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James S. House

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The Culminating Crisis of  
American Sociology and Its  
Role in Social Science and  
Public Policy: An  
Autobiographical,  
Multimethod, Reflexive  
Perspective

James S. House

Survey Research Center, Ford School of Public Policy, and Department of Sociology,  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104; email: jimhouse@umich.edu

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**Abstract**

For over 50 years I have been, and remain, an interdisciplinary social scientist seeking to develop and apply social science to improve the well-being of human individuals and social life. Sociology has been my disciplinary home for 48 of these years. As a researcher/scholar, teacher, administrator, and member of review panels in both sociology and interdisciplinary organizations that include and/or intersect with sociology, I have sought to improve the quality and quantity of sociologists and sociology. This article offers my assessment as a participant observer of what (largely American) sociology has been over the course of my lifetime, which is virtually coterminous with the history of modern (post–World War II) sociology, and what it might become. I supplement my participant observations with those of others with similarly broad perspectives, and with broader literature and quantitative indicators on the state of sociology, social science, and society over this period.

I entered sociology and social science at a time (the 1960s and early 1970s) when they were arguably their most dynamic and impactful, both within themselves and also with respect to intersections with other disciplines

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and the larger society. Whereas the third quarter of the twentieth century was a golden age of growth and development for sociology and the social sciences, the last quarter of that century saw sociology and much of social science—excepting economics and, to some extent, psychology—decline in size, coherence, and extradisciplinary connections and impact, not returning until the beginning of the twenty-first century, if at all, to levels reached in the early 1970s. Over this latter period, I and numerous other observers have bemoaned sociology’s lack of intellectual unity (i.e., coherence and cohesion), along with attendant dissension and problems within the discipline and in its relation to the other social sciences and public policy. The twenty-first century has seen much of the discipline, and its American Sociological Association (ASA), turn toward public and critical sociology, yet this shift has come with no clear indicators of improvement of the state of the discipline and some suggestions of further decline.

The reasons for and implications of all of this are complex, reflecting changes within the discipline and in its academic, scientific, and societal environments. This article can only offer initial thoughts and directions for future discussion, research, and action. I do, however, believe that sociology’s problems are serious, arguably a crisis, and have been going on for almost a half-century, at the outset of which the future looked much brighter.

It is unclear whether the discipline as now constituted can effectively confront, much less resolve, these problems. Sociologists continue to do excellent work, arguably in spite of rather than because of their location within the current discipline of sociology. They might realize the brighter future that appeared in the offing as of the early 1970s for sociology and its impact on other disciplines and society if they assumed new organizational and/or disciplinary forms, as has been increasingly occurring in other social sciences, the natural sciences, and even the humanities. Society needs more and better sociology. The question is how can we deliver it.

## INTRODUCTION

The *Annual Review of Sociology’s* (ARS’s) prefatory articles were initiated in 1986 with the hope that such “personal reflections on sociology and [the writer’s] own intellectual development...should be of great current interest...and may also become an important resource for historians of the discipline” (Blake et al. 1986, p. v). The ARS itself began in 1975 “as a step toward strengthening sociological knowledge” pursuant to the recommendation in 1969 of “the Sociology Panel of the Joint Behavioral and Social Science Survey of the National Academy of Sciences and the Social Science Research Council” (Blake et al. 1986, p. v). The past two decades’ prefatory articles have become more like other ARS articles, i.e., largely reviewing bodies of work in a field and/or by the author. Perhaps reacting to this trend, the Editorial Committee encouraged me “to present a critical discussion of the current status of the field, rather than an encyclopedic coverage of papers... [and] your personal perspective, especially with respect to what you think is most important and where the field is going—yet the presentation must be balanced.”

This article provides an autobiographical, multimethod, and reflexive perspective on the promise and problems in the joint developments and intersections of sociology, social science, and public policy. My lifetime is essentially coterminous with the almost three-quarters of a century since World War II. This has been a period of momentous developments, for better and for worse, in the history of our nation and world, and in the development of sociology, social science, and public policy, and the intersections among them. My life and work have centrally engaged with these developments and intersections, and have increasingly focused on understanding the

current nature and intersections of sociology, social science, and public policy; how they have changed over time; their prospects for the future; and the implications of all of this for the development of human society in our nation and world.

I am in and care about sociology because of its broad relevance to all of these developments. I worry, however, that sociology, in particular, has increasingly failed to realize the promise it showed in the third quarter of the twentieth century to be a major interdisciplinary player, and even leader, in the development of the social sciences, public policy, and hence human society, both nationally and globally. As befits the *ARS*, my focus will be on sociology, but with considerable attention to comparisons and intersections with other social (and even natural) sciences, and with public policy, as problems and declines in these interdisciplinary and policy intersections are central to what I term “the culminating crisis of sociology”—the essence of which has been and remains a lack of intellectual unity in the discipline, which increasingly paralyzes its ability to contribute what it could and should to the understanding and improvement of human society.

Full articulation of how all of this has come to pass, much less what can and should be done about it, is beyond the scope of a single *ARS* article or author. My hope is to stimulate broad discussion and research on these issues, reinforcing positive developments and remediating less positive ones. I draw not only on my work as a researcher/scholar and teacher, but also, more than most similar articles, on my work as an administrator and member of review groups, both within sociology and in multi- or interdisciplinary settings. These experiences have made me acutely aware of sociology’s internal challenges as a collective enterprise, and the skeptical, even hostile, reception it often receives in the larger world of science and society.<sup>1</sup>

## PERSONAL LIFE AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

I begin with some personal and intellectual history and will intersperse more of it as my chronological narrative unfolds. My life is quite ordinary in many ways, especially compared with many prior authors of these prefatory articles (e.g., immigrants/refugees to the United States, representatives of previously un(der)represented sociodemographic groups). But it still influences who I am and what I do and think. I also hope that the history since World War II presented here will be of use to many younger sociologists, as the average employed American sociologist is 43, and hence was born in 1975 and not employed as a sociologist until the late 1990s or even later (<https://datausa.io/profile/cip/451101/>).

Like many in post–World War II America, I grew up in a middle class suburb, in this case of Philadelphia. There were almost no people of color in our suburb or its schools; men were the breadwinners of their families and households; and women were generally wives and mothers, often college-educated but not employed in the paid labor force. Mine was a prototypical family of a husband, wife, and two children.

Our family was, however, more in than of our plain vanilla suburb. My father was an artist and professor of art originally from the Midwest; my mother, from a southern family, had a full-time elementary school principal as her mother and her own career before marriage as a children’s librarian in Washington, DC, then a still quite southern area. My parents had met and first lived in Philadelphia, moving to the suburbs, like so many others, for the sake of their kids. They were devoted and good parents. Their own relationship was more challenged by their disparate backgrounds and my mother’s acquiescence to my father’s wish that she give up her prior career to

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<sup>1</sup>As noted in the abstract, I try to balance my experiences and observations “with those of others...broader literature and quantitative indicators.” Those whom I’ve talked with and received comments from appropriately caution against generalizing too much from my own experience, though none have really gainsaid the central tendencies of my discussion.

become a housewife and mother, and hence also an example of Betty Friedan's (1963) "problem that has no name." My parents were also older than most other parents of children my age, and we were also among the very small number of Democrats and agnostics/atheists in our largely Republican and conventionally religious community.

We traveled mainly to visit our grandfather and step-grandmother on my father's side in Michigan (my mother's parents having died before I was born). My grandfather was a rock-ribbed Republican in one of the putative birthplaces of the Republican Party. My grandparents were very anti-Catholic (there being virtually no nonwhites or Jews in their neck of the woods) and would not allow us to play with the Catholic kids down the block. This initial close-up exposure to prejudice was magnified many times over by a trip to Williamsburg, Virginia, in the early 1950s, on which we saw firsthand the almost otherworldly racial apartheid of the Jim Crow South. My parents believed strongly in equal treatment of all people, but we also saw a great deal of racial-ethnic prejudice and discrimination in our own northern suburban and urban life, and struggled with our personal and national heritages of white male domination in social life.

Living in our family and our community left me with a sense of a society with serious problems of inequality and segregation, the pros and cons of human conflict, and the fundamental existential social challenges inherent in gender relations, issues which ultimately drew me to psychology and sociology.

To short-circuit tensions with my father over where I could afford to go to college, I settled early on attending then all-male Haverford College, which was close to home and affordable. I thought I would become a lawyer (along with many of my male colleagues, the rest largely oriented to medicine or business) and majored in history, an early and continuing intellectual fascination, and seemingly good preparation for law. But, as college did in the early 1960s, perhaps even more than now, Haverford opened my eyes to new social and intellectual horizons.

I discovered an environment in which academic and intellectual concerns were the coin of the realm, rather than the social and athletic culture of suburban public high schools (see Coleman et al. 1961). About a third of my fellow frosh were private school graduates, at first running intellectual and social circles around those of us from ordinary public schools. But by the end of the first year, the rest of us largely caught up, an early lesson in the power of social forces to override preexisting individual differences and the potential inherent in seemingly less smart or sophisticated people.

I also became influenced by Quakerism, which underlies Haverford as an institution and community. The Quaker culture promoted simultaneous commitment to moral-ethical concerns and rigorous intellectual and academic inquiry. And it supported personal commitment to core values, coupled with tolerance, moderation, and humility toward others. Decision making at all levels of the college followed Quaker consensus<sup>2</sup>—a system I thought rather foolish at the time but have come to see as the optimal goal in organizational decision making. Thus Haverford offered an intellectual and sociocultural context consonant with my prior development, but with more intellectual and ethical stimulation and coherence, and has served me well since, often in rather unconscious ways.

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<sup>2</sup>Quakerism provided perhaps the earliest articulation of what has become a modern system and science of consensus decision making. In the Quaker case, as I understand it, for a decision to be enacted, it must be unanimous, with a recognition that any individual or minority may block such enactment on principled moral or intellectual grounds. Such an individual or minority also recognizes a responsibility to join in affirming decisions they may not fully agree with absent a quite strong principled basis of opposition. Great emphasis is also placed from the beginning of a decision-making process on all gaining full appreciation of the views of others, even those they do not agree with. This allows for evolution of the ultimate decision to allow for a final consensus.

Finally, college exposed me to fields and disciplines, especially the social sciences, that didn't exist in my prior education and social milieu. In my sophomore year I realized that these fields offered a more theoretical and quantitative framework for understanding the social and political history, and ameliorating the attendant problems, that had fascinated me increasingly from childhood. I was particularly attracted to social psychology, taught by the Department of Psychology, and took courses in political science, economics, and philosophy, especially as they related to social and behavioral science. I took no courses in sociology, despite Haverford having (as I later learned) a couple of nationally known sociologists, largely because sociology was viewed as a somewhat intellectually disreputable discipline at Haverford.

I decided to pursue graduate study in social psychology, primarily because of my intellectual fascination and sense of its relevance to social and public policy issues that had been gradually emerging in the 1950s and were full-blown by the time I graduated Haverford in 1965; secondarily because one could do this for free, given the comprehensive financial support provided to graduate (but not law) students; and finally because graduate students were not (at least initially) being drafted into a military that was becoming deeply involved in a controversial and misguided war in Vietnam.

This took me westward to an interdisciplinary program in social psychology at the University of Michigan (UM), jointly run by the Departments of Psychology and Sociology. We took courses in both departments, and I discovered that I resonated with the intellectual and methodological concerns of sociology, though I was turned off by some of the faculty in sociology, especially those most focused on how sociology was different from and better than psychology and other social science. One of my lowest grades on a paper was from a distinguished sociologist, with only one comment—"not a genuine sociological analysis."

My graduate school experience imprinted me with the guiding theoretical and methodological orientations of my career: (a) sociological social psychology, especially what others and I have termed "the social structure and personality" perspective (Cook et al. 1995; House 1977, 1981; Inkeles & Levinson 1968), focused on the interplay between macrolevel social structures and processes and microlevel individual behavior and psychology; and (b) survey research as a method for studying these processes in representative samples of large local, regional, national, and international populations and social contexts—arguably sociology's most important twentieth century contribution to scientific methodology (Converse 1987, House 2005). Edward Laumann, Philip Marcus, and especially Howard Schuman were instructive and supportive sociological mentors in graduate school and beyond.

But overall, the intellectual climate at Michigan was very interdisciplinary—especially in the social sciences, which were UM's most visible and prestigious fields—and also oriented toward the potential utility of social science for addressing social and public problems and policies (responding in no small part to the centrality of the university's faculty and students to major social movements of the 1960s). This interdisciplinarity and policy concern was epitomized by Michigan's Institute for Social Research (ISR). My search for a sharper theoretical framework for understanding the impact of social stress on participation in social movements, which I unexpectedly found in psychophysiology (Selye 1956), morphed into a dissertation on the impact of occupational stress on physical and mental health, guided by social psychologists and social epidemiologists at ISR who had formed one of the seminal research programs of this type in the nation and world, using a social psychological version of Selye's psychophysiological theory of stress and adaptation (French et al. 1962).

It was in this context that I met Wendy Fisher, the love of my life, a fellow interdisciplinary social psychologist who migrated eastward from Kansas to join our entry cohort in social psychology in 1965. Together we have navigated our initial (see Mechanic 1962) and subsequent occupational

stresses and marital and familial ones, always pulled forward by the great and growing joys of our love, our work, and our family.

Thus, over the 1960s, I became an interdisciplinary social scientist. But upon leaving graduate school in 1970 I had to choose a discipline. I looked at jobs in both psychology and sociology and ultimately chose the Department of Sociology at Duke University, which was both strong in social psychology and adjacent to a strong social psychology program in the Department of Psychology. My experiences at Duke and in the broader field of sociology stimulated concerns that have grown over time and are central to this article and my current professional and intellectual work. This line of thought began with my initial sense of sociology as a field with growing internecine conflicts along lines of both theory and method. In contrast, psychology largely had a core paradigm around empirical analysis of individual psychology and behavior, albeit with many subfields, and the normal controversies and contention of any science.

In writing the present article I have discovered that this was a central concern of the founders of the *ARS*, which they labeled as the problem of “unity *or* diversity” (Smelser 1999, p. 1; emphasis added). This problem of the intellectual diversity of sociology has only increased over time and will become a leitmotif of much of my discussion, recognizing that it has morphed into a problem of “unity *and* diversity,” referring not only to intellectual issues, but also to the sociodemographic composition of sociology and all disciplines and institutions in our society and world. When I later became associate chair and then chair of the Department of Sociology at Michigan in the 1980s, I recalled a picture of the Michigan sociology faculty taken in the late 1960s—38 or so white men in suits and ties. It is hard to imagine today, as that “unity” has changed greatly, if gradually and often grudgingly, over the next half century.

My research and teaching interests were in policy-related areas, and Duke was founding its Sanford School of Public Policy. Senior faculty in sociology, however, chose not to affiliate with the school and counseled junior faculty against affiliation, for either or both of two reasons: (a) not wanting to be associated with or co-opted by the “establishment,” or to “dirty” one’s hands in real social policy (versus making more independent and “radical” critiques of society and social policy à la Gouldner 1970), and/or (b) not wanting to risk being treated as inferior by faculty in economics, political science, or other fields.

Given this, I focused on developing research and teaching in social psychology within my new discipline of sociology (House 1975, 1977, 1978; House & Harkins 1975; House & Wolf 1978) and doing policy-relevant research and teaching focused on political alienation (House & Mason 1975, Mason et al. 1985) and on occupational stress and health, which I had wandered into in my dissertation and continued at Duke in collaboration with colleagues in the professional schools of medicine and especially public health (the latter at the neighboring University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) (House 1974, 1976; House et al. 1979).

I entered graduate school thinking I would end up teaching at a small liberal arts college like the one from whence I came, and then got more deeply into research as one does in a PhD program at a major research university. Duke provided me with a comfortable balance of teaching and research at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and a perfect context for pursuing my intellectual interests. We were also able to have a life in a climate where we could often celebrate January and February birthday dinners on the screened porch of our small Cape Cod house and send our young son and daughter out to play all winter in, at most, a light jacket or sweater.

As I received tenure, however, developments in the Sociology Department were increasingly worrisome, and it was reviewed by the university for closure in the early 1980s, though not closed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Problems in sociology more broadly led to subsequent closures of major departments at the University of Rochester in 1986 and Washington University in 1991 (recently reopened in 2015) and major revamping

I spent several years as director of undergraduate studies, working to improve teaching and reverse declining enrollment in sociology courses. Our family also faced life course development challenges—needing a larger house, problematic public schools,<sup>4</sup> and Wendy's transition from social psychology to clinical psychology. Hence, we began to explore opportunities in the Research Triangle area and elsewhere. Surprisingly, an option arose at ISR at UM, with a professorial title and the ability to teach at least one course per year in the Department of Sociology. There were good public schools, and an attractive job in community mental health was available for Wendy. So we returned to UM and Ann Arbor in 1978, which provided an environment for our family and careers for my wife and me that we soon recognized were unlikely to be replicated, much less improved upon, elsewhere.

ISR and Michigan provided fertile territory for my teaching and research, with outstanding faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral colleagues in ISR, sociology, and other social sciences and related professional schools—too numerous to mention by name, but evident in all of my research grants and writing. I also spent about half of my years at Michigan in administrative positions, where my central goal was to improve research and teaching within and across sociology and the social sciences more broadly, both in their disciplinary departments and in related research centers, institutes, and professional schools. This occurred in increasingly challenging times for sociology, social science, and public policy, to which I now turn.

## **SOCIOLOGY, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND PUBLIC POLICY: 1961–1981**

### **The Broader Context**

The years from the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 to President Ronald Reagan's inauguration in 1981 were momentous and exciting, especially for those completing their education and entering early adulthood. The Great Depression and World War II had produced more political and economic destruction and human misery and death than virtually any period of human history. And they ushered in a new world order, with an anachronistic colonial world order left in tatters, and a new global world of nation states in which the United States and Soviet Union were the two superpowers. The internal colonialism of a largely white and male domination within nations, and an international neocolonialist domination of developed nations over developing and underdeveloped ones, remained. But there was an optimism of continuing social change, with political and economic development and improved quality of life for all people, though whether that future would be more capitalist or more socialist/communist was uncertain.

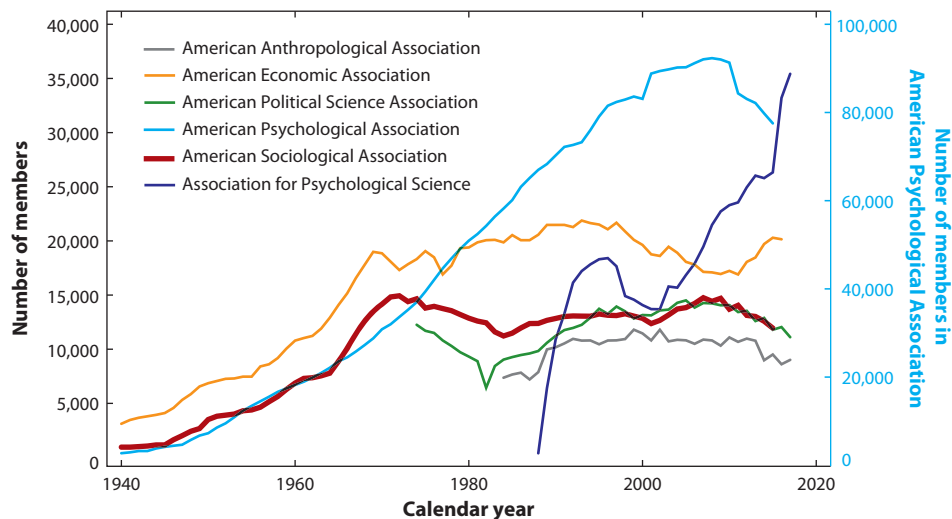
Developments seemed even more optimistic in sociology, social science, public policy, and their intersections in the quarter century after World War II. The social sciences entered World War II as small academic disciplines with a modest presence in public policy and discourse. They were, however, able to play a significant role in the war effort in the military, international, and domestic spheres. Social scientists emerged from significant collaborative work during the war with a desire to continue and expand such work in the postwar period (Converse 1987, House et al. 2004). They entered—as faculty and students—systems of higher education and support for science that were growing at an explosive pace to serve a burgeoning population and an increasing sense of the importance of education and science to the nation's well-being and international competitiveness.

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of previously prestigious Ivy League departments at Columbia, Princeton, Yale, and even, to some degree, Harvard. I return to a broader consideration of these issues shortly.

<sup>4</sup>Duke's then-president, Terry Sanford, had made his reputation as the so-called education governor of North Carolina who moved spending on public K–12 education in North Carolina from forty-eighth to forty-first among US states, now regressed to forty-fifth.





**Figure 1**

Members in social science professional associations, 1940–2017. The left axis represents members in all associations except for the American Psychological Association (*blue line*), which is shown on the right axis. Data were provided courtesy of the respective organizations.

And sociology was an increasingly central player in social science, despite its having been the last of the social sciences to attain intellectual and organizational autonomy in the early twentieth century (see Featherman & Vinovskis 2001, especially chapter 3, for a broader take on development in all these areas over the last half of the twentieth century).

### Growth and Development of Sociology, Social Science, and Public Policy

**Figure 1** shows the dramatic growth of sociology, economics, and psychology as professional, and largely academic, disciplines between 1940 and 1970, as indexed by memberships in disciplinary associations, along with trends since 1970 to which I return below.<sup>5</sup> There was also a significant flowering of interdisciplinary programs of research and training both among the social sciences and between them and professional schools, including law, education, social work, and even the business and health professions. The Joint Program in Social Psychology and the ISR were prominent at Michigan, and there were numerous notable examples elsewhere involving sociology, including the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia, and National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. This interdisciplinarity was fostered by the initial relatively small size of individual social science and related disciplines, which facilitated (and even necessitated) interdisciplinary collaboration. The growth of interdisciplinary programs also reflected a genuine sense of the inability of isolated academic disciplines to develop the basic and applied scientific understanding needed to ameliorate the vexing problems confronting human beings and societies—locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

<sup>5</sup> Political science and anthropology, for which we could only obtain data from the mid-1970s and early 1980s onwards, undoubtedly paralleled the explosive linear growth of the other social science disciplines between 1940 and 1970. The data in **Figure 1**, and **Figure 2a,b** below, just scratch the surface of potential quantitative indicators of the state and development of disciplines, leaving a fruitful area for future work.

This optimistic sense of the growing maturity and value of the social sciences was articulated in the first comprehensive assessment of the “behavioral and social sciences,” initiated in late 1966 and published in late 1969 under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences and the Social Science Research Council (Behav. Soc. Sci. Surv. Comm. 1969, p. 1):

We are living in social crisis. There have been riots in our cities and in our universities. An unwanted war defies efforts to end it. Population expansion threatens to overwhelm our social institutions. Our advanced technology can destroy natural beauty and pollute environment if we do not control its development and thus its effects...

At the root of many of these crises are perplexing problems of human behavior and relationships. The behavioral and social sciences, which are devoted to studying these problems, can help us survive current crises and avoid future ones, provided these sciences continue to make contributions of two kinds: first, in increased depth of understanding of human behavior and the institutions of society; and, second, in better ways to use this understanding in devising social policy and the management of our affairs.

## Developments in Sociology

Similar assessments and aspirations were evident in both general overviews of the state of sociology in the quarter century or so after World War II (e.g., Faris 1964) and in efforts to articulate actual and potential contributions of sociology to policy and practice in both the public and private sectors (Coleman 1972, Demerath et al. 1975, Lazarsfeld et al. 1967). Sociologists and other social scientists were actively engaged in social policy formulation and evaluation via their roles in Presidential Commissions (Komarovskiy 1975) and as authors of influential, and also controversial, government policy research, reports, and recommendations (e.g., Coleman et al. 1966, Moynihan 1965, Rainwater et al. 1967).<sup>6</sup> Many other examples are extensively and animatedly described in earlier *ARS* prefatory chapters (Gans 2009, Glazer 2012).

## The Social Indicators Movement

Sociology and sociologists were also central to a movement to develop a set of social indicators and a Council of Social Advisors at the federal level to parallel, complement, and compensate for the narrower focus of the increasingly established, influential, and successful Council of Economic Advisors, who utilized and supported a system of economic indicators at the federal level (Bauer 1966). This was in many ways an extension of sociological work in the 1920s and 1930s led by William E. Ogburn and Howard W. Odum on behalf of President Hoover.

A Council of Social Advisors never came into being, but progress was made in conceptualizing a useful set of social indicators, assessing the extent to which relevant data existed, and suggesting how a continuing set of such measures could characterize the state of American society and change in it, for purposes of both science and policy (Campbell & Converse 1972, Duncan 1969, Sheldon & Moore 1968). Both the federal government and foundations supported the social indicators movement and the actual and potential utilization of social science data, theory, and methods, in formulating and/or evaluating social policies. A unit was formed, first in the President's Office of

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<sup>6</sup>Sociologists were also involved, some rather peripherally, in Project Camelot—a Department of Defense research project begun in 1964 to understand the basis of insurgency movements in other, especially Central and South American, nations in order to mitigate them. The study's purposes, and the involvement of social scientists in it, drew early criticism, and it was canceled in 1965, though such work continued in the Department of Defense (see Horowitz 1967).

Management and Budget and then in the Commerce Department and Census Bureau, to produce and publish three compilations of social indicators (OMB 1973, 1976, 1980).

The social indicators approach was embraced and continued in many international settings, such as the United Nations and countries of the European Union and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, but died quietly in the United States by the early 1980s.

### **Growing Uncertainty and Discontent in Social Science, and Especially Sociology**

From the late 1960s through the 1970s, the social sciences, perhaps especially sociology, became increasingly uncertain about and discontented with their involvement in social policy. Those who valued pure disciplinary science saw engagement with other disciplines and more applied policy as diversions from, or corruptions of, the fundamental nature of their field, and many interdisciplinary programs and institutes (and their associated joint appointments) began to decline as the cooperating units became separately larger and more powerful, and more protective of their own turfs.

Not only disciplinary purists, but also those working to bring sociology and other social sciences to bear on social policy, became increasingly concerned or disappointed with the degree to which attempts at practical and policy application actually succeeded (Scott & Shore 1979, C.H. Weiss 1976, J.A. Weiss 1976). Some efforts to engage social science in major federal and domestic policy created polarizing controversies in sociology and other social science disciplines (e.g., anthropology, political science, and psychology) that increasingly muted direct involvement of social scientists, and certainly sociologists, in many areas of applied policy research.<sup>7</sup>

By the beginning of the 1980s, sociologists and much of social science (excepting especially economics to which I return below) had largely withdrawn from many former areas of interdisciplinary and applied policy endeavors.

### **SOCIOLOGY, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND PUBLIC POLICY: THE 1980s AND 1990s**

#### **The Broader Context**

The 1970s marked a gradual and somewhat tortured transition from the heady world of sociology, social science, and public policy of the first quarter century post-World War II to the new order that took shape over the 1980s, with the elections of 1968 and 1980 arguably the bookend turning points. The tumultuous year and election of 1968 were pivotal in ending almost four decades of Democratic ascendance in the political world and ushering in a decade of economic stagflation and associated slowing of growth in spending for public goods, including research and higher education in the social sciences and more broadly. Nixon's successful southern strategy in the 1968 election permanently disrupted the New Deal coalitions of northern and southern Democrats that had dominated the political scene at the federal and many lower levels of government since 1933.<sup>8</sup> But whether this would be a long-term realignment was unclear as Watergate ended

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<sup>7</sup> See Bobo (2005) and Massey & Sampson (2009) for thoughtful discussion of controversies around aforementioned work by Coleman et al. (1966), Moynihan (1965), and the Kerner Commission (Natl. Advis. Comm. Civ. Disord. 1968) and the negative and positive shorter- and longer-term impacts on work in sociology and its relation to policy.

<sup>8</sup> Conflicts on the Democratic left contributed to Hubert Humphrey's narrow defeat and then spread into left-leaning areas of the social sciences, perhaps especially sociology, fueling some of the internecine struggles of the last several decades of the twentieth century.

Nixon's career, and then 1976 showed that a southern Democrat could hold enough of the South to win the Presidency (demonstrated again by the Clinton and Gore campaigns of 1992 and 1996).

Nixon (and his successor Gerald Ford) in many ways pursued international and domestic policies that were not radical breaks with the 1948–1968 period, including bringing back Daniel Moynihan as a principal advisor on domestic policy, and Carter (and later Clinton) represented a more centrist approach to traditional Democratic policies. I moved to UM in fall 1978 without a thought of how economic and political change might adversely affect support for the educational or research missions of public research universities. On arrival, things seemed to be humming along, with state and federal funding still driving an optimistic and at least modest growth mentality, despite the increasing challenges of stagflation. This all soon changed with the 1980 election and the largest (in terms of unemployment) post–World War II economic recession before the Great Recession of 2007–2009.

The abrupt and steep decline of the American auto industry in the 1980s made Michigan the prototype of Rust Belt decline and led to rapidly diminishing public support at the state level for higher education. And the election of Ronald Reagan ushered in an increasingly conservative era in American politics, predicated on shrinking government spending in many areas, including a targeted assault on federal support for research and training in the social sciences.

Almost immediately the Reagan administration implemented large, politically motivated cuts in research and training funding for social sciences at the National Science Foundation (NSF) and most “mission” agencies (e.g., the Departments of Labor and Education). Funding that was not directly linked to health was also cut at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the then-separate National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). From the early 1970s to the early 1980s, federal research funding for social science fell by one-third. The cuts were very differentially distributed: Sociology and “other social sciences” sustained 50–100% reductions, with economics, political science, and psychology more modestly affected (House et al. 2008, pp. 245–47 and figures 3a,b). These reductions in federal research funding for sociology were not restored in real dollar terms until the year 2000—impacting sociology's nature and direction for the last two decades of the twentieth century and beyond.

### **Manifest and Latent Consequences of the Reagan Era for Sociology, Social Science, and Higher Education**

The manifest impact of reduced state and federal support for sociology and much of higher education is clear in the declining membership of the ASA that began in the later 1970s and accelerated in the early 1980s, never to return to the high water mark of the late 1960s and early 1970s as shown in **Figure 1**, and in data on degrees granted discussed below. Again, economics and psychology weathered that storm better than sociology (and anthropology and geography), with a more mixed picture in political science, for all of which data are not as complete.

There were also latent, probably unintended, yet equally significant, consequences for sociology and other social sciences. Interdisciplinary research and training declined as disciplinary units circled their wagons to protect the dwindling resources they had. Intradisciplinary consequences affecting sociology took several forms. First was a decline in areas of research and training most dependent on substantial external funding, again with the exception of those most closely tied to health. NIMH's long-term support for basic disciplinary training and research (of the type provided to biological sciences) disappeared, as did NSF and NIH funding for more basic large-scale research on sizeable organizational, state, regional, or national populations. Support continued for three basic social science studies that were providentially designated as NSF national data resource studies in the late 1970s—the General Social Survey, the (American) National Election

Study, and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics—though these also experienced considerable belt-tightening.

Areas such as the sociology and psychosocial epidemiology of Health and Aging and Population Studies remained supported in the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD), the National Institute of Aging (fortuitously established in 1981), and gradually all disease-specific institutes. In most other areas, however, funding came in fewer and smaller bundles, fostering intradisciplinary shifts toward secondary analysis of existing large population data, and toward theoretical, ethnographic, historical, and experimental work that could be accomplished with modest or even no external funding. It also fostered movement in demographic/population studies (funded heavily by NICHD) beyond more traditional formal demography toward social demography, which increasingly became the principal locus for larger-scale quantitative sociology.

All of this increased intradisciplinary competition for resources exacerbated the problem of intellectual unity versus diversity, which was already apparent in the 1970s as polarization increased along theoretical/substantive and/or methodological lines. Polarization was further exacerbated by a humanistic turn of parts of sociology and other, more humanistic social sciences (e.g., socio-cultural anthropology); this movement was heavily influenced by postmodernist, poststructuralist, and phenomenology movements that challenged the very idea of objective data, evidence, and science (McDonald 1996, Steinmetz 2005).

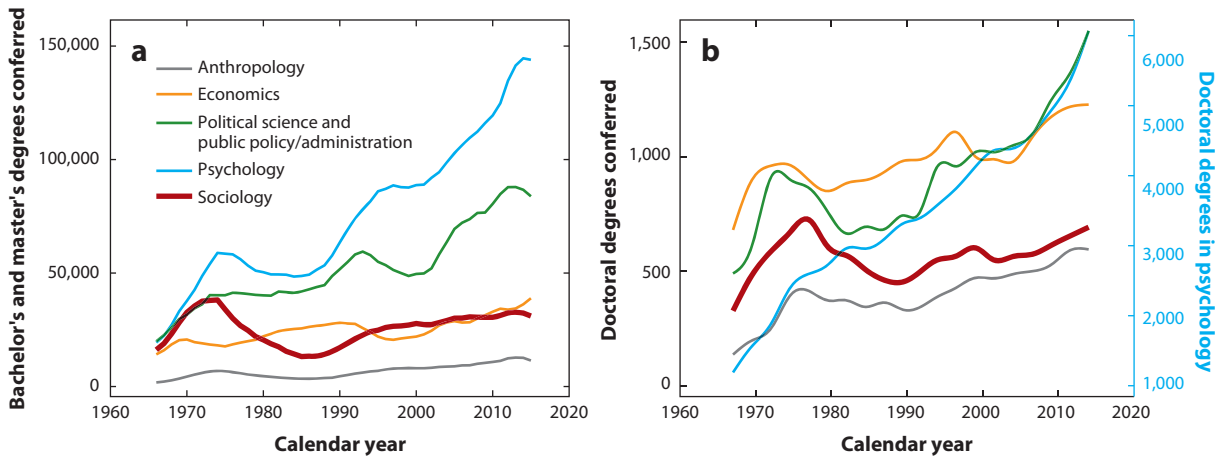
These all impacted my developing career as both faculty member/researcher and administrator during the 1980s. On arriving at Michigan in 1978, I was able to easily fund research projects in both social psychological (from NSF) and health (from NIH) aspects of my work. By 1981, this was becoming much harder, especially in nonhealth areas.<sup>9</sup> While retaining a significant engagement in research at ISR, which was increasingly focused solely on health and aging, I committed more heavily to teaching and administration in sociology, serving as associate chair (principally for graduate studies) from 1981–1984 and chair from 1985–1990. My administrative concerns, beyond the overarching goal of enhancing the quality and size of the department, were battling declining graduate and undergraduate enrollment, increasing the sociodemographic diversity of the student body (especially at the graduate level while associate chair) and of the faculty (as chair), and improving the integration, coherence, and collegiality of the department in terms of both theory/substance and methods.

I became increasingly concerned in the early 1980s about the cohesion and integration of sociology at the level of our and other departments and of the overall discipline, and its relation to interdisciplinary endeavors and broader social policy in both the public and private sectors. Sociologists continued to flourish in many ways, including areas in which I was involved—social determinants and disparities in health, and the impact of social contexts and neighborhoods on health and other aspects of social behavior and well-being—but the whole seemed increasingly less than the sum of its parts [as reflected in **Figure 1** (above) and **Figure 2** (below), and discussion of applied/policy sociology above and below]. My personal dis-ease in these regards was reinforced when our dean noted, in discussions about my becoming Chair, “I have a lot of respect for many sociologists, but not much for sociology.” And I fear that neither he and I, nor the broader department and discipline, made much progress in these regards over the remainder of my term, or since.

The end of the Reagan administration brought a “kinder, gentler” conservatism in society and politics, with gradual improvements in support for higher education, research, and social science,

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<sup>9</sup>My own research and training reflected the broader impacts of the shifting funding environment. Sociological social psychology became a less central focus, with interdisciplinary work in health and aging increasingly dominant. Ironically, Ron Kessler and I inherited (and had to refocus around interdisciplinary work on health) an NIMH training program that had supported graduate training in sociology across all areas of sociology.



**Figure 2**

(a) Social science bachelor's and master's degrees granted in the United States, 1966–2015. (b) Social Science doctoral degrees granted in the United States, 1966–2015. The left axis shows degrees in all disciplines except psychology (blue line), which is shown on the right axis. Data are from the National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Completions Survey (<https://ncesdata.nsf.gov/webcaspar/>).

though, as noted elsewhere, to levels at the end of the century that in real terms only approximated those of the 1970s. Our department experienced growth in the quantity, quality, and diversity of faculty and students, along with a curricular reform that momentarily showed great promise of breaking down the theoretical/substantive and methodological divisions, but gradually lapsed back toward the status quo. And efforts to maintain, much less enhance, interdisciplinary appointments and programs gradually diminished. After fulfilling my commitment as chair, I moved back toward a focus on research and teaching on the social determinants and disparities in health and aging, and administrative duties at ISR.

Neil Smelser's (1988, pp. 11, 14) characterization of the state of sociology, both absolutely and relative to the golden years of the first quarter century after World War II, resonated with me then (and now) (see also House 2008, Sewell 1989):

...possible stagnation or contraction of the resource base for the discipline, and...internal differentiation, fragmentation, and conflict...must be at the center of any discussion of sociology...The view of the behavioral and social sciences in the halls of government, moreover, is fraught with ambivalence.

And Stephen and Jonathon Turner (Turner & Turner 1990) diagnosed sociology as “the impossible science,” with only one of them holding out any hope for its resurrection as science.

### The Rise of Economics and Public Policy

While sociology languished in increasingly internecine debates over the 1970s and 1980s, economics rose to a position of preeminence among the social and behavioral sciences, and a new profession of public policy was created, heavily dominated by (micro) economics.

Beginning with its “enNoblement” as a Nobel Prize discipline in 1969,<sup>10</sup> economics increasingly assumed a mantle as the most scientific, objective, and nonideological of the social sciences.

<sup>10</sup>The Sveriges Riksbank (Bank of Sweden) Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel was established by the Bank of Sweden long after Alfred Nobel endowed the original five awards in 1895, and it

It also came to play an increasingly central role in professional education in a number of fields, especially business, but also public health and, most notably, public policy, which was literally created as an academic discipline and profession in the 1970s and 1980s out of and beside the older professional field of public administration (Allison 2008). Over this period, microeconomics became the dominant paradigm of economics, which increasingly defined itself as a science of individual and organizational choices under constrained opportunities and resources—including reformulation of macroeconomics as an aggregation of microeconomic principles and phenomena (e.g., Lucas & Sargent 1979).

Impetus for creating schools of public policy came from the implementation of the Planning, Programming and Budgeting System—a framework for planning and cost-benefit analysis blending elements of microeconomics and operations research—first by Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense, and then throughout all federal agencies by President Lyndon Johnson. This, in turn, required a “new cadre of rigorously trained analysts” (Stokes 1996, p. 160), and major universities responded by establishing programs training students in public policy analysis at the University of Michigan, Harvard University, the University of California at Berkeley, Carnegie Mellon University, RAND Graduate School, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Minnesota, the University of Texas, and Duke University (Crecine 1971, pp. 7–32). In 1972 the Ford Foundation, under the leadership of McGeorge Bundy, provided five-year, multi-million-dollar grants to support eight such programs.

By the mid-1990s, Rebecca Blank (2002) noted that economists trained either in economics or in related professional schools with a dominant microeconomic framework (e.g., business and public policy) occupied most policy analysis positions throughout the federal government, not just in obvious economic places (e.g., the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Commerce, the Federal Reserve), but in virtually all agencies (e.g., the Departments of Defense, Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, etc.).

Economics also significantly impacted other disciplines, as rational choice theory gained increasing prominence in sociology (e.g., Coleman 1990) and political science, with political scientist Elinor Ostrom becoming, in 2008, the first woman awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics. Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (Kahneman & Tversky 1979) also made special, and successful, efforts (i.e., publishing a paper in *Econometrica* after failing to get attention from economists for papers in psychology journals and even *Science*) to demonstrate the nonrationality of much economic behavior, contributing to the development of the field of behavioral economics and two Nobel Prizes (to Kahneman in 2002 and Richard Thaler in 2017). In sum, as sociology has increasingly withdrawn from the area of public policy, economists have come to be the dominant social-behavioral science influence in public policy, both academically and in practice. This had significant repercussions for me personally, and for the role of sociology in public policy.

## The 1990s

In 1991 I became director of the Survey Research Center (SRC), the largest unit of ISR. I continued teaching in sociology, helping to implement another attempt at curricular reform, which somewhat increased the unity of graduate training in sociology and reinforced a trend toward multimethod research at Michigan and in the larger discipline. But underlying substantive/theoretical and methodological diversity and division remained.

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is easy to imagine that another comparably resourced sponsor might have defined the scope as, for example, “social, behavioral, and economic sciences,” or some other area altogether. However, recipients have included noneconomists and economists with broad social science interests and accomplishments (e.g., Gunnar Myrdahl, Herbert Simon, Elinor Ostrom, Amartya Sen, and Daniel Kahneman).

I worked as director of SRC to grow and strengthen it, including increasing joint appointments between academic units and SRC and also the diversity of SRC's research faculty, again with some success—not always sustained into the twenty-first century as departures of those hired have not always resulted in comparable replacements.

While support for research and training in much of sociology continued to languish into the twenty-first century, I became increasingly involved in interdisciplinary training and research on psychosocial determinants and disparities in health with faculty colleagues, postdocs, and predocs in not only sociology, but also other social sciences, public health, and medicine. Supported by funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the doubling of NIH's budget between 1997 and 2002, I had a full plate of teaching, training, and research by the time I stepped down as SRC Director in 2001, which is well described elsewhere (e.g., House 2002, 2015).

During the 1990s others experienced my sense of frustration with the increasing dissension and dissipation within sociology. Lewis Coser (1993, pp. 12–13), a sociologist of a decidedly different stripe than Smelser or me, wrote:

...the last 20 or so years have been years of turmoil, distress, and dissension in the ranks of American sociology..., so that one is tempted to compare the current state of affairs in the American sociological field to a "Tower of Babel"...We are clearly experiencing a crisis of American sociology...

Coser (1993, p. 14) saw the way out of the crisis through better interaction and synthesis between theory and research:

...sociologists...may upon occasion be able to develop a theoretical tool without being concerned for the moment with its application, but in the long-run, a tool will be of value only if it is applied in research operations. It is the dialectical interplay between tool and research problem that is, or rather should be, the essence of the sociologist's task.

A special issue of *Sociological Forum* in 1994 was devoted to "What's wrong with sociology?" (Cole 1994), and in an *American Journal of Sociology* Centennial Essay, Joan Huber (1995), one of sociology's highest-ranking university administrators to that point, lamented the lack of a "core" and other problems in sociology, noting that the report of a high-powered task group on graduate education in sociology appointed by her as ASA president in 1988 was neither approved nor circulated to the ASA membership for discussion when presented to the ASA Council in 1992 (Huber 1995, pp. 206–10).

Several years earlier, Lois DeFleur (1991) another leading sociologist and university president commented:

I have found over the years that when I meet with administrators, as soon as they find out I am a sociologist, they all have a woeful story to tell about how they just can't understand how their Sociology Department can continue to fight among themselves, and that if that continues, they will in fact write them off. They won't channel resources to a department which is incapable of keeping its own house in order; that does not support the professional development of junior faculty or that seems more interested in petty squabbling than the atmosphere and reputation of the university. There are, in fact, many worthy competitors for funding.

A contemporaneous survey of deans rated sociology lowest among nine disciplines on departmental quality of teaching and research (Lynch et al. 1993).

## **SOCIOLOGY, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND PUBLIC POLICY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

### **A Personal Tilt Toward Public Policy**

My life after administration proved fuller than expected, with increasing senior faculty member service both within the university and outside continuing to provide a broad perspective on the



nature of and relations among the social sciences, and their intersection with other disciplines and professions and with broader public policy. I also became more interested in potential public policy applications of my and others' work on social determinants and disparities in health (House 2015, 2016). The increasing predominance of economics among the social sciences and in academic and actual public policy became more acutely concerning to me as economists engaged in and with research and policy regarding social determinants and disparities in health, extending their traditional and quite natural leading role in research and policy regarding health care spending and insurance.

Seeking to integrate work on social determinants and disparities in health by sociologists and social epidemiologists with related work of economists and policy analysts, a team comprising a sociologist (me), a social epidemiologist (George Kaplan), an economist (Robert Schoeni), and a policy analyst (Harold Pollack) organized a 2006 conference in which two presenters and two discussants, one of each pair being a sociologist/social epidemiologist and the other an economist/public policy analyst, evaluated the evidence for the health effects of five areas of social and economic policy. The papers were published as a book (Schoeni et al. 2008).

Although there was considerable congruence across pairs, sociologists/social epidemiologists were clearly coming from different perspectives and traditions, both substantively and methodologically, than economists/public policy analysts. Our and other work, both observational and experimental, indicated that social determinants and disparities in health had, for over four decades, come to have a growing impact on health and health research (e.g., research of this type was nonexistent at NIH through most of the 1960s but grew to have a presence in almost all institutes by the twenty-first century) and evidence-based health policy (see Healthy People 2020; US Dep. Health Educ. Welf. 1979; US Dep. Health Hum. Serv. 1990, 2000). Economists and public policy analysts, however, were more skeptical of broad explanatory and policy variables, and of observational evidence, preferring to focus on more specific policy factors and “nudges” (Thaler & Sunstein 2008) supported by randomized experiments.

I concluded that I and other sociologists/social epidemiologists could have greater impact on academic and actual public policy only by becoming more engaged with schools of public policy, both to better understand the dominant economic framework of current public policy education and practice, and to infuse greater sociological perspectives in both domains. Serendipitously, UM's Ford School of Public Policy and Sociology Department had been struggling to make a senior joint appointment and welcomed my dividing my academic appointment between the two units, with my teaching and locus of academic activity shifting to policy.

I had a tripartite goal: (a) better understanding the perspectives and practices of public policy and its dominant analytic paradigm of applied microeconomics/cost-benefit analysis, (b) increasing the role of sociologists and sociological perspectives in public policy education and practice, and (c) improving my and other sociologists' capabilities to influence public policy. I made considerable progress on the first goal, not only from interactions with Ford School faculty and students, who welcomed me warmly, but also by auditing the central core course in the Master of Public Policy curriculum—microeconomics and cost-benefit analysis—my formal economics education to that point having been an undergraduate course in macroeconomics circa 1964.

The second goal proved unexpectedly difficult, given the active pursuit of sociologists by the Ford School. Multiple recruitment attempts with very good candidates at both the tenured and tenure-track levels foundered, largely because of reluctance of sociologists to have primary appointments in the Ford School and/or unwillingness of the Department of Sociology to allocate fractional positions to true joint appointments. Much remains to be learned about the reasons for this, but it clearly indicated a serious problem in moving sociologists into public policy that was

largely absent with economists, political scientists, and those in other disciplinary or professional fields.<sup>11</sup>

I succeeded in teaching a generally well-received course on Socioeconomic Policy and Health Policy and the introductory seminar for students in joint Public Policy PhD Programs with Economics, Political Science and Sociology, and in completing a book (House 2015) on the essential role of social determinants and disparities in health in understanding and resolving America's paradoxical crisis in health policy (spending more and more for health care and insurance and getting less and less in returns to population health, first relative to other comparable nations and now also absolutely). Unfortunately, whatever its intrinsic merits and demerits, the book was addressed to a Hillary Clinton administration; it appeared in June 2015 as Donald Trump began his ultimately successful run to the Republican nomination and US presidency. I retired in summer 2014 from formal teaching, service, and external grant getting (though I have continued research, writing, and even service more of my own choosing), having made less progress than I'd hoped toward forging greater links between sociology and public policy.

### Meanwhile in Sociology, the Discipline

From my perspective, the twenty-first century has only further accentuated the problems, and perhaps even the impossibility, of sociology as a discipline, while, at the same time, sociologists have continued to be active and productive in many ways. The way sociology behaved and presented itself as a discipline around the turn of the millennium and the ASA's hundredth anniversary as a professional association was perplexing and troubling. In 2000 the *ARS* invited "sociologists from different specialties to write about what they wished they knew but did not know at the dawn of the next century." The result was eight "eclectic and provocative" essays, manifesting no coherent collective sense of the accomplishments of sociology in the twentieth century nor its likely and best directions for the twenty-first (Cook 2000, pp. v–vi). Similarly, the *American Sociological Review*, the official flagship and most cited journal in the discipline, undertook a millennial issue that asked contributors to "emphasize the state of society, *not* the state of sociology" (Firebaugh 2000, p. v, emphasis in original), resulting again in interesting and useful analysis of selected topics (modernization, globalization, and industrialization) but again little sense of the development and accomplishments of sociology in the twentieth century, or the most likely or promising directions for the twenty-first century.

A more coherent, though also quite particularistic, direction was increasingly adopted by the ASA in the twenty-first century. Many of the key events and initiatives occurred around the hundredth anniversary of the ASA in 2005. The most consistently present person in the ASA hierarchy over this period was Michael Burawoy, who was elected ASA president in 2002 and hence served as president-elect in 2002–2003, president in 2003–2004, and past president in 2004–2005. He used these years to develop, articulate, and promulgate a systematic conceptualization of what sociology is (and might be) as a discipline and advocate for a greater central focus primarily on what he termed "public sociology," and secondarily on "critical sociology," which became reflected in actions of ASA over this period. How much Burawoy was an innovative entrepreneur and leader in the actions of ASA, and to what extent he was merely articulating ongoing trends, is uncertain from current evidence. Understanding Burawoy's vision of and for sociology is useful, however, for discussing major issues and directions in the discipline since 2000.

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<sup>11</sup>At some universities, especially Harvard and Princeton, who hired almost exclusively at the tenured level, sociologists were more engaged with their policy schools (e.g., Christopher Jencks and William Julius Wilson at Harvard; or Douglas Massey and Sara McLanahan at Princeton; and more recently Kathryn Edin, Devah Pager, and Matthew Desmond at both).

**Table 1** Burawoy’s conception of sociology, delineating four types or aspects of sociology

Type of Knowledge	Type of Audience	
	Academic	Extra-academic
<b>Instrumental</b>	<b>Professional sociology:</b> “research programs that define assumptions theories, concepts, questions, and puzzles and provide true and tested methods and accumulated bodies of knowledge”	<b>Policy sociology:</b> “performed in the service of a goal defined by clients”
<b>Reflexive</b>	<b>Critical sociology:</b> “examines [critiques] the research programs of professional sociology”	<b>Public sociology:</b> “strikes up a dialogue between sociologists and publics”

Adapted from Burawoy (2005, pp. 9–12 and tables 1 and 2).

### Burawoy’s Conception of and Direction for Sociology

Burawoy’s arguments regarding the past, current, and future nature and direction of sociology are laid out in 11 theses and embodied in the fourfold **Table 1**, which integrates aspects of his text and tables 1 and 2 (Burawoy 2005, pp. 9–12) and delineates four types or aspects of sociology.

Note that Burawoy (2005, pp. 9–16) does not define sociology in terms of what it is about and/or the phenomena it seeks to explain, but rather in terms of four kinds of sociological labor. These four ideal types are defined by two dimensions: instrumental versus reflexive knowledge, and academic versus extra-academic audience. Policy sociology is in the service of a client, which some public and most private policy is. But I also see much work in public policy and sociology simply seeking to bring evidence to bear on policy issues and choices confronting various levels and sectors of society, and many applied sociologists define their own agendas (e.g., promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion; or improving the criminal justice system, etc.) and contract to work with clients who have similar ideas and goals.

Burawoy’s public sociology by contrast, “strikes up a dialogue between sociologists and publics...in which each adjusts to the other” (Burawoy 2005, p. 9) (as also does much public and private policy sociology, in my view). Professional sociology is characterized as what sociologists mostly do, supplying “true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge,...[and] is not the enemy of policy and public sociology but the sine qua non of their existence” (Burawoy 2005, p. 10). The role of critical sociology is “to examine [and critique] the foundations...of the research programs of professional sociology” (Burawoy 2005, p. 10). Burawoy (2005, p. 15) sees virtues and vices in each of these four forms of sociological labor, contending in his sixth thesis that proper integration and balance of them is what is needed.

Burawoy’s (2005, p. 17) seventh thesis appropriately notes that all of society and academic/scientific disciplines are stratified and contested domains along lines of resources and power (but also, I would add, values and ideas, and data). Working out these contests and inequalities is a dynamic force for change, in both positive and negative ways. At this point, Burawoy (2005, pp. 17–25) increasingly abandons his catholic and inclusive perspective for partisanship and particularism, arguing that professional and policy sociology (with, or at least alongside, political science and economics) have subjugated critical and public sociology to the detriment of sociology as a discipline and of human (“civil”) society, both domestically and globally. Indeed, Burawoy (2005, p. 24) suggests the natural sciences, more scientific forms of social science (including professional and policy sociology), and the “instrumental” knowledge they generate increasingly serve the interests of societal power structures, undergirded by mainstream economics’ legitimation of “market tyranny” and mainstream political science’s legitimation of “state despotism.” This leads to his call for greater public, and also critical, sociology to counteract these trends.

To support his arguments, Burawoy (2005, p. 18) adduces quantitative data on the growth and development of the discipline between 1985 and 2005:

Sociology's decline in the 1980s was short-lived. Far from being in the doldrums, sociology has never been in better shape. The number of BAs in sociology has been increasing steadily since 1985, overtaking economics and history, and nearly catching up with political science. The production of PhDs still lags behind these neighboring disciplines, but our numbers have been growing steadily since 1989... [and] will continue to grow to meet the demand for undergraduate teaching... Given a political climate hostile to sociology, this is perhaps strange, yet it could be that the very climate is drawing people to the critical and public moments of sociology.

Contextualizing those data within the full record from the 1960s to the present tells a much less optimistic story, to which I return after noting some other important impacts and associations of Burawoy's work on sociology via the ASA.

### **An American Sociological Association Tilt Toward Reflexive/Critical and Public Sociology**

The ASA pursued an agenda in the first decade of the twenty-first century that was increasingly oriented toward public and critical sociology, beginning perhaps with the inauguration in 2002 of a quarterly magazine, *Contexts*, "about society and social behavior...as the public face of sociology,...The hallmarks of *Contexts* are accessibility, broad appeal, and timeliness" (<http://www.asanet.org/research-and-publications/contexts>).

Activities around the hundredth anniversary of ASA in 2005 further signaled and reinforced this new tilt in ASA. One was the official scholarly centennial publication of the ASA—*Sociology in America: A History*, edited by Craig Calhoun (2007) in collaboration with an editorial advisory committee comprising Andrew Abbott, Troy Duster (the 2005 ASA President), Barbara Laslett, Alan Sica, and Margaret Somers. The volume is largely an exercise in critical historical sociology focusing on intellectual and group conflicts in sociology, but with little indication of what sociologists have contributed to the development of their field or the broader world of social science and human society, either as a total discipline or in major subareas beyond criminology, gender, and race/ethnicity. There is virtually no discussion of methodology (with survey research caricatured as a form of Fordism) or of major substantive fields (educational and economic stratification and inequality, organizations, demography/population studies, social psychology, marriage and family, medical/health, and life course/aging among the most obvious). Critical sociology needs to be a part of the study of sociology and its subfields, but it cannot and should not be all there is. Whatever its contribution to critical sociology, the volume virtually ignores professional/scientific and policy sociology, and cannot have much advanced public sociology, as best I can tell, as it received a varied set of reviews and has, to date, 202 Google Scholar citations.

One can also perceive change in other ASA activities including foci of its annual meetings, and participants in them, toward greater engagement with the world external to sociology, with emphases on public sociology becoming more coequal with longer-term foci on professional and policy sociology.

As noted above, Burawoy (2005, p. 18) cited growth since 1985 in ASA membership and degrees granted in sociology as signs that "sociology's decline in the 1980s was short-lived,...[and] today [2004] sociology has never been in better shape." Unfortunately, the full range of data from the past half century, and even the past three decades, belies this characterization. As **Figure 1** shows, ASA

membership did rise from 2000 to 2004, perhaps heavily driven by growing student memberships, but never quite returned to its early 1970s peak. The years since 2005 have seen a steady decline, now approaching the nadir of the mid-1980s.

Burawoy (2005, p. 9) also pointed to the growth in BA and PhD degrees in sociology since 1985 and 1989, respectively, hence in the major audience for public sociology, our students. **Figure 2a** shows the number of bachelor's and master's degrees granted in the United States since the mid-1960s in the five major social sciences (driven mainly by bachelor's degrees, except in political science, which the National Center for Education Statistics lumps with public policy/administration). Sociology manifests growth in bachelor's and master's degrees from the nadir of 1985, with the bulk of that growth in the mid-1990s and little or none since 2000, with a return to declines in the current decade. In the early 1970s, bachelor's and master's degrees granted in sociology were about double those in economics, about equal to political science, and about half of the always-largest discipline of psychology. Presently sociology lags much further behind all of the other social sciences, excepting anthropology, and is the only discipline that has not yet recovered to the peaks of the 1970s. And at the secondary education level, sociology is the only one of these fields not to have an Advanced Placement examination. No causal inferences are possible with respect to the tilt toward public sociology, but it is clearly not spurring a growth in bachelor's and master's degrees in sociology, or in the serious study of sociology at the level of secondary education.

The longer-term perspective regarding doctoral degrees may be marginally better absolutely, though not relative to other social science disciplines, as shown in **Figure 2b**. Again, sociology has grown since the nadir of 1989, with an apparent recent upward bump. Still, sociology is the only discipline to have not yet returned to levels of the mid-1970s; sociology was only 25–30% below economics and political science in the 1970s, and about twice as productive of PhDs as anthropology. Now sociology is barely above anthropology, and awards only half as many PhDs as economics, one-third as many as political science, and one tenth as many as psychology. Thus, sociology has gone from being a major to a minor player in PhD production in the social sciences, and PhDs provide the work force for sociology in all its forms.

None of this should be taken as an argument against critical and public sociology as appropriate components of what sociology, or any discipline, has been or should be. Burawoy (2005, p. 15) himself argues that professional sociology is most of what sociologists appropriately do and the “sine qua non for the existence of policy and public sociology” (and, by definition, critical sociology as well). My concern with some of Burawoy's arguments and the directions of the discipline, especially as they become more partisan, is their adverse impact on the coherence and cohesion of the discipline, and hence also the research knowledge function, which is the discipline's *raison d'être*. Without a sound scientific and scholarly base, the critical and especially policy and public aspects of any discipline are rendered ineffectual, and even counterproductive, perhaps especially so sociology, which is regarded with skepticism to hostility by many outside of it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Let me also note other positive developments in sociology that are not intrinsically linked to its intellectual and organizational unity, coherence, and cohesion of the discipline, and are also simply beyond the size limitations of an *ARS* article. One has been the greater professionalization and development of ASA as an administrative organization trying to facilitate the achievement of its mission as defined by the membership. Another is the sociodemographic diversification of the field that has occurred over the last quarter of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, and has become increasingly evident in the occupancy of senior and leadership positions in both the ASA and academic and nonacademic sociology. Both of these developments have been and should be assets to the further progress and development of sociology in all its forms.

## THE CURRENT STATE AND CULMINATING CRISIS OF SOCIOLOGY

Based on a lifetime of participant observation as a sociologist and interdisciplinary social scientist, input from other informants with a similarly broad perspective over time and intellectual and disciplinary space, and review of historical literature and quantitative evidence over most of the post–World War II period, I cannot be sanguine about either the current state or future prospects of sociology as a discipline, at least in its present form, though I can be quite sanguine about the work of many sociologists. From its inception, and even during its golden age in the quarter century after World War II, sociology has been vexed by an existential problem of (intellectual) unity versus (intellectual) diversity.

Despite the best efforts of many via their research and scholarship, teaching, service, and/or administration and leadership, this problem has become increasingly polarized along lines of both substance/theory and methods, and hence increasingly debilitating for the discipline, a conclusion supported by many observers and increasing empirical evidence. Currently, the whole is not only less than the sum of its parts, but the friction between the parts adversely affects both research and teaching across the field, even in places doing the best work of all types. The consequence is lack of growth and development of sociology as a discipline and profession, and in its broader missions of research, scholarship, teaching, service, and contribution to public policy and the betterment of human individuals and societies. Another worrisome sign is the growing tendency of sociologists to retreat into increasingly homogeneous communities within their discipline (e.g., the proliferation of sections within the ASA), and/or to prefer other professional associations and meetings (e.g., the Population Association of America for quantitative sociologists or the Social Science History Association for comparative historical sociologists).

It is increasingly difficult to achieve even a Quaker consensus as to what sociology is, and hence how it should be taught, and what it should contribute to the world of knowledge and the functioning of human society. Examples of this are the minimalist and/or highly variegated definitions of sociology offered in textbooks, in internal review documents, and on departmental or professional association websites. For example, on the website of the ASA (<https://www.asanet.org/about-asa/asa-story/what-sociology>), one finds the following summary that sociology is:

- The study of society
- A social science involving the study of the social lives of people, groups, and societies
- The study of our behavior as social beings, covering everything from the analysis of short contacts between anonymous individuals on the street to the study of global social processes
- The scientific study of social aggregations, the entities through which humans move throughout their lives
- An overarching unification of all studies of humankind, including history, psychology, and economics

## WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The sources of sociology's current state and crisis are manifold. Sociology has been much affected, even victimized, by forces in its external environment, but also by both the way it has responded intradisciplinarily to these external forces, and the long-term internecine conflicts within it. No organization or discipline can effectively respond to external challenges without substantial internal coherence, cohesion, and consensus. So I focus here on how sociologists and sociology must and might deal with their internal problems.

Sociology is hardly unique among the social sciences, natural sciences, or humanities in experiencing centrifugal forces toward intellectual disunity and diffusion. However, when these forces

reach the level they have in sociology, they impede both the whole and major parts in making the progress they could and should regarding scientific and scholarly development and contributions to society and public policy.

Tragically this comes at a time when the knowledge and wisdom of sociology are more crucial than ever, both in the academic and scientific worlds and as a resource for progress and positive development of human society. Over the past half century, we have come to live in an age of economics, genomics, and informatics, all of which view the collective world as emerging from the development and interaction of human individuals making autonomous choices with as much access to information as possible, and guided by their evolved nature as biological organisms. Macrolevel sociocultural structures and processes emerge from these microsocial processes, but they are largely benign; if not, they are seen as failures or undesirable externalities of the market, information flows, or normal genetically guided growth and development. Hence these problems putatively can be solved by modest external nudges to restore normal positive functioning of market choices under maximal information and healthy genetic tendencies. The strong and independent power of macrosocial structures and processes, whether for good or bad, is little recognized or discussed.

Sociology should be the source of recognition, discussion, and understanding of those macrosocial forces and their operation in threatening or improving individual and collective well-being and social policy. Sadly, in its current form intellectually and organizationally, sociology is increasingly unable to play that role, and making it more, rather than less, difficult for sociologists to do so. I see three possible paths out of this tragedy, with only one being both feasible and desirable.

First, sociology and sociologists can continue along their current path, with sociology gradually dissipating and disintegrating, and sociologists increasingly shifting themselves into other kinds of academic and organizational settings for research, scholarship, education, service, and societal and policy engagement. For example, public policy and applied microeconomics could absorb many quantitative sociologists and is probably doing so already. As one of my informants said, “Some of my best sociologists are economists” (yet it could be vice versa). Analogously, many qualitative and humanistically oriented sociologists could shift into or coalesce with sociocultural anthropology, history, philosophy, or even literary studies. And many sociologists have already transferred their main locus of activity to professional schools (e.g., organizational sociologists to business, educational sociologists to education, and health/medical sociologists to medicine and public health). The very real and undesirable risk here is that sociology is left as a hollowed out, and quite possibly unviable, shell, and its distinctive perspective muted or lost.

Second, sociology and sociologists could collectively reach a Quaker consensus on major issues (e.g., are we a science and what does that mean; what is our substantive domain of expertise and value-added in the realms of both science and policy; how can we best organize ourselves and act, both intra- and interdisciplinarily, to promote positive development of sociology and society?). Such consensus decision making and action could occur in many types of sociological organizations—academic departments, research centers and institutes, and policy/applied or disciplinary organizations—and at many levels—local, state, regional, national, and international. The optimist in me fervently wishes this to be the case; the realist tells me that we are simply no longer capable of this, if we ever were, except in isolated times and places.

Third, and probably the most feasible and effective, would be to resolve the problems of sociology as it currently exists by devolving it into two independent, though related, fields of scientific/empirical sociology and humanistic/philosophical sociology, with most sociologists going into one

or the other, but some retaining a foot in both.<sup>13</sup> Multiple other disciplines and fields in social and natural science have, over the past half century, faced similar problems and taken this course. Botany and zoology first become a unified biology and then devolved into what are, at least in my university, molecular, cellular, and developmental biology on the one hand, and evolutionary and ecological biology on the other. Anthropology (which was once often combined with sociology, as in my first faculty appointment) has long dealt with divisions and conflicts between biological, archaeological, sociocultural, and linguistic anthropology, in some cases maintaining a single, but often quite balkanized/federated multiple field discipline or department, and in others splitting into two or more separate units. Psychology has similarly dealt with growing divisions and conflicts between bio- and neuropsychology versus social and clinical psychology.

Freeing sociologists from the increasingly dysfunctional nature and crisis of sociology as it now is offers a way for both sociology and sociologists to flourish and to make their increasing sociodemographic diversity a benefit to all aspects of sociology, social science, and public policy, thus fulfilling their long-term promise and calling both to better understand and to improve human life and society.

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<sup>13</sup>I would emphasize that scientific/empirical sociology is not just quantitative or statistical sociology, though that is what I personally mostly do. Much qualitative/ethnographic or historical/comparative sociology is also scientific to the extent that it generates empirical data/evidence for evaluating theoretical ideas and propositions and/or the functioning of society and public policy. Likewise, humanistic/philosophical sociology can and should be empirical and evidence-based, and even utilize quantitative data. However, the emphasis and balance in each would be quite different, and each could prosper better if more clearly separated in terms of organization and functioning.



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# Contents

## Prefatory Article

- The Culminating Crisis of American Sociology and Its Role in Social  
Science and Public Policy: An Autobiographical, Multimethod,  
Reflexive Perspective  
*James S. House* ..... 1

## Theory and Methods

- Machine Learning for Sociology  
*Mario Molina and Filiz Garip* ..... 27
- Bayesian Statistics in Sociology: Past, Present, and Future  
*Scott M. Lynch and Bryce Bartlett* ..... 47

## Social Processes

- Aging Populations, Mortality, and Life Expectancy  
*Eileen M. Crimmins and Yuan S. Zhang* ..... 69
- Social Networks and Health: New Developments in Diffusion, Online  
and Offline  
*Jingwen Zhang and Damon Centola* ..... 91
- The Role of Space in the Formation of Social Ties  
*Mario L. Small and Laura Adler* ..... 111
- Sexual and Romantic Relationships in Young Adulthood  
*Kathryn Harker Tillman, Karin L. Brewster, and Giuseppina Valle Holway* ..... 133
- Theories of the Causes of Poverty  
*David Brady* ..... 155

## Institutions and Culture

- Assimilation and the Second Generation in Europe and America:  
Blending and Segregating Social Dynamics Between Immigrants  
and Natives  
*Lucas G. Droubot and Victor Nee* ..... 177
- Religion and Adolescent Outcomes: How and Under What Conditions  
Religion Matters  
*Lisa D. Pearce, Jeremy E. Uecker, and Melinda Lundquist Denton* ..... 201

What's New with Numbers? Sociological Approaches to the Study of Quantification <i>Andrea Mennicken and Wendy Nelson Espeland</i> .....	223
Moral Cultures, Reputation Work, and the Politics of Scandal <i>Gary Alan Fine</i> .....	247
Sociologies of Islam <i>Charles Kurzman</i> .....	265
The Cultural Impacts of Social Movements <i>Edwin Amenta and Francesca Polletta</i> .....	279
The Social Structure of Time: Emerging Trends and New Directions <i>Benjamin Cornwell, Jonathan Gersbuny, and Oriel Sullivan</i> .....	301
<b>Formal Organizations</b>	
Retail Sector Concentration, Local Economic Structure, and Community Well-Being <i>Martha Crowley and Kevin Stainback</i> .....	321
<b>Political and Economic Sociology</b>	
Fascism and Populism: Are They Useful Categories for Comparative Sociological Analysis? <i>Mabel Berezin</i> .....	345
<b>Differentiation and Stratification</b>	
Inequality and Social Stratification in Postsocialist China <i>Xiaogang Wu</i> .....	363
<b>Individual and Society</b>	
Divergent Destinies: Children of Immigrants Growing Up in the United States <i>Min Zhou and Roberto G. Gonzales</i> .....	383
Examining Public Opinion About LGBTQ-Related Issues in the United States and Across Multiple Nations <i>Amy Adamczyk and Yen-Chiao Liao</i> .....	401
Technology, Work, and Family: Digital Cultural Capital and Boundary Management <i>Ariane Ollier-Malaterre, Jerry A. Jacobs, and Nancy P. Rothbard</i> .....	425
US Labor Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Understanding Laborism Without Labor <i>Jake Rosenfeld</i> .....	449

## Demography

- Analyzing Age-Period-Cohort Data: A Review and Critique  
*Ethan Fosse and Christopher Winship* ..... 467
- Family Instability in the Lives of American Children  
*Shannon E. Cavanagh and Paula Fomby* ..... 493
- Well-Being at the End of Life  
*Deborah Carr and Elizabeth A. Luth* ..... 515

## Urban and Rural Community Sociology

- Race, Place, and Effective Policing  
*Anthony A. Braga, Rod K. Brunson, and Kevin M. Drakulich* ..... 535

## Policy

- Social Background and Children's Cognitive Skills: The Role of Early  
Childhood Education and Care in a Cross-National Perspective  
*Nevena Kulic, Jan Skopek, Moris Triventi, and Hans-Peter Blossfeld* ..... 557

## Historical Sociology

- Causality and History: Modes of Causal Investigation in Historical  
Social Sciences  
*Ivan Ermakoff* ..... 581

## Sociology and World Regions

- Convergence Toward Demographic Aging in Latin America and the  
Caribbean  
*Roberto Ham-Chande and Isalia Nava-Bolaños* ..... 607
- Education in East Asian Societies: Postwar Expansion and the  
Evolution of Inequality  
*Emily Hannum, Hiroshi Ishida, Hyunjoon Park, and Tony Tam* ..... 625

## Indexes

- Cumulative Index of Contributing Authors, Volumes 36–45 ..... 649
- Cumulative Index of Article Titles, Volumes 36–45 ..... 653

## Errata

An online log of corrections to *Annual Review of Sociology* articles may be found at  
<http://www.annualreviews.org/errata/soc>