

Sociology As a Martial Art

MSc student, Jalal Movaghary-Pour, discusses the idea of sociology as a martial art.

While recent contributions to this blog have answered the question ‘why sociology?’ by saying that it is **kind**, or that it encourages ‘**T shaped**’ expertise, in the following I would like to offer a different response by emphasising another dimension of the subject; one which initially endeared me to it and has motivated my interest ever since. To borrow from Bourdieu, I study sociology because it is a martial art.



Students of most martial arts are taught both techniques and sensibilities needed to counter or neutralise a threat. They do not use these skills to actively seek out confrontation, but are capable of defending themselves if under attack. Slightly differently, the value of sociology as a martial art is not necessarily to provide a means of *self*-defence. Rather, it is the vulnerable, marginalised, powerless, discriminated, and defenceless members of society that sociology often seeks to protect from attack. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of battles to which sociologists may wish to lend support. In our current climate of austerity attacks are mobilised – both discursively and financially – against the poor, the disabled, and the young (to take only three examples) on an almost

daily basis. Against these, and perhaps more than most other academic disciplines, sociology seeks to speak out.

Sociology as a martial art equips you to be guarded against claims of ‘common sense’. This critical vigilance is especially needed when such perceptions are utilised by politicians to inform and shape policy. Indeed, with a nod to the tradition of critical theory, I believe sociology is often at its best when it attempts to expose the gap between purported reality and things as they really are. Notwithstanding, this is not to say that sociologists always know better. Rather, it is the task of sociology to cut through the unsubstantiated or hyperbolic assertions found in popular and political discourse with carefully researched empirical data.

For example, when Iain Duncan Smith justifies his draconian, regressive and destructive welfare regime by claiming that there are “three generations of families where no one has ever worked”, it was **sociologists** who stepped in to dispel this “culture of worklessness” myth; finding that families with even two generations of complete worklessness are extremely rare, and that long-term worklessness is not something passed down over generations but the result of the impact of complex, multiple problems associated with living in deep poverty. Likewise in our purportedly meritocratic society, where allegedly all you need to succeed is hard work and effort, and where it is said that “**middle-class parents are middle class because they have learned what it takes to succeed**”, it is sociologists (and other social scientists) who have shown that patterns of privilege are reproduced through mechanisms such as the ‘**class ceiling**’ and the ‘**glass floor**’.

Although some see it as a weakness, I also think the multi-faceted nature of sociology is one of its greatest strengths. Under the banner of sociology there is a vastly diverse set of interests and topics of exploration and engagement, ranging from global issues to highly localised matters. On the one hand, we can find articulations of the lived experience of ‘**getting by**’ on a deprived council

estate in St. Ann's, Nottingham. While on the other hand, and looking at the other end of the social spectrum, we have recently seen the emergence of a novel research agenda – championed by the new International Inequalities Institute here at the LSE – that wants to explore the **sociology of elites**; looking not so much at how the other half but at how the 1% lives.

While I am not suggesting that sociology has all the answers to the difficult questions facing the contemporary world, the point I am making is that I believe it should at least be part of the conversation; more so than it is now. In my view, the current hegemonic worldview espoused by economics is infinitely impoverished without sociology. Undoubtedly, sociological insights can make an invaluable contribution towards understanding and addressing current affairs. As exemplified most acutely in the recent situation with Greece, it can often be forgotten that behind the abstract and detached world of GDP, deficit reduction, and debt restructuring, lies tangible people, biographies, and relationships. And so perhaps it is the role of sociology to remind the world of this.

So, why sociology? Because it is often sociologists who are the ones capturing and articulating the harsh realities faced by those suffering from excessive welfare cuts, or those for whom 'labour market flexibility' means living a both financially and temporally precarious existence. It is sociologists who attempt to provide a platform for marginalised people, to give a voice to the normally voiceless. It is sociologists who are documenting and challenging the fact that children from poorer and particular ethnic minority backgrounds consistently do less well throughout the whole education system. It is sociologists who demonstrate that the effects and victims of 'natural' disasters are not arbitrary but follow particular patterns of vulnerability. To use the famous phrase from C. Wright Mills, sociologists translate private troubles into public issues. And by doing so, they challenge us to think of ways in which biographies can be altered and improved.

Yet it should also be recognised that sociology does not, and cannot, offer conclusive solutions to the situations described above; its task is never fully complete. Nonetheless, to borrow from Derrida, I strongly believe that sociology as a martial art can play an indispensable role in the perpetual pursuit of "justice to come". This is exactly why I study, and am passionate about, sociology.

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