



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 29

Issue 1 March - Symposium on Native American
Wellness

Article 20

March 2002

Liberation Sociology. Joe R. Feegin and Hernan Vera.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2002) "*Liberation Sociology.* Joe R. Feegin and Hernan Vera.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol29/iss1/20>

This Book Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



of the struggles of people with disabilities to be treated as ordinary human beings and to be given the rights that other American citizens take for granted. The book begins by dramatically contrasting President Roosevelt, who sought to conceal his disability, with Charles Ruff, President Clinton's Chief Counsel, who appeared at the 1999 impeachment hearings in his wheelchair. It then chronologically traces the way people with disabilities have campaigned to change the prevailing approach from one which stressed charity, institutionalization and segregation to one which celebrates the ability of people with disabilities to live their lives within the community and to participate fully in the economy and society. Their campaigns have involved a difficult and protracted struggle which has, nevertheless, successfully contested conventional attributions, policies and practices and replaced them with a new insistence on normalization and inclusion. While the book shows just how much progress has been made in a relatively short period of time, it also reveals how much effort, determination and suffering has been required to affect social change. In addition, the authors are not complacent and warn that efforts are currently underway to reverse the gains of the past sixty years.

This is an important book. It exposes attitudes and practices towards people with disabilities that are at first shocking but on reflection evoke an awareness of how deeply ingrained prejudices about disability are, even among ordinary, well-meaning people. Its emphasis on rights and inclusion rather than charity offers an important basis for analyzing the movement's success. The authors cover an enormous range of topics, events and issues but despite its detail and comprehensiveness, the book is readable and engaging. It should be consulted by anyone interested in knowing how people who are discriminated against can overcome and bring about substantive social change.

Joe R. Feegin and Hernan Vera, *Liberation Sociology*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001. \$28 papercover.

It is an indication of sociology's maturity as a discipline that many different normative positions, reflecting diverse ideological commitments, are given expression in the subject's literature. Although these positions are often implicit, they are sometimes presented in a very explicit way. This is particularly true of

Marxist sociologists whose analysis of the negative consequences of capitalism was direct and forceful and whose advocacy of a the desirability of a collectivist alternative was unequivocal. On the other hand, sociological functionalists often revealed an implicit approval of social arrangements that supported the existing social order and maintained cohesion.

Feegin and Vera's useful and readable book falls somewhere between these two positions. They are highly critical of what they regard as 'establishment sociology' and its commitment to instrumental positivism. But, their book does not provide a single, coherent normative alternative and instead is informed by an eclectic mix of approaches emanating from critical theory, radical populism, feminism, anti-racism, liberation theology and humanism to name but a few. The authors offer an equally loose definition of liberation sociology noting that it seeks to make the world a better place, empower people, challenge social hierarchies and eradicate oppression. While these are indeed desirable goals, it is clear that sociologists of different normative positions will interpret these goals and the best ways of achieving them in different ways.

The book's failure to transcend generality is unfortunate. The author's own commitment to a vague left-radical-populist-critical perspective is familiar but it does not explicate a clear ideological position that can be contrasted with that of others who also want to make the world a better place or empower people or end oppression. Terms such as 'empowerment' are no longer the prerogative of the political left but are used with equal conviction by those on the political right who believe that true empowerment occurs when individualism rather than collectivism is institutionalized. Similarly, the definition of what comprises social improvement is a relative one. Conservative Christians believe that social improvement involves the statutory imposition religious teaching and the promotion of social piety rather than the acceptance of secularism which characterizes left-progressivism. And, they are quite radical in their commitment to attain their version of the utopian condition. Similarly, while many on the political right believe that oppression is a consequence of state 'interference' in social and economic affairs, those

of a social democratic disposition have a quite different view of state collectivism.

Although the authors would have offered a more sophisticated account of liberation sociology if they had contrasted their own position with that of others who are equally passionate about their beliefs, they have written an engaging and informative text which will inspire many students. The authors provide excellent case study material and their frequent biographic references to sociologists who have campaigned for social betterment in the past are instructive. They also refer to other disciplines that have informed critical analysis and action. However, the neglect of social work is a glaring omission. Indeed, several historically important social workers who have made a significant contribution to social development are coopted and described as sociologists. The authors would have enriched their book if they had taken the time to refer to social work's historic commitment to the values that they espouse. Despite its shortcomings, this book will show students that sociology has been involved in promoting progressive social change. Its account of participatory research and other forms of left-progressive sociological involvement is thorough and informative.

Martin Carnoy, *Sustaining the New Economy: Work, Family and Community in the Information Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. \$39.95 hardcover.

Like the social changes that accompanied industrialization, changes in social institutions characterize the current Information Age. Modifications in the organization of work, the structure of the family and the community characterize life in information-based societies. Focusing on this issue, Carnoy examines similarities and differences in the social changes occurring in OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries. He argues that the nature of these changes and the ways governments respond to them, will determine which OECD economies succeed and which do not.

Global economic competition has forced companies to change the nature of work in order to survive. As a result, many have disaggregated work into discrete tasks that can be completed by