

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Wilkinson, Iain and Arthur Kleinman. *A Passion for Society: How We Think About Human Suffering.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. 304 pp., \$US 29.95 (9780520287235)

Since the emergence of academic social science in the late 1800s, some academics have raised ethical-political questions about social research directly or indirectly giving legitimacy to unjust social arrangements or bolstering the power of the powerful. For example, the 21st century discussion of public sociology in Canada and the US reflects concern about the discipline's relationship to universities and societies that are undergoing deeper neoliberalization as well as the desire to contribute to opposing this process and advancing social justice. *A Passion for Society* questions contemporary social science from a different angle.

Wilkinson, a UK sociologist of suffering, and Kleinman, a Harvard-based medical anthropologist and psychiatrist, offer "a manifesto for a way of doing social science that the authors regard as liberating and redeeming." (x) They present it as an alternative to that which "is in thrall to technocratic procedures and structures of career that leave it critically sterile, cynical, and devoid of passion" (xi). Their approach "begins and ends with the question of how to respond to social suffering" (x), which is their "generic term of reference for the lived experience of deprivation, misery, pain, and loss" that "is part of any social event, social condition, or social process that delivers harm to people's lives" (91). They argue for an "overtly humanistic and humanitarian" (159) orientation. Infused with such a spirit, social inquiry should be centred on caregiving, a practice which is key to understanding "how social life is made possible, sustainable, and with a potential for human flourishing" (163). The authors hearken back to Jane Addams as an exemplar from the early years of sociology but caution that contemporary community-based participatory research, which often gestures to Addams, usually succumbs to the conventions of standard academic research practices. They contend that within today's academic field it is the critical current within medical anthropology that holds out the most promise for how social inquiry immersed in the problem of social suffering can be done. This, they suggest, is because of its location at the junction of "an ap-

plied engagement with health care” (181) and ethnography. Such an approach is best-suited to meeting their avowedly-pragmatist criterion for social research: “the extent to which it serves to advance caregiving both as a response to human suffering and as an indispensable component of the pursuit of human social understanding” (180).

A Passion for Society is made up of six loosely-linked chapters. It opens with an exploration of the origins of social suffering as a concept in 18th century Western Europe, where confidence in divine providence was in decline and a new structure of feeling emerging. This is followed by a look at the ethical and emotional dimensions of the development of the notion of the social and of social research in 19th century Britain. The third chapter examines the strengths and weaknesses of C Wright Mills’ contribution, pragmatism and contemporary bodies of research that pertain to social suffering. The book then turns to Max Weber, who “comes as close to a hero of social theory and practice as we can discern” (115), after which the authors provide an overview of key antecedents of their approach, from Bartolome de Las Casas’ denunciation of Iberian colonialism’s murderous treatment of indigenous peoples in the Americas to recent photoethnography. These five chapters set the stage for the sixth, which presents Wilkinson and Kleinman’s preferred approach rather than systematically developing an argument for it.

A Passion for Society’s effort to encourage readers to reflect on the question of what the purpose of social research ought to be is laudable, as is the answer it offers: to enhance human well-being, not academic recognition. This kind of attention to the ethics of research — much deeper than what we find within the institutional research ethics apparatus — is all too uncommon in universities today. The authors’ insistence on the importance of understanding the social causes of human suffering and the necessity and possibility of action to address it are commendable in the present era, in which many people in the Global South and growing numbers within the advanced capitalist countries are treated as surplus because they are of little or no value to employers and state managers. The book’s brief discussions of a few significant episodes in the history of social science that will be unfamiliar to many readers are also interesting and useful.

However, there is good reason to question the extent to which the approach Wilkinson and Kleinman advocate can realize their ends. *A Passion for Society* says very little about what it is about the social organization of contemporary societies that generates harm or about possibilities within this for change for the better; in other words, it does not present a social theoretical account that could guide action for change. The implicit theoretical conception that can be discerned does not grasp

the extent to which heteropatriarchal racist capitalist social relations prevent people from meeting their needs and flourishing. Here it is worth noting that the book's chapter on Weber is remarkably uncritical. It demonstrates no understanding that Weber's sociology was a complement — not an alternative — to the marginalist economics of his day (an ancestor of the neoliberal ideology that today legitimates and encourages harm on a wide scale in spite of what many critics see as its intellectual bankruptcy). Nor does it illuminate the political implications of Weber's social theory (or this hero's political practice). Although the importance of caregiving deserves to be appreciated (as it is by social reproduction feminism, for example), the book avoids any consideration of how to change deeply-rooted social relations that inflict systemic harm rather than fostering care. As a result, it is not nearly critical enough of the limits of humanitarian politics. *A Passion for Society* also lacks a coherent theorization of the harm that underpins social suffering (here social philosopher Jeff Noonan's research on human life-requirements and ethics is pertinent).

The authors are conscious of the obstacles that exist within today's universities to putting their approach into practice. They briefly note that their approach to social inquiry "may well require that, where possible, we take steps to unshackle the work of research and writing... from the deadweight of university bureaucracy" (202). This is a logical response to the diminishing opportunities within universities to work on the kind of research geared to liberal social reform efforts to which Wilkinson and Kleinman are committed, but they do not develop this suggestion and explore its implications for their project. This is regrettable, since doing so might have opened the door to thinking about what can be done outside universities, such as research and writing within community and workplace organizing.

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