

# The Return of the Repressed: Recovering the Public Face of U.S. Sociology, One Hundred Years On

*By*  
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At its inception one hundred years ago, the American Sociological Society was concerned to separate itself from the social movements and reform impulses to which it had hitherto been connected. One hundred years of professionalism have achieved the splitting and amassed an impressive body of theory, empirical analysis, and innovative techniques, but sociology's public face has remained underdeveloped. Public sociology today requires rethinking the meaning of the public sphere as well as that of the discipline of sociology. Moreover, in today's world, reaching out to publics demands recognition of the interests of the different social sciences within the new global dispensation.

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The founding of the American Sociological Society took place exactly one hundred years ago, at the 1905 annual meeting of the American Economics Association. Sociology's declaration of independence marked the coming of age of the new discipline, taking it from a social movement of reformers and utopians into the era of twentieth-century professionalism. Lester Ward, vociferous opponent of social inequality, was elected its first president. Among its charter members were two future Nobel Peace Prize winners, Jane Addams and Emily Balch, as well as feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman.<sup>1</sup> The postbellum development of a vibrant civil society had imprinted itself on sociology, giving it a public profile, against which it emerged as a discipline within the university. If, in the beginning, social science and social reform were seen as inseparable—two sides of the same coin—later they took separate routes, as social work became its own profession and

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sociology sought to secure its legitimacy as a social science—a late developer struggling to define a distinctive niche for itself.

Even though the struggle has been largely won, and professional sociology is now a well-established and thriving academic discipline, it still behaves as though it were in gestation, defensive about its scientific credentials, insistent on separating itself from lay sociology, wary of showing any public face for fear it would be discredited. This sense of inadequacy has often been a self-fulfilling prophecy, encouraging others to wonder whether the emperor has any clothes, while prompting sociologists to underplay their public role. This article aims to show that sociology's recent return to its publics takes place in circumstances very different from those in which the discipline originated: within the framework of an advanced discipline that can only benefit from an invigorating and open interaction with the worlds it studies. Just as the individual sociologist represses the early zeal for social transformation under the compulsions of a normalizing career, with the possibility of returning to the past in the reflective security of tenure, so the discipline as a whole can now safely recover the inspiration that was so central to its origins—origins that it repressed a century ago to build a professional infrastructure, knowledge, and experience. Today our disciplinary edifice supplies the foundations for a mature public sociology—a sociology that contributes to public debate and discussion.

## A Century of Professionalism

The road to professionalism, with its accoutrements of journals, peer review, research programs, distinctive theories, method and concepts, and textbooks as well as the definition of the undergraduate major and the carefully regulated doctoral program—in other words, the autonomization of its disciplinary field—was built through the promotion of policy sociology. The philanthropic foundations, including such outposts of capitalist enterprise as Rockefeller and Carnegie, supported the fledgling science's investigation of a plethora of social problems that beset America in the early decades of the twentieth century. Rockefeller was especially active, supporting the research for Robert and Helen Lynd's (1929) *Middletown* as well as sponsoring leading research communities at the University of Chicago (under Robert Park) and at the University of North Carolina (under Howard Odum).

Support from the private foundations required that sociology shed its political radicalism. The resulting neutered professionalism became attractive to the federal government as early as the 1920s when it incorporated rural sociology into its Department of Agriculture (Larson and Zimmerman 2003). During the depression, the federal government actively promoted policy-relevant sociology, epitomized by the President's Research Committee's (1933) *Recent Social Trends in the United States*, headed by William Ogburn. This was followed by wartime research on the effectiveness of propaganda and Samuel Stouffer et al.'s (1949) famous study of military morale, *The American Soldier*. In the postwar years, federal funds

poured into sociology, both directly from state agencies and through such relatively autonomous bodies as the National Science Foundation.

If the first phase of the discipline's autonomization (before World War One) sprung from a dialogue with publics, and the second phase, from the 1920s to the 1960s, was marked by an increasing separation of professional sociology from publics and a continuing dialogue with the policy world, the third phase was marked by an internal critique of professional sociology—the questioning of policy sociology through the vehicle of critical sociology. This third phase had antecedents as early as the 1930s in the work of Robert Lynd (1939), but it crystallized in C. Wright Mills's (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, which called into question sociology's connection to the corporate world through the development of “abstracted empiricism” (survey research devoid of context or theory) as well as the

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abstruse architectonics of what Mills called “grand theory.” Alvin Gouldner (1970) and others carried the critical mantle forward into the 1960s and 1970s, drawing attention to the ideological bases of grand theory, and specifically the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons and his students, that celebrated the essential harmony and progressiveness of American society. Like Mills, Gouldner (1968) also exposed and criticized sociology's hidden connections to the welfare state. His writings appeared just as a wave of social movements engulfed the university—movements that indicted liberal academia, including sociology, for closing its doors to minorities, even as it celebrated the supposed openness and pluralism of American society. It was not simply the underrepresentation of African Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and women within the academy but also the absence of corresponding sociologies, views from the margins, that made mainstream sociology suddenly seem so anachronistic to so many in these turbulent years.

In the 1970s, professional sociology moved to accommodate critical perspectives, absorbing the blows directed its way by becoming more open to political pressures. Subfield after subfield thus moved to the left: stratification and education became the study of social inequality; the sociology of culture incorporated ideology; industrial sociology became the study of domination in the labor process; the sociology of the family refocused around patterns of male domination and commodification; political sociology turned to the state and its relation to class; social movements were reconceived not as irrational responses to social change but as its

rational promoters; the sociology of development moved from modernization to theories of underdevelopment, dependency, and world systems theory. At the same time, the sociology of race, gender, and sexuality became ever more popular. Throughout this period, American sociology became less parochial, questioning its earlier assumptions and embracing historical and comparative perspectives.

As the tide of social movements ebbed (or, as in the case of the labor movement, was forcibly repressed), as national politics reacted against the liberal hangover of the 1970s and the very idea of the social was called into question, as attacks on public welfare and state regulation mounted, and as the market panacea gained credence, sociology was pushed back on the defensive and the field moved rightward. Economic sociology now became more focused on markets and their social preconditions, neoinstitutionalism traced the adoption of American institutions globally (a reincarnation of modernization theory), and for some the family became once more a haven in a heartless world. The shift was discernible but was modest relative to the rightward turn in the national political and cultural scene, which became increasingly hostile to the defining ethos of sociology—its opposition to social inequality and its valorization of the social. This broader shift against sociology is today both an inspiration for and the greatest obstacle to a new (fourth phase) of sociology—a renewed dialogue between professional and public sociology.

A century ago, sociology was all too easily identified with a primitive public sociology, what some have called “charity sociology” or “social movement sociology,” closely tied to good works and social reform. The founders of American sociology—Sumner, Giddings, Ward, and Small—broke with this early public sociology by assuming an academic pose, drawing on Spencer’s evolutionary theory and Comte’s positivism. Today’s public sociology, bolstered by a century of advances in professional, policy, and critical sociology, can be far more sophisticated. We are now sufficiently secure in our science to engage with publics, to promote a deeper and broader understanding of our endangered world, and thereby reinvigorate sociology with the pressing issues of our times. But to stride forward in this direction requires rethinking the foundations of our discipline and how we conceive of the public sphere, but first, what exactly do we mean by public sociology, and what are the challenges it faces?

## What Is Public Sociology?

What is “public sociology” today? Most simply, it is taking sociology to publics beyond the university, engaging them in dialogue about public issues that have been studied by sociologists. Indeed, it is a triple dialogue—a dialogue among sociologists, between sociologists and publics, and most importantly within publics themselves. The balance among these three types of dialogue varies, giving rise to a distinction between traditional and organic public sociologies.

*Traditional public sociology* is the conventional portrait of public sociology—conveying sociology to a wide lay audience through sociological interventions that set a new agenda for the discussion of public issues. It can be an op-ed in a national

newspaper or a widely read book, such as W. E. B. DuBois's (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*, William Foot Whyte's (1943) *Street Corner Society*, Gunnar Myrdal's (1944) *An American Dilemma*, David Riesman's (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*, Daniel Bell's (1973) *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Robert Bellah et al.'s (1985) *Habits of the Heart*, Arlie Hochschild's (1989) *The Second Shift*, or Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher's (2000) *The Case for Marriage*. All these books have stimulated public debate in such areas as race, gender, class, individualism, family values, the new economy, and so forth. Traditional public sociologists, then, bring sociological expertise on issues of public concern to wider audiences, generating dialogue within and between publics. Here the sociologist is a *catalyst* of public debate and discussion.

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In focusing on the celebrated works of sociology, written by academics at elite departments with the space and time, the research support, and the connections to make their work visible, we too easily overlook the everyday work of what I call the *organic public sociologist*, who is intimately and directly connected to publics themselves, often articulating and representing issues that publics are already struggling with. There are myriads of unpublicized projects of this kind, involving labor organizations, community groups, communities of faith, environmental groups, neighborhood associations, and so forth. In contrast to the publics of traditional public sociology, here publics are local rather than national, thick (bound by a dense set of relations) rather than thin, active rather than passive, often counter-publics rather than mainstream. Here we find such projects as Boston College's Media Research and Action Program that brings sociologists together with community organizers to discover how best they can present social issues to the media. This collaboration between academia and community is based on the theory of "framing" developed by William Gamson (1992) and Charlotte Ryan (1991). The Institute for Labor and Employment at the University of California offers a different umbrella for organic public sociology. It has worked closely with different labor unions to develop research on family leave, contracts in the construction industry,

conditions for successful organizing, and the resurgence of immigrant unions; and it has organized a union census. There may be no tangible product of organic public sociology—dialogues that are not recorded but nevertheless mold and shift people's understanding and civic practices. If there is a tangible product, it is likely to be framed in terms of locally defined issues. Indeed, in the celebrated terms of Robert Merton (1949), we may say that the traditional public sociologists are “cosmopolitans” while the organic public sociologists are “locals.”

The public sociologist, whether traditional or organic, engages in a relation of reciprocity in which neither side unilaterally sets the terrain for the other. In this regard, public sociology is very different from *policy sociology*, where a client hires the sociologist to solve a particular problem or justify an already formulated solution. James Coleman (1966), for example, was hired to conduct his famous studies of schooling and inequality, showing that school desegregation would enhance educational outcomes, and thus advocating the policy of busing. No less controversially, he reversed himself a decade later (Coleman 1975), after studying busing's effects on white flight to the suburbs. As often happens in large-scale policy research, Coleman's work was widely debated and thus entered the domain of traditional public sociology.

Equally public sociology can feed public debate and cause policy changes and so indirectly becomes policy sociology. Diane Vaughan's (1996) analysis of the *Challenger* shuttle disaster of 1986 began as (traditional) public sociology with an indictment of the organizational culture of NASA as “normalizing deviance,” but after the *Columbia* shuttle disaster of 2003 it became policy sociology as her work was adopted by the government body that investigated the causes of the accident (Vaughan 2004). The distinction between public and policy sociology is analytical—the one a conversation about values and goals and the second concerned with the means to solve well-defined problems—but in practice the two are often closely connected.

Whether it be the policy sociology of James Coleman or the public sociology of Diane Vaughan, both are dependent upon *professional sociology*—the genesis, expansion, reconstruction, and degeneration of intersecting and multiplying research programs. Each research program has its distinctive set of assumptions, conceptual frameworks, more or less developed theories, and methods of investigation as well as contradictions and anomalies that drive it forward. Professional sociology is primarily consumed—read, evaluated, and discussed—by fellow sociologists. It is, as we say, subject to peer review, whereas public sociology is also responsive to publics just as policy sociology is also accountable to clients. There is, however, a fourth type of sociology—*critical sociology*—that exposes and engages the assumptions, often the normative assumptions, of professional sociology. Above I referred to Robert Lynd, C. Wright Mills, and Alvin Gouldner as pioneers of critical sociology. The audience for their work is largely composed of academic sociologists, although the values they espouse often permeate public sociology.

Our four sociologies can be placed in a two-by-two matrix as in Table 1. One dimension defines the audience: academic or extraacademic. That is to say professional and critical sociologies speak primarily to peers whereas policy and public

TABLE 1  
THE DIVISION OF SOCIOLOGICAL LABOR

	Academic Audience	Extraacademic Audience
Instrumental knowledge	Professional	Policy
Reflexive knowledge	Critical	Public

sociologies speak to audiences beyond the academy. The second dimension is not “knowledge for whom?” but “knowledge for what?” On one hand, we have a sociology that is concerned with instrumental rationality, solving puzzles within research programs or solving problems for clients. The values and ends are given and the sociologist is concerned with means. On the other hand, there is reflexive knowledge that is concerned with elucidating foundational values themselves, what Max Weber called value discussion.

Here I can only hint at the ramifications of this reclassification of sociological labor.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say, at any one time a given sociologist may occupy more than one quadrant within this matrix, while sociological careers become paths among the categories. The four sociologies are mutually interdependent and invigorating. As such, they not only represent a vision and division of sociological labor, but they also form a field of power in which, at least in the United States, instrumental knowledge dominates reflexive knowledge. The relations between the four sociologies that define the discipline vary historically within any given country, as we have seen for the United States, but also from country to country. Beyond the nation, one can also discern a global division of sociological labor, with professional sociology ever more concentrated in the United States. A similar analysis can be extended to other disciplines: the natural sciences are dominated by instrumental knowledge, the humanities by reflexive knowledge, and the social sciences reveal their complexity in different combinations of instrumental and reflexive knowledge. Here I am concerned especially with the implications for public sociology in the United States.

## Challenges to Public Sociology

Within our discipline, public sociology is caught in a contradictory position between, on one side, professional sociology’s concern to develop a monopoly of abstract, specialized knowledge, evaluated by peers and, on the other side, publics that demand accessible knowledge devoted to concrete issues. Let me first deal with the relation of sociology to its publics before turning to the relation of public sociology and professional sociology.

The symmetrical exchange between sociology and its publics, what Jürgen Habermas (1984) has called “communicative action,” is hard to achieve, let alone sustain. On one hand, public sociology easily veers toward a more instrumental



relation in which sociologists become hostage to their publics—traditional public sociologists pandering to their publics or organic public sociologists going “native.” For their part, publics want to turn public sociologists into their own policy sociologists! On the other hand, sociologists may seek to subjugate publics, demanding moral conformity to their edicts, as when traditional public sociologists turn science into sermons or when organic public sociologists ply their trade like a vanguard party. That the balance between sociologist and public is hard to maintain makes the regulatory ideal of a symmetrical reciprocity more rather than less important.

Public sociology is not only challenged from the outside, by the very publics it addresses, but also from within the discipline, by professional sociology. From the beginning, professional sociology has deployed the mantle of science to distinguish itself from common sense, to distinguish its analytical theory from folk theory, and to distinguish its systematic methods of data collection from random and incoherent experiences of everyday life. It has developed bodies of knowledge, subject to peer review and all too often rendered inaccessible to wider publics. Professional sociology is intended first and foremost for fellow sociologists.

This insular orientation was first driven by sociologists' need to establish their legitimacy within the wider academic field; to justify its existence as a latecomer discipline; and to distinguish itself from philosophy, psychology, and even closer enterprises like economics, political science, and anthropology. Not only in its efforts to establish its separate identity on the borderlands of competing disciplines, but also within sociology the quest for recognition, whether by individuals or departments, has led to intense competition, especially among those with the greatest concentration of academic capital. The competition is defined by the terms of science, whose meaning is itself a stake in the struggle, but which is conventionally marked by the use of statistical models and by publication in journals regulated by professional gatekeepers. The evolution of sociology has led its dominant institutions to foster a language and practice at odds with the needs of public sociology—knowledge that would be available to publics and evaluated on the basis of its relevance to public issues.

Professional sociologists often fear that public sociology not only threatens the “reputation” of sociology within the world of competing disciplines but also in the political realm beyond the university. In this view, a public display of the findings and theories of sociology, especially in these conservative times, risks delegitimizing the discipline in the eyes of foundations, government agencies, and others who provide the funds that support the leading departments of sociology. The guardians of professional sociology, thus, often see public sociology as partisan sociology—as if their own professional sociology carried no political stakes of its own. This is the metaphysical pathos of *cognoscenti*, found in such collections as Terence Halliday and Morris Janowitz's (1987) *Sociology and Its Publics* or Stephen Cole's (2001) *What's Wrong with Sociology?*<sup>9</sup> Irving Louis Horowitz's (1993) *The Decomposition of Sociology*, similarly, is an unrelenting lament about the politicization of sociology in the 1960s and 1970s.



If sociology is politicized, it is most often at the hands of politicians and irrespective of its public character. Thus, sociological research (but not just sociological research) has come under attack in the U.S. Congress, threatening federal programs that support, for example, research in the area of sexual behavior—so essential to the understanding of sexually transmitted diseases. Increasingly, politicians are directly intruding on the academic prerogative to decide what research is worth carrying out. The multiple attacks on the academy now emerging are forcing sociology, but again not just sociology, to undertake a far more public defense of what they do. In these circumstances, public sociology can become a defense *against* politicization thrust upon it from without.

Indeed, one may argue that privatization (diminishing public funds), corporatization (the turn to private donors), and marketization (appealing to the most vulgar instincts to boost student admissions and justify escalating fees), call for a new alliance of the university and its lay publics. Rather than capitulate to the reigning orthodoxies of privatization and regulation that emanate, ironically, from the neighboring disciplines of economics and political science, sociology should be at the forefront of defending the public domain against the encroachment of markets and states, and in so doing it must acquire a public face.

## Rethinking the Discipline

Today's arguments against public sociology are not new, but stretch back to the birth of professional sociology, when it was struggling to establish itself as a discipline, as a new science. But now it is a thriving discipline in the United States, with more than two hundred journals, a growing professional membership of more than fourteen thousand, an elaborate national labor market for doctorates, more than twenty-five thousand majors produced every year (having overtaken economics and history), ever more coverage in the media, and a significant international influence as well. Its reentry into the public age was marked recently by the launching of a new magazine, *Contexts*, designed to bring sociology to a wider audience. Moreover, as the political tide rises against them, sociologists increasingly believe that their critical perspectives should be widely disseminated, even if only as a pebble thrown into the onrushing conservative tide of national politics.

Yet we still train sociologists and conduct our discipline as if it were born yesterday. Thus, methodology texts and courses promote the conversion of common sense into sociology rather than suggesting the ways sociology can be returned to the publics from which it came and to whom we are ultimately accountable. We have at our command the most sophisticated techniques of research, but they are all focused on the translation of data into theory. It is simply presumed that theory will seep back into society through osmosis. Indeed, it is the case that the sociology of today has often become the conventional wisdom of tomorrow. Some have even complained that this gives the impression that sociological knowledge does not accumulate. Still, there is a paucity of thinking on precisely how analytical theory can be turned back into folk theory. We devote ourselves to using the world to

change sociology—but how sociology changes the world, that is more like immaculate conception or, more usually, immaculate miscarriage.

Just like the methodologists, today's theorists have adopted a defensive posture, building a professional moat around the sociological edifice rather than taking our discipline into the trenches of civil society. Indeed, the latest trends within sociological theory warn against any such advance into society, calling attention, instead, to the nefarious and insidious collaboration of knowledge and power. Michel Foucault warned that to disseminate social science is to extend domination, governmentality, and disciplinary powers, although that did not stop him from spreading his texts. He had no theory of his own practice. Influenced by Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman (1987) proposed that in this age of postmodernity, the intellectual as legislator is being replaced by the modest role of intellectual as interpreter, so we might as well abandon the aspirations of social science as we know it. Such are the bleak prognoses of our theories of knowledge.

Even such a devout defender of the enlightenment as Pierre Bourdieu, the leading public sociologist of the late twentieth century, never ceased insisting on the decisive separation of scientific sociology from what he called spontaneous sociology, the everyday understandings we have of the world. This separation is both inevitable and necessary as the viability of everyday existence depends upon "misrecognition," deeply rooted in habitus, that cannot be altered by intellectual bombardment. Yet this never stopped Bourdieu from transmitting his own science of sociology back to the people, seeking to denaturalize and de-fatalize the world. In popularizing his theory, he became a celebrated exception to his own rule that subaltern classes are beyond redemption. For all his reflexivity, he had no theory of what he did! He failed to analyze the conditions of his own practice of public sociology.

In short, theory and methodology are stuck in the originating impulses of social science, its desperate struggle to make a place for itself. Sociology's self-understanding now needs to catch up with its silent and embarrassed practices, with the ubiquity of small- and large-scale public sociologies, unrecognized as such. We need to replace theories of impossibility with theories of the possibility of public sociology, consonant with the impulsive practice of the greatest theorists and methodologists themselves.

## Rethinking the Public Sphere

It is not enough to rethink our discipline, that is, to develop methodologies and theories of the back-translation of sociology to publics; it is also necessary to use our discipline to rethink the meaning and potentiality of publics. Here our forefathers are of limited help. Max Weber, after all, saw the citizenry as an "inarticulate mass," subject to manipulation by dishonorable leaders. Emile Durkheim pinned his hopes on occupational associations but was dismissive of social movements—the very soil from which associations spring—as confused responses to anomie. Theories of fascism and communism as well as of mass society playing

heavily on the notion of the atomized individual bent by irrational forces, dominated the sociology of the 1950s, influenced by the pessimism of the Frankfurt School and ranging from Hannah Arendt's (1951) *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and David Riesman's (1950) *The Lonely Crowd* to Neil Smelser's (1971) *Collective Behavior*. Similarly, theorists of the public sphere, from Walter Lippmann (1922) to Hannah Arendt (1958) and Jürgen Habermas (1962/1991), have presented it as atomized and colonized by mass media, consumer markets, and meaningless politics. To think of the public sphere as accessible to sociology, we need to reconceptualize it.<sup>3</sup>

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What better place to begin our revisions than with the 1960s social movements, which instigated a revolution in the way we regard the political competence of citizenry? New theories developed by Charles Tilly, William Gamson, Doug McAdam, and Alain Touraine, as well as Edward Thompson's hugely influential *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), all replaced a thinly veiled contempt for the "masses" as hapless victims swayed by irrational sentiments, with an articulate populace, facing institutional obstacles to the realization of group-based interests. Social movements were no longer pathological responses to structural change subject to the propaganda of unprincipled leaders but now were understood as competent, rational actors, mobilizing available resources to realize interests denied or even unrecognized by electoral and machine politics. More recently, social movement theory has taken a cultural turn, endowing publics with the capacity to generate their own identities through oppositional discourses. The contributors to this literature, not coincidentally, were often ex-participants in the movements of the 1960s and were therefore disposed to seeing its self-constituting moments.

From the standpoint of the development of publics, this literature not only illuminates the political competence of citizenries but also reveals the ways in which participation (virtual or real) in social movements dislodges folk theories that spring from and govern the inertial pressures of daily life, leading to a more reflective engagement with the world. A contemporary theory of publics, similarly, must make a sharp break with theories of mass society and highlight the reflective dispo-

sition provoked by movement between contexts. Sociology has always attracted students from immigrant backgrounds, perhaps because it offers reflective understandings of new contexts. Indeed, those from immigrant backgrounds have often been pioneers of new directions in sociology, from Pitirim Sorokin to Reinhard Bendix, from Herb Gans to Alejandro Portes. Today, globalization recruits ever-wider populations into flows between different contexts, intensifying autonomous patterns of communication and creating the basis of more vibrant, rational, and reflective publics—publics of a local, regional, national, but also transnational scope.

The mass society hypothesis provided a convenient justification for the autonomy of professional sociology. If there are no publics to reach, then we can justifiably focus inwards on developing a professional community, which could convey its enlightened perspectives to policy makers, with the added benefit of funds for more research and education. This became a self-fulfilling prophecy, driving a wedge between publics and professionals. But once the fruits of critical theory (and critical practice) had led theorists of collective behavior to abandon the notion of *mass society* and to replace it with *civil society*, a complex of associations, movements, and publics, there was no longer any excuse to overlook our connections and responsibilities to publics.

### The Public in the Profession, the Profession as Public

Reenchanting the world of publics beyond the university inevitably reverberates back into the university, causing us to rethink our relation to the publics on our own doorstep. Take the public, or potential public, closest to home—the students we teach. The past century has seen an academic revolution, with more than half the population exposed to higher education at some point in their life. The university cannot be conceived of as simply a place for the inculcation of specialized knowledge and skills. Although it is certainly that, it is also an arena for the development of national (and increasingly global) citizenship, as the movement for service learning has made us aware. Insofar as education is public, we are in the business of producing publics as well as being accountable to public interests. In the humanities and social sciences, but also in professional schools, students are the first and most immediate public. To constitute students as a public is to tie their lived experience to the broader context that shapes it, to link micro processes to macro forces, to expose the structural forces that limit the way society can be changed, to recognize that what exists is not natural and inevitable but subject to human control. These are eminently sociological tasks.

But constituting students as a public means more than imparting a particular contextualized and historicized understanding of the world they inhabit; it also involves a particular way of interacting. For traditional public sociology, students are empty vessels to fill with sociological knowledge that they then carry forth into

the world. In the organic model, however, sociology begins not with teachers and their certified sociology but with students and their spontaneous sociology, which, through pedagogy, is transformed into an understanding of the social contexts that shape it. The organic model conceives of pedagogy as a reciprocal relation in which the educator too is educated, through another triple conversation, this time between teacher and student, among students themselves, and finally between students and a series of secondary publics—a conversation that, to use C. Wright Mills' (1959) oft-quoted phrase, converts private troubles into public issues. This model is fraught with all the tensions and dilemmas of public sociology more generally—the dangers of pandering to students and of faddishness as well as of a certain vanguardism that exploits the charisma of the teaching relation.

There is a second sense in which the discipline contains its own public, namely, when we constitute ourselves as an institutional participant in the broader democratic process. If a century ago the American Sociological Society had to abstain from political engagement, today the accumulated wisdom of sociology and its theory of civil society propel it into the public arena, beyond the defense of professional privilege. Indeed, the American Sociological Association (ASA), which is what the American Sociological Society became in 1959, has made a number of such forays in recent years. One example involved making public the results of a century of research into race—its existence, its antecedents, and its consequences, advancing the claim that race exists as a socially constructed category, irrespective of any biological basis, with crucial consequences of discrimination and adversity. Relatedly, the ASA filed an *amicus curiae* brief with the Supreme Court in 2003, defending affirmative action in admissions to the University of Michigan's Law School. In 2005, the ASA issued a statement about the social science evidence for social and institutional bases of differential achievement of men and women in science and mathematics, criticizing the view that women are less suited to certain disciplines.

More controversially, the ASA declared itself against the Iraq War in 2003 and against any constitutional amendment that would outlaw same-sex marriage in 2004. Instead of basing their resolutions on direct research evidence, sociologists were expressing the value presuppositions that underlie both their research programs and their assessment of world events. On both occasions, the resolutions were passed by a majority vote of the membership of the ASA. To declare its position in this way, it is important that the ASA provide venues for public discussion—or value discussion, as Weber would call it. The ASA constitution is open and democratic both in terms of the way issues can be brought before the membership and in the way they are discussed. Thus, a resolution need only garner the support of 3 percent of the members (some four hundred members) for it to come before the Executive Council, which can either accept it or pass it on to the membership at large for a vote. Unlike other professional associations, there is no limitation on the types of issues that can be the subject of resolutions.

With the help of electronic media, the ASA has developed the infrastructure for open discussion, especially through its various committees and its forty-three self-governing sections, which mirror both publics and interests in the wider civil soci-

ety and subfields within the discipline. Over the past half century, the influence and importance of these sections has grown exponentially, a counterweight to the expansion of the administrative office. In making statements on behalf of its members, the ASA has constituted itself as a discursive and deliberating public. The reflexivity with which its theories have endowed the organs of civil society is thus turned back on itself. As a result, the association has become a more vital organization, and membership has grown. It has become a public unto itself.

### Sociology among the Social Sciences

How new are these outward moves of sociology, and are they any different from moves in the other social sciences? Recall that at the inception of the American Sociological Society one hundred years ago, it was a part of the American Economics Association from which it split. Then, during the first half of the twentieth century, sociology fought to secure its boundaries with economics, psychology, and anthropology. This effort was so successful that by the postwar years sociology advanced an imperial project, seeking to subordinate economics, political science, psychology, and even anthropology in a much broader interdisciplinary matrix. This was the project of structural functionalism, led by Talcott Parsons at Harvard's Department of Social Relations. Although it had the support of eminent Harvard social scientists, it made limited headway outside sociology, and even within sociology its dominance has been exaggerated. It would crumble under the assault from critical sociology of the 1960s.

In the postwar period, there were other moves toward interdisciplinarity, reflecting the new global role of the United States. Now state-promoted area studies brought the social sciences together in programs usually dominated by political science and economics. Still later, reflecting the influence of the social movements of the 1960s, a range of interdisciplinary programs were created to respond to the specific interests and perspectives of hitherto excluded and marginalized groups—Women's Studies, African American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Native American Studies. Although their scholarship and vision became influential within sociology, these programs developed quite separately, and their existence has often been precarious in an academic world dominated by disciplines.

Whether inspired by developments in the biological and natural sciences or by arguments about the anachronism of disciplines created in the nineteenth century, calls for interdisciplinarity have fallen on deaf ears, largely because the different social sciences are rooted in specific interests not just within the academic hierarchy but also beyond the university. To put it crudely, the standpoint of economics is the expansion of the market, the standpoint of political science is the maintenance of political stability, focusing on the state, while the standpoint of sociology is the expansion of civil society. The collapse of *laissez faire* capitalism in the first decades of the twentieth century and the rise of fascism, communism, and social democracy all helped blur the boundaries between state, economy, and society, thereby creating a basis for interdisciplinary projects after World War Two. However, the last



quarter of the twentieth century saw the re-creation of these separate spheres, culminating in the historic transformations of the 1990s. The collapse of communism, the financial crises of the 1990s, the increasing role of the World Bank and IMF abroad, and the deregulation of the domestic economy have contributed to the ascendancy of economic models in policy making, just as the world policing role of the United States, struggles against terrorism, and rhetorical support for constitutional democracy have given a boost to political science. For its part, sociology finds itself upholding civil society and the public sphere against the corrosive effects of market resurgence and state authoritarianism. This investment in civil society manifests itself in the development of public sociologies.

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*In the organic model . . . sociology begins  
not with teachers and their certified  
sociology but with students and their  
spontaneous sociology . . .*

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Three qualifications are in order. First, although the standpoint of economics is the market, that does not mean economists have nothing to say about the political or the social. Indeed, economists have notoriously tried to reduce the social to a set of utilitarian exchanges. The currency of social capital and rational choice models reflects the power of economic modes of thought in both political science and sociology. Political scientists, similarly, have never confined their analysis to the state or even politics. They study the terrain of the social, for example, but from the standpoint of the stability of democracy, and today they find themselves reenacting theories of mass society like those of the 1950s, as in Robert Putnam's (2001) *Bowling Alone* or Theda Skocpol's (2003) *Diminished Democracy*. Likewise, sociologists have never been shy about venturing into the study of the economy, underlining the social foundations and consequences of markets, just as they have studied the state from the standpoint of its consequences for civil society, whether these be social movements or patterns of inequality. What distinguishes these social sciences, and others, is the standpoint they adopt with respect to the social phenomena they study, standpoints that have become ever more sharply delineated with the redivision of the spheres.

However, and this is the second qualification, disciplines are heterogeneous fields with dominant and subordinate tendencies. Even in economics, a paradigmatic social science, dissident voices can be heard from institutionalists, radical political economists, and more recently the network for Post-Autistic Economics.

Political science, always balkanized into different subfields, has generated its own opposition in the form of the Perestroika Movement. Sociology is a more pluralistic—some would say fragmented—discipline, the result of its absorption of oppositional tendencies in the 1970s. Given the array of different political positions within disciplinary fields, there is ample scope for alliances and collaborations across disciplinary boundaries.

The third qualification involves the international dimension. U.S. social science has taken up a dominant, some would say imperial, position in the global context, reflecting its political and economic domination. Not surprisingly, this is most strongly accentuated in the field of economics, but U.S. sociology also commands an impressive concentration of resources and research facilities, and it is by far the largest source of Ph.D.s, both domestic and foreign. Domination in terms of content—theory and methodology—follows from the concentration of material and institutional resources. U.S. social science is used by national governments to benchmark and evaluate their own social scientists, so that jobs and careers are dependent on publications in Western and particularly U.S. journals. The effect is to pull national sociologies, especially in third world countries, away from questions of national urgency and away from the public sociologies in which they had often hitherto specialized. Thus, valorizing public sociology in the United States is an important counterweight to U.S. worldwide professional hegemony, giving more space to national public sociologies and revisioning the global division of sociological labor. The development of public sociology cultivates local, national, and international publics that are an important bulwark to the tyranny of markets and the despotism of states.

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Individual and discipline follow analogous life cycles. Just as the sociologist, who begins graduate school fired by visions of social transformation or reform, soon encounters the normalizing practices of a total institution, so the early fervor of social movement sociology was diverted into and suppressed by professionalization and the disciplined accumulation of scientific knowledge. Just as the individual sociologist, on gaining tenure, often seeks to recover the energy of a repressed adolescence, so our collective discipline on reaching adulthood also asks what it was all for, and returns to the publics it has forsaken, much the wiser for the intervening years. Building on a secure foundation of theory, methodology, and research, engaging publics is no longer threatening but invigorating, not discrediting but ennobling, not a choice but a necessity. The turn to sociology, and public sociology in particular, is a pent-up response to unpropitious times and a hostile environment. The more publics are endangered, the more degraded the very idea of the public becomes, the more challenged and yet the more urgent the task of public sociology.

## Notes

1. Nonetheless, the American Sociological Society was run by a coterie of white men and marginalized the participation of women, including these three celebrated figures. It would not be until 1948 that the American Sociological Society would have an African American President (E. Franklin Frazier) and not until 1952 that it would have a woman President (Dorothy Swaine Thomas).

2. For further elaboration, see Burawoy (2005) and the symposia on Public Sociology in *Social Problems* (February 2004), *Social Forces* (June 2004), and *Critical Sociology* (October 2005).

3. Here I stress the sociological underpinnings of such a revisioning, but it has also been advanced in other disciplines by such commentators as Nancy Fraser (1997) and Michael Warner (2002).

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