JAMES F. SHORE, Jr. EDITOR

# THE STATE OF SOCIOLOGY

**Problems and Prospects** 

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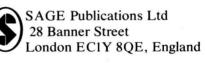
## JAMES F. SHORT, Jr. **FDITOD**

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## **Contents**

	Introduction: Themes on the State of Sociology JAMES F. SHORT, Jr.	7
1.	The Schools of Sociology S. N. EISENSTADT	22
2.	Sociology of Scientific Knowledge JOSEPH BEN-DAVID	40
3.	The Formalization of Theory and Method LEE FREESE	60
4.	Stratification and Social Mobility: Two Decades of Cumulative Social Science DAVID L. FEATHERMAN	79
5.	Shifts in the Analysis of Race and Ethnic Relations WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON	101
6.	Human Ecology: Persistence and Change AMOS H. HAWLEY	119
7.	Biosociology ALLAN MAZUR	141
8.	Social Psychology: Trends, Assessment, and Prognosis SHELDON STRYKER	161
9.	Criminology and the Study of Deviance JAMES F. SHORT, Jr., and ROBERT F. MEIER	182
10.	Developments in Organization Theory, 1960-1980 W. RICHARD SCOTT	199
11.	Comparative Education: Synthesis and Agenda FRANCISCO O. RAMIREZ and JOHN W. MEYER	215
12.	Production, Reproduction, and Social Change: The Family in Historical Perspective  BARBARA LASLETT	239

13.	Changing Fashions in the Study of the Social Causes	
	of Economic and Political Change DANIEL CHIROT	259
14.	Applied Sociology PETER H. ROSSI	283
	About the Authors	300

### Introduction

Themes on the State of Sociology

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This volume concerns the state of sociology, as it has developed over the past few decades, especially since the close of World War II. It is necessarily selective, but certain themes emerge which seem generalizable to the entire discipline. It is around these themes, especially as they relate to the cumulation of knowledge, that I will organize this brief introduction. First, however, a word about the nature of the enterprise.

All the chapters were either commissioned for the January 1981 anniversary issue of the American Behavioral Scientist or for this expansion of that issue. As noted in my introduction to the ABS issue, I wished to focus on the fundamental underpinnings of the discipline — that is, theory and method, formal organization, social psychology, population and ecology, stratification and mobility, deviance and social control, and, because of its increasing importance in generating and testing ideas from virtually every subarea of the discipline, as well as in employing sociologists, applied sociology. Each of these areas is touched on in one or more of the other ABS Anniversary Special Issues, some quite extensively; for example, social psychology (the May/June 1978 issue, edited by Daniel Katz) and research methodology (the July/August 1980 issue, edited by George W. Bohrnstedt). Though some overlap in treatment of those areas is inevitable certainly it is desirable — different issues and perspectives are discussed in each case. Several papers in this volume discuss, for example, research methods, but the focus is on general trends and their consequences (e.g., formalization of methods) or in the context of substantive areas or applied research.

Additions to the ABS issue for this volume were guided by the desire to fill in the sketch of sociology by including discussions of sociology of science (by Joseph Ben-David), of major institutional areas (here represented by Francisco Ramirez and John Meyer on education, Barbara Laslett on the family, and Daniel Chirot on

economic and political systems), of racial and ethnic relations (by William Wilson), and of biosociology (by Allan Mazur).

The portrait thus achieved necessarily remains incomplete, the more so since I deliberately chose authors whose approaches to these substantive areas differ. Thus, for example, Ramirez and Meyer focus on comparative studies of education; Laslett views the family in historical perspective; Chirot compares modernization and world systems approaches to the study of economic and political change; and Mazur assesses (1) evolutionary, genetic, and neurophysiological explanations of human species behavior, (2) differences among humans, and (3) social interaction.

Understandably, the individual essays vary in comprehensiveness of research and theoretical review. Detailed review was not the primary task assigned. Authors were asked to broadly reflect on developments in their areas of general interest — as distinguished from their more specific research specializations — over the past two or three decades. What sorts of questions have been asked, data and methods employed, and knowledge generated, and what of the future in these respects?

Out of such expert assessment and commentary I hoped a portrait of sociology might emerge which would impart a sense of ferment and excitement, of disciplined inquiry and cumulative knowledge. I anticipated more of the former than of the latter, but expected, nevertheless, that a record of accomplishment would be revealed. I also expected that problems would be identified — empirical, theoretical, methodological, and substantive — which might suggest the future course of the discipline.

As these chapters demonstrate, I was extraordinarily fortunate in my choice of authors. While not all the papers originally commissioned were in fact completed, those that appear here are broadly representative of the discipline. Their quality is excellent. They reveal much of both progress and problems, not all of which I had anticipated.

#### THEMES OF IDEOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

My choice of topics and authors was constrained (happily) by the fact that S. N. Eisenstadt had earlier been invited to prepare a paper on "The Schools of Sociology." Eisenstadt's architectonic sketch of recent theoretical schools sets the stage for somewhat more detailed consideration of more specific, though still quite general, topics. In

fact, Eisenstadt does a good deal more than set the stage for other topics. His essay is both synthetic and penetrating in analyzing general and specific topics of sociological concern, and it initiates discussion of a recurring theme in the volume. He describes the state of theoretical discussions in sociology as lacking common ground, despite focus on common (and ancient) problems and fundamental agreement that systematic research is the principal means of problem resolution. He notes, and attempts to explain, "the paradox of great advances in sociological research on the one hand and of strong sectarianism on the other." His subsequent analysis of schools of sociology emphasizes the richness and the promise of substantive and theoretical foci and research initiatives, yet concludes that "because of . . . sectarian tendencies . . . in the sociological community, these possibilities have barely begun to be actualized."

This theme recurs in other chapters. Indeed, in the view of some contributors, ideological controversy appears to be at least as serious a problem as is failure to agree on fundamental paradigms to guide inquiry. Thus, Featherman decries the "polarized," "often antagonistic" relationships among scholars attempting to understand social stratification and mobility and calls for "a spirit of collegiality" in pursuit of common goals. Wilson notes ideological bases of competing theoretical frameworks for studies of race and ethnic relations, but sees empirical and theoretical gains based on continuous critical reexamination of these frameworks. Chirot chides both "modernization" and "world-system" theorists for allowing ideological convictions to shape their inquiries and interpretations of economic and political change, and argues for "unbiased" study of these phenomena. Ben-David notes that the political orientations of scientists have been topics of investigation by sociologists of science, as well as the themes of critiques of that specialty within the discipline.

More is involved in these controversies than political and economic ideology, as Freese makes clear in his discussion of counterreactions to the formalization of theory and method. There are fundamental differences of epistemology. Traditionally, rejection of theoretical and methodological formalization has been based on conceptions of social reality associated with phenomenology, emphasizing the "subjectivity, heterogeneity, complexity, or nonmeasurability of social phenomena." A second counterreaction, represented by critical theory, with its emphasis on social praxis, also rejects the positivist theory of objective knowledge, and brings with it an adversarial premise that the search for truth cannot be separated from the search for freedom and justice — a search, it might be added, that is

probably shared by the vast majority of positivist oriented sociologists.

Both of these counterreactions, Freese thinks, are more suited to inductive-empiricism than to deductive-rationalism, the two major "varieties" of positivism. And, while the former has been the more traditional positivist orientation, it is toward the deductive-rationalism of a theoretical science that sociology may be evolving. This, for example, is Stryker's posture when he considers the possibility of a generalizing science of social psychology. Stryker meets the pessimism of those who argue that the ever-changing nature of human interaction precludes such a science with the argument that "the proper task of social psychology is not to discover laws but to invent theories, that the proper locus of determinism is not in the world but in those theories, and that science need not presume a total determinism to investigate such stability and regularity as exist in the social world."

On external influences and the cumulation of knowledge. Ideological impediments to scientific advance and epistemological differences are not the only evidences of external influences on the course of the discipline. Mazur points to the influence of "Nazi racism," in addition to intellectual currents of the day, in "expunging" biology from sociology. Social policy concerns of government have been responsible for many developments, especially with respect to applied sociological concerns. In his chapter on this topic, Rossi cites such examples as the establishment of data series, methodological innovations (and conventions), and substantive focus, through mobilization of research talent and the allocation of research funds. Private interests have been influential, as well. Civil rights, student revolts, crime control, and other broad political, economic, and social problems spark research and theoretical effort in support of or reaction to perceived conditions and policies (see especially Ben-David for consideration of these and other influences on the course of scientific endeavor; also see Laslett, Wilson, and Short and Meier).2

Sociological specialties do not all progress at the same rate. The reasons for variable progress doubtless are numerous and complex. Clearly the situation cannot be understood solely on the basis of ideological conflict. If that were the case, for example, social stratification would surely be among the least advanced subareas of the discipline. Yet, there is much evidence of cumulative knowledge in this area, as Featherman discusses in some detail. Contrast social stratification with the study of criminology and deviant behavior, where recent theoretical work has been oriented toward ideas ad-

vanced as much as fifty years ago within sociology, or even longer. One answer to the variable progress in knowledge cumulation between these two subareas of sociology appears to lie in the fact that many who were involved in stratification and mobility research reached agreement on a formal methodology and a frame of reference which resulted in substantial empirical work which had cumulative effects. Criminology and deviance, in contrast, experienced a measure of agreement on a frame of reference — "labeling theory" — which has proved intractable with respect either to formal theoretical statement or agreed upon methodology. Yet the labelling *perspective* — as contrasted with labelling theory (see Becker, 1973) — remains an important insight not only in criminology but in other areas as well, such as medical sociology, where the concept of the "sick role" has been influential.<sup>3</sup>

The counterpart of external influences on sociology thus is the influence of sociology on society. Ben-David notes the interest of "civil servants, politicians and scientific statesmen" during the 1970s in sociology of science, "as a field of potential use in the reformation of scientific institutions and the acceleration of scientific and technological growth in Europe." Rossi's treatment of applied sociology deals with even more "practical applications" than are encompassed by these broad interests.

Rossi's chapter is also relevant to the issues raised by Freese concerning formalization in theory and method. It is clear that, in applied sociology, a nomological orientation has enjoyed competitive advantage, as Freese notes has generally been the case with formalized schools of sociological thought. Rossi points to the fact that technological and methodological contributions have been more important to applied sociology than have empirical knowledge and theory, because they are easier to transfer across substantive fields. The former tend to be generic to the social sciences and adaptable to many problems, while the latter may be so embedded in particular substantive fields as to lack application to others.

I have argued elsewhere that the lack of formal theory in criminology has resulted in the confusion which attends apparently conflicting findings, contributing to "the image of social science as confused and scientifically immature" (Short, 1980: 316). While the trend in sociology over the past quarter-century seems clearly in the direction of theoretical formalization, it remains the case that empirical and methodological advance has outstripped theory in this respect. Most empirical observations, for example, are of "ordinary cases" rather than theoretically designed test cases, and scope conditions of

theories are rarely sufficiently specified. As a result, conclusive evaluation of the significance of empirical findings for the cumulation of knowledge or for social policy is impossible. Formalization of theory, as well as method, may in some instances reconcile apparently contradictory theories — and therefore theories of little "practical" value — making them more powerful for both purposes. For the "kinds of success" that a nomological orientation and its methods "are capable of providing," again to quote Freese, are of significance for applied concerns as well as for the cumulation of knowledge. While immediate goals may differ, in the long run the former (applied concerns) are dependent on the latter; and, as Rossi demonstrates, the latter is enhanced by pursuit of the former.

#### THEMES OF PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS

There is much evidence in these chapters of progress — in data bases, methods, substantive findings, and in theory. Not uniform progress, to be sure, but progress nonetheless. In some fields such progress has taken the form of impressive cumulative knowledge; for example, in work on status attainment, expectation states (see Freese, Featherman, and Stryker), and certain aspects of human ecology (see Hawley). In others, such as sociology of science (see Ben-David), organizational theory (see Scott), race and ethnic relations (Wilson), the comparative study of education (Ramirez and Meyer), study of the social causes of economic and political change (Chirot), historical study of the family (Laslett), biosociology (see Mazur), the study of crime and deviance (see Short and Meier), and applied sociology (see Rossi), progress is marked primarily by expanded or newly exploited data bases or in terms of knowledge generated by focusing on new problems.

Progress in biosociology is a special case inasmuch as it is characterized by research done primarily "outside of the discipline," as Mazur notes. Sociology has long had an uneasy relationship with biology. The current resurgence of interest in biological phenomena among sociologists has been sparked by the challenge to traditional sociological explanations posed by Harvard biologist Edward Wilson, whose *Sociobiology* was published in 1975. Mazur's chapter in this volume (see also Rosa, 1979) distinguishes biosociology from sociobiology. The symbolic importance of the distinction, Mazur notes, is that "sociobiology promises to revolutionize the social sci-

ences at all levels . . . while biosociology seeks a quiet niche in positivistic microsociology" (see Mazur's footnote 4).

Progress at times takes the form of convergence between different approaches and subject-matter areas, as we see in Eisenstadt's essay on general theory and Ben-David's on sociology of science and scientific knowledge, between human ecology and institutional approaches to the study of social organization and social change (Hawley); between status attainment and Marxist approaches to stratification and mobility (Featherman). Stryker notes similar convergence on problems and approaches between psychological and sociological social psychology; as does Scott between rational and natural system models of organization. And most areas influence and are influenced by applied sociology (see Rossi). Conversely, lack of convergence between and integration of approaches is often a serious problem, as Laslett emphasizes in the case of functionalist, feminist, Marxist, and modernization theories of "Production, Reproduction, and Social Change."

Progress in problem-finding<sup>4</sup> appears in most fields to be more cumulative than are empirical and theoretical advances. This is especially the case with respect to such previously neglected approaches as comparative study. Except for human ecology and demography, quite recently developed historical perspectives within sociology, and modernization and world systems approaches to the study of social change, studies of single societies — or of smaller units within single societies — have dominated sociological research. Ramirez and Meyer's strictures regarding comparative studies of education are equally applicable to most substantive areas within the discipline. Yet, there is growing emphasis on comparative research in virtually every special area within sociology.<sup>5</sup>

A variety of circumstances account for this situation, including the accelerated development of the social sciences in the United States compared with other parts of the world, and the fact that the methods which have been so successful in this country have been more suited for study of single societies, or of smaller units within single societies, than for large-scale comparative studies. Trained personnel for research in other cultures have been rare among social scientists in this country, and data bases which would permit crossnational comparisons have been lacking. Establishment of statistical series under the auspicies of UNESCO has greatly facilitated the latter goal, though the variable quality of data remains a problem for many purposes.

14

Development of social science personnel with expertise beyond the borders of the United States has been a special undertaking of the Social Science Research Council, an organization founded in 1924 "for the purpose of advancing research in the social sciences." SSRC has often been in the forefront of trends in substantive, methodological, and theoretical focus in these disciplines, and has sought always to promote cross-disciplinary relationships. Kenneth Prewitt, president of SSRC, notes: "Prior to World War II, foreign area studies, in the sense in which the term is now used, were virtually nonexistent in the United States" (1980: 50). SSRC appointed a Committee on World Regions in 1943; and in 1959, in cooperation with the American Council of Learned Societies, it established three Joint Area Committees (on Contemporary China, Latin American Studies, and the Near and Middle East). The recency of these comparative concerns is revealed by the dates of appointment of committees for other geographic areas: African Studies, 1960; Japanese Studies and Korean Studies, 1967; South Asia, 1970; Eastern Europe. 1971; Western Europe, 1975; and Southeast Asia, 1976.

The Joint Area Committees with ACLS and other international programs of SSRC have recently undergone extensive internal review. The review concludes that the mission of the Joint Area Committees should no longer be concerned primarily with training social scientists for area specialization, since major strides toward this goal have been made and other resources now exist to support such training and research. The future work of the committees, Prewitt reports, will "include bringing to bear local knowledge on international and comparative questions, understanding the boundary conditions of social processes and behavior, moving ideas (and people) across regional and disciplinary lines, and the continuing task of integrating disciplinary scholarship with area studies" (1980: 52, emphasis added).

Comparative study also involves integration of knowledge within and between social sciences and other disciplines. Another recent SSRC initiative, for example, involves the relationship of the social sciences and the humanities. For some, concern with these relationships is based upon "a growing disenchantment among social scientists with the explanatory adequacy of models borrowed from the natural sciences" (Szanton, 1980: 54). The reference presumably is to positivist models and methods.

Yet, these concerns are widely shared among positivists. The complexity of issues related to these concerns, and communication about them, is illustrated by the report that "the humanities and the social sciences" SSRC symposium on this topic "was based upon the

view that the world of individual and social experience is not a 'natural' object, but is rather a human construction" (Szanton, 1980: 54). But it is a fundamental premise of positivist social science that human constructions of the world of individual and social experience are natural as objects and as processes. Ben-David has discussed the influence of cognitive processes and moral norms versus scientific norms in various aspects of scientific endeavor, including "the need for articulating the application of moral norms with the procedures of cognitive evaluation of evidence and argument" (see also Zuckerman, 1977). In this volume, Stryker stresses the importance for psychological social psychology of the "new respectability" of "subjective experience, both as a phenomenon to be explained and as an explanation of subsequent individual and social behavior," and he observes that the subjective has been respectable and important for sociological study in the subdiscipline since its beginning.

The boundaries of knowledge attainable by means of "scientific" versus other methods of "knowing" are not fixed, but ever-changing. Discovery that different ordinary languages have different logics, for example, as linguist-anthropologist Alton Becker notes is the case for English and Burmese (see Szanton, 1980: 55), informs the nature of cultural differences and their consequences, but does not contraindicate scientific study of those logics — indeed, this was an early Durkheimian theme of sociology of science (see Ben-David) — or scientific inquiry into cultural differences and consequences. Such discoveries have profound implications for comparative study and for scientific study in general, many of which doubtless are not yet known or fully appreciated.

The challenge of comparative study thus is very broad. The extent of its reach and proper methods for its conduct will always be matters of debate. It surely reaches beyond the human species, for, as Boorman and Levitt (1980) note: "Comparative sociology challenges us to think in truly comparative terms about social structures as alien to humans (or to each other) as, for example, the societies of coelenterates and cooperative arachnids" (p. 228). Mazur's chapter in this volume demonstrates the validity and the vitality of this challenge. Elaboration of the challenge is found, also, in recent work on environmental sociology (see, Dunlap and Catton, 1979; Catton, 1980, Catton and Dunlap, 1980), a topic which Hawley's excellent chapter touches on but does not discuss in detail.

Paradoxically, the ultimate result of disciplinary specialization is to make possible the integration of knowledge. Yet, disciplinary boundaries are increasingly anachronistic, both for the pursuit of specialized inquiry and for the integration of knowledge. Differences in methodological approach within disciplines — for example, case study versus comparative study, quantitative versus qualitative methods, cross-sectional versus longitudinal study — often are greater than differences between disciplines in substantive focus. Differences in substantive focus and theoretical level of explanation within disciplines, as in choice of units of analysis and dependent and independent variables, vary a great deal within disciplines, while evidencing great similarity between disciplines.

There is much evidence in this volume of both internal and external disciplinary boundary-crossing. The healthy ferment that is thereby enhanced is noted in several of the chapters. Yet, with notable exceptions, there has been relatively little penetration of "mainstream" findings and theory into some special substantive or applied areas. The flow of influence has been greater, I suspect, from applied to substantive areas than from the latter to applications of substantive knowledge, though examples can be found of both types of influence. The field of criminology has benefited a great deal from such projects as the Rossi et al. (1980) evaluation of an experimental program to provide unemployment benefits to newly released offenders, from Klein's (1971) evaluation of experimental street-work programs with delinquent gangs, and from street-work programs and related research in Chicago (see Mattick and Caplan, 1964; Short and Strodtbeck, 1974), to cite but a few examples.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Why is not sociological knowledge more cumulative? The answer to this frequent query doubtless is multifaceted and extremely complex. Some of the answers are touched upon in this volume. Theories constructed on the basis of findings in different disciplines, and in areas of specialization within disciplines, impede cumulation. To the extent that the problem inheres in the uniqueness of broad classes of phenomena it is perhaps inevitable and unsolvable. To some extent, the problem relates to the relatively greater progress made in data bases and statistical methods compared with theoretical advance. Methodologically sophisticated analyses often result in descriptively powerful but theoretically weak statements. The power to explain, in the final analysis, is as much a theoretical as an empirical matter, and the cumulation of knowledge depends upon both.

If Freese is correct — and I believe he is — increasing cumulation depends on *combinations* of formal theory and methods, since these are associated with concentrated research programs which thereby