
INTRODUCTION TO THE ASR MILLENNIAL ISSUE

Although the *American Sociological Review* ordinarily does not publish thematic issues, the beginning of a new millennium has prompted this special issue. It provides a forum for sociologists to offer insights about the contours of social life over the past century and probable directions for the next. And, in addition to contributions this millennial issue might make to current interest in such topics as modernization or globalization, this collection of articles on broad social trends may serve as a time capsule for future scholars interested in sociological perspectives and methods at the end of the twentieth century.

My term as Editor officially ended December 31, 1999, but because a special issue requires a long gestation period, I was the logical person to spearhead this project. I chose the title "Looking Forward, Looking Back: Continuity and Change at the Turn of the Millennium," and selected the following articles from manuscripts submitted in response to a call for papers. The call said, in part, "Submitted papers should emphasize the state of society, *not* the state of sociology. I am especially interested in insightful investigations of broad trends over the past century and (if appropriate) projections into the next century" (*ASR*, June 1999, p. *iii*).

The articles herein look back in time more than they look forward. This is probably for the best, given social scientists' less than stellar track record making predictions. For example, the major social upheavals of the twentieth century—the Great Depression, the rise of Nazism, the fall of Communism—were not generally anticipated by sociologists. And there is no good reason to think that we will anticipate the major upheavals of the next century.

This "forecasting problem" is the theme of Portes's 1999 Presidential Address. Portes warns sociologists of the dangers of large-scale purposive action precisely because the consequences of such actions are so unpredictable. Since efforts at human betterment can yield results that are actually the opposite of those intended, Portes believes that

sociologists can better serve human society as "social craftsmen" than as social engineers.

Whether as engineers or as craftsmen, sociologists must—like the Greek god Janus—peer forward and back simultaneously, because the present and future emerge from seeds sown in the past. The remaining articles in this issue address some of the seeds that have flowered in recent times—modernization, globalization, industrialization, secularization. During the last 250 years, these seeds took root, grew, and sustained a period of spectacular economic and demographic change. Imagine yourself at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. It has been only a century since Hobbes warned that a powerful sovereign was needed lest life be "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." Your contemporary, Thomas Malthus, fears, however, that poverty might be the human lot even with a strong ruler because unchecked population growth inevitably overtakes linear economic gains. Hence economic expansion, he predicts, will result in more people in the long run, but not in richer people.

Now return to the present. As Malthus would have expected, the productivity gains of the Industrial Revolution were accompanied by an era of unprecedented population growth—the world's population has more than quintupled since Malthus's day. Yet, contrary to his expectations, the world's total income shot up even more rapidly: According to recent estimates, the world's *per capita* income (in constant dollars) increased *eightfold* from 1820 to 1992.

Suppose world per capita income continues to ratchet upward in future centuries. Is there a limit to income growth? Will any income level satisfy human beings? While economists or ecologists can better address the question of income limits, sociologists can address the question of satiety. In the second article in this issue, Inglehart and Baker report on a worldwide survey of values. They conclude that economic development is associated with change from materialistic values (which emphasize economic

and physical security) to post-materialistic values (which emphasize self-expression and quality of life). This finding bears on the satiety question: It suggests that in an increasingly affluent world the relative marginal demand for material goods and services might decline in favor of a demand for nonmaterial items that tend to place less strain on the ecosystem. It is entirely possible that a decreasing relative demand for resource-intensive material goods will emerge as a defining issue of the twenty-first century.

In the third article, Pescosolido and Rubin argue that instead of ignoring postmodernist scholarship as a passing fad, sociologists should embrace the questions they raise as a springboard for reevaluating the discipline's foundational issues. For sociologists, probably the most contentious postmodernist claim is that we live in a "decentered" social world in which attempts to generalize about social organization are futile since all individuals and all experiences are unique. Using network analysis to examine the claim of a "new social form," Pescosolido and Rubin conclude that the assertion is wrong—that postmodernists have mistaken a transitional social structure for a new structural type.

The next two articles make the kind of sweeping generalizations that might cause postmodernists to gnash their teeth. Chase-Dunn, Kawano, and Brewer construct data for a time-series analysis of global trade over the past two centuries: "It seems that our breakfasts increasingly come from distant lands. . . . [I]f we count all the commodities and adjust for the overall growth of production, is the average breakfast more 'globalized' now than it was in the nineteenth century?" (p. 78). Their answer to the question is that, although trade globalization probably now stands at an all-time high, global trade has traced a cyclical pattern over the past 200 years. This is an important conclusion, if only because it debunks popular accounts depicting trade globalization as a new phenomenon.

The next article, by Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer, makes the case for the existence of a world society, at least with respect to environmental protection. Frank et al. focus on

the diffusion of environmental protection activities over the twentieth century, which they argue was a "top-down" process that began with global redefinitions of environmental problems and ended with a relatively standardized set of policies and activities that diffused to individual nations for action. As Buttel notes in his comment on the article, the key argument of the world society school is that there is "a level of isomorphism of social structural and organizational forms across world societies that is far too great to be solely explicable in terms of functional necessity or task demands" (p. 117).

The sixth article, by Horton, Allen, Herring, and Thomas, examines the class structure of the United States from 1850 to 1990, focusing on the black working class. They argue that the black working class constitutes a largely forgotten group, since sociological studies of U.S. blacks tend to focus either on the emerging black middle class or on the poor black population. Their findings remind sociologists that most blacks are working class, a fact that is often "lost in the storm of the race-class controversy over the last two decades" (p. 135).

The *ASR* millennial issue ends with Gorski's enlightening historical account of church, state, and society. Based on a careful study of religious life in Western Europe before and after the Reformation, Gorski concludes that "Western society has become more secular without becoming less religious" (p. 138).

On a personal note, I have enjoyed being *ASR* Editor, and I am delighted that Charles Camic and Franklin Wilson have succeeded me as Co-Editors. Professors Camic and Wilson are committed to upholding *ASR*'s standard of excellence by publishing the very best that sociology has to offer in all areas of sociology. I look forward to reading the *ASR* issues they edit.

It has been a privilege to end my own editorial term with this millennial issue—I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed putting it together.

—Glenn Firebaugh, Editor 1997–1999
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