

Political Sociology and the Fate of the Precariat Professor

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Abstract

The sociologists' mandate is to recognize and research the social, political, and economic forces that influence people and groups and to advocate for the disadvantaged among us. If sociologists want to fulfill the whole mandate, they should also be willing to advocate for the precariat professor. In the United States, these contingent workers teach part-time, are employed on a short-term basis, receive low pay and no health benefits, and have little input into the governance of the institutions in which they work; in short, precarity. To advocate for the precariat professor is to advocate for reform of the academic system. We argue that all sociologists should learn from their feminist colleagues in advocating for the lecturers and non-tenured adjuncts teaching sociology courses. Political sociology has a special role to play in reforming academia; as students of the intersection of society and politics, and as the primary researchers of social movements, they could be at the forefront of radical sociology, public engagement, and activism for disadvantaged groups across society, including the precariat professor.

Keywords: Precarious work. Academia. Precariat faculty.

A tidal wave of change floods the world and, in its wake, bestows upon sociologists a wealth of phenomena to study: war, refugees, rising economic inequality, political upheavals, and a nationalist resurgence, to name a few. At the same time, we have a technology boom – internet and its knock-on effects – that have allowed sociologists to collaborate across vast reaches of space, and to become media producers to publish what and when they want – from tweets and blog pieces, to podcasts and open access journals. Never before have had sociologists such an array of powerful means to document the world’s problems. The end may be nigh, but our academic output has never been stronger.

On a neglected island of American academia live the adjunct professors, sociology’s contingent and precarious workers. They, too, experience the tidal wave. Their low-paid, short contract role, thus far, have been to teach students about what sociologists know. In the United States, the symbiotic relationship between precariat adjuncts and their students is fueled by social forces: the necessity of college education to get a decent paying job produces more students; the downward trend in state funding for education and, paradoxically, an increasingly bloated administration produces more short-term contract adjunct professors¹. More students mean more

¹ Pulling Up the Higher-Ed Ladder: Myth and Reality in the Crisis of College Affordability May 5, 2015 by Robert Hiltonsmith <http://www.demos.org/publication/pulling-higher-ed-ladder-myth-and-reality-crisis-college-affordability>

adjuncts. As students struggle to find post-graduation employment in a sluggish economy that produces more precarious jobs than good jobs, the adjunct faculty prepares for the next lesson and hopes for a job next semester. Academic workers on part-time contracts are faced with a choice: accept the decline of their wages and working conditions, or organize to resist and maybe even reverse that trend.

Our main argument is that sociologists must confront the tidal wave of change as it hits two populations. One population is the mass public and their policy-producing governments that would benefit from sociological knowledge. The second is the contingent, precarious faculty whose life chances are lesser than that of the salaried professoriate. These populations are among us. To solve the problems of both fits the sociologists' mandate. The sociologists' mandate is to recognize and research the social, political, and economic forces that influence human beings and their groups, and to advocate for the most vulnerable among us. If sociologists wish to fulfill the whole mandate, they must apply their sociological knowledge in the institutions in which they work, and acknowledge that they and their colleagues are laborers in an unequal system; they must be willing to advocate for the precariat professor.

While our discussion is about sociology as a whole, we feel that political sociology has a special role to play. Political sociologists study the intersection of society, politics, and social movements and thus, theoretically, should be at the forefront of public engagement and activism. There is a movement afoot in political sociology to question their field and the role they play in shaping

policy². We argue that part of this soul-searching should include a feminist approach that has long exhorted sociologists to engage the public, and should include advocating for the precariat faculty that teach our political sociology courses.

Political Sociology: Science and Social Movements

Given the diverse input by scholars of many disciplines and specializations, political sociology is hard to define. According to the website of the Political Sociology section of the American Sociological Association (ASA), the study of political sociology encompasses the “sociological understanding of political phenomena.” The Committee on Political Sociology (CPS), a multidisciplinary organization that joins the political sociology sections of both the International Sociological Association (ISA) and the International Political Science Association (IPSA), sees political sociology as about “the interrelationships between political and social forces in the light of transnational and interdisciplinary comparisons.” The massive *Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies and Globalization*, edited by Thomas Janoski and colleagues and published in 2005, offers 32 chapters and over 800 pages in its attempt

² For example, there is an upcoming (December 2017) conference in Andrés Bello University, Chile, organized by the Committee on Political Sociology of ISA and IPSA, called 'Redefining Political Sociology', and whose main questions are, “What is political sociology today? How is political sociology innovating in its theory and methods? How has political sociology contributed to the disciplines of sociology and political science? What is political sociology’s current social and political role within academia? How can political sociology best inform the wider audiences as well as policy makers?”

to provide an “integrated overview of major theories and findings” in political sociology (Janoski et al. 2005, p.4). Political sociology itself is not specifically defined beyond the vague, “social bases of politics” (4).

Political Sociology as a Dispassionate Science, 1945 – 1970s

Given that both sociology and political science share a common devotion to scientific methods, it has been long suspected that political sociology is a bridge between them. The study of what political sociology is has a century-long history (Hicks et al 2005: 1; Satori 1969; Mitra & Pehl 2010). The relationship between political sociology and political science has been called “deeply interdependent” and very similar in “metatheory and method” (Hicks 1995, p.1219; Satori 1969, p.198 made a similar point). “Political sociology,” Satori (1969, p.200) wrote, “is an interdisciplinary hybrid attempting to combine social and political explanatory variables.” Thus, we begin the discussion of political sociology to include both sociology and political science.

Political sociology grew out of the idea that sociology is an impartial, objectively dispassionate science. The post-World War Two period, up until the 1970s, featured the “ascendency” of the social sciences, owing much to the broadening and democratization of higher education in the U.S. and Europe (Ross 2003, p.229), and the general ascendency of Western science as an intellectually satisfying way to generate orderly explanations of the chaos that seems to be everywhere (see also Satori 1969, p.196). Science was so important to certain key figures of early 1900s political research

that, when they created their professional association, they chose it as part of their name (Gunnell, 2006: 481-3). Though, as Sigelman (2010) points out, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that political scientists sought “to place the discipline on a more ‘scientific’ footing” (884). From 1945 to the late 1960s, political science focused on behavioralism, with a growing emphasis on science, quantification, systems and political behavior (Farr 2003; Dryzek 2006, p.490).

Who Owns the Study of Social Movements? Post-1970s Political Sociology

Part of our argument is that sociologists studying political sociology are potentially suited to lead the public advocacy for the precariat professor because these sociologists have a strong background in the study of social movements. History and empirical evidence suggest that they possess this background.

The 1970s became a turning point in the history of the relationship between sociology and political science: They grew apart. In the 1970s, sociologists and political scientists in the West re-examined their assumptions and disciplinary foci (Ross 2003, pp. 234-7; Sigelman 2010, pp.883-5). Ross (2003, p.234) argued that the leftism of the social sciences brought previously under-researched phenomena in the social sciences, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation, into the mainstream. At this time, some sociologists questioned whether sociology is a “science” (Gove 1979, p.799), though this did not slow major advances in, and the growing popularity of, quantitative methods in sociology and political science in the major journals (Porter 2003). Sociology and political

science began to separate further as each discipline fought internally; within these fights they compared themselves with other social sciences and with the physical sciences. Since the 1970s, political science carried on many of the methodological traditions of the behaviorist era, with an increasing emphasis on the State as having a great deal of autonomy from sociological forces: “Reacting against alleged societal reductionism of the behavioral era,” Dryzek (2006, p.491) argued, “the new statisticians saw the state as an independent variable in the sense that public officials could have interests of their own that did not simply reflect social forces.” Political science intensified its focus on politics, while sociology had continued to treat politics as one of the many inter-related factors that influences human thoughts and behaviors.

Political sociology’s popularity and importance to sociology and political science have been debated. Political sociology was once a vibrant area of political science, one that inspired a number of analyses of its present and speculations on its future (a classic analysis is by Satori 1969). In a recent article in *Sociologias*, Dubrow and Kolczynska (2015) measured this relationship with citations of full-length articles contained in the main journals of each discipline. The major journals are the prime means of scientific communication; such journals considered to be within a particular discipline will reflect the tastes of that discipline. Dubrow and Kolczynska (2015) analyzed both the total number of cross-citations, and of cross-citations between articles on the topic of democracy. They found that, between 1945 and 1970, sociology and political science were almost equally likely to publish works on the

major concepts of political sociology: democracy, political participation, civil society, and social movements. By the 2010s, political science became the more likely destination for research on democracy, participation, and civil society. In this disciplinary divorce, sociology took social movements.

Thanks to its slow-but-sure building of feminism into sociology's mainstream, and the continuing discussions within sociology about the discipline's relevance to society and the need to advocate for the disadvantaged, sociology had become a destination for social movement research publications. Since social movements are a core area of political sociology that is studied largely within the discipline of sociology, sociologists *qua* political sociologists have a useful background to learn from social movements and engage with the public.

On this score, and in the spirit of a sociology that is in dialog (thus the title of this journal) we offer a quote from a reviewer who commented on an earlier version of the article:

It seems quite naïve to think that political sociologists could be at the forefront of radical sociology due only to their knowledge of social movements. The political game and organization have their own logic. Being a good activist does not always depend on expert knowledge, rather on a practical sense (a "sense of the game") generated through experience and practical commitment"

This is well put and quite right; we are thankful for this criticism. Perhaps we are being a bit naïve. Perhaps, though, there is a defense for being naïve. There has always been a tension between

sociology as a science and sociology as activism. Former ASA president Joe Feagin in “Social Justice and Sociology: Agendas for the Twenty-First Century” (2001) wrote that sociology’s goals “have long reflected a dialectical tension between a commitment to remedy social injustice and the desire to be accepted as a fully legitimate discipline in the larger society, especially by powerful elites” (p.6). Perhaps sociologists should ask themselves where they fall within this dialectic. What does the discipline mean to them? What is its purpose? How do their social statuses (privileged and targeted identities) influence where they stand?

On this (and many other things) we can learn from feminist social science.

Feminism and the Sociologists’ Mandate

The history of feminism has many authors and is important to read about. Our point here is to remind sociologists that feminists have, for many, many decades, both recognized the inherent social bases in politics (and the politics of social bases), and have advocated for an activist approach to contending with the tidal wave of change.

Organizations such as Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS) and the European Consortium of Political Research’s (ECPR) Standing Group on Gender and Politics, have long been meetinghouses for feminist and other gender scholars to study politics and society, to promote activism, and to actively assist their fellow social scientists. SWS is a U.S. based organization formed in

1971³, the years when sociology was beginning to question its direction. The mission of SWS today is: “1. Encouraging the development of sociological feminist theory and scholarship; 2. Transforming the academy through feminist leadership, career development, and institutional diversity; 3. Promoting social justice through local, national, and international activism; 4. Supporting the publication and dissemination of cutting edge feminist social science.”⁴ Thus, support for adjunct faculty is well within their own mission. Note, too, that feminism and the study of politics and society goes beyond the U.S. Internationally, ECPR’s Gender and Politics group formed in 1986 and currently “encourages workshops, panels and research groups with an emphasis on gender and seeks to increase the profile of women in the main fields of political science”⁵ (see also Lovenduski 2010; Celis and Kantola 2009; and Dahlerup 2010).

Sociologist activism on behalf of their fellow academics, and with mass publics, has a long history. In the 1960s and 1970s, sociologists had actively challenged the dialectical tension between science and activism and attempted to push the American Sociological Association, and sociologists generally. Fuller (1996) outlines this in her work, “Producing Radical Scholarship: The Radical Sociology Movement, 1967-1975”:

Many sociologists want their scholarly work to better human life. Peace researchers, students of women's studies and minority studies, and Marxist sociologists, for example, generally

³ <http://www.socwomen.org/sws-activism/>

⁴ <http://www.socwomen.org/mission-statement/>

⁵ <http://www.ecpg.eu/ecpr-standing-group.html>

intend their work to contribute to the elimination of different forms of domination in society. Yet we have been remarkably unreflexive about how precisely our work can serve this end. Specifically, we have neglected to investigate how the social arenas within which we work--the university, on the one hand, and radical movements on the other--affect the scholarship that we produce. Given the conservative nature of the university, how is it possible for radical academics to survive within it? What kind of working relationship with radical movements is most conducive to producing knowledge for social transformation? One group of scholars who asked these questions was the radical sociology movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. Radical sociologists sought to develop a "sociology for the people," exposing what it perceived as the complicity of mainstream sociology in maintaining ruling class power in America, and creating a "radical" alternative supportive of radical social change. In short, they sought a reflexive understanding of their participation as sociologists in social transformation (Fuller, 1996, p.37).

Out of the radical movement came a number of radical sociologist publications, such as *The Insurgent Sociologist*. Its intellectual heir, the *Critical Sociologist*, wrote about that time: "By the 1967 ASA annual meeting the conflict between left and right in sociology came to a head, and by the 1968 ASA meeting in Boston the Sociology Liberation Movement emerged. It quickly became clear that there was interest in a competing analysis, and soon thereafter *The Insurgent Sociologist*, the forerunner to *Critical Sociology*, emerged to promote critical scholarship and engage in debates over the direction of the discipline."⁶

⁶ <http://www.criticalsociology.org/journal/index.html>

Perhaps activist sociology is making a comeback. Or, perhaps we are again seeing a rise in sociologists who are invested in a “sociology for the people”, those who are willing to identify as activist-scholars even when the structures of the academic system rarely award or positively sanction their activism. During the 2016 American Sociological Association meeting titled “Rethinking Social Movements”, the plenary “Protesting Racism” featured a Q&A with panelists Charlene Carruthers, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Mariame Kabaan. There, an attendee stated that there was “no place for activism in the field of Sociology”. In a meeting for Sociologists for Social Justice where over 100 attended and spoke of their concerns in the discipline. The meeting recap discussed these concerns, one of which was related to “the lack of support in the discipline for scholar-activism in general, but racial justice activism in particular” (Lubin, 2016). The suggestions that were offered are as follows:

First, activism should be fully embraced by ASA as a part of sociological work. The sentiment is that many more sociologists would become involved in racial justice activism (or activism in general) if there was a greater acceptance of public sociology, especially efforts to advance racial equity through public engagement and policy advocacy. The status quo in many universities often means that public sociology is seen as less worthy sociological work. Much of this is related to how tenure is awarded. Meeting attendees felt that although public sociology is promoted within the discipline, when it comes to decisions about tenure, activism and public engagement (e.g., writing articles in popular media) are seen as

less valuable contributions despite those vehicles reaching more people and possibly having more of more an impact than scholarly journal articles (Lubin, 2016).

But if activist sociology - one that engages the public and advocates for the vulnerable among us - is resurgent, will this resurgence reach the precariat professors in our own departments?

The Precariat Sociologist

Universities around the world are increasingly relying on contingent faculty, i.e. adjuncts who teach part-time, and are employed on a short-term basis (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008; Robinson, 2006). Full-time, non-tenure track instructors who are hired on short term contracts, as well as graduate students and post-doctoral candidates are also be included under the umbrella of “contingent faculty”. Part-time adjunct professors routinely receive low pay and no health benefits, and are given little to no opportunity to voice concerns or take part in the governance of the institutions in which they work. The United States has experienced a shift since 1975 where only 30 percent of all faculty were on part-time contracts, to 2005 where part-time faculty represented approximately 48 percent of all faculty members in the United States. Today, non-tenure-track positions of all types account for over 70 percent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education (AAUP, 2017, “Trends in the Academic Labor Force, 1975-2015”). In the United States, about 25 percent of part-time faculty is on welfare of some kind (Jacobs, Perry, & McGillvary, 2015). Because of the poor compensation, adjuncts may work several

jobs, with many commuting between different campuses and teaching a full-time course load without the pay and benefits that typically come with a full-time appointment.

The term, “precariat faculty,” is appropriate to describe this new highly skilled, yet disposable, class of workers. Precarious work, according to former American Sociological Association president Arne Kalleberg (2009, p.2), is “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker.” Adjunct faculty faces uncertain and unpredictable employment. The precarious professor job is not a reliable source of financial security, and by working in such a position, such academics are always on the brink of unemployment. This does not get better with time: there is a common understanding that the longer someone remains in an adjunct line, the less likely they are to be considered for a more secure appointment (Beckett, 2015).

Precairety seems to be a byproduct of the belief that a sound US university business model includes a reduction in the pay and benefits to its contingent faculty. Cardozo (2017) argues that “the neoliberal university and state have colluded to create a marginalized care work sector within the professoriate, devaluing the teaching labor necessary to sustain the life of higher education” (406). The university and the departments of sociology do not necessarily display overt animus toward contingent faculty. Yet, in terms of their employment contracts – the substantial material factors that influence life chances - these precariat professors are treated as disposable. On a systemic and institutional level, the lack of long-term investment in contingent faculty and the lack of a path toward promotion ultimately keep these individuals in precarious positions.

Advocating for the Precariat Professor

The *status quo* in many universities often means that public engagement is seen as less worthy sociological work. Much of this is related to how tenure is awarded. Meeting attendees of Sociologists for Social Justice felt that although public sociology is promoted within the discipline, when it comes to decisions about tenure, activism and public engagement (e.g., writing articles in popular media) are seen as less valuable contributions despite those vehicles reaching more people and possibly having more of more an impact than scholarly journal articles (Lubin, 2016).

If public sociology, scholar activism, and social justice activism are not valued within the field of sociology, how can we expect sociologists to challenge the current systemic ways in which they are oppressed in the academic spaces they occupy? Cardozo (2017) expands on this paradox and questions the ways in which the tenure system operates:

Under current circumstances, we cannot seriously believe that the tenure system is a meritocracy housing ‘the best and brightest’ that the professoriate has to offer or that our governance systems are ‘naturally’ populated by those with the requisite vision to lead us out of the current morass. More likely, academic gate-keeping systems reward those who conform to institutional norms, which increasingly place career advancement and institutional branding above all else (Cardozo 2017, p.420).

Sociologists, as well as other academics, are thus forced to choose whether they will “play the game” or challenge the status

quo. However, playing the game today rarely leads to the expected achievements that academics have historically strived for and been able to attain. The trend to demote tenure-track positions into precarious adjunct lines has left even those who play the game with little chance to progress in the academic job market.

Some have proposed structural solutions to the rise in contingency, including Bérubé and Ruth (2015), who call for the formation of a second tenure track. This tenure track would be for people whose job is to teach, not do research. Cassuto (2017) discusses this work, stating that the “proposal of a separate tenure track for teaching-oriented faculty members shows how ill-suited the present tenure system has become for the workplace we now inhabit” (Chronicle Vitae). There are also counterarguments to this suggestion, including questions regarding how we then train students in graduate school for these positions, whether this would create another hierarchical system, and whether research and teaching are both necessary in training well-rounded professional academics (Cassuto, 2017).

Conclusion

The post-World War Two world provided a wealth of economic, social, and political phenomena to study, and thus created great demand for the sort of knowledge that political sociologists produce. From 1945 to 1970, academia was relatively well-funded and university administration was kept to a minimum. Around the 1960s – 1970s, sociology, including political sociology, experienced an internal and radical upheaval, where the tension of science *versus*

activism became a major debate point. By the 1990s, states in the U.S. began to invest less and less into state run education while the labor market required more and more students to get a college degree in order to get a good job. At this time, university administrations began to increase their ranks and demand bibliographic metrics and other quantitative measures of scholarly productivity to justify new tenure track lines. This created two perversities: one is fewer and fewer tenure track lines and more and more contingent precariat faculty, and the second is a publish-or-perish ideology that does not properly value public engagement. The priorities of academic institutions in the US have shifted from an investment in faculty, to an investment in ways to get families and students to “buy in” to the institutions by spending more money on sports arenas, attractive programming, and the like, and less on those who teach in the classroom. Adjuncts have become the “careworkers” of the academic institution.

The new wave of social change now flooding the world is yet another opportunity to remake academic social science. Sociologists *qua* political sociologists who, over time, have taken ownership of social movement studies, have the great possibility to use what they know in order to advocate for the precariat faculty in their midst. What is needed is a new social movement: one inspired by feminism, fueled in part by political sociologists, and for the reformation of the academic labor market.

Given the state of higher education in the United States today, and given the necessity for constructive change that would end the exploitation of faculty members around the country and en-

courage next generations of faculty to pursue jobs in higher education, a “sociology for the people” movement is critical to the evolution of the discipline and academia as a whole. The fate of the precariat professor depends on it. The fate of the academy also may depend on it: If we do not improve these conditions, who will teach in these positions in the future? What do we tell students who want to teach sociology at the college level? What will our discipline become?

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