



Paradigms as Epistemology, Ontology and Politics

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In this issue we present a thematic set of articles that illumine aspects of contemporary sociology in Israel, thereby continuing the effort to make the journal broadly international, as was done with earlier issues on sociology in Canada, Japan, France, Belgium, and Brazil. Special thanks are due to Professor Nissim Mizrahi, who organized the project, working closely with contributing authors throughout the process of development, and who has provided a very scholarly and wide-ranging introductory essay. Thanks also to the individual authors for their stimulating case studies.

The articles share a focus on moving beyond a perspective in sociology that the authors call “the liberal grammar,” which might be characterized as a combination of social conflict and social contract assumptions about social organization, with corresponding methods of analysis. Importantly, the authors do not seek to refute the liberal grammar, but rather to demonstrate that it has certain limitations that make it difficult for sociologists who employ it (as a “tool kit”) to understand adequately some types of persons and practices. The authors have a particular concern for developing a sociological understanding of those groups—which are often prominent among Israeli and Palestinian peoples—that can be defined as conservative or as “non-liberal subjects.” They ask: Can non-liberal subjects be allowed to speak in their own voice and to describe their own reality, and, if they do so, can sociologists listen and understand? As noted in some of the articles, this approach accords with the Weberian tradition of “*verstehen*” (“understanding”) and is similar to the phenomenological method of “surrender and catch” that Kurt Wolff articulated.

Saying that the “liberal grammar” has limitations is arguably true by definition, since every perspective is constrained by its foundational premises. Sociology has not been any more successful than has physics in creating an all-encompassing “Theory of Everything.” Rather, the field remains “multi-paradigmatic,” in the often-cited phrase of George Ritzer. Consequently, it sometimes seems to audiences that, as the historian Crane Brinton complained almost a century ago, “Sociologists can’t agree on anything.” The question therefore arises as to whether there is, or might be, some sort of “unity in diversity.”

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Pitirim Sorokin attempted to deal with this issue over the course of several decades. In a widely read survey of “Contemporary Sociological Theories,” Sorokin organized various approaches in terms of “schools” that adhered to a range of foundational premises, such as the “mechanistic,” “psychologicistic,” and “sociologicistic” assumptions. Sorokin argued for a tolerant attitude that would appreciate the value of each school for understanding some aspect of the great complexity of social life. Subsequently, in examining “Sociological Theories of Today,” Sorokin expressed this tolerant ideal as “Integralism,” which refers to a blending of the truth and insights of particular outlooks: structure and process; conflict and cooperation; stability and change, etc. The approach of the authors in this issue seems to me to be in the spirit of Integralism.

What complicates matters, of course, is that in addition to the epistemological aspect there are also psychological, economic and political aspects that influence the creation, as well as the maintenance and the rise and decline of paradigms or “grammars.” Psychologically, some sociologists are more inclined either to “affirm what is good” or else to “critique what is evil,” especially, in the latter case, if they consider themselves to have been harmed by social and cultural arrangements and practices. Some are drawn to the field by a desire to pursue critical sociology as a vocation and to engage in “public-sociology style” activism. Such attitudes, along with a desire to interact mainly or exclusively with like-minded colleagues, can contribute to what Sara Crawley has characterized as “encampment.”

Economically, some perspectives have, one might say, a greater or lesser market value, in the sense that they “sell” more or less widely, both within the field of sociology and outside of it. Generally speaking, for instance, sociologists who adopt quantitative methods in order to carry out network analysis based on exchange theory will have more career options, and perhaps greater earning potential than will others who choose, say, ethnomethodology. The same holds true for students, who may select a program of study based on a sense that certain perspectives available in an academic department appear to offer wider career possibilities. In addition, outside sponsors and consumers can impose demands, such as the stipulation that grant-funded research should employ a method of random clinical trials.

Meanwhile, there is an ongoing political dynamic that has perhaps not yet been studied empirically, in which adherents of particular perspectives compete and struggle for prominence and hegemony. For instance, there are sometimes disputes in academic departments with regard to such matters as defining job ads or developing areas of emphasis in curriculum. In professional associations political commitments sometimes influence decisions about themes for conferences and thereby feature certain perspectives, while downplaying or even excluding others. Presidential addresses at conferences sometimes also signal which approaches are favored or not favored, perhaps even stigmatized. One result, as many readers are already aware, is that there has developed, to a significant extent, a split between adherents of different approaches, and perhaps especially between those who continue to support a “science-building” project and those who see the field in terms of “political engagement” toward extensive, even radical transformation. There are significant external political factors as well. In some nations, governing regimes have required that sociologists employ a Marxist or Leninist or Maoist approach, or that they carry out their work in accord

with religious teachings such as those of Christianity or Islam. Authoritarian rulers, across the ideological spectrum, will, in general, tend to suppress critical sociological work and to reduce sociology to a technical adjunct to established policy. There is, in other words, not simply intellectual agreement or disagreement regarding paradigms, but also a mobilization of resources to impose or suppress paradigms that is sometimes backed by legal enforcement and by military power.

The political dynamic also involves a moralistic dimension, in the sense that those with contrasting and competing views frequently pass judgment on one another in terms of a presumed standard. For some in the discipline, the reduction of sociology to partisan politics and the abandonment of any shared “ethos of science” is objectionable. Others, meanwhile, incline toward the view that anyone not doing “liberation” sociology is acting unethically, in the sense of being directly or indirectly complicit in ongoing injustice and oppression. It is difficult to see how this opposition can be resolved amicably.

Such concerns, however, are beyond the scope of the present issue of the journal, where the focus is mainly epistemological and methodological. I expect that many readers will appreciate the informative and insightful analyses by our guest editor and contributing authors.

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