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# Sociology as Documenting Dystopia: Imagining a Sociology without Borders - a Critical Dialogue

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## **Sociology as Documenting Dystopia: Imagining a Sociology without Borders – a Critical Dialogue**

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### **Abstract**

This is a dialogue between a teacher-student and a student-teacher in the discipline of sociology. Critical questions about the state of sociology are pursued in the context of a hegemonic American sociological enterprise. American sociology has become content with continuing to document dystopia, with exploiting those who struggle under societies' structural weight, leading to a discipline whose work reproduces the very structures of domination we study. Through this Freirean dialogue, we ponder epistemologies and pedagogies of justice, liberation, and humanity. We hope this critical dialogue will help spark more conversation towards imagining a sociology without borders – away from the imperialism of American sociological epistemology, methodology, and practice.

### **La sociología que documenta la dystopia: imaginando una sociología sin fronteras – un diálogo crítico**

Este es un diálogo entre un profesor-estudiante y un estudiante-profesor de sociología. Se tratan cuestiones críticas sobre la situación de la sociología en un contexto americano. La sociología americana se contenta con continuar su documentación de la dystopia, con la explotación de quienes sufren bajo el peso estructural de la sociedad y conduce a una disciplina cuyo trabajo reproduce las mismas estructuras de dominación que estudia. A través de un diálogo al modo de Freire, nos planteamos las epistemologías y las pedagogías de la justicia, de la liberación y la humanidad. Esperamos que este diálogo crítico pueda fomentar más conversaciones acerca de la posibilidad de imaginar una sociología sin fronteras, alejada del imperialismo de la epistemología, metodología y práctica de la sociología americana.

### **Sociologie en tant que documentation de dystopia: imaginant une sociologie sans frontières – un dialogue critique**

L'article est un dialogue entre un professeur-étudiant et un étudiant-professeur dans la discipline de la sociologie. Des questions critiques au sujet de l'état de sociologie sont poursuivies dans le cadre d'une recherche sociologique américaine hégémonique. La sociologie américaine

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est devenue contente de documenter le dystopia, et, en même temps, d'exploiter ceux qui luttent sous le poids structural des sociétés, menant à une discipline dont le travail reproduit les structures de la domination mêmes qu'on étudie. Par ce freirean dialogue, nous considérons des épistémologies et des pédagogies de justice, de liberté, et d'humanité. Nous espérons que ce dialogue critique encouragera plus de conversation vers imaginer une sociologie sans frontières – loin de l'impérialisme de l'épistémologie, de la méthodologie, et de la pratique sociologiques américaines.

#### Keywords

critical sociology, pedagogy, epistemology, Paulo Freire, utopistics

#### Introduction

**Teacher-student:** Yes, sociology is indeed in a state. However, before lamenting, I want to start by sending us back a bit. A memory, perhaps fading. Let's drift back to an Introduction to Sociology course where you fell in love with the discipline of sociology – a discipline that offered both explanation and hope. Think about the professor who led that class through material that, though it did not have definitive answers, had the most wonderful questions and thus your sociological imagination was developed. Allow yourself to be enveloped in the memory of the sociology professor whose passion for what she did both broke through the cynicism as well as shone light on your shadowed dreams. Sociology offered us a road map and a set of tools in our early walks towards social justice – it did for me, yes. It is true, I think, that by and large we have come and continue to come to sociology with experiences, notions, something called (by those who take pleasure in turning the pursuit of justice into ideology) “idealism,” and, we have come with desires to “make the world a better place” for all who inhabit it. Remember?

**Student-teacher:** *Yes, I do remember. It was a time and a place when I came open hearted, desperately seeking reason, seeking understanding, seeking myself. I came as a vulnerable and rebellious mind. I was offered a critical look at a world with which I was so desperately frustrated – a world which seeks so much domination. I was told sociology was the science of liberation – I came to learn the operative word: was. Sociology has simply become a science.*

**Teacher-student:** Your observations are timely, important, and I hear such frustrations articulated more often than I would like to acknowledge. Let's think about the classic readings by Peter Berger, C. Wright Mills, Emile Durkheim, and, yes, W.E.B. DuBois and several critical others who “invite” us and our students to sociology, who ask us to question, who ask us to speak truth to power – perhaps these early introductions give us the master's tools

with which to dismantle the master's house? Perhaps. For those privileged enough to "major" in sociology or even achieve a PhD in this discipline of ours, these early invitations and experiences both resonate and challenge. For those who do not receive such formal training in sociological inquiry (the vast, vast majority), many of them, as Charles Lemert reminds us in *Social Things*,<sup>1</sup> are *already sociologists* – the objects of our study, in their collectivities, in their cultures, in their continuing struggle – we document their variation, we typologize their experiences, we collect data, we publish our findings in academic journals, far removed from their reality (the vast majority's reality), *we rarely give back* (really, think about it, we hold a one-way mirror to the people – we can see them, but they rarely see us... what if we turned it 'round? What if we actually held a mirror up to our discipline and looked honestly at what we saw?). We rarely give back, their collective, struggling voices become our "areas of interest," our lines of our vitas, our ticket to promotion and tenure (Perhaps the master's tools *are* the master's house).

**Student-teacher:** *Now think about the things people would see if we offered ourselves up to their scrutiny (an emergent transparency as we break our own ivory tower), if we analyzed ourselves in the mirror in the same way we have analyzed the objects of our own studies, if we allowed our subjects to study us in the same way we study them. Turn the mirror around and look into your soul, asking, "how have you, as a sociologist, done something to help people and how have you contributed to the movement for social justice"? This science, for so long now, has been reaching for purity – grasping for something thought to be a better career. In the name of scientific purity, sociology has enslaved the already desperate for its own ends. Sociology, with all of its radical foundations, has turned inside out and has become a science of/for capitalism. In our constant struggle to jump through the various flaming hoops that are our graduate programs and tenure processes, we have lost touch with our humanitarian roots and we have sacrificed justice in order to gain capital. The master's tools? The master's house? Maybe it's time to set a fire in the living room.*

**Teacher-student:** Many of my colleagues refer to academia, and academic sociology, as "the big house" – we must listen to these voices. Though the vast majority of us come to the discipline "empowered" to utilize our tools and knowledge to "change the world" – something has happened along the way, hasn't it? I hear it in your laments. The epistemologies informing

<sup>1</sup>) Lemert 2005.

our work, the social and ideological architecture of our departments, the institutional inertia of the “doing of higher education,” indeed, of graduate education, the scientific method, the reliance on mainstream white, Eurocentric, patriarchal, bourgeois, normative methodologies and analytical techniques, bolstered by a “blind” journal reviewing structure and the forces of publish-or-perish, the fact that there is a “sociological elite” in the center, and most of the critical, important work is being done in the margins, these things and more, I fear, slowly, insidiously, zap the original knowledge-as-creative-power approach in favor of a knowledge-for-knowledge’s-sake formulaic straightjacket of a sociological enterprise – one that does not take its bird of utopian thought and let it fly, but one that appears content to continue to *document dystopia*, to try and fit models to the dystopia, to wax ivory and eloquently about the despair and tenuousness of life, and, in varying ways, actually work to *reproduce* the very inequalities that we study.

In fact, it may be the case that our sociological training actually seeks to distance us from those who struggle in dystopia – recreating dystopia – so that we can further document it. (Teaching new masters how to wield the masters tools?)

**Student-teacher:** *But now, having learned how I am supposed to wield these tools in order to make money, my rebellious soul tells me that these tools can surely be used for different ends. Surely these tools can be adapted to alleviate the devastation of dystopia. Having learned the lessons of “good students,” we have lost our humanity while believing to have gained it. In being the good student, I have learned much that has led me to believe capitalism to be an ultimately destructive paradigm. Having learned all the lessons about the nature of this beast, I am now expected to bow down, to accept a life subordinated to capitalism, to buy into a way of life which sociologists have repeatedly told me is destructive. How is it that, having learned these lessons, I am supposed to forget them in order to build the best career? How is it that, having learned these lessons, I am supposed to ignore justice in order to make my work fit the expected institutional standard and traditional style? We have immersed ourselves so deeply in the institution that we have lost sight of our own bonds, we have forgotten the sacrifices made to create an institutional sociology in a world of capitalism. We need to recreate ourselves in order to free ourselves from our own power.*

**Teacher-student:** Yes, yes, and yes! While it is abundantly clear that the world still needs changing, it is also very much clear that in order for sociologists to be a significant part of that process, that we must change ourselves. Michael Burroway has written: “Now the point is not to transform sociology

but to transform the world.”<sup>2</sup> However, I agree with Bonilla-Silva’s assessment that this approach is highly problematic, in fact, a major point is this: *that sociology is in need of deep transformation and that sociologists need to learn from the real experiments of anti-systemic social movements in the world and not the other way around.*<sup>3</sup> We have colleagues that have made strides in these directions, colleagues that both think (theory) and act (praxis) “utopistically”: Paolo Freire, Patricia Hill-Collins, Rodney Coates, Sandra Harding, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Barbara Risman, Philip McMichael, Joey Sprague, Maulana Karenga, Maggie Hunter, Alberto Moncada, Francis Fox Piven, Keri Iyall Smith, and Judith Blau. With these, and others, we join in this conversation that they and others keep alive. Interestingly, those of us who feel our roots – the roots I think we all share, but perhaps have let go, misplaced, traded in for bags of silver – some of us feel (and allow ourselves to feel) these roots being validated in the last several years, those of us who sense a subtle, but potentially seismic, epistemological shift in our discipline that *explicitly* recognizes issues of social justice, equality, peace, human rights and the life-sensibility so central to feminist and afrocentric approaches – the scholar activist – something that non-American sociologists have engaged themselves in for decades – our epistemic and disciplinary isolationist tendencies are killing us softly. But this shift is occurring, or the initial ripples are being sent throughout American sociology. Evidence? Consider what has occurred in the American Sociological Association presidency for the past several years.

**Student-teacher:** *Yes, consider all the steps that we’ve taken. Consider the rising tide of world social forums. Consider that, finally, the USA is going to have their own national forum in 2007. While many expect change to come quickly, this, to me, seems like the base of a truly global social movement in the works. While so many are fighting to gain the rights of self control in the factory, perhaps we should be working to reclaim the ivory tower which has become nothing more than a publication factory. Perhaps the time has come for us to show that social movements happen at all levels, that those who act high and mighty can truly exist to help those they have come to exploit for their own ends. The movement is already in the making. Some activists and sociologists alike are reflecting on history and building justice upon the foundations of past critical*

<sup>2</sup>) Quoted in Bonilla-Silva 2006: 114.

<sup>3</sup>) Bonilla-Silva 2006, p. 114.

*thinkers without seeking some mythical long lost justice. Some are reading through our roots to build and understand the present, realizing that our collective future will only come with social action built on a deeply democratic dialogue.*

**Teacher-student:** Deeply democratic sociological dialogue? Fantastic! DuBois, Mills. The idea seems so foreign in our contemporary practices. But, perhaps it takes 100 years to touch again these roots – collectively? Maybe. Indeed, as the American Sociological Association celebrates its centennial, as we enter the 21st Century, we have been reminded nationally of our original intentions. President Buroway reminded us of DuBois and Public Sociology – though his notions were perhaps too comprehensively attempted, trying to please the majority of his constituency – trying to document “existing practices” of sociology instead of challenging those very practices. President Duster focused our attention on the rise and declining significance of the sociological enterprise – he seems extremely concerned. President Cynthia Epstein asks us to consider boundary transgressions within society and our own discipline. President Francis Fox Piven asks “how can sociologists, whose intellectual mission it is to understand the connections between everyday life and large social forces, and to communicate that understanding to wider publics, contribute to the strengthening of democratic forces on which the prospects for a better future depend.”<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, she wants us to consider whether “a better world is possible” – she knows that one is, so do we. Or do we? Four years in a row! Four years of 100 does not a shift in sociological epistemology make right? I am not so sure. Perhaps we are being given license, validation, encouragement, support, that we can all return to our roots and use our tools to indeed change the world – to actually commit to using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house? There is movement. Many are working very hard to make it seismically shake us to the core. Meanwhile, the subjects – I mean objects – of our studies may be breathing a sigh of relief, saying, “finally, what’s taken you so long?” “We’ve known these processes for sometime, but we have no power!” “We do not have to follow methodological correctness, nor must we follow theoretical correctness, but we do know what needs to be changed... finally” – they might say. Indeed, it has become a common understanding among those of us who have nurtured the sociological bird of utopia that one must step outside of American society to understand and have materials to discuss human rights, social

<sup>4</sup> Piven 2006.

justice, and equality. Why? American sociology's dominant academic mode of production has actually squelched our sociological imagination!

**Student-teacher:** *As Einstein once said, "imagination is more important than knowledge."<sup>5</sup> Where once sociology, even US American sociology, fostered the sense of importance of this great human creativity, the bureaucratization of sociology has led to an emphasis on rote regurgitation. Where once the creative and critical sociologist sought to help the utopian bird fly, this sociologist is today told that creativity is a project to be handled outside of the institution. Some talk this push for public sociology. How can we expect to connect with the public when we rely on methods time tested to do more good for the institution, for the canon, and for the science than for the people or for the movement. Yet, this time tested dystopic sociology is shaking on its foundations, barriers to this creative and critical sociology are being bent and broken. Challenges to our mode of production grow as sociology is globalizing in theory and practice. As this occurs, the push for human rights and social justice grow stronger.*

**Teacher-student:** Actually, if one does a search in *Sociological Abstracts* things become clearer. Out of approximately 30,000 peer-reviewed journal entries between the 1950's and 2005 – over 50 years – 605 (2%) on human rights (almost 50% of those have been published in the last five years, since 2000); 239 entries (less than 1%) on social justice; and 195 on utopia (50% of these published since 1990 and this decade on a pace to double that which was written in the 1990s). Of the utopian literature, the majority of these writings are dealing with substantive issues that lie outside the United States (i.e., in Latin America, former Soviet Union, Israel, African nations), and with consistent references to notions of egalitarianism, Paolo Freire, justice, feminism, democracy, imperialism, colonialism, marginalization, postmodernity, and empowerment. Something is happening – but it does not appear to be happening *here* largely.

**Student-teacher:** *The time has come to be critical of our own position, to understand that we, in our attempt to end oppression, have become oppressors. We have recreated the oppressive structures of our culture and instituted them in our departments, our lives, our studies, our science, and, worst of all, our students. All of us, from student to faculty, need to seriously challenge ourselves, to look at the way we work on all levels, and rid ourselves of these oppressive structures.*

<sup>5</sup> Viereck 1929.

**Teacher-student:** The time *has* come – it has not passed. American sociologists have a unique position and a unique need to begin thinking utopistically, to alter pedagogical strategies more in line with Paulo Freire’s “conscientização” (pedagogies of justice, of hope, feminist pedagogies, critical race pedagogies),<sup>6</sup> to deeply democratize our departments (the rifts in many of our departments are rooted in the racial contract, the gendered division of labor, and our inability to have open, honest dialogue with colleague, I might also add that many departments treat their graduate students like second-class non-citizens!). Utopistic thought might be allowed to fly if we deeply democratized our universities, our communities. American sociologists are in a unique position to critically begin altering the epistemological foundations of our work in order to reinvigorate and radically alter the research process – the questions we ask, the methods we utilize, the findings we report, the interpretations we offer, and the uses to which research is put – in short, an epistemological revolution. Epistemology is no small detail – it is *the* detail. We need an epistemology of justice to guide our work and we need to both start to think what this might look like and implement it without fail.

**Student-teacher:** *This shift is rooted, not only in the ways we do research, but in the ways we teach sociology to both undergraduate and graduate students. This teaching, as Freire has already stated, needs to emphasize that we are all teacher-students and that we can learn from our student-teachers just as they learn from us. Instead of recreating capitalist domination of life within our own classrooms, we need to shift toward an emphasis on building the mutually beneficial connections between teacher and student. We need to use our imaginations in order to build new epistemologies, pedagogies, politics, and shared principles which will provide us the tools to liberate us all from the various forms of domination in which our lives have become enmeshed.*

**Teacher-student:** You are right on track. Teaching is indeed where our shared humanity is more apt to flourish, where we can collectively explore utopistic notions. Immanuel Wallerstein (1998), in his book *Utopistics* clarifies the term “utopistics” for us, in contradistinction to “utopias” (which he states are “dreams of heaven that could never exist here on earth”).<sup>7</sup> He writes:

<sup>6</sup> Freire 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Wallerstein 1998.

Utopistics is the serious assessment of historical alternatives, the exercise of our judgment as to the substantive rationality of alternative possible historical systems. It is the sober, rational, and realistic evaluation of human systems, the constraints on what they can be, and the zones open to human creativity. Not the face of the perfect (and inevitable) future, but the face of an alternative, credibly better, and historically possible (but far from certain) future.<sup>8</sup>

This taps into our conversation here – does it not? Epistemologies of justice – social realism. He goes on to discuss that this enterprise is an exercise simultaneously in science, in politics, and in morality – just like Durkheim, like DuBois, like Mills, like Piven, like Hill-Collins, like Coates and Moncada, like Blau. Like Shostak and Sprague. In each of these cases and more (many of whom are battle-weary from deepest marginalization in this discipline), we have colleagues who have deeply and radically reconsidered the structures of knowledge, of what we really know about the social world, how we know it, and, in doing so, realize that we have indeed placed an epistemological and methodological stranglehold on our knowledge, and, therefore, on our praxis. Social realism, utopistics, these force us to alter our epistemologies – in doing so, we are closer to those who suffer, who fight, who lack power, who dream amidst disillusion, while we disillusion amidst their dreams. Fredric Jameson, in his new book, *Archaeologies of the Future*, states that the best utopias fail the most completely, but not without altering structures of knowledge production along the way.<sup>9</sup> So, even if Buroway, Duster, Epstein, and Piven “fail” in their revolution, there will be effects on the “world system” of the sociological enterprise, if you will, as a whole from which their can be no turning back. There is no limit on human creativity in its purest form should we choose to revisit such a concept.

**Student-teacher:** *As we start to realize the nature of this world-system of knowledge we can venture to construct our enterprises as useful to every person, not just some amorphous “sociology.” We can start at the grassroots and rework our epistemologies and pedagogies in an effort to construct a valuable science. For me this means refocusing our efforts to where they can be most useful, organize our discipline around helping whoever fights for themselves in a world of the disempowered. This means localizing our research, it means building our understanding of place. Both the place we are in and the place of those we study*

<sup>8</sup>) Wallerstein 1998, pp. 2–3.

<sup>9</sup>) Jameson 2005.

(physically, mentally, socially, epistemologically, etc). Our everyday lived environment means much to our ideas and experiences. In this, we must not force our own world-system on others; instead, we must help start or simply become a part of a grassroots dialogue to which we can contribute our knowledge and energy. While some may feel that these moves (especially as a second class citizen to sociology, a graduate student) may be threatening to their long term career, consider my case. My masters thesis, my first serious attempt at public sociology, was received with some resistance but I passed nonetheless. To me, this is very meaningful. While my department is open to some levels of creativity, my attempt pushed the boundaries and it has opened a discussion on thesis requirements within the faculty. Even the smallest pushes can be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

**Teacher-student:** I encourage you to continue pushing as you encourage me to continue pushing – we have a history of this, but it has remained marginalized. Perhaps you have read the recent Symposium in *Contemporary Sociology* on Rhonda Levine's recent book *Enriching the Sociological Imagination: How Radical Sociology Changed the Discipline*<sup>10</sup> with reviews of this work by several critical scholars. The bottom line for these scholars, is that radical sociology has not indeed changed very much about the discipline – for the structures of knowledge production in this discipline of ours incorporates and co-opts these “tolerated insiders.” Wallerstein's contribution encourages our feelings of an emergent epistemological shift. Bonilla-Silva, also stands in solidarity with such utopistic thought and offers several points as to what we must attend to in the years to come, I share these with you in my own way. In the 21st century, sociology must: 1) recognize that race, class, and gender are articulated in a matrix of domination, we must develop practice and theory that fit this reality, recognize this reality in our own production of knowledge, open ourselves to people's models and quit holding onto our prefabricated models, break from theoretical correctness as well as “chic radical elitism” – towards real, true-to-the-struggle praxis, pedagogy, and politics. Learn from the people enmeshed in this matrix of domination *and* recognize that we and our work are enmeshed in it as well; 2) like all disciplines, sociology is implicated with power, it is implicated in the matrix of domination, therefore, sociology is part of the problem, we must remain critical at all times of sociology as a social project, as a racial project, as a gendered project and be skeptical of its various epistemological lullabies that

<sup>10</sup> Levine 2005.

continue to “kill us softly” with their song; 3) democratic Socialism is a prominent goal (for our society, our communities, our departments), unity, solidarity, and justice are goals, but not based on class-based politics only (as if this were the only way to unify people); 4) seriously question patriarchal, Eurocentric, white, Americanist organizing principals of this discipline and challenge them at every turn – any utopistic pursuit must engage these primary obstacles; 5) finally, we must struggle against *complacency* (remember our roots?), *objectivism* (the scientific method and its misuses have been a fundamental problem for us), *depoliticization* (we should be able to speak truth to power – even in our classrooms – otherwise our students come in and leave reproducing the matrix of domination; there are so many things that should count as “legitimate” scholarship that do not now count in most places: like activism), and we need to struggle against *incorporation* – if the core is shifting, it may be solely to incorporate those of us committed to radical, utopistic sociologies of justice. Our utopian imaginations, and even our sociological imaginations, are victims of our current academic mode of production. I encourage you to step outside this current mode and incorporate utopian writings, films, art, music, poetry, and voices *from the margins* as well as those written from *outside* the American context. Standpoints are not solitary, we must collaborate, we must build bridges, standpoints are achieved, we can achieve a collective standpoint, one that stands for social justice and human rights, anything else may just be but another tool of the oppressors. We need radical democracy, deep democracy, in our lives, in our families, in our departments, in our communities, in the questions we ask, in the interpretations we invoke, in the ways we discuss our findings to others. As Wallerstein puts it, we face historical choices as we enter the 21st century.<sup>11</sup> Let us think utopistically, let us understand a *collective* free will, let us unleash our *collective* creativity, change sociology, and indeed, come back again to why we are here (most of us) – to make this world a better place for all who inhabit it. It is not going to be easy, but the success, the victory, is in the struggle.

**Student-teacher:** *We come to shake things up, to break things up. We come with a lust for democracy, a desire for the freedom we have been promised all our lives. A drive to make this freedom of self determination a possibility for all people. An unstoppable force that will break the iron cage. We call to all those who would believe that we can command our own future, despite living in a world we never chose. We come with a rage, a fury, and a non-negotiable demand*

<sup>11</sup>) Wallerstein 1998.

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*for our soul. We call out sociology for failing to pay up on its promises and we demand that those unwilling to take this call to dialogue seriously leave this body so that we can be done with your cancer.*

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