

# The State of US Sociology: From Crisis to Renewal

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/crs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crs)**Michael Burawoy** 

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Writing in 1970, Alvin Gouldner famously diagnosed *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. The cracked cement that held postwar sociology together was crumbling. The weak consensus forged around structural functionalism, always something of an elite phenomenon, was out of sync with the times. The burgeoning social movements of the 1960s – free speech, civil rights, anti-war, third world, and women’s movements – created turmoil on campuses and beyond. All these punctured the complacent liberal verities radiating from Harvard’s school of social relations. The 60s generation of sociologists no longer believed that the United States was the promised land, the lead society, the great protagonist of modernization or that the United States signaled the end of ideology. Talcott Parsons and his colleagues had thought they had exterminated radicalism, but now in the 1960s, radicalism was returning with a vengeance, shattering their theoretical edifice.

Gouldner’s (1970) prognosis proved correct. The 1970s did witness the *degeneration* of sociology. What Gouldner failed to anticipate, however, was the *regeneration* of sociology. Impelled by those very social movements, new vistas swept through our discipline. During the 1970s and 1980s traditional fields were transformed: political sociology turned from pluralist euphoria to critical theories of the state; the sociology of work shifted from the pursuit of higher productivity to the study of alienation and class dynamics; the focus on industrial work was redirected to unpaid housework and emotional labor in the service sector; the sociology of the family moved from role integration to patriarchy; urban sociology made urban space an arena of struggle over collective consumption; race theory abandoned assimilationist theories for power dynamics and internal colonialism; stratification theory based on occupational hierarchies was replaced by intersecting social inequalities; social movement theory no longer regarded collective action as pathological but a rational form of extra-parliamentary politics. As old fields were transformed, so new fields were created such as world systems theory, comparative history, feminist theory and critical race theory.

The lesson is simple: out of crisis a revolution was born.

Like Gouldner, James House (2019) anticipates another ‘culminating crisis’ of sociology. And like Gouldner, he fails to see the emergence of a new vision of sociology. How does House come to his bleak prognosis? In House’s history of decline following those ‘golden years’ of postwar sociology, we hear nothing of the revolution in sociology that I have just described. Instead, he presents us with figures of falling ASA membership, a down turn in sociology degrees, and sinking research funding. But we must ask, what lies behind these grim figures of decline?

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With regard to the decline in funding for policy research, House places the blame on Reagan years of supply-side economics that gave short-shrift to the very idea of society and social problems. House points a finger at the over-riding influence of neo-classical economics and cost-benefit analyses, but he also laments sociology's failure to develop a critique of marketization. This is surprising since sociology, from its beginning, has been built on a critique of utilitarianism from Marx, Durkheim, and Weber to Parsons, Habermas, and Bourdieu. Indeed, if one pays attention to the last three decades of sociology, one of its persistent themes has been the critique of neoliberalism emanating from the burgeoning field of economic sociology, including critical accounts of the Soviet and Chinese market transitions; the assault on labor and the rise of the precariat; the destruction of the environment, climate change, and most recently global pandemics; the rule of finance capital; the rise of the penal state and mass incarceration.

Indeed, sociology itself has become a commodity – shaped by the privatization and corporatization of the university. As state funding for higher education diminished, so universities became revenue seeking machines, taken over by bloated administrative apparatuses. Revenues are extracted from ballooning student tuition, from student dormitories and dining halls, from newfangled and costly special degrees, from inter-collegiate athletics, from corporate investment in research, from wealthy alumni; but also from cost cutting – in particular, replacing tenured track faculty with a poorly paid, contingent labor force of lecturers drawn from the surplus production of PhDs. In the light of these developments, we can appreciate why there might have been a decline in sociology students. Impelled by the rising costs of attendance, strangulating loans and an uncertain job prospects, they turn to careers in engineering or business. If you are paying US\$50,000 plus in tuition at a liberal arts college or at an Ivy League University, you might think twice before committing yourself or your child to a degree in sociology.

But that is not the whole picture. In my own public university, for example, the sociology major has expanded from 150 students in 1976, when House's degeneration begins, to over 600 majors today. And why? Part of the answer lies in the way the new sociology directly addresses the lived experience of student life, especially with broader admissions to universities. This underlines the importance of teaching. There is more to sociology than our impact on public policy. We must also consider our lasting impact on the millions of students we teach. From among them, after all, will arise those who will shape the future of sociology, if not the world.

What am I saying? I am saying that House's 'culminating crisis' is not so much a crisis of sociology but a *crisis of society* – a crisis of society that has called forth *sociologies of crisis* – exposing the commodification of everything, starting with the digitalization of everyday life that turns each of us into unconscious accomplices of capital accumulation – so brilliantly analyzed by Shoshanna Zuboff (2018). To be sure our critique of the dominant trends in society may have reduced the flow of external funds, may have made us unpopular in the corridors of power, may have reduced our presence in the policy world, but our integrity, our responsibility, our mission remain intact inasmuch as we expose the capitalist juggernaut that is destroying planetary life.

Instead of the rise of a new sociology, focused on impending crises, House only sees a discipline mired in fragmentation, division and incoherence. Now, there is some truth to what he says. For sociology has always been a contentious discipline. Sociology, let us not forget, distinguishes itself from economics and political science by taking the standpoint of civil society – a conflict riven arena of organizations, associations, and movements that arose in Western society in the late-19th century. Civil society was and is host to a rowdy science built on competing moral foundations – the Durkheimian research program built on a critique of anomie and inequality, embracing a vision of organic solidarity; the Marxist research program built on the critique of alienation under capitalism and a vision of communism; the Weberian research program built on a critique of

rationalization in which the pursuit of a vocation is the only compensation; the feminist program built on the critique of masculine domination. The vitality and appeal of sociology lie in its antagonistic but interconnected research programs that spawn their own anomalies and contradictions that twist and turn with history.

Let me be clear, a science with moral foundations is no less a science for that. It is a science guided by visions and convictions that vitalize empirical research. Morality and science are inextricably bound together. The idea of a moral science is, however, anathema to House. Failing the development of a new 'consensus', which he rightly thinks is not on the cards, he would sever sociology into two: the humanists and philosophers on one side and the scientists doing applied research, like himself, on the other side. He wants to cut away what he regards to be the debilitating virus of critical and public sociology from the professional and policy sociology. That, indeed, would be the end of sociology!

Instead of an excision or a new consensus, I propose a new 'dissensus'. Just as the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s brought about a crisis in the reigning sociology so the wave of social movements of these last 10 years – Occupy, Arab Spring, Indignados, new environmental movements, Black Lives Matter but also the right wing movements inspired by Donald Trump and other populist leaders – these movements do call into question the sociology of today. Just as waves of Marxism and feminism rejuvenated sociology in the 1970s, so today the entry of W.E.B. Du Bois represents a rejuvenating response to the new social movements. Thanks to the leadership of American Sociological Association's President, Aldon Morris, the inspiration of Du Bois is radiating through these historic ASA meetings, encouraging such explorations of Du Boisian sociology as the recent one by José Itzigsohn and Karida Brown (2020).

If any sociologist from the past speaks to us today, it is Du Bois. From among the classics, there is no more contemporary sociologist, especially if we take into account the entire gamut of his writings; from his Durkheimian beginnings in *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Souls of Black Folk* to his anti-Weberian writings in *Darkwater* and *The Crisis* – the flagship magazine of the NAACP he edited for 25 years – to his last 30 years of Marxist writings beginning with his magisterial *Black Reconstruction* and his autobiographical *Dusk of Dawn* going on to his global sociology represented in *The World and Africa*. In bringing Du Bois into sociology, we must avoid sanitizing or homogenizing his work. We must resist vindictionalism – celebrating Du Bois as flawless. After all, the excitement of Du Bois lies in the tensions between science and politics, between race and class, between essentialism and historicism, between micro and macro, between structure and agency – all the great tensions that have animated sociology from its birth.

To conclude, Du Bois was the public sociologist par excellence. His steadfast political commitment to social justice, but particularly racial justice in a changing world led to the unfolding of an enormous scholarly corpus that at every juncture contests reigning orthodoxies, a truly novel scholarship. He demonstrates how moral conviction without science is empty and science without moral conviction is blind. He demonstrates there can be no division between humanist and scientific sociology; they are bound together at the hip like Siamese twins. Uniquely, he brings together public, professional, policy and critical sociology, demonstrating the synergy among all four. During his long 95 years, Du Bois often looks back; not to lament the passing of some golden age, but to understand the forces driving history to better comprehend the pressures of today and possible futures of tomorrow. There is a persistent utopian moment. From the voices and experience of subaltern peoples, his sociology ascends to the heights of global capitalism, from where it descends back down, to dig over the ground from whence it came. Last but not least, Du Bois feeds off and feeds into the movements of his time – socialist, Pan-African, Harlem Renaissance, civil rights, African independence, and international peace movements – showing us how sociology undergoes permanent revolution.

### Authors' note

This address to the American Sociological Association (2021) was given at the invitation of Aldon Morris, then President of the ASA, asking me to respond to James House's 'The Culminating Crisis of American Sociology and Its Role in Social Science and Public Policy'.

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