

Book Review

Glenn A. Goodwin & Martin D. Schwartz, eds.
'Professing' Humanist Sociology.
Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

In the Spring Semester of 1968, I took a graduate course in “Classics of Sociological Theory” at the University of Hawai’i. The professor was a personable young man named Michael Weinstein. He had arrived in Honolulu, duly armed with a doctorate that he had recently won from Harvard University.

Knowledgeable and diligent, he returned our term papers with several pages of single-spaced comments that were helpful, mainly because they were both thoughtful and constructively critical. I know I have mine somewhere, for I came across it a few years ago ... and I never throw anything out!

I have one especially vivid recollection of Mike in that class. Responding to a comment from another student about “freedom,” he said somewhat derisively that freedom depends on social organization, that to speak of any individual as being “free as the birds” is sociologically meaningless and socially irresponsible. Mike seemed nothing if not intellectually rigorous. He took his subject seriously.

In January of 2007, I was in Honolulu teaching in the College of International Studies at Hawai’i Pacific University, and was living at the East-West Center on the campus of UH. On a non-teaching day, I decided to wander over to Saunders Hall – the social science building – to see if I could recognize anyone. Astonishingly, Mike Weinstein was one of three familiar faces who had not moved, retired or passed away. It was a delight to see him, and we had a convivial chat. As I was leaving he handed me a photocopied page or two that he had written on “Reflexive Statements” in Sociology. It is one item in the substantial inventory of “humanist” sociological documents contained in the volume under review.

I was a little surprised when I read it, for its emphasis on personal engagement with the subject matter seemed a little distant from what I recall of that “Classics” class almost forty years earlier. We had plowed through Durkheim and Weber, Mannheim and Mead (George Herbert, not Margaret), Park and Parsons, and the likes of Charles Horton Cooley – the theorist who was to become my personal burden. At first glance, a number of the contributions seemed akin to the “avian” sociology advocated by the student and dismissed by Mike Weinstein four decades before.

In my own journey on the outskirts of sociology, I have studied the subject in a number of forms at three different universities. I have been instructed in structuralism, functionalism, symbolic interactionism, behaviorism, feminist sociology and Marxist sociology with a dash of ethnomethodology and phenomenology on the side. Buffeted by the changing fortunes and fashions of “paradigms” within the discipline, I have emerged as what I am sometimes pleased to

call a “cultural materialist,” somewhat in the tradition of the anthropologist Marvin Harris, if I may be so bold. I remain, moreover, supportive of the idea and the ideals of “humanism” at its best – which I take to be an approach that seeks to disclose the unnecessary barriers to human potential as individuals and as a species. For me, it is an approach that welcomes different voices from Marx to John Stuart Mill and from Veblen to C. Wright Mills.

I can generally agree with many of the self-described humanists whose epistemological assumptions and political aspirations are described in *‘Professing’ Humanist Sociology*. I understand knowledge to be socially constructed, and so I am sceptical of the artificial distinction between “facts” and “values.” I find the myth of objectivity in social inquiry to be largely an illusion used by positivists to cloak their own ideological positions. I am also aware that there is a danger of using sociological instruments as methods of social control rather than human emancipation. I worry that sociologists seem to spend more time studying poverty, crime and “deviant” behaviour, rather than wealth, oppression and conformist behaviour. Who are sociologists *really* working for? I concur that the task of sociology should be explicitly values-based, and dedicated to the improvement of life for all humanity. I do not mind if sociologists seek to understand the world, but I think that such understanding should be put in the service of changing it. In sum, adopting a humanist perspective that is said to constitute the “first step to freedom.”

My problems arise when the time comes to make these honourable ambitions specific. While heartily endorsing the notion that a totally “value-free” social science is not merely impossible, but may be something of an oxymoron, the search for empirical answers to empirical questions is not entirely foolish. Sometimes there are facts that need to be taken into account. Accordingly, I place myself at a mid-point between logical positivism and subjective individualism, preferring to think in terms of an objective-subjective dialectic in which, for example, the concept of “social class” can be examined: (a) from the outside as an empirical inquiry into the structural position of working people in the capitalist mode of production; and, (b) from the inside in terms of the viewpoint of workers themselves insofar as they develop (or fail to develop) a politically relevant “class consciousness.” Both a statistical measure known as a Gini Coefficient and the experience and expression of a sense of solidarity are necessary parts of understanding, in Edward Thompson’s phrase, the “making of the working class.” Thus, both the objective historical development of the capitalist mode of production and the subjective awareness of that development among the people whose lives it largely determined are preconditions for praxis, the synthesis of theory and practice and of structure and subjectivity which Paolo Friere, for example, regarded as essential to progressive social change.

The understanding that reality is socially constructed, however, gives no license to those who might claim that it is therefore just “made up,” and may be grasped from the epistemological (and, in extreme cases, the ethical) perspective of uncritical cultural relativism. Anything approaching a scientific description and analysis of social arrangements must be grounded in a careful and critical (as well as a “reflexive”) study of human attitudes and actions. So, although the authors of the various segments of this book are conscientious in assuring their readers that they are respectful of scientific theory, and wish to see their work grounded in scientific methods, it is difficult to find these issues articulated with precision. Moreover, when reading about the actual work that humanist sociologists perform, the limitations of heroes such as Clifford Geertz and

Ervin Goffman, whose techniques of “thick description” and the “dramaturgical perspective” respectively, make connections to any recognizable scientific method tenuous. Geertz and Goffman exemplify qualitative rather than quantitative methodology – a preference that beggars the possibility of generating falsifiable hypotheses, general theories and ultimately “laws” of human beliefs and behaviour.

In terms of recommended methods for teaching sociology and doing sociological research, I was further discomfited by the example of a professor coming to his first class in the costume of a Man from Mars, a Conehead, a Pilgrim or a “primitive” [sic], and proceeding to engage the students in conversation about comparisons and contrasts between “his” society and “theirs.” Adventures in role-playing and what I consider to be an occasional over-reliance on “audio-visual aids” such as films, videos, DVDs and downloads of various sorts are sometimes presumed to be more effective “teaching tools” than lectures and formal discussions. I remain unconvinced.

I was further distressed by some of the perceptions that many of the contributors have of students – especially in community colleges. They appear to be anxious that their charges pose potentially disruptive behaviour problems up to and including physical threat. They are concerned that young folk in their classes are almost inherently unwilling or unable to relate to sociology as a practical and “relevant” academic discipline, especially when their relative marginalization from comfortable middle class status would seem to make their intuitive understanding of bias and discrimination based on class, race and ethnicity an obvious part of their personal identities.

At worst, some of the selections seemed presumptuous and condescending. At best, they seemed to display a serious lack of rigor. It would have been easy, especially when I read the hyper-cautious and tentative treatment of the question of whether Marxism counted as an example of humanism, to dismiss the entire project as an almost iconic example of “bourgeois” sentimentality wrapped in a blanket of Maslovian platitudes and packaged in terms that would make it congenial to Human Resources professionals as much as serious social critics and practical social reformers. “Humanistic sociology as self-actualization in the protected confines of a college classroom,” I heard myself snort. “Humanistic sociology as an excuse for students to write imaginative journals, give voice to rudimentary prejudices and escape the necessity of actually reading a book,” I grunted. “Humanistic sociology as an excuse for teachers to avoid grading student papers on the pretense that student evaluation is inherently immoral,” I gasped in irritated disbelief.

On completing the book, however, I could not simply put it aside.

So, I re-read each segment and sometimes did so twice. It contained, you see, only slightly distorted versions of what I have been attempting to do over an extensive career as a classroom teacher. I don’t dress up as a Conehead, but I do try to push against boundaries of conformity, and I encourage students to probe the artificial limits of their experience as well. I urge them to try something daring if only to see what they can “get away with” as they plough their way through semester after semester in the quest for a piece of paper that may (or may not) unlock the door to their occupation of choice (or necessity). I try to make plain and render in comprehensible and comprehensive sociological language the unnecessary and externally enforced constraints on

their thoughts and actions, and to provoke students to act upon their new understanding. This sounds dangerously close to ‘professing’ humanist sociology.

Students already are viscerally aware of oppression, repression, suppression, economic recession and psychological depression. The trick is not only to connect what is called the “sociological imagination” to these lifelong experiences, but also to show how sociological understanding can become an essential ingredient in the struggle against institutionally imposed “lifelessness.”

I am still not “comfortable with” everything that is identified or implied as an element of sociological humanism in this teaching resource. I continue to esteem scholarship and to be skeptical of manufactured fun and rigged games, to say nothing of idle chatter on the one hand and cathartic moments of self-revelation on the other.

I do, however, credit the common rationales for teaching sociology much less. Generally speaking, teachers are persuaded to teach sociology as a “feel good” project that will help students overcome feelings of superiority or inadequacy based on ascribed characteristic of class, race and gender. We are asked to proselytize on behalf of the nostrum that better communications, individual respect for others and appreciation of diverse cultures will ameliorate, if not eradicate, patterns of prejudice injustice that seem endemic in our society. It is ultimately a course in resignation. Far worse are studies in sociology that are training for careers in commercial marketing. By learning how to target audiences, to take advantage of subcultures based on age and ethnicity and to advertise the sale of targeted goods and services makes sociology the servant of precisely the corporate arrangements that underlie inequity in our society. Worst of all is the use of sociology – most often industrial or organizational sociology – as a technique for promoting deference and compliance in the workplace.

Under the control of already dominant political and economic interests, sociology can become, in the words spoken by Martin Nicolaus to the American Sociological Association in that tumultuous year of 1968, “a criminal conspiracy” in which sociologists have been schlepping this knowledge that confers power along a one-way chain, taking knowledge from the people, giving knowledge to the rulers.

Forty years after Nicolaus outraged the icons of the profession with a speech intended to promote the radicalization of sociology – a project with which I largely concurred – and forty years after I first met Mike Weinstein, it seems that I have mellowed (or matured) a little. I still re-read Nicolaus’ speech to keep my professional moral compass in working order, and I am glad both that Mike had something to teach me about the classics back then, and that he has something new to teach me now.

About the Author

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