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Sounds Pretty Hopeful to Me: Hope for Sociology in Fostering Social Change

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Abstract
Sociology today is critical about its role in bringing about social change. It pays attention to nuances and the context-bound particularities of the world around us. In popular thought, changing the world seems to require identification of the root cause of what needs to be changed but causal relationships are tricky, to say the least. Sociologists need to ask questions that focus on *how* change happens: What agents are responsible for generating change? Who does change benefit? And what role can academia have in this? During my professional experience as a cultural conservationist, I attempted to use academically connected research to generate social change. As a result, I learned to explore these questions of the role and impact of academia in real-world applications. Through this, I have become aware of the connection between hope and change and the responsibility that sociology as a discipline has towards society. I explore these connections here through a debate conducted among my students in a foundation-level sociology course. The idea of change gives purpose to academia, a way to combat the bleakness of what research often points out about the world we live in. As the students concluded, change is indeed necessary but maybe we need to rethink our inquiry. Is the value of academia related to the expectation that it generates change, or in its ability to reflect on its relationship with social change during a period in which such change has become increasingly rapid?

Keywords: social change; sociology; academia; causal relationships

Up until my current position as a doctoral candidate in Sociology, I worked in cultural heritage management, historical research and cultural conservation. My foray into teaching at a tertiary level has been at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington in undergraduate sociology courses covering the foundational concepts of sociology and social theory. It is a role that has prompted me to critically reflect on the nexus between academia and society, and the responsibilities incumbent upon sociologists to bring about social change. Much of this reflection is guided by the awareness that education in sociology often highlights critical debates about the role of sociology itself, the extent of the influence the discipline has in bringing about meaningful social change, and more crucially, whether the responsibility to generate social change is even a part of sociology itself. Drawing from my professional experience has made me increasingly aware of the frequent misalignments between academic sociological research and the practical applications of research in professional settings, plunging me into a sense of hopelessness about the entire discipline. Yet, my emerging exposure to academia has emphasised the symbiotic relationship between academia and societal change. There remains an opportunity to cultivate hope within sociology. Such cultivation requires us to re-evaluate the evolving roles and responsibilities within the discipline at the university level.

My starting point in the consideration of these roles and responsibilities was a module in an introductory sociology course on the classical thinkers. While teaching that module, I organised a debate among my students regarding the historical discourses of Marx, Weber and Durkheim (Morrison, 2006). Centred on the role of sociologists in effecting societal change, the question I posed to the students concerned the role of sociology itself. As sociologists, is our role to follow the footsteps of Marx in his

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advocacy of transformative action and for the bringing about of societal change? Or, building on Weber's and Durkheim's understandings of causal plurality and of the near impossibility of identifying the single specific factor that would solve society's problems, is the role of the sociologist simply to study and document the social in the most objective way possible? The class was split into two groups, each group debating for one of the two viewpoints.

Initially, the allure of a Marxist advocacy of transformative action captivated the students' aspirations, even scuttling the enthusiasm for the debate in the group assigned to support Weber's and Durkheim's argument. In the students' understanding, academia was a catalyst for change. Sociology as a discipline held the promise for emerging sociologists like themselves to become the vanguard of societal transformation. In the twenty-first century, an era beset by constant social upheaval rooted in underlying structural issues in our societies, if sociology was not equipped to address these problems of living, then why were any of the students here at all?

That is a very hopeful narrative about the role of sociology; however, my professional encounters as a researcher in the Middle East now leads me to question this narrative. My job before teaching was to research historic sites in the Middle East, to evaluate their cultural value, and then develop strategies for how to best preserve that value. It was necessary to both understand the belief systems and interpretive frameworks of the societies in which I worked regarding their own culture and heritage, and to engage with these beliefs and frameworks in a way that matched the goals of the conservation projects I was working on. The conservation strategies I was responsible to develop arose through extensive research with the local community, with archaeologists, conservationists and other academics. While academic research was imperative in designing how conservation work would proceed, the extent to which academia actually helped that work was fairly minimal. My experience did not support the students' Marxist-inspired perception that academic sociological research plays a significant role in catalysing meaningful change in a real-world setting.

The role of research-based academia was minimal in directing governmental agencies in making the big decisions about the future of cultural assets. The publications by experts in the field that I presented to decision-making bodies for incorporation in cultural and social policy had a limited role in bringing about the desired outcomes for which I was advocating. Rather than based on the betterment of society, the majority of the decisions taken were made based on financial grounds, political agendas, marketability, timing and so on. Academia's limited influence in policymaking unveiled a disconnect between scholarly insights and real-world decisions that were governed primarily by finances, politics, market forces and other factors.

The point my students were debating, that academia has the responsibility and ability to implement change, has, in my experience, limited application. At a governmental level, the disconnect was often framed as a schism between academia and the so-called 'real world'. This was indeed the point that the other team presented in the class debate, and in response, the discussion adopted a more nuanced position on academia's potential as a change-agent. The Marx-inspired team presented a proposal that if sociological academia were not directly responsible for bringing about change, by nature of its capacity to conduct research in the study of society, the discipline was still the best suited for providing decision-makers with the information necessary to bring about social change in the best way possible.

While this is a comparatively more realistic outlook on the role of sociology, the misalignment between academia and decision-making bodies that I had experienced in my professional work also extended to a misalignment between scholarly pursuits and practical application. At many points, my research team would often need to turn to academic institutions and scholars for specialised help. One particular conservation site, for example, required research to be undertaken into the history and development of aviation and communication networks, the social and geopolitical factors that guided early civil aviation, and the evolution of the technology that made it possible. We needed historians and aviation

specialists to help us contextualise our site within the global narrative of early air travel, and as a result, we travelled to numerous seminars and conferences on the history of aviation.

The unpleasant discovery we uncovered was that much of the scholarly research we encountered was not very applicable. Most of the time, the research topics were too niche to be easily implemented at a practical conservation level. In the example of our aviation site, the research we encountered at conferences included topics like the evolution of pilots' rations, the design of facilities for the storage of canned beans in 1930s airport hangars, or the development of white paint pigment for the marking of early airport runways. The more practical research we needed for our work was often missing from research. The topics we were looking for included the impact having an airport in the 1930s had had on local communities, the influence local cultural influences had on airport construction and design in non-European settings, the effect foreign travellers in remote regions for the first time had had on international and regional relations, the impact early aviation had on modern urban development, and so on. In the end, I had to conduct much of this research from scratch, which was both costly and very time consuming. Collaboration with academia highlighted the mismatch between practical applications of research and scholarly pursuits, further consolidating the perceived schism between academia and the so-called real world.

This point was also presented in the students' debate. Not only were the students already beginning to doubt the agency and impact of sociology and academia, but that scepticism now also extended to the relevance of the discipline itself. Marx's optimism for sociology's ability to make society better kept drifting further out of reach, tempered with the growing understanding that the realities of bringing about social change are complicated. Social theory, in general, today echoes this developing understanding. Sociology itself is much more critical about the nature of what we call change. The discipline today pays a lot more attention to nuance and the context-bound particularities of why things have come to be the way they are in particular places. Sociological pedagogy and contemporary sociological discourse have underscored the imperative to dissect the nature of change, scrutinising the complex interplay of multifaceted causalities within social dynamics. My students came to the same understanding and to an associated sense of disillusionment with sociology's capacity to drive societal change. The debate transformed, shedding light on the intricate relationship between academia and societal transformation, and the many ways this relationship was misaligned.

The revelation that academia might not be the direct harbinger of change called for great introspection among the students. What devolved into a distinctly hopeless stance regarding the role and future of sociology ultimately re-emerged with a new understanding through the debate exercise. The objective to bring about change was not the problem. The possibility that the students discovered was that as sociologists, maybe we are asking the wrong questions. Maybe we should be asking what agents are responsible for bringing about change rather than simply assuming that the responsibility lies with academia. After all, what evidence exists that disciplines like sociology are the 'best suited' to influence policy and decision-making? We should ask instead who is affected by the research that we as academics produce? But more than that, maybe it is worth asking what relationships exist between academia and change? It is worth questioning whether we give value to academia simply because we expect it to generate change. That ability to drive direct social change may have been the case for the discipline of sociology at the time of the classical thinkers, but social contexts and structures have changed since then (Bulaitis, 2020). Instead, it might be worthwhile to shift the emphasis from an expectation for academia to effect change to instead understanding how the symbiotic relationship between academia and social change has evolved and what that relationship looks like now in our rapidly changing society. It necessitates evaluating sociology's evolving role and its impact on an ever-evolving social world.

The idea sociology can incite social change gives purpose to the discipline. Alternatively, perhaps it gives the discipline hope, in the face of the sometimes bleak discoveries about the world we live in that we uncover in our own research. The pursuit of change, albeit complex, beckons us to refine our inquiries.

If societal change is the goal and hope of sociology, then we should be asking better questions about the role and impact of the discipline. Part of this exercise is scrutinising the schism that prevails in some circles between the world of academia and the real world. It is important to question when this gap arose, and whose actions facilitated the delineation of these separate spheres of influence?

Sociology in our current world needs to be redirected away from prevailing expectations that it generates change and instead towards a better understanding of its intricate relationship with social movements. Embracing this paradigm shift would offer a chance to rekindle the academic beacon of hope. It would propel us towards a deeper comprehension of sociology's academic responsibilities and of the interconnection of those responsibilities with societal transformation. It prompts a re-examination of the roles, responsibilities and expectations of sociology as an academic discipline in shaping a better world.

In conclusion, while academia's ability to bring about societal transformation might be contested, the acknowledgement of its nuanced understandings of societal complexities fosters a hopeful vista for the future of sociology. If tertiary education allows the next generation of sociologists to arrive at the same place of critical inquiry and realignment that my students did, then that sounds like a pretty hopeful place for the future of sociology and academia, if you ask me.

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