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Introduction: The Foreseeable Future of Sociology

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Throughout the 60 years of its existence, International Sociological Association (ISA) membership has grown from a roster of a few dozen sociologists to one of about 4000. In 2009, the number of Research Committees had increased from five to 54, with six additional groups working toward applying for full Research Committee status. This is undoubtedly a sign of the vitality of sociology – and of sociologists. In line with the capitalist ideals of accumulation and growth that stamp the neo-liberal economic and political policies around the globe, the ISA is realizing the enormous potential for expanding sociology as a discipline. But the variety of headings under which sociologists seek to present their work does lead to pressing questions. Among some sociologists there is concern that sociology is threatened by its spread; for them this signals fragmentation, a danger to the existence of sociology as a distinct domain of knowledge. Whether or not we are partner to this fear, it is undoubtedly pertinent to ask about the nature of this 21st-century sociology that is happily – or unhappily – proliferating. The seminar on *The Shape of Sociology Today* that took place in the course of the First ISA Forum at Barcelona in September 2008, attempted to clarify some of the issues.

Why Pose the Question?

Foucault (1973) found that the human sciences are constrained to reflect on their nature and on the paths of their development because they are located precariously in the interstices of the sciences of life (biology), labour (economics) and language (linguistics), with their reliance on representation. Indeed, an integral part of the history of sociology is the thread of unrelenting reflection on the nature of the discipline. After all, the official beginning of sociology stems from Comte's (2001/1855) search for a positive science of society. Several decades later, Durkheim (1964/1938) formulated rules to justify his vision of the social as an autonomous area of scientific research. Spencer (1972) sought to establish as a 'first principle' of sociology that 'superorganic evolution' parallels the evolution of organisms. Confirming that social life is governed by processes of change, Marx pointed out that causes were to be sought 'not in the *philosophy* but in the *economics*' of an era, and with this laid out a strategy for social research (Engels, 2004/1877: 425). Even at the dawn of the 20th century, Weber (1947) found it necessary to provide fixed definitions of such key concepts as legitimation for his sociological writings. Similarly, Simmel (1971) explicated a platform to justify a formal social science.

The felt need for reflection did not end with the recognition of sociology as worthy of such academic categorization as fixed university departments in the USA. At Harvard, Parsons (1949) found it necessary to review the work of his predecessors to describe the thrust of sociology, and later he collaborated with some of his colleagues to survey how sociology and its functions related to the natural sciences and the life sciences (Parsons and Shils, 1951). The work of Garfinkel (1967), with its emphasis on taken-for-granted meanings that govern social immediacy, could be seen as a development of the Parsonian project; but ethnomethodology was destined to lead a sociological 'invasion' of the originally distant fields of discourse and conversational analysis. At about the same time, Gouldner (1970), who pointed to what he saw as a crisis in sociology, introduced Marxist thought to academic sociology in the USA as a potential route to rehabilitation.

In Europe, reflections on how to improve society were imbricated in reflections on sociological explanation. This orientation was central to the work of Bourdieu who explicated his grasp of a reflexive sociology (Bourdieu, 1990). The emphasis of the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) on sociology as a tool in helping people free themselves from chains was related to the varied forms of oppression that were promoted in what should have been the realization of the enlightenment project. Habermas (2001) staked a claim to the legitimacy of civilized

discourse as a basis for the existence of society and hence, for sociology as the domain of such discourse, albeit betimes indirectly. Showing a bias toward theorizing that was all-encompassing, Elias (1994), who dealt with the sources of civilization and threats of de-civilization, proposed a foundational approach to the idea of society that was an important shift to thinking about sociology at the end of the last century.

Especially since the 1970s, on both sides of the Atlantic, feminist sociologists critiqued traditional sociology for confining consideration of women to the private sphere of the family (if women were considered at all). They also proposed new types of theorization that take gender into account (for example, Acker, 1973; Guillaumin, 1978; Hacker, 1951; Oakley, 1974; Smith, 1975). Unequal power on the basis of gender is of particular importance within this 'engaged' orientation, whether the feminist framework is informed by functionalism, materialism or a discursive approach.

All of these sociological theorists, and the streams of theorizing associated with them, shared the goal of seeking out a limited number of principles on which it would be possible to erect a disciplinary edifice. With the turn of the century, the interest in reflecting on sociology and on the social sciences did not abate. Publications since the 1990s have examined and re-examined constituents of the discipline. An early example is the volume edited by Nedelman and Sztompka (1993) *Sociology in Europe: In Search of an Identity*, in which researchers describe how sociology has developed in each of their countries, among them the UK, France, Germany, Poland, Austria, Hungary, as well as (from outside Europe) Japan and the USA. An implicit theme of such a collection is the idea that sociology is the product of historical and geo-political forces. Sociological practices have also been subject to the light of reflection. Revamping of practices has been associated, among others, with the burgeoning school of Actor-Network Theory, which emerged from an almost ruthless examination of how science is done in laboratories; with enhanced applications of systems theory, and adaptations of developments in theories of complexity (Byrne, 1998; Law and Hassard, 1999; Marcuello, 2006). The *Report of the Gulbenkian Commission* (1996) headed by Immanuel Wallerstein traced the development of academic disciplines more generally and indicated how, under the conditions developing in the world system, it was necessary to highlight interdisciplinarity as a point of departure. A recent compilation by Michel Wieviorka (2007), *Les Sciences Sociales en Mutation*, also deals with sociology on a broader disciplinary scale, examining the evolution of the social sciences, and the place of sociology in relation to these other disciplines.

Several different points of view are serving as a kind of wake-up call for contemporary sociologists to look at how the field of sociology is changing.

Reflecting on sociology as both an area of study and an organized profession, Andrew Abbott (2001) finds in sociology a *Chaos of Disciplines*. Looking at the consequences of sociological method, the work of Nowotny et al. (2001) explicates the need for what they see as 'transgressive' approaches. In their view, researchers must partner with the clients of their research; thus they remind sociologists about the fundamental goals and aspirations of the scientific enterprise as the ultimate expression of the enlightenment in generating knowledge (Capaldi, 1970). Calling attention to valuable content that is regularly ignored and to methodological innovations overlooked so far in the West, voices from the global 'South' strike new chords. Among them, Connell (2007) points to the variety of southern texts that are available for interpreting the uneven realities of the social world and of sociology. For his part, Alatas (2006) shows how historical thinkers of the East, as far back as Ibn Khaldun, can contribute to a broader theoretical base for contemporary sociology.

Focused reflection on the changes that are taking place in the science of the social during the palpably radical transition from the 20th to the 21st century is undoubtedly part of the sociological project. In professional meetings, available structures facilitate opportunities for members to clarify the scientific grounds that serve to bind professionals into a community. In the meantime, the most vocal assertions are complaints about the patent fragmentation of the discipline and the impossibility of community. These critiques stem from a perception that subdivisions in a defined body of knowledge are a sign of disciplinary decline, and even of the decline of the social as a dimension of human existence that is worthy of attention (Knorr-Cetina, 1997). In the USA, Bernard Phillips and colleagues undertook to combat fragmentation by elaborating an abstract model that could account for the discipline's fragmentation and could demonstrate how to overcome it where necessary (Phillips, 2001; Phillips et al., 2002).

In the seminar held as an opening event of the First ISA Forum at Barcelona in 2008, a group of sociologists from different corners of the globe were invited to take part in summarizing views about the structure of sociology as a discipline in a changing world. When all is said and done, the numerous sociological descriptions of the changes that the 21st century is producing in values, in economic relations, in political divisions and in the configuration of individuality, call for reflection about what this means for how sociologists as a group can, or should, conceive of sociology as a discipline and as a set of practices. In planning the seminar, we considered that all the issues involved in tracing the shape of sociology today are *empirical*. That is to say that an attempt to reflect on sociology in our time has to be founded on the kinds of work sociologists are doing and on their orientations toward their investigations, rather than in terms of disembodied abstractions.

Thus the issues we defined as central to an examination of sociology as a discipline and to an analysis of how sociologists constitute a profession were the following:

- A What are the significant changes in the social that sociologists are observing?
- B How should those developments be represented in sociological research and theory?
- C How, if at all, should these changes be expressed in the organization of the sociological community worldwide? Specifically in the operation of the ISA?

From these overarching concerns stem series of specific questions which provided a framework for the papers that participants presented and discussed during the seminar. Among them are:

- 1 Is sociology an independent discipline? What, if any, connections can we discern with psychology, geography, political science, or philosophy? Are connections reflected in subfields of sociology?
- 2 What is the best way to see the organization of the discipline?

Around Central Terms and Theoretical Approaches?

Are there terms that can be identified as central and pivotal to the current needs of sociology? Should we build our work around concepts such as: agency, alienation, civilization, conflict, consensus, cooperation, culture, empire, gender, interaction, nation, performance, power, praxis, process, reflection/reflexivity, social change, spheres of interest (public, private), structure, maybe simply society? Or – should concepts be allowed to grow any which way in the spirit of ‘let a thousand flowers bloom’?

Around Contemporary Processes/Trends

In the 19th century, theoretical approaches were developed on the basis of perceived changes in the public sphere; among them, the expansion of the factory system, urbanization, concern with the formation of states, on-going secularization and revisions of family structure. Out of sensitivity to failures in meeting the needs of diverse populations, sociological investigations were derived from a need to deal with the mishandling of goods, failures in health care and poverty. To find ways of describing and explaining social breakdowns, sociologists elaborated theorizations of process such as anomie (Durkheim), alienation (Marx), and for extremes of rationalization – ‘iron cage’ (Weber).

It is certainly appropriate to ask what social changes are perceived as crucial today. To what extent are they independent of one another? To what extent are they inter-related? How then should sociology respond to them in terms of content? Are they significant in the formulation of sociological objectives? In decisions on action? Problems that can serve as key rallying points for sociologists in contemporary literature include: the breakdown of the family, the dislocation and relocation of work and workers, the restructuring of work, mass migration, the persistent exclusion of women, the privatization of public services together with the 'publicization' of the private sphere, the reassertion of religion as a central factor in political life, the revision of political units – the rise and fall of states, regions and/or localities, the risks resulting from technological development, the spread of myths and illusions, including the superfluity of information, and the carnivalization of dreams.

Around Methodology or Methodologies?

How do methodologies integrate with the problems above? Why? Are there advantages or disadvantages in treating methodology as a distinct subfield in sociology?

Around Institutionalized Fields?

For many, sociological practice is indelibly defined in terms of relatively institutionalized domains, such as the arts, education, gender, health, law, professions, religion, science and youth. What are the advantages and the disadvantages of perpetuating this type of division?

As we had hoped, the seminar provided a stage for a limited, but still a meaningful empirical examination of a variety of directions in which sociology is developing today. Essentially, each of the participants in the seminar spoke for her or himself, and chose to comment on a selection of the wide-ranging questions posed. From the papers included in this collection, readers will be able to assess the extent to which participants thought of concepts, processes, methodologies, or institutionalized fields as the key axis of sociology as it is actually practised. More generally, the very presentation of a collection of this kind shows something about the relationship between the conceptualization of the discipline and the organization of a professional association.

Following this introduction, the book is divided into five parts, which reflect on the complex intertwining of 'tradition and renewal' in sociology in the early years of the 21st century. These are followed by a single chapter in the prospective Part VI – 'Looking Ahead'.

In Part I, 'Sociological Theory – From Past into Future', four sociologists offer their retrospective and prospective contributions to our reflections.

Wieviorka provides a broad overview of recent changes that have occurred within sociology and illustrates the changes he has identified. Sztompka, in what for him is a reorientation of emphasis, argues for a 'third' sociology, to complete the analyses offered by macro-conflict and consensus sociologies, on the one hand, and interactionist analysis, on the other. He focuses instead on social bonds and networks, contrasting these with the impersonality of globalization. Focusing on the evolution of sociology from the 19th century, Kalekin-Fishman points to diverse international challenges to institutionalized sociological analysis. She identifies new trends in research, and suggests that developments in sociology indicate the crystallization of 'globality' as a project replacing the virtually outmoded project of modernity. Finally, Walby proposes a synthesis of how complexity theory – specifically the analysis of complex inequalities whose bases include, but are not limited to, social class – should become integral to a more nuanced sociological analysis. The type of analysis that she proposes is sensitive to globalization, while challenging the boundaries of the nation-state and the limiting of inequalities to those with economic bases.

In Part II 'Sociology and Social Change', the authors approach social change in three distinctive ways. Lamo de Espinosa argues that we must question key classical assumptions in sociology. He shows that taken-for-granted beliefs about time, space and the non-interventionism of 'scientific discourse' have not been critically interrogated. Yet, only by doing so can we develop the theory needed for a global sociology. Extending the theory of Polanyi (1944), Reis suggests that a new 'great transformation' is occurring, which involves 'changes that force our conceptual frames to their limits and impose theoretical redefinitions' worldwide. Finally, shifting to a more explicit international and globalized focus, Smith advances the importance of humiliation as a motor force for social change, as part of four fundamental shifts in the shaping of global society. He illustrates his thesis by reference to Georgia and the 2008 invasion of two of its provinces by Russia.

Part III shifts the focus to 'Concepts', relating them to social change and globalization. For Langman, the key concept is 'identity', with a focus on the contemporary global age, in which collective identity is imposed (legitimated), challenged by resistance or 'playful moral transgression' – and transformed by new projects designed to address some of the challenges. Humphrey turns his attention to the concept of 'community'. Drawing on explorations of the meaning of community in the past and in contemporary literature, he highlights the lessening importance of (geographical) space for this concept, together with the heightened significance of 'belonging' (whether physically or virtually). Evetts shifts our attention to the concept of professionalism, arguing that the maturity of sociology is demonstrated by the increasingly nuanced understanding of

what constitutes professionalism, with its shift of meaning from responsible and caring autonomy to the promotion of disinterested service within a framework of occupational control. Specialization and diversity, together with the increasing importance of policy relevance, complete her analysis of conceptual changes within the field of the professions.

The authors in Part IV – ‘Unconscious and Conscious Differentiation in Sociology’ – extend the analyses of differentiation that have been advanced earlier. The focus in this section shifts to the nature of sociology itself, and begins to develop an analysis that acknowledges diverse – perhaps ‘national’ sociologies – and the contributions these can make to the development of the discipline as a whole. Connell begins this section with a critique of Northern neo-liberalism (and ethnocentrism), which, she argues, has largely characterized sociology to date, suggesting ways in which salutary changes might be introduced in the future, notably by a decentred geography of knowledge. From a different perspective Rosenthal is also advocating a less Eurocentric (and perhaps also American) focus within sociology, coupled in her case, with an epistemological shift towards interpretive sociology, which at the same time is more historical in its understanding. She illustrates her argument with the example of the sociology of migration. Titarenko, like Connell, talks about differentiation within sociology in terms of regional specifics, but focuses on the particular theoretical and empirical needs, and therefore analytical priorities, of post-Soviet sociology. She does not claim that the result is a ‘universal’ sociology, although the post-Soviet sociology of her example could be useful beyond the borders within which it has been developed.

In Part V, ‘Unresolved Challenges’, we move from the potential, at the macro-level, of more regional sociologies to specific cases and some of their implications. By advocating the inclusion of sociological practice within sociology, illustrated by American examples of its institutionalization, Fritz argues that sociologists are not necessarily disengaged and can contribute, probably at some combination of meso- and micro-levels, to ameliorative problem-solving. Ahponen suggests that attention to cultural creativity may enrich our sociological insights, although it can also be a double-edged sword, with the potential for both liberation and alienation under government rule. Prosono highlights a problem of disengagement, which he identifies within American sociology, making a case for engagement as a priority of the profession – a priority that he does not find in the trend toward public sociology. Such engagement and contestation, he argues, is notably lacking within the American hegemonic articulation of the discipline. From quite a different perspective, McDaniel’s analysis documents the extent to which the most prestigious (more precisely, the most extensively cited) journals – all American – are also highly ethnocentric in their subject matter, illustrating perhaps

some of the criticisms that a number of the contributors level at ethno-centric American (and often hegemonic) sociology. Porio extends this critique of hegemonic sociology, pointing to both the (often stultifying) use of American-oriented evaluation yardsticks in the Philippines, an example of the economic South, and to national expectations of sociologists there, which may well be at cross-purposes with these yardsticks and are in fact more reflective of the types of needs that Titarenko has discussed in relation to post-Soviet Russia.

In Part VI, 'Looking Ahead', Denis proposes a prospective analysis, which is informed by the diverse strands from the earlier chapters and stresses complexity, diversity and a recognition of the impact of taking a global perspective, both for the discipline and for the International Sociological Association.

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