

From the issue dated August 12, 2005 -- Volume 51, Issue 49, Page B 12

On the occasion of the American Sociological Association's centennial, The Chronicle asked seven sociologists to discuss what attracted them to the field, what they consider to be the discipline's fortes and failings, and where they'd like to see it go from here.

SOCIOLOGISTS ON SOCIETY

Culture, Structure, and False Oppositions

By FRANCESCA POLLETTA

I was a comparative-literature major when the teaching assistant in my introductory sociology course took us to meet with detainees in a juvenile reform school. The fact that the TA was in trouble at the time for having harbored a fugitive from the school added to her glamour as well as that of the discipline. But what hooked me was the idea that I could answer big, thorny questions about crime, class, and resistance simply by talking to people. I could ask the boys in the reformatory about the effect of having been labeled a delinquent and could figure out what had happened to limit their aspirations and make them talk so casually about their futures in the adult prison. I began to do sociological research for all my papers -- in philosophy, English, and religion. One professor who happened to be the daughter of the sociologist Marion Levy gave me an A for my paper on Rudyard Kipling but noted that it was sociology, not comp lit. I switched my major.

I eagerly signed up for graduate work in sociology. But when I got to Yale in the mid-1980s, comparative literature was where the action was. It was the heyday of poststructuralism, and Jacques Derrida and other theorists were exploding the neat antinomies of structural linguistics to reveal the instability of meaning. Language was power, but it was a slippery kind of power, always at risk of escaping the intentions of its authors. Criticism was anything but a dry analysis of texts; rather it would expose the linguistic mechanisms by which power was exercised, concealed, and contested. This was exciting stuff. So I was disappointed by sociologists' hostility toward poststructuralism, hostility that seemed to me both overheated and indifferent to the promise of using literary critical methods to analyze political discourse.

But I wasn't about to switch to a Ph.D. in comparative literature. My friends talked about "interrogating" texts and what was "at stake" in a particular interpretation, but, in the end, they were reading novels. Other friends were turning to postcolonial and cultural studies, and their more explicitly political analyses were often provocative. But I was discomfited by their dearth

of -- for want of a better word -- data. Was it just a lack ofchutzpah that made me anxious about generalizing from my reading of a Hollywood action film to the state of Western imperialism?

That niggling worry probably should have clued me into the fact that I was, in the end, a sociologist. Indeed, perhaps what makes many of us sociologists is a temperament that combines in equal measure intellectual ambition and anxiety. We truly believe that we can produce new answers to age-old philosophical puzzles and political dilemmas. We have real faith in data. Yet, at the same time, we worry about statistical confidence levels. We analyze not one but dozens of texts. We learn everything we can about a case and then move on to do the same with another. Our respect for what Max Weber called "inconvenient facts" sometimes leads us to redo an entire analysis -- and, occasionally, produce truly novel theories in the process.

Were lives to follow simple plot lines, I would have realized all this in my second year of grad school and marched proudly back to the sociology department. Instead, I dropped out to work for an urban-planning firm. But I returned to sociology two years later, the prospect of explaining things in big ways having proved more alluring than that of changing them in small ways.

I discovered then that it was the perfect time to be a sociologist. Perhaps the fact that a longstanding conceptual opposition between structure and culture was beginning to erode had something to do with it. No one was denying that structures like race and class were real and, often, obdurate. To say that race was a cultural invention was not to claim that it could be reinvented at will. Rather, it was the first step in tracing how a particular, biologically arbitrary set of assumptions about race had come to hold the status of common sense. Class, too, was cultural, Pierre Bourdieu and others argued, but in the sense that it was transmitted through cultural competencies that were socially distributed.

These perspectives treated culture as powerful but as discernible in institutional practices. In the media, political points of view that were out of the mainstream were further marginalized, Herbert J. Gans, Michael Schudson, Gaye Tuchman, and Todd Gitlin showed, but in part as a result of the very reporting routines that had evolved to guarantee journalistic objectivity. In courtrooms, dualities of autonomy/dependence, victimhood/agency, and reason/emotion operated to reproduce inequalities of gender. Sociologists like Ruth Milkman, Martha Fineman, Lynn S. Chancer, and others thus made poststructuralists' concern with binary oppositions sociological by showing how alternatives to those oppositions were actively ruled out.

For me, social movements have proved an especially fertile site in which to study the dynamics of cultural innovation and constraint. What is *familiar* has sometimes opened up strategic possibilities, as it did for the 19th-century women's activists who, Elisabeth Clemens showed, adapted the associational forms of the social club, parlor meeting, and charitable society to become a major force for social reform. But the familiar has also operated to foreclose options. When radical democrats modeled their decision making after familiar relationships of friendship, tutelage, and religious fellowship, I found, the expectations characteristic of those relationships made for predictable strains.

My recent research on narrative led me to believe that telling personal stories is a powerful way to gain a hearing for new priorities. But activists have often been hurt by conventional

expectations about the occasions on which personal storytelling is appropriate. The pragmatic, nuts-and-bolts style of talk that was favored by the antiwar activists Stephen Hart studied paradoxically proved less effective in mobilizing people than the discursive style that was characteristic of faith-based organizing groups, in which participants talked about their personal commitments and broad ideological visions. Culture, these lines of research suggest, operates through familiar relationships, institutional routines, and conventions of self-expression as much as through people's beliefs and worldviews. That can be constraining or enabling, depending on circumstances. And it calls for study not just of meaning but of how the authority to make meaning is distributed.

I don't think sociologists have culture all sewed up. Like some of my colleagues, I worry that in treating culture as objective, something that can be measured, we may end up devaluing interpretive approaches, and that the concept of "institution" may be appealing precisely because it seems to join culture and structure without making clear just how. But I've come to believe that that kind of worry can be analytically productive.

Francesca Polletta is an associate professor of sociology at Columbia University and a visiting scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation. She is author of Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements (University of Chicago Press, 2002) and It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics (scheduled to be published by the University of Chicago Press in 2006).

<http://chronicle.com>
Section: The Chronicle Review
Volume 51, Issue 49, Page 12