Teaching An Introduction to Sociology Course in a Secular College: Systematic Reflections from an Orthodox Catholic Worldview

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This essay addresses some of the central issues, prospects, and problems that a serious Catholic scholar can be expected to deal with in teaching an Introduction to Sociology course in a secular college. The paper assumes the basic validity and utility of the secular discipline of sociology while noting certain dysfunctional empirical tendencies that are not intrinsic to this intellectual enterprise. Rather, these dysfunctional tendencies reflect the secular and progressive individual worldviews and biases of the majority of scholars who teach, write, and practice the discipline at this present moment in time and space. Examples of how the individual secular and progressive biases impact on the discipline can be found in numerous ways. Among others, they can be found in 1) the construction of concepts and definitions and in the choice of theoretical frameworks, all bringing with them distinctive, albeit usually implicit, philosophical assumptions; 2) the denial of any metaphysical dimension; 3) the degree and amount of hyper-specialization found in research; and 4) the utopian and ideological aspects part and parcel of the analysis in question. The line of analysis pursued here generally follows an earlier effort of mine dealing with similar issues, i.e., “Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments—An Exploratory Critique From a Catholic Sociological Sensibility” (2011).

INTRODUCTION

The discipline of sociology was created and first emerged in Western civilization, i.e., in both Western Europe and the United States, approximately in the mid-nineteenth century. One major presupposition for its development was the institutionalization of Enlightenment thinking, the latter breaking the monopoly that traditional religion held over those perspectives that hitherto, for the Western mind, had provided explanations for the central occurrences that had shaped organized social life and the state of human consciousness for the most part for the preceding eighteen centuries. Put into the terminology of scholars Arthur Vidich and Stanley Lyman (1985), the discipline of sociology was an example of a
“sociodicy” (or secular explanation) that was partially replacing what Max Weber (1963) had referred to as a “theodicies” (or traditional religious explanations for the meaning and purpose of life, including as a subset, issues of death and illness). It is important to point out, in passing, that the relationship between “theodices” and “sociodicies” is not “zero-sum,” i.e., they do regularly co-exist in the modern world and in the worldview of many modern-day individuals. Nonetheless, it is fair to state that a minority of individuals with a traditionally religious worldview in the modern world do reject anything that smacks of the secular, while some unspecified larger number within this minority is very suspicious of giving precedence to modern ways of thinking and acting.

For his/her part, the educated and knowledgeable orthodox Catholic in the modern world, while understanding the especially oft-times inhospitable terrain that one’s intellectual, political, and cultural activities must operate from, most often is not sympathetic to anything that smacks of rejection, tout court, of the modern world and its perspectives. The typical Catholic orientation is to reform any modern day commitment that is, indeed, capable of being reformed. The key issue, from the authentically Catholic orientation, is whether or not the human construction in question (e.g., in a modern perspective like sociology) accepts, or is at least compatible with, a natural law perspective (Hittinger 2007; Budziszewski 1997; Rice 1999) that is “written on the heart.” Simply put, it is indeed possible for a secular argument significantly to manifest what Catholicism refers to as the exercise of “right reason.” Catholicism posits the complementarity and compatibility of faith and reason as indicated in the title of Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, Fides et Ratio (1998). The Pope starts off this encyclical by stating that faith and reason “are like two wings in which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.” As an exercise in human reason, all modern day citizens can and should affirm the theoretical possibility of sociology helping to explicate the dialectical relationship between, on the one hand, society and, on the other, individuals and more localized social groups (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The discipline of sociology as a “form of human consciousness” (Berger 1963) and in the development of a “sociological imagination” (Mills 2000) can assist the individual in understanding how the surrounding environment impacts the individual on an existential level and provides assistance in the possible formulation of social policy solutions for pressing problems affecting the social order.

Sociology, however, can only approximate its bright promise if it can hold in check its various utopian and ideological impulses and other dysfunctions. It is undeniably the case that there are some forms of secular academic argumentation in which the exercise of reason is faulty, deficient,
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spurious, artificial, and, in a real sense, based on assumptions about the human being, society, or social relationships that are palpably “unnatural” and “unreal.” Put another way, as a matter of fact, the legitimacy, validity, and utility of a secular sociology from an authentically Catholic sensibility depends on how it stacks up against the standard provided by the application of “natural law” thinking and the exercise of “right reason.”

In speaking of the “natural law,” philosopher D. Q. McInerny states that “it is a law to which man, precisely as a rational creature and moral agent, is specifically subject. The natural law is the supreme moral law, and thus provides the foundational criteria upon which all positive law (i.e., human legislation) . . . is to be based, and from which it derives its ultimate legitimacy” (2007: 744). He follows with an important qualification: “(while) . . . the basic principles of the natural law are invariable, . . . the application of those principles necessarily varies . . . to reflect the persons and the circumstances that relate to an individual case” (2007: 746).

“Reason,” following McInerny again, is defined as “the process by which proposition is conjoined to proposition to form arguments” (2012: 297). In order for “reason” to earn the designation of “right reason,” he argues that all the propositions in the reasoning process must be true and all inferences derived find their legitimacy from within the proposition itself.

The Catholic scholar constantly must be wary of the employment by secular (and religious) scholars of the faulty exercise of reason in all academic work.

THE ETHICAL REQUIREMENT TO PRESENT THE SOCIOLOGICAL TRADITION IN ITS TOTALITY, PERCEIVED WARTS AND ALL

In teaching an Introduction to Sociology course, it is important to acknowledge that the Catholic scholar has an ethical and professional duty to present to the student all the various corners of the discipline, i.e., the total sociological tradition, as it has historically developed, in a descriptively fair and accurate manner. This imperative must be executed as objectively as possible regardless of any intellectual misgivings held a priori in the evaluation of any specific aspect or sub-tradition of the larger intellectual tradition. For instance, scholars operating from a distinctive Catholic worldview would probably be unsympathetic to the underlying philosophical anthropological assumption found in both “rational-choice” and “exchange” theories with their implicit positing of the human being as essentially “homo economicus.” Likewise, and relatedly, the Catholic scholar likely would harbor great doubts about the utility of Marxist sociological theory based as it is, among other legitimate objections, on a fun-
damentally materialistic conception of the person. The Catholic scholar, for his/her part, does not deny the importance of the economic in social life but, following Max Scheler (1980), would grant it a lower rank in any normative discussion of what ought to be the natural hierarchy of the set of eternal values that exist in civilization, i.e., one that prioritizes the spiritual and moral over the material and biological. The Catholic intellectual, like any other scholar operating inevitably out of what the Marxist sociologist, Alvin W. Gouldner (1970) refers to as a set of implicit or explicit domain assumptions, has the right and duty to critique, in an even-handed fashion, differing intellectual perspectives but only after fairly and accurately presenting the oppositional (or partly oppositional) worldview in question. The Catholic scholar has the imperative, so to speak, to “give the devil his due,” or, at the very least, to acknowledge the right to offer his/her academic opponent the opportunity to draw “first blood” in any intellectual argumentation or exchange. The crucial point is that the student, Catholic or not, taking an Introduction to Sociology course in a secular college has every right to expect to be taught both what historically and presently passes for as the sociological discipline as defined by the latter’s contemporary set of professional gatekeepers. Only then should any even-handed critique of the secular discipline be presented to the student. As such, the offering of a pluralism of evaluations—including a self-reflexive and self-critical presentation of the teacher’s—provides the student the practical opportunity to make his/her own judgements while allowing the instructor to follow his/her own scholarly conclusions and exercise a legitimate understanding of “academic freedom.”

**TYPICAL PROBLEMS FOR THE CATHOLIC SCHOLAR IN PRESENTING TO STUDENTS THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Previously mentioned in this Comment was the critique of secular sociological perspectives like “rational choice,” “exchange,” and “Marxist” theories that overplay the role of economics and materialism in everyday social life. This section expands this critique by providing a few additional and typical examples of secular exaggerations and distortions that presently color the discipline along four categories or sub-headings: concepts/definitions/theoretical frameworks; denial of any metaphysical dimension; degree and amount of hyper-specialization; and utopian and ideological aspects. My understanding of the philosophical grounding for the array of sociological schools of thought can be extrapolated, in part, from excellent introductions to the discipline such as Peter L. and Brigitte Berger’s *Soci-*
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Concepts/Definitions/Theoretical Frameworks

The concepts, definitions, and theoretical frameworks that sociologists consciously employ are many times, in no effective sense, “neutral,” i.e., in actuality, they point to some desired normative outcome or state of affairs. It is therefore incumbent upon sociologists who take their Catholicism seriously to understand the consequences of their choices regarding these issues for their teaching and the potential impact for their classroom students.

The “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,” for instance, makes the case that language does more than merely reflect reality, but can actually change reality (Henslin 2017: 50). Regarding concepts, it makes a difference in sociological analysis if one refers to an individual as an “Italian” or as a “wop,” as a “freedom fighter” or as a “terrorist,” or as a “pro-lifer” or as an “anti-chooser.” Regarding definitions, the issue of “race” can involve disagreements over whether it refers merely to different physical characteristics or actual biological, i.e., genetic, realities and human potentialities. The utility and truthfulness of definitions can also be viewed as contentious or problematic. Some radical feminists have invented and fabricated the idea of “androgyny,” i.e., a alleged merging of male and female sexual and gender characteristics, placing this predicted and hoped for development in an evolutionary framework. Finally, regarding the issue of theoretical frameworks, each framework contains normative dimensions or biases that should be analyzed in an up-front manner. “Structural-Functionalism,” or a “Systems” approach to understanding society, assumes as an ideal a socially integrated social context undergirded by at least a good deal of consensus in its central value system. Conversely, “conflict” theories such as Marxism and radical feminism assume no such integration or cooperation between societal components. Rather, they accept a Hobbesian-like state of affairs, i.e., “a war of each against all” positing conflict, competition, and self-interest as definitive for social life and social interaction. Evolutionary theories, from Auguste Comte forward, assume a movement in history from “simple” to “complex” marking the allegedly inexorable movement to Progress and a utopian, “heaven-like” state of civilization. Finally, “cyclical theories”—such as those propounded by such thinkers as Pitirim Sorokin, Vilfredo Pareto, and Niccolo Machiavelli—deny any such movement, either unilinear or multilinear, toward societal perfection. Rather, they depict the never-ending “rise and fall” of civilizations based on a specific understanding of a constant, never-changing human tenden-
This is the tendency for an emerging civilization to strive energetically to advance up the global stratification ladder only to be dethroned by some subsequent civilization temporarily situated lower on the ladder. From the cyclical perspective, simply put, the once hungry, aggressive, and successful become lazy and fat only to be replaced by the next up-and-coming civilization that is not yet successful but effectively fueled by its hunger and dream of success. Both Pareto and Macchiavelli refer to this cyclical process as one in which “foxes” and “lions” continually replace each other.

**Denial of Any Metaphysical Dimension**

By virtue of their underlying and accepted worldview, Catholics and other religionists assert the existence of a supernatural/metaphysical realm. The typical response of many mainstream Catholics who teach sociology is to “bracket,” i.e., put aside and not consciously address the epistemological question of the existence and the impact of the latter while performing their professional teaching duties in the classroom and, derivatively, in the realm of publishing. This pragmatic concession is acceptable to more than a few serious Catholic scholars given the reigning academic conventions about an allegedly “value-free” sociology, the inherent controversy generated by exposing one’s confessional commitments in a pluralistic and, even more so, secular social context, and the presence of a left-wing and often virulent atheism pervasive in the university sub-universe.

On the one hand, sociologists who are simultaneously religionists may note the reality of an uneven playing field acknowledging that radical sociologists of the Left—following Karl Marx in the American tradition of C. W. Mills, Alvin Gouldner, and W. E. B DuBois—have far less to fear by publically exposing to students their value-laden analyses vis-à-vis Catholics or other religionists who are sympathetic to even a qualified and nuanced integration of religion/philosophy with their sociological craft. On the other hand, radical empiricists and positivists of one sort or another—following the inspiration of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) in the American tradition of such scholars as William Fielding Ogburn (1886–1959), George Lundberg (1895–1966), and Paul Lazarsfeld (1901–1976)—attempt to hide the inevitable philosophical assumptions contained within their interpretation of data and within their allegedly “objective” and “scientific” conclusions. They do so through the employment of frequently mystifying methodological procedures opaque and intimidating to the average, intelligent, and interested lay person. The structural basis for these respective double-standards are the quasi-monopolistic and high status positions these, respectively, radical left-wing and positivistic, schools of thought hold within the discipline; the practical power that faculty, almost
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universally of one progressive bent or another, possess over the student body and concerned citizenry; and the diffuse and commanding influence of the secularism that tends to dominates the secular university and college (Kirk 1978; Bloom 1987; D’Sousa 1988; deRussy 2007). Of passing note is that these same factors similarly affect Christian, including Catholic, institutions of higher learning and their respective student bodies (Marsden 1994, 1998; Burtchaell 1998).

**Degree and Amount of Hyper-Specialization**

In his *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist: How to Explain the World Without Becoming a Bore* (2011), Peter L. Berger makes reference to the unfortunate institutionalization within the contemporary sociological discipline of twin pitfalls. The first is the acceptance of a positivism characterized by its methodological fetishism. The second is the acceptance of ideological and utopian thinking, almost always of a radical left-wing nature (Berger 2011; Varacalli 2012b).

The central intellectual pitfall concerning positivism from an orthodox Catholic worldview does not deny the necessity, inevitability, and desirability of some significant degree of disentanglement of sociology from, first, theology; second, philosophy; and, third, social policy. What the Catholic worldview does argue is that hyper-specialization has proceeded too far, producing sub-universes of meaning that are compartmentalized and which mask inevitable interdependencies, thus doing an injustice to the intellectual requirement to produce comprehensive and holistic analyses of social life that nonetheless are capable of making and acknowledging subtle and necessary distinctions between faith and reason and metaphysics and empirical reality. The positivistic model, while claiming to aim for objectivity, tends to view the individual and the individual scholar as devoid of free will, creativity, and responsibility. Its tendency toward hyper-specialization in research leads to a focus on topics of little or no importance to those concerned with the construction of a “good society.” Simply put, in most positivistic sociology, technique trumps substance (Varacalli 2013: 320, 321).

**Utopian and Ideological Distortions in the Discipline**

The sociological perspective has been marred, to varying degrees, by respectively, the unnecessary incorporation of utopian and ideological thinking. One key intellectual source for understanding both concepts can be found in Karl Mannheim’s introduction to the sociology of knowledge, *Ideology and Utopia* (1936).
Most generally, for Mannheim, utopian ideas are those that transcend the contours of the existing social order and suggest the exaggerated possibility that some salutary revolutionary alternative to the existing social order is possible. The “socialist myth,” as discussed by Peter L. Berger (1977) represents the example, par excellence, of the utopian impulse. More concretely, one can point to the hopes and expectations expressed by leaders and supporters of the various cataclysmic—and destructive—revolutions that have marked the historical record of an emerging modernity (e.g., the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions). Of note is that the utopian vision is often resistant to empirical disconfirmation in the eyes of many of its supporters as the “facts” about the historical and social order are selectively perceived or ignored in order to maintain the plausibility and justification of the social movement and its various manifest claims for the “salvation” of society.

The utopian impulse is also found in social contexts less inclusive than that of the society or nation, i.e., at the sub-cultural or counter-cultural level. Academic departments within the university system constitute, if you will, sub-cultures within a sub-culture. Many times academic departments, especially found within the divisions of the humanities and social sciences, are controlled by a cadre of utopians, protected by tenure and situated away and insulated from the realism that typically characterizes the mainstream of many societies and communities. On the other hand, the “hippies” of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States who “dropped out” of—at least for a short period of time—mainstream society by abandoning the typical conventions of the day represented an example of utopian counter-culture.

There is evidence of the embrace of utopian thought on the part of significant sectors within university based departments in the humanities and social sciences in the United States. One example is the acceptance, by more than a few sociologists, of the promise of Marxism both in the internals of their intellectual work and in their political commitment to the Marxist vision for the eventual ushering of a global “communal” world order bringing about a supposedly “classless” civilization. Another example would be the acceptance of the “scientistic” dreams of, for instance, behaviorists in the tradition of B.F. Skinner for a completely rational and “programmed” humanity. Both of these dysfunctional social scientific traditions that so clearly violate the natural law find their social policy embodiment, in one particularly grotesque historical example, in the “One Child Policy” coercively enforced in post–World War II China by Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party from 1949 until his death in 1976. Yet another example of dysfunctional utopian thought and
practice can be found in the contemporary promotion of what sociologist Lisa S. Matthews (2007: 407–09) has referred to as “alternatives in family living” or, more specifically, of alternatives to the traditional nuclear family. A few examples of such alternatives would be the active advocacy on behalf of, the granting of legitimacy to, and the increased tolerance for, polygamy, co-marital “swinging,” group marriage, homosexual and bi-sexual arrangements, co-habitation, and single-parenthood. As such, scholar Bryce Christensen (1990), has made the case, as the title of one of his most important volumes indicates, that many of the problems of the American family find their origin in the utopian impulse with its propensity to deny the reality and salutary effects of the natural law/nature in social life. Consistent with this discussion of the utopian proclivities of many in the discipline, note should be taken of the scholarship of intellectuals Seymour Martin Lipset and Everett Carll Ladd (1972) who have documented the well understood reality that sociologists as a group are the most politically progressive in the academy.

Ideologies, for their part, can be generally defined by those systems of thought that attempt to defend and stabilize a given and unjust state of social affairs in the broader society or in the latter’s various sub-cultures. Henslin (2017: 196–97, 254–55, 490) provides examples of the use of ideology to legitimize the existence of a system of social stratification—defined as the unequal distribution of the three dimensions of wealth/income, power/politics, and prestige/respect—in American society and, more specifically, of its early history of slavery, of limited social mobility, and of the competing promises offered by capitalism and socialism. Like utopian formulations, ideology can be found at the sub-cultural level. Most relevant to our present discussion are the ideological elements used to defend the, at times, self-centered and selfish intellectual activities and products of sociologists in their teaching and publishing within their university and department locations.

On the one hand and by virtue of their professional accomplishments and training, sociologists and other academics deserve, on the part of students and the general public, an initial presumption of legitimate authority and respect. On the other hand, given an awareness of the finiteness, imperfection, and potentially vested and self-centered interests that undergird all human activity—students and the public alike should be cautious and appropriately critical in their assimilation of the knowledge and cognitive claims put forth by the inhabitants of academia. Academics are part of what can be termed an elite “new knowledge class” (Berger and Neuhau 1977) or “gnostic” class (Varacalli 2012a: 66), in which knowledge
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is oftentimes inextricably intertwined with, and distorted by, ideological (and utopian) elements.

Sociologists should eschew, as much as humanly possible, utopian and ideological elements in their teaching and writing. Conversely put, Catholic scholars in the practice of doing sociology should be guided solely by the pursuit of truth and realism. A few prominent examples of non-Catholic sociological literature that have earned the designation as “classics” in the sub-fields of the history of the discipline and in sociological theory exemplify the latter and include the work of Robert Nisbet (The Sociological Tradition [1993]), Pitirim Sorokin (Social and Cultural Dynamics [1985]), and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (The Social Construction of Reality [1966]). In the area of marriage and family studies, many secular sociologists have produced crucial research findings consistent with the Catholic emphasis on the importance of maintaining the intact nuclear family for the moral and physical health of children and, ultimately, for the entire civilization. Regarding research documenting the negative consequences of divorce is the work of Judith Wallerstein, Sandra Blakeslee, and Julia W. Lewis (2001). Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher have produced a study indicating that married couples generally do better than do singles along a host of different measurements (2001). Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur demonstrate the significantly greater chance of children suffering various dysfunctions when reared in single-parent families (1994). Mary Eberstadt uncovers the hidden price that some children pay when exposed to excessive use of day care and other “parental substitutes” (2004). In the closely related and very secular field of anthropology, Robert Edgerton opposes its generally overt relativism by proposing the creation of a “quality of life” scale that judges the degree to which various cultures enhance or, conversely, diminish the lives of their respective inhabitants (1992). And sociologists who are Catholic should not hesitate to employ, where justified and appropriate, seminal sociological works in the Catholic natural law intellectual tradition such as those by Jacques Leclercq, Marriage and the Family (1947), and Carle C. Zimmerman, Family and Civilization (1947). Neither should Catholic intellectuals shy away from digging into the goldmine of proto-sociological concepts and insights embedded in the social encyclicals (e.g., a “just” or “living” wage in Pope Leo XIII’s Rerum Novarum (1891) and “subsidiarity” in Pope Pius XI’s Quadragesimo Anno (1931).

CONCLUSION

As is both explicit and implicit in the three volume set commissioned by the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, the Encyclopedia of Catholic
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Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy (2007–2012), sociology is accepted as an important intellectual discipline that can assist the overall civilization, the Catholic Church, and the individual citizen in various ways. When derived from or consistent with the natural law, sociology can help promote, for instance, the construction of a humane society; the Catholic Church, qua religious institution, in maintaining her fidelity to Jesus Christ; and the average individual in making ethically informed decisions. However, it is the case that any cultural formation and human being, given the widespread reality of sin and imperfectability, is inevitably, to some degree or another, destined to stray from the straight and narrow path. Hopefully, the ideas contained within this essay might serve the function of assisting serious Catholics who are sociologists to do justice to the professional demands of their chosen discipline including, most importantly, the welfare of their Catholic, nominally Catholic, and non-Catholic students, while at the same time maintaining the high ideals of being a scholar in the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Bibliography


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