

Sociology's Next Decades: Centrifugality, Conflict, Accommodation

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Article abstract

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Sociology's Next Decades: Centrifugality, Conflict, Accommodation

Neil J. SMELSER

Within the past two years, a book bearing the same title as this symposium — *The Future of Sociology* — made its appearance¹. In that volume, some 30 American sociologists looked backward, surveyed the present, and gazed into the future. Some commented on the field as a whole; some on institution-based subfields such as medical sociology; some on special approaches such as historical sociology; some on subfields dealing with social control and social change; and some on subfields dealing with stratification, such as race relations.

Not surprisingly, sociology's future looks like the proverbial elephant being described by several people touching its various parts. In another way, it is like a Rorschach ink-blot, possessing only vague objective characteristics but stimulating a myriad of idiosyncratic fantasies on the part of its viewers. The reader learns that the field is simultaneously fraying around the edges², losing theoretical vitality³, and needing salvation by applied research⁴. Glimpses into the future of subfields, found demography as thriving and expanding⁵, mass communication emerging from decline into resurgence⁶, urban sociology

¹ E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *The Future of Sociology*, Newbury Park (Ca.), Sage Publications, 1988.

² E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), 'Sociology and Its Future', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op.cit.*

³ H. Turk, 'Sociological Theory', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op.cit.*, p. 18-41.

⁴ R. A. Berk, 'How Applied Sociology Can Save Basic Sociology', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 57-72.

⁵ T. W. Pullum, 'Demography', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op.cit.*, p. 224-235.

⁶ S. S. Ball-Rokeach, 'Mass Systems and Mass Communications', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op.cit.*

remaining sluggish substantively but active methodologically⁷, educational sociology becoming more policy-oriented⁸, and social psychology spreading from cognition toward affect, emotion, and motivation⁹. Interestingly, however, none of these seers regarded the field as moving toward intellectual integration or synthesis; rather, the opposite trends were seen everywhere. This theme merits a central place in any prognosis of the field, including the one I will develop in this essay.

The reasons for the disparity of these prospective accounts are not difficult to discern. For one thing, different subfields will indeed differ from one another in their future development and location within the field. Second, each prognosticator brings his or her individual preferences and prejudices to bear; these are likely to be especially salient because the future is in fact unknown. And finally, prediction about the future means, above all, making selective assumptions about the stability or change of parameters affecting the field or its subfields; depending on the pattern of those assumptions, predictions about the future will vary widely.

In this essay, I will try my own hand at forecasting. I will proceed by three steps: first, to identify some broad societal trends affecting sociology, including some trends within higher education; second, to suggest broad directions of change for the discipline suggested by these trends; and third, to locate certain bases of conflict and bases for accommodation and integration. The picture will be complex, presenting a myriad of independent, convergent, and divergent trends. My remarks will apply mainly to the American scene because I know that scene best; but at the same time, it should be noted that some of these observations are generalizable, in varying degree, to sociology in other parts of the world.

1 Some Contours of Societal Change

Sociology has always been a field that has been responsive to social forces and social changes. Its subject matter — social behavior, institutions, and culture — is the focus of normative, ideological, and moral sensitivities in the larger society, and these sensitivities constitute pressures on the field. In addition, social changes constitute changes in the subject matter of the field, forever inviting it to keep pace through understanding and analyzing them. Any view toward the future of

⁷ B. A. Lee, 'Urban Sociology', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op.cit.*, p. 200-223.

⁸ L. Gordon, 'Sociology of Education', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 86-104.

⁹ K. S. Cook and K. C. Pike, 'Social Psychology: Models of Action, Reaction, and Interaction', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op.cit.*

sociology, then, should specify the broad directions of those changes that are most likely to constitute factors conditioning the evolution of the field. In this connection, the following trends can be identified:

- The long-term trends toward societal differentiation, in progress for centuries, will not be reversed. This trend toward increasing complexity will continue to create problems of integration of society, and to increase the role of integrative agencies, including government. The established government functions, including big welfare, big administration, and big government involvement in the economy, will not recede. For that reason, the great administrative-state-rational complex noted by Habermas¹⁰ will continue, though one can be less certain about the validity of all his claims regarding its impact on the human condition.
- The trends toward increasing internationalization of production, trade, migration, and travel — all making for increased interdependency of nations — will continue. This will generate a paradoxical result with respect to national states: on the one hand, governments will lose direct control over conditions affecting their economies and societies because these conditions will be generated more by international forces; on the other hand, governments will be called upon to intensify their activity because of the need to deal with the internal consequences of these international forces. (These trends, plus the two aforementioned ones, suggest that, despite trends toward deregulation and privatization in Western economies and tendencies toward de-administration and market principles in socialist economies, the state will not recede in salience).
- On the economic front, new technologies, especially information technologies, will continue to grow, with a further growth — at various rates — of productivity, dominance of the service sector, and increase in leisure.
- The tendency to permit free intellectual inquiry in the academy — including sociology — will continue where it is strong and increase where it is weak. The basis for this assertion is the continuing worldwide pressure for democratization, including free expression and free inquiry. This pressure will prove difficult to stem in the long run, despite episodes of backsliding and repression.
- At the same time, the tendency for governments to mobilize, attract, and provide opportunities for scholars will also increase. As a rule, governments will ask these scholars to provide data and knowledge relevant to governments' needs. Those needs will be complex, and the information and knowledge needed to deal with them will be uncertain, by virtue of the first three trends noted in this section.

¹⁰ J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1975.

— For the academy, these economic and political trends will involve a buildup of pressures for more applied emphases, augmenting the role of applied research institutes and professional training, and intensifying the rearguard battle on the part of universities and colleges to protect their commitment to the mission of the general pursuit of knowledge and truth in all fields.

These diverse trends constitute an important set of determinants for the future development of sociology, as well as other social science disciplines. I will note the significance of these trends in the discussion that follows. By way of qualification, however, it should be said that their influence is of a general character — and therefore highly specific predictions on the basis of them are not warranted — and that their influence is mediated by their complex interplay with the discipline's past traditions and ongoing autonomous developments within it.

2 Centrifugality and Related Trends

Many of the likely future trends in sociology are captured under the broad heading of centrifugality, a concept which encompasses the processes of specialization, differentiation, and fragmentation. As indicated, this direction will be influenced both by the external trends noted and by processes internal to the discipline.

2.1 Emphasis on applications

Most of the trends noted above call for an augmentation of applied work in sociology. Much of this impetus will come from government demands and provision of research opportunities, but other large organizations may find themselves calling more on behavior and social scientists as well. With respect to the intellectual life of the discipline, this will probably highlight the already long-standing distantiation, if not a complete split, between 'theory' and 'methods' and between 'basic' and 'applied' emphases, as the latter in each set gain salience. This change will be reflected in manpower statistics as well, as a higher proportion of sociologists will find their livelihoods in applied settings — government agencies, professional schools, research institutes with applied missions, as well as businesses and other organizations¹¹ — and a lower proportion in college and university faculties. In fact, there may develop a sharper organization differentiation as well, with theorists and basic researchers in academic departments, and methodologists and applied researchers in professional schools

¹¹ In the United States, the one exception with respect to professional schools may be schools of medicine, which have not recovered from their disappointment with the vigorous efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to incorporate social and behavioral scientists into their faculties.

and other non-university organizations. This differentiation may also reverberate into professional and sociological associations, deepening the differences between academic and applied sociologists¹².

2.2 Continuing to play 'catch-up' with change in society

As indicated, one part of the history of sociology is a story of its adaptation to social changes and emerging social problems. The following illustrate future instances of this principle:

In the area of family sociology, there will be an increased research focus on step-parenting, households with multiple members employed, 'commuter marriages,' and family implications of new 'cottage industries', such as working at home with computers.

In the area of sociology of religion, more research will focus on fundamentalism and other developments that have challenged the 'secularization hypothesis' of modernization theory, new forms of religious conflict, and various manifestations of 'privatized' religions¹³.

In the area of medical sociology, there will be an increased emphasis on the problems of large organizational medicine, the implications of occupational oversupply for the profession, and the future economic and ethical implications of complex medical technology for professional practice.

In the sociology of social movements, there will be a further shift away from the study of movements as revolutionary or otherwise disruptive, and toward their study as purposive political behavior and as ingredients of civil society, as governments and other agencies institutionalize mechanisms to accommodate and respond to movements.

In the area of theory, the themes of the state as system, the management of instability in complex societies, and social integration will generally retain their salience. We may also expect a further recession of classical Marxian theory, as economic classes themselves continue to recede as the organizing basis for stratification, group consciousness, and social protest. And finally, the

¹² In the United States, this may mean that the American Sociological Association, long an association dominated by academic sociologists, may drift in the direction of the American Psychological Association, which has come to be dominated by clinical and other applied psychologists.

¹³ A. Shupe and J. F. Hadden, 'Sociology of Religion', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op.cit.*, p. 120-137.

phenomenon of international interdependency, international conflict, and global society will constitute a focus for theoretical activity. The major bases for this last prediction are, first, that the international dimension will continue to grow more important — Europe in 1992 is only the most dramatic symbol — and scholars will strive to modify and go beyond the existing theories of dependency and world-system, whose historical specificity and corresponding limitations are already acknowledged.

With respect to emergent social problems, examples of future emphasis will be on international sex tourism, the social epidemiology of AIDS, new forms of occupational and technological risk, and the social dimensions of environmental threats.

The implications of all these examples are centrifugal, in the sense that they create new foci of research interest in subfields of sociology that pile upon longer-standing research concerns, create new specialized subgroups of researchers with common interests, and, in some cases, spawn new subfields. As such, these kinds of developments will extend long-standing tendencies within sociology toward specialization and fragmentation.

2.3 A complication from theory

One of the developments in various sociological subfields that resulted from the theoretical turmoil of the 1960s and early 1970s, was that some new theoretical approaches arose (for example, dependency theory, ethnomethodology) and some older ones were revitalized (for example, neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian perspectives). In addition, each new approach tended to 'invade' specific subfields and generate different and competing approaches to the subject matter of them. This can be illustrated with respect to family, deviance, and social ecology, among others¹⁴. This process will no doubt continue, as the double-process of emerging subfields and topics, on the one hand, and emerging theoretical emphases and shifts, on the other, continues apace. The result is a sort of two-dimensional grid — one dimension of substantive subfields and the other theoretical perspectives — that reflects these chopping-up tendencies.

2.4 Activity around the edges

Given these tendencies for intellectual specialization and division, it might be supposed that sociology would manifest some tendencies to hive off specialties, such as demography, social psychology, or development and change, into separate

¹⁴ N. J. Smelser (ed.), *Handbook of Sociology*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1988, 824 p.

organizational entities, such as academic departments. There is precedent for this in the biological sciences, for example, with fields like biochemistry, genetics, biophysics, and molecular biology emerging into new departmental units. In their short history, however, the social sciences have shown little of this. A likely candidate for separation, demography, has been organized on a few occasions into independent departments, but only rarely have these become permanently established. The main tendency, rather, is for demographers to spread themselves around existing departments (sociology, economics, and statistics) and existing professional schools (medical, public health) rather than forming new units. The reasons for organizational rigidity are not entirely understood but these are likely to be found in the institutional inertia of universities, the vested interests of departments in protecting themselves, and the need for a disciplinary label to succeed in the occupational market for social scientists.

With respect to the intellectual boundaries of the field, however, we see more fluidity. The history of sociology shows a continuous process of exportation into other fields. Examples are the rise of behavioral political science in the 1950s and 1960s, which relied heavily on methodological tools (for example, survey research), specific theoretical formulations (modernization), and general theoretical orientations (structural-functionalism), all borrowed from sociology. Similarly, the rise and consolidation of a new social history in the past three decades, including, more recently, a new history of the family, has drawn on sociological frameworks and theories as well as demographic methods. These developments tend to blur the disciplinary boundaries of both sociology and the other fields, so that political sociology and historical sociology cannot properly be located within a disciplinary province.

There are examples of importation as well. The sociological study of family and socialization in the 1940s and 1950s, was influenced by psychoanalytic perspectives and the 'culture-and-personality' emphasis proper to anthropology. Homans¹⁵ behavioral sociology was an explicit importation from psychological learning theory and economic theory. Other, more concrete illustrations include the possible takeover of some areas of the field of marriage and the family by applied agencies such as the National Council on Family Relations, the 'takeover' of industrial sociology by psychologists¹⁶, and the shift in the center of gravity in the study of formal organizations from sociology departments to schools of business administration.

¹⁵ G. C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974.

¹⁶ E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), 'Sociology and Its Future', in E. F. Borgatta and K. S. Cook (eds), *op.cit.*

At present, perhaps the most vivid challenge in the area of sociological theory is found in the work of Gary Becker¹⁷, an economist from the University of Chicago, who for two decades has engaged in a program of generalizing the principles of economic theory to many subject matters not previously within the scope of economic analysis — racial discrimination, crime, education, child-bearing, and marriage. The main principles of this line of analysis are to posit stable preferences and to analyze the consequences of rational choice and calculation in accord with those preferences. In building his program, Becker has incorporated certain novel elements, such as the cost of information-seeking, which replaces classical assumptions of complete knowledge of market conditions.

Up to this point the impact of adaptations of economic theory to sociology have been modest. Homans' theory is seen as one facet of the 'microsociological revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s, but has generated neither significant theoretical work nor substantial empirical applications by others. The study of 'public choice' — the analysis of social policies along modified principles of economic analysis — has appealed to a number of sociologists, but work in the area has been dominated by economists and political scientists. Becker's influence in sociology has been notable among demographers, particularly those interested in fertility, but very limited in the areas of family, education, and crime; and it has also had a certain negative impact in that it has generated some hostile reactions among sociologists who know about it.

The debate over economic theory in sociology may be expected to warm soon, however. James Coleman's forthcoming work on rational choice, the applications of rational-choice logic in research on networks and other areas, and the appearance of the new journal *Rationality and Society*, will crystallize attention on that line of theory. In addition, the nascent development of 'socio-economics,' manifested concretely in the work of Etzioni¹⁸, is, in its significance, partly an attack on rational-choice theory and 'economic imperialism,' and should spark debates. We should not expect this theoretical foray to conquer much territory in sociology; the field is a large, complex, and pluralistic aggregation from a theoretical point of view, and most sociologists will continue to follow their own predilections and/or continue in their mode of theoretical eclecticism. Nevertheless, a dialogue over the promises and limitations of rational models will be a significant feature of the landscape in the coming decade.

¹⁷ G. S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976.

¹⁸ A. Etzioni, *The Moral Dimension*, New York, Basic Books, 1988.

2.5 Interdisciplinary work

Academic fields, including sociology, have a certain institutional reality. This reality is reproduced and renewed year after year in the existence of undergraduate teaching, graduate training programs and degrees granted under the disciplinary name, academic departments that sustain their legitimacy and command resources within colleges and universities, research institutes, and learned journals with disciplinary appellation, and professional associations organized along disciplinary lines. So strong is the momentum to maintain disciplines institutionally that we are continuously invited to view them almost as Durkheimian 'social facts.'

Much ongoing work by social scientists, however, belies this view. If this work is examined in detail, it is seen to deal with problems that defy strict disciplinary identification — problems such as the differential distribution of rewards and power in society, or the origin and consequences of revolutionary movements. Such work is interdisciplinary (or multidisciplinary) in that a researcher makes use of materials, concepts, and theoretical frameworks from a variety of disciplines, develops theoretical approaches that synthesize ideas from many disciplinary sources, or actually collaborates with scholars from other disciplines. In a recent survey of promising research developments in the behavioral and social sciences, a national group commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences/National Research Council¹⁹ reports that the most innovative and dynamic lines of research were interdisciplinary in character. Examples touching sociology reported by this group, included health and behavior, information and decision-making, and the internationalization of social, economic, and political life. The group recommended that funding and the development of research infrastructures should be developed along these interdisciplinary kinds of lines — in addition to existing disciplinary ones — in the coming decade.

From the standpoint of an academic discipline, interdisciplinary work stands as yet another example of the kinds of centrifugal forces dealt with in this section of the essay. It means a diffusion of disciplinary rigor — such as that might be — in the interest of comprehensive solving of a scholarly or scientific problem. It weakens, furthermore, any effort to identify any given piece of research as disciplinary and any effort to characterize a discipline like sociology as a recognizable 'thing.'

To summarize the line of argument to this point, it appears that the various specified centrifugal forces — emphasis on applications, 'chasing' new social

¹⁹ D. R. Gerstein, R. D. Luce, N. J. Smelser and S. Sperlich (eds), *The Behavioral and Social Sciences: Achievements and Opportunities*, Washington (D.C.), National Academy Press, 1988.

changes and emerging social problems, theoretical pluralism, blurring around the edges, and interdisciplinary work — may accelerate in the next decades. If so, this will make it more difficult to characterize sociology and perhaps other social-science disciplines as distinctive and intellectually unified enterprises. This centrifugal diffusion will continue to occur, moreover, in the context of inertia and continuity with respect to the organizational and institutional realities of disciplines in the colleges and universities, and in the professional associations. In this way, the discrepancies, if not contradictions, between the intellectual and the institutional faces of sociology will be intensified.

3 Associated Lines of Tension and Conflict

Whenever some kind of identifiable theoretical position, disciplinary subfield of the discipline, 'hot' area of research, or methodological innovation results from the centrifugal processes noted, the potential for intellectual and organizational conflict also arises. Whether their vision is correct or not, many sociologists and other academics regard their discipline as a kind of intellectual turf, to be expanded by aggrandizement and defended against invasion or capture. They also regard the sub-parts with which they are identified in similarly jurisdictional terms. The modes of conflict may be aggressive, especially on the part of those who regard themselves as innovating and seeking a territorial place, or defensive, on the part of those who experience themselves as under polemic attack or otherwise threatened by competitors. The supposed stakes — the victors' spoils and the vanquished's losses — are scientific and intellectual prestige and whatever enhanced power in the discipline that might bring; perhaps augmented research funds; appeal to graduate-students-in-training; power to press for faculty positions in departments; a conspicuous place in scholarly meetings; and access to journal space. The strategies employed in these conflicts include attempts to demonstrate the scientific soundness of one's own theoretical approach, area of research, or favored method in relation to others; to persuade by argument and/or assertion that one's area is scientifically or socially important; and to claim that one's area is up-and-coming or not declining and that others are not rising or declining. That evidence is slim and decisive scientific proof or disproof is not possible with respect to the kinds of statements that emerge from these strategies and probably encourages, rather than discourages, their employment.

Earlier in this essay, it was argued that, as a result of the dominant trend emerging from the changing needs and demands of government and society, empirical methods and applied emphases would move toward becoming more mainstream than they are, and theory and basic research would move toward becoming more rearguard. This is no doubt true as a general statement, but to gain a more textured flavor of the dominant bases of future tension and conflict, it

is necessary to disaggregate these into a series of overlapping emphases, of which the following are identifiable:

- Scientific vs. humanistic emphasis, or the effort to relate research and conclusions to the normative canons of one or another model of science, on the one side, as against referring to considerations of equality, social justice, morality, or some other dimension of the human condition of the persons, institutions or societies under study, on the other. The first emphasis stems from sociology's efforts to legitimize itself as a science, and the second from the philosophical and reformist concerns from which the field arose.
- Value-free vs. critical/activist. This dimension is closely related to scientific-humanistic, but refers more directly to the investigator's moral posture.
- General research vs. policy-oriented research. This distinction is a difficult one to maintain in practice, and should probably be regarded as a kind of continuum involving the degree of explicitness of social concern or public policy issue toward which the research is oriented.
- Within the arena of research methodology, the main basis of division will be the emphasis on quantitative/statistical analyses of systematically gathered or constructed databases, on the one hand, versus the array of 'other' methods, including ethnographic study, archival/historical research, and the method of systematic illustration in the comparative study of societies, on the other.
- Within the arena of theory, there will also be a division between formal/mathematical theory (for example, adaptations of econometric theory, computer simulations, etc.) and 'other' types of qualitative theorizing, analyzing the history of sociological thought, and drawing out the moral, political, and ideological dimensions of sociological knowledge.

In all cases, we may expect that the scales will be tilted in the direction of the first term of each of these equations, because of the continuing effort of sociology to strive toward scientific legitimacy and because of the demands for quantitative, applied, and policy-oriented research emanating from the state and other institutions.

These broad conflicts will take place in the context of both ongoing conflicts among those who speak for sociological subfields (e.g., sociology of family, sociology of education), and continuing conflicts among those who speak for different theoretical perspectives (e.g., phenomenological sociology, neo-Marxist sociology). With respect to the latter, it is my impression that we have witnessed a change in atmosphere from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Both periods have

manifested much theoretical conflict but the tone seems to have changed. In the former period, the picture of theory in American sociology — and to some degree elsewhere — was one of embittered polemic attack and defense, with the accompanying claims that the competitors represented exclusive alternatives, and that there was little room for accommodation or synthesis. Now the picture is more one of peaceful pluralism, with the perspectives existing in a kind of side-by-side toleration, and there are some limited signs of theoretical synthesis on the horizon, to be mentioned presently. 'Peaceful pluralism' also implies that no particular perspective is clearly dominant, and I believe this to be the case, despite some claims to the contrary. I also sense that this situation, along with its more subdued mode of conflict, will continue into the coming decades, if for no other reason than the fact that institutionalization of a peaceful-pluralism culture makes for a general expectation that representatives of new or revitalized theoretical perspectives will be regarded as one of mainly claimants rather than the dominant one.

4 Integrative and Synthetic Themes

The above account constitutes, in my mind, most of the story regarding the future of sociological work over the next 10 to 20 years. The story would not be complete, however, without mentioning a few counter-trends toward integration and synthesis. These are weaker than the centrifugal and conflictual forces I have identified, but not negligible. In these final notes, my remarks will again refer mainly to the situation in the United States, and should be regarded only partially applicable, at best, to other nations and regions.

The themes of integration and synthesis can be discussed at two levels: the organizational/institution and the intellectual. At the former level, there are many forces making for organizational continuity of the field and for accommodation of diversity. Perhaps the most important of these is the existence of the academic departments as seats of graduate training and collegiate teaching. Departments will maintain their organizational independence within the college and university setting, by and large, and will continue to go by the name of 'sociology.' Those who are professionally trained in them are constrained, moreover, to identify themselves publicly as sociologists, mainly for market reasons, since professional social scientists who do not have a disciplinary label signifying their type of training, are at a disadvantage in the occupational market. Within departments, there are three identifiable pressures that proliferate accommodation. The first is the great difficulty for an academic in the college or university setting to break away from his or her department, and either join another department or become an independent scholar and teacher within the institution. The second is the evident pressure for departments striving for a high place in the prestige hierarchy of the

university to 'cover the field,' i.e., to stress comprehensiveness and balance in their faculty composition (thus accommodating a diversity of theoretical and research orientations). The third is the pressure for departments to include a certain theoretical and methodological core in their graduate training programs — to cover the past masters and current leading theorists and to bring the student to a level of acquaintance, if not mastery, of the major techniques for sociological research; if a department is negligent in these respects, its reputation as a training institution for sociologists is likely to suffer. All these pressures make for a common organizational membership in a department, and a certain level of cooperation and consensus in the preparation and execution of teaching and training programs.

Some accommodative tendencies are found in the professional association as well. The American Sociological Association experiences a certain amount of tension between the specialized 'sections' (medical sociology, theory, sociology of education, for example) and the organizational center (represented by the Council); at the same time, it must be remembered that the mechanism of section-formation is itself an accommodation, a way of honoring the specialized interests of sociologists and providing a meaningful intellectual base for them, while at the same time keeping them within the association. There are additional exigencies working against the splitting-off of multiple associations of sociologists, among them the considerable infrastructural cost of establishing a new organization and the loss of a single disciplinary presence in lobbying for research funding and for or against legislation affecting the profession.

On the intellectual side, one must take care not to predict more efforts at integration and synthesis than are actually justified by present trends. However, some signs can be noted. In a general sense, the aura of pluralistic peace is more encouraging of integrative thinking and collaborative work than the atmosphere of embittered polemics which precede it. The diverse efforts to find common ground, theoretical linkages, and empirical connections between the microscopic and macroscopic levels that have been in evidence for the past several years, probably could not have developed 20 years ago. The same atmosphere of pluralistic peace is also more permissive of cooperation in empirical research.

Beyond this general point, a few more specific observations are in order. In my estimation, ambitious efforts at theoretical synthesis on the model of the Parsonian program at mid-century, are not on the horizon. For one thing, the increasing complexity and centrifugality of the field renders such comprehensive efforts more difficult. In addition, the Parsonian mode suffered a long season of profound criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, and the generations of sociologists trained in those decades are neither sympathetic to nor well-versed in that theoretical style. In fact, in the past 50 years, the center of gravity of general theoretical thinking has shifted from the United States to Europe, and this shift is

represented in the works of scholars like Alain Touraine, Pierre Bourdieu, Jurgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, and Anthony Giddens. Much of current theoretical thinking in the United States stems from the influence of these figures on faculty and graduate students.

Other efforts will be more modest. We may expect additional efforts to accommodate and integrate along the lines of the micro-macro relationship, as well as in other areas. The series of conferences jointly sponsored by the Theory Sections of the American Sociological Association and the German Sociological Association on the micro-macro's link, theory of modernity, and theory of culture, are perhaps models for this. Finally, interdisciplinary research on specific analytic topics and empirical phenomena generate a different kind of synthesis. For example, insofar as collaborative work among economists, psychologists, and sociologists generates empirical findings and theoretical formulations on the process of individual behavior in the face of risk and uncertainty, this knowledge is synthetic in that it generates certain principles that comprehend phenomena which are of interest to several different disciplinary lines of inquiry. All these efforts represent different kinds of counter-balances to the centrifugal and fragmentary tendencies stressed earlier.

The spirit of this essay has been to avoid global proclamations — 'a field of crisis,' 'a field of decline,' 'a new dynamism' — about sociology, but rather to honor its complexity by identifying a number of probable trends working in different directions. For that reason, it seems inappropriate to attempt any sweeping conclusions. One general word, however, might be in order. That is, that the road ahead does not seem an easy one for the discipline. Sociology has always been a field that has experienced some difficulty in settling on its own identity. It appears that in the future this difficulty will become even greater, because of the trends described in this essay. At the same time, however, the evident organizational and institutional continuity of the field, as well as the continuity in the professional designation of those who practice in it, will continue to force the issue of identity upon sociologists. To seek this identity at a time when the field shows many signs that its common ground is receding, is a challenge that is not exactly welcome.

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Résumé

L'auteur construit sa démarche en suivant trois étapes: 1) il identifie des tendances sociétales générales ayant des retombées sur la discipline sociologique; 2) il dégage de ces tendances d'importantes orientations de changement pour la discipline, qualifiées de forces centrifuges; 3) il identifie certains enjeux conflictuels dans le développement de la sociologie ainsi que des formes de compromis et d'intégration. Son analyse concerne surtout les États-Unis mais plusieurs observations sont généralisables à d'autres pays.

Summary

In this essay, the author proceeds in three steps: first, by identifying some broad societal trends affecting sociology; second, by formulating important directions of change of the discipline suggested by these trends and described by the notion of centrifugality; third, by locating certain lines of conflict within the discipline and bases for accommodation and integration. His essay applies mainly to the American scene with observations applicable to sociology in other parts of the world.