



The Future of Sociology's History: New Voices in the History of Sociology

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This special issue of *The American Sociologist* brings to fruition a plan that was first formulated and discussed during the 2019 ASA Annual Meeting in New York. As the incoming chair for the ASA's History of Sociology (HoS) Section, Jill Niebrugge-Brantley issued an invitation and challenge. At the most practical level, the invitation and challenge were to find ways of drawing new members into the Section. But, at a more conceptual level, the invitation and challenge were to lend greater dynamism and relevance to the history of sociology among U.S. sociologists.

As recent movements to “decolonize” sociology provocatively attest, the history of the discipline remains of vital relevance to academic sociology. And yet, unfortunately, the history of sociology is rarely presented to undergraduate and graduate students as a vital field of study. To the extent that history of sociology is taught, this is often in theory courses, which are today especially stretched by pressing calls to diversify the canon. Some prominent U.S. sociologists have successfully established their careers on the basis of history of sociology research, but, without additional encouragement, it is likely that early career scholars will see history of sociology as a risky proposition for significant intellectual investment.

The papers published in this special issue of *The American Sociologist* accordingly represent the fruits of a concerted effort to encourage “new voices” in the history of sociology. Nearly all of these papers were first presented as part of a New Voices Symposium, held on August 11, 2020, in pursuance of the plan hatched in August 2019. In our view, these now-published articles amply attest to the intellectual enrichment that U.S. sociology will glean by supporting and encouraging history of sociology scholarship on the part of graduate students and early career scholars, as well as from established scholars who are willing to take new turns in their scholarly endeavors.

In the remainder of this brief introductory essay, we retrospectively review the steps leading to development of what is now a flourishing New Voices Initiative for the

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history of sociology, an Initiative that is being actively carried forward by graduate students and early career scholars in the ASA HoS Section (which is now the History of Sociology and Social Thought (HoSST) Section). We also offer a survey of opportunities and needs for history of sociology scholarship, with examples and illustrations drawn from a widening terrain of developing research in this vibrant field.

The New Voices Initiative – A Retrospective Sketch

A vague conception of what would become the New Voices Initiative was floated by Laura, at the 2019 HoS Section Council meeting, held in the early morning of August 10, in a tiny basement conference room of the Sheraton Hotel. The plan drew on experience from the ASA's 2013 Annual Meeting, which was also held in New York City. Inspired by the Theory Section's now multi-year Junior Theorists Symposium, the HoS Section had hosted a mini-conference, aided by the generous support of The New School for Social Research and *The American Sociologist*, which offered a strong incentive for participation by holding out the opportunity for publication. Volume 46, Issue 2 of *The American Sociologist* (June 2015) showcases the results of that 2013 HoS conference, including the lessons learned by the conference organizers.

In early 2020, amid news reports of a coronavirus outbreak in China, the plans started to crystallize. A working group was formed to organize what was then being called a Junior Historians of Sociology Symposium. In addition to Jill and Laura, the working group included Anne Eisenberg, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, Gary Jaworski, and Larry Nichols, in an advisory capacity. Jill was in close contact with ASA Annual Meeting organizers, and, mindful of HoS's limited budget, proposed a roundtable structure, to be hosted as part of an ASA opportunity for pre-conference meetings. A Call for Proposals was finalized in February, with a deadline for proposals set in June.

In the meantime, COVID-19 was spreading around the world, and it soon became clear that the August meeting in San Francisco would be transformed into a virtual event. The possibilities for a video conference alternative to the in-person Symposium began to present themselves, as we all were rapidly acquiring new facilities with video-conference technologies, like Zoom.

It was at this point that graduate student organizers, Hannah Waight and Taylor Winfield, stepped in to assume increasing responsibilities for hosting what was to be a Zoom-based Symposium. The New Voices Symposium, held in August 2020, represents the fruits of their labors, together with those of the Working Group, and it led into monthly Zoom meetings extending throughout the fall semester, in which history of sociology research by rising scholars received commentary and encouragement from more established scholars. The momentum generated by this New Voices Initiative is today being carried forward by Kerby Goff, Hannah Waight and Taylor Winfield, with support from Kevin Anderson and the HoSST Section, in the planning for a second New Voices Symposium, to be held on August 5, 2021.

In all these efforts, Larry Nichols and *The American Sociologist* have played a crucially important role of encouragement and support. While additional institutional supports are needed to enable generative scholarship in the history of sociology to move forward, journals like *The American Sociologist* and associations like the ASA

are clearly vital in providing the publication opportunities and social capital that enable history of sociology scholarship to flourish.

The Future of Sociology's History – Assessments of Ongoing Opportunities and Needs

Both historical record and current dynamics suggest that the twenty-first century may prove to be the history of sociology's moment. In 2000, the HoS Section attained full section- status in the ASA—the first time there had been such a section in the association. Section status has offered scholars interested in the history of sociology a base from which to launch significant initiatives, including the New Voices project described above, which, begun as an activity to mark the Section's 20th anniversary, has grown in a year to become a vehicle for both scholarly dialogue among members and outreach for new members.

This volume of *The American Sociologist*, under the leadership of long-time Editor Larry Nichols, reaffirms the journal's position as “the go-to” site for scholars in the history of sociology. In 2005 Section members were significant participants in ASA's activities marking the one hundredth anniversary of its founding, with Section member Craig Calhoun (later Section Chair) editing the key centennial publication, *Sociology in America—a History* (2007), to which many HoS members contributed, and which served to confirm to a wide range of audiences the significance of the subfield, history of sociology. Twenty-first century ASA Presidents' Presidential Addresses have drawn on and celebrated the work of scholarship in the history of sociology, including Joe Feagin's 2000 Address “Social Justice and Sociology in the 21st Century” and Mary Romero's 2019 Address “Sociology Engaged in Social Justice,” (both of which pointed to the long history of sociology's social justice tradition), to current President Aldon Morris's theme for the 2021 annual meeting “Emancipatory Sociology: Rising to the Du Boisian Challenge.” In part because of the work of scholars in the history of sociology, Du Bois and Jane Addams are being increasingly incorporated into the teaching of sociology and sociology's understanding of itself. In 2020, the Section answered a call from ASA leadership to supervise the revision of the online ASA Presidential biographies—a project now underway and seeking authors.

The dynamics surrounding the field also suggest prospects for vitality. Sociology now has a history of nearly 200 years—sociology keeps happening and there is more of it at this moment than there has ever been. That very increase brings challenges to the HoSST Section, the New Voices initiative, and the ASA itself, and rising to meet these will create new opportunities. The writing of this history continues to be important because the story it tells helps recruit new members to sociology by suggesting the kinds of work that can be done and successes that can be won within the boundaries of the discipline. The field is being energized by new insights and methods for doing “history of sociology.” One of the most exciting developments is the possibility of new ways to communicate about the history of sociology—notably, virtual conferences using technologies like Zoom can cast a wider net for scholars, moving beyond “the brown bag department symposium” to convene a global conversation. This is especially important to a field like history of sociology which as yet has no institutionalized base in departmental curricula. Equally important is an openness to

thinking about and allowing for a variety of answers to the question of what it means to produce “a history of sociology.”

In a personal effort at history of sociology, the late National Institute of Mental Health and Johns Hopkins sociologist Mel Kohn (who died while this volume was in press) wrote the memoir *Adventures in Sociology: My Life as a Cross-National Scholar*, which offered the provocative disclaimer, “the true hero of this tale is not Mel Kohn, but an academic field, Sociology” (Kohn, 2016: 7).¹ What follows here both rejoices in Mel’s statement and attempts to unpack it—for the future of the history of sociology lies in part in our ability to capitalize on the nuances buried in that seemingly straightforward name “the history of sociology.”

Sociology is not only an academic discipline, as Kohn experienced it, that is, an organized body of ideas and practices; it is also a profession, “a system of relational ties that give body and form to and come to represent the interests of practitioners of the discipline, which shapes sociology’s place in the society it seeks to study” (Niebrugge-Brantley, 2020: 2). And the combination of those two elements—discipline and profession—gives sociology its third important character for the historian, that of an institutional actor in the world it seeks to study. In any individual history, these three qualities can be treated separately or as intertwined factors. Typically, “the history of sociology is . . . told as the history of its theorists and their theories. This is a choice . . . and there are sound reasons for choosing to study sociology as a history of its theories, as long as we remember we are making a choice” (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998/2007: 2). That sociology is most frequently conceived as an academic discipline—that is a set of ideas and practices, usually embedded in texts—is attested to by the recent name change the HoS Section effected in 2021 to “The Section on the History of Sociology and Social Thought.” It is also shown in the number of papers in this volume that share this focus on the history and effects of disciplinary ideas² (e.g., Stefan Bargheer looks at how C. Wright Mills’ promotion of the 2×2 table as a method for practicing “the sociological imagination” affected thinking across disciplines in social science; Ryan Parsons traces the rise, fall and reconsideration of *caste* as a concept in the sociology of race and race relations; Alec McGail applies a demographic interpretation to citation practices to arrive at generalizations about sociologists’ relationship to their past; Hannah Waight argues for the recovery of John Dewey’s original vision for social science by comparing it to the way his pragmatist philosophy is being used by contemporary sociologists; Taylor Winfield builds on her earlier study of Durkheim to think about the tracing of a theorist’s thought model as a general method for the history of sociology, showing how features of the thought model survive in the theoretical text).

And opportunities still await scholars who find alternative ways for patterning the history of the discipline—as, for instance, a history of major empirical works [e.g., Kalasia Daniels and Earl Wright II “‘An Earnest Desire for the Truth despite Its Possible Unpleasantness’: A Comparative Analysis of the Atlanta University Publications and *American Journal of Sociology*, 1895 to 1917” (Daniels & Earl Wright,

¹ Mel Kohn’s memoir, *Adventures in Sociology: My Life as a Cross-National Scholar*, is available for a limited time from the DC bookstore Politics and Prose <https://www.politics-prose.com/book/9781624290749>

² In the survey of opportunities below, we use full titles of many exemplar publications as the shortest way to give the reader a beginning sense of the breadth of possibilities that exist for meaningful work in the history of sociology.

2018); Jennifer Platt, *A History of Sociology Research Methods in America, 1920–1960* (Platt, 1996); Shulamit Reinharz *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (Reinharz, 1992)]; or the development of specialized fields [e.g. Pamela Barnhouse Walters, “Betwixt and Between Discipline and Profession: A History of Sociology of Education” (Walters, 2007); Howard Winant, “The Dark Side of the Force: One Hundred Years of the Sociology of Race” (Winant, 2007)] or because sociology is, for reasons explainable by its history, primarily a teaching discipline, that history could also be told in terms of the alumni produced by sociology departments.

While the history of sociology as a profession has received less attention than the history of the discipline and is an area ripe for more work, it produces studies that direct the reader to think about how the operations of the profession may ultimately affect the content of the discipline. Histories of the professional workings of sociology may focus on ways the profession operates [e.g., John Pease and Barbara Hetrick “Association for Whom—The Regionals and the American Sociological Association” (Pease & Hetrick, 1977); Lawrence J. Rhoades, *A History of the American Sociological Association, 1905–1980* (Rhoades, 1981)]; or on moments of crisis in these operations [e.g., the rebellion at the 1935 meeting of the American Sociological Society—Patricia Lengermann “The Founding of the American Sociological Review: The Anatomy of a Rebellion” (Lengermann, 1979); Don Martindale *The Romance of a Profession: A Case History in the Sociology of Sociology* (Martindale, 1976)].

Study of the history of sociology as a combination of discipline and profession may lead to issues of sociology as an institutional actor on the world stage— [e.g., Charles Camic “On the Edge: Sociology— During the Great Depression and the New Deal,” (Camic, 2007) and “Everywhere and Nowhere Remarks for History of Sociology Session on American Sociology in the 1930s” (Camic, 2020); Mike Forrest Keen *Stalking the Sociological Imagination—J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI Surveillance of American Sociology* (Keen, 1999); Patricia Lengermann “On the Edge” and at the Margins—An Appreciation of and Response to Charles Camic’s Study of Sociology in the 1930s” (Lengermann, 2020); Anne Rawls “The wartime narrative in US sociology, 1940–1947: stigmatizing qualitative sociology in the name of ‘science’” (Rawls, 2018); Stephen Turner and Dirk Käsler *Sociology Responds to Fascism* (Turner & Käsler, 1992)]. These works treating sociology as an institutional actor, the product of discipline and profession, may also make a different argument, showing how sociology is affected by conditions in the world it studies. Mary Jo Deegan’s *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School* (Deegan, 1988) and Aldon Morris’s *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. DuBois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Morris, 2017) both show the ways sociology was shaped by stratificational practices in the society it sought to study. Current calls (e.g., in this volume, Angela Fillingim and Zawadi Rucks-Ahidiana’s proposal for a for a reconsideration of the ways the classical canon has been patterned) may have the same effect of making sociology a more inclusive discipline, not only in its study of society but in its own understanding of itself.

Within the history of sociology, biography has been a rich form for capturing this combination of discipline, profession, and institutional actor—from full life histories [e.g. Steven Lukes’s *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study* (1973), Marcel Fournier’s *Emile Durkheim—A Biography* (Fournier, 2012)], to a specific moment in the life of a major thinker, [e.g., Lawrence Scaff’s *Max Weber in America* (Scaff, 2011),] to comparisons of biographies of a subject written at different

times [e.g., Randall Collins’s “Durkheim: via Fournier, via Lukes” (August 2014)]. By extension, biography may also take a collective actor as its subject, as in the case of a school of thought [e.g. Andrew Abbott *Department and Discipline—Chicago Sociology at One Hundred* (Abbott, 1999); Thomas Wheatland *The Frankfurt School in Exile* (Wheatland, 2009); Joyce Williams and Vicky McLean *Settlement Sociology in the Progressive Years* (Williams & McLean, 2015)]. In this volume, Francesco Ranci argues that the biographical focus has been overused in current interpretations of Erving Goffman.

The future of sociology will depend on the ability of emerging historians both to encourage action by sociology as a profession and to refine and enlarge the tools and concepts available for the practice of the history of sociology as a discipline. Professionally, two goals seem especially important, both of which require arguing with vigor for allocation of resources: one, to preserve the records of the profession’s history and two, to act creatively to inject history of sociology into the standard curriculum. Alan Sica and Roberta Spalter Roth have worked to preserve records of the reviewing process for ASA journals and many scholars have worked to preserve the history of specific sociology departments [e.g., Andrew Abbott, 1999; Anthony Blasi and Bernard F. Donohoe *A History of Sociological Research and Teaching at Catholic Notre Dame University, Indiana* (Blasi & Donohoe, 2002); Michael Hill *The Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln* (Hill, 2016) among others] but in this area there is so much more to be done. Right at this moment that history is both being made and lost—lost through the destruction of departmental records because of lack of storage space; there is an opportunity here right now to join with HoSST in its Departmental History Project. The advent of digital recordkeeping makes the possibility of preservation realizable if we can find ways to leverage the necessary resources.

The last word here belongs to Larry Nichols, though he has not asked for it to be so.

Larry, an invaluable astute student of the sociology of sociology, ruminated, in an email to Laura and Jill, “I wonder if the authors, and other participants in the 2020 HoS event, feel they have developed as historical scholars as a result of the process. In other words, do they now have a clearer idea of what it means to be a “working historian,” to apply some historical method and gather data and illumine events, perhaps by discovering surprises or by grappling with contradictory evidence or by learning that some of their initial assumptions need to be adjusted... There are no perfect journal articles; it’s enough to make some significant contribution, which might mean simply advancing a particular scholarly conversation.”

A fitting conclusion, by way of a question, which directs our attention to the ongoing project of scholarly research. We are honored and proud to introduce the articles published in this special issue, articles which advance the conversation, and offer significant contributions, to the dynamic scholarly conversation that is the history of sociology and social thought.

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