The Problem of Suffering as a Problem for Sociology

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I am grateful to the editors for devoting some space to comments on my book *Suffering: A Sociological Introduction* and to Gareth Williams for his initial thoughts about this work. His opinion piece highlights two of the core problems that I present for further dialogue and debate. Firstly, there is the problem of how we might venture to conceptualise the brute facts of human suffering. Secondly, there is the matter of the forms of thinking and inquiry whereby these might be brought within the frameworks of sociological research and understanding.

Williams notes that, following writers such as Arthur Frank (2001), Arthur Kleinman (1991, 1995, 1999) and Pierre Bourdieu (1999), my work dwells in some detail on the ways in which symbolic forms of communication always appear to fall short of expressing what suffering actually ‘is’ in human experience. Quite rightly, he points out that, one would be quite wrong to understand such difficulties as a sign that suffering defies cultural representation. What is at stake here is the adequacy of words, music and visual imagery for conveying the existential character and moral meaning of human suffering. A great deal of our culture is devoted to the expression of suffering; but it seems that we are always left struggling to account for the existential and moral sufficiency of our attempts to make proper sense of this experience.

I do not believe that this is a peculiar problem for a post-Enlightenment culture; rather, it seems to me that the record of human history always speaks of humanity struggling to bring a sufficient meaning to the experience of suffering. Following Weber, I regard the problem of suffering as a constant spur within the dynamics of contrasting modes of rationalisation across and within cultures. However, I am inclined to understand some of the social and cultural processes implicated within the event of Enlightenment and subsequent conditions of modernity as giving rise to a heightened sensibility towards the conceptual and ethical failings of our shared attempts at communicating what suffering does to people. In this sense, the problem of suffering understood in terms of the difficulty of assigning a proper meaning to extreme forms of pain, appears to be more widespread and acute in our times. In my book I work to remind readers that this understanding is a component of Marx’s thinking on the experience of alienation and immiseration, Weber’s account of the social psychology of modern rationality and Durkheim’s conception of the anomie division of labour in society. Accordingly, I present the social and cultural constitution of our sensitivity towards the problem of suffering as a neglected matter of analysis in classical sociology. It is this which leads me to suggest that a critical sociology of suffering would involve attempts at tracing out the ways in which our ongoing struggles to make suffering productive for thought and action contribute to broader dynamics of social and cultural change. I argue that the ways in which individuals and groups struggle to make sense of suffering should be revisited as a topic of sociological inquiry in its own right.

I hold back from suggesting that it might be possible for sociologists to piece together an adequate account of human suffering; rather, I seek to address the difficulty of realising this endeavour as a matter of sociological interest. In no way do
I intend to devalue the efforts made by writers such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992; 1998) and Veena Das (2001) to highlight the (seemingly) more or less productive ways in which people “bear witness” to experiences of suffering so as to achieve a measure of cultural healing. Indeed, I am greatly concerned for social researchers to work at furthering our understanding of the potential for the bodily experience and psychic trauma of suffering to be moderated and modified through the lens of culture. However, it seems to me that the scope of research and writing on matters of ‘social suffering’ should not be limited to this interest. I would encourage a more elaborated analysis of the particular ways in which, it is not so much due to the cultural achievement of conveying the meaning of human suffering, but more as a consequence of making clear the crushing sense of failing to provide an adequate address for suffering that wider questions of humanity are brought to bear on the moral values enshrined within our individual actions, institutional behaviours and political decisions.

With this project in mind, I suggest that Hannah Arendt’s attempts to make sense of the “evil of totalitarianism” can be regarded as an example of the “critical praxis” of writing on suffering (Arendt 1951; 1994). I argue that her style of writing is designed to appeal to a shared sense of the difficulty of understanding what suffering does to people under the conviction that, this amounts to an opportunity to advance new terms of ethical and political debate. I note that Arendt displays a great sensitivity towards the ways in which our adopted styles of writing might be fashioned to either open up or deny space for a critical questioning of the moral meaning of harrowing events in human history. Moreover, I argue that it is with a particular interest in the practice of writing as a form of moral engagement with the existential meaning of human suffering that Pierre Bourdieu explains the wider purposes of his work in The Weight of the World.

I am prepared to stand alongside these writers in the hope that the practice of sociological writing about human suffering serves to render “visible” the dynamics of society, economy and culture in terms of their human consequences and costs to humanity. I believe that this should draw us to openly acknowledge the “unspeakable” subjectivity of those with experiences of extreme suffering. I argue that the value of such writing may well lie in the ways we are provoked by the failings of our endeavour to debate with the human/moral meaning of the “brute facts” of the harms we inflict on one another. I contend that the intellectual and ethical tensions borne under the failure to provide an adequate address for suffering have the potential to invigorate critical debate over the forms of society and culture in which we are made to live. I further believe that this incorporates a critical questioning of the social and moral value of academic sociology.

In seems to me that such practices are already well established within the cultural politics of modern humanitarianism. I understand these to have a long history that finds expression within the value placed by key figures of Enlightenment on feeling for humanity (a neglected theme within sociological accounts of this era). Where my thesis turns to raise questions about the enduring sociological value of intellectual traditions of debate on moral sentimentality, this is with a mind to establish grounds for re-invigorating methods of sociological and critical inquiry into the current force and manifestations of compassion within the public realm. There are many forms of
appeal to human suffering as a means to challenge modes of political decision, professional practice and policy formation. Indeed, in our times, it seems that some of the greatest expressions of political solidarity are mobilised with the aid of carefully crafted cultural representations of extreme violence and pain. It is under the conviction that a sociological voice should be heard within these arenas that my work is offered as an encouragement to further research, thinking and debate.

References