



Three Sociologists as National Leaders: Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Jože Pučnik and Bernardo Arévalo

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Abstract

Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil and Bernardo Arévalo of Guatemala are PhD sociologists who served as presidents of their countries. Jože Pučnik of Slovenia, also a PhD sociologist, was a leading but defeated candidate in his country's first post-communist presidential election. This paper explores the relationship between their sociological work and their political careers. Cardoso's work was interdisciplinary and focused on historical conjunctures. He was very widely cited in scholarly publications. Pučnik was concerned with overcoming fundamentalist megaliths and uniting theory and practice. He had difficulty communicating the relationship between his sociology and his political leadership. Arévalo wrote a dissertation in the historical sociology of Guatemalan militarism, and also pursued an applied sociological career in conflict resolution. Sociological leadership may be enhanced by using middle-range theories tuned to current situations, especially at times of crisis, and by advocating timely and feasible solutions.

Keywords Presidential leadership · Applied sociology

Sociologists have seldom played prominent leadership roles in the national politics of their countries, despite the obvious relevance of the discipline. This paper explores the contributions of three sociologists who are exceptions: Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil, Jože Pučnik of Slovenia and Bernardo Arévalo of Guatemala. Cardoso and Arévalo served as presidents of their countries, Pučnik narrowly missed being president for reasons that will be discussed, and served as leader of the opposition in parliament.

Cardoso put his leadership experiences in a sociological perspective in a televised lecture titled "Max Weber's essay 'Politics as a Vocation' and its relevance to today's world" (Cardoso, 2019). In that lecture, which can be viewed online with English closed captions, he says that sociologists used to think that it was enough to analyze social forces as if they were objective facts leading to determined outcomes, but that leaders must shape reality, not just analyze it. He says that charisma is the

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most important of Weber's concepts of power, and that a leader must create a path, not choose one. He thought leadership was a dramatic role, and stressed that leaders must not shy away from the state's control of violence.

Jose Arévalo, in his seminal work on Guatemalan political sociology (Arévalo, 2018), stresses the importance of a multidisciplinary historical approach, focusing on the issues of each time period rather than on more general social theory. He left a successful diplomatic career to become an applied sociologist working on conflict resolution.

Pučnik (Kos n.d.) was concerned with demolishing "fundamentalist megaliths" and building a society that went beyond the cult of the leader. He rejected the dichotomy between theory and practice, believing that everything is both theory and practice.

In this essay, I discuss the sociological work of the three leaders and its relevance to their politics.

Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1931-)

Cardoso was one of the most widely cited social scientists of his generation (Goertzel, 2010). His work and biography are well known, so I will summarize briefly for comparative purposes. He is sometimes referred to as a Marxist sociologist because he was one of the organizers of a study group that read Marx and nurtured several prominent Brazilian scholars. But the group also read Max Weber and other classic social scientists. Marxism was an important part, but only a part, of his intellectual formation. He was active in the literary and intellectual periphery of the Brazilian Communist Party as a young man. As a mature political leader, he frequently referred to Weber.

Cardoso began his sociological career with field work on race and social mobility in Brazil and on the leaders of Brazilian capitalism. The latter work led him to disagree with the political line of the Brazilian Communist Party which thought that Brazilian capitalists could be mobilized on national grounds against American and European imperialism. He found that the capitalists were eager to work with foreign companies. His most influential work was a book on dependency and development, co-authored with Enzo Faletto. That book, which compared the economic histories of several Latin American countries, came about because he was exiled from Brazil after the 1964 *coup d'état* and was working for a United Nations agency in Chile.

When Cardoso is asked about the impact of his sociological background on his political work he stresses that he was trained in anthropology and economics as well as sociology (Burawoy, 2013). He thinks that his early field work experiences helped him to relate better to Brazilians without his educational and social advantages. When a policy issue came up in government, he says he found that there was always some social scientist who had studied it. He did not think of himself as applying a theory, but as a leader informed by empirical work. While he was often referred to as a founder of "dependency theory", he did not think of dependency as a theory but as a topic for empirical study.

Cardoso came from an elite social background, his father was a general in the army, albeit with close ties to the Communist Party. He was active in the movement to return Brazil to democracy and was elected to the Brazilian senate as an “alternate”, a kind of vice-senator. When his senator moved to another post he became a senator and flourished as a leader in the senate. He had moved to the role of ambassador to the United Nations when he accepted the president’s unexpected plea that he take on the job of finance minister. Three other finance ministers had failed to control the hyperinflation that was the overwhelming concern at the time. The finance ministry was thought to be a dead end for a politician’s career, but he surprised everyone by succeeding in stabilizing the currency without imposing austerity. While this might be thought of as an economic rather than a sociological accomplishment, his role was putting together a coalition in the Brazilian government to take measures his economic advisors said were necessary. He took advantage of a window of opportunity when the Brazilian establishment was frightened that the economy was about to collapse. This accomplishment enabled him to win the presidency against the leftist candidate, his ally in the democratization movement, Lula da Silva. He served two terms as president, and passed the presidential sash on to Lula.

Jože Pučnik (1932–2003)

Pučnik was born just nine months after Cardoso, and both earned doctorates in sociology. Both were prominent in democratization movements in their countries. But the political situations in their countries were very different as were their careers. Pučnik’s academic works have been published only in Slovenian and are very seldom cited. Pučnik would be an interesting subject for a serious biography, but that would need to be undertaken by someone who knows Slovenian. I have relied on the sparse material available in English and on computer translations of documents available online in Slovenian and one in Russian. This is obviously not ideal, but I have proceeded since it seems unlikely that anyone better qualified will write on the subject.

Pučnik was born in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia which was occupied by the Axis powers when he was ten and was taken over by the Yugoslav Partisans when he was fourteen. His family were Catholic peasants who supported Slovenian liberation during the Axis occupation. His older brother fought with the Yugoslav partisans. But by the time he entered high school, he and many young people were disillusioned with Communist rule. He wrote an article for a school magazine in which he stated that “today’s man is chained in the shackles of legitimized violence”, and “The autocrat is trying to destroy the close ties among people” (Gabrič, 2018). As a consequence, he was not allowed to take his final exams, did not get his diploma, and was drafted into the army.

After military service, he was able to enter the university and earned a degree in philosophy and literature. He continued to write critical articles, and was known for using language that was especially blunt, saying clearly what others said indirectly or with metaphors. As a result, he spent five years in prison, then after a parole, another two years. He had to be represented by his brother at his wedding to his pregnant girlfriend.

On his release from his second prison term, he emigrated to Germany hoping to do graduate study, but he could not do so because the authorities refused to send his transcript from the University of Ljubljana. He supported himself with laboring jobs, and began undergraduate studies in philosophy and sociology at the University of Hamburg. He became interested in the intersection of philosophy and sociology, reading the phenomenologists and sociologists such as Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann. He received a PhD in 1971 with a dissertation titled: “Structural–functional analysis and empirical research: Attempt at a scientific–logical interpretation of the connection between sociological theory and empiricism” [in German]. After getting his degree, he taught sociology in Hamburg and Lüneburg, and also became involved in German Social Democratic Party circles (Wikipedia, n.d.).

In the 1980’s, liberalization in Slovenia made it possible for him to resume publishing there. He was one of a group of critical intellectuals centered around a magazine, *Nova Revija*, which became a focus of the movement to develop “civil society” groups independent of the regime (Starikova, 2021). Pučnik was especially known for an article, “The Political System of Civil Society”, that appeared in 1987 in volume 57 of *Nova Revija* which became the manifesto for the transition to democracy. His contribution stood out for openly calling for a transition to a pluralistic political system.

In 1989, he returned to Slovenia and became the leader of a newly formed coalition of democratic parties, DEMOS, which won a majority in the parliamentary elections on April 8, 1990. There was a separate vote for the presidency, leading to a runoff on April 22. Pučnik lost the runoff, 59% to 41%, to Milan Kučan, a former leader of the League of Communists who had left the party and advocated democratic reform.

In a provocative essay, Bernard Nežmah (2003) argues that Pučnik was ideally positioned to become president. He was the icon of democracy, greatly admired for his courage and determination. He could have played the role that Lech Walesa played in Poland, Vaclav Havel played in Czechoslovakia and Arpad Goncz played in Hungary. The reasons for his loss in the presidential runoff are complex, but apparently many voters thought that Kučan was pragmatic while Pučnik was lost in the clouds. The five key policy positions DEMOS had advocated were largely passed by parliament and implemented by the Kučan government. However, the DEMOS parties did much worse in the elections that were held in 1992, and it was increasingly difficult for Pučnik to hold the coalition together.

In a very sympathetic review of his sociological treatise published by the Jože Pučnik Institute (Kos n.d.), the reviewer begins by acknowledging “the theoretical abstractness and difficulty of the language, which the author himself admits”. The reviewer also provided some illustrative quotes from the book:

- “Culture is primarily technology in its effects. Culture is technology in its way, technology is culture in its effects”.
- “Thinking is only a specific form of action and is structurally indistinguishable from sweeping the road or the growth of human hair”.

- “The elimination of violent Leninist politicization of the whole life and bringing social regulations closer to the infrastructural happenings in culture as well as the lives of individuals”
- “The degree of consideration of personnel is the criterion or measure by which we judge and evaluate but also change existing institutions”.

The reviewer concludes that “Pučnik’s book leads the reader into a deep labyrinth and offers him in the process also Ariadne’s comeback thread”. These quotes, and the review, might be easier to understand in the original Slovenian than in the computer translations I have relied on. But the reviewer also found the book difficult to follow and there are no citations to it in Google Scholar. Pučnik was grappling with some difficult epistemological issues and may have confused more than he clarified.

In addition to the review just mentioned, there is a paper published in English by a professor at the University of Ljubljana (Kommel, 2014) which puts Pučnik’s work in a biographical context. It seems that Pučnik’s experience as a political prisoner left him deeply skeptical of political ideologies and especially of personality cults. He was critical of tendencies within Slovenian society that had allowed the cult of Tito to thrive, and thought those tendencies had persisted after the end of communism. He retired from active participation in politics in 1966. His feelings of alienation from Slovenian society were expressed in a 1999 article (in Kommel’s translation):

“The chronic lethargy of legal, political, and moral measures is causing an erosion of the rule of law and presents a threat to the democratic system. The cause does not lie only in the negligence and irresponsibility of individuals because both are already the consequence of the general value lethargy of the Slovenian public and the institutions of the state. This lethargy enables the spread of an insincere relation towards reality, the falsification of facts, and public appearances, in which the people assuming the key positions in our country are lying to your face while at the same time looking into your eyes. ... Not only politicians do this, but also people in journalism, science, business, and government. Because of this general value lethargy in Slovenia, we do not have a completely formed sensitivity to truth and lies”.

Pučnik did not become president of Slovenia, possibly because his concerns about cults of personality kept him from projecting the kind of charisma some voters wanted. He played an important role in parliament as leader of the main opposition coalition during Slovenia’s first democratic government. He headed a commission to assess responsibility for summary executions perpetuated by the Communist regime. He may have done as much or more to advance Slovenian society in those roles as he could have as president. He did not entirely escape the cult of personality; the main airport in Slovenia is the Ljubljana Jože Pučnik Airport.

Bernardo Arévalo (1958-)

Bernardo Arévalo is the son of Juan José Arévalo, a professor of philosophy who was president of Guatemala from 1945 to 1951. Juan José was known for his philosophy of “spiritual socialism”, a social democratic value oriented approach. He went into voluntary exile when his successor, Jacobo Árbenz, was overthrown in 1954, and Bernardo was born in Montevideo.

Bernardo spent much of his childhood in Venezuela, Mexico and Chile, as his father pursued academic and diplomatic appointments. He traveled to Guatemala for the first time when he was 15 where he finished high school and then moved to Israel where his father was the Guatemalan ambassador. He learned Hebrew, got a bachelor’s degree in sociology from the Hebrew University and began a diplomatic career as first secretary and consul at the Embassy of Guatemala. He worked his way up in the foreign service, becoming Ambassador to Spain in 1995–1996, then left the foreign service to work for an international organization, Interpeace, which helped countries develop skills in nonviolent conflict resolution.

As time permitted, Arévalo pursued his interest in the political sociology of Guatemala’s violent history and its struggle to democratize, the struggle which had consumed his father’s life. In 2015, at the age of 56, and 25 years after his father’s death, he defended his PhD dissertation at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. The title: “From the Violent State to the Political Army: Violence, State Formation and the Military in Guatemala, 1500—1963” [in Spanish]. It was published as a book (Arévalo, 2018) and a free pdf is available online. It is an impressive and clearly written work in which he explains his methodological approach (in my translation):

“It is not possible to understand a reality “sociologically” without a basis in the corresponding historiography, nor to develop intelligible historical narratives without recourse to the analytical categories of the social sciences. The same thing applies to the incorporation of tools and perspectives coming from other analytic disciplines - for example, use of elements from rhetoric, anthropology, political economy or literary studies - in a socio-historical analysis. This has led some authors to characterize historical sociology as eminently trans- or post-disciplinary. (p. 25.)”.

The book is organized chronologically, with each section having two chapters, one based in the historical literature, the other offering an analytical interpretation. His stated intention to separate the historical accounts from the analytical interpretations seems inconsistent with his argument that historical narrative is not intelligible without analytical categories. It might have been requested by his thesis advisors. But his historical accounts are sociologically informed and quite intelligible, and each section ends with a summary section that is more analytical. The book explains how Guatemala developed from a country dominated by a loosely organized land owning elite that used militias to suppress the lower classes to one dominated by a professionalized army that became the dominant

political force. The professionalized army managed to suppress a guerrilla movement that was more threatening than those in Argentina or Chile with much more loss of life. As it became more professionalized, the army came to realize that it needed democratic political institutions to establish a stable social order.

The dissertation was written in his spare time while he was employed as a diplomat and applied sociologist, working with a number of organizations focused on peacebuilding and nonviolent conflict resolution. His publications in this period had an applied focus, including materials to be used in workshops and evaluation studies (Arévalo, 2007; Arévalo & Tager, 2016).

He also became active in political organizing in Guatemala, helping to build a new political party, *El Movimiento Semilla* [*The Seed Movement*] with a strong focus on fighting corruption. In 2023 he won a surprising landslide victory as the party's presidential candidate and in February 2024 he was able to take office despite legal maneuvers by the establishment. Strong support from the United States government was a factor in persuading the military and the establishment to allow him to take power, a remarkable change from his father's era. He has not had time to update the historical account in his dissertation, but events seem to be following from the pattern he had analyzed.

As of this writing, Arévalo has just taken office and has strong support, especially from the indigenous population, but opposition to his presidency and to *Semilla* is very strong from the elite which controls other branches of the government. This is not the place to analyze Guatemalan politics and certainly not the time to attempt to evaluate his presidency.

Conclusions

It is perhaps not surprising that few sociologists have played national leadership roles, neither have PhD political scientists. Woodrow Wilson, with a PhD in political science and history, is the only U.S. president to have a doctorate in any field other than law. People who have the inclination to write a doctoral dissertation are more likely to pursue academic careers. Cardoso was well along on a very successful academic career, after his exile, when the military government banned him and many other professors from teaching anywhere in the country (although allowing the university to continue his salary). This led him into applied sociology and electoral politics, just as exile had led him into Latin American studies. In a more stable country he might have stayed in academia. He has described himself as an accidental president (Cardoso & Winter, 2007).

Arévalo followed in his father's footsteps in many ways. He was doing well in a diplomatic career, which is a not uncommon path for leading Latin American intellectuals, when he made a decision to become an applied sociologist focusing on conflict resolution. He had a nuanced understanding of the structural issues and trends in Guatemalan society and helped to develop techniques that could resolve them. He faces very difficult challenges as president of Guatemala, but it is hard to think how he could have better prepared to deal with them.

Pučnik came from a working class family and had a much more difficult life. His involvement in academic sociology in Germany was a break from the severe repression in Yugoslavia. He did not choose to do historical or political sociology or to write a dissertation on the transition in Eastern Europe, instead he became absorbed in theoretical and epistemological issues. At the same time, he was active in social democratic politics in Germany, taught sociology courses, and resumed publishing social commentary in Slovenia when it became possible. He thought his theoretical and his political work were related in that both were concerned with breaking down fundamentalist thinking/practice, but he had a hard time communicating this.

Cardoso and Arévalo both focused much of their scholarly work on the political and social situation in their countries, and wrote works which were accessible to the educated public. Both were active primarily outside of academic sociology. Cardoso's writing focuses largely on specific historical conjunctures, as does Arévalo's dissertation. Arévalo's applied work on conflict resolution draws on general principles of group dynamics, with a focus on how these principles could be applied in the Guatemalan and Central American context.

Three cases are not enough to form strong conclusions, but they do offer some food for thought. Sociological theories and research that focus on change in specific historical conjunctures may be more valuable for leaders than work that seeks to establish lasting abstract principles. Work that takes sociologists out of the academic cocoon, either to do field research or applied practice, may help them to break out of the world of abstract ideas and statistical generalizations. Specifically sociological knowledge may become more salient when a society faces a crisis that calls for questioning established paradigms and making structural changes. Legal training, on the other hand, may be more useful for routine transactional politics. This is not to suggest that our sociologist leaders weren't good at day-to-day politics, which takes place in academia and foreign ministries as well as in legislatures. Cardoso was a successful senator and he and Arévalo were both successful diplomats. Pučnik effectively managed a fractious coalition of progressive political parties. But the distinctively sociological aspect of their contributions was to understand the need for structural change and to formulate and advocate solutions.

There are other leaders who also used sociological perspectives although they did not obtain a doctorate in the subject. Tomáš Masaryk received his doctorate at the University of Vienna in philosophy, but his dissertation topic and his first book were on "Suicide as a Mass Social Phenomenon of Modern Civilization". He attributed suicide rates to rapid social change at the *fin de siècle* and advocated renewed religious faith as a solution (Zeman, 2019). In a book published in Vienna in 1889, he criticized Marxism for its economic determinism and stressed the importance of ethical and spiritual factors in political life. He published widely on social topics, such as ethnic differences in central European societies, as well as on philosophical, literary and historical topics. Masaryk became a charismatic figure, revered as the founder of his country, by resolutely articulating his vision for a Czechoslovak nation and by diplomatic skill in realizing it in the aftermath of World War I. When he was lying in state, the procession of mourners past his coffin lasted all night.

Edvard Beneš, Masaryk's designated successor as President of Czechoslovakia, taught sociology with a philosophy degree and wrote sociological essays. As leaders,

both men were necessarily absorbed with defending the Czechoslovakian nation in treacherous geopolitical situations.

Michael Higgins, the President of Ireland, earned a masters degree in sociology from Indiana University and taught some sociology and political science courses, although he is much better known as a poet. As president, he opposed neoliberalism, advocated cultural diversity and fought racism and homophobia.

Sociological ideas also have impact through writers who influence important political leaders. Three who come to mind are Michael Harrington, whose writing on poverty inspired John F. Kennedy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose ideas on racial relations influenced Richard Nixon, and Anthony Giddens whose writings on the Third Way influenced Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. These writers need not be formally trained in sociology. Harrington had an M.A. in English literature but got involved in sociological thinking through the socialist movement. Moynihan had an undergraduate sociology major, as well as one in naval science, but got his graduate degrees in diplomacy and history. He became a United States senator as well as an advisor to presidents.

Giddens, on the other hand, is a leading sociological theorist with an impressive academic career. His writings on methodological issues are very widely cited. When he got involved in political advocacy, however, he put aside his abstract theoretical concepts for middle-range theorizing about ideological polarization in advanced democracies.

Two types of middle-range sociological theorizing seem to be helpful to political leaders. The first is theorizing about specific social problems in specific historical contexts such as poverty and race relations in the United States, macroeconomic instability in Brazil, and corruption in Guatemala. The second is theorizing about group dynamics and leadership processes, such as Cardoso's application of Max Weber's writing about politics as a vocation to the Brazilian context and Arévalo's work using conflict resolution techniques in Guatemala.

Theoretical ideas have to be adapted to a context. Max Weber's writings about charisma were largely rooted in his study of religious movements and placed emphasis on the personality of the charismatic leader. None of our three sociologist leaders is known for a mesmerizing charismatic personality, yet they became charismatic figures. Despite his professorial demeanor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso twice defeated the most charismatic personality to emerge in Brazilian politics since Getúlio Vargas in the 1930s, Lula da Silva. Cardoso won his charisma as the wizard who slew the dragon of hyperinflation. It might be said that his sophisticated professorial manner was part of his mystique; this also might be said of Tomáš Masaryk. Lula da Silva, a charming union leader without academic pretensions, finally won the presidency when he promised to continue Cardoso's key economic policies and developed a softer image that Brazilians called Lula Lite.

Slovenian scholars have suggested that the classical archetype of the hero may be helpful (Fikfak, 2013). A hero is a person who combats adversity with strength, courage and ingenuity. Our sociological heroes became charismatic by steadfastness in standing up to compromised authority and by finding solutions to the acute problems of the day. Their solutions were not new so much as they were timely. Cardoso didn't devise a new theory of inflation, he relied on economists, most of whom had worked for previous ministers and had learned from their experiences. Pučnik had

great courage in clearly advocating well known Western ideas about civil society and democracy at a time when Eastern European communism had lost legitimacy and was violently clinging to power. Arévalo's and *Semilla's* anti-corruption ideas are widely shared throughout Latin America; they succeeded in packaging and promoting them at a time when it was just barely possible to win the presidency.

Very few sociologists will have the opportunity or talent to become national heroes, but there are many opportunities to play leadership roles that may be enhanced by using middle-range theories tuned to current situations, especially at times of crisis, and by advocating timely and feasible solutions. Sociological thinking, adroitly applied in the right circumstances, can even provide a useful kind of charisma.

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