

BOOK REVIEWS

SACRED PROJECT FOR AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY, by Christian Smith. N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2014, 224 pp., \$18.94

When you read the title of Christian Smith's new book, you will immediately ask two questions. One, of course, is what is that sacred project he speaks of and why can this project from an academic organization be classified "sacred?" At the same time, there are already two things you already know when you read a book by this author. You know the book will be meticulously well documented, and you know if the topic is controversial he will write respectfully and concentrate on the issues rather than on the personalities of those he confronts. Before answering the first two questions, I suggest that if you are a sociologist, whether affiliated with the American Sociological Association (ASA) or not, the book is a must read. This volume is written by a sociologist to sociologists. And the project Dr. Smith is referencing can be stated quite clearly. I quote directly from the text: "American Sociology ...is committed to the visionary project of realizing the emancipation, equality and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally so desire, by constructing their own favored identities, entering and existing relationships as they choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential, material and bodily pleasures."

Smith is quick to emphasize that not all sociologists hold to this directive; that is especially true if one entered the field with the original intention of simply studying what is happening in society, what are the consequences and causes. Smith's contention is that American Sociology (not necessarily true of all international sociology) has been a more activist organization that is not just studying society and social problems but taking an overt stance on what equality means (equality can be approached from a material standpoint, a moral viewpoint, a teleological viewpoint and others). Without a question, American Sociology asserts the individual is the center of consideration for equality rather than the group or community, which is the viewpoint of many other non-American cultures. This is a hidden presumption of the ASA while this may not be the position of sociologists in India, Japan, and many other countries.

A second major point emphasized is the "sacred" nature of ASA's project, an assertion some members may question since most members are not religious. But if you are a sociologist, this term does not need to be explained. Anyone remotely versed in Emile Durkheim's work realizes "sacred," as opposed to the mundane, refers to anything that is set apart from the profane and forbidden to be violated. Once a group asserts a passionate agenda and fights for a particular stance, that agenda is no longer value free, and that passionate cause then becomes "sacred," using Durkheim's reasoning. Based on the evidence presented, the major issue is that American Sociology is approaching a violation of the principles of science by no longer striving for a value-neutral examination, especially when that agenda is not declared forthright. Yes, American Sociology is intended to be a scientific study using the scientific method in its research, but having

a biased agenda is certainly not value neutral study. For proof, Dr. Smith suggests going to any ASA annual convention and walking through the bookstore exhibit. Other than textbooks, most books are iconoclastic, oriented toward inequality with enmity toward anyone in power—a very liberal approach to controversies. Though once sociology emphasized structures that bind society, now American Sociology draws attention to the breaking down of structures that appear to promote inequality without suggesting ways to nurture social stability.

Our author makes his case by presenting simple statistics like the numbers and the very names of the sections in the ASA. Most have decidedly liberal positions on public issues in their respective areas of expertise, whether Family, Economics, Urban, or Youth. His anecdotal case studies are quite compelling. Some are well known, like the Regnerus case where a double standard was used to complain that his data was not perfect though vastly improved over data presented in previous studies. ASA Spokespersons' main complaint with Professor Regnerus being that the data could be construed negatively to impact homosexuals, which is in opposition to the "Sacred Project" of promoting equality among all groups especially minorities. Dare anyone publish anything under the auspices of ASA that could even remotely appear to condone inequality? Conversely, the Lenore Weitzman example is equally telling. For ten years, this ASA darling refused to divulge her data set while she promoted her agenda that mainly women in divorces were economically devastated. Finally after ten years when other studies continued to show results conflicting with hers, she did reveal her data and blamed the inaccurate results on a graduate student's error. Why had the ASA stood behind her results for all those years? Her interpretation of results was in line with the ASA agenda, of course. For those ten years, she used her erroneous data to effect major policy changes throughout the country. Many such examples are provided.

Finally, Smith makes his intentions clear in his closing chapters. He is, of course, condemnatory of the dishonesty in the peer review process of ASA journals that carefully screen articles that provide results contrary to agenda, but mainly he hopes all associated with ASA will realize the hidden agenda of the organization. It is being transformed from an organization promoting the scientific study of society to one of the activists taking positions on social issues that promote a particularly biased set of positions on how a healthy society should look. There is a vast difference between an organization encouraging the understanding of society and one that promotes specific positions. Smith mentions a number of suggestions to rectify the disparity between appearance and reality but appears to be content to make his point to coax sociologists to at least admit what is happening in American sociology rather than condemn the discipline as becoming less scientific and more activist.

In summarizing this reviewer's assessment of the volume, I would strongly encourage all sociologists to read the book. The issues brought to the fore are thought provoking. Smith writes with the boldness that only a well-respected and qualified sociologist could write—a must read for all sociologists.

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