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The Visions and Divisions of Sociology

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The American Sociological Association is celebrating its centennial this year and is growing in ways it hasn't since the 1960s. But the century of development and achievement for the discipline and its major professional association has also been marked by contestation and controversy. That is no coincidence, for no discipline is more closely intertwined with broader social currents than sociology. The first systematic course in sociology brought the wrath of Yale's president down on William Graham Sumner in 1879 -- because he assigned the evolutionary work of Herbert Spencer.

Despite a history of dissent and diversity, sometime around 1970 sociologists began to refer to an illusive phenomenon called "mainstream sociology." The mainstream was typified by the ASA leadership, by the *American Sociological Review*, and by a few elite departments like those at Harvard and Columbia. It was more East Coast than West Coast, and some influential West Coast sociology departments achieved stature and derived glamour from appearing insurgent.

During the lean and mean years that followed, funds for higher education were curtailed across the nation. Provosts and deans targeted some sociology departments for cutbacks or even closure. Sociology suffered for its perceived politics, but the retrenchment was widespread. And as in many disciplines, insurgency gave way to incentive systems. Crude rankings based mainly on numbers of publications in "mainstream" journals ascended to the fore, and "mainstream" became a term sociologists increasingly used to describe the work that would gain the most protection from ax-wielding administrators.

Those usages of "mainstream" are misleading, though. From its inception, sociology has been a confluence of many streams -- and nowhere more so than in the United States. While it grew alongside the modern research university, it has always had strong roots outside academe. The early years were shaped by Christian projects of social reform, the settlement-house movement, and other currents in the development of social-welfare institutions; efforts to integrate and

provide what we would now call social capital to both African-Americans and immigrants; and concern for the depopulation of rural America and the problems of urbanization. Despite early interest among reforming clergymen in the East, the discipline grew disproportionately in the Midwest. Its most important base was the University of Chicago, where sociologists pioneered field research in the growing city and drew deeply on the pragmatism of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead.

Through much of the 19th century, concerned citizens had advocated a more "scientific" approach to solving social problems and understanding social change. Initially that push was largely nonacademic, from ministers and administrators of relief for the poor. Beginning in the 1870s, these concerns gradually migrated into the universities as the older "classical" curriculum gave way to more practical subjects, the growth of doctoral degrees, and the invention of the undergraduate major. Sociology took root among historians and was often approached as a branch of the also new field of economics. It was not until 1905 that sociologists turned their segment of the American Economic Association into an autonomous organization, the American Sociological Society (the name was changed when acronyms became more popular). Institutionalization had already started in the 1890s, however, with the founding of the field's most important journal, the *American Journal of Sociology*, and first major department, both at the new University of Chicago.

Over the next 50 years, both departments and journals proliferated, and the Ph.D. became standard as the basis for a faculty appointment. Sociology was shaped by efforts to synthesize the history of social thought, new empirical inquiries, and sociologists' engagements in projects of social reform. There were specialists in each -- for instance, Howard Becker synthesized, Howard Odum did research, and Jane Addams pressed social reform and service at Hull House. But to imagine the three dimensions as separate would be misleading, as all three can be seen in protean figures like Robert E. Park, W.I. Thomas, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

When Columbia produced the second major sociology department, early in the 20th century, it was less shaped by reform movements than was Chicago's. Instead, its leaders Robert McIver and Robert Lynd symbolized the dimensions of theoretical synthesis and empirical inquiry. But when McIver and Lynd chose Robert K. Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld as their successors, the newcomers bonded in an unexpected way -- and explicitly pursued the integration rather than the opposition of theory and research.

While Chicago and Columbia dominated the early production of Ph.D.'s who would take faculty positions at major universities around the country, sociology grew disproportionately in state universities. Rural sociology was especially prominent in land-grant institutions and has long been a major branch of the field, although the urban studies of the Chicago School were destined to be better remembered partly

because urbanization has been such a strong social trend. Already by the 1930s there were major departments at the Universities of Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, and North Carolina (though efforts to launch a department of sociology at Berkeley were resisted until after World War II, when Herbert Blumer left Chicago to start that program). The diversity of institutional bases was, and remains, mirrored in a diversity of approaches.

Questions about how "professional" sociology should be are as old as the discipline, and struggles over professionalization shaped both the formation of the American Sociological Society and the quarrels in the 1930s when the association severed its previously close relationship with the University of Chicago and the *American Journal of Sociology* to launch the *American Sociological Review*.

The growth of large-scale, substantially financed research projects -- especially with foundation money, but also with corporate and government support -- encouraged one version of professionalization, epitomized by Lazarsfeld and Merton's leadership at Columbia, with its Bureau of Applied Social Research and enormously successful graduate-training program throughout the postwar era. Foundation support -- notably from Rockefeller and Ford -- was also pivotal in establishing demographic and survey research. Quantitative methods were widely seen as linked to professionalizing projects, and these were often challenged by field researchers, specialists on social problems, those carrying on the reform traditions, and critical theorists.

Especially important was a long, mostly Midwestern, and in many ways populist tradition anchored in the Society for the Study of Social Problems. Its journal, *Social Problems*, was more widely read but less professionally prestigious than the *American Sociological Review*. The contrast in styles was apparent in the very titles of two classic, almost simultaneous studies of medical education, *Boys in White* (Howard S. Becker et al.) and *The Student Physician* (Robert K. Merton et al.).

Theory had its own professionalizer in Talcott Parsons, who used his base at Harvard to promote a standard canon of sociological texts and his synthetic theoretical framework. This professionalization flourished, but in tension with more critical perspectives. Parsons's functionalist theory -- which sought to explain society as a system in which parts ideally worked for the whole -- would by the 1960s provide one of the dominant images of a disciplinary mainstream (in all senses of "disciplinary"). Formal analyses of survey data would offer another. Yet the 1960s were not only an era of theory wars but also of major advances in quantitative research. The decade saw the increased use of multivariate statistics -- especially the introduction of path analysis, which built more complex causal models on the basis of multiple-regression analysis, as in the work of Otis Dudley Duncan and the enormously influential study of *The American Occupational*

Structure he wrote with Peter Blau in 1967.

C. Wright Mills both analyzed and satirized the opposition of "grand theory" and "abstracted empiricism" in *The Sociological Imagination*. His point was how dualism obscured lack of critical attention to public problems. Alvin Gouldner took up a similar theme in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. Mills's book appeared in 1959 and would shape the rise of the New Left; Gouldner's appeared in 1970 and marked the crest of a wave of campus politics in which sociology was centrally involved.

Growth in sociology wasn't just a matter of foundation support or professional projects. It was shaped by engagements with the government during the New Deal and World War II, and by the GI Bill afterward. The growth of universities during the 1950s and 60s brought the founding of new sociology departments -- especially in the West -- and rapid expansion of the field. Perhaps no discipline was shaped more by those boom years, or contributed more to the student movements of the 1960s. The Port Huron Statement was greatly influenced by the writings of Mills; two of the earliest presidents of the Students for a Democratic Society (Todd Gitlin and Richard Flacks) and numerous other members became prominent sociologists.

But the legacy of the boom years was broader. Sociology became a much more inclusive discipline during the course of its expansion, building on the gains of the civil-rights movement, as well as a long tradition of sociological research on questions of race and ethnicity. With the feminist movement, women entered the field in large numbers, and many became frustrated at continued male dominance of the field.

To this day, even as women make up the majority of the field, they are underrepresented in many of the top-ranked departments. In 1970 Sociologists for Women in Society was founded, with implications not just for internal participation in the discipline but also for the study of gender. Meeting resistance from the ASA, it launched *Gender & Society* as an autonomous journal.

Efforts to promote diversity continued during the 1970s and 80s in the context of an extremely tight job market. Many graduate students attracted to the field by the social engagements of the late 60s and early 70s found it hard to make academic careers. This was an era of tight funds for higher education generally, as well as new competition for sociology from the growth in business majors and other fields that catered to students concerned about job and career prospects.

Sociologists were prominent in several of the growing professional fields. As had long been the case with social work, however, in fields like the sociology of education there was an ambivalent relationship between disciplinary departments and professional schools. Enrollments often grew faster in "applied" fields like

criminology and industrial relations than in the more abstract subdisciplines emphasized by the most prestigious research departments. Enrollment was also high in classes on race and gender. But tenure decisions at many leading departments now explicitly embraced the once pejorative label of "mainstream," emphasizing publication in the *American Sociological Review* and research supported by external sources. And there were indeed transformative improvements in research techniques and data sets in fields from demography to social stratification. The elite departments were not monolithic -- this period also saw a rise in historical sociology, much of it influenced by Marxism. But starting in the late 1970s, the elite departments and journals largely pursued agendas only loosely connected to either of the main sources of undergraduate interest -- the social-problems tradition and the new professional fields.

That shifted in the 1990s, partly because of the development of some prestigious research fields like economic sociology that forged closer relations to professional schools. At the same time, if business seemed to rule the roost, the 1990s was also a watershed for interest in civil society and nongovernmental organizations concerned with the environment, the arts, and human rights. Globalization fueled the internationalization of sociology. Soaring numbers of immigrants returned scholarly attention to classic sociological investigation of assimilation and ethnic identities, discrimination and access, and the continuing struggles of American minority groups for equal rights. Sociology contributed the idea of social capital to public debates over citizenship and participation, as well as to research on class and social mobility.

Equally important, undergraduate enrollment started to increase again, and job prospects for new Ph.D.'s improved. An increasing number now turn to jobs outside academe, but often by choice and not necessity, and partly because of the centrality of sociological issues to corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and grass-roots mobilizing efforts by traditional and new social movements.

Sociologists are rediscovering their scientific excitement, though which concerns are "hot" reflects, as always, not only developments in theory and method but also engagements with prominent social issues -- for example, religion in the public sphere, new levels of inequality, and transformations in the role of science and technology.

Both public and professional visions of sociology are prospering. Perhaps they are less in tension with each other than at some earlier times -- though clashes are likely to continue as they have for a hundred years. Rather than advocating a march toward an increasing homogeneity in which one or the other is dominated or obliterated, we would embrace diversity and the capacity for competing visions -- and arguments -- to inform each other as well as divide.

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