



In Conversation with Prudence L. Carter

Interview by Gisela Redondo-Sama

Prudence L. Carter is the E.H. and Mary E. Pardee Professor and Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Berkeley. Before, she was the Jacks Family Professor of Education and Professor of Sociology (by courtesy) at Stanford University and Associate Professor of Sociology at Harvard University. Prof. Carter received her MA and Ph.D. in Sociology from Columbia University.

Dean Carter's research focuses on factors that both shape and reduce economic, social and cultural inequalities among social groups in schools and society. As a sociologist, she examines academic and mobility differences influenced by the dynamics of race, ethnicity, poverty, class, and gender in the U.S. and global society.

Dean Carter's award-winning book, "Keepin' It Real: School Success beyond Black and White" (Oxford University Press, 2005), engages with and interrogates cultural explanations used to explain school achievement and racial identity for low-income Black and Latino youth in the United States. "Keepin' It Real" was recognized as the 2006 co-winner of the Oliver Cromwell Cox Book Award given by the American Sociological Association (ASA) for its contribution to the eradication of racism; a 2005 finalist for the C. Wright Mills Book Award, given by the Society for the Study of Social Problems; and an Honorable Mention for best book given by the section on Race, Class, and Gender of the ASA. Her other books include "Stubborn Roots: Race, Culture, and Inequality in U.S. & South African Schools" (2012) and "Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must

Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance" (2013), co-edited with Dr. Kevin Welner — both published by Oxford University Press.

Gisela Redondo-Sama (GRS): Thank you very much Prof. Carter, it is a privilege for us to have this conversation with you and to hear about your inspiring work and contributions in the sociological field. I would like to start by asking you how, as a sociologist and more specifically as a sociologist of education, sociological knowledge has contributed to your work to the understanding of the intersection between race, class and gender.

Prudence L. Carter (PC): It is a very good question. Sociology is the discipline in which I was trained and from where my initial days of theory building and methods come. I would not call myself a theorist but certainly, the theoretical frameworks that I have read mostly stem from Sociology. I will say that my work is not just based in Sociology, however. I realized very early on when I was in graduate school at Columbia University that I had to read across disciplinary boundaries. When I think about it, particularly in the US context— and I have also have conducted research in the South African context—it is important to understand history, politics, economics, education, social psychology, as well as sociology. So, I tend to see Sociology as the most integral discipline to how I analyze and I think about and I write, but also I want to be clear that I see my work as interdisciplinary in the sense that there are thinkers from other disciplines

who have also shaped my understanding. Moving to a School of Education years ago also expanded my horizons and exposure to knowledge. My research within schools as organizations, among individuals, and on intergroup dynamics is situated within macro-historical and macro-social and -economic contexts.

Sometimes I think of how much I love history, for having shaped my understanding of the contemporaneous moment. Then, there is economics. I have an undergraduate degree in Economics. I am not so much interested in Economics in terms of its methodological contributions, but certainly the confluence of political and macroeconomic analyses have shaped the contours of my understanding of the material realities of different social groups and have been deeply informative.

GRS: We very well know about your book “Keepin’ It Real” has been recognised for its contribution to the eradication of racism. Since its publication, which are the advances achieved and the main pending challenges from your view?

PLC: Well, “Keepin’ It Real” was my first book, and it was really from the perspective and the meaning-making of young people in terms of their engagement with schools, as it intersects with their own cultures and social and class identities. But, that book was not in any way going to change the world, be groundbreaking in the sense of how to eradicate the disparities that we see in society and education. As I thought more about disparities and implications for policy, I wrote a second book, which is “Stubborn Roots”, which took me to four cities between two countries. That work really helped me to understand some of the organizational mechanisms that reproduce inequality within education across social groups. In other studies, I have interacted with policymakers and other key decision-makers, particularly educators as practitioners. I acquired an understanding of how a specific groups of children and youth, particularly in the the lessons for “Keepin’ It Real”, perceive, understand and experience their schooling and their material realities. My observations, interviews and surveys within schools, and really talking to multiple

constituencies inside schools enabled me to consider more direct implications of my findings, and perhaps even prescriptive in some things that need to happen in the educational policy realm. In practice as well. In the educational research field, I read significantly more research about how to influence practice and behaviors; how to change how schools run; how to change how educators implement, and how to be mindful of the social, cultural, and economic realities of the children coming into the schools. I think collectively that some research is making some impact, but I would suggest that is much more to do at a macro-level, because schools alone cannot solve the problems of racial and economic inequality. They cannot solve the problems of racism. In the United States, we are now talking a lot about white supremacy and systemic racism. Schools cannot solve those problems alone, particularly since students live in segregated neighborhoods and communities, and have parents or guardians who have been socialized under disparate and discriminatory systems and then reproduce them. When we think about the intersection of the school, family and the neighborhood, we realize that it is going to take more than what happens inside schooling or what educators can do to solve social problems and inequality.

GRS: In your work, you explain key historical moments that have contributed to the accumulation of disadvantages for low-income groups in the US. In the light of this, how do you see the movement “Black lives matter” that we know around the world? How do you see this in the current scenario?

PLC: Well, it has been a remarkable moment. I am now reading my son a book called “March”, which is a graphic non-fiction book written by the great Congressman John Lewis who passed a few months ago here. When he was a college student, he was one of the founding members of SNCC, the Student Non-violent Coordination Committee. Youth activists then were fighting against racism and particularly the right to vote, the right to have access to quality schooling in primary, secondary, and higher education, the right to be able to eat in any restaurant—liberation... You

know, there was so much that was denied to black people and other racial minoritized people then. Then you move forward to the 21st century, now we realize that those basic rights are available; but there many other things that did not come along with the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s. What the movement for Black Lives has done is to demand an understanding of systemic racism, which is not just about individual-level prejudice. It is not just about one person or group of persons spewing venom or hatred, or steeped in implicit bias, but rather, racism is actually deeply ingrained in how many institutions and organizations function in U.S. society. The Black Lives Matters Movement, as I understand it, aims to increase societal awareness of how systemic racism connects to the the criminal justice system, the lack of justice around policing and certainly the criminalization of black bodies in this country. Perhaps, for the first time, there is a spotlight on the concepts of “systemic” and “institutionalized racism” in national conversations. Corporations and universities, everyday people, are attempting to grasp the meanings of these terms and their accountability for how to eradicate these social forces. In the past, “prejudice” was the focal concept, and I recall barely being able to write about “racism” in my early years, because of feedback about issues of measurement and limited theorization or conceptualization about it. How do you measure “racism”? Was it enough to believe interpretative findings from ethnographers and interviewers about its pervasiveness? Certainly, not many scholars and researchers in the mainstream of sociology thought to regard the systemic and institutional aspects of racism. Yet, various studies now, along with experience, and what the entire world has witnessed before its very eyes—thanks to social media, implicate a social matter embedded in the DNA of U.S. society and its systems. It is not merely a social project, but also a massive economic and political project.

GRS: How we, as sociologists, can make connections internationally for the study of common research topics that maybe they are very connected and we can create synergies across countries, across regions? What can be the role of the sociological associations on this?

PLC: I think that the discipline encompasses numerous dynamic and very innovative thinkers who can not only conceptualize and show commonalities empirically across global society, and create universal frameworks, but also obviously, the particularities and the uniqueness of social contexts, you know, right down to the neighborhood, family, and individual levels. I believe that Sociology contributes to how we understand human nature and how individuals, groups, and institutions as social actors behave and operate. Across the globe, when power is infused in the context, when a social setting engenders a status hierarchy, we might observe some commonalities. Everyday social processes and relations may not manifest exactly; the nature, texture of the social relationships across societies may vary; but where power and subordination exist—whether by class, by gender, by race, by ethnicity, religion, we may observe similarities in the dynamics, the experiences, meanings, and manifestations of outcomes. Global societies provide the empirical fodder for understanding inequality, for understanding how subjugation, marginalization, and domination operate, for understanding how status and power work together. Yes, it is also important to contextualize and understand differences, or particularities, about how these social forces play out when we go within specific communities, cities and localities. Some may be more similar than others may. In some places, the actual economic forces may be more salient; class becomes the social organizing principle that is more dominant. In other societies, like in the United States where certainly one think about the production of early capitalism in the US, but race became the fundamental social organizing principle. In other societies, ethnicity may be more salient. As you can tell from my comments, for my research, the scholarship of sociologists and other social scientists who focus on deep social problems like racism, poverty, inequality, educational inequality, and boundary making has influenced me. I hold high regard for some social scientists, sociologists and historians, who have written about comparative global racisms. I think about the people who do comparative research on global capitalist systems and markets across the globe. Those frameworks actually help to

shape, to show what the universal dynamics are, and then, if they are doing their research sites any justice, they help us to understand the uniqueness of the settings, their particularities.

GRS: What do you think about the role of the sociological associations working at the national level but they are also scaling up their initiatives?

PLC: The International Sociological Association, as well as the American Sociological Association and others, are all overarching umbrella professional and scholarly organizations. Then we have the specific interest groups, the SIGs of the special interest groups or the different sections within the organizations. What I think would be great is if we could spend more time figuring out how to bring ourselves together, to cross-fertilize and illuminate the ecological nature of social systems. As we fragment into these different sections and interests groups, sometimes we do not come back to take the time to tell a bigger story collectively. One research study cannot fully explain a large social phenomenon. There are too many dimensions and facets to most social problems or areas of inquiry in the discipline. A major role of our associations, to me, is to share, inform, collaborate, and cross-fertilize ideas across research paradigms, methods, and sites, as well as across institutional, national and local boundaries. Personally, I would like to see professional sociological associations do more to bridge and braid theory, policy, and practice. This is my greatest wish in terms of scale.

I think that in terms of the role of the American Sociological Association to the ISA and to other national societies is in some ways akin to how nation-states should operate in terms of cooperation. How do we improve our levels of engagement and cooperation? How and what do sociologists share across national boundaries? How can we support one another better in our fundamental work as sociologists?

GRS: What is the role of the American Sociological Association in the American society? How it works? What is the role between the academia at the association level and the impact that maybe

researchers in Sociology or linked to Sociology are having to the society?

PLC: The role of sociologists is to help elucidate how society functions. One of the things that is important for me is to take a step back in Sociology and think about what we contribute as academics, as scholars, as researchers, which in many ways can be quite abstract. For the learned society, that is quite fine. Again, I am also interested in the application of the knowledge creation in our discipline, for the sake of social progress, problem solving, improving democracies, reducing inequality, eradicating harmful systems of racism, patriarchy, and other hateful phenomena. In my opinion, it is not sufficient for the discipline to remain primarily scholarly. Might we think more collectively as a discipline about this—a sort of reimagining of what we want not only our discipline but also our institutions and society to look like on the other side of this wretched, global pandemic? Some sociologists have done that, for sure. Yet, certain markers of status reveal that some forms of critical, applied, and more policy relevant scholarship and research are less appreciated in our discipline. I think it is high time to disrupt the status hierarchy of knowledge and research in sociology, and change that! Honestly, I believe that Sociology as a discipline could render itself obsolete in the future, if it does not keep up with the needs and demands for problem solving in both national and global society.

GRS: Finally, what advice would you like to share with young sociologists that they are starting their careers, for their future works?

PLC: I have had the pleasure to work with graduate students for over two decades. What I would say to them is to know your field more generally, and in addition, avoid focusing too soon in a specialized area or topic. Gather an understanding of the discipline's breadth and the genealogy of ideas. I believe that training is more fluid and possibly more expansive today because of the emergence of fertile, new ideas, frameworks, and research tools. Also, I have observed more thought put into the creation of program

requirements and faculty syllabi. There was more social closure to “legitimate knowledge” when I was in graduate school 25 years ago. I had a few women professors, and certainly, there were very few people of color whose scholarship was made available to mold my thinking. I had to look for much of that on my own. Back to where I began earlier, I encourage early scholars to not to be too disciplinarily bounded because multidimensional social questions and issues actually entail multiple multidisciplinary perspectives. For me, it is important to read and understand more broadly. I also think it is important for young scholars to be trained well across multiple methodological techniques. Make sure that your research questions are congruous with your methods. One thing that I see over time is that some are not as careful, and dare I say, that some faculty may not be taking as much time to really teach and apprentice. Consequently, when I review papers, I frequently read manuscripts exhibiting limited empirical rigor to substantiate actually the rhetorical claims. In addition, I would encourage young scholars to push themselves beyond the familiar and comfortable and expand their growth as thinkers. If you are theorizing and/or conceptualizing, read and learn enough as much about other contexts, groups, or perspectives as the one in which you are interested. Certainly, I learned much when I was in a sociology department, and I learned exponentially more when I ventured beyond the bounds of sociology and into a school filled with social scientists from various, other fields.

Choose problems that interest you; choose problems that you think are important; and choose

problems that challenge you. I would love it if this generation would take up more of what I just mentioned: spending more time choosing problems to solve for the progress of society. It would be great for Sociology as a discipline to lead in terms of the production, the eradication, the alienation of so many of the ills that affect us. I am fully aware that I have a social-problems orientation. I realize that sociologists do other things. It is fine for some to be able to teach, explain and describe and theorize about esoteric social matters, and still I aspire for a larger segment of our discipline to become more committed to actually helping to solve social problems.

GRS: Thank you very much, very inspiring and encouraging ideas for those working in Sociology!

PLC: Thank you very much!



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