

By Invitation | Afflicting the comfortable

## Why is sociology the hate-piñata of the social sciences?

Accusations that it is thinly disguised socialism are wide of the mark, writes Brooke Harrington

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PLEASE ALLOW me to introduce myself: I'm one of those sociologists newspapers have been warning you about. Among my left-wing indoctrination projects this summer I've been explaining to Dartmouth undergraduates how mortgages and pensions work, and teaching them what a tax bracket is. Yes, this is all part of a bog-standard Sociology 1 course.

So is showing the evidence that women often earn less than men for the same work. Or that black Americans have shorter lifespans than their white counterparts, partly because of worse medical care. My class has also discussed why labour unions exist and how professions have for centuries been granted special privileges by society—such as self-governance—in return for a pledge to use their expertise in the public interest. Not exactly “To the barricades!” material.

From recent articles in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*—one of which muses whether it might be time to “liquidate” my field—I have learned that when sociologists study or teach inequality, that topic is a “left-leaning concern”. Yet I can’t help but notice that when inequality is taught or researched by my colleagues in economics, political science or law, that work does not usually get labelled as political indoctrination (an exception being Gabriel Zucman, an award-winning economist branded a “far-left activist” by France’s richest man, Bernard Arnault).

Why does sociology serve as the hate-piñata for Concerned Pundits on the higher-education beat? My theory is that they have misplaced their critique of the discipline. Contrary to the claim in the recent *Times* article, the problem is not *that* we study inequality. After all, almost all the other social sciences do too. Instead, I think the real problem pundits have is what we do with that information.

During the nine years I taught at a business school before coming to Dartmouth, I saw lots of research and teaching conducted on inequalities among individuals and firms. But a major goal of that work was figuring out how to exploit the inequalities for profit. That’s not necessarily bad or evil: for example, when the best product or service “wins” in the marketplace, it is generally a good thing.

But when sociologists talk about our findings on inequality, we often highlight its negative consequences. By arguing that inequalities might be harmful, we play the same role traditionally attributed to journalists: “afflicting the comfortable”. And for that, we become targets. Witness the barrage of hyperbolic claims seen recently in the British press—such as that sociology is “a scam”—after Jason Arday, a Cambridge University sociologist, was accused of plagiarism.

My work on the offshore financial system shows how the political inequalities the system generates undermine democracy around the world. Through serving as a conduit for illegal campaign financing—as exposed in leaks like the Panama, Paradise and Pandora Papers—offshore finance gives the rich ways to circumvent the rule of law and erode the legitimacy of electoral processes. Is analysis of threats to democracy a leftist crusade?

My research also points out how capitalism itself is imperilled by the legal and financial inequalities created by the offshore system. Unequal access to the cloak of secrecy that offshore shell companies provide to rich individuals and firms makes possible all manner of dirty tricks against investors. Remember Enron? Its chief financial officer used thousands of shell companies to hide mountains of debt. When the firm toppled, 25,000 employees lost their jobs, along with \$2bn in pension savings.

Is pointing out that sort of inequality a “left-leaning concern”? Marco Rubio didn’t think so. As a Republican senator from Florida, he sponsored a law to stop it, and got it passed over a presidential veto: the 2021 Corporate Transparency Act. President Donald Trump has just halted its enforcement.

I certainly don’t speak for the entire discipline, but I do know that there are many sociologists just like me who are contributing to society in ways even the most critical pundits would probably support. We’re investigating matters of urgent importance to the functioning of institutions most of us cherish. We’re teaching about practical, everyday issues that citizens should know about—hence my segments in the Sociology 1 course on financial markets, professions and bureaucracies. Crucially, sociology doesn’t teach answers to the problems afflicting human social life; rather, it offers a method of analysis, a bundle of related frameworks and concepts that can be used like a Swiss Army knife to slice and dice complex issues.

As for our alleged “activism”, like many sociologists I share the practical applications of my research with the public and with policymakers. Given the focus of my work on offshore finance, that means working with entities ranging from America’s Treasury Department to the tax agencies of half a dozen countries around the world. If we didn’t heed those calls to contribute to public life, wouldn’t the Concerned Pundits call us out-of-touch ivory-tower dwellers? To them I say, with all respect: please pick a lane.

Soon, my summer-term course will end and I'll unleash a new cohort of Sociology 1 graduates into the world. They might observe their Ivy League peers' manner of dress or summer-vacation souvenirs and think of what we learned from Max Weber about the difference between "class" and "status", or from Thorstein Veblen about "conspicuous consumption". Thanks to our discussions, they will know the actual definitions of capitalism, socialism and communism—definitions that every American voter should know, since the terms are tossed around our political discourse like bacon bits on a Chef's Salad.

What my students won't do is come out of class parroting "inequality bad" or "inequality good". Rather, they'll leave Sociology 1 equipped with some new analytical tools that they should find of value in understanding a complex, fast-changing world. They will have more of what the world needs: original thinking about old problems. ■

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