

Contesting Higher Education

Donatella della Porta, Lorenzo Cini
and César Guzmán-Concha

Bristol University Press
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Focusing on higher education, this book provides an informative comparative study on key episodes of student protests against neo-liberal policies in contemporary universities in the UK, Canada, Chile and Italy. Examining both the origins and the outcomes of higher education reforms, Della Porta, Cini and Guzman-Concha set the waves of student demonstrations in the wider contexts of student movements and political activism.

The waves of unrest being investigated in the book cover different HE systems, from those where the role of the state remains prominent (Italy, Quebec), to others in which the market has acquired greater relevance in recent decades (England, Chile). The authors suggest that in order to explain the evolutions and effects of social movement campaigns, one has to consider the relations between the state and the market in the policy field of higher education, and how these relations shape the processes that either promote or hinder relevant alliances and oppositions in the policy field.

At the beginning it is acknowledged that several reforms, started in the 2000s, have introduced market mechanisms in the higher education sector, including policies of tuition fees and competition between universities. Triggered by the announcement and implementation of such reforms, a global wave of student protests has arisen since 2008 to oppose them. To quote the authors, “in the last few decades, neoliberal policies have brought about a major shift in the paradigm that informed education policies during the

so-called embedded liberalism period ...” Drawing on the assumption that the private sector approach is superior to the public sector’s, the new HE paradigm promoted the “discipline of the market place, the power of the consumer and the engine of the competition as defining principles for the sector” (p. 9-10).

One of the most insightful cases being investigated in the book is that of Italy – a country that has historically exhibited a strong tradition of student activism, displayed both in the university and in the more general mobilisations throughout the 1960s and 1970s (including youth and urban movements, peace movements, etc.). More recently, a number of protests occurred in Italy in 2008 and 2010. In both campaigns, it is argued, the student activists and their organisations deployed a very diversified array of tactics, ranging from the most conventional to the most disruptive, to halt the process of marketisation of Italian HE.

The Italian students undertook two protest campaigns against two national laws: Law 133/2008, introducing significant cuts to the public system of funding for HE; and Law 240/2010, aiming at the restructuring of the university governance towards a managerial pattern. Student-protesters not only contested the extant system and the reforms, but they have also been able to “put forward radical and alternative conceptions and practices of HE to show that a more equal and democratic model of HE was possible, even in times of economic and political crisis” (p. 61). According to the authors, they were



Bookends

particularly successful in putting values of democracy and self-government at the core of alternative conceptions of HE.

In summary, while focusing on recent student movements around the globe, the book fills a number of gaps in social movement studies. In the above-mentioned case of Italy, it showed the complexity of social relations which was at the basis of student protests between 2008 and 2011 aimed at stopping the processes of dismantling of public HE and of manager-ialisation of university governance. The authors embed these movements within a broader concept of student politics, looking at movements but also non-movement dynamics, especially within student unions and associations. The content of the book is therefore appealing to anyone with a thorough interest in social and political studies focusing on universities and developments in higher education systems across the world.

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respond to the question ‘what is sociology?’ in different ways. The first chapter, for example, highlights specific ways in which sociology can be understood – as a field of knowledge, an outlook, or even a way of working. Many of these points are further illustrated in a discussion on sociological imagination in chapter two. Drawing on C. Wright Mills’s work, this chapter discusses what characterises sociological imagination – or how to think like a sociologist.

Unlike many sociological books, the authors of *Imagining Society* acknowledge the impact of institutional arrangements in shaping the idea and the practices of sociological imagination. Following up on this, the third chapter delves into the core topic of concern for all sociologists, the

Reviews of recent books in social science and sociology

The End of Love:

A Sociology of Negative Relations

Eva Illouz

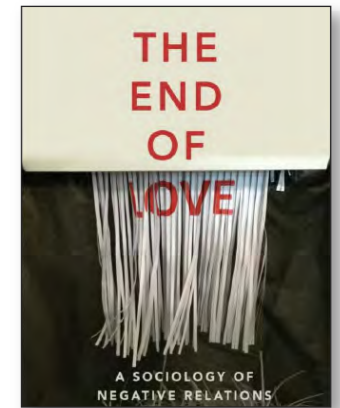
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friends-with-benefits, the ‘zipless fuck’, etc. (chapter three), or, a more institutionalised form of non-relationship, divorce (chapter six).

This variety in sexual and romantic settings and practices is explained by how capitalism has been transforming sexuality and love since the 19th century through various discourses, practices and technologies. Drawing on Bourdieu, Debord, Foucault, Giddens, Goffman and feminist thinkers such as Bernstein, McRobbie, Pateman, and others, Illouz argues that the sexualisation of the body by a consumer and capitalist culture is the direct result of a male-dominated and patriarchal “media-market-technology nexus” (p.103). Because women and men occupy different positions in the sexual field, this new socioeconomic structure affects them differently.

Although women made modest progress in the political and economic realms, they have ended up being devalued in the sexual market (p.117), and while most (white) Western women have gained better control of their body and sexuality through contraceptive pills and various institutional changes, this freedom-through-sexuality was hijacked by capitalism to commodify women’s bodies and sexuality in the sexual market.

By lowering the legal, economic and social barriers to heterosexual women’s bodies for sexual purposes, this increases the abundance of sexual partners, legitimising

For Eva Illouz, uncertainty is the predominant feature of contemporary love, sex and romance. In *The End of Love*, the Moroccan-born French sociologist examines how individuals choose to exit or not enter into a heterosexual romantic relationship – in short, how one chooses to ‘unlove’. Drawing on interviews, novels, letters, blog entries, films, TV shows and other textual material, the author shows that the social malaise some of us encounter in our romantic and sexual lives cannot be explained only by the strength or weakness of our psyche.

Instead, as in her previous books, Illouz focuses on the impact of capitalism on how and why we love and have sex, suggesting that “a sociological critique of sexuality and emotions is crucial to a critique of capitalism itself” (p.5). Illouz develops a sociology of relations where various (heterosexual) actors compete against each other in what she calls ‘situationship’, where sexual(ised) actors describe sex that is “not serious” – casual sex, hookups,

social. In this chapter, the authors adeptly outline core aspects of sociological thinking developed over time in the discipline of sociology.

In comparison, chapter four shows the trajectory of sociology as a discipline in the western world, culminating this discussion in acknowledging the changing nature of the social itself and the power underlying sociological imagination to accommodate the ever-evolving social practices. The core theme that runs through all of these chapters is the changing nature of sociology as a discipline.

The following four chapters in the book tackle the question ‘what is sociology for?’ by delving much deeper into imagining society with all its complexity, produced

men’s control of women.

Illouz’s sole focus on heterosexual women and men from Western countries such as the US, Israel, France, Germany and England has led some to rightly point out that the book overlooks romantic and sexual relationships that are not from dominant groups and Global North countries.

Illouz does not reject the fact that some of us are happily in love with one, two or more partners, or alone. The aim of the book is therefore not to call for a return to old ways to love, or to say that pre-modern European lovers were better at it, but to free love from its capitalist chains (p.13).

In my view, this line of defence falls short in at least one substantial aspect: it runs against current trends made in sociology that try to ‘provincialise Europe’ and distance the discipline from able-bodied heteronormativity by including perspectives from marginalised groups. This investigation on contemporary love needs to explore if these findings apply outside of the white Western/Eurocentric heterosexual matrix.

The End of Love ultimately provides us with a rich, yet partial, sociological explanation of how and why men and women in Western and capitalist countries still, to borrow Bourdieu’s sociology, invest in the game of love.

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Imagining Society: the Case for Sociology

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256 pages
£21.99 pbk
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Many would agree that our world has changed remarkably in the past few years. We have been living through a global pandemic that has already taken so many lives worldwide. We witnessed the killing of George Floyd and its aftermath across cultures. We continue to hear about new wars and threats to humankind. We saw technology becoming pervasive in our daily lives, making it difficult to even think about people without it. These and many other changes compel us to rethink the role of sociology, as a discipline and practice, in understanding the everydayness of individuals and the public more broadly. This book explores this question by focusing on what sociology is and what it is for.

The first four chapters in the book

through the changing nature of the society that we live in and the evolving field of sociology as a discipline. Various issues, such as sociology in diverse cultural contexts, the move towards decolonising sociology amidst the shifting nature of structure, agency, power and conflict, and new forms of understanding difference, stratification and social inequalities, have been usefully introduced both independently and in relation to each other.

Chapter nine redirects the focus from the other to the self, offering a legitimate place to identity and emotions in making sense of the politics of self.

The final chapter in the book brings to the fore some of the contemporary issues shaping the present and the future of

sociology as a discipline.

Beyond answering these two questions, this book also shows sociology’s changing nature and position vis-à-vis society and other fields of inquiry. A great thing about this book is that while the authors offer a strong case for sociology by really illustrating how sociology enables imagining society with, rather than simplifying, all its messiness, they do not shy away from problematising it as a discipline, thus offering a great possibility of reconsidering the (ever-changing) social.

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