



Transcending the Liberal Grammar of Critical Sociology: The Theoretical Turn in Israeli Sociology

Nissim Mizrachi¹

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Introduction

During the last third of the twentieth century, the US became a major – if not *the* major – producer of the world’s professional sociologists. In many countries, publication in top American journals has become decisive in determining sociologists’ career paths and providing them with an imprimatur of undeniable excellence (Azaria 2010; Jacobs & Mizrachi, 2020). In many countries, American sociology sets the discipline’s theoretical and research agenda, leading to a worldwide stratification of the field (Jacobs & Mizrachi, 2020).

A recent article by Jerry Jacobs and Nissim Mizrachi (2020), “International Representation in US Social Science Journals,” published in this journal, shows that only a fifth of the articles appearing during 2010–2016 in the two leading American sociological journals, the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*, addressed non-American societies. When comparing international representation in top journals in sociology, political science, demography, education, and economics, these two top sociological journals were found to be among the journals with the least representation of other countries, ranking just above the education journal, which was the least international of the entire set. This underlines not only American sociology’s centrality, but also its sequestered nature.

The dominance of American sociology may be troubling for sociologists elsewhere. Unable to recognize their own societies in the supposedly universal insights emerging from America, their sense of isolation and marginalization grows stronger. Nevertheless, this special issue is not about unmasking American “tyranny” over the discipline, even if it is hardly possible to overstate the impact the academic imperialism that it entails. While we are fully aware of the influence that the centrality of American sociology wields on stratification and on the career paths of sociologists

✉ Nissim Mizrachi
nissimm@tauex.tau.ac.il

¹ Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

around the world, we have convened to address the effect of this centrality on what many sociologists consider to be the discipline's core mission, that is, the search for understanding the social world that dates back to Weber's notion of *verstehen*. I argue that the normative stance taken by American sociology has had a tremendous impact on our ability to make sense of the world. Moreover, in a global reality in which different visions of social justice compete, American sociology has sworn allegiance to one particular type of justice, that of *liberal justice*. More specifically, American sociology has openly declared its loyalty to the liberal moral and cognitive vision for a progressive global social order as the discipline's own normative stance (Abbott, 2016; Burawoy, 2005; Hochschild, 2016), which is rooted in what I call the 'liberal grammar.' By "grammar", I am referring to the unwritten set of analytical and normative principles that guide the interpretative act. These principles channel the processes of data collection and the articulation of the respective analysis towards the emerging insights. Of course, I consider this grammar to be an ideal type (a la Weber), that is, a category that emphasizes certain features for analytical purposes, a deliberate over-simplification.

Because of American sociology's hegemonic position, this trend, so aptly described by Burawoy over a decade ago (2005), has not been limited to the confines of the US. Indeed, critical sociology's theoretical foundations and the corpus of its literature reached Israel's shores primarily from the US,¹ where it was cast and recast in the local context. In lockstep with American sociology, Israeli sociology aligned itself with the liberal left and declared unquestioning loyalty to the values of liberty, equality and human rights (Ram, 2006).

However, at this point, after almost three decades in the grip of American sociology, discontent with the critical discourse is growing. Increasingly, social scientists are asking if a sociology that is committed to a normative, particularistic stance and identified with liberal justice and human rights is capable of making sense of their local social reality. In contemporary Israel's diverse society, its constituent groups uphold differing moral visions of the social and political order. Some are distinguished by their adherence to underlying justifications for the social order and allegiance to sources of authority that liberals do not see as legitimate. These include non-liberal cultures such as ultra-Orthodox Jews, nationalistic settlers, pious Muslims, traditionalist Jews and Arabs. The clash between the rival visions of society, that of the liberal progressive moral and political vs. the non-liberal, represents not only a wrenching political issue but also a weighty theoretical challenge.

In attempting to probe the roots of this clash, Israeli sociology's commitment to the liberal vision has become its own Euro-American-centric blind spot. Once liberalism became sociology's theoretical stance, it would no longer be an object for empirical investigation and analytical critique. As a result, sociology's field of vision has been considerably diminished and, in tandem, its interpretive space has contracted. As I have previously argued (Mizrachi, 2016, 2017), this normative commitment bound sociology's self-awareness to the limits of the liberal imagination, hampering its abil-

¹ Although some of the icons and major schools of thought belonging to the critical discourse were born in Western Europe, they entered the Israeli curriculum mainly after they had appeared in English and gained their canonic status in the US.

ity to offer a fuller reading of non-liberal subjects in the field as well as to delve into their resistance to liberal justice and human rights.

The studies in this special issue are the products of their authors' discomfort with this state of affairs. Each of them seeks to emancipate the sociological gaze from the shackles of the liberal stance and to go beyond what I call the *liberal grammar of critical sociology*, upon which I will elaborate below. Their goal is to broaden their field of vision so as to deepen our reading of crucial issues in the society in which they live and work.

At this point, many critical sociologists may be raising an eyebrow wondering why am I lumping together highly diversified critical approaches and intellectual traditions such as Marxism and neo-Marxism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, different schools of feminism and queer theory, among others, into such a narrow box. I nonetheless dare to argue that they all hold to the liberal grammar.

This theoretical turn could be read as a reactionary move back to a naive non-critical view of social reality. To address this, we must probe the meaning of the term *critical*. When we attach the adjective *critical* to sociology, what do we mean? The term encompasses several different meanings, each stemming from a different intellectual tradition. Indeed, since its inception as a scientific discipline, sociology has often confronted the tension between the term's two polar meanings, the one referring to analytical critique and the other to social criticism (Boltanski, 2011; Eisenstadt and Cudelar, 1976); the first refers to understanding the conditions of possibility of social phenomena; the second refers to personal moral and value judgments regarding the social phenomenon of interest. I argue here that in recent years, sociology has largely drifted, often unreflectively, from the pole of *analytical critique* to the pole of *social criticism*. Doing so has significantly narrowed the discipline's interpretive space. Moreover, critical sociology's unquestioning loyalty to the values of liberty, equality, and human rights has limited the reach of its self-awareness. By so doing, critical sociology has diminished its ability to make sense of the resistance of "target groups" to the liberal message and stifled its potential to offer new avenues for thinking and acting in the face of our deeply divided social world (Mizrachi, 2017). Hence, rather than being reactionary, the suggested theoretical turn aims at broadening the scope of critique and deepening its roots.

Background, in Brief

In a comprehensive article, entitled "Whither Israeli sociology? From a Sociology of Suspicion to a Sociology of Meaning" and published in Hebrew in 2017, I provided a programmatic account of my discomfort at the growing mismatch between my sociological toolkit and the world I study. The article was the trigger for the establishment of a working research group, composed of sociologists and cultural anthropologists. The group was formed under the auspices of the Shoham Institute² and Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. The Van Leer Institute has served as the hub of the critical discourse and the intellectual home of critical sociology in Israel for the last

² <https://www.shoham.org.il/about-us/?lang=en>.

30 years,³ and this new direction of inquiry thus marks a turn in the Institute’s intellectual history.

This new turn actually began well-before any organized, programmatic effort emerged, as evidenced in the number of studies in this vein that found their way, albeit sporadically, into local and international publications. These articles offered an alternative reading of the global political rupture between left and right; the ethnic divide between Ashkenazim (Jews of European and North American origin) and Mizrahim (Jews of Middle-Eastern and North African origin) (Fischer, 2016⁴; Mizrahi, 2016⁵); the meaning of conscientious objection beyond the liberal horizon (Weiss, 2014); the role of religious boundaries in creating a peaceful and respectful space for coexistence (Mizrahi and Weiss, 2020); the disparate visions of peace as perceived by liberal and non-liberal communities (Weiss and Mizrahi, 2019); the conditions of cultural mediation and translation (Borenstein 2019); as well as forms of dialogue between polarized groups (Mizrahi 2012, 2014; Sadeh, 2021) and non-liberal perceptions of tolerance (Sadeh, 2021). However, because they were published intermittently and in scattered forums, these studies remained localized, tagged as regional studies that do not transcend the singularity of the Israeli case. They have not had a concerted effect on American and international sociologists and have not even put a dent in the centrality and homogeneity that are at the base of American dominance of the field.

This special issue seeks to provide an initial response to this state of affairs. But first we will briefly review the relatively recent trends in American sociology and their impact on the sociological toolkit used by sociologists in Israel, which of course was forged in the United States. Therefore, these trends are relevant far beyond the Israeli case.

The “Scissors Movement” and the Hermeneutical Bend

In his 2004 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, as well as in a later article entitled “For Public Sociology” (2005), Michael Burawoy dis-

³ See <https://www.vanleer.org.il/en/projects/from-a-sociology-of-suspicion-to-a-sociology-of-meaning-on-living-together-with-difference-within-and-beyond-liberal-imagination/>.

⁴ Shlomo Fischer’s article “Two patterns of modernization: An analysis of the ethnic issue in Israel” (1991) was ahead of its time when it first appeared, in Hebrew, in the journal *Theory and Criticism*. Fischer’s alternative reading of the historical roots of the ethno-political rift diverged from the theories of modernization that attributed Mizrahi Jews’ adherence to right-wing religious parties and their objection to the liberal left to their pre-modern state of development, on the one hand, and from critical approaches that viewed Mizrahi political attitudes as an outcome of oppression and exclusion on the other. Instead, Fischer interprets the Mizrahi Jewish communitarian attitude, as well as the Ashkenazi liberal-universal stance, as two reactive forms to modernity embedded in two different historical and political contexts.

⁵ The original version of this article, on the rejection of human rights by disadvantaged groups, first appeared in Hebrew in 2011. The article explains rejection of the human rights discourse by Mizrahi Jews from disadvantaged backgrounds by turning the direction of inquiry away from transmission and reception, which are the two common explanatory channels prevailing in the liberal critical discourse. Transmission refers to the failure of human rights activists and adherents to deliver their message properly. Reception relates to the problem of the recipients’ failure to understand that message and act according to their own interests. This channel reflects variations of false consciousness. Instead, the article proposes that the problem lies in the message itself.

cussed the manner in which contemporary critical sociology has distanced itself from the social world it studies. Burawoy's depiction reflected the liberal *zeitgeist* of the American sociological community at the time. He captured this situation in the metaphor of the "scissors movement," noting that during the second half of the twentieth century, sociology and the world had moved in opposite directions—sociology to the left, the world to the right. While sociology, in his view, has taken a critical position towards the political and economic order, the world, he claimed, has gone in reverse, as evidenced by the expansion of the global market economy, the rise of neoliberalism, and the recurrence of human rights violations.

In this address, Burawoy further argued that as a result of sociology's critical position, its alliance with social activism has been strengthened, and increasing numbers of sociologists are cooperating with labor organizations and unions, human rights organizations, and migrant groups. For Burawoy, such cooperation signifies sociology's special vantage point from within civil society, which, he argues, is not only an important object of sociological research but also provides sociology with its disciplinary standpoint and serves as a marker that distinguishes it from the other social sciences. His observation is not only descriptive; it is also prescriptive. The synthesis between sociology and civil society is not merely a fact, he contends; it is an ethos worth cultivating. His address, described as electrifying, was widely accepted by the American sociological community (see Brint, 2005).

From a contemporary vantage point, a quick look at the "scissors movement" will reveal that the distance between the blades has widened. Trump's election in 2016 exemplified the "great paradox," to use the expression coined by Thomas Frank (2004). Voters in many blue-collar working-class areas continue to vote Republican, ostensibly against their own interests (see Hochschild, 2016; Wuthnow, 2018). As the world shifts rightward, American sociology's explicit commitment to liberal justice and human rights has taken on a messianic fervor. Tellingly, the theme of the 2019 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA), was "Engaging Social Justice for a Better World". The statement of the 2019 theme reads:

Embracing a sociology that challenges social injustices and sustains scholar activists is pivotal in this time of increasing social inequalities. Sociologists possess the analytical tools and empirical data necessary to support communities fighting against injustices in many realms. These areas include: racial inequality, environmental degradation, immigration restrictions and law enforcement violence, housing segregation, unequal educational opportunities, disparate health outcomes, mass incarceration, and precarious violence against women and LGBTQ. Sociologists who partner with community groups, human rights organizations, civil rights lawyers, and other social justice advocates can make significant contributions to promote scholarship that can facilitate progressive social change.⁶

The 2021 theme was even more combative: "Emancipatory Sociology: Rising to the Du Boisian Challenge." The 2021 statement reads:

⁶ (<https://www.asanet.org/annual-meeting-2019/2019-theme>).

Sociological scholarship has repeatedly shown that systems of domination-patriarchy, race, class, and sexual orientation- have been endemic features of societies, especially given their propensities to intersect and mutually reinforce each other. The 2021 program committee is committed to organizing the conference to push the limits of knowledge to point us toward relief from gender discrimination and sexual harassment, racism, ableism, heteronormativity, devastating class inequalities and epistemological and methodological blindness. In these troubling times, a sociology of liberation rooted in empirical observation and theorizing from data rather than ideology is overdue. This sociology is realizable through systematic study and rigorous reasoning in the scholarly tradition pioneered by W. E. B. Du Bois.⁷

The same pattern appears in the conferences held by regional sociology associations, as well as in those of such organizations as the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Sociologists for Women in Society, and the Association of Humanist Sociologists (see: Anja Maria Steinsland Ariansen (2021), “Quiet Is the New Loud,” for a table of the titles of presidential addresses in the ASA, SSSP, SWS, and AHS from 2000 to 2020).

These recurrent themes inextricably stem from the underlying normative and analytical principles that guide contemporary critical research, which I refer to as the liberal grammar of contemporary critical sociology. To be sure, that is not to say that *critical sociology* represents the entirety of American sociology. Parallel to critical sociology, other “sociologies”, such as *professional* and *policy sociology* in Burawoy’s terms, are still alive and less politically committed (see Turner 2019). That may not be the case for most *public sociologies* (à la Burawoy), particularly those that tightly cooperate with liberal progressive NGOs. However, it would be safe to argue that critical sociology holds a grip over American sociology and, as such, is crucially determining the current discourse in Israeli sociology. Hence, the liberal grammar, as an ideal type, represents the underlying analytical and normative principles guiding the interpretive and political stance of contemporary critical sociology.

Returning to the previous statements of critical sociology voiced from the central stage of American sociology, and resonating from the core (the ASA) to the periphery (other regional societies), we can clearly recognize two fundamental assumptions. First is a resolute portrayal of the prevailing power structure; second is the absolute moral and political meaning attached to this oppressive structure. Within this conflictual portrayal of social reality, people, particularly marginalized groups, are caught in a binary state between “submission” and “resistance”, awaiting “emancipation”.

As to critical sociology’s moral stance, its alliance with one particular vision of social justice (the liberal-progressive), rooted in what I have termed the liberal grammar, has culminated in contorting sociologists’ views of the many groups that do not share that same moral and political vision and constraining its ability to elicit generalizable insights and share cross-national sociological knowledge.

⁷ (<https://www.asanet.org/annual-meeting-2021/theme>)

The Liberal Grammar of Critical Sociology and Beyond

Once again, we must first clarify terms; the adjective “liberal” especially demands examination. First of all, in the American context, it refers to the embrace of a progressive moral and political vision for the global social order. Second, some critical thinkers identify with different approaches and would not identify themselves with liberalism, and, in fact, some critical thinkers would be reluctant to identify their critical stance with “liberalism.” Hence, it could be argued that my analysis lumps diverse critical traditions into a single monolithic conceptual space. Indeed, contemporary critical discourse is far from monolithic. As we pointed out earlier, it encompasses wide-ranging theoretical approaches stemming from multiple intellectual traditions and schools of thought, including post-colonialism, neo-Marxism, and Western feminism, among others. Most of those approaches, however, share the same guiding normative and analytical principles of the liberal grammar as (an ideal type) of contemporary sociology (Mizrachi, 2017), which consists of the following key components:

(1) The **ontological** view is made up of two building blocks. The first is the conflictual underlying view of social reality, according to which relationships of power and control are at the foundation of social life. The second is the sovereign, rational and equal autonomous individual, who is captive to the prison-like constraints of these oppressive structures and awaits rescue. (Abbott, 2016). These structures can be national and religious boundaries, domineering global markets or neo-liberal regimes, the post-colonial condition, or pervasive structural inequality (according to, for example, class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability). This image of the *autonomous individual* is deeply rooted in what Abbott (2016) describes as the *liberal contractarian ontology*⁸ at the core of contemporary social science’s normative underpinnings. This component contorts our view of individuals whose identities are embedded⁹ in interdependence or “thick kinship,” that is, communities in which the individual’s moral experience is derived from their fixed identity

⁸ According to Abbott (2016: 350), “[t]he contractarian ontology divided the world into nations or, to use Durkheim’s word, ‘societies.’ A nation or society was a community of political equals implicitly linked by a social contract. Public life was a realm of absolute equality in both rights and responsibilities. Public (or ‘political’) individuals were thus equivalent to one another and almost contentless. But beside this public life contractarianism envisioned a private sphere, which was by contrast a realm of substantive differences between persons.”

⁹ The notion of the “embedded individual” has been part and parcel of sociology as a discipline from its earliest years. See, for example, the works of George Simmel (Simmel 2007; Bodoksic 2010) or George Herbert Mead (Mead 2015). Norbert Elias (Elias 2012 [1939]), was overtly critical of the concept of the individual as a separate, bounded and autonomous, to whom he refers as “homo clausus.” Instead, he views the individual as inherently connected to social networks, within which their identity and his activity is formed in relational means and processes. Furthermore, Elias also identifies the connection between the system of relationships within which the individual acts (which he refers to as “figuration”) with their ability to act. In the modern history of the discipline, it’s worth mentioning the work of Robert Bellah (Bellah 1985), which provides a striking example from 20th century American sociology. Bellah argues that the modernist sanctification of the individual, which gives priority to personal rights and autonomy in almost all spheres of life, conflicts with the traditional worlds of meaning, which are predicated on entirely different basic assumptions.

(Berger & Berger, 1973; see also Lamont, 2000, Swidler and Watkins 2017) and moral duties, tightly linked with their position.

(2) This ontology leads to the **political** stance of liberal grammar, which extolls liberation. In its progressive version, it seeks to free the individual and accords priority to actions of “resistance,” “subversion,” and “disruption,” all of which are crucial to the struggle against the repressive power structure. An *emancipatory spirit*, directed at freeing individuals from these shackles, resonates in the growing kinship between sociology and civil society as well as the prevailing collaboration between sociologists and NGOs described by Burawoy (2005). This same spirit can warp our view of communities (such as religious communities) that maintain continuity with, rather than break with, past traditions as the essential source for any envisioned social change. Those communities do not await liberal salvation or emancipation from “oppressive” past traditions (see Mahmood, 2005; Mizrahi, 2014).

(3) The third component, on which I will focus and further elaborate below, is a **suspicious mode of interpretation**. That is, interpretive reading of a social text is based on a strong assumption that surface reality is driven by essential power structures and social forces that lie underneath the surface, known to the critical observers but hidden from the research subjects in the field. This mode of suspicion becomes excessive when a strong moral and ideological meaning is attached to this structure. This interpretive mode is then driven by excessive suspicion and constant negation of overt reality and an ethos of deconstruction. Suspicion and negation nurture a skeptical and pessimistic spirit towards reality and often towards the manner in which the research subjects understand the world in which they live.

(4) Finally, the three components combine with a **secular anti-traditional stance** — that is, negation of tradition per se as a source of authority and of any religious and/or primordial contents and behaviors that seem to clash with the secular and individualist ontology. I refer to this critical-liberal stance towards religious content, values, and norms as *moralistic methodological atheism*. Here, I draw on Peter Berger’s notion of *methodological atheism* (Berger, 1967, 1979), which refers to “the practice of bracketing—or refusing to consider for the purpose of sociological study—the ultimate reality of such religious objects such as God, angels, or cosmic unity” (Porpora, 2006, p. 75). To describe the current critical-progressive take on religion, however, I offer the term *moralistic methodological atheism*. That is, critical observers “unbracket” religious phenomena and cease to maintain “neutrality” regarding the true value of some religious phenomena or adopt an agnostic stance toward them (see Porpora 2006). Instead, they tend to vilify religious content and behavior, especially in cases where religious content and behavior deny the inherent priority of the *autonomous equal individual*, (for example, gender inequality and the maintenance of group boundaries).¹⁰

¹⁰ We should stress one major qualification to our description. Some post-secular approaches accept neither *moralistic methodological atheism* nor *methodological atheism*. Yet, they may contain other components of the liberal grammar. For instance, some contemporary post-secular scholars question the secular nature of critique itself and ask, “is critique secular?” (see Asad et al., 2009). Not all of the approaches that can be viewed under the post-secular umbrella, however, necessarily undermine the validity of the liberal grammar’s other components. In a different vein, John Milbank (1990) offers a diametric view of the relationship between social theory and theology by looking at social theory from a theological perspec-

The main focus of our theoretical thrust is the effect of this liberal grammar on interpretive space and the problem of representation of the world of meaning and behavior of non-liberal subjects whether they are considered “victims” or “marginalized” and or regarded as “victimizers” or what anthropologist Susan Harding (1991) defined nearly three decades ago as the “repugnant cultural other.” Our point of departure will be the interpretive component, which has been strongly informed by Paul Ricoeur’s distinction between the hermeneutics of suspicion and meaning.

The Hermeneutic Pendulum: Between Suspicion and Meaning

Becoming Overly Suspicious

Paul Ricoeur’s notion of *hermeneutics* provides the key to probing sociology’s interpretive stance and enables us to link sociology’s adherence to the liberal moral and cognitive vision to its mode of interpretation of the social world. In his monumental philosophical project, Ricoeur writes that human interpretive activity mediates between the person and their surroundings, whether the object of that activity is a written or a social text. In his book, *Freud and Philosophy* (1970), he claims that the interpretive act is dually motivated by the tendency to suspect, on the one hand, and the effort to decipher a text’s meaning as fully as possible, on the other. Suspicious interpretation is motivated by the desire to uncover a text’s putative true meaning, which is assumed to lie beneath its surface. Texts thus require excavation to reveal their “real meaning.” In the context of the social sciences, the hermeneutics of suspicion takes the form of an interpretive mode driven by a belief in an essential truth known to the critical observer but often hidden from the subjects in the field. As such, the hermeneutics of suspicion relates to Ricoeur’s other mode of interpretation, the *hermeneutics of meaning or faith*. The hermeneutics of meaning calls for total attention to the text – only by studying it, learning from it, and being utterly open to its influence can its original meaning, its creator’s true intent, be fathomed.

Subjects Without Subjectivity: The Interpretive Risk and the Problem of Representation

The message I wish to convey is that something about the interpretive swing between *suspicion* and *meaning* has gone out of whack. To be sure, we certainly do not want to encourage total dismissal of suspicion in favor of a naïve reading of social reality. As Ricoeur noted, suspicion and meaning are both essential to the very act of interpretation. But we do want to remain vigilant, lest the pendulum swing from suspicion to over-suspicion.

tive. Similarly, Saba Mahmood (2005) offers a post-liberal reading of liberal feminism by particularizing its liberal grammar. These two moves may invite a reverse act of bracketing, this time by placing secular liberalism within brackets as an object for religious or theological inquiry. In the Israeli context, Yehouda Shenhav offers a post-secular reading of Israeli sociology (2008) and explores the Protestant roots of the progressive liberal camp in Israel (2018).

Two core factors can exacerbate this imbalance: a structural assumption and a moral-ideological assumption. Put simply, when an observer (in our case, a social scientist) maintains a clear and robust vision of a social structure, the activation of an ideology endowed with absolute moral meaning may cause them to find themselves in an overly suspicious mode of interpretation. Social texts may be flattened, and social actors may be reduced to assigned roles in a ready-made script conflating the ‘is’ with the ‘ought.’

From an overly suspicious viewpoint, non-liberal subjects are often weighed against a moral scale, with “bad subjects” or “victimizers” (e.g., white males in rural America or Ashkenazi national religious settlers and patriarchal *haredim* [ultra-Orthodox] in Israel) placed at one pole, and “victims” (e.g., women of color or Arab Palestinians in Israel) placed at the other. In liberal progressive eyes, the victims’ non-liberal behavior appears “self-defeating.” For most critical progressive observers, the ideas and actions of “bad subjects” are viewed as “beyond reason” and often tagged as racist and misogynist. (Wuthnow, 2018, 1). Most critical approaches view this behavior as an *anomaly*, a problem to be solved or a social ill awaiting a liberal remedy, rather than as an independent mode of thought and action, rooted in an alternative, non-liberal world of meaning.¹¹

However, when the subjects’ moral marker is “positive,” as in cases of “self-defeating” behavior by “pure victims” (e.g., working-class people supporting right-wing economic policies, women supporting gender hierarchies, minorities rejecting affirmative action and open immigration policies), the negative epithets do not come into play. Such cases inspire resurrection of the Marxist notion of *false consciousness*. Most contemporary social scientists, while not admitting to applying this term, even in its thin, partial, and superficial meaning, do use it in one or another of its guises (e.g., “internalization of oppression,” “acting against one’s own interests,” “acting white,” or “compliance with hegemony”).¹² The liberal remedy is furthermore shared by most contemporary critical approaches, despite their diverse intellectual roots. Within the interpretive space they share, non-liberal behavior of “victims” may be regarded as “false,” a symptom of social ills, or an epiphenomenon that dooms the subjects’ voices to remain unheard.

In all of these cases, we run the risk of emptying the subject of her subjectivity: the subject becomes a “victimizer” to be judged or a “victim” in need of protection. Her subjectivity plays a fixed role in a structural meta-script, a component in a social structure dressed with an essential moral meaning. Her own reading of the same structure is silenced or denied.

This missionary spirit is intensified in cases where minority critical scholars take a position of advocacy with regard to their own community members. Armed with a liberal-critical script that they view as the key to salvation of their own disadvantaged

¹¹ Exceptions to this rule can be found, for example, in the work of cultural sociologists Michele Lamont (2004) as well as Ann Swidler and Susan Watkins (2017). Lamont (2004) shows how her North African informants view the individualist approach of white French citizens to be less moral than their sense of moral duty to their families and elderly parents. In a similar vein, Swidler and Watkins (2017) show how Western assumptions such as individualism, independence and autonomous decision making hinder their ability to effectively reach their altruistic goals, such as the eradication of HIV in Malawi.

¹² For a fuller Marxist reading of the historiosophical meaning of the concept, see Lukács, 1971.

group, these scholars then fail to recognize the way in which the group members themselves understand the problem.

In the context of the American critical sociology, Orlando Patterson's "culture of poverty" provides a salient example of the fine line between liberation and paternalism and the manner in which scholars may be blind to, or even consciously ignore, any "contradictory evidence," even if is offered by the subalterns themselves. Patterson (2006, 2014; Patterson and Fosse, 2015) describes a case in which critical sociology chose to define young African-American slum dwellers as "cultural dopes" who must be saved from themselves.¹³ According to Patterson, the firm view held by young African-Americans that "culture" plays a constitutive role in patterning their life in the ghetto and has enormous influence on their chances of extricating themselves from poverty is what led critical sociology to unequivocally characterize these subjects as dopes. The subjects' position is at complete odds with the structural and ideological assumptions of critical sociologists. The term "culture of poverty" was in fact taboo in critical sociology for several decades due to the concern about shifting attention from poverty's ("true") structural causes to the poor themselves, a shift that could lead to "blaming the victim" (see also Lamont, Small and Harding 2010). Identifying culture as the source of the problem was also portrayed as a pathologization of black culture (Patterson & Fosse, 2015).

Can the Non-Liberal Subaltern Speak?

Here we are revisiting Gayatri Spivak's (1988) query "Can the subaltern speak?" However, I would turn the question back to progressive critical sociology and ask, "Can the non-liberal subaltern speak?" and "Are we listening?" As Spivak asked, "Do we hear the voices of those subaltern who refuse to play their part in the critical script?" Or, "Could it be that the only ones who are allowed to speak are those who, overtly or covertly, echo the progressive view held by the critical researchers?" How, then, should students of society relate to subjects who refuse to enact their assigned roles in the liberal meta-script?

Consider a woman who obstinately adheres to a religious or other communitarian gender structure that dictates that she take on what the sociologist sees as an unequal and subordinate role. According to the sociologist, this woman is oppressed, a subaltern. Can a subaltern sincerely and freely wish to perpetuate a hegemonic power structure that ostensibly oppresses her?¹⁴ Contemporary sociologists pride themselves on listening to the voices of subalterns. It would seem, however, that in all too many cases, their attentiveness extends only to those subalterns who conform to their theoretical script. The speech of non-liberal subalterns is presumed not to be a true expression of their concerns; as such, it does not bear listening to.

¹³ He borrowed the term "cultural dopes" from Harold Garfinkel (1967) who sought to describe by the term the way structuralist functionalist approaches to sociology treated the people they study. From Durkheim up to Parsons, argued Garfinkel, the objects of study are thought of as products of socialization, as empty vessels to be filled by sociality (values, norms, beliefs, symbols and so on), and as puppets activated by structural and systemic forces.

¹⁴ For such an eye-opening account see Saba Mahmood (2005).

Suspicion of Suspicion: Sociology's Self-Parochialization

How might we be on guard against *over-suspiciousness*? This vexing question invites a rigorous methodological and phenomenological study of the interpretive process, which has yet to be explored. In the interim, however, and as long as we maintain our liberal position of certainty, the danger of depriving the non-liberal subject of her subjectivity lies in wait. The first methodological move that I propose is to become suspicious of suspicion¹⁵. However, this is not an easy task, precisely because it demands that we cast doubt on our certainty. It is only when we doubt our certainty that we can become suspicious of our suspicion. In the meanwhile, I can suggest one rule of thumb, although it may only be helpful in retrospect: “If your findings always suit your moral stance, doubt your sociology” (Mizrachi, 2016: 58, 2017).

We can apply this rule in various empirical contexts as we analyze statistical data, read a text, or make sense of our subjects' narratives and behaviors. But we are still left in a quandary: How can we recognize when we are being overly suspicious during the research and not only after we have completed it? We have begun to look for answers.¹⁶ Casting suspicion on my own suspicion entails a deep recognition of the limits of my own normative and cognitive stance. That is, I am required to acknowledge my sociological self-parochialization.

I borrow the term, self-parochialization from anthropologist Saba Mahmood,¹⁷ who refers to our willingness as scholars to challenge our most precious moral positions and attitudes that are inseparable from our core identity. This can only be accomplished by a thorough reading of alternative — if not incongruous — moralities. This conscious move involves what I call *methodological parochialization* and demands the surrender of the scholar's moral certainty. It is the starting point for observation and research, a necessary act if we are to open our interpretive spaces to other, perhaps conflicting stances. This position requires a conscious effort to listen to the non-liberal subject.

This first step of *self-parochialization* involves turning the suspicious gaze on our own suspicions; in other words, it requires us to recognize our own position of advocacy. This is a necessary step for opening the interpretive space, but it is not a sufficient one. We cannot be satisfied with simply identifying, neutralizing, or even suspending our advocacies. For such scholars, be they Palestinians, Mizrahim, or Blacks, for example, the opening of this interpretive space facilitates as full a reading as possible of the conflicting evidence. This ambition, emerging from the deep desire to learn and readiness to rethink theoretical and political points of departure, requires considerable spiritual strength and, often, the taking of huge personal risks in light of the reactions anticipated from “home,” that is, from the critical research

¹⁵ In this sense, this process resonates with what Kurt Wolff termed the surrender-and-catch. See Roberto Cipriani (2017).

¹⁶ In my book in progress, to be published with the UC press, I have developed a methodology which I refer to as multiple hermeneutics, which is aimed at activating the non-liberal subject by shifting her from the position of a participant or a creator of data in a statistical survey to that of a member of a focus group whose participants analyse the data that they created in the survey. In each of these stages, I put the advocacy and emancipatory power of my sociological categories to the test of my research subjects.

¹⁷ See Keane, 2018.

community. And yet, such instances of methodological parochialization are needed in order to regulate the interpretive swings between “suspicion” and “meaning,” even with regard to a politically charged field that is saturated with passion and emotions.

Methodological Parochialization and the Act of Listening

Obviously, liberal sociologists do listen to their non-liberal subjects, especially to subalterns—the people they are so eager to protect. But can they truly hear their subjects’ non-liberal voices if they are overly suspicious? What does the conscious effort at *self-parochialization* demand?

Let me briefly outline what this act entails when the subject’s voice expresses a moral view radically polar, if not repugnant, to that of the researcher. (1) Listening in this situation is an act driven by curiosity, by the desire to understand, implying that we truly believe that the informant’s “improper voice” should be fully heard and that it may provide us with valuable insights. (2) Truly listening to subjects in the field requires us to be open-minded, that is, to be ready to reconsider our presuppositions. (3) Not only must we maintain an open mind in terms of being ready to accept evidence that contradicts our positions, we should actually celebrate when this happens and see it as an opportunity to gain new insights. This is not a naïve version of the scientific ethos but, rather, an essential reminder of the risk of being entirely oblivious to the “bad-subject’s” voice. (4) The act of listening is obviously no less emotional than rational. It entails an open heart. We must, as researchers, open our hearts¹⁸ to the lived and moral experiences of our subjects in the field, “good” and “bad” alike, to the fullest extent possible¹⁹. (5) Before we can listen, we should be ready to revise our own moral and cognitive vision of the social order.

As Max Weber ([1919] 1946: 148) reminds us when referring to Nietzsche, when studying the world, “we realize that something can be beautiful, not only in spite of the aspect in which it is not good, but rather in that very aspect.”

The previous passage obviously resonates with the well-worn literature on reflexive sociology and anthropology. But here I dwell on listening as a conscious act in response to the risk of being overly suspicious in cases of a profound moral clash. I should stress that I am not referring to the researcher’s ethical quandaries when encountering moral clashes between her own moral stance and the stance or behavior of her subjects in the field. Nor am I speaking of the type of reflexive narcissism so well-known from the anthropological literature. Rather, I am talking about the act of listening to the “bad subject” or the “objectionable subject” when measured against the moral stance held, whether overtly or covertly, by the researcher’s professional field. Listening to that voice may thus be quite risky because the very act of listening to the “bad subject” may be perceived as support for and even approval of the subject’s worldview. The knowledge produced by listening may thereafter become

¹⁸ See the role of sympathy in the work of Charles H. Cooley in the process of interpretive understanding. For a review, see Gunderson (2017). For a broader discussion on the meaning of “doing sociology with love” see the North Central Sociological Association Presidential Address of Lawrence T. Nichols (2012).

¹⁹ This act of listening resonates with what Roberto Cipriani calls a sociology of understanding. He advocates adopting Wolf’s concept of “surrender and catch”, a methodological process of patient and deliberate engagement, required to more profoundly understand, to “catch” otherness (Cipriani, 2016).

painted as “forbidden knowledge.” This risk lurks throughout the entire knowledge-production process, from the stage of the presentation of the study to one’s colleagues to the attempt to publish that study and its findings in professional journals and the academic press.

Moving Back from Suspicion to Meaning

The reader may ask: “So what? What is the benefit of moving away from suspicion and towards meaning?” This special issue is an initial attempt to answer that question. All the authors have made a conscious effort to move in this direction. They all share the need to unleash sociological reasoning from the confines of the liberal grammar so as to achieve a fuller reading of liberal as well as non-liberal subjects. They all attempt to provide an alternative reading that goes beyond suspicion through the act of listening as outlined above. Nevertheless, the search for meaning should not come at the expense of losing sight of the social structures and constraints in which our subjects are embedded.

The Center is Not Holding

The theoretical and methodological turn which I briefly outlined above emerged from over a decade of discontent with what I view as the growing mismatch between my critical sociological toolkit, grounded in liberal grammar, and the world I study. That specific “world” is in Israel, yet the implications of this mismatch extend far beyond the singularity of the Israeli case.

Equipped with “made in the USA” categories (Loveman, 2014), Israeli sociologists have long-sought to understand their homegrown non-liberal subalterns in the field, including working-class traditionalist Mizrahi Jews, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and religious Muslims, among others. What they found is that many of their subjects in the field refused to be pigeon-holed into these categories and stubbornly resisted the emancipatory spirit of critical sociology (Mizrachi, 2016, 2017).

Sociology’s partisan loyalty to the liberal agenda is politically branded and has been forced into a symbolic enclave identified with the political left. In Israel, as in America, (Frank, 2004; Haidt²⁰ 2012, Hochschild, 2016), its messages are rejected not only by its ideological rivals but also by young men and women who hail from the social periphery and who, sociologists contend, should presumably be their allies (Heilbrunn²¹ in Mizrachi, 2017, p. 73). These so-called anomalies can no longer be dismissed as temporary glitches or social ills waiting to be cured with liberal remedies.

²⁰ See also social psychologist Jonathan Haidt’s work on the moral clash between the left and the right in American (2012), which strongly resonates with my own analysis.

²¹ In her address at the closing plenum of the annual Israeli Sociological Association conference, held in January 2016 at The Tel-Aviv-Yafo College, Prof. Sybille Heilbrunn of Kinneret College spoke of the gap between sociological conceptualization and the cosmology of students from the periphery, as well as of their expressed resistance to the liberal message as experienced in her classes. In her words: “Feminism is not a concept, an idea, a way of life or a viewpoint that many students find relevant, or even desirable.”

To use Thomas Kuhn's terminology (1962), critical sociology today functions as a normal science constantly encountering anomalies. Anomalies to the liberal grammar of progressive sociology can occur in the center as well as in the periphery, and they can also obviously be ignored when they occur in the center, as we noted in our discussion of the "great paradox" or in the case of the culture of poverty as described by Patterson, let alone in the periphery. But when the anomalies appear in the periphery, that is, in non-American societies or those considered outside the core's "members," they only rarely command the attention of the disciplinary fortress at the center (see Jacobs and Mizrachi, 2020), where liberal sociology, conducted from within the prevailing paradigm, constitutes the normal science. Within that mode, counter-evidence, in this case from the periphery, is doomed to be dismissed. Cries from the periphery that the "center is not holding" are left unheard. And if these cries that come from sociologists outside the United States are still not heard by the American practitioners who set the field's agenda, fashion its prevailing assumptions, and serve as the field's gatekeepers -- can sociology really be considered an international science?

Beyond issues of the discipline's international academic stratification, Jacobs and Mizrachi's (2020) findings raise questions about the generalizability of sociological knowledge. Put simply, is sociology international? Can international sociologists, equipped as they are with a theoretical toolkit that was "made in the USA," make sense of their own societies (see, for example, Loveman, 2014)? And when they attempt to do so, what happens? These questions resonate with an older debate about the political and epistemological implications of sociology's Western canon (see Bhambra and Santos, 2017; Connell, 1997; Seidman, 1994). They likewise evoke previous discussions regarding methodological nationalism, that is, the limits of sociology's reading of society through the lens of the nation-state (Beck, 2006; see also Stompka, 2010) or, more particularly, through the lens of a particular kind of nation-state, i.e., the liberal democratic state. We are all aware that sociologists work around the world, in places such as Greece, Cyprus, Israel, or South Korea; but does this mean that there is a Greek sociology? Or a Cypriot, Israeli or South Korean sociology? Or are these sociologists working in these and many other places trying to make sense of their local maze with an American map? These issues summon us, sociologists in the international community, to seriously rethink questions regarding sociology and social place. To be sure, the balance between core and periphery in sociology cannot be resolved by a presentation of cases from around the globe that are merely intended to provide empirical evidence to fit into the predetermined American Western theoretical grammar.

These questions are far beyond the scope of this issue. However, this special issue does present an initial attempt to share with the American and international community cases that transcend the American core, that is, the liberal grammar of American sociology. We invite our colleagues abroad to converse with us about the issues at stake and contribute to the understanding of how these processes manifest themselves in diverse societies across the globe.

The papers in this issue cover a number of research areas – class, ethnicity and nationality; diversity, tolerance, and group boundaries in public space; the sociology of the family; the sociology and anthropology of peace; the liberal and non-liberal

divide in the Jewish diaspora; bio-ethics and altruism; and the notion of responsibility in medical sociology.

The paper by Guy Abutbul Selinger examines ethnic identification among middle-class Mizrahi adolescents. He goes beyond critical theories that view minority ethnic identification as an act of submission or resistance and finds that ethnic Mizrahi identity, rather than being stigmatic, is positively perceived by his informants. In practice, ethnic Mizrahi identity serves as a valuable cultural resource for improving their self-confidence and social status among their middle-class peers.

Aziz Haider and Eyal Bar-Haim's paper reveals a surprising, and extremely positive, trend in the socio-economic status of Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel: the emergence of a middle-class. This middle class developed primarily because Arab Palestinians were able to seize opportunities paradoxically created by the same policies meant to marginalize the Arab Palestinian population and to exploit the new opportunities and easing of inequality that was engendered by the free market and the expansion of higher education. According to Haider and Bar Haim, critical sociological scholarship, which focuses almost exclusively on mechanisms of oppression and political resistance among this population and is characterized by excessive suspicion and pessimism, has largely missed this trend. Their paper presents empirical findings supporting the emergence of this Arab Palestinian middle class and invites a broader discussion with regard to the respected political and theoretical implications.

Shlomo Fischer's paper addresses a well-known sociological riddle common to Israeli lived reality: the fact that working-class Mizrahim get along quite well with Arabs in the workplace and other public spheres, yet hold right-wing, ethno-centric and anti-Arab political attitudes and behaviors and maintain tightly defined group boundaries in the familial and political spheres. In order to address this riddle, he points to critical sociologists' liberal assumptions that crossing boundaries in one sphere of life automatically entails crossing boundaries in all the others. Fischer argues that liberal-progressive expectations rely on totalizing, utopian social ordering, which demands that all spheres of interaction be organized according to one principle. In contrast, working-class Mizrahis draw a clear line between profane spheres, such as work and public spaces, and sacred spheres, such as the family and politics.

Kineret Sadeh's paper also examines group boundaries, but within Mizrahi mixed families that include members adhering to different levels of religious observance. Unlike the prevailing premise in the critical sociological literature on mixed families, which celebrates the breakdown, blurring and challenging of group boundaries and social categories, Sadeh shows how Mizrahi families reaffirm and safeguard the boundaries that separate one from the other of their members. Her study provides a different lens through which to view non-liberal ways of managing diversity and fostering tolerance, solidarity and affection outside the familial sphere in societies in which liberal and non-liberal groups share a joint political space.

Erica Weiss' paper focuses on non-liberal peace initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians, a sphere of activity greatly neglected in the literature since the peace camp is assumed to be liberal. However, a significant majority of Israelis and Palestinians are religious, culturally traditionalist and community-oriented, experience a sacred connection to the land, and look to their religious traditions for a sense of justice and ideas about citizenship. They are, in other words, non-liberal subjects. These

non-liberal groups are also beginning to re-envision peace through their own cultural, Middle Eastern lens. Weiss suggests that for researchers to make a substantive, or meaningful contribution to the topics of peace and conflict resolution, they need to be far more self-reflective regarding their own normative and ideological presuppositions as well as to open their interpretive space beyond the liberal grammar and the Euro-centric models it continuously reproduces.

In her paper, Mijal Biton critiques the dominant constructivist approach to the study of American Jewish identity, which she views as based on liberal assumptions about the autonomous self, and therefore fails to accurately describe traditional communities in which the self emerges from that tradition. Focusing on the case of the Syrian Sephardic Jewish community in the United States, Biton explores the assumptions embedded in the social scientific constructivist notion of Jewish identity and argues for the scrutiny and acknowledgment of their liberal grammar. She argues that the Jewishness negotiated in this group cannot be properly understood solely through the category of Jewish identity and must instead be seen within the framework of tradition. Her analysis sheds light on the discrepancy between constructivist social scientific categories presented as not only proper but also more ethical due to their supposed universal inclusivity, and the way these categories can end up omitting the groups they are meant to include.

Hagai Boaz's paper examines the tension between altruism and solidarity through a case study of an Israeli non-profit organization matching donors with renal patients in need of a transplant. This organization allows its volunteers to select their recipient's background and indeed almost all donations are directed to Jewish patients. Based on a narrative analysis of donors' motives, Boaz seeks to expand the discussion on altruism and solidarity beyond the boundaries of the liberal interpretations of these concepts.

David Rier seeks to challenge the current discourse on personal responsibility in medical sociology and public health. He focuses on the rejection of personal responsibility in contemporary medical sociology literature and points to the advantages of taking responsibility seriously, particularly from the individual's perspective. By expanding the discussion beyond the liberal critical vision and its almost exclusive focus on structural factors and inequities, Rier sheds new light on the reasons for the mismatch between how sociologists and subjects in the field view these issues, and suggests areas for future research.

These papers provide a nascent point of departure for further research. We invite the international sociological community to join us in these endeavors.

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