RECENSÕES/REVIEWS

Is that True? Critical Thinking for Sociologists

Joel Best
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230 pp.

Joel Best's book – Is That True? Critical Thinking for Sociologists – is an introduction to critical thinking issues in the social sciences, particularly sociology.

The book begins with setting the grounds of the overall argument (chapters 1, 2, and 3). Critical thinking is defined as "a set of tools for evaluating claims" (p. 2), and this evaluation always concerns evidence. Joel Best adopts Stephen Toulmin's grounds-warrants-conclusions model of arguments, explaining critical thinking regarding each of the three elements of the model. He then critically reviews forms of everyday common sense argumentation: anecdotes, ad hominem arguments, the myth label, verbal shortcuts such as metaphors and other folk aphorisms, and the uncritical understanding of what "a fact" is. Besides demonstrating its flaws, Best also suggests approaches and questions for assessing them critically.

Throughout the book, points on logic and method are also analysed sociologically. For example, concerning ad hominem arguments, the author highlights how they "are terribly dangerous, because they cause us to huddle among those who share our views, while discouraging us from using our capacity to engage in critical thinking" (p. 20). This sociological perspective on critical thinking is a central point of the book, at the same time that it intends to focus on critical thinking *for* sociologists, as its subtitle states. Critical thinking "is a skill" (p. 4), but "the specific challenges for critical thinking vary among the social sciences" (p. 37). Chapters 4 to 8 make

this sociological focus on sociology: "[t]his book begins by applying a sociological perspective to sociology as a discipline, viewing sociology itself as a social world and trying to understand how that world is organized and how its members think about what they are doing" (p. 45).

For Joel Best, sociology focuses "on the effects individuals have on one another's behavior. For sociologists, critical thinking usually involves unpacking those social influences" (p. 43). I find this definition too simple. It seems to reduce the sociological analysis to cause-effect relations, leaving aside other kinds of analysis, such as on constitution and meaning, and passing a poor image of sociology. At another point in the book, the author himself acknowledges that "the variables that [sociologists] study can rarely be treated as *the* cause of some effect," which makes that "the tendencies that sociologists identify are not particularly powerful" (p. 117).

Chapters 9 to 12 go deeper into evaluating evidence, as "questioning evidence choices is probably the most common form that critical thinking takes in sociology" (p. 126). Joel Best stresses that it "is always possible to question the choices an author has made in handling evidence" (p. 126), so he provides us with a kind of road map for assessing our own and others' research.

The book reads easily and quickly, in coherence with a broader critical stance towards some writing form and content in sociology. In this particular, it is interesting the classification that the author does in chapter 6 in analysing sociology as a social world. Among others, he points to some sociologists' "philosophy envy" (pp. 55ss) which accounts "for much of sociology's reputation for jargon and bad writing" (p. 56).

Although the author points out the book's relevance in tandem with the contemporary salience of fake news and the like, it would also be interesting to confront cancel culture. In the final chapter, Best considers "Research Questions That Must Not Be Asked" (p. 148). The taboos in the discipline "foreclose debate by trying to discourage the very expression of some ideas" (p. 149). In this line, it would have been interesting to reflect further on the implications of contemporary cancel culture for sociology.

Maria João Barata
Instituto Superior Miguel Torga