

Social Science as Public Philosophy Revived

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Civic Sociology

More than thirty years ago, in their best-selling *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues coined the phrase "Social Science as Public Philosophy" (SSPP). They proposed it as an alternative to the "professional sociology" they believed had become increasingly hegemonic; too many sociologists, they contended, mistakenly embraced an ideal of social science modelled on the natural sciences. Instead, they championed a vision of sociology in which "the boundary between social science and philosophy was still open"—a vision they traced back to the classical works of Tocqueville, Durkheim, and others. Though rhetorically tantalizing and rich with critical potential, unfortunately SSPP remains undertheorized and thus neglected. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to systematically reconstruct, refine, and ultimately revive the sociological vision underlying SSPP. This vision consists of five pillars: (1) a rejection of the dualist aspiration to separate facts from values, in favour of an interpretive-cum-normative conception of social science; (2) a view of sociology as grounded in, and motivated by, specific traditions of ethical and philosophical inquiry; (3) transparency regarding the sociologist's theoretical and normative commitments, and a willingness to subject them to public scrutiny; (4) an immanent conception of social criticism, which values identification rather than detachment; and (5) a commitment to democracy, substantively conceived. I contend that SSPP remains a vital resource for sociology today.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most sociologists today relate to normativity in one of two ways. The first involves distancing themselves from it as much as possible; for these "dualists," as Andrew Abbott (2018) calls them, social science should be "value neutral," and thus the normative must be excised and eliminated. In their private life, the sociologist is perfectly free to moralize all they'd like, but as sociologists, compartmentalization is required. Good sociology requires a categorical separation of "subjective" values from "objective" facts, of the "soft" humanities from the "hard" sciences, as the role of the sociologist is to assist others—be they the state, firms, or individual actors—to accomplish their normative ends, whatever those might be. Dualists, then, not only accept C. P. Snow's famous "Two Cultures" thesis but adapt it to distinguish good sociology from bad: normativity represents in their schema a kind of moral pollution, a threat to that which they hold sacred—"pure science." The second involves embracing the normative, both in principle and in practice, but with minimal critical reflection on what that actually means. For "monists" (again, Abbott's term), sociology is always already normative, or normative through and through—thus the dualist aspiration for objectivity is misguided, if not deluded. But more importantly, good sociology, according to monists, deliberately espouses a set

of normative goals that they assume to be self-evident: "equality," "equity," and "emancipation." Thus, the task of the sociologist, for monists, is to use the theoretical and methodological tools provided by the sociological tradition to demystify and thereby undermine the (structural) barriers that stand in the way of realizing these ideals. This, then, is how the normative takes shape in most contemporary sociological practice: one either avoids it like the plague ("No normativity here!"), or one unapologetically flies its flag but says little about the character of one's commitments ("Of course, we are normative! Who isn't? Plus, aren't we all for equality?").

Reflecting on these two approaches, Abbott (2018) justifiably calls the state of normative work in sociology "haphazard" (159). My impression is that sociologists today give very little thought to the scope, role, or nature of normativity in their research. Among dualists, normative questions or issues are simply ignored, while among monists, it is simply assumed that, as long as one admits that one's work is "normative," there is no need for further discussion. Sociologists can ostensibly choose only one of two roles: *scientist* or *activist*. That said, as Abbott points out, there is technically a third option; he draws a distinction between "strong" and "closet" monists—that is, between those who explicitly acknowledge the normative dimensions of their work and those who publicly claim to be dualists while actu-

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ally being monists in their sociological practice. So, things are slightly more complicated than I am letting on. Nevertheless, that some publicly claim one role (scientist) while actually adopting the other (activist) does not change the fact that there are ostensibly only two options.

But is this true? Have we no other ways of relating the normative to sociological theory and practice? Abbott suggests that the state of sociological normativism is so dire that we need to look beyond sociology for exportable models. He proposes that we construct a distinct subdiscipline or branch whose task would be to deal with issues of normativity in sociology, and he envisages this consisting of two models, which he calls *canonical* and *legalist*. The canonical approach would resemble political theory insofar as it would organize itself around a canon, or a set of exemplary sociological texts, and be tasked with offering systematic inquiry into the normative dimensions of modern social questions at a general, theoretical level. The legalist approach would resemble common law in that, rather than being organized around a canon, it would organize itself around specific bodies of sociological research, with the aim of constructing a body of systematic concepts and precepts for assessing normative work, while also creating standards for determining what Abbott refers to as “normative excellence” (Abbott 2018, 161). I find this proposal intriguing and worthy of consideration. But I want to question Abbott’s claim that North American sociology lacks a coherent model for doing normative sociology. Moreover, while Abbott’s proposals are certainly innovative, they are not entirely new. Indeed, calls for a more ethically literate and normatively conscious type of social science have a long and durable, if somewhat undertheorized, history within sociology.¹ In this article, I explore one particular instance of this history, which I believe remains as timely and urgent as ever.

2. ON HABITS OF THE HEART

In 1985 Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton coauthored what is arguably a sociological classic.² *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* is today widely considered a landmark text on American society and culture. It is no less than an attempt to capture, in comprehensive terms, the spirit of the United States at the end of the twentieth century—its hopes and concerns, its promise and potential, its faults and failings. Over the course of 350 pages, Bellah and his coauthors tell the story of America as they understand it—of where the American character comes from, of how its founding cultural myths live on in the voices of ordinary Americans, and what this means for

the future of the country. It is the kind of undertaking that few sociologists today are willing (or even able) to attempt. Moreover, *Habits* is one of those rare academic books that found crossover appeal; not only was it widely discussed within the academy, attracting the attention of scholars across a host of disciplines, but it also struck a chord with nonacademic audiences (Yamane 2007). In the year of its publication, it was reviewed in almost every major newspaper, and it eventually became one of the best-selling books ever written by sociologists, selling between four and five hundred thousand copies (Bortolini 2021, 285). Naturally, this is not to say that *Habits* failed to attract controversy; on the contrary, the book has accumulated as many critics as it has admirers—attracting particular ire from academic sociologists. Some of these criticisms are undoubtedly justified. For instance, soon after its original publication, critics such as Vincent Harding (1988) raised vociferous objections regarding the lack of racial diversity in the book’s interview sample, which narrowly comprised members of the white middle class, while M. Elizabeth Albert (1988) criticized *Habits*’s lack of engagement with feminist thought and practice. No doubt, were *Habits* published today, these serious vices would have to be corrected. At the same time, I would contend that an important source of the criticism of *Habits* stems from a motley mix of what its lead author, Bellah (2007), referred to as “misreadings” and a commitment to either dualist or monist sociology. In other words, much of the resistance to *Habits* centers on its underlying theoretical and methodological approach, the explication of which was tucked away in its appendix—what the authors call “Social Science as Public Philosophy” (SSPP).

In this all-too-brief account of their sociological approach, Bellah et al. take stock of the state of contemporary social science as they see it, lament its colonization by the positivistic ethos of the natural sciences, and defend a version of sociology that they trace back, in various respects, to classical theorists like Tocqueville, Durkheim, Marx, and Mill. In the accessible and compelling prose typical of the entire book, they describe SSPP as an “older conception of social science ... in which the boundary between social science and philosophy is still open” (Bellah et al. 1985, 298). It is a form of social science, they write, that adopts a “synoptic view, at once philosophical, historical, and sociological” (298). And it aims to “speak to the major ethical questions of the society as whole” (299). Given the evident success of *Habits*, it is striking how little attention has been paid to this vision. As mentioned above, I surmise this is in no small part the result of the growth of the dualist and monist models within sociology in the proceeding years: it is much easier to either avoid normativity altogether or simply pay it lip service than to adopt the challenging integrationist model championed by Bellah and his coauthors.

1 Any general schematic always risks oversimplification. I recognize that, outside North America, the dualist-monist binary classification is arguably far less tenable. European and UK sociology, for instance, have been far more open to alternative modes of normative theorizing; one thinks of the likes of Habermas, Beck, Honneth, Boltanski, Thévenot, Giddens, and Archer, to name a few. Thus, I wish to stress that my focus in this article is on North American sociology as an institutional and a disciplinary field.

2 For a useful summary of *Habits* and its distinctiveness as a work of social science, see Reynolds and Norman (1988), as well as the recently published biography of Bellah by Matteo Bortolini (2021), especially chapters 16 and 17.

But to be fair, one has to admit that another reason one doesn't hear much about "social science as public philosophy" these days is that it is not very clear what it entails concretely. The fact is this vision, though provocative and compelling, remains undertheorized. No doubt, the authors of *Habits* chose a "show" over a "tell" method, offering up their book as an exemplary case study in how to do SSPP. But there is much to be said for elucidating, in analytic fashion, the core tenets of such a sociological approach.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to systematically reconstruct, refine, and ultimately revive the sociological vision underlying SSPP. That said, given the relative terseness of its appendix, my reconstruction of this vision is based not simply on what is found in *Habits* but also on works that played a key role in animating its vision, as well as those which have subsequently developed it. These include William M. Sullivan's (1986) *Reconstructing Public Philosophy*; the 1979 reader in *Interpretive Social Science*, coedited by Sullivan and Paul Rabinow; and earlier essays of Bellah's such as "Social Science as Practical Reason" and "The Ethical Aims of Social Inquiry." It also includes the hermeneutic philosophical investigations of Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer, the neo-Aristotelian thought of Alasdair MacIntyre, and, naturally, subsequent collaborations between Bellah and his coauthors (notably, *The Good Society* (1992) and Bellah's *Festschrift, Meaning and Modernity* (2001)). Finally, given Bellah's immense influence on subsequent sociological theorists such as Jeffrey Alexander, Philip Gorski, Paul Lichterman, and Nina Eliasoph, among others, I take the liberty of drawing inspiration from the writings of those who have carried forward some version of SSPP in their own work, albeit under different labels, as well as those whose work closely aligns with the vision animating SSPP. Put simply, this vision consists of five pillars: (1) a rejection of the dualist aspiration to separate facts from values, in favour of an interpretive-cum-normative conception of social science; (2) a view of sociology as grounded in, and motivated by, specific traditions of ethical and philosophical inquiry; (3) transparency regarding the sociologist's theoretical and normative commitments, and a willingness to subject them to public scrutiny; (4) an immanent conception of social criticism, which values identification rather than detachment; and (5) a commitment to democracy, substantively conceived. In reviving this vision, my aims are twofold: first, to distinguish SSPP from the existing models of sociological normativism; and second, to make the case that it remains a vital resource for sociology today.

3. THE FIVE PILLARS OF "SOCIAL SCIENCE AS PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY"?

3.1. A REJECTION OF THE DUALIST ASPIRATION TO SEPARATE FACTS FROM VALUES, IN FAVOUR OF AN INTERPRETIVE-CUM-NORMATIVE CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

SSPP begins as a critique of dualism, or what Bellah et al. (1985) refer to as the "myth of social science" (297)—the idea that social science is soon to be, or should at least aspire to be, like natural science. While this myth has long-standing roots—Bellah et al. trace it back to August Comte—it did not really catch hold in America until the late nineteenth century. It was during this period that sociology underwent a process of professionalization: the research university replaced the liberal arts college as the model for higher education, specialization became the fashion of the day, and the "man of learning" was replaced by the "scientist" (299). This process intensified over the course of the twentieth century, conferring legitimacy on the dualist platform and remaking the discipline in its image. It reached its zenith in the 1950s, when Bellah studied at Harvard under Talcott Parsons—in many respects, the ultimate dualist. And while the dualist pretension to separate facts from values came under sustained attack in the wake of the 1960s (e.g., Gouldner 1970), dualist sociology remains in many respects dominant (Alexander 2019).

Although Bellah et al. acknowledge that real gains have been made as a result of these changes (Bellah was, for years, Parsons's intellectual protégé before departing from his abstract structural functionalism in favour of a cultural sociological interpretivism), they also lament the rise of dualism, or what they call "professional sociology."³ One consequence of its rise is that many sociologists have forgotten what originally inspired the sociological vocation: classical social theorists were not concerned with merely identifying the causal relationships between single variables but rather with determining what makes for a good society (Bellah 1982). In other words, the earliest social theorists, from Aristotle to Montesquieu to Mill, espoused an essentially philosophical concern with practical reason, or how to create a society where individuals and communities would flourish. Thus, Tocqueville never drew a categorical distinction between social science and philosophy—for one, because the distinction did not yet exist, but more importantly, because he assumed that you could not have one without the other (Bellah et al. 1985, 297).

Of course, the rise of dualist sociology has meant more than just historical revisionism; Bellah et al. contend that the increased specialization produced by professionalization has regrettably led to academic siloing and the production of sociological knowledge that is increasingly abstract and inaccessible. "Today's specialized academics, with notable exceptions, write with a set of intellectual assump-

3 In a famous ASA Presidential Address, Michael Burawoy (2005) developed and expanded on this typology, distinguishing between professional, policy, public, and critical sociologies. I discuss the debates this address spurred, and their relevance to SSPP, later.

tions and a vocabulary shared only by their colleagues” (Bellah et al. 1985, 299). Moreover, in their quest for “objectivity,” professional sociologists have dramatically reduced their ambitions, opting only to study that which they can measure. As a result, as Isaac Reed and Jeffrey Alexander (2009) rightfully lament, we are encouraged to say “less and less about more and more” (26). Likewise, the unity of knowledge once aspired to by social thinkers like Durkheim and Marx has been replaced by the dualist penchant for technical expertise and specialized knowledge of an exceedingly narrow and instrumental kind. Consequently, as Christian Smith (2014) explains, “philosophical questions that actually bear importantly on the purpose, value, and methods of sociology are ubiquitously considered irrelevant to ‘real’ work in the discipline” (143).

In contrast to dualism, SSPP aspires to draw from and integrate insights spanning the social sciences and the humanities in order to produce what Bellah et al. (1985, 300) call a “larger view”—that is, how individuals, cultures, institutions, and historical circumstances fit together “as a whole” and, just as importantly, what this *means* for us—socially, politically, economically, and even existentially. SSPP therefore does not narrow its ambitions for the sake of statistical accuracy, but rather broadens its scope in order to synthesize knowledge produced in discrete corners of the academy as a means of shedding light on the “big picture.” As Richard Madsen et al. (2001) explain in their introduction to *Meaning and Modernity*, “Scholars who follow this approach do not define their task simply in terms of solving theoretical puzzles or fashioning new tools for more efficient scientific investigation. They see their task as one of responding to the major moral challenges of their time” (xv).

Undoubtedly, dualists will take issue with this on the grounds that it violates their commitment to “value-free” sociology. It is therefore worth considering the origins of this doctrine. Although Bellah et al. trace the myth of social science back to Comte, most today would likely associate it with Max Weber, since it is ostensibly Weber’s doctrine of “value-free” sociology which gives life to dualism today (for instance, Abbott sees Weber as the quintessential dualist). However, the fact is that Weber was no positivist; he readily admitted that values enter into the research process at multiple points (Houtman 2021). In fact, he writes in “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” “There is no absolutely ‘objective’ scientific analysis of culture” because “cultural science in our sense involves ‘subjective’ presuppositions insofar as it concerns itself only with those components of reality which have some relationship, however indirect, to events to which we attach cultural *significance*” (Weber 1949, 72, 82). Weber therefore clearly recognized that research questions and problems would be selected on the basis of a researcher’s values (Bellah 2006, 393). And he was far more sensitive to the value-laden nature of socio-

logical concepts than most contemporary dualists (see, for instance, Weber 1949, 76).

Nevertheless, it remains true that Weber championed a “scientific” sociology that keeps facts and values separate—at least to the extent that this is possible. Thus, it is precisely here that Bellah et al. would take issue with Weber’s dualism. Their argument has two parts. First, SSPP begins, in hermeneutic fashion, from the conviction that human life is fundamentally *meaning-full*—that is, meaning-making via culture is constitutive of what it means to be human (see Rabinow and Sullivan 1979). A preoccupation with meaning systems can be traced back to Bellah’s earlier work on what he called “social realism” (see Bellah 1970). Inspired by Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, which identified the constitutive role of the symbolic in social life, Bellah argues in a well-known article, “the symbol is not decoration but our only way of apprehending the real” (95).⁴ For Bellah, then, the symbolic should not be conceived as a by-product of some other more “real” or “material” factor but rather must be understood as having autonomy. As Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Sherwood (2002) explain, “Symbolic realism suggested that symbolic patterns were themselves powerful determinants in their own right” (12). It is on this basis that SSPP, like the “strong program” in cultural sociology (for an overview, see Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2010), conceives of social theorizing as *itself* a form of meaning construction—it is, as Alexander (2013) puts it, “a mental reconstruction of its time” (5).⁵ Or, put otherwise, theories are distillations of preexisting meaning structures, which we, as sociologists, apply to make sense of the meaning structures of those we study (Reed and Alexander 2009, 33). In this sense, social theory is hermeneutic *all the way down* (see Taylor 1971). From the concepts we use to the theories we employ to sort, categorize, and prioritize our empirical observations, we cannot escape the “webs of significance” (to invoke Geertz’s famous phrase) we inhabit.

Now, it might be suggested at this point that it does not follow from an interpretive conception of social life that social science must always be normative. While true in principle, SSPP would contend that sociology, at its best, is never simply *interpretive* in character but also irreducibly *evaluative*, and thus *normative*. Why should this be so? It begins from the fact that, as William Sullivan (1986) puts it, “A social context ... is always and necessarily a moral order” (39). What this means is that SSPP conceives of social life *itself* as a moral enterprise—that is, dependent upon meaning systems that are themselves moral in nature. As Charles Taylor (1989) observes, humans, being self-interpreting animals, always live within a space of “strong evaluation”—that is, a linguistic space of moral values and social goods, which constitute who they are and how they ought to live. Consequently, given the hermeneutic nature of social theory, no sociological account can ever be normatively neutral, for in

4 Bortolini (2021) characterizes Durkheim as a “proto-symbolic realist” (142).

5 SSPP and the strong program in cultural sociology share much. Of course, this is no coincidence; Bellah is widely considered one of the founders of cultural sociology (see Alexander and Sherwood 2002; Alexander 2014).

the process of interpreting social life, all social theoretical frameworks must make assumptions about persons, their motivations, and the nature of society, which will themselves be drawn from those meaning structures that make up society—which, to repeat, SSPP conceives as a moral order. As Bellah (2006) explains:

While taking moral definitions current in his society as a major reference point for his inquiry, the investigator will seldom do so uncritically, for he is the inheritor not only of the general social tradition but of the particular tradition of social inquiry itself. That tradition provides not only intellectual tools but, simultaneously, ethical interpretations of human action. (393)

He thus concludes, “Without a reference point in traditions of ethical reflection, the very categories of social thought would be empty” (394). Importantly, this insight applies equally to, say, anthropologists who seek only to communicate the lifeworlds of their informants to their readers. For when anthropologists choose to interpret a particular action or event in the language and cultural idioms of those they study, they are (wittingly or not) accepting the underlying moral assumptions embedded within that particular culture; and, vice versa, if they choose to translate an indigenous understanding into their own social theoretical categories in order to explain how it came about or how it works, this translation is by no means normatively neutral. Indeed, as Taylor (1985) puts it, “the adoption of a framework of explanation carries with it the adoption of the ‘value-slope’ implicit in it” (75). Of course, when the object of study is the researcher’s *own* society, the normative stakes only increase. As Sullivan notes, there “is no purely neutral position from which to assess the spirit of any people or historical undertaking, much less one’s own” since “disputes over how to define moral and political topics are themselves always moral and political conflicts” (90). In short, from the perspective of SSPP, the dualist belief that we can separate facts from values in sociological research rests on a mistake; there are no brute facts—facts exist only within a framework of interpretation-cum-explanation which is both “evaluative and analytical” (Bellah et al. 1985, 303).⁶

To sum up, SSPP rejects the dualist aspiration to “value-free” sociology on the following grounds: First, it recognizes, with Weber, that all social science is normatively motivated (values dictate which questions an investigator pursues and finds interesting). Thus, SSPP takes seriously what Abbott (2018, 165) calls “the problem of heteronomy”—that is, to the extent that an external third party dictates one’s research questions, one’s “value-free” research is likely to serve this party’s normative interests. Second, in line with the hermeneutic tradition, SSPP conceives of human life as fundamentally interpretive, and in line with

Taylor and others, it conceives of social life as inherently moral. Accordingly, SSPP holds that social theoretical reflection, if it is to explain social life, cannot but make moral assumptions. As Bellah (2006) remarks, “The choice of fundamental categories in the social sciences cannot be other than ethical as well as cognitive” (398). Of course, this is not to deny the fact that there exist different degrees or kinds of normativity, or that values can enter into one’s research findings to a greater or lesser extent. Nor is it to suggest that all social theory is purely “subjective.” SSPP must still be based in empirical observation, and the standards of reason continue to apply. But the fact is, from the perspective of SSPP, categorically separating values from facts is not only philosophically confused but also nefariously “insulates individual social scientists from considering the normative dimensions of their descriptive claims” (Gorski 2017, 441). And yet, in the end, what is to be lamented most about the dualist aspiration to “value-free” sociology, from the perspective of SSPP, is less its philosophical confusions than that it is deeply deflationary of the original sociological ambition. Bellah et al. are adamant that the true task of social science in modernity is not simply to identify statistical correlations but rather to discern and articulate the best of a society’s ideals, and how they might be realized in its self-understanding, institutions, and social practices.

3.2. SOCIOLOGY AS GROUNDED IN, AND MOTIVATED BY, SPECIFIC TRADITIONS OF ETHICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

Bellah et al. (1985) write, “Social science is not a disembodied cognitive enterprise. It is a tradition, or set of traditions, deeply rooted in the philosophical and humanistic (and, to more than a small extent, the religious) history of the West” (301). In speaking of “tradition,” Bellah et al. draw from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre ([1983] 2007) and use it to refer to a generation-spanning conversation or argument about the good life and the good society, which is constituted by an attachment to particular modes of inquiry, ethical concerns, social practices, and virtues. This talk of “tradition” is one reason why *Habits* received vehement criticism from the political Left. Equating “tradition” with “traditional,” many critics interpreted Bellah et al. as offering a conservative defense of the status quo. But this is not at all what SSPP entails. On the contrary, from the perspective of SSPP, even the most radical forms of social criticism themselves belong to a tradition of sorts. This explains, perhaps, why *Habits* has often been called a “communitarian” work of social science (see Lasch 1988).⁷ Against the tradition of classical liberalism, which can be traced back to Hobbes and Locke, *Habits* does not conceive of individuals as atomized selves, who preexist society, but instead conceives of the self as constituted by language and community. To this ex-

6 Furthermore, if we accept the social ontology underwriting Abbott’s (2016) process sociology, any “facts” that we identify will never be static, for they will necessarily be about a social world that is in constant flux, created and re-created by the ceaseless social activity of collections of individuals.

7 Although Bellah et al. (1991) disavowed the “communitarian” label, it has nevertheless stuck. *Habits* remains, for many at least, a prime example of so-called communitarian social science.

tent, it makes sense to speak of *Habits*—and SSPP, for that matter—as “communitarian.” But here we must distinguish between the *specific* philosophical and ethical traditions the authors of *Habits* endorse in their book (civic republicanism and biblical religion) and the broader tradition that I am here referring to as SSPP. For as I understand it, SSPP does not endorse any single ethical or philosophical tradition, except to the extent that it holds as a key component of the good life and the good society an interest in *keeping the public conversation going*. In this way, SSPP, understood as a tradition, is committed only to the constant invigoration of a public debate about “the common project of a society and those things which make that project deserving of loyalty and commitment” (Sullivan 1986, 90)—the moral and political content of which must always be open to democratic deliberation.

Now, monists share with SSPP a critique of the dualist self-understanding; they, too, recognize that one cannot be “value free,” since all of our social theories consist of a unity of normative and analytic presuppositions. But monists still tend to share with dualists a lack of appreciation of the inescapably *tradition-derived* dimensions of both social life and social theory. Indeed, both monists and dualists often forget that the theoretical traditions they espouse have grown up out of distinct historical circumstances, in response to particular moral and social crises, and that, as discussed in the previous section, all social theory embeds within itself quite specific ethical concerns and assumptions about what it means to be human (Alexander 1987). For instance, Durkheimian sociology presupposes a dual conception of human nature (*Homo duplex*) and a conception of the good life that emphasizes the need for social integration and moral regulation; Marxist sociology—with its concepts of alienation, surplus value, and *species being*—makes little sense without its distinct view of human flourishing; and Weber’s tragic theses of rationalization and disenchantment presuppose a whole gamut of normative claims, not least that humans have a universal need for ultimate meaning and romantic self-expression. So, the fact of the matter is the frameworks of interpretation these classical theorists bequeath to us are neither ethically neutral nor self-evident. Rather, they contain within them, down to their core, morally charged, and indeed contestable, assumptions about what makes for a life well lived.

Again, the idea that all social theorizing emerges out of particular traditions of philosophical inquiry and evaluation flies in the face of dualist common sense, which presupposes that one can separate reflection upon ends and reflection upon means. By contrast, SSPP holds that, as it relates to the human sciences, reflection upon means always implies, if only covertly, particular normative assumptions about ends. Bellah (2006) remarks, “What we say human beings fundamentally are has inevitable implications about what they ought to be” (398). An illustrative example might help to clarify why this is: when neoclassical economists—the ultimate dualists—naturalize *Homo economicus*,

assuming, for the sake of their scientific models, that self-interested behaviour is rational and universal, they are implicitly lending this type of subject legitimacy and therefore subtly engaging in both description *and* prescription. Moreover, even the most “objective” scholarship—that which makes the least number of normative assumptions and is only minimally theory laden—does not take place in a “moral vacuum” (Bellah et al. 1985, 302). In other words, it is highly likely that such “scientific” research will end up serving the status quo—which is, of course, *itself* normative (Abbott 2018, 165). Undoubtedly, monists would agree with this. But, as I earlier noted, they tend to offer little explicit reflection on the ethical and philosophical traditions to which their analyses belong. And the reason for this, I surmise, is that they ignore the extent to which the sociological tradition itself comprises *multiple* normative traditions. That is, monists tend to universalize their *own* tradition, assuming it to be both self-evident and natural when, in fact, it is not.

3.3. TRANSPARENCY REGARDING THE SOCIOLOGIST’S THEORETICAL AND NORMATIVE COMMITMENTS, AND A WILLINGNESS TO SUBJECT THEM TO PUBLIC SCRUTINY

Bellah et al. (1985) write:

Social science makes assumptions about the nature of persons, the nature of society, and of the relation between persons and society. It also, whether it admits it or not, makes assumptions about good persons and a good society and considers how far these conceptions are embodied in our actual society. Becoming conscious of the cultural roots of these assumptions would remind the social scientist that these assumptions are contestable and that the choice of assumptions involves controversies that lie deep in the history of Western thought. *Social science as public philosophy would make the philosophical conversation concerning these matters its own.* (301; emphasis added)

In this passage, Bellah et al. articulate a key component of SSPP, a component that distinguishes it from dualism, monism, and even most cultural sociology: that sociologists should not just be forthright about the traditions we belong to, but should also be willing to engage in rational debate about their merits and shortcomings. *Habits* demonstrates how to do this by championing the revival of what its authors call the traditions of civic republicanism and biblical religion. Tracing their origins and influence in American history, and demonstrating through the use of interview data that these moral languages capture important aspects of social and political life that competing languages cannot, Bellah et al. make a powerful case for why these traditions deserve the loyalty and commitment of Americans. Of course, while we might admit the strength of their case, we may not be fully persuaded by it.⁸ And yet that is all right, for Bellah et al. contend that it is precisely through a process of publicly debating and discussing the value of

⁸ I am not wholly persuaded. See my book-length response to *Habits* (Watts 2022).

specific traditions that we come closer to realizing the good society. Indeed, it is for this very reason that we must be forthright about the ethical and philosophical traditions we espouse, rather than burying them deep within our theoretical frameworks.

Unfortunately, very few sociological approaches today are up-front about the normative assumptions that animate their work, and even fewer are willing to subject those assumptions to public scrutiny. Needless to say, dualists do not do this—indeed, they are not even willing to admit that they *have* such assumptions. But things are just as bad with monists—both “closet” and “strong.” Closet monists present themselves as dualists, when in reality they identify and practice as monists; this is, in effect, no different from denying one has assumptions, only it is arguably worse, since it also reflects a form of intellectual dishonesty.⁹ “Strong” monists, by contrast, own their normativity—indeed, they wear their normative commitments proudly—but offer little in the way of critical or philosophical reflection upon the origins, scope, and character of their normative commitments. A good example of this is Mary Romero’s 2019 American Sociological Association Presidential Address, “Sociology Engaged in Social Justice,” in which she offers a historical account of what she calls the “social justice tradition” (Romero 2020, 3) in sociology. To be sure, Romero’s is a rich analysis that admirably shines light on sociological work that has been marginalized in much mainstream historiography of the discipline. And yet, while she includes in this tradition the works of Jane Addams, Ida W. Wells-Barnett, W. E. B. Du Bois, C. Wright Mills, and Alvin Gouldner, nowhere does Romero acknowledge the vast philosophical and normative differences between them.¹⁰ Rather, she lumps them together under the broad umbrella of “social justice”—a concept she nowhere defines. In this, it must be said, Romero’s work is far from exceptional. Abbott (2018, 168) notes that this is par for the course among monists, and he suggests that this is because they assume that the concepts of “social justice,” “equality,” and the like are scientific, rather than normative, in nature. I would propose a different explanation: “strong” monists like Romero are perfectly willing to admit that these concepts are normative; what they are unwilling to admit is how utterly *contested* they are.¹¹

Even an impressionistic glance at the philosophical scholarship on “social justice” and “equality” makes it crystal clear that there is by no means a consensus on these terms. For example, while it remains the case that almost all contemporary political theories take *equality* to be an ultimate value (see Kymlicka 2002), there nevertheless remain ongoing and heated debates about how best to make sense of it: what makes it morally desirable, how it should be conceived (captured in the classic “equality of what?”

question), and what kinds of duties are demanded by a commitment to egalitarianism. In fact, if sociologists took the time to familiarize themselves with some of this literature, they would realize that there are innumerable varieties of egalitarianism—welfare egalitarians, resource egalitarians, and relational egalitarians, to name but a few—and each of these theories diagnoses “injustice” differently. No wonder, then, that philosophers Nils Holtug and Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2006) in their overview of this scholarship conclude, “equality is a complex notion that requires considerable elucidation” (2).

Of course, from the perspective of SSPP, this is not surprising in the least. For, as Michael Walzer (1983) explains:

In a world of particular cultures, competing conceptions of the good, scarce resources, elusive and expansive needs, there isn’t going to be a single formula, universally applicable. There isn’t going to be a single, universally approved path that carries us from a notion like, say, “fair shares” to a comprehensive list of the goods to which that notion applies. Fair shares of what? (79)

Like *Habits*, and SSPP more generally, Walzer here acknowledges the irreducibly interpretive nature of ideals such as “justice” and “equality,” and thus their variable character. Thus, he writes, “Justice and equality can conceivably be worked out as philosophical artifacts, but a just or an egalitarian society cannot be” (xiv). Ironically, one would think, given their awareness of the socially constructed nature of much human experience, that sociologists would be the first to agree. Yet this insight is nowhere to be found in the vast sociological literature concerned with inequality.

Naturally, this is not to suggest that sociologists should refrain from orienting their work toward achieving “social justice” or “equality.” For one, that would be at odds with why many (if not most) of us become sociologists in the first place. For another, given the inherently normative character of sociological research, it is most likely to serve as a justification for conserving the status quo. So, the goal of SSPP is not to stamp out the “social justice tradition” within sociology. Far from it! Rather, it is simply to appreciate its *pluralist* character (Flores and Burg 2021), and thus request that sociologists be transparent about the normative traditions to which we have allegiance. Needless to say, this requires more than merely stating at the outset, “I am a Durkheimian” or “I am a Marxist,” as if that ought to end the discussion. It rather requires that we explicitly state the underlying moral and political assumptions that give life to the traditions we stand within, and then be willing to defend them. This is what it means to break down the “iron curtain” between the social sciences and philosophy.

⁹ Of course, the fact that this position has become so common is a testament to the hegemony of “professional” dualist sociology in the twenty-first century.

¹⁰ Moreover, Romero (2020) seems to confirm my suspicion that there are ostensibly only two roles available to the sociologist today—scientist or activist: “Just as tension exists between value-free science and scholar-activism in the discipline, the struggle is evident in the Association” (19).

¹¹ In his *Political Concepts and Political Theories*, Gerald Gaus (2000) refers to these concepts as “essentially contested concepts” (28).

One way of capturing SSPP, then, is that it consciously makes both the *means* and the *ends* of social inquiry a topic of critical reflection and debate. As Bellah (2006) contends, SSPP is “concerned with the criteria by which one can judge whether an outcome is good or not. In asking, ‘What must we do?’ one cannot take for granted the ends of action defined by any given group. One must inquire into the validity of the claims. One must ask, ‘What is a good society?’ or perhaps even, ‘What is the best society?’” (400). In this way, one could say that SSPP owes a debt to Aristotle, for whom social science should be self-consciously oriented toward identifying the social and political conditions that enable human flourishing (see Salkever 1981). But I am hesitant to trace too much of SSPP to Aristotle for, as I mentioned above, SSPP, as I understand it, is not committed to any substantive conception of the good life (e.g., that the life of the citizen is the highest form). So, rather than calling SSPP Aristotelian, I think it is better conceived as what Philip Gorski (2017) calls “critical social science”—that is, the kind of sociology that “explicitly and systematically analyze[s] and critique[s] the relationship between normative and descriptive claims” (443). This can entail critically reflecting upon the descriptive assumptions informing particular normative claims or, by contrast, the normative assumptions shaping distinct descriptive claims. However, what SSPP stresses is that any reflection of this kind will take place not *outside* or *above* specific ethical or philosophical traditions, but rather *within* them.¹²

One might object that to the extent that we all stand within a tradition, we are likely to stay there, so engaging in democratic deliberation about these is unlikely to lead anywhere productive. SSPP takes a different view. As Bellah (2006) puts it, “Though individuals will, through accidents of birth and education, feel closer to some strands of tradition than to others, there will always also be an element of choice” (393). In other words, although we may feel a particular allegiance to one tradition, most of us, if not all of us, inhabit *multiple* traditions—hence we so often feel pulled in different directions—and thus remain open, at least in principle, to switching our allegiances. Furthermore, even the most dogmatic among us seek to justify to ourselves the moral commitments we hold, for this is part of what it means to be a self-interpreting animal—and it is precisely in this reflection that the element of choice resides. Accordingly, in promoting public discussion of the traditions themselves—their assumptions, their ethical concerns, and their existential appeal—SSPP assumes that persuasion is possible, that minds and hearts can change.

3.4. AN IMMANENT CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL CRITICISM, WHICH VALUES IDENTIFICATION RATHER THAN DETACHMENT

As we have seen, SSPP holds that the proper role of social science is to animate and enliven a public philosophy. However, in doing so, the social scientist must not refrain from social critique. On the contrary, critique is central to SSPP. However, social critique is conceived in a particular way: even the most radical forms of critique, from the perspective of SSPP, derive from the traditions, social practices, and institutions immanent in society. Or, as Walzer puts it in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, “The critique of existence begins ... from principles internal to existence itself” (Walzer 1987, 21).¹³

Now, in one sense, Walzer’s is just a descriptive claim about the nature of social criticism. To speak of social science as *public philosophy* is to implicitly acknowledge that there exists a “theory implicit in our practice” (Sandel 1996, 4), such that what the social critic is doing, whether they realize it or not, is reading, or interpreting, the ethical theories implicit in social life, and then articulating them in the most hermeneutically plausible and rhetorically compelling way they can. As Walzer (1983) explains, “It is to these understandings that we must appeal when we make our arguments—all of us, not philosophers alone; for in matter of morality, argument simply is the appeal to common meanings” (29). However, it is also a normative claim about how social criticism ought to be conducted. For if we accept that all criticism is *immanent*—that is, derived from the ethical and philosophical traditions already implicit in our social life—then it follows that the social critic should offer their criticism from a location not of detachment, as has become common, but rather identification with those they seek to criticize. Let me explain.

In much monist social criticism, the immanent character of the critique is almost always downplayed, if not denied, such that the critic ends up framing themselves as an outsider, rather than a member, or ally, of the community they criticize. That is, the dominant form of criticism today—what Nina Eliasoph aptly calls the “politics of denunciation”—is rarely offered from a place of mutual identification or shared commitment. Instead, it is offered from a supposed moral high ground, radically distant from the targets of one’s censure and employing a kind of “scold-and-scorn” technique (Eliasoph 2007, 88). The problem is that a critic of this kind will inevitably be perceived as an enemy rather than as a friend by those they critique. And as Walzer astutely remarks, “We expect and simultaneously discount criticism from our enemies” (Walzer 1987, 59).¹⁴

12 It is worth noting the similarities between SSPP and Abbott’s canonical and legalist approaches. SSPP shares with the canonical approach a recognition that social theory is comprised of various traditions that weave together the theoretical and the normative, and that are often personified in particular figures (e.g., Durkheim, Weber, Marx), while SSPP shares with the legalist approach a substantive concern with defining, and realizing in sociological practice, standards of normative excellence. Of course, there are also differences. For one, SSPP does not aspire to be a subdiscipline or branch of sociology but rather conceives of itself as an unmitigated model for normative sociology. For another, SSPP must inevitably be less systematic in application than either the canonical or the legalist approaches. But as should be clear, the spirit of Abbott’s proposal is far from foreign to SSPP.

13 This conception has Durkheimian origins. In *Ethics and the Sociology of Morals*, Durkheim writes, “One cannot construct an ethic in its entirety and impose it on reality later: one must rather observe reality to infer morality from it” (Durkheim [1887] 1993, 70).

Indeed, this probably explains why so much monist social criticism falls on deaf ears.

By contrast, SSPP would hold that the best social critics are those who present themselves not as enemies but as friends—though friends of a particular kind. We are friends who share the moral commitments of those we critique and who offer our criticisms in the hope that, as a result, we will come closer to living up to the ideals we share. In other words, the best kind of social criticism “brings the traditions, ideals, and aspirations of society into juxtaposition with its present reality. It holds up a mirror to society” (Bellah et al. 1985, 301). But what might this mean, concretely? It does not merely mean helping us to see that the ideals we profess are not realized in our practice—although this is obviously important. We must also be reminded why these ideals are worthy of our allegiance. And this requires the construction of a *story*—a narrative that helps us to better understand where we come from, how we got here, and where we are headed. For, as MacIntyre ([1983] 2007) reminds us, to be human is to be a “story-telling animal” (216). SSPP, then, takes seriously the fact that it is through stories that we come to know *who we are* and *what we stand for*; that it is through stories that we are inspired to do, and be, better. In a word, the social critic holds a mirror up to their society by telling a story that helps their fellow citizens make sense of where they’ve collectively gone awry.

Some might worry that, to the extent that social criticism is conceived as a form of immanent critique, it will be limited by the normative traditions that exist within society at it currently is. Undoubtedly, this is true. No community will voluntarily embrace ideals that offend that which they hold sacred. Unless members can find something they hold dear in a critique, it will have no force. As Sullivan (1986) observes, a public philosophy “must be closely tied to the mores, the practical understandings of everyday life. If it is to maintain its authenticity and power to infuse the public acts of individuals with significance, it can neither be an intellectually detached theory about politics nor a mere set of slogans” (10). However, we should not forget that no society is static; moral communities are constituted, as we have seen, by multiple traditions, and these traditions are constantly undergoing processes of evolution and change. So even though the critic might be limited to the traditions extant within a particular community, this should not stop them from engaging in moral innovation. As Bellah et al. (1991) counsel, “We must clearly draw from older traditions, but reconceive them in ways consonant with new conditions” (305). Moreover, it is precisely through changing our collective self-understandings that the motor of history is fuelled. As Alexander (2013) reminds us, “If the world is itself based on collective understandings, then changing the world always involves, in some large part, changing these understandings in turn” (193).

With this discussion behind us, we can now make out a third role option available to the sociologist: rather than

the scientist or the activist, SSPP would propose, following Durkheim, the *educator* (see Bellah 1973, xxxvii). The educator does not conceive of their role as “value free.” They are morally engaged and conscious of the traditions they belong to. In fact, they conceive of their role as custodians of that which is best within those traditions. However, they do not presume to be able to speak from a moral high ground, nor do they reserve the right to denounce from a distance. Rather, they see it as their responsibility to inspire and rouse their fellow citizens, by helping them to see themselves in a new light, through the prism provided by the values and virtues they cherish in common. As Bellah (1973) elucidates, “It is our function to help our contemporaries know themselves in their ideas and in their feelings, far more than to govern them” (xxxvii).

3.5. A COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY, SUBSTANTIVELY CONCEIVED

SSPP is fundamentally democratic—and this, in several respects. First and foremost, it is committed to the practice of democracy, conceiving the act of public conversation about the good society as a supreme value, or as a good in itself (Bortolini 2021, 253). This, I believe, distinguishes it from what Michael Burawoy (2005) calls “public sociology.” In his much-discussed ASA presidential address, Burawoy championed public sociology as a sociological response to the rightward shift of American society. Although his address suggested that public sociology was not wedded to any specific ideological agenda, he was widely (and, in my view, fairly) interpreted otherwise (for an overview of this debate, see McLaughlin, Kowalchuk, and Turcotte 2005). Many on the right read Burawoy as advancing a left-wing, even Marxist, agenda (Nielsen 2004), while many on the left who were sympathetic to Burawoy’s political aims nevertheless took issue with his characterization of critical sociology, as well as his seeming romanticization of American civil society (Brewer 2005; Acker 2005). While *Habits* might be correctly characterized, within the Burawoy typology, as a work of “public sociology” (though there are good reasons to doubt this), SSPP is not best understood as such. For one, SSPP clearly combines Burawoy’s categories of public and critical sociology, as it seeks to engage the public (or publics) beyond the ivory tower while also encouraging critical reflection upon the normative assumptions shaping sociological theory and practice. Moreover, there is no reason why it cannot lead to policy recommendations, and thus take on the form of policy sociology. For another, SSPP is neither inherently left- or right-wing, for it is a mode of conducting social science that rules out no ethical or philosophical traditions in principle, except those that seek to shut down, or end, the public conversation. An important implication of SSPP, then, is that the need for moral argument is never exhausted. Too much sociological normativism assumes that the answers to our moral and political dilem-

14 In fact, the monist critic often resembles a missionary who seeks to impose a foreign belief system upon those they deem, in their righteous wisdom, in need of it. Of course, in such instances, it is more accurate to speak of *conversion* than *criticism*, which Walzer (1987) again reminds us are quite “different activities—rather like conquest and revolution” (45).

mas are simple and clear, and that all that stands in the way of realizing a just society is ignorance or malice. SSPP assumes, by contrast, that public problems are difficult and, in some cases, irresolvable, if only because in a free society moral consensus will never exist. Finally, SSPP assumes that any interpretation of the direction a society ought to go in is just that—an interpretation that must be continuously challenged and revised in light of new evidence, ethical concerns, and historical circumstances.

Second, SSPP is democratic in that it does not speak from a place of supposed epistemic or ethical privilege, imagining that the sociologist operates from some Archimedean point. Nor does it presume that the sociologist is exempt from the implications of their own analysis. Bellah (2006) writes:

In the social sciences we study the same kinds of beings that we are. Unlike the natural scientists, we are not “above” it. To imagine that we are is to deprive those we study of their dignity by treating them as objects. It is also to imagine that we understand them better than they understand themselves because our heads are not filled with the muddled ideas, false consciousness, traditions, and superstitions (murk and vestiges) that theirs are. It is to imagine that we are enlightened and free of illusions. (398)

Of course, this is not to say that individuals cannot be mistaken about themselves (if this were the case, sociology would have nothing to contribute). Rather, it is to acknowledge that what the sociologist claims about those they study necessarily applies equally to themselves—something few sociologists today seem willing to appreciate. For example, significant monist scholarship presupposes that all talk of morality is, at base, self-interested and strategic (Vandenbergh 2017). But this leaves the monist sociologist in something of a performative contradiction. For it makes little sense to claim that moral claims are always self-interested and then make ostensibly moral demands in the name of “social justice,” as the former claim undermines the latter. That is, claims for “social justice” ought to be interpreted—if one takes one’s theory seriously—as a veil for the naked pursuit of the sociologist’s own self-interest. Hence Eliasoph (2007) astutely remarks, “When we say that competition for money and power is the only game in town, we demolish all other grounds on which to stand” (62). Accordingly, like the “strong program” in cultural sociology, SSPP rejects the reductionism of what Paul Lichterman (2007) calls “demystifying” sociology—both dualist and monist—which reduces the human condition to the narrow motives of self-interest and status acquisition, and thus treats freedom and ethics as “systematic delusions” (Laidlaw 2014, 3). For how can we possibly square a commitment to democracy—which presumes the capacity for self-governance, reflective deliberation, and moral action—with the theoretical postulate that ethics is fraudulent? It is a peculiar fact that, while much explicitly normative sociological scholarship is conducted in the name of “democracy,” the dominant theoretical frameworks animating this work are profoundly elitist in that they assume ordinary persons are either dupes or villains.

Third, SSPP is democratic in that it takes seriously the rhythms and problems of ordinary life, refusing to write them off as the effects of “bad theory” (Lichterman 2007, 45). It does not suppose that the “real” issues are unknown to the masses or can be ascertained only by experts. On the contrary, “With an eye to democratic decision making in a self-governing society, social science as public philosophy seeks to animate and enlighten public dialogue about the diverse social goods, practices, and ways of life persons share in a good society” (Madsen et al. 2001, xiii). In this way, SSPP places its hopes in democratic deliberation, rather than technocratic imposition and manipulation. Moreover, it does not profess from a place of moral certainty but instead conceives of the social scientist’s as one voice among many in an ongoing conversation about the common good (Bellah 2006, 398). Indeed, it is for this reason that *Habits* concludes with the following call to action: “We hope the reader will test what we say against his or her own experience, will argue with us when what we say does not fit, and, best of all, will join the public discussion by offering interpretations superior to ours that can then receive further discussion” (Bellah et al. 1985, 307).

Finally, SSPP is democratic in *style*. Rejecting the needlessly specialized jargon that has become a staple of so much academic writing, SSPP advocates for language that is both accessible and humane, captivating but clear. The reason for this, however, is not simply for the sake of increased inclusivity. It also derives from its hermeneutical orientation: SSPP recognizes that the moral argument is never won on the basis of reason alone but is equally the result of having tapped into the collective conscience and emotional center of a moral community. Thus, I agree with Alexander and Sherwood’s (2002) reflection on the success of *Habits* that “the way that these writers presented culture had as much to do with the revolutionary impact of their work as *what they said*” (4). Bellah et al. struck a chord, I believe, because they combined the best of the humanities and social sciences in order to weave together empirical data, historical analysis, moral argument, and personal confession in an emotionally resonant way. Furthermore, they did not speak down to their audience, treating them as naive or evil, but rather spoke, as equals, to their common concerns. And they offered a compelling story that inspired their readers to critically reflect on the American experiment, in the hopes that doing so might rekindle their collective commitment to the ideals that, in their view, define it.

CONCLUSION

In the more than thirty years since its original publication, many, on both the left and the right, have justifiably criticized *Habits*, often vociferously contesting its interpretation of American life while challenging the ethical and philosophical traditions its authors championed. If I read Bellah et al. correctly, this is nothing to be lamented. For, in their view, the tradition of modern social thought is carried forward through the social practices of deliberation and critique. And no society can long survive without vigorous and ongoing debate about how best to interpret its animating ideals. Thus, while I have deep respect and admiration for *Habits* as a work of scholarship, in my view, its most im-

portant contribution is less its specific prescriptions than the vision of sociology it strives to embody—which Bellah et al. felicitously call “Social Science as Public Philosophy.” As I see it, this vision consists of five pillars, which cumulatively offer a model for normative sociology that is superior to the extant alternatives—the dualist and the monist approaches. That said, to the extent that SSPP seeks to capture the spirit of classical social theory, as Bellah et al. proposed, we should assume that it can animate a rich diversity of sociological work. So, my intention, in setting out this vision, has not been to create boundaries with which to police future scholarship but rather to offer a rough road map for sociologists who are not satisfied with the narrow role options currently on offer.

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