

Critical Sociology after 40 Years: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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Modern scholarship is in deep crisis. The extent of intellection prostitution to those who oppress and manipulate others may have already reached the point of no return. (Western Union of Radical Sociologists, 1969b)

With these opening sentences, the founders of *The Insurgent Sociologist*, which later became *Critical Sociology*,¹ gave notice to the academy writ large, and the sociology profession in particular, that a new era had begun, a challenge to orthodoxy had emerged, that would call into question business as usual within academe. Heretofore ‘scholarship’ that did little to really interrogate the world as it was, that more often than not served as apologist for governments and policies, that provided a rationale for actions and outcomes creating poverty and despair, would no longer be tolerated. The remainder of this inaugural issue laid out a program of action, in part as a result of a conference of radical sociologists in Berkeley, designed to protest and challenge the sociology profession during its annual meeting to be held in San Francisco in 1969. This included truth squads that would attend traditional sessions in order to correct misinformation, provide literature that challenged what was being presented by main-stream scholars, and organize counter sessions and workshops to begin the hard work of building a radical alternative.

The guiding principles of this emerging movement can best be summarized by the acting steering committee’s manifesto ‘On Elitism and Democracy’:

In carrying out our responsibilities we have been constantly aware of the corruption of ‘professionalism’ and ‘elitism’ in our own minds and hearts. We have tried in every way to resist the contradictions presenting themselves to any radical democratic organization in our society ... In short, we have committed ourselves to turning the ASA on its head: to avoid closed circles of ‘colleagues’ appointing friends and supporters to activities, to avoid ... means of ‘career advancement’. (Western Union of Radical Sociologists, 1969a: 8)

Shortly thereafter, Al Szymanski (1970) laid out principles and perspectives that guided the early actions of this growing radical movement:

- (1) it is not immediately obvious to many what are the ideals behind the movement, and so constant education and discussion is imperative;
- (2) the solution to a more radical sociology cannot be found by trying to work within a system that successfully co-opts scholars through professionalizing rituals;

- (3) to change sociology and society, activists must be part of an insurgency opposed to mainstream scholarship, and must act outside of the structures of the ASA; and
- (4) we must understand that this is an ideological struggle that calls for new ways of thinking and different ways of conducting our work as sociologists, ways that focus on educating people to what is really happening in society, and on changing the very institutions that serve to reproduce the oppressive social structures in which we function – which include both the institutions in which we work and other associations that profess to speak for all sociologists.

In the issues and years that followed this opening salvo, scholars began to explore what it means to be a radical scholar working in the university (Domhoff, 1972; Flacks, 1972), how to make scholarship work in the interests of social change (Gedicks, 1972; Molotch and Lester, 1973), and how to understand and integrate new ways of thinking (Szymanski, 1972). The journal inspired contributions from key scholars exploring the nature of and reasons for a radical sociology (Domhoff, 1974; McClung Lee, 1973; Petras, 1974; Therborn, 1976; Wallerstein, 1973; Wright, 1975). *The Insurgent Sociologist* also served as a record of political firings of active radical scholars, noting the reasons for their dismissals and, in many cases, chronicling the successful challenges brought to regain their positions. The reality that sociologists were seeking an alternative perspective, and that they were paying a price for their efforts, was no longer in doubt. The orthodoxy and defense of a status quo within the discipline of sociology was on full view for any, and all, who were willing to look.

For the next three decades the pages of the journal were at the forefront of sociological research that took a critical perspective on key dimensions of our society. Contributors explored our understanding of class (Brenner, 1988; Domhoff, 1999; Gibson-Graham, 2003; Ollman, 1987; Stinchcombe, 1988; Wright, 1987), of class politics (Domhoff, 1991; Offe, 1990; Salt, 1989; Therborn 1999), of race and racism (Bonacich, 1987; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006; Newby, 1988; Omi, 1991), of the changing nature of work in capitalist society (Brenner, 1988; Connell, 2010; Gimenez, 1987; Gottfried, 1995; Milkman, 2000), of the interplay between development, globalization and neoliberalism (Acker, 2004; Connell, 2010; Frank, 2006; Fuchs, 2010; Gottfried, 1995; Petras, 1974; Robinson, 1992), of the role of environmental change (Broszmitter, 1991) and of the general meaning of a progressive sociological agenda in action (Burawoy, 2005; Harvey, 1998). Many of the ongoing discussions in sociological journals found their initial voice in the pages of *Critical Sociology*, by scholars who went on to be identified as the foundational authors in their areas.

Over the past five years *Critical Sociology* has grown by leaps and bounds. It is now one of the premier outlets for international scholarship, with a large portion of its subscription base and submissions coming from outside Canada and the USA. Several years ago the journal added a Latin American and Caribbean Editor charged with soliciting works by major scholars from that region. To encourage submissions we review many of the articles in their original Spanish language and then subsidize the costs of translating accepted articles into English. Over this period we have produced special issues from the region, and now routinely include articles from noted Latin American scholars who, heretofore, did not have a voice outside their region. That was followed by the appointment of an African Editor and the forthcoming special issue on and by African scholars exploring non-Eurocentric approaches to critical scholarship. Starting in 2014 we have added a North African and Middle Eastern Editor who will be expanding our reach to solicit articles by and about the region broadly, and on the importance of social changes in the Islamic world. A forthcoming issue focuses on how Islam is being presented and the paranoia it generates in Western understandings of that part of the world.

The creation of an International Advisory Board has produced benefits as well. A recent issue of the journal focuses on the impact of a new administration in Brazil, and Saad-Filho provided an insight into the political upheaval this past summer in Brazil (Saad-Filho, 2013). As we increasingly publish articles by authors from around the world our readers are introduced to new lines of reasoning, the works of authors not traditionally covered in North American scholarship or featured in the reading lists of graduate programs. The rapid growth in the number of articles downloaded from this journal attests to its reach, and the increasing submission rate of high quality articles is causing us to consider increasing our publication rate from 6 to 8 issues per year to accommodate these important contributions.

The future of radical scholarship has come a long way from its original oppositional days of 1969. The American Sociological Association now has sections on: Marxist Sociology; Sex and Gender; Labor and Labor Movements; Human Rights; Race, Gender and Class and many others on topics that were first identified in *The Insurgent Sociologist* as shortcomings in the scholarship represented by main-stream sociological orthodoxy. As the current economic system seems ever in crisis, as unemployment remains a problem even as capital seems to reap exorbitant profits, as growing disparities between rich and poor countries and within countries persist, and as finance has replaced production putting the entire global economy at risk, we will find critical perspectives and realistic analyses will continue to appear in the pages of *Critical Sociology*.

Note

1. While all references from the journal indicate the publication name as *Critical Sociology*, it should be noted that until 1988 the publication was entitled *The Insurgent Sociologist*. All articles from *The Insurgent Sociologist* are archived and available on the SAGE journal page for *Critical Sociology*, found at <http://crs.sagepub.com>

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