Editor's Introduction: Contemporary National Sociologies

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Published online: 25 October 2017
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We live, it is often said, in a rapidly globalizing world, and this does indeed seem an incontestable fact of life. Nevertheless, the dynamics of change are not all pulling in the same direction. Indeed, we are witnessing, and participating in, a significant clash between forces tending to diminish the importance of nations, and other forces working to reassert the importance of that level of social organization. Perhaps this is most readily evident in the recent experience of the European Union, and especially the imminent withdrawal of Great Britain (“Brexit”) from what was to become—many supposed—the “United States of Europe.”

The field of sociology is itself embedded in these dynamics, and contributes to them. A century ago, there were very distinctive national sociologies across Europe and the United States. In France, where some of the earliest efforts to create a sociological field of study modeled on existing sciences occurred, there was a characteristic emphasis on the impact and constraints of group life on individual action, as in Auguste Comte’s “law of three phases,” Emile Durkheim’s “social facts” and Gabriel Tarde’s “laws of imitation.” In England, Harriet Martineau adopted the Comtean approach, but there Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary writings, which retained a strong individualistic element, would have a wider impact. In Germany, Karl Marx created a conflict approach that focused on social class divisions, while Max Weber developed an interpretive, historically grounded perspective for the analysis of capitalism and comparative civilizations. At about the same time, sociologists in the United States adopted a melioristic approach, often grounded in the Christian Social Gospel, within which W. E. B. DuBois examined race-based conflict, the Jane Addams circle (followed by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki) documented the suffering, striving and adaptations of competing immigrant groups, and Robert Park and Ernest Burgess mapped the ecology of cities.

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In the post World War Two era, these differences seemed to lessen as a trans-national sociology emerged. Here, the political and economic dominance of the United States generated an intellectual dominance for perhaps several decades, as universities in war-ravaged nations rebuilt. American sociology, in particular, spread to many countries and also influenced how sociology was done in Europe, which might, in a sense, be considered its original “home.” Earlier issues of this journal examined this process with regard, especially, to Canada and Japan, which then had to struggle to free themselves from American tutelage and define their own sociological imaginations in their own autonomous voices. The influence of U.S. sociology was perhaps most evident in modernization theory, in the “small groups” approach, and in the use of inferential statistics and regression analysis. The structural-functional approach of Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton also spread internationally, and gained—perhaps surprisingly, given the criticism that it was inherently conservative—a strong following in the Soviet Union.

But the process was not linear, and other dynamics emerged to challenge it. In France, the writings of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu changed sociological discourse, which was also modified by the approach of Jacques Derrida and other post-structuralists, who were themselves influenced by new work in linguistic analysis. Meanwhile, in Germany Jurgen Habermas developed what would become a widely influential model of “communicative action” that had roots in the earlier Frankfurt School. In England, Anthony Giddens poured out a series of works on “structuration.” These various innovations than “returned the earlier favor” by impacting sociological theory and practice in the United States, where Foucault gained something approaching a cult following.

It therefore appears that national sociologies, far from being mere relics of an earlier age of nationalism in culture and politics, are what Herbert Blumer might call “obdurate facts” in social science. National contexts, in other words, continue to matter very much, and to place their imprint on academic fields such as sociology. In some places, such as Latin America, sociology addresses the legacy of colonialism. Israel, by contrast, has a distinctive sociology of the kibbutz movement. Nations of the former Soviet Union are now seeking a new sociology, in the wake of the nearly total discrediting of Marxist-Leninist social science, and the Integralism of Pitirim Sorokin—which has deep roots in Russian intellectual history—enjoys a significant revival there. We can also expect to see similar developments in many Islamic nations, such as Turkey, where modernization, secularization and religious revival interpenetrate, and where there are the beginnings of women’s movements. Such instances can be multiplied indefinitely, as indicated by Andrew Abbott’s current project of “varieties of the sociological imagination.”

In this issue we focus on the contemporary situation in France, across a wide range of sociological specialty areas, mainly within academia, but also in the corporate and governmental sectors. Special thanks are due to our organizer and guest editor, Professor Julien Larregue, with whom I have been pleased to collaborate for many months. I would also like to thank each of our contributors, both for their expert analyses and for their patience over the lifetime of the project. This issue makes no pretense of being the final, authoritative word on contemporary sociology in France, and I would welcome additional entries to this conversation, as I would also welcome further submissions on national sociologies in other lands. There is much to celebrate in such ongoing and increasing diversity of sociological thought.