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*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.*

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## SOCIOLOGISTS ON SOCIETY

# One Hundred Years of Sociological Solitude?

By RUBÉN G. RUMBAUT

*"Life is what happens to you  
while you're busy making other plans."*

-- John Lennon ("Beautiful Boy")

**I** never planned on becoming a sociologist; sociology came to me.

In 1960, on the eve of my 12th birthday, with five cardboard suitcases, \$450, no contacts, and not a clue about what would happen next, our family of seven left a revolution in Cuba for exile in the United States, speaking only Spanish and surmising that our sojourn would be short. (So much for prediction: It's been 45 years and counting.) At the age of 16, with one of those old cardboard suitcases, a scholarship, and my wits, I arrived alone at Washington University in St. Louis to begin my pre-med studies. I remember identifying with Dr. Zhivago (I had just read the novel), the idealistic physician-poet engulfed in the tragic absurdity of another revolution. But before my freshman year was done, I had declared sociology as my major.

The United States was becoming ensnared in war, shaken by assassination, and challenged by social movements that questioned the country's self-image and made me question my own. Still, I completed my pre-med studies, not once considering graduate school in sociology, let alone sociology as a career. I had more-pressing concerns.

I wasn't a U. S. citizen, so while I could be taxed and drafted, I could not vote. (I felt for those rebels of 1776.) Stateless, I had no passport and could not leave. In the year of my graduation from college, I became a naturalized citizen so that I could get a passport and leave the United States to begin a second exile, studying medicine in Mexico, where I knew no one and would need to relearn all that chemistry and biology in Spanish. By then marginality and migration were becoming as familiar to me as those well-worn suit-cases from Havana. Yet just two weeks before my departure, I got a 1Y deferment from my draft board (because of a compound fracture

of an ankle), and then an offer of a teaching assistantship in the sociology graduate program at San Diego State. I never got to Nuevo León. I dove instead into sociology, less as a career than as a lifelong passion, to make reasoned sense of social existence and, perhaps, of my own in-between-ness.

Of the first 100 years of the discipline's American association, I've now shared in the past 40 as a student and a practicing professional. For me sociology's leitmotifs remain those that first drew me to it, not as a bag of tricks but as a form of consciousness. It is a cosmopolitan, comparative, and emancipative perspective, ever curious about the human variety in its historical and cultural entirety; a critical if detached vantage, like those of Georg Simmel's stranger and Robert Park's marginal man, who are not bound "to worship the idols of the tribe" but see through the unwitting artifice of social realities; a reasoned inquiry, based on rules of logic and evidence, into the never-dull dialectic of individuals and their contexts, teasing out truths of uncommon sense from the intersections of biography and history. The sociological imagination is catalyzed by crisis, by conditions of rapid change and conflict that shake individuals from their routines and institutional moorings and reveal the constructed character of social worlds, their relativity and precariousness.

Sociology today is a sprawling field, too diverse to be characterized monolithically. Nonetheless, its strengths and weaknesses can be gleaned from a retrospective glance at its first 100 years. The contextualizing discipline par excellence, with the widest-angle lens of the social sciences, it is indispensable to grasp the new, global century in all its complexity and maddening paradox. Sociology's main failings will be magnified if it slips into irrelevance by remaining aloof from human affairs and global social problems. It could become smug with the pretensions of a naïve positivism that reduces social life to a set of linear associations measured with mathematical exactitude; or it could evaporate into the ether of arcane academese; or practitioners could sell out to a relentless careerism, mirroring in their self-absorption the collective attention-deficit disorder of the larger society. In any case, it could slide into an intellectual solitude worthy of the last paragraph of the best known of Gabriel García Márquez's magical novels, or of Max Weber's prophetic warning in his classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: "For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.'"

Robert Lynd's question on the eve of World War II remains as central today as ever: "Knowledge for what?" We, infinitesimal but clever specks in an infinitely expanding universe, can now observe with precision the maelstrom of nebulas 10,000 light years away. We can decipher the human genome, no longer nonplused by the latest scientific discovery or technological marvel. Yet we are once more ensnared in murderous wars, mind-bending Orwellian doublespeak, intractable inequalities, even new monkey trials.

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?* Perhaps the new crises will unleash new sociological impulses, as they are wont to do, whether or not you're an ASA member. But a social science that becomes little more than a technical accompaniment to the status quo is impoverished and misses the promise of its profession: to lend a radical sagacity to self and society within their irreducible historical actuality.

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