

# The Warped Vision of Contemporary Sociology

*by Alexander Riley*

In 1995, Roger Kimball and Hilton Kramer wrote a famously acerbic evisceration of the state of English as an academic discipline in the form of a critical report on the bizarre goings-on at the annual Modern Language Association conference that year. They described a once-vibrant intellectual enterprise rotted from within by political radicals with no interest in the intellectual tradition of their field and a full-blooded commitment to the destructive tenets of the cultural revolution of the 1960s.

In the early 1990s, not long before Kimball and Kramer made their critique of English, I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in sociology. I vividly recall a conversation early in my time as a doctoral student with a prominent visiting scholar in which I asked him (and was pleased to find he agreed with me) if he thought that sociology had taken the place of philosophy in the modern world. That is, my view then was that the field I was entering was the disciplinary perspective most suited to fruitfully engage with the big questions about the human condition. Philosophy had, in my perspective, doomed itself by its compara-

tive lack of concern with the empirical data emerging from the various sciences and preferred armchair theorizing, whereas sociology wanted to integrate careful speculation and attentive study of the external world. I wanted, at bottom, to figure out what kind of creature I was, and the road to that end led through close and objective study of human nature.

I spent much of that decade endeavoring to pursue this intellectual dream. I did notice that disturbing evidence was accruing in American sociological circles, as identity politics and political correctness grew into a formidable opponent of the serious thought I admired and to which I aspired. But I believed the good guys would win.

They did not.

The story of the decline of sociology has been unfolding for a few decades, but it becomes a more hair-raising tale every year. What happened in sociology is just what happened in English as described by Kimball and Kramer. The crazed and intellectually empty ideologues completely colonized the field. They have made it their own, and the

consequence is that contemporary sociology is now a wasteland for any seeking the complex truths of human life.

If Kimball and Kramer had not already presented a perfect example of the genre, I might have considered orienting this essay around a visit to an American Sociological Association meeting. But I have not attended those meetings in nearly two decades now, and I am confident I would be unable to tolerate such an event long enough to generate ethnographic material.

Fortuitously, the ASA operates an extensive webpage that advertises its view on the discipline in great detail. Much substance on what sociology teaches today can be had by consulting a collection of short videos on the ASA site. Titled “Sociological Insights,” the clips, typically about five minutes in length, feature academic sociologists discussing research they are engaged in. They are slickly produced to appeal to the short attention span of the contemporary online reader. The sociologist is seen sitting and talking about the work only briefly before striking images related to the topic (police arresting suspects, protestors marching and shouting) stream across the screen, accompanied by music calibrated to indicate discordance and alarm. “*Things are not going well in American society!*” is the fundamental message.

In what follows, I take a few of these videos and submit them to the test of reason and empirical evidence. Let us see what the discipline gives the public as testimony to the insights it offers us on the human world.

## Sociological Insights & Ideological Follies: The Videos

In the first of these videos, *Complaining While Black*, sociologist Jacob Faber from NYU describes his examination of 10,000 citizen complaints against police in Chicago. He finds—consistent with his expectation—that “complaints by black . . . citizens and against white officers are less likely to be sustained.” In addition, white complaints about interactions with police in predominantly black neighborhoods are disproportionately sustained. What might explain such findings? The video does not give a direct answer, but the conclusion Faber gives in the article on which the video is based is plainly intended as the only conceivable reading of the evidence: “[I]ndividual and institutional actors prioritize white victimhood.”

The video gives us a lot of dramatic cuts in which suspects struggle with police on the street, but no effort is made to support Faber’s claim, and copious amounts of information suggesting other factors are ignored. In the article, Faber cites data he believes support his theory of racist discrimination in the way citizen complaints against police are handled e.g., “[w]hites have lower rates of contact with police . . . street stops are more common in communities of color.” Physical altercations with police are a more common subject of complaints made by blacks than by whites, and the video suggests we know why without really having to think about it.

Faber presumes that only antiblack racism can be the cause of these phenomena, but he gives no evidence of its existence in the processes of policing and resolving police complaints. Why might there be more police activity and a higher likelihood of physical altercations between police and citizens in black neighborhoods? It could be that there is more street crime in black neighborhoods and police are more active precisely because they are trying to stop that crime. It could be that blacks are more likely than whites to physically resist arrest and to escalate police encounters. Indeed, there is much evidence to support both of these hypotheses. In Chicago, for example, the data demonstrate that “blacks commit about 80% of all shootings and murders,” while whites commit only 2 percent. Moreover, “blacks resist arrest at four times the rate of whites” and “make up over 40% of all cop killers.”<sup>1</sup> These data are not mentioned in the video or in Faber’s article.

In the article, but not in the video, Faber admits that his data contain no information about the criminal record of those who filed complaints and that his sample of complaints is overwhelmingly from black complainants, which makes sense given the greater likelihood of black interaction with police. Faber believes this is explained solely by racism, but crime data suggest it is more likely about rational policing.

Faber complains about the very low rate of sustained black complaints, in which formal action against police results. But if some high percentage of

complainants were in fact charged and convicted of crimes, this would go a long way toward supporting the belief that some high percentage of these complaints are frivolous, used by complainants as a strategy to gain leverage against criminal charges.<sup>2</sup> But we know nothing about racial differences in criminal charges among complainants, so we cannot know if this is a factor.

The basic problem in Faber’s work—and in contemporary sociology—is that it assumes there are no baseline differences in attitudes and behaviors of different racial groups in terms of policing. Blacks and whites must, almost by definition, interact with and respond to police attention in exactly the same ways, with exactly the same statistical range of possibilities in behavior. But virtually nothing with respect to police and crime—crime rates, responses to police intervention, beliefs about crime and justice—is the same between blacks and whites. At the very least, Faber’s assumption that blacks are no more likely than whites to file frivolous complaints against police requires evidence, which Faber makes no attempt to provide.

The next video clip, *Shackling Children’s Futures*, presents an implicit attack on the criminal justice system through a look at how children are affected by an incarcerated father. The sociologist here, Anna Haskins of Cornell University, presents her finding that “parental incarceration has a negative effect on children’s outcomes” as though it were something other than the truism it is. She then spends the entirety of the clip

talking about what is obvious, without acknowledging the important context or complexity in interpreting this obvious fact. Egregious “intergenerational transmission of disadvantage” is a consequence of the workings of our prison system, Haskins notes. In this subtle way, she gets the viewer to bring race into the conversation without explicitly having to state that this is her central point. Though her argument about the disproportionate racial impact relies on it, she makes no mention that black children are more profoundly affected by this phenomenon precisely because black fathers are far more likely than other fathers to be in prison. This is a direct consequence of their greater participation in serious criminal activity.

Haskins never manages even the slightest curiosity about why those men are in prison. Should we release convicted felons who have committed serious violent crimes simply because their children are affected negatively by this perfectly defensible social response to their actions? How much more harm would we thereby be inflicting on society, since many if not all of these felons will reoffend, and many of those multiple times? Perhaps seven in ten released prisoners are rearrested within five years of release,<sup>3</sup> and we do not know how many reoffend without coming under the control of law enforcement. And might we even be inflicting harm on the children of those men, many of whom have long records of criminal violence and are almost certainly not among the most com-

passionate and loving fathers in American society?

Another set of issues *Shackling Children's Futures* ignores altogether is representative of a blind spot of sociology. It is implied that performance by the children of imprisoned men is catastrophically harmed by the father's imprisonment but we have no knowledge of the baseline of educational outcomes for children in such families. We know that imprisoned men of all races are very typically at the lower end of the education and intelligence distributions. Their partners are highly likely to be in the same part of the social demography. Single parenthood is a phenomenon that has reached levels in the U.S. unmatched anywhere else in the world. It has demonstratively negative effects on children. Single parenthood in the U.S. is highly concentrated among those families at the low end of the distribution of income and education, and poor households are more likely to be single-parent. The phenomenon of single parenthood is far more common among black families than among other racial or ethnic groups.

Given all this, how many of the affected families in Haskins' analysis would be single parent families, and therefore likely to face comparative disadvantage even if the father were not incarcerated? We do not know, but one would suspect many. It is entirely unclear, in a statistical sense, whether even complete decarceration of the entire prison population of men with children would markedly affect those children in

a positive way. This perspective, however, is far too complex for the ASA, and the makers of the video have no interest in putting it to the attention of viewers.

In another video, *The Complexity of Gender Identity*, Arlene Stein of Rutgers and Stef Shuster of Michigan State claim that “many people see themselves as moving to an understanding of gender that is not clearly defined as either male or female.” The fact that medical professionals are not as hip to the politics of contemporary gender identity as Stein and Shuster would like them to be creates difficulties for these complexly gendered individuals in obtaining access to “gender affirming” medical care, e.g., with surgical interventions.

In frustrated tones, Shuster claims that “doctors still approach their [transgender] patients in a very stepwise fashion [requiring that they] ‘slow it down . . . to ensure that you’re really ready.’” This medical practice typically entails requiring a therapist’s recommendation instead of simply acceding to the demands of a patient for hormones or an appointment for surgery on his or her first visit. Shuster enthusiastically sides with the “hurry up” approach of such patients, who are implied to know more accurately than any doctor what the healthiest approach to their difficulty with sex and gender identity is.

The video speaks of none of the details of its foundational research, which consisted of interviewing women seeking mastectomies as part of their effort to sex and gender reassign. The video is pure agitprop for complete patient

autonomy and elimination of medical expertise from the decision-making process in such cases. Yet academic studies on the phenomenon of detransitioning, i.e., when individuals who have pursued sex and gender reassignment at some point change their minds, are few and much debated. This is in large part because such research is typically undertaken by people like Stein and Shuster whose partisan views on the topic are obvious and whose studies almost always bear the methodological signs of their partisanship. The science of the efficacy of sex reassignment surgery, in other words, is most accurately summarized as complete uncertainty.

Those who are honest about this state of the science, and who are aware of the complexities, traumas, and possibilities for tragic mistakes that cannot be undone recommend that “[u]ntil more is known, young people considering these interventions and their families should be made aware of this significant uncertainty as part of informed consent.”<sup>4</sup>

In recent years there has been a sharp uptake in the numbers of people, especially youth, claiming transgender identity and pursuing some kind of medical intervention. The most plausible cause for this is the increased cultural power and reach of the pro-trans narrative. We can say with certainty that, left without traditional medical guidance on this issue, some number of young people will follow a whimsical and mercurial sense of identity down the medical transitioning road and later come to regret it, too late to reverse the physical consequenc-

es. With videos like this one, which occlude all complexity and lack of certainty on this very serious cultural topic, and advocate for allowing patients much more freedom from medical protocols, the ASA presents itself as an advocate for the accomplishment of that unknown number of dreadful outcomes.

In the video *Do Men Matter More?* Stanford sociologist Aliya Hamid Rao expresses outrage that women's labor is valued less than men's in families. When men lose jobs, she claims, it is seen as more devastating than when a woman loses hers, even when the woman in the couple earns more than the man. This, it is implied, is an intolerable aspect of anti-female patriarchy in American society. She does not acknowledge something that everyone with even minimal knowledge of American families knows, which is that in two parent families in which only one parent works, it is overwhelmingly likely to be the man. More, when both parents work, the man is still significantly more likely to earn more and work longer hours than the woman. According to 2022 data, married men are quite more likely to be employed outside the home (94 percent) and to be employed full-time (96 percent) than women (73 percent and 80 percent, respectively).<sup>5</sup> This information adds quite a bit of important context to the decision families make about job loss, but Rao tells her viewers nothing about it.

Rao also fails to acknowledge that relative desire for working outside the home and spending time in the home with children might not be the same

for the two sexes, and that this difference might have some effect on how job loss is experienced in families. Indeed, she makes it clear that she takes it as an *a priori* given that everyone in a family should have a purely materialistic understanding of the relative contribution men and women make to labor markets outside the domestic realm. She gives an example of a woman earning \$150,000, married to a man who was making \$50,000. When the wife lost her job, the husband indicated he was fine with her spending more time at home. Rao's response: "This makes no sense from a material point of view, as they clearly need her money to maintain their lifestyle." No consideration is given to this particular family's non-material "point of view."

How do people become gun owners? This is the question for Ariel Shapira of the University of Texas at Austin in the video *Guns: Weapons or Tools?* Adhering to the same level of intellectual pluralism we have seen in the other ASA videos, Shapira suggests there can only be one correct answer to that question, and benighted American gun owners have, alas, not arrived at it. He claims gun owners learn as part of their training with guns at shooting ranges to think about the world in a dishonest and dangerous way. They come to mistakenly feel that they need guns, as they "develop a sense of fear [and are] taught that the gun is a solution to these fears . . . [they] learn to be afraid of the world but not to be afraid of guns." Gun owners come to understand that "bad guys who may cause violence to you or a family mem-

ber” exist and “the way to respond to those people is by killing them.”

In his insinuation that it is the most patent paranoia for gun owners to imagine one might be criminally victimized, he runs up against other elements of the leftist worldview he represents. Do we not hear, for example, from the advocates for the victims of sexual violence that as many as one in six American women will be the victim of an attempted or completed rape during her life? Can we truthfully say that a woman is utterly delusional, a victim of false beliefs about the state of reality, if she thinks that a weapon that could potentially prevent her own rape might be a useful tool to have?

The discussion of the likelihood of being the victim of violence is a complex one, but complexity is nowhere to be found in Shapira’s account. Overall, violent crime rates in the modern West are considerably lower than they were in the past, and they are much lower than the violence rates in many societies outside of the West.<sup>6</sup> But the U.S. violent crime rate is comparatively high among Western societies, for complicated reasons involving our cultural, social, and demographic uniqueness. Our murder rate was nearly eight per 100,000 annually in 2020, several times that of most other Western countries. How can anyone maintain it is unreasonable for someone living amidst this murder rate, and the much higher non-lethal violent crime rate (which over the past decade has fluctuated between twice to five times that murder rate)<sup>7</sup> to try to decrease his

risk by legally purchasing a firearm? Does Shapira believe his determination of acceptable risk the only reasonable one? The video gives us an implicit answer in the fervency of its ideologically warped narrative.

## A Farewell to Sociology

It brings me no pleasure to have to report on these dismal examples of what contemporary sociology presents to the public as evidence of its intellectual acuity. The sociology that attracted me to this field is no more. That now almost entirely extinct variety of sociology approached complex and contested questions with an open-ended and objective rigor, prepared to consider all reasonable hypotheses and all evidence prior to carefully presenting arguments.

Today, sociology treats complex and contested questions with the most simplified framework imaginable. All questions about human life are now equations of victims and victimizers and the mechanisms by which the powerful oppress the powerless. No alternative explanatory models for the empirical outcomes we see in the world are entertained or even acknowledged as legitimate. All evidence that cannot be adequately twisted to fit the storyline is ignored. Outright mendacity about empirical matters is embraced, details of cases are occluded, and everything is furiously spun from the start in the direction desired.

The videos I presented above are not a random collection of grad student papers at the ASA annual meeting, the

poor quality of which might be excused, or at least understood. The discipline's professional organization selected this work specifically to show the public what it sees as the strengths of the discipline. The people talking in these videos are in tenured faculty positions in high-ranking universities and they are publishing in the discipline's top journals. This pathetic intellectual pablum, this simple-minded groupthink, is the best sociology has to offer.

These are the facts concerning the discipline of sociology in our time, and rational members of the public are well-served by remembering them every time they see a public proclamation made and defended with some bit of sociological research.

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