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Achieving Social Impact

Sociology in the Public Sphere

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Foreword

Social Science, Sociology in particular, may be, on the defensive in many countries, weathering the storm of neoliberalism that is uprooting the university; in Spain, the battle is against a feudal order of the great professors. At the forefront of this battle is CREA, *Community of Research on Excellence for All*, a homegrown cross-disciplinary institute of engaged sociology born 25 years ago at the University of Barcelona that today attracts faculty and students not just from Spain but from all over the world. Founded by the charismatic figures of Jesús Gómez and Ramon Flecha in 1991, the institute has been directed by Marta Soler for the last 10 years. Her own research among literary groups within the working class of Catalonia, showing how, given the opportunity, the most oppressed groups can appreciate great literature—her research has inspired CREA’s distinctive approach for overcoming inequality.

The hallmark of CREA, then, is dialogue: open dialogue among sociologists; dialogue between sociologists and the people they study; and the promotion of dialogue within the communities they seek to uplift. They have successfully built an egalitarian network in the interstices of academic hierarchies, contending with the pressures of careerism and challenging the powerful overlords and full professors known locally as *catedráticos*.

One of the more hidden and painful expressions of such hierarchy is sexual harassment, pervasive not just in Spain but in many universities elsewhere—the unscrupulous deployment of power, often not only over students, but also over young colleagues and staff. CREA has not only openly and bravely challenged such egregious behavior but, emerging from this, has developed a research program to study gender violence. While workplace relations are important in fostering such violations, CREA researchers go further in trying to reverse predatory instincts that are fostered among peers, e.g., in high-schools. They organize and lead dialogic groups that bring gender relations into focus, which question assumptions behind sexual interaction and gender stereotypes, and that help people reflect on the meaning of sexual attractiveness. CREA has developed a sociological intervention that they call “preventative socialization” based on theories of the relationship between reason and desire in which neither is beyond the reach of the other. They

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have not stopped at such experimentation but used the results of the research to shape policy-making, contributing to the extension of the meaning of sexual harassment in the law.

Starting from their own lives in the academy, CREA has fostered a community that not only challenges academic hierarchies, not only undertakes research into manifestations of those hierarchies, but also seeks to advance changes in the law. Their own community is prefigurative of the world they seek to create through "communicative methodology," bringing sociologists into dialogue with the people they study. This is research in pursuit of equality—democratic sociology for a democratic society. This is not research at a distance that objectifies the community, reproducing the stereotypes of the poor, immigrants, and outcast minorities, without ever consulting them. To the contrary, CREA works directly with the community, bringing its "common sense" sociology into relation with the inherited body of sociological knowledge. By their interventions, the CREA researchers develop the trust of those they study, especially important when the latter are the subject of all sorts of fanciful stigma in the print and visual media and in the public at large. This goes beyond participatory action research in which the community defines the problems of the researcher, but involves also the interrogation by the community of inherited bodies of social science scholarship. This is a genuine two-way conversation.

Communicative methodology is, in other words, a perfect example of organic public sociology—a sociology that engages communities directly in face-to-face fashion. Different from traditional public sociology that engages audiences at a distance through diverse media, organic public sociology engages its participating communities in an *unmediated* fashion. Here, the publics are more restricted but, on the other hand, they are visible, thick, active, and often counter-publics. Organic public sociology is not only a public sociology that can be more effectively directed, but also a public sociology that is accountable to its participating communities.

Thus, CREA research teams may bring to the community institutional models that have worked elsewhere such as the model of cooperation as developed by the great Mondragon Cooperative. The model is discussed and then applied to an urban Roma community as a way of tackling unemployment through what they call labor reinsertion. Of course, no model can be simply taken from one context and implanted in another, it requires adaptation. Here, again collective engagement through dialogue is the key to the intervention if it is to become a "successful action." In conducting such dialogue, the researchers face a problem—the diversity of interests and identities within the community. With whom should one dialogue? CREA responds to the challenge by constituting an advisory committee that represents those divergent interests and identities, ensuring effective representation as well as internal dialogue within the community. All this requires enormous patience, courage, and the stripping away of the mistaken assumptions each side might have toward the other. Throughout, the researchers make every effort to recognize and consult with representative bodies, and to do that most effectively they also constitute themselves as a multi-cultural team.

But it does not stop there. CREA brings their research and the communities they study to the European parliament, generating an open discussion about the way of reversing, for example, discrimination against Roma people. Legislation is passed that further galvanizes Roma communities and their willingness to participate in more experiments designed to overcome inequality, leading to more successful actions. In the CREA model, success breeds success. They develop an exemplary synergy between organic public sociology and policy sociology.

One of the more extraordinary achievements of CREA is their project in living theory. They are opposed to the instrumental view of theory in which ready-made social theory is simply applied to the world. To the contrary, there is neither ready-made theory nor an inert world. One of the defining features of CREA is its regular "book in hand" seminars where a group that includes community members as well as sociologists set about discussing some abstruse "text," whether it be Habermas's theory of communicative action, Alain Touraine's theory of social intervention, Ulrich Beck's risk society, or Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Often the theorist is there him or herself, and subject to critical interrogation not just from card-carrying sociologists but also people from communities. As Marta Soler reports in this book, the invited theorists come away shocked and energized by the experience. Judith Butler says she will have to revise her notion of feminism as a result of her participation in the seminar. So theory lives as theorists and communities together rebuild it.

But theory lives not only just as a dynamic process of theorizing, but also in the lives of subjects. Communities learn to bring theory into their lives, educating themselves "with the book in hand" to the wider forces shaping their communities, problematizing the assumptions they make, and above all, making it clear that what is does not have to be. The communicative methodology allows people to live theory imagining alternative worlds—the first and necessary step to create such worlds. Living theory is none other than giving people hope for a better world and inspiring them and others to create such a world. That is what CREA means.

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