

Symposia

Charting Futures for Sociology

Sociology and World Market Society

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It was not pre-ordained that sociology should come into existence; and it is by no means guaranteed that sociology will continue to exist. In this essay I reflect on sociology's conditions of existence as a global project in the past, and on its possible conditions of existence in the future.

Sociology, as an intellectual project and an academic practice, was created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a specific formation within the growing domain of "social science." To many of its first-generation practitioners, sociology was "the social science," or the universal social science. Sociology was the integration of all scientific attempts to understand social facts and social problems. Its object of knowledge was social progress, conceived on the grandest possible scale.

This project allowed social critique. It even encouraged criticism of institutions or practices that stood in the way of progress—criticism made, naturally, in the name of science. But evolutionary sociology did not yield a consistent political standpoint, since the same warrant of "science" could be claimed for Spencer's defense of free-market capitalism, Durkheim's mild ethical socialism, and tough-minded economic Marxism.

The loose implications of evolutionary sociology had much to do with the character of the group who created it—a loose coalition of liberal intellectuals, ranging from journalists and clergymen to academics, officials and independent men of letters. Most were men; almost all were residents of the imperial powers at the high tide of imperialism, and beneficiaries of bourgeois class advantage as well. The lives of sociology's creators were beset with contradictions between liberal thought and their actual conditions of existence—contradictions that both fuelled the creation of "sociology" and gave it characteristic problems and limits.

During the twentieth century, the enterprise of sociology fell into the hands of the academics. Evolutionary sociology collapsed for a variety of

reasons, not least the undermining of the liberal intelligentsia by militarism and war in the metropole (a war which the metropole with characteristic arrogance called the "First World War," ignoring the recently concluded global war of conquest over other societies).

In its new conditions of existence within academia, sociology was transformed into a specialty, one of a patchwork quilt of territories within the continent of "social science." It laid claim (as all academic specialties must do) to special expertise on a particular set of topics and methods. Its object of knowledge, increasingly, was social differentiation within the metropole.

In the English-speaking world, sociology became more closely linked to the developing welfare state and to the professions that dealt with "social problems"—such as social work, social administration, education, and public health. Sociology became useful for its expertise in surveys and field observation. This still allowed critique, though of a more limited sort. Sociologists became noted for their documentation of inequalities within metropolitan society (hence the trio class/race/gender).

But this critique circulated mostly within a professional community. As an academic specialty, sociology increasingly adopted the techniques of closure—qualifications, professional membership, publication in technical journals—that were becoming dominant features of academic life in general through the twentieth century. By the mid-twentieth century, professional sociology had recovered enough self-confidence to adopt ambitious generalizing theories about "society" once more. But this was now on a systems model that took the metropole as a self-sufficient unit and, if it spoke about the colonized world at all, usually regarded it as underdeveloped.

The huge growth in student numbers after the 1950s, along with the expansion of professionalized sociology across the world in the growing international university system of the

later twentieth century, expanded sociology's academic base and diversity. The radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s injected socialist, feminist, and anticolonial thought, without doing much to change sociology's institutional structure. It is not surprising to see a gradual taming of these impulses, even as their influence has spread.

But the external conditions under which professional sociology formed and flourished have now changed. The welfare state, which both defined many of the problems for sociology to investigate and employed many of sociology's graduates, is in decline across the metropolitan world.

This decline is, of course, connected with the rise of a form of politics which in Australia is called "economic rationalism," in Latin America "neoliberalism," and in Britain simply "Thatcherism." Attempts at collective will-formation and rational policy debate have been drowned steadily by a mighty celebration of the competitive market as the only social decision maker. In this political framework the role of government progressively is reduced to securing the unfettered operation of private capital. Initially an agenda of hard-line conservatives, in the 1980s and 1990s the "market agenda" also came to dominate the thinking of labour, social-democratic, and reformist parties. The current convergence among Clinton, Blair, and Schroeder perfectly reflects this shift.

The almost complete ascendancy of the market agenda in mass media and mass politics worldwide—secured by the collapse of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism in China—poses sharp problems for a discipline so closely connected to the welfare state as sociology. A quite probable future for sociology is gentle decline into an atmosphere of nostalgia. As the realm of "the market" expands, the realm of "the social" shrinks.

In a world dominated by the market agenda, sociology will still have some functions. One is to perform a kind of salvage ethnography on modern society. As the market overwhelms all nonmarket relations, sociology can perform a valuable role documenting ways of life now doomed to pass away: bureaucracies, neighborhoods, ethnic communities, sexual subcultures, public schools, and the like. Since market society numbs the intellect as well as the conscience, this may even be a lucrative role for sociology, providing bored utility-maximizers

with social-scientific entertainment, as the old ethnographies of "nuts, sluts, and perverts" once did.

For those sociologists who still want to affect the world, market society has many residual problems that the market does not solve, or does not solve quickly: the poor, the chronically sick, the disturbed, the violent; linguistic minorities; people who can't read, hold a job, or manage the Internet. There are many practical problems of adjustment for people who can't engage in market competition, or who lose out in the race to be "winners." Market-society sociology, then, could be the science of the "losers," explaining why they lose and working out what to do with them.

Of course there is not much money in this. By definition, the losers are not in a position to buy the services of sociologists on the market, in the way corporations can buy the research they need. But there will still be a residual role for government in holding the ring for capital. This involves not just enforcing property rights through courts or police, but also preventing disruptions to the market from those on its margins. Sociology, therefore, could eke out a living by writing reports for market-agenda governments on how to manage problems for which the market hasn't yet produced an answer. Some of us are doing that already.

The market agenda has gained much of its stranglehold on politics because it has come with a panic factor: globalization. In Australia, for instance—an early example of the virtually complete takeover of a Labor Party by free-market ideologues—a policy of deregulation and privatization was driven through in the 1980s on the argument that this was the *only* way to prevent the country from going under in global competition. The nature of the "global competition" was specified only vaguely (as is characteristic of alien threats of all kinds), but the effect on the overall mood of public debate was very strong, as it has been elsewhere.

Globalization is a current buzzword in business, where it loosely signifies both the existence of worldwide arenas—global commodity markets, global capital markets, global stock exchange, global telecommunications—and their growing importance vis-à-vis local arenas for business. Much hype and loose talk has created some strikingly false impressions:

- that globalization is something radically new;

- that globalization has already integrated local economics into a monster world economy;
- that the state, and local, national, and regional social forces are necessarily overwhelmed by the pressures of the international economy;
- that in global markets all are equal, and in "global culture" all local cultures mix and match on equal terms.

Hence the familiar media images of the world citizen. We come to believe a typical world citizen is the businesswoman in Kuala Lumpur in a Chanel suit giving orders on a cellular phone to her stockbroker in New York to sell Japanese shares to a Brazilian rubber baron. Yet the construction of world society is not a myth, but a real social process, infinitely more complex and problematic than the pretty picture of globalization. It began with the growth of overseas power by Portugal and Spain in the fifteenth century, followed by the creation of other permanent overseas empires by Holland, France, and England, and by the overland expansion of Russia and the United States. This was a process both violent and destructive, on an immense scale. Along with millions of deaths, epidemic disease, large-scale slavery, and other forms of forced labor and migration went the disruption of local gender orders and political systems, and assault on indigenous religions and cultures.

But imperialism was not only destructive, it was also creative—producing new social orders both in the colonized world and in the metropole. It reshaped not only economies but also cultures. Imperialism indeed had become the condition of existence of Western society by the time the new social sciences began to take society as an object of knowledge and offer generalizations about it.

This connection was quite plain to the sociologists of the late nineteenth century and, in however distorted a form, became the central theme of the sociology of progress (Connell 1997). But twentieth-century sociology, rightly rejecting the muddy concept of "social evolution," also rejected the sense of connection with the colonized world that underpinned it. Twentieth-century social science, treating the society of the metropole as if it existed on a separate planet, thus formed itself on a gigantic lie: that modernity formed itself within North Atlantic society independent of the rest of the

world. That lie can be undone, not by fables about the merging of cultures, but by recognizing the constitution of modernity *within* the history of imperialism. Contemporary world society is not an extension of the North Atlantic "modern" across the globe, but a transformation within an already-global system of social relations.

In the transformation of the last 60 years, the political structures of earlier imperialism have been dismantled—with one important exception, the United States. The United States has never decolonized its nineteenth-century conquests, but instead has integrated them more and more tightly into a gigantic nation-state, thereby succeeding at a task at which the French and the Russians failed. Apart from the United States, in place of politically integrated empires we have a set of economic institutions, most importantly global capital markets and multinational corporations, which now frame the policies of individual governments.

The global structures that have developed in the postcolonial era are massively unequal and strikingly undemocratic. While universal suffrage in national legislatures is now widespread, and ideologies of capitalism tell us of the global triumph of liberal democracy, the most important decisions are made by the top officials of private bureaucracies, over which there is no democratic control at all. The self-selected elite of global business—mainly American, European, and Japanese, with an admixture of oil wealth from the Middle East—are highly unrepresentative in social character. Almost all are men, from a limited set of ethnic groups, mostly drawn from the privileged classes of the most privileged countries. It is not surprising that they operate with only occasional reference to the well-being of the rest of humanity.

Under the aegis of this new global elite, a new cultural order is being created. In market society, the leading science is the science of markets—that is to say, economics: not political economy, not even "economics" in its sense of public housekeeping. Rather, it is the stripped-down economics that is interior to market society—that concerns itself only with the internal dynamics of markets, and not with their conditions of existence, with what is outside the markets.

But that is only the leading science. The cultural impact of the new global capitalism is much wider. For the ascendancy of the market places a premium, quite literally, on what suc-

ceeds in markets. This applies to cultural production as much as to other forms of production. What is encouraged, in all areas of cultural production, is not what is true, or beautiful, or profound, or necessary, but exclusively what sells.

So we get global systems of mass communication dominated by commercial fantasy—Hollywood, TV soaps, consumer advertising, celebrity gossip, the major content of mass culture. And we get political discourse whose leading feature is the dominance of spin, where political leaders never talk honestly about their problems or the public's problems, but always talk in ways calculated for personal, party, or national advantage. We now live in a world where the normal content of mass communication is lies, distortions, and calculated fantasies. I don't think it is any wonder that the last 20 years have seen a steady decline in political party membership, a deepening public disillusion with politicians, and a collapse of citizenship. These are all too reasonable responses to the global commercialization of public spaces.

More than ever before, we are in need of critical sciences of society—intellectual projects that concern themselves with what lies beneath, beside, and beyond the market. Indeed, we may now say that this intellectual project is even more important the more the market itself gains a grip on intellectual culture. And anyone who works in contemporary universities knows how that grip is tightening—in forms ranging from “enterprise culture” in neoliberal Britain, through the power of commercialized sports in U.S. universities, to the new business-oriented managerial elite of Australian universities.

This sounds apocalyptic. Am I proposing that the cultural future of humanity depends on a tiny band of gimlet-eyed sociologists standing shoulder to shoulder with iron determination against the tides of commercialization? Well, yes. But they cannot stand alone. For the most determined sociologists have only tiny impact unless they are part of a larger movement, in which sociology is itself transformed. A democratic project cannot be carried by a small elite. If we have learned anything else from the history of twentieth-century socialism, we must have learned that.

The future of sociology, if it is to escape marginalization and slow decline, is to be reconstituted as a democratic science—as the self-knowledge of global society. This necessarily means new media, new forms of research, and

above all, new participants. The greatest obstacle to the advancement of sociology is sociology's own professionalism. Every organizational move that limits participation in sociological work, that constitutes sociology as a closed unit or a self-contained culture, is against sociology's long-term interests.

A democratic science is defined less by its intentions or its rhetoric than by its place in a process of democratization. In a knowledge-based economy, knowledge is a crucially important resource, and distortions of knowledge are a crucially important tool of social control. A democratic sociology, then, will be the enterprise of producing and circulating knowledge relevant to the democratization of social institutions—knowledge that serves the goals of broad participation in decision making, mutual respect among social groups, and social equality.

Sociologists already know how to do this, in principle. Studies of power structures, ideologies, systems of domination, and the production of privilege and exclusion are familiar in the discipline. What must be developed—and what would make a qualitative shift if strongly developed—are ways of making these genres of research and analysis more useful to the dominated and excluded than they currently are.

I believe that such an agenda will lead to forms of knowledge that are more dispersed or decentralized than an academic discipline is accustomed to be. Sometimes what will be needed is simply a group of facts, which reveal the state of play in a given sphere—for instance, inequalities of educational provision in a particular region. Sometimes what will be needed is a technique, an approach to producing knowledge that a community group can use for itself—as advocated in Yoland Wadsworth's *Do it Yourself Social Research* (1983). Sometimes what will be needed is an explanation of processes that had been obscured, neglected, or distorted by ideology—as in Gary Dowsett's dissection of sexuality in *Practicing Desire* (1996). Sometimes what will be needed is new insights or themes that show connections that had not been seen before—as in Valerie Kuletz's study of nuclear landscapes, *The Tainted Desert* (1999).

Such work will often involve “doing sociology” in settings outside academia, with partners who have no background in the discipline, and with agendas and deadlines that are hard to reconcile with the rhythms of universities. It may involve cooperative work with union organizers,

with teachers, with broadcasters, with community activists, with bureaucrats. This will certainly produce difficulties for university-based sociology, given the way university finances and career structures work. The "body of knowledge" produced will not look much like the bodies academics are familiar with, the anatomy we see in *Social Science Citation Index* or even *Contemporary Sociology*. But it will depend on empirical truth, it will be open to rigorous testing, and it will be capable of development. That is to say, it will be *science*, even if it does not wear a lab coat of traditional cut.

Yet to argue that sociology should develop in a democratic direction is not to suggest evacuating the university, or abandoning the idea of a discipline or even the project of systematic theory. The university system is too strategic a social institution to abandon. But the historical moment in which we find ourselves gives a specific character to what a democratic social science in the university context must be.

The central point here, I would argue, is the global triumph of the market and the motivated self-ignorance of market society. Crucial intellectual tasks for sociology are defined by this: to re-invigorate the study of the market as a social form, and of the cultural and social processes that underpin its dominance. As argued above, there is desperate need for a critical analysis of the culture that the dominance of the market is producing, the beliefs and forms of knowledge that flourish in market contexts, and the human consequences of their dominance. The particular form that these projects must now take is defined by the world scale of contemporary market society—which distinguishes them from the "critical theory" or "critical sociology" of earlier generations. It is now a question of analyzing a market society whose formation includes the whole history of imperialism, and whose structure now includes world-embracing systems of power, communication, and exploitation. These issues now pose formidable intellectual challenges to older areas of sociology. For example, in deviance: How can we now study drug abuse or violence without understanding the world drug trade and the world arms trade? Or organization theory: How can we ignore the global grip of neoliberalism and the creation of transnational organizations? And the challenges extend to newer areas as well. For example, gender: Feminism is global, but gender theory is still focused on the metropole. Or cultural studies,

where a certain recognition of globalization is now common).

These issues, however, are not just intellectual; they are also practical issues in the struggle for democratization, which must, increasingly, operate globally. So the points made above about the connection of sociological knowledge and methods with the practical search for participation, respect, and equality must also be rethought on a world scale. A sociology developing as a critical science of world society must connect at a practical level with the democratization of world society.

Again, there are ironies aplenty. The largest issue about inequality in world society is the huge disparity in income and wealth between the populations of rich and poor countries. Sociology was created in the metropole—the countries that were becoming rich through the contributions of others—and today mainly exists, as a recognizable set of practices, institutions, and people, in the rich countries. The intellectual techniques on which sociology is based, and which one must master to become a good practitioner of sociology, were developed by Western intelligentsias and passed on within Western university systems. This intellectual culture is now dominant internationally, but its dominance over other cultural systems is precisely part of the problem in global culture, part of what a critical science of world society must problematize.

In the long run, I believe, Western sociology must be transformed by interaction with the intellectual techniques and cultural resources that have been generated in other parts of the world—not as a gesture of intercultural understanding, but because it will be forced into those encounters by the demands of the project of democratization. This will be a slow process. Most Western sociologists don't at present know there are significant intellectual resources, for instance, in Islamic critiques of modernity, or in Chinese analyses of the complex encounter with Western imperialism. No one can predict the outcome of sociology's encounter with these traditions of thought; but we can at least recognize that they must happen, and try to make them as inclusive and productive as we can.

All of this reinforces the importance of open intellectual boundaries for sociology, and an inclusive approach to participants and practitioners. As an academic profession, sociology can exist in market society only in the place

assigned to it by the science of markets. It would be a special science of market failures, explaining the poor, the deviants, the unsuccessful, and the odd. As a democratic science, sociology has the potential to become a strategic starting point for the creation of a new world culture.

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Reflections on the Future of Sociology

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There are two aspects to the future of sociology: social structural and intellectual. On one hand, we ask whether sociology will survive as a discipline at all; on the other, we ask whether there are new ideas to inhabit that structure if it survives.

Social structurally, we can think about sociology's future as unfolding in two contexts: on one hand, within the system of university education; on the other, within that of academic disciplines. (I realize that there are sociologists in commercial or governmental contexts, but in the United States sociology is dominated by an academic labor market and the training institutions that support that labor market.)

The American system of academic disciplines is a peculiar and peculiarly resilient structure. Current appearances to the contrary, it has endured with little substantial change for nearly 100 years. (Interdisciplinarity turns out to be as old as disciplinarity; the Social Science Research Council was founded in the early 1920s to promote interdisciplinarity, less than 20 years after the founding of the ASA.) The extraordinary stability of the disciplinary system arises from the basket-weave structure of academia, which is organized into departments that are both pieces of universities and pieces of disciplines. No single university can radically modify its departmental structure without undercutting the employability of its Ph.D.s. At the same time, no single discipline can be destroyed unless a large number of universities decide simultaneously to get rid of it. Even if one discipline were destroyed, the system would endure; the other disciplines would just fill in the gap.

The system works because department faculty members, in their capacity as agents for their universities, guarantee the survival of their disciplines by hiring almost exclusively from those disciplines. Departments are thus the structure by which academic disciplines with thousands of members control many of the resources of institutions with millions of students. The whole system is driven by the undergraduate curriculum, which for nearly 100 years (since the phenomenon of departments emerged) has been organized into majors, a curricular form to which no serious alternative has ever been presented and which is often little more than a focused set of distribution requirements.

Even the size of graduate programs is strongly driven by majors, since a crucial if latent function of most graduate programs is to generate cheap teaching labor so that universities don't have to hire so many regular faculty. As one of the long-standing inhabitants of this curious system, sociology is largely safe as long as the underlying structure holds. As long as majors exist, sociology departments will exist. They may get combined with anthropology or social work departments occasionally, but they won't disappear altogether. As for the major system as a whole, it seems unlikely to disappear; credentialism is stronger than ever in higher education, and what are majors if not credentials? (Indeed, double majors are on the rise, apparently for credentialist reasons.) But the strong drift toward vocationalism, propelled by student demand, has its dangers for sociology. In the first instance, vocationalism means students will continue to choose sociology majors, since there are jobs that they think a sociology degree is good for.