

*Reconstructing Sociology: The Critical Realist Approach*, Douglas Porpora, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, £19.99 (Paperback).242 pp. ISBN: 9781107514713. Accepted by *Sociological Review*, December 2016,published March 2017 DOI: 10.1177/0038026117701357.

Douglas Porpora's challenging book is for readers who are devoted to sociology but are troubled by current guiding assumptions and their negative effects. His concerns about American sociology raise questions about how far they apply in Britain too, when there is ever more need for social science to provide convincing valid information for the public and policy makers.

Porpora summarises many current problems and disconnections in sociology into the following widely-held myths. Ethnography and historical narrative can only explore and describe but not explain. Social research should be value neutral. There is no truth, only relative social constructions. The most important scientific questions are empirical not conceptual. Sociology should replace conscious embodied individual agents with structures, variables, habitus, or with deconstructed or post-human agency. There is no difference between structure and culture or structure and action. And many sociologists can dismiss statistical analysis as being the distinct methodology of positivism.

By unravelling and refuting the myths, Porpora shows the value of critical realism to expose their gaps and contradictions and to offer tenable remedies and alternatives. He sets out seven philosophical commitments, theories central to sociology as a social science. First there is the humanist recognition that each agent is an embodied centre of conscious experiences, intentions and motives. In contrast, several sociological approaches transfer agency away from agents onto structures, or determining factors, or variables. Second is respect for the objective human relations or social structures which connect people, such as competition, power and inequality. These require analysis that gives convincing accounts of both structure and agency, their origins and interactions. Third are the intensive methods in observations and interviews, and fourth the extensive or macro methods too often separated or set in opposition. Porpora advocates greater trust in intensive ethnography, narrative and history as sources of valid causal explanations, and less trust in extensive statistical correlations as either explanations or predictors, with intensive and extensive research methods being complementary and interacting.

Metatheory, the fifth commitment, involves explicit critical analysis of the philosophical theories and tacit assumptions that underlie all social research. These include questions about reality, existence, belief, proof and accuracy, how we can know and understand phenomena, which perspectives and methods to select and how they relate to one another. The sixth commitment, truth, is neglected or avoided by relativist sociological perspectives but valued by positivists, Marxists and the Frankfurt School, by pragmatists and critical

realists. Porpora reviews their differing forms of truth. Finally, there is value orientation that recognises the inherent values in social facts. It sees objectivity as fair, open and impartial, but not neutral, such as when attempts to withhold judgment on the abuses of power can only inadvertently support them.

Porpora reviews many confusions that arise when sociologists overlook these commitments, which explicitly or implicitly relate to all sociology. Although much good social science can be achieved despite faulty premisses, it will not be the best that it could be, Porpora contends. He adds that the first essential practical step in research is to address the philosophical commitments integral to each main sociological perspective or paradigm if sociology is to be rescued from being a 'sham discipline, one that looks like a science but is not' (p. 188). The belief that data can be collected, collated, counted, reported and brokered, uncontaminated by ideology or theory, denies how beliefs and values covertly influence all these 'objective' processes.

*Reconstructing Sociology* analyses how sociology loses realism and relevance if it is seen primarily as the means of producing research methods and findings and not also as a theory-based social science. Main sociological perspectives are reviewed in detail, including positivism, the postmodern group, pragmatism, interpretivism, social constructionism, actor network theory, Marxism/Frankfurt School and Bourdieu. A table (p. 192) summarises the whole book by showing how each perspective explicitly addresses the key philosophical commitments, or else has no explicit position on them or support for them. Only critical realism seriously addresses all the commitments, although it is not an alternative sociological perspective but a philosophy that can assist us in analysing and clarifying the scientific strengths and weaknesses, validity or invalidity, in each sociological perspective.

Porpora shows how critical realism adjudicates across the plethora of sociological paradigms to create new consistency, which can strengthen the validity and usefulness of our discipline. Imagine governments redefining obesity or poor mental health from medical problems into social problems, to be tackled by wide-ranging interdisciplinary research coordinated through a coherent framework of sociology and covering, for example, the related economics and politics, industries and services, healthcare and urban planning, with studies of the complex everyday life of the groups and individuals concerned.

Although sociologists may influence detailed policies, our warnings of the present and likely future dangers of social discord, repression and inequality, besides potential ways to reduce and prevent these ills, seldom appear to influence major policies. Sociology is edged out of public debates when economists and psychologists are introduced as self-evidently respected scientists, whereas sociologists, if they are included at all, seem more likely to evoke scepticism than respect. When sociologists of different persuasions, from positivists

to postmodernists, are unable to convince one another of the validity of their work, they are still less likely to convince the rest of society.

One defence of our discipline's diversity is that its adaptable rich variety can embrace numerous theories, methods and topics. However, variety does not preclude coherence, and coherence does not demand narrow uniformity - like the neoclassical mantras that now monopolise economics. Medicine is a hugely varied discipline yet, fortunately for society's healthcare, it is unified by powerful common values and theories about causal realities. By contrast, and unfortunately for society's wellbeing, sociology is split apart not only by disagreements but, more seriously, by basic contradictions: positivism accepts pristine independent social facts and aims to discover general laws, whereas interpretivism sees only local contingent variety; statistics and experiments are set against ethnography; sociology is variously taken to be value-free, relativist or a moral endeavour.

Sociology is hardly convincing to any group, from students to politicians, when it is presented as a random pick-and-mix medley of approaches. Societies urgently need sociology to position its many valuable insights and methods in relation to one another, showing how they connect and interact within larger relations, to be more like a coherent jigsaw puzzle in progress, rather than a heap of pieces. *Reconstructing Sociology* provides a wealth of ideas to promote a theory-based social science.

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