

SOCIOLOGY IN AMERICA: THE DISCIPLINE AND THE PUBLIC*
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HERBERT J. GANS

When I first began to think about the presidential address, I planned to choose one of the research areas in which I've worked all of my professional life. I considered a paper on Sociology and the City, urban sociology currently being in an exciting intellectual transition, and also one on Poverty and Inequality, a topic about which sociologists have far more to contribute than they now do. I would also have liked to discuss Sociology and the Mass Media, an ever more significant field which still has not received the attention and respect from the discipline that it deserves.

Instead of writing a paper that might have been relevant to only some colleagues, however, I chose a topic in which all of us are or should be interested, the discipline.¹ More particularly, I want to discuss our relations with America's nonsociologists, the *lay public*: both the very large general public and the smaller well-educated one which does much of the country's professional-level analytic and creative work. Since the lay public includes the country's entire population, less the approximately 20,000 sociologists, my topic is also an intrinsic part of Sociology in America.

Although I shall concentrate on what we

still need to do to serve the lay public and the institutions in which it is involved, in many respects we are doing better than we have in the past. Sociology has established a presence in many kinds of policy analysis and is moving into large numbers of other so-called practice areas, even if our ideas continue to be largely absent from the country's political thinking. As best I can tell from energetic but unsystematic observation, the news media pay more attention to us than before, and some journalists now want sociological angles on feature stories they are covering. Slowly but surely they are also becoming interested in sociological research. We even show up as sympathetic characters in occasional popular novels and films, although we continue to play villains and fools in high culture. I have the impression that the majority of the literary community still believes that only it can analyze society.

When one talks with publishers of general, nonacademic books as well as with editors and writers for so-called serious magazines and with foundation heads, the picture also remains discouraging. Too many people still dislike sociology or, worse still, are not interested in it. To be sure, often they react to caricatures of sociology, but the very fact that they are not motivated to go beyond caricatures is itself depressing. In effect, we play a smaller part in the country's intellectual life than we should.

Many sociologists find nothing wrong with this state of affairs. For them, sociology is a social science with emphasis on the science, and reaching out to, or obtaining the attention of, the lay public is irrelevant. Others hold a stronger version of this point of view; being in touch with the laity, except when necessary for earning a living, impedes the progress of scientific research. Colleagues who feel most strongly speak of vulgarizing sociology or pandering to the uninformed.

I believe that these feelings are mistaken. Maintaining some relationship with the American public is part of our responsibility as members of society and as recipients of its

* Direct all correspondence to Herbert J. Gans, Department of Sociology, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.

I am grateful to many colleagues who made helpful comments on the version of this essay presented in Atlanta, and to those at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, the State University of New York at Albany, and Fordham University for allowing me to try out early versions of it on them. My thanks also to Anna Karpathakis for library research assistance and to Allan Silver for convincing me to use an allusion to Alexis de Tocqueville's classic work for the title of this paper and the theme of the 1988 Annual Meeting.

¹ I had, however, made presentations about where I thought sociology was going to seminars at Columbia University in 1980 and 1985, each time before large enough audiences to suggest that there was considerable interest in the topic.

funds, public or private, whether as tuition payments, salaries, grants, or contracts. Moreover, when members of the lay public feel that our work is useful or enlightening or both, they have an incentive to give us their cultural and political support if we need it—when issues like student interest in sociology, the allocation of research funds, and freedom of research are at stake. The rest of the essay will show that paying more attention to lay America can be done without pandering.

This essay has three major parts. The first describes some of the research needed to analyze sociology's roles in America, for without it we cannot fully understand how we can best reach out to the lay public. The second part discusses some ways in which we can now improve our relations with the public. In the last part of the paper I focus on sociology itself, offering some ideas on what we can do better for ourselves even as we do better by the public.²

Before I start I must define the term "we." I use it broadly, referring to "we the discipline" and "we the collectivity," knowing all the while that the discipline is highly diverse while the collectivity is far from a functioning sociopolitical entity. "We" is therefore mainly a shorthand about how numbers of us act or how we should all act, but I must apologize to the practitioners that my "we" is mostly the academic discipline and collectivity, they being what I know best.

STUDYING SOCIOLOGY IN AMERICA

My initial topic is researching Sociology in America. At one level, I see the topic as a set of studies in the sociology of knowledge that tries to understand where we are coming from and going and how we are tied to the main structures and hierarchies of American society. In the process, we should identify our employers, sponsors, funders, supporters, and allies, as well as our clients or constituents—and our possible victims. In short, we must understand whose sides we have been on, purposely or accidentally (Becker 1967).

At another level, Sociology in America is evaluative, the application of our analytic

tools and our values to understand and assess what we are doing for and to the country, as well as to all the sectors on which we might impinge, from underdogs to top dogs, for instance. We need to know whom we help and whom we injure and damage, intentionally and unintentionally, so that we can figure out what we should be doing and not doing in behalf of a better society, however "better" may be defined.

"Sociology in America" is a good title for an ASA annual meeting theme, but the topic could also be called sociology and society, in part to emphasize that it must be cross-national and cross-cultural as well (Kohn 1987). A first priority is conceptualizing the basic subject, and many alternatives are possible. One can begin by looking for and at sociology's *contributions*, identifying activities and institutions in which sociologists have participated directly or in which their work has been used indirectly. A major problem with looking at contributions is that we tend to forget the negative ones and the ones we fail to make, but this problem can be corrected.

A slightly different approach would be to ask what *roles* sociology has played and is playing, adding the evaluative element by also asking how well these roles were played, and which should be played in the future. Some roles are self-evident, but the concept allows us to wonder whether, for example, we somehow also represent particular interest groups, or falling, not to mention rising, classes. Or are we mainly one of a set of academics whose role it is to add a touch of cultural polish and a smidgen of social conscience to the socialization of young Americans able and willing to go to college? Yet how do we fit into the scheme of things when we play what I think of as the Martian role, distancing ourselves and going to Erving Goffman's backstage—or back of *it*—to report on how society or some of its constituent parts operate.

My own thinking takes me in the direction of *effects* concepts, because what matters most is not what we have done but how our work has affected others. Somewhat the same outcome as a study of effects can be achieved by the use of functional analysis, for functions are operationalized as consequences—as long as we always inquire into functions and dysfunctions of what for whom, and assume the possibility that some of our

² Some of what follows was also said by presenters at the Atlanta thematic and special sessions, but I wrote this essay before reading their presentations.

activities are functional mainly for ourselves. Alternatively, one can look at sociology's benefits and costs—if these are not treated solely as quantitative concepts. We must also remember that researchers will not always agree on what is beneficial and costly, and that the determination of benefits and costs must reflect the views of all those who actually win and lose. Moreover, we must never exclude the possibility that our work has neither significant benefits nor costs—nor major independent effects. We are, after all, only 20,000 in a country of 230 million.

I am aware of all the methodological difficulties of studying effects, functions, and benefits and costs, but we *must* discover what impact we have had. Furthermore, any properly sociological effects study has to examine the agents and processes that have shaped sociology to achieve whatever impacts it is having. Thus, a study of sociology's impact on America must be preceded by research on America's impacts on sociology (Gouldner 1970; Vidich and Lyman 1985). However, if we analyze the roles we have played, we must likewise ask who helped us play these roles and how we were invited or shoehorned into them.

Needless to say, there are other conceptual schemes for looking at sociology in America, but whatever the schemes, the questions I have raised also have to be answered historically. In fact, it may be strategic to begin with historical analyses because the historical view can give us a better fix on the primary theoretical and empirical issues on which we must concentrate in order to understand the present.

Although the teaching of sociology has still not obtained enough respect from the discipline, the fact remains that virtually all academic sociologists, including those at the most elite research universities, earn their living by teaching. Consequently, one of the first and most important questions to be researched concerns the effects, and thus also the effectiveness, of our teaching.

ASA estimates that 75 percent of America's sociologists—or 15,000—are still academics. If each teaches four courses a year, and many unfortunately teach many more, that comes to 60,000 courses a year, and of these the most frequently taught continue to be introductory, marriage and the family, and social problems. Although studies have been made of the major texts used in these courses,

we ought to start finding out what is actually being *taught* in them: not only what kinds of sociology, but what descriptions of and prescriptions for American society. For example, a multicampus sample of marriage and the family courses could be analyzed to identify what models of marriage and the family sociologists teach, and what postures they encourage students to take toward them, explicitly or implicitly. To what extent do we teach conformity to the culturally dominant models, and if we suggest the desirability of sociopolitical change, what new or old models do we have in mind?

After that, we ought to begin on the more urgent but also more complex task of looking at what students *learn* from these basic courses, for their own lives and their citizen roles, to see if we can establish findings about the effects of their exposure to sociology. Since sociology has begun to drift down to the high schools, similar research can be done there. Schools not being the only teaching institutions in America, however, someone should also take a look to see whether sociology has yet had any visible impact on the country's news and entertainment media.

Parallel kinds of research can be undertaken among sociological practitioners. Indeed, now is an ideal time to begin, for before-and-after studies should immediately be conducted at some of the many public agencies and private companies that are first hiring sociologists, so that we can learn what early effects they are having. Now that sociologists are being employed in market research, for example, it would be useful to look at a sample of firms to discover what, if anything, the sociologists do differently—and with what effects—from the previous market researchers who have generally been MBA's and psychologists. Do sociological market researchers have more empathy for the subjects of market research than had their predecessors, and what effects does this have on their work, the resulting firm policies, and the profits? Or are sociologists in big organizations more likely to practice what their organizations prescribe rather than what their discipline has trained them to practice? Incidentally, an interesting study of *academic* practitioners, the increasing number of sociologists who become deans and provosts of their universities, could be done to see what, if anything, they do differently because they are sociologists.

The effects studies of the greatest urgency are those with potential public policy significance. I will limit myself to two examples. One is the roles and functions sociology has played in past culture-of-poverty research and is now playing in the study of what is currently called the underclass. We could begin, for example, with the effects the most widely-read new sociological book of the last two years, William J. Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), has had for the public understanding of the underclass, and for the policies needed to bring it into the country's mainstream. As sociological underclass research proliferates, however, we must also look at what we may be doing against the people now assigned to that class.

The term *underclass* was first used in recent times by Gunnar Myrdal (1963) as an economic concept for describing a set of people being driven to the edges or out of the economy. While most current underclass research seems to be in the hands of economists, they have generally adopted a different definition, perhaps of journalistic origin, in which the members of that class are also associated with a variety of criminal, pathological, or stigmatized activities and are generally black or Hispanic.

No laws prevent us from studying the impact of economists alongside of, or in comparison to, our own, and many questions deserve answering. Do studies using the underclass concept call attention to people who need economic and other kinds of aid? Or are researchers primarily giving scientific legitimization to the latest buzzword for the undeserving poor and concurrently helping to disseminate a new code word for the covert expression of racial hostility? More generally, what role do researchers play in the emergence of a new public stereotype, and how can they prevent a social science generalization or an ideal type from being interpreted as a stereotype?

To the extent that underclass studies are seen and used by social workers and other street-level bureaucrats as well as policy-makers, we have to ask whether these studies mainly help the people of the underclass or help government to control them? Once again, what sides are we on, intentionally and unintentionally, as we study this newest "hot" topic? Perhaps the biggest problem stems from unintentional "putdowns" of poor people, because of either lack of researcher

reflexivity or the use of data from agencies that exist in part to be punitive toward the poor.

I have the impression that sociologists doing research among underclass people are more likely to be on their side while the economists tend to treat them as a dangerous class. Even so, sociologists and economists play only a small causal part in the tragic relationship between the underclass and the rest of America. Indeed, the current research is itself an effect of public appetites for information, scapegoats, and, of course, solutions. These appetites have themselves emerged for such reasons as the increasing fear of crime—and of dark-skinned Americans—the rise of homelessness, the economic insecurity created in many parts of the population by the Reagan economy, and the relentless pressures by the Reagan administration on people who cannot afford the values of mainstream cultures.

My second example might serve as a model not only of what we have done well as sociological researchers but also of the ways in which sociology can be useful, and relatively easily. I think here of the large set of findings which indicate on the one hand that informal groups and related social supports have both illness-preventing and healing functions, and on the other hand that isolation and loneliness as well as alienation produced by hostile or distant formal institutions can breed and worsen physical and mental illness. The basic idea goes back to 19th-century sociology, but since World War II many researchers have shown how the presence or absence of kin, friends, neighbors, and other informal groups and networks affect health (Litwak and Messeri 1988).

For the study of sociology in America, and for the making of health policy, we must examine whether and how such findings are, or could be, providing competition for purely medical models of health and illness. In addition, we need to know whether and how these findings are leading to changes in medical activity, from physician practice to national health policy. Conversely, we must also study why changes did not take place, so that we can try to understand how they could take place. Since informal groups should cost less than doctors and hospitals, social supports would help reduce medical costs and might be welcomed for that reason alone—

unless hospitals and doctors decide to turn them into a medical specialty, and charge accordingly.

Whether the study of Sociology in America involves basic, applied, or policy-oriented research, we will, in effect, be studying ourselves. I need not list the dangers of a disciplinary-wide self-study, and in a utopian world, another social science would study us while we study yet a third. However, in this world, *we* have to do the needed studies and *we* have to learn how to deal with the likely conflicts of interest.

An essential ingredient for self-study is the right mixture of deliberate and systematic reflexivity and an equally deliberate and systematic distancing. Appeals for more reflexivity without structural underpinnings and instrumental incentives being the material of sermons, I am reluctant to go further except to hope with Alvin Gouldner that what I have in mind here does not become "just another topic for panels at professional conventions and not just another little stream of technical reports" (Gouldner 1970, p. 489).

Consequently, as relevant studies are undertaken, we have to begin to think about what we will do with the results. Even before we know more about our contributions, roles, and effects, we must debate how to increase sociology's positive effects and cut back the negative ones. We ought also to confront once more an old, recently forgotten question: what is a good society and how can sociology help bring it about?

I have no illusions about how much we can agree on the nature of the good society or how much we can do to bring one about, but the discussion of these questions will have beneficial results for the discipline itself. The very innocence of the notion of the good society may be a useful antidote for our too frequent tendency toward excessive abstraction. Moreover, asking fundamental general questions, even the kind that cannot be answered easily or completely, forces us to address issues of widespread interest in America and is, in addition, a way of reaching out to the general public.

SOCIOLOGY AND THE LAY PUBLIC

The second part of my paper is about improving relations with the public and its institutions. I begin again on an empirical

note, because at least two further topics badly need study if we are going to act intelligently to improve our relations with both the large general and the smaller well-educated public.

One study seeks to identify *lay sociology*, the generalizations about society and its parts that all people—we included—start learning as children, long before knowing of the existence of professional sociology. True, lay people do not label their knowledge about society *sociology*, but nonetheless it consists of ideas and data in all of the fields we study. Much lay sociology is learned during the process of socialization, yet more is discovered through the applied participant-observation we all do constantly in everyday social life, and some comes from nonprofessional, or so-called pop, sociology: research done by nonprofessional sociologists who use some of our methods but few of our concepts and theories.

For my purpose, the significant questions center around what happens when people's lay sociology comes into contact with our professional sociology. We have to discover what impacts we have on lay sociology, and whether and how we add to and change it. Perhaps even more to the point, we have to find out if and why we are ignored or rejected. When the generalizations of lay and professional sociology diverge, we generally seek to replace the lay kind, and our students may fail to learn because they are not persuaded that our sociology is more valid than theirs. I wonder, for example, what happens when working-class and poor students, whose lay sociologies are particularly rich in the fields of class and inequality, take a course in social stratification which sees society solely from a middle-class perspective. Although we assume that professional sociology is always better than the lay version, that assumption also deserves some inquiry.

The other study strikes at the heart of our relations with the educated public because we need to know in detail how our sociology is judged by that public. If, when, and where our standing is not as good as it should be, we have to identify the reasons and causes. In addition, we have to find out what the members of this public want from sociology, ours and theirs. There is clearly a great demand for applied organizational research, for the management literature is full of pop sociology on this topic, much of it so poor

that every six months yet another new analysis becomes a brief best-seller.

In their nonoccupational reading, however, many members of the educated public seem to specialize in literary and historical works, which is one reason why just about all of the important magazines and publishing houses catering to this public continue to be run by people from literary and historical backgrounds. Why the reading public is so fond of history and why it ignores—and perhaps dislikes—some or much sociology is a research topic of fundamental importance, for until we have a comprehensive answer our work will not get much attention from the journals of cultural and political opinion, the large circulation “class” magazines such as *Time*, *The New Yorker*, or *The Atlantic*, and “trade book” publishers who publish nontechnical books in the social sciences.

Despite the need for these researches, many suggestions can be made *now* for how to improve our relations with the lay public, but I will limit myself to five I consider particularly significant.

First, I assume the lay public—general and educated—will pay more attention to professional sociology if and when our research addresses salient subjects and issues. Many of these center around the family, the economy, and health—subjects about which we have something to say that can help people’s understanding, if we can present our ideas and findings in plain English. Other lay concerns touch on or are set off by current events, and we should figure out how we can do more studies on significant topics of the moment. Many years ago Gladys and Kurt Lang proposed “firehouse research” for such studies, and their proposal is as timely as ever. We can also supply useful comments on topical issues, especially as debunkers and correctors when the early journalistic reports and nonprofessional sociology are wrong. In addition, we can report on trends underlying topical subjects and can often provide more systematic explanations of events and trends than do journalists and pop sociologists.

An already existing lay interest in our sociology has to do with the diversity of American life. Because of that diversity, some members of the lay public want to know how other Americans cope with common problems such as familial and community ones, as well as how they interpret, or substitute for, the conventional rules and

norms of American life. It is no coincidence that the best-known sociological works of the last 75 years—*Middletown*, *The Lonely Crowd*, and *Habits of the Heart*—respond to one or another of these lay inquiries.

These studies also exhibit what I consider one of sociology’s distinctive qualities: they are based on research among ordinary Americans. While other social sciences concentrate on elite decision-makers, exotic subcultures, or laboratory subjects, sociology has always done much of its work with and among typical Americans. This is one reason why professional sociology, when properly presented, appeals to the lay public. That appeal is widened when we use the research methods that seem most attractive to this public: the depth-interview, in which people have a chance to talk and to explain themselves fully; and fieldwork, in which sociologists are on the scene to hear them on a continuing basis, and inside the social structures in which they act and interact.

The ideal study format may be the community study, not because I have done a few but because it is broad; it allows researchers the opportunity to report on a variety of people across a wide range of institutions and situations. If the communities and people studied are reasonably representative or thoughtfully chosen deviant cases, the sampling is done properly, and the research is focused on significant theoretical and substantive questions, this is the best way to look at America, for both the discipline and the lay public (Keller 1988).

Community studies are hard work; they can take a long time and, like many qualitative studies, do not fit the currently dominant definition of science. As a result, funding agencies have not been supportive—a serious mistake that helps to explain why sociology is not as much in the public eye as it should be.

The *second* of my five suggestions is a corollary of the first: that undergraduate sociology courses should concentrate, whenever possible, on sociological analyses of American institutions and society rather than on sociological principles illustrated with samples from America. There is nothing like an overly concept-filled introductory course to turn many students against sociology forever. Courses that teach sociology through an analysis of American society also require

research on topical issues and current events.³ Unfortunately, even reading a first-class newspaper or weekly news magazine with a sociological eye is not normally part of the graduate school training program. If we carried out more analyses of topical issues and current events, sociology could make more original contributions to understanding both. If any sociologists now prepare such analyses for their classes, we should find a place where the best of them can be published for the rest of us.

My *third* proposal is that we must recruit and encourage talented sociologists who are able and eager to report their work so that it is salient to both their colleagues and the educated lay public. Borrowing Russell Jacoby's concept of public intellectuals (Jacoby 1987), they might be called *public sociologists*, and the public sociologist par excellence that comes at once to mind is David Riesman. Public sociologists are *not* popularizers; they are empirical researchers, analysts, or theorists like the rest of us, although often their work is particularly thoughtful, imaginative or original in some respect.⁴

Public sociologists have three further distinctive traits. One is their ability to discuss even sociological concepts and theories in the English of the college-educated reader, probably because they enjoy writing as well as doing research and may even think of themselves as writers. Their second trait is the breadth of their sociological interests, which covers much of society even if their research is restricted to a few fields. That breadth also extends to their conception of sociology, which extends beyond research reporting to commentary and in many cases also to social criticism. To put it another way, their work is intellectual as well as scientific.⁵ A third, not

unrelated, trait is the ability to avoid the pitfalls of undue professionalism described by earlier ASA presidents (for example, Hughes 1963, p. 890; Lee 1976, pp. 927–29).

I do not know how one recruits fledgling or mature public sociologists, but I fear that too many young people with an interest in society get Ph.D.'s in English, literature, or history. Consequently, sociology must encourage those it does attract, beginning in graduate school. It also has to assure them that they can be both sociologists and writers and will not be discriminated against for this combination of skills. For example, they must be rewarded for being writers, and their major sociological writing in nonscholarly publications must be treated as equivalent to scholarly writing in promotion and tenure decisions. We should also find outlets for their writing inside sociology so we do not lose all their work to other publications.

I have been around long enough to remember when David Riesman was not considered a sociologist in many parts of the discipline, although even today some colleagues who hold fervently to a natural science conception of sociology reject public sociologists. Worse yet, they may dismiss them as "journalists," a term that we should never use as a pejorative for yet other reasons I will come to shortly. I am told that John Kenneth Galbraith, the dean of public economists, has never been accepted as an economist by many of his colleagues, but then economics is a backward social science in other respects.

The *fourth* suggestion for adding to our impact on the lay public requires revitalizing an old mode of public sociology: social criticism. I oversimplify only slightly to point out that American sociology began in part as social criticism, and while a handful of sociologists have continued this tradition, today's American social criticism is almost entirely in the hands of journalists, essayists, literary critics, and philosophers. Europe is quite different in this respect, because many European sociologists and researchers double as newspaper or magazine columnists, writing regularly the kind of social commentary found here in journals of opinion and cultural criticism.

We are not Europeans and we should not even imitate America's current social critics. Our task is *sociological* social criticism. Journalistic and humanistic critics too often

³ Some time ago I received a blurb for an annual review of sociology text for undergraduates and discovered that the vast majority of contributions were not written by sociologists.

⁴ I distinguish public sociologists from visible scientists (Goodell 1977) because the visible scientists she describes earned their visibility not only as scientists but also as popularizers and as commentators on social issues far outside their scientific fields.

⁵ Jacoby's hopes notwithstanding, public sociologists also have to be academics or practitioners, there currently being no free-lance writing market to provide a living for even one sociologist.

view social ills by what makes them personally unhappy, and they may also misunderstand the causes of these ills or offer solutions that reflect the values of a single group—be it intellectual elite or working class. Partly as a result, conventional criticism is frequently nostalgic or apocalyptic, with good old days being mourned right and left and many institutions thought to be in permanent rapid decline—headed almost always by the family.

The sociological social critic can do much better! The identification of social ills ought to be based both on empirical data about what the public or several parts of it feel to be wrong, *and* on the critic's own concerns. Proposed solutions can likewise transcend the perspective of the critic's own immediate circle, and they should draw on systematic causal analyses of the problems to be solved.

Social criticism is not for every sociologist, but it should become part of the discipline just as social policy research became a part of it in the last 20 years, once we were able to move beyond the primitive conceptions of value-free sociology on which the early disapproval of social policy research was based. Sociological social criticism will never grow as large as social policy research, however, because it cannot, and should not, become a government function.

My *fifth* and last proposal is particularly focused on the general public. Since its major contact with professional sociology comes from the mass media, we should try to get more of the sociological perspective and our own studies into these media. Reaching the general public requires *popularizers*, sociologists and others who can turn the ideas and findings reported in our journals and books that should be of general interest into everyday English.⁶

Concurrently, we should encourage the journalists who also popularize our work: the small number of free-lancers who do it from time to time, as well as the handful who have regular social or behavioral science beats. We

should assist journalistic popularizers as much as we can, for good popularization will increase public interest in sociology. At the same time, we may be able to head off some inaccurate or sensationalized popularization.

In addition, we should help nonprofessional researchers who undertake pop sociology, which I described earlier as research based on the concepts and ideas of lay sociology. We can be particularly helpful with advice on methods. After all, the rules of sampling, question construction, field work, and statistical analysis apply equally to professional and pop sociology. True, nonprofessional sociologists often cannot apply these rules as rigorously as we do, for the lay public is not interested in professional subtleties and qualifications, whether in sociology or in physics. Still, our common interests in good methodology can make us useful as long as we understand and are tolerant about the differences between their sociology and ours.

Good nonprofessional sociology is useful to us for the same reasons as good popularization. We have a special interest in reducing bad pop sociology, however, because its low quality can reflect on us directly and quickly since the general public may not distinguish between professional and nonprofessional sociology.

Professional sociologists should keep an eye on pop sociology, if only because it has a much larger audience than we do. They should also distinguish between good and bad pop sociology, but unfortunately too many of our colleagues look down on all of it, as they do on popularizers of our work. This stance can only hurt the discipline, for when some of us appear distant and superior, we may turn off members of the lay public otherwise ready to pay attention to our work. Worse yet, wholesale rejection of sociologies other than ours may end up by biting the public hand that feeds us.

An ideal solution, allowing us to have our cake while eating it, is an ASA-run or supervised magazine of high-quality popularized and pop sociology, but that solution is unrealistic since the current lay constituency for sociology is too small to support such a magazine. Sociology may be inherently less newsworthy than, for example, psychology or economics, since both give advice about everyday life of a kind that we cannot supply—or anthropology and psychiatry, which can tell more dramatic stories than we.

⁶ Actually, a number of sociologists are already working with ASA's Public Information Committee and ASA staff to write popular articles from papers in various sociological journals. Now we need to find ways to get their work into the media, which also requires learning what kinds and subjects of sociology will appeal to the general public, and the editors who supply their newspapers and magazines.

Thus, a *Sociology Today* modeled on the monthly *Psychology Today* is not in the cards.⁷

Today's most significant disseminators of our sociology to the general public are magazine and newspaper journalists who incorporate our work in their stories, occasionally because they judge a sociological study to be newsworthy but increasingly often because they want sociological commentary on and in their stories. In these cases they may look for appropriate sociological findings, a sociological perspective to increase the quality of their story, or a quote to provide the story with some sociological legitimation.

These journalists are a crucial resource for us, a veritable disciplinary treasure, and they should be given our full and immediate cooperation (Gans 1988). That we are being called more and more often by reporters, feature writers, and their equivalents in television can only be viewed as a compliment. I hope it is also a sign that the old days, when sociology was good only for a cranky feature exaggerating our shortcomings, are coming to an end.⁸ Besides, the more we help journalists with their stories, the more interested they may become in reporting our studies.

We can be helpful further by eliminating the mindless attacks on journalism that are still heard in the discipline. At one level they reflect a disciplinary stereotype that all journalism is superficial, but at another level they may express unhappiness with the competition journalists provide us in the study of society. While journalism is often superficial, sociology would be superficial equally often if it had to report to a diverse and often poorly educated lay audience; if it had a two-to six-hour deadline for data collection, analysis, and writing; and if the research

report had to be condensed into a few hundred words. Journalism has other faults too, but we must learn to distinguish between good and bad journalism. Indeed, we should not refrain from criticizing bad news stories about our work and ideas, as long as we make clear to the journalists involved how and why their work was inadequate. Conversely, we have every right to expect that journalists will learn to distinguish between good and bad sociology, to give up their stereotypes of us, and to stop thinking of the term *sociological* as a pejorative.

I end this section of the paper with a modest proposal: that the abstracts of our journal articles and the summaries of our academic books be written in nontechnical English.⁹ Journalists may then become interested in our work instead of becoming discouraged at the very outset, and while they will probably still have troubles with the technical writing in the body of the text, they may be motivated to get in touch with the author for help in clarifying his or her work. They may also wean us away from writing so many of our article and book texts in "Sociologese."

SOCIOLOGY FOR AMERICA

The third of my three topics is the discipline itself and what we can do to help as well as improve ourselves. I again limit myself to the academic side, mainly at the research university level I know best. I will not systematically evaluate that side of the discipline, however, and I cannot even go into some specific problems that badly need discussing: for example, the ways we still often mistreat graduate students and part-time instructors, which is in part a reflection of long-standing inequalities within the discipline. These inequalities are currently worsened by the ever-expanding star system and the treatment of some colleagues as celebrities.

Here I want principally to outline what we need to do for and in the discipline in order to obtain a better reception from the public, particularly the educated one. This goal requires attention to the intellectual level of

⁷ *Psychology Today*, which was founded as, and is once again, a commercially owned magazine, was for some years published by the American Psychological Association, which lost several million dollars in the process and proved that even a giant social science organization is not necessarily commercially adept.

⁸ Such features, which criticize us for the use of jargon, too many numbers, irrelevance, academic restatements of the obvious, as well as for triviality and excessive seriousness, still appear from time to time, and we should make sure that we do not act according to this now-aging caricature.

⁹ Moreover, article abstracts should not be repetitions of the first and sometimes the last paragraphs of the article but should supply readers with a summary of the article's findings.

our work and the imperfections that intellectual observers and other members of the educated public see in that work. I will limit myself to two such imperfections. Both can also be found in the other social sciences, which means that their causes transcend our own discipline. However, the imperfections of the other social sciences do not excuse ours—and besides, we should be the first to overcome them, thus leading the way for the others.

The initial imperfection is *mindlessness*, research that is poorly thought through. Mindlessness cuts across fields and methods. It is the use of proxies or indicators because tangentially appropriate quantitative data are accessible, even though these proxies have only the most tenuous logical or empirical connection to the phenomena under study. Mindlessness is grounding the analysis of a complicated phenomenon on survey questions without any idea of how respondents understood the questions. Mindless fieldwork supplies thick descriptions of what is already common knowledge but fails to provide the thick analyses that are sorely needed. And whatever the research method, there are still occasional sociological analyses that, once translated into ordinary English, turn out to be examples of what we have often been accused of: restating the obvious.

Another kind of mindlessness sacrifices substantive validity to a favored analytic technique of the moment. That kind of mindlessness is part and parcel of our passion for methodology, which is actually long-standing. Jules Poincaré, who was writing at the turn of the century, even then described sociology as “the science with the most methods and the fewest discoveries.”¹⁰ Otis Dudley Duncan, whose theme I am here repeating, has put it more pointedly:

Writing on “methodology” cultivated for its own sake produces a bifurcation of scientific effort that is stultifying. You have on the one hand inept researchers who think they have no responsibility for the methods they use because they can cite the authority of some “methodologist” and on the other hand “methodologists” whose advice is no good because they do not

actually know how to do research (otherwise, we must suppose, they would have done some). (Duncan 1974, p. 2)

The second imperfection, also of long standing, is what I think of as *overqualification*. I have no quarrel with statistical or mathematical analyses per se; they have advantages and disadvantages just as the various qualitative methods do. However, overquantification takes place when the research problem calls for qualitative analyses but quantitative ones are used instead, or when the use of such analyses changes the research problem. Overquantification occurs when elegant statistical analyses are performed on sloppily collected data, or on data forever made unclear by the covert or overt agendas of the collectors. And it takes place when quantitative analysis is not preceded—or driven—by concept and theory formulation, when researchers are literally merely crunching numbers. Needless to say, equivalent sins happen on the qualitative side. There may be no phrase for qualitative data crunching, but it occurs, and fieldwork alone is inappropriate when the research problem calls mainly for frequency distributions.

Some unfortunate effects of overquantification result from its ideological character. One is the inability of overquantifiers to tolerate disagreement, and their resulting stigmatization of and discrimination against qualitative research. Perhaps as a result, some advocates of qualitative method have also become ideologists. Consequently, a *scientific* discipline, in which research problems ought to determine the methods, and in which many problems are best solved by the use of both types of methods, is locked into an ideological dispute over a dubious typology—which is, moreover, actually about the nature of sociology.

A related effect of overquantification is the time and energy academic departments, individuals, and the discipline as a whole waste in endless battling over the two types of methods. Robin Williams was recently quoted as calling this a sham battle, adding rightly that “energy should be better utilized in applying whatever techniques seem to produce reliable knowledge” (Hirschman 1987, p. 5). However, by now the crucial battle is less over ideas than over “scarce resources . . . jobs, research funds, editorial policies of our journals, professional recognition and prestige,” as Mirra Komarovsky has pointed

¹⁰ I am indebted to Otis Dudley Duncan for this quotation. Robert K. Merton has planned to include it, with its source, in a collection of social science quotation which he and David Sills are editing.

out (Komarovskiy 1987, p. 562). *Such* battles are not sham, and were they to end now, the superior resource position of quantitative sociology would become permanent. Those of us who believe in the virtues of qualitative empirical and other sociological work have to continue the struggle for equality of resources. I consider it scandalous, for example, when funding agencies with public mandates or tax exemptions nonetheless base their grant policies on the power balance inside disciplines.

A final effect of overquantification that needs mentioning is its tropism toward secondary analysis, which makes it possible for sociologists to study society for their entire lives without ever leaving their offices to talk or listen to the people they study.¹¹ The reliance on secondary analysis also makes us increasingly dependent on officially produced data. Worse yet, the resulting impersonalization of research is thought to make sociology more scientific, whereas in fact intensive interviewing and fieldwork are generally more scientific because the researchers get to know closely the people and social structures they are studying.

The problems I have described are familiar and have been discussed in previous presidential addresses (e.g., Coser 1975). Thus, nothing is gained by further elaboration. What would be useful, however, is more sociological research into why sociology and the other social sciences have been developing what I see as imperfections. If I were doing the study, I would want to look particularly at three sets of current academic arrangements.

The first of these arrangements might be called scholarly insulation and a correlative lack of reality checks, which can disconnect our work from what is generally referred to as the real world. Unlike practitioners, our research does not need to be accountable to nonsociological kinds of validity, so that, for example, we are not open to and thus do not receive corrections from the people we have studied. We are accountable to funders to some extent, but many tend to base their judgments on peer reviews and, whatever

their other virtues, peer reviewers can be as insulated from the nonsociological world as other researchers.

The absence of reality checks, which is also one cause of intellectual mindlessness, could actually be remedied somewhat by instituting such checks as part of our empirical procedure at the start and just before the end of our research. Basically such checks would involve informal reconnaissances, through the use of informants, informal interviewing, and fieldwork, among the people or institutions under study, as well as the application of independent statistical data, already available or newly collected from a small sample. Even theoretical papers and quantitative secondary analyses can be improved by reality checking.

Another kind of reality checking would identify thoughtful nonsociologists to critique our work and identify errors of omission and commission. Where possible, these must also include the people we study. Reality checks seem to me to be at least as important as literature reviews, and we will be well served if we can make them intrinsic parts of our research procedures.

The other two causes of imperfection are less easy to remedy. One is *scientism*, the modeling of sociological (and social science) research methods on a highly idealized version of the methods of the natural sciences. Although this modeling began even before sociology first became systematically empirical, it continues today when we know full well, in part from research in the sociology of science, that natural scientists do not operate according to the idealized conception of their method. Indeed, the ideal is humanly unworkable; nevertheless we cannot let go of it. We also know that social structures are not molecules and cannot be studied like them, but we cannot seem to let go of that analogy either. Nor have we yet learned to appreciate Donald McCloskey's lesson that "scientific work is rhetorical" and that it is so "even in its stylistic appeal to a rhetoric of not having a rhetoric" (McCloskey 1985, p. 98).

Idealized natural science is a kind of civil religion in modern America, and there may be a quasi-religious element both in the ideal and the consensus behind it. The ideal also continues to justify the search for sociological "laws"—the nomothetic approach to sociology—but that search may express the latent

¹¹ David Riesman has pointed out that some survey researchers draft their interview questions, have others obtain the answers and then analyze the data and never leave their offices either (personal communication).

hope for power—in an ideal society in which these laws—and their formulators—would play a central decision-making role. Such a society is as millenarian as those of the major religions: when salvation has been achieved, the Messiah has come, Mohammed has returned, or the State has withered away.

The search for sociological laws is, furthermore, sufficiently abstract to be “above” cultural or political conflicts of the moment. It is perhaps no accident that nomothetic sociology—like overquantified work—is usually noncontroversial, and unlikely to produce criticism of economic, political, and cultural power holders who are behaving in undemocratic or unjust ways.

The third and last cause of imperfection in sociology I will discuss concerns that strange institution in which academics work and in which all academic scholarship is therefore embedded. Although we are paid for the number of courses we teach, we are promoted by how much we publish, and only sometimes by the quality of our publications as well. In effect, our strange institution operates like a machine shop in which publications are treated like piecework. And like employees in any other kind of machine shop basically concerned with amount of productivity, we may overspecialize to study one part of the “social machine.”

Moreover, again like workers in other machine shops, we are periodically greeted by new technology oriented to improving productivity, most recently of course the computer. The virtues of the computer for both quantitative and qualitative sociology far outnumber the vices, but there are some downsides too. Despite its potentials for high-quality research, the computer facilitates the speedier and thus greater production of piecework. It further encourages secondary analysis and the use of official, rather than self-generated, data. Although creative researchers can make creative use of the computer, the new technology even reduces the need to think and analyze once the right computer program has been found. Like many other industries, we too are becoming less labor-intensive.

These patterns are also symptoms of the continuing bureaucratization of research and, as often happens, the new technology is merely handmaiden to the socioeconomic process. In fact the computer nicely fits the academic shop routine, for it enables academ-

ics to do their research during the interstices of a full teaching load, and to publish more work at a faster clip.¹² The computer adds further to the impersonalization of research, and thus fits in with the worship of the idealized natural science method. What comes out of the computer is therefore automatically judged to be scientific, and insufficient attention is frequently paid to what human beings put into it.

The imperfections I have described not only stand in the way of a better sociology but also damage our discipline and its reputation. The public, general and educated, cannot understand, or even see the justification for, much of what we produce, since in too many cases our work appears to have no benefit, direct or indirect, for people’s understanding of society or for their lives. The reactions of the lay public *must not* determine social science policy or shape our research, but they cannot be ignored either. Meanwhile, the leaders as well as the foot soldiers of today’s dominant sociologies ought to remember that a good deal of the intellectual standing and good will our discipline has developed comes from the work of public sociologists. They—and books like *The Lonely Crowd* and *Habits of the Heart*—essentially persuade much of the lay public and its politicians that sociology ought to be cared about and funded!¹³

OUR SOCIOLOGICAL IDENTITY

To conclude my highly selective analysis of the discipline and to end this essay, I want to raise the issue of our identity as sociologists in an era of ever-greater specialization of fields and subfields within the discipline.¹⁴

¹² Perhaps the current crisis in university library finances, brought about in part by the ever-increasing number of journals which charge ever-increasing subscription rates, will eventually put a damper on the publish-or-perish syndrome.

¹³ Their reasons for supporting sociology could shrink if cultural anthropologists who can no longer do fieldwork overseas and who learn to cut back on their appetite for exotic U.S. subcultures replaces us even further in doing American community studies.

¹⁴ Again, I must omit the practice side of sociology, but the discipline’s most serious long-term identity problem is our continuing to conceive of identity in academic research terms, as I do here. Thus, we neglect the fact that many practitioners may have little reason to identify with

That identity should concern all of us, to further our own well-being *and* to help us make our case for the desirability of sociological knowledge to the lay public.

Sociology is once again no different from the other social sciences, although the degree of specialization may be greater than it is among our peers because we are the residual social science. We are more diverse to begin with than economics (even though it is now branching out beyond the economy) and political science, which is basically still concerned with politics only in government.

In any case, it is worth looking into the benefits and costs of further sociological specialization. Among the major benefits are the intellectual vitality usually found in new fields and subfields, as well as the intensive personal contact among researchers as long as these fields remain small. Indeed, because of the vitality that accompanies work in the new fields or at the frontiers of research, we ought also to be moving deliberately across the accepted or imagined boundaries of sociology, and in two ways.¹⁵

For one thing, we should look more closely at other social science disciplines to see what we can learn from them as well as to discover how we can improve on their work, jointly or by ourselves. To mention just a few: social history, the study of symbols and symbol systems which we share with anthropology, and empirical research in and of economic institutions can all gain from such a look.¹⁶ Disciplinary boundaries in the social sciences are arbitrary anyway, and they should be crossed freely, preferably for substantive, not imperialistic, reasons. We should act similarly toward boundaries beyond the social sciences and take a greater interest in the humanities. Among other things, the study of the interrelations between culture and social

structure can benefit from the concepts and ideas of literary scholars. These can put some of our concepts and ideas to use as well in their work on literature and society—for instance, what we have learned about the roles of audiences in the production of culture.

Increasing specialization inside sociology also carries costs, however. For one thing, the more sociologists specialize in particular fields, the more are some likely to limit themselves to really tiny specialties within the discipline as a whole. Moreover, when new fields and subfields develop, they quickly breed their own technical languages.

The end result is that [the discipline] looks like a wheel. People sit on their own spokes and talk less and less to those on the other side. Eventually the wheel may become a doughnut, with a huge intellectual hole in the middle. (Winkler 1986, p. 7)

The person I quote is geographer Sam Hilliard talking about his own discipline, but his comment is starting to apply to sociology as well, and the challenge is to prevent both the wheel and the intellectual hole. The hole cannot, however, be filled by pinning for one approach or theory that will reintegrate sociology, for such reintegration is neither likely nor desirable in a pluralistic discipline.

Instead we should ask ourselves what can or should bring us together as sociologists. One approach may be to identify intellectual cores that are common to many of us. These can be concepts, frames, theories, methods, or other intellectual forms and qualities that we continue to share. A related approach is to look empirically at some major old and new fields and subfields and determine what ideas, concepts, and theories are operationally similar in the significant research and theorizing in them, even if the terminology is different.¹⁷ Such a project might even increase the sharing of terms and reduce the excessive number of terms in the discipline. The more we emphasize elements of sociology that we share in annual meeting sessions, other conferences, and various kinds of publications, the more we will discover to

an academic discipline, especially if and when they are pushed or pulled by industry/agency- and job-specific demands for their loyalty.

¹⁵ Both of these boundary-crossing themes were considered by the 1988 Program Committee and translated into a number of Special Sessions at the Atlanta meeting.

¹⁶ The intellectual vacuum created by the economists' emphasis on econometrics and model-building could and should be filled in part by more ethnographic and other institutional studies by sociologists of the giant, and the small but innovative, firms that currently play a significant role in the American economy.

¹⁷ Harriet Zuckerman has suggested, in a personal communication, that some sociologists' practice of changing fields and the migration of problems and approaches from one field to another may act as countertendencies to fragmentation.

what extent we can remain a single discipline. Even my previously mentioned question, "What is a good society?" can perform this function. Imagine a medical sociologist, an ethnomethodologist, a specialist in gender and sex roles, a market researcher, and a mathematical sociologist, all with roughly the same values, being asked to come up with a single answer to this question!

Identity is social as well as intellectual; consequently, we should also look at social mechanisms that can contribute to being and feeling a part of a single discipline. ASA does what it can along these lines, but only a bare majority of all sociologists belong, and much too small a number of them are involved in ASA as other than receivers of its services. Also, the organization still relies excessively for its agenda and leadership on academics from the major research universities to be fully representative. The Annual Meetings bring about 3,000 of us together for a hectic few days, although the sessions themselves increasingly are vehicles for specialization. In 1988, for example, 43 percent of the *regular* sessions were run by sections, and many other regular sessions were on subjects for which there are sections.

Publications could bring us together as well, but I wonder if they do since our journals tend to appeal largely to specialists, whatever the editor's hopes. For example, *ASR*, being the flagship journal, is supposed to represent the best in sociology. However, for this reader and I imagine many others, it is also a journal of lengthy research reports on specialized topics, only some of which are of general interest. In addition, *ASR* is dominated by often elegant quantitative research. In fact, some have suggested that *ASR* is actually a methodological journal for quantitative sociologists not able or willing to work through the yet more technical articles in *Sociological Methodology*. There are exceptions in *ASR*'s emphasis, to be sure, and recent editors have published more exceptions than past ones. On the whole, however, most major articles continue to be research reports of roughly the same format and from basically one kind of sociology. Sometimes one gets the impression that *ASR* is "run" by its contributors, the editors functioning primarily as quality controllers and traffic cops even if they might personally prefer to publish a different journal. Like the organizations we study, *ASR* has become institutionalized.

CS may be the most general of the journals, for it reviews a large proportion of all the books sociologists publish. While the reviews are classified by sets of specialties, *CS* readers can get a kind of overview of sociology by reading all of the reviews. Conversely, anecdotal evidence suggests that many of *ASR*'s readers scan the abstracts, read an article or two, and leave it at that. Over the years many have reported in the discipline's grapevine that they have difficulty understanding or getting involved in many of the articles, and there are regular complaints, some published (Wilner 1985), that *ASR* almost never deals with any of the severe problems or controversial issues abundant in American society.¹⁸

None of these observations are intended as criticisms of present or past editors of *ASR*, for they work harder and longer at less celebrated tasks than any other active ASA members. Furthermore, I do not think *ASR* should be anything else than what it is now: a journal of research papers, although it should publish more reports of qualitative research and theoretical as well as historical papers.¹⁹

Instead of making basic changes in *ASR*, we need another sociological journal that publishes what *ASR* cannot: articles of general interest to sociologists. Although such a journal should be published for sociologists and not the lay public and should be of high intellectual quality, it must not be a technical journal. This should also add to its appeal and help make it profitable for an academic publisher. We would not even be pioneers in establishing such a journal, for in 1987 the American Economic Association began to publish *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, which described itself in its first issue as "a scholarly economics journal for the general audience of economists" (Stiglitz, Shapiro, and Taylor 1987, p. 3).

The editors of this new journal would have

¹⁸ Despite the high reliability and validity of the sociological grapevine, my evidence is anecdotal, and we badly need sophisticated readership studies of the discipline's major journals.

¹⁹ In fact, the number of historical papers in *ASR* is now rising and one way to begin to assure the publication of qualitative research reports and theoretical papers is to submit them in large enough numbers and at such high levels of quality that *ASR* cannot want to do other than to publish them.

to use their intuition, experience, and values to decide what their sociologist-readers want and need, but I will describe some kinds of articles this reader would like to see:

1. Analyses of general intellectual issues in sociology, including, for example, studies of the roles and effects of sociology in America, the relevance of sociology in postindustrial societies, and the relation between American sociology and the American economy.

2. Extended debates about, and critiques of, current theories or trends in theorizing, as well as fundamental or controversial issues in empirical research, teaching, and practice.

3. Review articles of sociologically relevant work in other disciplines, such as institutional economics, literary criticism, and theories of knowledge.

4. Nontechnical research reports and *Annual Review of Sociology*-style articles about currently significant or controversial trends in American society: for example, downward mobility in the middle class, causes of drug use and abuse, convergencies of and relations between high culture and popular culture. This category could also include analyses (and corrections) of pop sociology, for example, of the decline of the nuclear family, the rise of greed and materialism in the 1980s, and the cultural and economic power of "yuppies" and "baby boomers" in American society.

5. Sociological analyses of current events that have been or should have been in the headlines, domestic and foreign, economic, political, and cultural.

6. Long reviews, of *New York Review of Books* quality, of important sociological books, well known and unfairly neglected, as well as of books of significance to sociology but written by nonsociologists.

7. Articles of professional relevance not likely to appear in *Footnotes*, *The American Sociologist*, or the practice journals: for example, analyses of sources of conflicts in academic departments, reviews of graduate sociology programs from the student perspective, and problems of sociological practice in profit-making organizations. These articles would frequently need to be anonymous.

8. Sociological biographies of influential figures in sociology, not necessarily from the past.

9. Provocative pieces that suggest unusual if untested (and even untestable) hypotheses,

or offer thoughtful analyses of the discipline by relevant outsiders.

10. Shorter or lighter articles: for example, sociological reviews of art, literature, and films—highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow; studies of the depiction of sociologists in American novels, films, and television, and even cartoons of sociological significance or relevance.

A lively journal that speaks to interests we share may help a little to bring us together as specialization moves us ever further apart. Nevertheless, perhaps the best way to add some unity to the diversity takes me back to the major theme of this essay: our being more useful to the public and to its various sectors. Being useful, as teachers, researchers, writers, practitioners, and as experts, advisers, and critics, will make us *feel* more useful—and this will strengthen the commonality of purpose among us. Being useful should also add to our pride in the discipline, and pride is itself a potent social cement. But if we have further reasons to be proud of sociology, we will surely grow intellectually and in other ways in the years to come.

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