

Re-envisioning the History of Sociology: Reflections on a Symposium for Junior Historians of Sociology held at the New School for Social Research, August 10, 2013

Michael Bare¹ · Laura R. Ford²

Published online: 19 May 2015

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2015

Six of the articles published in this issue of *The American Sociologist* – Álvaro Santana-Acuña’s *Outside Structures*, John Boy’s *The Axial Age and the Problems of the Twentieth Century*, Corey Colyer’s *W.I. Thomas and the Forgotten Four Wishes*, Marcus Hunter’s *W.E.B. Du Bois and Black Heterogeneity*, Ben Merriman’s *Three Conceptions of Spatial Locality in Chicago School Sociology*, and Gina Zurlo’s *The Social Gospel, Ecumenical Movement, and Christian Sociology*—are connected with a Symposium held at The New School for Social Research on August 10, 2013. The Symposium was generously hosted by The New School’s Sociology Department, and sponsored by the History of Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association (ASA). Ambitiously hoping to “highlight the relevance of sociology’s past to its present and future, and to bring the history of sociology out of its marginal position,” we issued a call to graduate students and early career sociologists, soliciting their help in “an effort to re-envision the history of sociology” (Bare and Ford 2012).

The fruitfulness of that call is now on display for all to see and judge.

In what follows, we offer our reflections on lessons learned and intellectual benefits gained from organizing this Symposium. In offering these reflections, we are (in a small way) contributing to the history of sociology. Looking to the future, we hope that these reflections might help garner support for similar initiatives by junior scholars.

The Background

Two important developments provide the context for our Symposium: (1) the growing energy and intellectual dynamism connected with the ASA’s Junior Theorists

✉ Laura R. Ford
lrf23@cornell.edu

¹ University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637, USA

² The Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy, SUNY Buffalo Law School, Buffalo, NY 14260, USA

Symposium, and (2) Richard Swedberg's Chairmanship of ASA's History of Sociology Section (HoS, 2012–2013). Having participated in the first development, Richard suggested that HoS try something similar. As luck would have it, we were both present at the meeting when the suggestion was made, and, as graduate student representatives, were tasked with making a "Junior Historians of Sociology" Symposium a reality. Such is the combination of fortuity, structure, and agency that is the stuff of social life.

Since ASA's Junior Theorists Symposium was an explicit model for us, we were very fortunate in having a supportive, friendly reception from the organizers of the 2013 Symposium: Fiona Rose-Greenland and Josh Pacewicz. Some of our early planning was discussed with them, and our Symposium was planned for the day following theirs, in the hope that people might attend both Symposia.

Our most substantial support, however, came from members of HoS. HoS is a tiny section of ASA. Nevertheless, it has a dedicated membership. Two of its members were especially helpful to us: Vera Zolberg, in offering The New School as a home for our Symposium, and Larry Nichols, in offering to publish high-quality papers generated by the Symposium in a dedicated issue of *The American Sociologist*. Other HoS members provided feedback on our draft Call for Papers, and encouraged us to see the Symposium as something that might continue into the future.

Sweetened with an offer of possible publication, and a location at the historic New School for Social Research, our Call for Papers was published in the fall issue of the HoS Newsletter: *Timelines* (Bare and Ford 2012). We also distributed the Call to forty ASA section chairs to forward onto their list-serves. Nearly all answered back with words of encouragement, support, and gratitude for our efforts. Many voiced acute interest in our discipline's history and collective memory—a flicker of hope for those who bemoan evidence of sociology's institutionalized amnesia. In that regard, we received 23 outstanding paper submissions, and selected 9 for the Symposium. We clustered these into groups of 3, in 3 panels, and also planned a final Reflective Panel, which would include organizers and discussants. Jeffrey Goldfarb, Martin Bulmer, and Jeffrey Olick generously agreed to serve as discussants for the 3 panels.

Our Program Announcement was published in the spring issue of *Timelines* (Bare and Ford 2013). Every effort was made to drum up enthusiasm for the Symposium. Large bold letters announced an "Important HoS Sponsored Event!" and an "Exciting New Program for New York." At this point we knew that the Symposium's costs—especially for food—would consume a large portion of HoS's annual budget, and we feared that it might be difficult to draw in enough participants to justify the expenditure.

The Symposium

August 10, 2013 was a spectacularly beautiful summer day in New York City. Small organizational snafus worked through, everything went as planned in setting up for the Symposium. And the paper presenters arrived at The New School's Wolff Conference Room full of enthusiasm about the opportunity to participate in an historic, scholarly event.

Unfortunately, our fears about insufficient attendance were justified. Whether it reflected the unattractiveness of leaving the ASA Annual Meeting location for a cab or subway ride to the Symposium, or something about HoS's status, the low and sporadic attendance was deeply unfortunate. This was especially so, given the

excellence of the presentations, and the thoughtful and animated discussions they stimulated. Intellectually, this was a rich Symposium, and the small number of participants even heightened the sense of genuine intellectual exchange.

Nevertheless, the Spirit of our Times is one of maximizing quantity (often within ever-multiplying cloisters of ever-smaller circles). And the number of our participants did not justify our costs. Already by the end of the day, and certainly by the end of ASA's 2013 Annual Meeting, some were pronouncing our little Symposium a failure.

Lessons Learned

Today, however, we have an opportunity to rebut that pronouncement of failure. Published in this issue of *The American Sociologist*, as promised in 2012, are six articles that have taken up the call to “Re-envision the History of Sociology.” And the fruits of these authors' labors exceed anything that we could have hoped for in 2012.

Accordingly, the first lesson from this Symposium is as follows: a long-term perspective is required when making judgments about the success or failure of scholarly efforts. Viewed from the perspective of September 2013, and judged by the number of participants, our Symposium was a failure. But viewed from the perspective of June 2015, and judged by the papers themselves, the Symposium was successful in generating new perspectives on the history of sociology. It showed too that such critical functions HoS shoulders for sociology—to wit, maintaining and reinforcing collective memory and providing a means and forum for rigorous disciplinary reflexivity—are still being taken up by a new crop of serious scholars.

We cannot change the Spirit of our Times, but we can resist it. And we can celebrate the moments when the justice of that resistance is on display.

But a corollary of this lesson is that some type of long-term investment by senior scholars is needed to bolster this kind of high-risk, high-reward effort by junior scholars. In this particular case, the opportunity to publish in *The American Sociologist* certainly helped to generate higher-quality papers, just as it provided the opportunity for a long-term perspective on the ultimate success of the Symposium.

A second lesson from the Symposium descends to the level of prosaic practicality. If you are planning a “boutique” academic conference, such as this one, and you are worried about low levels of participation, spend very little money on food. Most of the people who will attend your event will not be attending for the food. You will simply open yourself up to criticism, and make your life organizationally complicated, in worrying about food service costs and delivery. Provide the bare minimum necessary to keep people from starving and complaining, savor the intellectual exchange, and go out for drinks afterward.

A third lesson from the Symposium concerns the issue of boundary-drawing. The lesson is simple: be flexible in your inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation. We learned this lesson the hard way, and for this reason it is especially gratifying to see Corey Colyer's article on W.I. Thomas's *Forgotten Four Wishes* included in this issue. Corey inquired about submitting a paper for the Symposium, but because his formal academic status seemed too far advanced to count as “junior,” we turned him down. Corey nonetheless generously agreed to participate in our Reflective Panel, and was a valued participant in the Symposium. Given the fact that we had relatively few

submissions, and there was no question of senior scholar participation driving out junior scholar participation, there seems to have been no reason to exclude Corey's submission. Fortunately, the costs of our mistake have been overridden in the long-term perspective, and we are honored to see the *Forgotten Four Wishes* included with the Symposium-affiliated articles.

Intellectual Benefits Gained

We both gained tremendous intellectual benefits from organizing this Symposium. Most fundamentally, these benefits came from reading the paper submissions, and engaging with the paper presenters.

The articles published in this Symposium-affiliated issue of *The American Sociologist* contribute important dimensions to our understanding of the history of sociology. They help us to remember parts of sociology's past that may have been forgotten, and they point to the relevance of sociology's past to its present and future. Each in his or her own way, these authors help us to "re-envision" the history of sociology.

Álvaro Santana-Acuña's article helps us to remember two works—Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and Gabriel Tarde's *Monadology and Sociology* (1893)—which today are peripheral to collective representations of the sociological tradition, but were once central in making sociology a science of "the social" and "society." In particular, Santana-Acuña helps us to remember that these two conceptions so foundational for sociology—depending as they do on a vision of social interaction, as something structural that exists "outside" our experiential consciousness—have not always been with us, and did not emerge with necessity. This important reminder challenges our traditional renderings of classical sociological theory, and also raises important questions about how sociological concepts should be used in contemporary research.

John Boy's article compares and contrasts the ways in which Karl Jaspers and W.E.B. Du Bois drew on Hegelian themes in conceptualizing processes of macro-historical social change. He emphasizes the strengths of Du Bois' relational theory of "double consciousness," the ways in which it helps us to understand the experiences of encounter between blacks and whites in the post-Civil War South, and offers broader insights into the relational experiences of domination, un-freedom, and inequality in cultural contact. By returning us to the big questions asked by "big books" (Graeber 2011) in sociology's past, Boy seeks to shed light on the ways in which sociology might address the big questions of its present. Du Bois has a particular relevance to such inquiries, according to Boy, because he helps us to see the ways in which the relational experiences of modernity may involve painful experiences of division, coercion, and rejection.

Corey Colyer's article recovers a central theoretical idea in the work of W.I. Thomas, the notion of "four wishes" integral to human motivation and action. Thomas's "four wishes"—for experience, security, response, and recognition—served as a framework of analytical categories, which referenced subjective processes mediating between sources of behavior rooted in physiology and sources from the objective social environment. While the notion played a key role in parts of Thomas's works, and provided viable working solutions to a set of problems that underlie all sociology, the notion all but

disappeared, despite widespread recognition of Thomas's importance. Colyer focuses historically on the reasons for this disappearance. He concludes that the ideas disappeared as Thomas's professional fortunes negatively changed, a result of his involvement in the scandal that effectively ended his university career. An important set of ideas was lost, due to intellectual and social contextual factors of politics and personalities.

Marcus Hunter's article on W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Philadelphia Negro* and the context of its production brings to the fore the role "heterogeneity" played as a central analytical theme. As Hunter notes, Du Bois has increasingly become appreciated as a key forebear in sociology, and in its advancement as an empirically grounded discipline. Du Bois' study preceded the Chicago School and others' works as an exemplar of ecologically situated inquiry founded on rigorous analysis and observation. And it was a pioneer in the study of race, especially of African Americans. What has been missed, and what Hunter recovers, is the way in which Du Bois used and emphasized themes and facts of socio-cultural heterogeneity, characterizing modern urban life in general and among blacks in Philadelphia in particular. Not only does Hunter's analysis bring to light a crucial new aspect in the ongoing recovery of an unjustifiably underappreciated figure, but it highlights Du Bois' concern with the empirical fact of great diversity among African Americans during a time when "homogeneity" was constructed and projected on the group by elites and scientists wittingly and unwittingly taking part in solidifying processes of racial formation.

Focusing on three different and inconsistent ways the early Chicago School conceptualized space, Merriman's article shows how the burgeoning research using spatial methods continues to work with what are in essence the same incomplete and faulty conceptions. The three notions of spatial locality Merriman uncovers are based on ecology, on institutions, and on subjective perceptions. Showing how each was embodied in Chicago Sociology and is currently embodied in contemporary research, Merriman suggests five distinct research goals that, if pursued, can help current research transcend long-standing difficulties inherent in each conception, while further progressing our knowledge of urban and other spatial processes.

Gina Zurlo's article reminds us of the extent to which Christian social movements and organizations were involved in the early development of American sociology. She highlights two under-recognized Christian social movements: the social gospel movement (1870s–1920s), and the global ecumenical movement (beginning in 1910). Focusing on an important, organizational confluence of these two movements—the Institute of Social and Religious Research, funded by John Rockefeller, Jr. – Zurlo points to the foundational importance of, and the tensions generated by, Christian religious motivation in the formation of American sociology. Noting Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* study as a case in point, Zurlo urges further investigation of the ways in which American liberal Protestantism helped to form the American discipline of sociology.

History of Sociology as Sociology's Collective Working Memory

In his 2012 and 2013 Messages to HoS, Richard Swedberg articulated a vision of the history of sociology as sociology's collective, working memory. The metaphor of working memory, for Swedberg, is meant to highlight the important role that collective

understanding of historical development plays in sociology's capacity to function adequately as an academic discipline today. Rather than being exclusively the preserve and concern of professional historians—although professional historiography is critically important—history of sociology is needed by all sociologists, in order to perform their professional activities well.

Anyone who has watched the tragic process of dementia-related decline can attest to the importance of memory in basic human functioning. In Swedberg's view, an analogy may be drawn to professional functioning in an academic discipline, like sociology. The implication is that, when sociologists forget important elements and episodes in their discipline's history, their theory-development and research may suffer. Histories of sociology that remind us of important, forgotten elements and episodes serve the entire discipline, and are relevant to all sociologists, according to this view.

As organizers of a Symposium for junior scholars in the history of sociology, we hope to have served the discipline of sociology, in this way. We have every confidence that the articles connected with our Symposium, which we are very proud to see published in this issue of *The American Sociologist*, have contributed in this way.

As we see from these articles, an engagement with and recovery of earlier thinkers can bring significant rewards in the form of ideas from the past that are made new to us in the present. Such ideas stand to illuminate new phenomena, and assist us in the production of new knowledge. At the same time, such vistas into our sociological past bring into clear relief ideas and assumptions that can limit our vision in the present. The authors of these articles document earlier scientific and intellectual forays, discoveries, and in some cases mistakes, thereby enabling us to move forward, recognizing the islands of social life that have already been visited and charted by our predecessors.

Along with their historical analyses, these articles perform an important disciplinary service, what one of HoS's long-time members, Donald N. Levine (whom we recently lost, sadly) referred to as forms of theoretical "custodial work": recovering aspects of the sociological tradition, and sustaining dialogs (Levine 2004).

References

- Bare, M., & Ford, L.R. (2012). Call for Papers: Reenvisioning the History of Sociology (and Much More). *Timelines: The Newsletter of the ASA History of Sociology Section*, 20, 15–17. <http://www.asanet.org/sectionhistory/documents/20-Timelines-2012.pdf>. Accessed 8 May 2015.
- Bare, M., & Ford, L.R. (2013). Announcing our Exciting New Program for New York: Reenvisioning the History of Sociology: A Symposium for Junior Historians of Sociology. *Timelines: The Newsletter of the ASA History of Sociology Section*, 21, 6–11. <http://www.asanet.org/sectionhistory/documents/21-Timelines-2013.pdf>. Accessed 8 May 2015.
- Graeber, D. (2011) Can we still write big question sorts of books? *Savage Minds: Notes and Queries in Anthropology*, July 31. <http://savageminds.org/2011/07/31/can-we-still-write-big-question-sorts-of-books>. Accessed 8 May 2015.
- Levine, D.N. (2004). On Theory Work in Sociology. Dialog in On the Chair's Corner. Website for the ASA theory section. <http://www.csun.edu/~egodard/asatheory/2004debate.html>. Accessed 10 May 2015.
- Swedberg, R. (2012). Message from the Chair: History of Sociology as the Working Memory of Sociology. *Timelines: The Newsletter of the ASA History of Sociology Section*, 20, 1, 11–12. <http://www.asanet.org/sectionhistory/documents/20-Timelines-2012.pdf>. Accessed 8 May 2015.
- Swedberg, R. (2013). Message from the Chair: History of Sociology as a Working Memory (Part 2). *Timelines: The Newsletter of the ASA History of Sociology Section*, 21, 1, 20–21. <http://www.asanet.org/sectionhistory/documents/21-Timelines-2013.pdf>. Accessed 8 May 2015.