The Prospects for Sociology into the Twenty-First Century

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In contrast to the malaise that Collins (1986), characterized for sociology of the 1980s, I argue that the future for sociology and sociologists is bright. There are three structural changes that lead to my optimism. First, the professoriate is changing from one that has been overwhelmingly white, male, and tenured, to one that will become younger and more diverse by gender and race. Second, the fiscal crisis of the state will limit monies for funded research, which will lead to more critical and more qualitative research. Third, societal and global changes will present sociologists with unprecedented opportunities. Globally, three momentous historical turning points present sociologists with incredible opportunities: (a) the shift to a post cold war era; (b) the ecological crises threatening the world's ecosystem; and (c) the transformation of the economy. Within the United States, there are many contemporary trends with considerable sociological relevance: the aging of the baby boom; the increasing proportion of the elderly; the growing racial/ethnic diversity; the regional shifts as the frost belt loses population, resources, and power, while the sun belt gains; and the growing urban underclass that is being left further and further behind. In short, the next two decades or so will present sociologists with exciting opportunities and challenges.

Randall Collins (1986) has provided a structural analysis for the malaise of sociology in the 1980s. The oversupply of sociologists in the 1980s, created, on the one hand, by their rapid numerical increase in the 1960s and 1970s, and the decline of students in academia, on the other, led to a number of problems that characterized the 1980s. Among the consequences of this mismatch were: unemployment and underemployment, a move away from academia for many, and, most important, a heightened competition among sociologists for jobs, tenure, and promotion. This latter result, led, further, to greater specialization (fragmentation, in negative terms), greater emphasis on publication for recognition and advancement, and less colleagueality. Moreover, there was a tendency for "generational conflict" as the new Ph.D. cohort of the 1980s was blocked by those who earned their advanced degrees in the 1960s and 1970s. In this overcrowded and overspecialized world, sociology and sociologists of the 1980s, were, in Collins' words "in the doldrums."
What of the future for sociology? Are there structural changes that lead to a more optimistic future for sociologists or is the future just as gloomy as was the reality of the 1980s? My argument is that the discipline and those of us in it face massive changes and challenges as we approach the year 2000 and beyond, but there is hope, lots of hope.

There are three basic areas within the discipline of sociology: theory, method, and praxis. These will be affected by three factors: the changing professoriate, changing sources and amounts of research funding, and societal/global trends.

The Changing Professoriate

For the last fifteen years or so, the academy, including sociology, has been relatively stagnant. During these years few professors retired, few were hired, and few moved to other positions in academia. Faculties were tenured in, so the only movement was among the non-tenured lumpenprofessoriate—the academic transients who were and are exploited by universities and departments. The result was a tenured professoriate that was overwhelmingly white and male. The typical department was dominated by aging, white males with few challenges to their entrenched ways of thinking and acting. But this ossification of the professoriate during the 1980s was a temporary phenomenon. Three facts make this point.

1. Most projections of college enrollments indicate that they will reach their low point in 1995. Thereafter, enrollments will begin to increase once again and continue to do so until the years 2005–2010. Moreover, the number of sociology majors across the country is trending upward. Thus, there will be demand by the end of the century for more professors.

2. Approximately one-third of American professors will be replaced by the year 2000 because of retirements. Between now and the year 2010 some 70,000 to 130,000 new full-time faculty will be added. These new professors will live the bulk of their lives in the twenty-first century—and they will not begin retiring until the middle third of that century.

3. There is a strong push for diversity in new hires across the nation. Thus, departments, once white and male, are adding women, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos.

These trends indicate the beginning of a dramatic changeover in the professoriate. These new professors will be younger and more diverse by gender and race. Most of them will have been trained in the 1990s, which means that their theoretical orientations, substantive interests, and methodological proclivities will differ, perhaps dramatically, from those of the retiring professors, who were trained in the 1950s and 1960s. As these professors gain tenure, they will have a pronounced effect on the direction sociology takes early in the next century.