euros per day, while economic inequalities continue to grow.

Many young sociologists, like many young journalists, want to immediately become successful. In trying to become rich as soon as possible they work for anyone who pays them more, without much thought about the motivations of those who employ their professional services. We know very well that the powerful do not want much known

about them and they rely on people in the academy, not to explain what they are doing but to disguise it! For the most powerful, the best information is no information and the best situation is scholarly impenetrability and jargon. Sociologists and also journalists who are servants of the powerful collaborate in exercises of obfuscation and by simplified slogans (e.g., “España va bien” Spain is working), persuasive among those that are accustomed to this. As is known, immediately after the attacks of September 11th, Bush advised New Yorkers to go out and shop, as the best way to overcome the tragedy. Who gave him this idea? A friendly sociologist?

During the last annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (August 12th-16th in Philadelphia, PA), we had very interesting conversations with those who advocate public sociology, which is another way of saying, ‘critical sociology.’ Specifically speaking about deontology, one of them referred to a book that Judith Blau and I recently wrote: “Human Rights: Beyond the Liberal Vision” (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). In the book we maintain that human rights are the ultimate version, the most complete in the long history of citizen struggles, especially because they not only include respect for peoples’ political and civil rights, but they hold that society accept and protect the basic rights barely recognized today, in a world where hunger, poverty, inequality, and oppression are so present. In *Sociologists without Borders* we propose that human rights should be our sociological deontology, our moral commitment. For example, we say that if a U.S. sociologist is asked to examine whether or not the death penalty serves to combat crime; after concluding that no, obviously it adds to it, then to also say that it is a violation of human rights. Of course, if the request to defend the death penalty is made in Texas or Nevada, or China or Kuwait, it might happen that the sociologist would no longer be hired. One has to choose between pleasing the powerful people or rocking the boat, and if we follow our proposed deontology, we should be inclined to go with the second option. .

Translated by: Gerald Lackey