

Sociological Perspective, Identity Crisis and Educational Practice – Vijitha Rajan

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The very nature of sociological imagination is that it unsettles our everyday beliefs and practices. Sociological imagination questions our common sense (Madan, 2019), and its unexamined and unconscious roots (Deshpande, 2003) and helps us see how 'things are not what they seem' (Berger, 1963). Its task and promise are to 'grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (Mills, 2000, p.6). Therefore, it exposes social structures in their most naked forms and the complex ways in which these structures shape and are shaped by



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human actions. One of the aims of having sociology as a core course for Post Graduate students of Education here at Azim Premji University is to utilize this capacity of sociology to understand questions of education. That is, to understand educational systems, processes, and practices not as closed endeavours but in conjunction with larger historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts. This also means to facilitate students critically evaluating their contexts and how these have shaped their experiences of life and education.

Often this has destabilizing effects on students as they begin to see life and the world around them differently. Once learnt to see through a sociological lens, it is virtually impossible to unsee it. It makes them question one's privilege as well as marginality and understand their life experiences as shaped through relations of power and inequality in society. One question that gets constantly posed to me as a teacher of sociology of education is about adequate and appropriate social action and ways in which students can refrain from being part of hegemonic social structures and thereby contribute to building an equitable society. And in the process how one

can sensibly and democratically engage with existing networks of family and friends who may often hold unjust social beliefs resulting in irrational and inequitable behaviours and actions. Most importantly students struggle with questions about living peacefully with themselves when possibilities of action and social change are limited and faced with challenges that are beyond their control. While for many privileged students, this creates immense guilt about their contribution to making the world unjust and unequal, for marginalized students this means dismay and anger about how their life chances and opportunities are limited for no mistake of theirs. I do not want to imply that these are the only kind of feelings that the course evokes or that all students develop these feelings through the course. Student identities being multiple, intersectional and dynamic, it is also not possible to straightforwardly label their experiences into binary categories of privilege and marginalization. Nevertheless, these feelings are significant and brought up frequently in discussions inside and outside the classroom.

Illustrated below is how one of the students, Tarannum, felt after a short assignment in the course that required them to watch the documentary, 'Nero's Guests' (Bhatia, 2009) and understand and analyze the agrarian crisis and educational inequality in the Indian context. On December 11, 2021, she wrote me an email as follows.

Hi Vijitha,

I just finished watching 'Nero's Guest' and writing a note on it for our Practicum.

Before writing further I want to apologise for such very personal sharing –

Nero's Guest is such a huge, heavy and very emotional documentary and writing notes on it was the most difficult task for me in the last 3 months. Pages in my notebook are still full of tears and I wrote this note from all my emotions and feelings. I couldn't write it in a way called "Academic writing". After a few drafts, somehow, I manage to write it in smooth language.

I know we have seen this issue in the news, we read about it though we always avoid reacting to it this time I was trapped.

I am still not able to write about mass schooling, it is really scaring me. Even though we have seen its other side, the documentary was so overloaded and bold to make me very sensitive.

I know this will happen when I actually start working in the field and I don't know how to calm down, or how to work on it.

Though fragmented in addressing her feelings, I wrote back to her.

Dear Tarannum,

Thank you for sharing this, it's very kind of you to share your personal feelings with me.

I am at a loss for words. As a teacher, I am happy that the documentary has appealed to you in both cognitive and affective ways. Yet, I know how disturbing it can be emotionally and how one might feel lost and helpless in all of these social realities. What I want to say now is easier said than done. We must keep our hope on and our ability to engage with the world. As I always say whether we will be able to radically change the world is a different question, but we have to try.

I am sure this knowledge has already changed you in your engagements with the world. And that will certainly have some effect on how our presence shapes the world. This will also certainly shape how you understand and apply things in your workplace. I don't want to promise that this journey will be free of challenges and that you will not feel any constraints. Knowledge gives you not only awareness but also the burden of engaging with the world differently and ethically.

Being the strong person you are, I am sure Nero's guest would be a guiding light in your life, and you will gain the courage to positively engage with the unjust realities that it exposes, even if it is in your small ways.

When students share such feelings, I am often left with silence and ramble all those thoughts that come to my mind at the moment. Sometimes I talk about the possibilities of micro-sociology in understanding and imagining human action in diverse ways. Sometimes I talk about students' possible roles as educational practitioners in the future and in what ways sociological thinking might help them look at things differently on the ground. Or as in the above email, I take refuge in the empowering potential of sociological knowledge for students' lives and work. But none of these fully alleviates the real and intense emotional struggles of identity and justice that students are faced with. In a way, these resonate with my own feelings in my personal and professional life ever since I was introduced to sociological thinking in my post-graduation. Sociology has given me language and frameworks to understand my experiences of class and gender inequalities and at the same time has unsettled my life in terms of having to live with its contradictions and enact a self that has become not mine. One of the core struggles that I faced during my doctoral research with migrant children was about how useless my research would be in terms of actually benefitting the lives of the participants that I was researching, writing, and getting a degree. And it is still very unsettling to think about whether and how one's location in academia enables social change in meaningful and socially just ways. While one derives hope from being part of students' learning who grow into agents of social change in their ways, these questions are here to stay and will be an ongoing sociological negotiation. The dialectical social labour of 'restoring the meaningfulness of knowledge to a way of life' is negotiated through constant 'efforts, struggles, abilities and skills' (Talib & Savyasaachi, 2003, p.82).

Part of the problem comes from the persistent divide between theory and practice in sociology. Though scholars like Freire have constantly reminded us of the importance of praxis and Maitrayee Chaudhuri has evoked to mitigate the 'arbitrary divide between the word and the world' in the Indian context (Chaudhuri, 2003, p.2), the effect of historical formulations around sociological theory as an endeavour to only 'understand' the world persists. For instance, in many doctoral seminars and viva that I have seen, it is common for students to respond to questions around real-life applications of their research that their task was only to 'understand' the problem. Sociologists such as Berger (1963, p.5) insist that Sociology is an attempt to theoretically understand the world and while it might help the practitioner, "*there is nothing inherent in the sociological enterprise of trying to understand the society that necessarily leads to this practice or any other*". Questions of morality and social justice are removed from such formulations of sociological theorizing. For Berger, when sociologists become aware of practical applicability and consequences, they leave "*the sociological frame of reference as such and moves into realms of values, beliefs and ideas that he shares with other men who are not sociologists*" (p.17). He goes on to claim (p.24) that

"...People who are interested in human beings only if they can change, convert or reform them should also be warned, for they will find sociology much less useful than they hoped... Sociology will be satisfying, in the long run, only to those who can think of nothing more entrancing than to watch men and to understand things human."

While such a narrative reveals the power of sociological imagination, it falls short in terms of envisioning the scope of sociology beyond 'understanding' the world. While it may be futile to suggest that sociology must enable people to envision solutions to all issues of identity and social justice, it is worthwhile to critically evaluate the role of sociology as a theoretical endeavour alone. On the other end, neoliberal discourse around education and development has diminished knowledge into mere skills, outputs, and best practices; social sciences as equipping oneself merely for the job-oriented market (Talib & Savyasaachi, 2003) and sociological theory into a technical and nominal endeavour (Chaudhuri & Thakur, 2018). Either way, the distance between theory and practice has grown much wider in the current context.

This distance often leads to underestimating the emotions of students around identity, justice, and social change and their implications for acting upon the world differently. Bringing back students and their participation, aspirations and identities that are otherwise absent, into the centre of the classroom is crucial here (Chaudhuri, 2003). Perhaps, as bell hooks suggests an 'engaged pedagogy' that goes beyond conventional critical and feminist pedagogies (Hooks, 1994) is required to address the aforesaid crisis. 'Engaged pedagogy' is not just about endeavouring for "*knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world*" (p.15). Hooks notes about her own students' experiences of the classroom as an emotional site (p.19),

“...There are times when I walk into classrooms overflowing with students who feel terribly wounded in their psyches (many of them see therapists), yet I do not think that they want therapy from me. They do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences.”

For Hooks, a pedagogy that can address such well-being of students is not one-directional, but symbiotic, that which can address the wholeness and self-actualization of both teachers and students. Only teachers who are vulnerable in front of their students, ready to accept curriculum and teaching practices as sites of resistance and can conquer the fear that a non-objective self would hinder the teaching process. In the Indian context, Rege articulates similar concerns through her Phule-Ambedkarite Feminist pedagogical practice and has demonstrated how such practices can be ‘slippery and hazardous’ and not free of challenges, despite making education a critical and dialogical endeavor (see Rege, 2010).

In the university here, there are multiple opportunities for students to engage with both theory and practice—through readings classroom discussions, practicums, internships, and various field visits. As we navigate through these realms of theory and practice, we often do not find enough time to spend with the bridges that separate them and the emotional struggles, identity crises and challenges for educational practice that accompany them. Staying and engaging with these bridges and struggles without disintegrating our souls and our relationship with the social world is perhaps one of the biggest challenges in front of teachers and students of the Sociology of education in current times.

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