

Review

Sociology and Classical Liberalism in Dialogue: Freedom is Something We do Together.

Fabios Rojas and
Charlotta Stern, eds.

JOSH MCCABE
Niskanen Institute

Social science provides positive analysis of how the world works while ideologies provide a normative framework for how we should shape our world. A naive student might expect participants in ideological projects to draw on findings of each of the social science disciplines to form a coherent view of the world. Conversely, they might expect each of the social science disciplines to maintain a skeptical view of ideological projects. In reality, we often see varying degrees of elective affinity between social science disciplines—economics, political science, sociology—and ideological projects—progressive, conservative, classical liberal.

A new edited volume from Fabio Rojas and Charlotta Stern assembles a motley crew of social scientists from several disciplines to start a dialogue between the two that have shown the least degree of elective affinity—sociology and classical liberalism. The book is structured as nine substantive chapters focused on specific topics sandwiched between two big picture chapters providing extensive background on the history of the dialogue (or lack thereof) and lessons for the future.

Rojas and Stern’s introductory chapter is the most illuminating of the volume. They spend little time documenting the chasm between sociology and classical liberalism because it is one of the most self-evident claims one can come across as an academic social scientist. They note vibrant communities of classical liberals thrive within economics, political science, and philosophy but most would struggle to name more and a handful of (living) classical liberals within sociology. Members of the American Sociological Association can find homes in subfield sections on Marxist sociology, critical sociology, and public sociology but they would be hard-pressed to find any section that explicitly or implicitly values classical liberal ideas. “Sociology,” they argue, “is poorer because a whole tradition of ideas is left out of consideration.”

The present day absence of any classical liberal tradition in sociology, they show, is not the result of any intrinsic tension between the two. Pointing a viable classical liberal lineage in sociology that never took hold in a durable way, they trace the rise and fall of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner—both of whom could have carried on the tradition in sociology if not for being unfairly smeared with the infamous “social Darwinist” label by American public intellectual, Richard Hofstadter.

This leads us to the question of where a new dialogue might be renewed today. They begin with an emphasis on making the “freedom-coercion axis” the primary object of empirical research. Just as many sociologists are motivated by a normative desire to learn more about the cultural and

Fabios Rojas and Charlotta Stern, eds.
Sociology and Classical Liberalism in Dialogue: Freedom is Something We do Together. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024. xxvi + 200 pages

institutional sources of inequality or poverty, classical liberals can and should use the same tools to learn more about the cultural and institutional sources of freedom or liberalism. This is a straightforward and promising line of research. Their other suggestions include a greater use of several canonical concepts in sociology (the stock of facts; symbolic boundaries; ritual change processes) that, while being generally useful concepts, leave the reader less clear on why we should look to these concepts in particular over countless other canonical concepts that could help us study the freedom-coercion axis.

Two themes emerge from the substantive chapters, which cover such disparate topics as poverty reduction (Iceland and Silver), criminal justice (David), healthcare (Hall), campus culture (Redstone), and more. The first, embodied by the Iceland and Silver chapter on poverty and the Rojas chapter on civil rights progress, takes aim at the strident claims of what we might characterize as the “scholar-activist” strain in sociology. Contrary to the claims of these perpetually pessimistic scholars, they find strong empirical evidence that liberal institutions and societies lead to better, more inclusive outcomes over time. The second theme, embodied by the other chapters, is showcasing examples of how sociology concepts can be helpful to classical liberals (Hall) and how classical liberal concepts can be useful to sociologists (Novak).

Both of these themes are important for thinking about the push and pull of sociology. Many classical liberals are pushed away from sociology by the extreme and unfounded ideological claims of its loudest self-appointed representatives. Others are simply unaware of the useful tools that might otherwise pull them toward sociology. All too often, they stay separate as a result.

Creating space for young classical liberals to feel welcome in sociology and find it useful is a good first step. Measured in this manner, *Sociology and Classical Liberalism in Dialogue* is a worthwhile read for sociology-curious classical liberals.