AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY IN A TRANSNATIONAL WORLD: AGAINST PAROCHIALISM*

In spite of its cosmopolitan origins, American sociology is widely regarded as parochial in its outlook and concerns. In this paper I outline factors contributing to the intellectual isolationism of American sociological research and pedagogy. Then I review recent social and intellectual trends toward internationalization. Finally, I offer concrete suggestions for sociologists interested in internationalizing their curricula.

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I shall be most disappointed if sociology becomes merely the study of the American, the mass, the distribution of moderate range, of the middle of the curve, of the well-established, of the parts of the world where only minor changes occur, where everyone speaks English, and everyone—including the women—wears pants (Hughes [1961] 1971:477).

The modal sociological focus on the white male American has drawn considerable criticism since the 1960s (see Acker 1973; Collins 1991). Yet Everett Hughes’s lament that American sociology is parochial still rings true in the 1990s. Although American sociologists are aware of the peril of generalizing from men’s or European Americans’ experiences, many continue to rely on the singular case of the United States (see Armer 1987). In this paper I argue that parochialism is harmful not only for sociological research and pedagogy but also for the survival of sociology in higher education.

Internationalization is not a good in and of itself. Global consciousness, as Edward Said (1993) reminds us, is largely a result of modern imperialism. Indeed, “sociology of development”—a sociological area in which international studies were most advanced—was beset by ethnocentric assumptions, and at times aided in the construction of U.S. hegemony in world affairs (Frank 1969:21–94; also see Lele 1993; Oomen 1991).

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I suggest that the origins of sociology reveal the fundamentally “international” outlook and concerns of the discipline. Second, I explain why American sociology has become parochial in spite of its cosmopolitan origins. Third, I trace the current social and intellectual forces that compel American sociology to internationalize its research and curriculum. Finally, I recommend concrete steps for sociologists interested in internationalizing American sociology. Throughout the paper I draw on examples from East Asian societies. I presume that the broad contour of my arguments and suggestions will apply to other areas of the world.

THE COSMOPOLITAN ORIGINS OF AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

When one reflects on the origins of sociology, it is curious that American sociology should have become parochial. Both its disciplinary and its American origins are characterized by cosmopolitanism. Further, the social conditions underlying the development of American sociology encouraged its international orientation.

The disciplinary origins of sociology—whether traced to Auguste Comte (who coined the term sociology) or to Herbert Spencer (his powerful popularizer)—indicate its cosmopolitan intellectual orientation. The very project of sociology—understanding fundamental social processes and institutions—challenges prevailing local and ethnocentric views (Wallerstein 1990). Evolutionary theorists such as

* Although it is parochial to equate the United States with America, lack of an adequate adjective forces me to use American when I mean the United States. This paper was presented at the 1994 meetings of the Midwestern Sociological Society, held in St. Louis. Thanks to Ray Olson for kindly encouraging my participation and to Miwako Kuno for research assistance. I wish also to thank Nancy Abela and the anonymous reviewers of Teaching Sociology for their helpful comments.
Comte and Spencer, even if enmeshed in Eurocentric assumptions, analyzed other places and other times.

Comparisons and changes across time and space are significant spurs to sociological thinking. If we examine the "Holy Trinity" of contemporary American social theory—Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim—we reconﬁrm the global outlook of early sociology. Marx’s writings on India and Russia, Weber’s comparative sociology of world religions, and Durkheim’s anthropological forays bear witness to classical sociologists’ comparative visions (see Genov 1991).

A cosmopolitan orientation animated early American sociologists as well. Of the most inﬁuential prewar theorists, Pitirim Sorokin and Talcott Parsons, had international experience and concerns. Sorokin, a Russian emigré, commanded various languages and cultures in his surveys of social theory as well as in his magnum opus, Social and Cultural Dynamics. Parsons, who studied at the London School of Economics and at Heidelberg, introduced European social theorists such as Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber in The Structure of Social Action. Parsons engaged in studies of various societies, which culminated in his two comparative-historical volumes, Societies and The System of Modern Societies. In addition, other scholars’ interests in international trends and topics were ubiquitous in prewar American sociology. For example, American sociologist E.E. Eubank’s homage to great European sociologists demonstrates American sociologists’ long-abiding interests in European intellectual currents (Käseli [1985] 1991).

The international—especially European—orientation of early American sociologists should not be surprising. Sociology, after all, originated and developed in Europe in the late nineteenth century. American academics were catching up to their European counterparts in the early twentieth century; command of German and French was requisite for any intellectually ambitious American sociologist.

The desire to overcome intellectual backwardness was not the only reason for an outward orientation. Because of the rapid influx of southern and eastern European immigrants in the early twentieth century, as well as the arrival of exiled Jewish intellectuals before mid-century, subject matter and scholars inﬂuenced American sociologists to look beyond their national borders.

The presumed intellectual dominance of American sociology after World War II diminished interest in European intellectual trends. Yet the Pax Americana provided powerful grounds for globalizing American sociology. World War II itself was crucial in deparochializing American higher education; GIs ventured abroad, while American government and corporate interests in global affairs increased (see Goodwin and Nacht 1991:2–4). As Columbia University president Nicholas Murray Butler stated in 1945, “Global warfare has made plain the fallacy of isolation...which, if followed now, would lead the people of the United States to political, economic, and social disaster” (quoted in McCaughey 1984:122). The Cold War generated ample funding for “area studies”—both to study our “enemies” in the Communist bloc and to analyze the “Third World.” Other inﬂuences included American military engagements in Korea and Vietnam, as well as interventions in Central America, and their connections to American academia (see Chomsky 1989). The Fulbright Scholars Program, the Peace Corps, the Rockefeller and the Ford foundations, and other forms of security and development assistance programs provided scholars and students with plentiful opportunities to pursue international issues (see McCaughey 1984, part 2). Finally, American intellectual supremacy elevated the United States into a major receiving country in the “brain drain.” The new intellectual immigrants provided a reservoir of knowledge about the world.

ISOLATIONISM IN AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

In spite of these inﬂuences, American sociology in the postwar period has been widely regarded as parochial. The prevailing atmosphere prompted Wilbert Moore (1966) to urge globalization of sociological research. One need not present empirical data to ac-
cept this characterization (but see Armer 1987, 1990). What is true for research is equally true for teaching: R.W. Connell (1990:265), an Australian sociologist, remarks that most American sociology textbooks "are written on the assumption that 'sociology' means the current social problems of the United States." Most introductory sociology textbooks of the early 1990s are ethnocentric, paying little attention to the world outside American borders (Najafi-zadeh and Mennerick 1992). What accounts for this intellectual isolationism?

First, the American tradition of pragmatism and problem solving circumscribed sociological concerns to local phenomena. The social policy orientation of empirical research, exemplified clearly by the Chicago School, analyzed problems of urban life through ethnographic and survey research that entailed close attention to specific sites. The involvement of sociology in the growing welfare state only increased the tendency of sociological research to focus almost exclusively on the United States. Furthermore, in spite of the importance of the Vietnam War, the 1960s' social movements did not significantly expand interests in comparative analysis and global affairs (Hollander 1981:26). Current concerns about "race, gender, and class," for example, often lead to neglect of cross-cultural comparisons in research or pedagogy.

Second, the increasingly quantitative orientation of American sociology contributed to analysis of the United States, or at most to other industrialized societies. The condition of possibility of quantitative sociology is the systematic gathering of data. Such data are exceedingly difficult to compile: collection requires generous funding—hence the stress on American policy concerns—or well-functioning government bureaucracy, such as the census. Not surprisingly, data collection is developed most highly in rich societies. Thus the reliance on dependable data narrows the focus of social research. Goodwin and Nach's (1991:29–36) survey of scholars most resistant to internationalizing the curriculum includes methodologically sophisticated social scientists. These authors write:

(W)e heard among the social sciences levels of enthusiasm for extended field trips abroad roughly inverse to their self-image of rigor, with the greatest skepticism expressed by "methodological multiplists" for whom theoretical modeling and quantifiable data (obtained by mail from national statistical offices) and its analysis are the be-all and end-all of their professions (1991:33).

If good sociology is defined as quantitative analysis of reliable data, then many situations in the world—including pressing issues within the United States—lie beyond the purview of sociology. Sociologists are left with the matters recounted in Hughes's quote.

Third, the prevailing intellectual division of labor in American research universities diverted the concern of American sociology from (comparative) history and non-industrial societies. In particular, anthropology virtually monopolized studies of nonindustrial societies. The range of intellectual concerns in American sociology thus followed the dictates of disciplinary territoriality. A related factor is that the niche for comparative and international work was not institutionalized in sociology. In contrast, political science, for example, has well-established subfields of comparative politics and international relations.

Fourth, the dominant evolutionary beliefs dovetailed with Eurocentrism to intellectually justify the focus on the United States and possibly Europe. The dominant evolutionary belief projected a unilinear track of history, with the United States at its apex. Daniel Bell (1980:247) points out "what had for several hundred years been a well-nigh universal expectation that the United States would inherit the future." Thus the study of the United States could be justified on the grounds that other societies were bound to follow its trajectory.

In this regard, larger cultural forces cannot be ignored. There exists a powerful tradition of American isolationism, which causes Americans' interests to turn in on themselves. This narcissism, furthermore, contributes to the belief in American exceptionalism (Ross 1991). One contemporary manifestation is the populist belief in American superiority; a school board member in Florida, for example, stated: "I don't
need to visit other countries to know that America is the best country in the world." Another said: "We need to reinforce that we should be teaching America first" (quoted in Rothe 1994:22). According to a prevailing chauvinism, Americans don't need to learn about the world outside the United States.

Finally, the massive growth of American higher education in the postwar period encouraged the isolationist tendency in American sociology. If traditional pursuits of higher learning were elite endeavors, then concerns with non-American societies remained largely the province of elite institutions. The support for international studies entailed intellectual infrastructures such as library resources, language teaching, and transdisciplinary interests. These crucial resources were not readily available at many public institutions. It is not surprising that language barriers are the most commonly cited culprit in noninternationalized research and curricula (see Lambert 1985; Smith 1990).

Thus American sociology became increasingly parochial in the age of the Pax Americana. Paradoxically, the isolationism of American sociology also has had negative consequences for international sociology. The political and intellectual prestige of the United States contributed to the virtual global dominance of American sociology in the post-World War II decades. Dan Chekki (1987), for example, argues that the development of Indian and Canadian sociology closely followed the model of American sociology. In South Korea in the late 1980s, I heard many sociology students complain that one of the professors repeatedly used an American social problems textbook. The text—with its emphases on drugs, teenage pregnancy, and so on—was irrelevant to that time and place.

THE CHANGING CONTOURS: THE 1990s AND BEYOND

Even as the classic Cold War rationales for studying foreign societies decline, there are compelling reasons to stimulate international components in sociological research and pedagogy. Indeed, recent trends toward internationalizing sociological re-

search led Peter Evans and John Stephens (1988:739) to write: "Parochialism, long a hallmark of American social science, is on the decline." In accounting for the deparochializing of American sociology, let me reconsider the factors I highlighted as contributing to the intellectual isolationism of American sociology.

First, the pragmatic and policy orientation of American sociology demands more rather than less comparative research. Irving Louis Horowitz (1964:32) noted 30 years ago: "You can no longer settle any major sociological problem within the boundaries of the United States" (author's emphasis). Let me cite one illustration of this statement. Unequal educational attainment is a major topic of empirical research. John Ogbu (1978) challenges the tacit and racialized assumption of educational inequality when he observes in his comparative study that the differential attainment between "blacks" and "whites" in the United States is roughly similar to that between burakumin (descendants of outcasts) and mainstream Japanese in Japan. This simple comparison demolishes facile assumptions about "racial" differences.

Equally critical is the globalization of social problems. The study of a social problem often entails looking beyond national borders. The case is clear enough, for example, in regards to the nuclear threat. Probably the most "popular" social problem—the environment—requires an understanding of the global dimensions of the ecological crisis (see Faber 1993). Even drugs, a problem that seems on the surface to be quintessentially urban and American, cannot be analyzed apart from global networks (see Marshall 1991). Indeed, in our transnational world, few problems, on close inspection, are purely "local."

Second, and in a related vein, methodological sophistication is inadequate in itself to overcome ethnocentrism. In particular, comparative historical sociology and world systems analysis challenge sociologists—even those who work outside these areas—

1 Their chapter, however, was the last of 22 chapters in Handbook of Sociology, most of which had few, if any, international components.
to confront comparative materials and world-historical contexts (Feierman 1993). The spirit of cross-cultural research has spilled over into skepticism about the validity of generalizations based on a single case, even if that case is the United States. Along with sociologists studying gender and ethnicity, sociologists studying other societies and other times challenge ethnocentrism. As Connell (1990:265) remarks: "Sociology is known by its concepts, and no theorist worth her salt wants her concepts imprisoned in one country, however large or splendid." A midwestern sociologist in his mid-fifties told me that he has decided to study an Asian society because he could no longer adequately defend the validity of his theory, which is based solely on American case studies. His situation and realization are by no means unique.

Third, sociologists are breaking away from disciplinary isolationism. Developments in gender and ethnic studies have been crucial in pushing sociologists to forge interdisciplinary collaborations and curricula. The very task of attaining a general understanding of social life should not be imprisoned by contingent disciplinary boundaries (Calhoun 1992).

Fourth, there is a growing challenge to the pervasive Eurocentric assumptions and outlooks. Even the limited internationalization of sociology—represented by comparative historical sociology and world systems analysis—has contributed to undermining value-laden, ethnocentric outlooks. Sociology is internationalizing in another sense as well: more sociologists, not only from Europe but from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, are making vital contributions to the discipline. In this regard, Goodwin and Nacht (1991:113) observe correctly, "U.S. dominance, probably exaggerated even at the best of times, is declining relatively in the world of scholarship as it is in the global economy."

Fifth, the demands on American higher education are changing, for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the globalization of capitalism—analyzed trenchantly by many world systems analysts—encourages the growth of international components in teaching. In particular, Asian economics generate "demands" for teaching about Asian societies. In this regard, an administrator at a "predominantly black college" said: "Our students want opportunities in Japan and Korea, where the economic action is, not in sub-Saharan Africa" (quoted in Goodwin and Nacht 1991:62). To cite a personal example, on several occasions the lecture hall could not accommodate all the eager listeners for my talk on foreign workers in Japan. My lecture was also on southeast and south Asian migrant workers in manual jobs, not the kind of jobs desired by American college graduates!

On the other hand, the new immigration patterns since the mid-1960s (Jasso and Rosenzweig 1990) have generated demands for a curriculum more closely attuned to the changing demographics. As children of new immigrants enter college in greater numbers, many of them express interest in both their origins and their current conditions. Ethnic studies and "homeland" studies, in other words, are less distinct than practitioners in both areas would like to believe. Is it surprising that a daughter of 1970s Vietnamese immigrants would be interested in both Vietnamese history and Asian American studies, or that the two should seem to her to be intimately intertwined?

Thus global capitalism and U.S. immigration patterns combine in a powerful way to create a demand for international research and curriculum. Indeed, globalization and transnationalism are powerful trends; sociologists cannot dismiss them as fads or deny their salience (Bamyeh 1995). What more obvious field is there than sociology to analyze these changing realities and teach them to students?

THE SURVIVAL OF SOCIOLOGY

Unfortunately, however, American sociology is not meeting the challenge. The isolationist forces I have described still maintain their grip on many sociologists, who resist the globalization of research and pedagogy. This is equally true at research and at predominantly teaching institutions.

At research universities, the imperative to publish requires that scholars heed the disciplinary status quo. The emphasis on
quantitative research and on policy orientations limits scholarly concerns to the United States and perhaps to a few other advanced industrial societies.

At teaching institutions, the legacy of isolationism perpetuates itself. An anthropologist at a small midwestern liberal arts college, for example, laments that all of her sociologist colleagues are trained to be parochial and assiduously noninternational in their outlook. Hence all of the teaching duties pertaining to non-U.S. societies and issues are left to the "token" anthropologist. This situation is not unique.

Sociologists must meet the challenge of globalization. The rewards are clear enough, but perhaps the sanctions are less clear. In the current climate of academic downsizing and budget cuts, sociologists have suffered more than their share of the administrative ax. American sociology is vulnerable because of its isolationism in both research and pedagogy. In avoiding ties with growth areas such as Asian studies or Asian American studies, American sociology renders the discipline increasingly irrelevant in the eyes of students and administrators alike.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

What is an individual sociologist to do? It is easy enough for a sociologist with ongoing research and teaching interests in Asian studies to call for globalizing research and teaching, but what of scholars without the requisite training and background? See Goodwin and Nacht (1991:13.) How can teachers internationalize their teaching? I offer several short-term and long-term suggestions.

In the short run, injecting international elements into research or curriculum need not entail a complete conversion; it is not a matter of revolution, but of reform. International materials can be introduced gradually into existing courses. A course on introductory sociology or American society, for example, may include a week on Japan (Liebman 1994), may explore U.S. interventions in other countries (Whyte 1990:226–27), or may simply incorporate some comparative materials (Stauffer 1985; Tiryakian 1986:158–63).

In this regard, useful teaching tools are available for novice professors. The Columbia Project on Asia in the Core Curriculum has published several volumes; the volume for the social sciences features short teaching outlines and reading lists on topics such as "Korean women" and "stratification in Japan" (Cohen 1992). Joy and Kniep (1987) have produced a useful volume of essays on teaching about U.S.-Third World relations. The American Sociological Association, through its Teaching Resources Center, offers a collection of syllabi and teaching suggestions (Goodman, Armer, and Carlson 1991). Certain introductory sociology textbooks have explicit international emphases (Bryjak and Soroka 1994; Ferrante 1992) and offer plentiful comparative examples (Giddens 1991; Walton 1993), as do some supplementary readers (Curtis and Teperman 1994; Lie 1991), and annuals (Brown et al. various years; UNDP various years; World Bank various years). In addition, some periodicals provide sources for teachers' resources and students' reading assignments. Untapped human resources also exist. Colleagues within the institution as well as in the discipline are eager to help. In schools with graduate programs, Asian stu-

2 The following periodicals offer useful supplementary reading materials. New Internationalist (PO Box 1143, Lewiston, NY 14092; $35.98/year), in addition to its thoughtful and readable articles, contains book, movie, and video reviews in every issue, as well a summary of statistical indicators for a country. See also Monthly Review (122 W. 27th St., New York, NY 10001; $15/year); and Multinational Monitor (PO Box 19405, Washington, DC 20036; $25/year) for critical perspectives. For more area-specific periodicals, see NACLA: Report on the Americas (PO Box 72, Hopewell, PA 16650; $27/year) on Latin America; Middle East Report (MERIP, 1500 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite 119, Washington, DC 20005; $25/year) on the Middle East and North Africa; Toward Freedom (209 College St., Burlington, VT 05404; $25/year) on Africa; and Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars (3239 9th St., Boulder, CO 80304; $22/year) on Asia and the Pacific. Furthermore, several professional journals feature a large number of comparative studies and global issues, which can be incorporated into lectures and discussions. See, for example, International Sociology (International Sociological Association; Sage Publications), Comparative Studies in Society and History (Cambridge University Press), and Public Culture (University of Chicago Press).
CONCLUSION

American sociology should not deny or resist the inevitable trend toward a transnational world. As I have suggested, our research and teaching should benefit from incorporating international materials. To remain encrusted in our isolationist shell would only render sociology irrelevant, whether in scholarship, policy, or teaching. As McCaughy (1984:255) writes in his history of international studies in the United States: "In America, at least, although the pursuit of learning may well be its own reward, it cannot for long among the otherwise occupied citizens be its own justification." One may say the same for sociology in its intellectual isolation. The survival of sociology may well depend on its internationalization.

REFERENCES


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