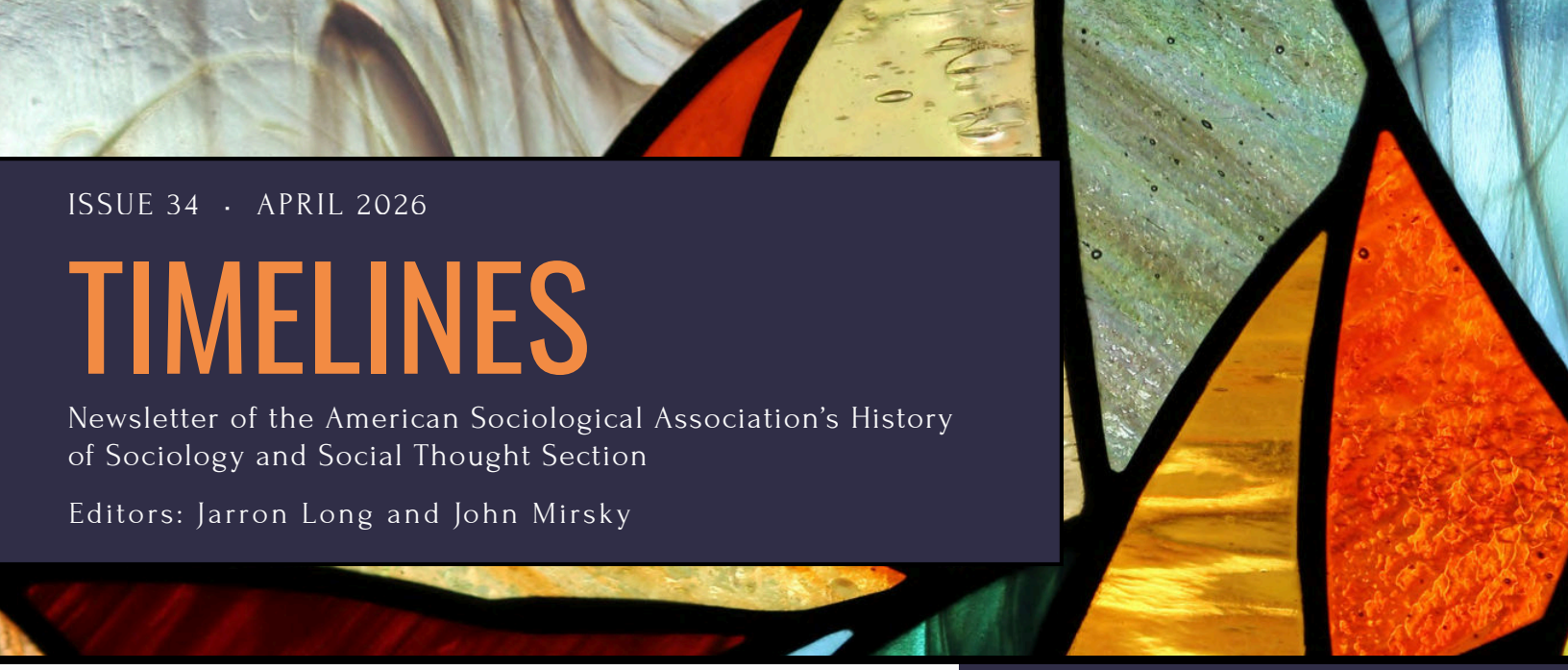
ISSUE 34 · APRIL 2026

TIMELINES

Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's History of Sociology and Social Thought Section



ISSUE 34 · APRIL 2026

TIMELINES

Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's History of Sociology and Social Thought Section

Editors: Jarron Long and John Mirsky

Message from the Chair

BY LISA MCCORMICK

Dear Members,

As sociologists, we know that the history of the discipline is more than a succession of individuals who developed ways to conceptualize and investigate the social world; social thought is a collective activity accomplished in social settings by intellectuals who are embedded in social networks. In the past few months, two experiences have helped me appreciate even more the importance of this fundamental sociological insight.

Since January, I have been based in Budapest, Hungary, as a Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study at Central European University (IAS-CEU). The history of the IAS-CEU offers both a warning to scholars today and a point of entry into the history of social thought in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. Founded in 1992 as the Collegium Budapest, it exemplified the institutional innovation enabled by regime change. Its aim was to create space where international and local scholars from diverse disciplines could engage in productive dialogues that would knit together academic networks previously separated by the Iron Curtain, while also supporting the democratic transition underway. To this end, the Collegium Budapest was modeled on the tradition of Princeton University's Institute of Advanced Study and linked with similar centers across Europe.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE →

Inside this issue:

Message from the Chair, cont.

For two decades, Collegium Budapest provided a place where scholars could take intellectual risks and create new connections. Then in 2010, the political context suddenly changed. Under the Fidesz government led by Viktor Orbán, institutions that had been celebrated for promoting academic autonomy became targets. In 2011, the Collegium Budapest was closed, and its historical building in the Buda Castle district was vacated. Its activities were renewed in 2017, but in less-than-ideal circumstances. The Collegium was transformed into the Institute of Advanced Study and integrated into Central European University as part of the "Lex CEU" law that resulted in CEU having to relocate its degree-granting programs to Vienna.

As a fellow of the IAS-CEU, I feel privileged to be able to focus on my research in a place designed to nurture creativity and independent thinking. But I am also concerned about the future of these precious intellectual spaces. In the words of its director, Balázs Trencsényi, the IAS-CEU is "one of the last bastions of academic freedom in Hungary" and, worryingly, it suggests a "possible future" for similar institutions in other countries where authoritarian, illiberal and autocratic regimes are in place.

Another experience that has brought home the collective nature of intellectual endeavors is writing my contribution for the festschrift for Jeffrey Alexander, winner of the 2025 HoSST lifetime achievement award. The editors of the volume, Celso Villegas and Galen Watts, challenged contributors to be innovative in our discussions of Alexander's scholarship and legacy by blending the personal and the academic; our analysis of his work's significance was to be informed and enhanced by drawing on our interactions with him. This challenge inspired me to reflect on my time in graduate school as Alexander's student from 2000-2008, which coincided with an important period in the history of the strong program in cultural sociology.

When I started my PhD at UCLA, Alexander was developing this research program in an informal intellectual community that called itself the "Culture Club". When Alexander accepted his appointment at Yale University in 2001, this intellectual community became institutionalized as a research center. Because I transferred to Yale to continue working with Alexander, I participated in this transition and witnessed the establishment and expansion of the Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS). Working on this chapter not only enabled me to place myself in the history of the discipline; it also provided an opportunity to figure out how the CCS created an environment that was so conducive to intellectual creativity. (The short answer: resources are necessary but not sufficient. The interactional infrastructure – regular opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue and contribute to a shared intellectual project – makes all the difference.)

Pictured above:
Group photo from Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) (ccs.yale.edu)

Message from the Chair, cont.

It is with this deeper appreciation for intellectual community that I look forward to the annual meeting of the ASA. In a few months, our section will gather in New York City to engage in scholarly exchange, stoke our intellectual curiosity, and build academic solidarity. No doubt some debates will become so lively that participants will move them from the conference venue to nearby coffee shops, which will be a fitting tribute to the recently departed Jürgen Habermas. Changes in ASA policy have worked in our section's favor, meaning that we have a bigger program than ever before. I am grateful to the members of the programming committee (Anne-Marie Champagne, Edmund Cheng, Paul Joosse, Omar Lizardo and George Steinmetz) for their hard work. In addition to four open paper sessions, the section has organized two invited paper sessions and a co-sponsored session with the Culture section. All members are warmly invited to the section business meeting and to the off-site joint reception with the Political Sociology, Theory, and Global and Transnational Sections. Details about the sessions, the schedule for our assigned section day (Day 4 – Tuesday, August 11), and the reception will be communicated shortly.

In a few weeks, you will receive your ballot for the HoSST election. My thanks to the nominations committee (Edmund Cheng, Laura Ford, Guillermina Jasso and Jiangnan Liu) for putting together such a strong roster, and to everyone who agreed to be a candidate.

Once again, the newsletter editors have put together an excellent issue full of fascinating material. The first feature is a collection of reflections by sociologists from all over the world, and at every career stage, about how their work intersects with the history of the discipline and the history of social thought more generally. The second feature is an in-depth interview with Charles Camic (Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University, chair of HoSST 2008-2009 and 2011 HoSST Lifetime Achievement Award winner) about his pioneering work in the history of sociology and social thought. As ever, I encourage members, especially those who recently joined the section, to submit items to the newsletter and to get involved in the section.

I look forward to seeing you in August.

Lisa McCormick
Chair, ASA History of Sociology and Social Thought Section
Senior Lecturer in Sociology, University of Edinburgh
Affiliated Fellow, Institute for Advanced Study CEU

Masthead of the previous issue of Timelines (October 2025)

HOSST SECTION LEADERSHIP

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Graduate Student Representatives:
Anthony Albanese, Georgia Southern University
Timothy A. Perez, University of California, Santa Barbara

Reflections from the Field

In this feature article, we highlight scholars at various career stages whose work intersects with the history of the discipline and the history of social thought more generally

Collected by John Mirsky

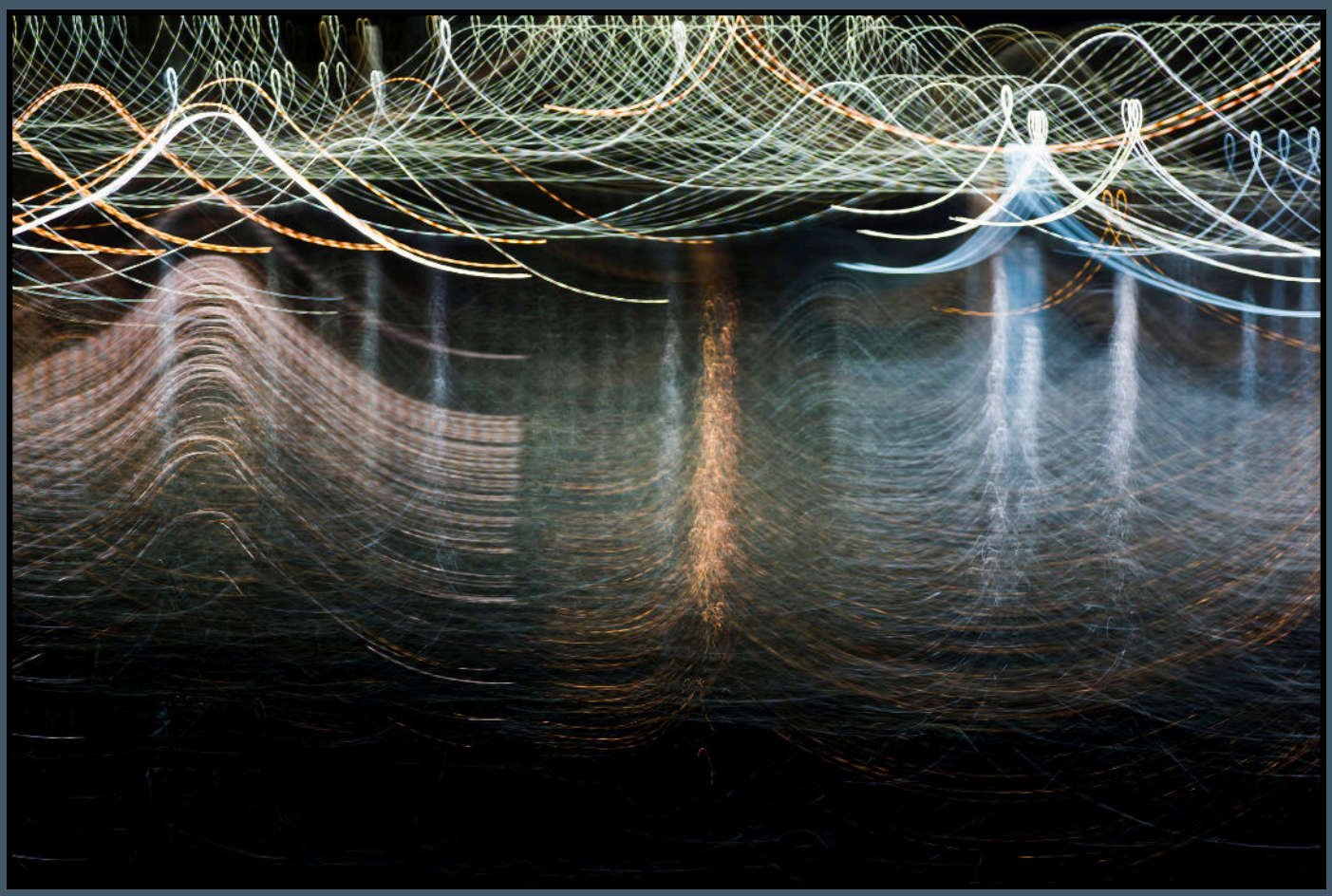


Image credit: "Blurred night lights", by Freepik

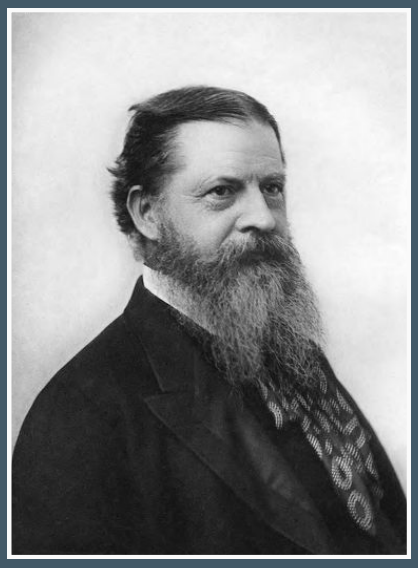
Bridget Ritz

My first Theory course in graduate school at the University of Notre Dame was taught by pragmatist social theorist Gene Halton. Naturally, he assigned some passages written by Charles S. Peirce. I had read my Descartes during my liberal arts undergraduate coursework, but I had never heard of this thinker who exploded numerous Cartesian myths with his cutting rebuke: "Let us not to pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts." I was fascinated, and have been pondering the meaning of this ever since.

My current work is based on a hunch, inspired by Peirce, that better understanding what doubt is and how it works will help shed light on questions of social reproduction and social change. I approach this from a critical realist perspective, attending to how various types of interaction between certain human potentials (e.g., the capacity to doubt), social conditions, and social mechanisms can generate different social outcomes. Substantively, taking a cue from Peirce's critique of Cartesian "doubt," and drawing on insights from contemporary neuroscience, I conceptualize doubt as an involuntary, affective, and social phenomenon. I also draw on Peirce's classic analysis of four methods for the "fixation of belief"—i.e., escaping the "irritation of doubt"—to analyze ways in which group processes, authorities, and culture can structure the systematic evasion or, alternatively, arousal of doubt to different degrees in ways that can cripple collective action or enable social change.

Peirce is typically regarded as a "philosopher's philosopher," as Dewey once described him. But, in a similar vein as scholars such as Dewey himself to Gene Halton and Norbert Wiley to Iddo Tavory, Mike Strand, and Omar Lizardo more recently, I am convinced that Peirce's yet-untapped insights about the sociality of doubt warrant appreciating him also as a social theorist.

Indeed, Peirce's theory of doubt is a particular expression of a more general insight, namely, that quality, feeling, what Peirce called "Firstness" and Dewey called "qualitative experience" – what contemporary theorists might simply call "affect" – is the medium through which we experience, act, think, learn, and generate change in our world. The American pragmatist tradition has more to offer social theory than insights about habit, problem solving, and creative action. Grounding of all these is, first, the recognition of the ubiquitous and powerful role of affect in social life—a timeless but also timely contribution to social theory.

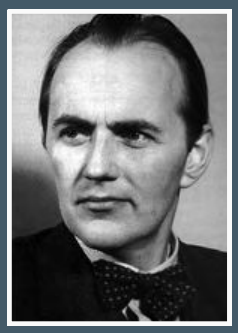


Portrait of Charles Sanders Peirce, circa 1891

Virgilio Urbina Lazardi

I study the constraints, capacities, and strategies for collective action on the labor market and in the workplace, these sites being the principal arenas upon which most individuals in a market economy derive their livelihoods—and nation-states their overall distribution of resources and power. Adopting a structuralist approach, I conceptualize the relationship between jobseeker and employer as one of asymmetric interdependency, within which a fundamental antagonism of interests dictates the choice of tactics by each party to advance their respective aims within and beyond the firm. Yet because that antagonism must contend with the competitive pressures that encroach upon worker and capitalist alike, my work is as interested in understanding the terrain upon which individuals act, as made up by the class, occupational and industrial structure of the economy as well as country-specific labor market institutions, as it is on the behavior of labor and management to game the market and arrange the labor process to their advantage. And as this terrain changes over time, the historical dimension forms an inedible part of the picture. Thus, my research combines elements of comparative political economy, labor process theory, and development studies in equal measure.

Recently, I have turned my attention to recovering the history of the trade-union-sponsored Rehn-Meidner wage and economic model of postwar Swedish social democracy. In forcing capital to adjust to targeted standards of living rather than vice-versa, the model simultaneously provides a blueprint for achieving macroeconomic balance without the whip of unemployment and beckons toward a future oriented around public rather than private control over investment. Contrary to the main bent of the existing literature, my appraisal homes in on the political motivations behind the choice of the model's instruments, which reveal a concerted effort on behalf of the blue-collar Swedish Trade Union Confederation to advance a counter-hegemonic class project. Through archival research that I intend to conduct later in my career, I aim to flesh out what I consider to be the most important lessons to be taken from the model's practice: the independence of working-class institutions in the labor market, and the use of relative wage rates to discipline investment decisions, which is not unlike what central banks do at present with their control over borrowing costs. As a comparative case, I aim to contrast Sweden's midcentury model with Australia's, which likewise constructed a highly centralized bargaining system but in which the state rather than the peak negotiating bodies played a preeminent role.



Pictured left: Economist Gösta Rehn, circa 1955

Pictured right: Economist Rudolf Meidner, circa 1966

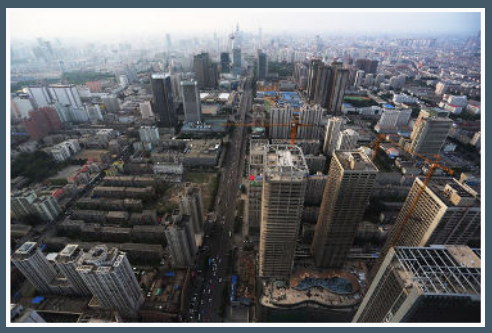
Zhehand Zhang

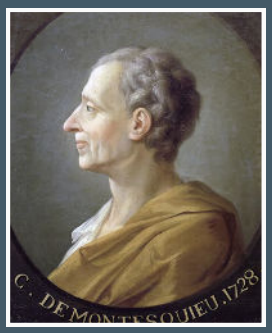
My work sits at the intersection of historical sociology, social theory, and political economy, with a focus on how large-scale institutional transformations reorganize everyday moral worlds. In a current project on China's postsocialist transition, I examine how state-sector workers in the industrial Northeast came to live with, interpret, and sometimes naturalize a market order that eroded the socialist protections they had long relied upon. Rather than treating "marketization" as a self-evident economic process, I trace the historically specific institutional sequences and governing practices through which reform was made thinkable and tolerable. This is also where the history of sociology and social thought is central to my approach: I use classic theoretical problematics of consent, legitimacy, moral economy, and everyday life, across Marxian political economy as well as postwar debates on state, class, and subject formation, to reconstruct how macro-structural change is translated into ordinary categories of deservingness, responsibility, and justice. In doing so, I aim to show how engagement with earlier sociological and theoretical traditions can illuminate contemporary transformations while also sharpening the concepts we inherit from them.

Nader Andrawos

One of the major forerunners and founders of sociological thinking is the French philosopher Montesquieu. It is not an exaggeration to say that Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws may have founded modern social scientific thinking, from comparative law to sociology and anthropology. Montesquieu's method of historical comparison, his sensitivity to geographical and historical difference, and his institutionally realist and secular-scientific perspective were crucial in the development of a distinctly modern perspective on history. I argue that social theory may require a rehabilitation of some of Montesquieu's arguments, and specifically, the idea of "spirit" and "the spirit of the law." By "spirit" Montesqiuieu meant the ethical and social customs that underpin the formal, written rules of a community, and this concept plays a central role in his explanations of how societies are shaped historically. The concept is both descriptive and normative, and hence, re-reading Montesquieu today may be crucial in understanding the normative importance of the very idea of "the social" and "sociality" as core ethical values. While Montesquieu's Eurocentric bias cannot be accepted today, there is still an urgent need to return to the "spirit" of his thinking, especially due to his incisive critique of authoritarian and despotic politics, his defence of the rule of law and rights, and his insistence that social, customary life is the ultimate source of normative values and legitimacy. This, I want to claim, is also the heart of sociology's ethical wisdom.

Shenyang, Northeastern China, circa 2014





Portrait of Montesquieu, circa 1753-1794

Daphne Fietz

My work engages the history of social thought as an analytic resource for examining how sociology has come to privilege particular models of action, temporality, and agency. Rather than treating theory as a canon to be applied, I use intellectual history to reconstruct how sociological problem formulations emerged and stabilized, and how alternative pathways were narrowed or sidelined in the process. This orientation informs my current research on climate resistance in Germany, the UK, and the United States, where I examine how activists recalibrate moral agency as futures are increasingly experienced as foreclosed. Drawing on classical figures to recent developments in the sociology of morality and time, I argue that as future-oriented problem-solving has become a sociological default, other moral-temporal frameworks through which actors render action meaningful have been sidelined.

In earlier work on Karl Mannheim, I pursued a similar strategy by rereading his generational theory through his early cultural sociology. Returning to his writings on experience, language, and meaning, I show that generational differentiation hinges on a historically contingent asymmetry between lived experience and cultural articulation. This reinterpretation recovers a non-foundational account of meaning that remains sensitive to environmental conditions.

Angelus Novus (1920)
by Paul Klee

Fiona Greenland

Social thought has aesthetic forms whose specificities can help us theorize social action. Allow me an example from Ukraine, where I have been studying culture and resistance for two years:

There is a town in southern Ukraine called Bashtanka, about 10,000 people and rural on the outskirts. On March 1, 2022, about a week into Russia's full-scale invasion, a convoy of 600 Russian soldiers entered the town. In the face of an overwhelming military firepower, Bashtanka's residents refused to surrender. They attacked the convoy with homemade Molotov cocktails, rocks, and clubs. They sent critical intelligence to the Ukrainian Army and civilians in nearby towns, thereby disrupting Russian operations and modeling effective local organization. The convoy fell apart. Russian soldiers disbanded and tried to escape through the fields. Several were captured by town residents. Bashtanka has become a case study of the willingness of civilians to fight, and a symbol of Ukrainians' commitment to freedom. A Bashtanka native explained: "There's a saying we all grow up with: 'I'm from Bashtanka, I don't fear tanks.' In the Ukrainian language, it rhymes. It reminds us who we are and what we're about." Identity, community, and cohesive equality are bound as such.

Ukraine was for centuries a stateless nation and so lacks the body of statecraft documents that help us trace social thought in other parts of Europe. It is in poems, sermons, and myths that we find the development and transmission of Ukrainians' answers to fundamental questions: Who are we, what is our role in the world, and where do we want to go? Writers and thinkers Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko, Lesya Ukrainka, and Mykhailo Hrushevsky were among those who developed literary aesthetics to express social and political ideas that resonated with cultural patterns of lyrical verse and story forms. Historically, the relationship between literature and social thought has been theorized in contexts of imperial domination, occupation, and genocide. Raphael Lemkin's original formulation of genocide as the destruction and replacement of a "national pattern" underscores the extent to which culture and thought are integral to collective existence. My research extends this insight sociologically by examining why it matters that political thought has developed in Ukraine through lyrical verse. In the more general framework, literature operates as a social institution: it encourages active interpretation, reinforces shared symbols, and supports various readings (local, national, diasporic) of the country's past and future in the face of their attempted dismantling.

Tad Stonicki

I was tricked into sociology by the classics of modern social thought. Since then, my work has wrestled with cultural dynamics of capitalism through the archival study of pioneering consumer activists at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These activists contributed to the history of social thought, as they mapped the structure of exchange and labor in the modern world. While completing The Sympathetic Consumer (2021, Stanford University Press), I began to take a more systematic interest in the language of social scientific analysis, social scientific epistemology, and its history - especially critiques of mainstream sociological reason and the prospect of genuine pluralism or heterogeneity in scientific knowledge. This has resulted in publications that address the role of holism and causality in sociological arguments ("Capitalist Totality and Developmental Explanation", Critical Historical Studies; "Two Ways of Arguing with Culture", American Journal of Cultural Sociology). With this ongoing line of research, I aim to illuminate, without merely dismissing, the production and maintenance of conventional wisdom in contemporary US sociology. Rather than mandate agreement on fundamental questions, I seek the conditions and criteria for productive disagreement. Such a project must learn from and engage with the history of sociology and social thought.

Kleine Dada Soirée (1922) by Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters [cropped]

Xi Wang

I am a PhD candidate in Sociology at Northwestern University and a student in the Psychoanalysis for Scholars program at the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute. My research is situated at the intersection of the sociology of professions, knowledge, and culture, with a specific focus on how psychoanalysis—as both a body of social thought and a clinical practice—is revitalized in modern societies beyond the West.

Following the Chinese government's 2017 decision to revoke the national licensing system for psychotherapists, my early work analyzed how practitioners navigated this institutional vacuum, assembling new forms of expert credibility through experience, informal training, and "quasi-credentials." As my fieldwork deepened, my inquiry shifted toward questions of transnational connection and elite formation. I found that psychoanalytic approaches occupied a particularly prominent position in China's mental health field, specifically within prestigious training networks that link Chinese students with teachers and supervisors from the "West."

My dissertation investigates the shifting dynamics between epistemic centers and peripheries within a decentralized and de-professionalized field. I trace the movement of psychoanalysis from "old" Euro-American centers to dynamic "new" peripheries: from West to East, from China's state-governed psychiatric institutions to grassroots organizations, and from a unified notion of truth to a proliferation of theory–practice hybrids. At the core of my study is the China American Psychoanalytic Alliance (CAPA), an organization that evolved from a small intellectual circle in 1990s Chengdu into a vibrant ecosystem connecting analysts from North and South America and Europe with multiple generations of Chinese practitioners. I explore a central paradox: how a community that remains "peripheral" to both the International Psychoanalytic Association and the

Image taken from website of the China American Psychoanalytic Alliance

Chinese state hospital system successfully maintains its authority and autonomy as a dynamic hub of transnational exchange.

Theoretically, my research examines the reproduction of hierarchical power within professional communities that explicitly champion a democratic ethos. I introduce the concept of "Strategic Occidentalism" to explain how local elites capture the moral prestige of Western egalitarian ideals, repurposing them as scarce cultural capital to monopolize professional distinction. Furthermore, I advance a model of "affective translation," arguing that in relational practices, knowledge migration is conducted through the emotional dynamics of the therapeutic encounter. By sociologically reinterpreting the clinical concept of transference, I demonstrate how it functions as a primary mechanism for mediating and re-embedding expertise across cultural boundaries.

Methodologically, my work is grounded in extensive multi-sited fieldwork and interviews conducted since Fall 2024. My sites include CAPA's transnational online training, local in-person seminars in China, and various professional workshops across Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Chicago, New York, and San Francisco. To navigate the "inside-outside" positionality of the sociologist, I have also engaged in direct psychoanalytic training since Fall 2023 to inform my ethnographic gaze.

Alongside my research, I teach the Northwestern University undergraduate seminar, Cultures of Care: Mental Health Across Borders. The course synthesizes sociological inquiry, the history of healing, and contextualized clinical perspectives to interrogate the transnational co-construction of mental suffering, the politics of care, and the influence of contemporary technology on mental and emotional well-being.

Cinthya Guzman

As we read ideas, we may begin mapping their trajectories in our minds, tracing when they came into and out of vogue, what lineages they followed, who championed or contested them. This historical work is often informed by biographies, archival materials, or our own lived experiences of encountering texts over decades in conversation with other ideas. Readers of this newsletter are already engaged in this kind of intellectual mapping, but how often do we study the history of sociological thought sociologically? When this analytical work lives primarily within our own minds, it becomes difficult to assess the mechanisms behind the rise and fall of ideas or to identify what factors shaped their creation and transmission. As a sociologist interested in the history of sociological thought, I wanted to approach these questions empirically, but doing so required finding empirical traces of what is often treated as a purely intellectual process.

In my collaborative research, I trace the trajectory of ideas through syllabi and textbooks, arguing that these are sites where we reify our collective beliefs about what sociology is and how sociologists think (Guzman and Silver, 2018; Guzman et al., 2023). This is not the only way to study canonization processes, but it offers a method for mapping how ideas are passed down across generations. Required courses and readings mandate that students encounter certain ideas, texts, or visions in order to enter the discipline; textbooks thus act as mechanisms of cultural reproduction, ensuring favored authors and frameworks are transmitted while others are marginalized (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Connell, 1997).

As standalone data points, syllabi and textbooks tell us about individual classroom choices and author preferences; aggregated across many cases, however, they expose patterns speaking to mechanisms behind these seemingly personal decisions (Silver et al., 2022). We can then connect these empirical patterns to generational shifts, developments within academia, and changes in broader society, allowing us to see canonization not as an inevitable unfolding of intellectual merit, but as a social process shaped by institutional and historical forces. Tracing how classical theorists appear in introductory textbooks over time, for instance, shows not simply shifting intellectual preferences, but the discipline's ongoing negotiation of its own identity and boundaries: who counts as a founder, which questions are deemed central, and what we collectively choose to remember or forget.

Of course, syllabi and textbooks are only one window into canonization. A fuller picture requires triangulating across multiple sources – citation patterns, archival records, various forms of institutional histories – each of which speaks to different dimensions of how ideas gain or lose standing within the discipline. By bringing these different vantage points together, we can develop a richer and more robust understanding of canonization as a social process, one that resists reducing it to any single mechanism or site.

Sociology textbooks
Image credit: "June 15 (take 2)" by >littleyiye<

Nicolás Rudas

My work examines the multiple intersections between culture and violence: the moral meanings that motivate perpetrators to engage in brutality; the symbolic frameworks of heroism and trauma through which different audiences interpret violent events; and the social uses of the category "violence" amid political controversies. Although grounded in specific empirical questions—such as the role of statistics in shaping the memory of atrocities committed during the Colombian Civil War, or the production of apocalyptic narratives within the contemporary far-right intellectual milieu —my research is centrally oriented toward theory-building.

Drawing on Malešević's observation in The Sociology of War and Violence that sociology has systematically marginalized violence as an object of inquiry, I argue that this disciplinary blind spot stems in part from the assumption that violence is transparent, i.e., that its social meanings are self-evident and unproblematic. I contend instead that the study of violence needs to develop a more hermeneutically rich and nuanced analytical apparatus, one that engages more seriously concepts such as performance, myth and audience. Furthermore, my work insists on subjecting to critical scrutiny the categories we conventionally use to survey meaning making. It is in this spirit that I recently developed a critique of "resonance," a widespread yet largely taken-for granted metaphor in analysis of cultural reception.

FEATURED SCHOLARS

Bridget Ritz is a sociologist living in South Bend, Indiana

Virgilio Urbina Lazardi is a sociology PhD student at NYU

Zhehand Zhang is a sociology PhD student at UC Berkeley

Nader Andrawos is a research student in the at the London School of Economics' Department of Sociology

Daphne Fietz is a sociology PhD candidate at Yale University

Fiona Greenland is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia

Tad Stonicki is Associate Professor of Sociology/Criminology/Justice at UNC Greensboro

Xi Wang is a sociology PhD candidate at Northwestern University

Cinthya Guzman is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at the University of Prince Edward Island

Nicolás Rudas is a PhD candidate at Yale University

Photo: Liberal Army's "red children" in Panama by Carlos Chahin (1899)

Publications

RECENT SCHOLARSHIP BY SECTION MEMBERS AND OTHERS

Member Submissions

Esposito, E., Pais, I., & Stark, D. (Eds.). (2025). Symposium: Academic Freedom Under Attack [Special issue]. *Sociologica – International Journal for Sociological Debate*, *19*(3). https://sociologica.unibo.it/issue/view/1417.

Jasso, Guillermina. 2025. Advancing Knowledge in the Spirit of Fararo: Generativity and Unification. *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*. https://doi.org/10.1080/0022250X.2024.242394.

Jasso, Guillermina. 2025. Certainty, Unity, and Tolerance (Invited Comment on Redstone). *Theory and Society*. 54(1):29-33. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-025-09594-7.

Meghji, Ali. (2026). Revisitation and resurgence of the race-caste debate: Returning to the classical texts. *Journal of Classical Sociology*. *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X261428412.

In the early-mid 20th century, sociologists were interested in sketching out possible similarities between caste and race. Since then, this approach has both been defended and – more commonly – rejected. In this paper, I contend that critics of the race-caste approach have fundamentally misunderstood the central arguments of that said approach, often committing methodological errors in their criticisms. I contrast this approach to advocates of the race-caste comparison. My argument is that this loosely knit group of scholars generated a sociological programme to think about racial domination as: (a) historically specific, which (b) in particular moments can appear to be caste-like, whereby (c) there are degrees of realisation of how rigid or loose the caste system can be (i.e. there is a caste continuum).

Classical authors of the race-caste approach argued that the concept of 'caste' could help to generate comparative insights into hierarchical relations across time and space, and could provide insights into the mismatch(es) between attitudes, practices, and social structure in the era of burgeoning capitalist social relations. The central thesis of this paper, therefore, is that the race-caste scholars of the classical era developed a sociological programme oriented not towards demonstrating an equivalence between race and caste, but rather oriented towards the relational empirical questions of when, how, and why, in certain specific moments, racial domination becomes caste-like.

Ore, Peter D., Menchik, David A. (2026). The Global Chicago School: Cases and Currents. *The American Sociologist*. *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-026-09683-9.

We frame the Chicago School as a case of global sociology by thinking through the contributions to a forthcoming special issue in The American Sociologist on the "Chicago School and its Others." In spite of the Chicago School's tendency to view itself and its city as what Michael Burawoy called a "closed world," both school and city sustained themselves through connections to Chicago's midwestern hinterlands, the continent, and the world. Mapping these connections yields a novel typology for "externalist" intellectual historiography that may be useful for section members working in the history of sociology, the sociology of culture, and the sociology of knowledge.

Rosenberg, James. (2026). Reactionary Bricolage: Curtis Yarvin and Postliberalism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764251407509.

As the authoritarian right advances in the United States, developing an accurate understanding of the constituent elements of its worldview is a task of great urgency. Toward this end, I assess the writings of Curtis Yarvin, one of the US right's most influential intellectuals. Yarvin's novelty consists in his syncretic blend of non-liberal, non-democratic social theory with a computational understanding of society. Considering this work offers valuable insights into ascendant anti-democratic and computational styles of thought. In light of Yarvin's influence on powerful figures in the Trump administration, this is by no means an academic exercise, but one with very high political stakes. Simply put, Curtis Yarvin may have something important to tell us not just about where we are, but also about where we are headed.

Steinmetz, George. (2026). "Durkheim and the Post-Colonial Critique." In *The Elgar Companion to Émile Durkheim*, edited by Paul Carls and Marcel Fournier. *Edgar Elgar*, April 2026.

This chapter examines Durkheim's thinking about colonialism and anti-colonialism and empire. The first section argues that a postcolonial sociology that would correspond to the foundational work in postcolonial theory by writers like Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak would be based on close, careful, contextual reading. Section II presents Durkheim's writings on colonialism, empire, and related topics such as states, morality, international orders, civilization, and race/racism. The paper rejects many of the self-described postcolonial critiques of Durkheim, arguing that he did discuss the colonial context of some of the ethnographies he reviewed, and that he rejected the civilizational and racist discourses that ungirded colonialism, empires that exist "without internal acquiescence from their subjects," advocated an "international system of states … based on Morals," and that he reversed the "imperial gaze" across the global South by arguing that traits defined at the time as "primitive" were present at the heart of more complex societies.

Steinmetz, George. (2026). W.E.B. Du Bois on Empires and Colonies, 1896-1963. *Journal of Classical Sociology*. *26*(1), pp. 3-33. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X251340284.

This article explores the scholarly and journalistic contributions by W.E.B. Du Bois to the history and theory of modern colonialism. Because Du Bois's understanding of colonialism evolved radically over his lifetime, the article examines all his relevant writing on the topic—nearly 300 separate texts, written between the 1880s and the twilight of his life. The article also traces the connections between Du Bois's ideas about colonialism to changing intellectual, political, and personal contexts. While showing that there is no singular "Du Boisian" theory of colonialism, the article concludes that Du Bois made several important suggestions that can contribute to further colonial studies.

Du Bois urged researchers us to track historical transformations in the forms of colonial rule, to compare national styles of colonialism, to trace the connections between colonialism and class formation and racial oppression in the metropoles, and to focus on the ways colonialism stems not from economic and political power motives as well as ideological discourses and other practices including racism. He argued that the slavery ended in the New World when it became more profitable for European capital to exploit African labor in Africa. He supported the political program of amalgamating colonial-era political units into larger African states. He pointed to the relations between science and colonialism. The survey of Du Bois's colonial studies is preceded by a brief discussion of postcolonial and decolonial approaches to canon revision and intellectual decolonization. Some of Du Bois's statements could be

read as violating sociology's present-day norms, such as his support for certain forms of colonialism and his description of certain colonized populations as "semicivilized." The article argues for a more tolerant, multiplex approach to historic thinkers that pays attention to the ways in which they may both conform to and move beyond the intellectual constraints of their time and place, and concludes that social research is never complete and that the history of sociology needs more research, rather than a "canon" or an "index" of forbidden works.

Steinmetz, George. (Forthcoming). Bourdieu and 'Grand Theory'. *European Journal of Social Theory*. Will appear in special issue on "Trajectories and Prospects of Grand Theory in the Social Sciences" edited by Stefan Bargheer, Wolfgang Knöbl, and Monika Krause.

This article begins by noting that Bourdieu's writing often seems entirely orthogonal to grand theory, as Bourdieu rejected Parsonian grand theory and the alternatives presented by Lazarsfeld and Merton. The article argues that Bourdieu's lengthy philosophical education created a relatively stable baseline epistemology and scientific habitus that positioned him against grand theory. At the beginning of his career, in his work on Algeria, through 1970, and during the 1980s, Bourdieu did not operate on the "nomological" terrain of grand theory. At two moments, however, grand theory emerged in his discourse: in the 1970s, due to changes in the French intellectual field and Bourdieu's trajectory through that field, and in the mid-1990s in response to macro-societal changes that Bourdieu described as neoliberalism. At the same time, however, he continued to reject grand theory in the last years of his life, as can be seen in Pascalian Meditations and Science of Science and Reflexivity.

Trevino, Javier. (2025). Talcott Parsons and the Totem-Taboo Problematic. History of the Human Sciences. 38(3-4):127-149. https://doi.org/10.1177/09526951251345649.

Trevino, Javier. (2024). Talcott Parsons as Psychoanalytically Oriented Social Psychologist. Psychoanalysis and History. 26(2): 209-228. https://doi.org/10.3366/pah.2024.0513.

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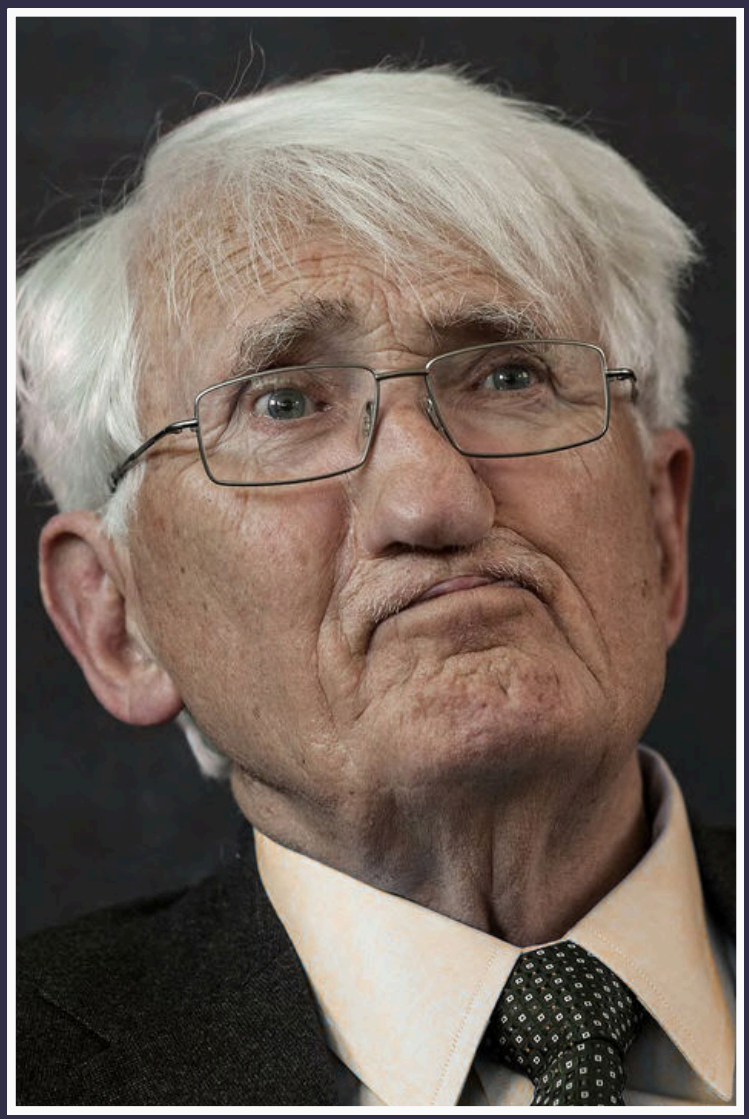
Remembering Jürgen Habermas

1929-2026

Reflections from Andrew Edgar and Rodney Benson



Habermas photographed during a lecture
at Eötvös Loránd University (2014)
Image credit: Európa Pont

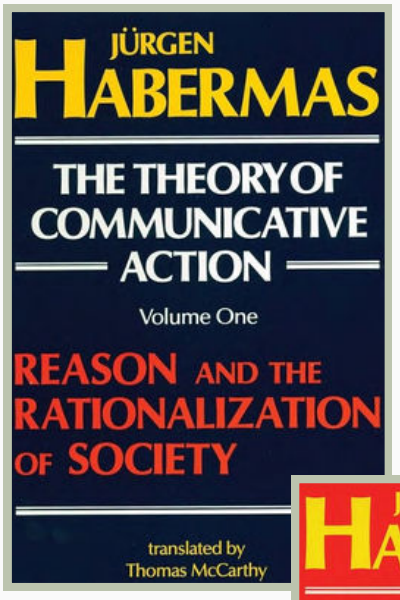
Andrew Edgar

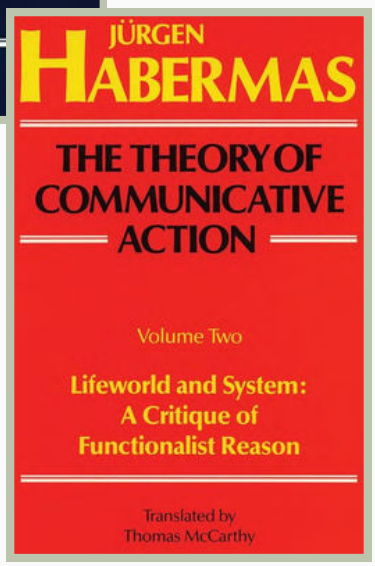
Jürgen Habermas was a major contributor to the development of social thought in the later part of the twentieth century and first quarter of the twenty-first. As a research assistant to Theodor Adorno, and thus a member of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, from the first Habermas bridged the disciplines of philosophy and sociology. This led him to a profound engagement not merely with the history of social theory - articulated profoundly in his magisterial Theory of Communicative Action - but also with liberal political philosophy. In the Theory of Communicative Action he sought a synthesis of the major traditions of social theory, from Parsonian systems theory to Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy and Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. The resulting image of a society in tension between a discursive lifeworld and the impersonal systems (of the economy and polity) that regulate it, was profound and disturbing.

Two key elements may be seen as constitutive of his social philosophy. Firstly, there is his early account of the bourgeois public sphere, and his consequent defence of rational discourse as the cornerstone of a civilised and free society. Secondly, there is his defence of truth, understood in terms of the classical pragmatism of Charles Peirce, and thus as the result of a long and critical process through which errors are exposed (through appeal to reason and good evidence) and truth claims gradually validated. In an age in which the fundamentals of liberal democracy are under threat, and where truth and scientific evidence are undermined for short-term political advantages, Habermas's approach to social philosophy is as important and urgent as ever. Habermas was never perhaps as stylish or radical as many of his post-modernist contemporaries, such as Foucault, Derrida, or Rorty, but his dogged defence of the values of the Enlightenment, of commitment to truth and the right to free speech, remains of the utmost value.

At the age of 96, one should not perhaps be surprised to hear of a life ending. It was, nonetheless, a sad moment for me personally when I read this news. A great mind has passed from us, but he has left a rich and important legacy of writings, and has fundamentally changed our understanding of the social world.

Andrew Edgar is Professor Emeritus in Philosophy at Cardiff University





Book covers: The Theory of Communicative Action (German: Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns). Published 1981 [English translations in 1984 and 1987].

Rodney Benson

When I learned that the great German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas had died, I recalled my first semester PhD Theory class at UC-Berkeley in the early 1990s. One of my fellow first years, fresh from university studies in Germany, asked if we would be reading Habermas. The professor answered "no," because it was "normative" theory, not sociological. At the time, I recall being a bit surprised by this binary, but I was also eager to jump into the rest of the syllabus, and I figured I would make my way to Habermas at some later point. And indeed, I have.

For many years, I have typically begun my sociology of cultural production graduate seminar with Habermas in dialogue with other democratic normative theorists.[1] Before students start analyzing how and why media operate in various ways, I feel it's important to give them an opportunity to articulate and clarify their own values, the often implicit choices that guide their research questions. Various conceptions of the good society and the good life also motivate and guide the actions of those we study; they are part and parcel of the social phenomena we are attempting to explain. Whether or not one believes that Habermas himself, in his public political interventions, has always fully enacted his model of inclusive, rationally-directed communicative action oriented toward mutual understanding, his discourse ethics provide a powerful guide for reflexive critical analysis and ethically-consistent individual and collective action.[2]

In similar fashion, Habermas's empirical model of media and politics, first developed more than six decades ago with The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, has proven its enduring conceptual and historical value, even as it has weathered multiple rounds of criticism. To his credit, he frequently responded to and modified his theories in response to these criticisms, as is evident in his 1996 book Between Facts and Norms. This important but less well-known book presents Habermas's most fully elaborated structural modeling of a multi-layered public sphere.[3] I particularly appreciate his conception of the media as a "sluice" connecting the lifeworld of everyday and associational life to systems of economic and political power. He also persuasively highlighted the negative externalities of commercial media and stressed the civic value of public service media. But even this framework remained somewhat schematic. It did not provide a way to drill down deeper into the variations within both commercial and non-commercial media and the ways in which they were shaped by the status-driven competition of media professionals, the social stratification of audiences, state policies, and diverse institutional logics of ownership and funding.[4]

Similar problems beset his final word on the topic, a 2022 Theory, Culture, and Society article, republished in 2023 as part of the book, A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics.[5] To be clear, these are not fatal flaws. As is often the case with many of sociology's classic works (The Elementary Forms of Religious Life; The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism), the flaws and the gaps are generative: they create the space for future generations of scholars to find their own voices, extending the original insights as well as improving upon them.

[1] In particular, I often begin with Myra Marx Ferree, William A. Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht, "Four Models of the Public Sphere in Modern Democracies," Theory and Society 31, 3 (2002), 289-324.
[2] See, e.g., Mathias Risse, "Singular Crime, Double Duty: Germany, Israel, and the Palestinian People after the Holocaust," March 18, 2026,
[3] See in particular chapter 8 on "Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere" and the condensed version found in Jürgen Habermas, "Political communication in media society: does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research," Communication Theory 16 (2006), 411-426. See also Hartmut Wessler's cogent synthesis in Habermas and the Media, Polity, 2018, chapter 3, "Media for Deliberative Democracy."
[4] Rodney Benson, "Shaping the Public Sphere: Habermas and Beyond," American Sociologist 40 (2009), 175-197.

In the meantime, even if the nonagenarian Habermas exhibited an understandable nostalgia for print and admitted to a less-than-complete mastery of the contours of the contemporary digital domain, his instincts for what is fundamentally wrong and what needs to happen to restore the "inclusive character of the public sphere and the deliberative character of the formation of public opinion and public will" seem to me to be spot on, hard as they may be to achieve.[6] According to Habermas, we will continue to need gatekeeping (he emphasizes journalism, but this could be broadly conceived to include a range of information professionals) to ensure that public opinion is formed from verified facts and "qualitatively filtered" opinions.[7] He insisted that we will continue to need a shared public space that is and is perceived to be fully "inclusive" and "supposed to direct the attention of all citizens to the same topics in order to both stimulate and enable each of them to make their own [considered] judgments," in other words some type of non-commodified "public" media system.[8] And since the politically-relevant information and opinion that flow through a small number of unavoidable platforms are "not mere commodities" despite the fact that they are treated as such, he presciently predicted that their Silicon Valley mega-conglomerate owners will need to be legally compelled to assume their civic responsibilities.[9]

If this is normative theory, so be it. The only kind of sociology that makes sense to me is one that makes clear what's at stake, diagnoses the current situation, and points toward potential solutions. On all these fronts, Habermas will continue to be urgent reading for the far foreseeable future.

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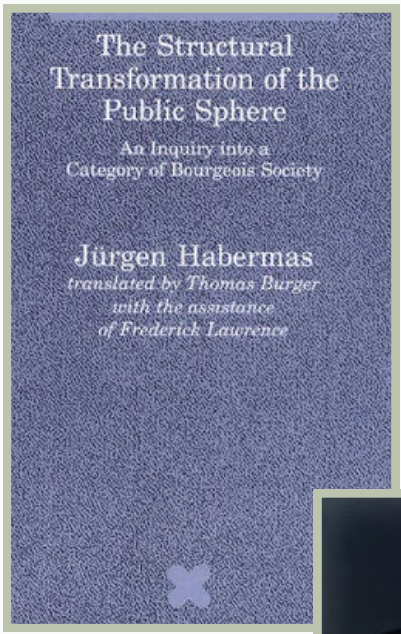
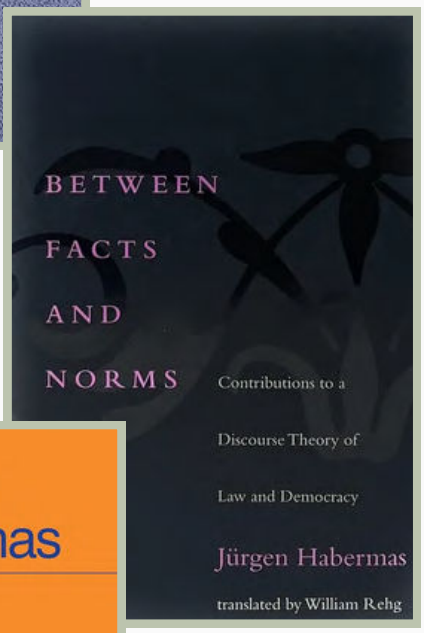
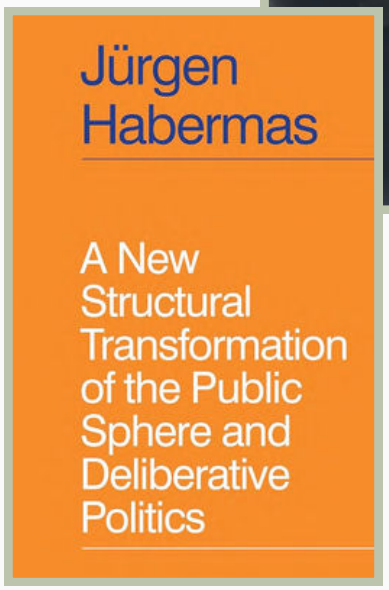


Book cover: The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (German: Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft). Published 1962 [English translation in 1989].



Book cover: Between Facts and Norms (German: Faktizität und Geltung). Published 1992 [English translation in 1996].



Book cover: A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics. Published 2023.

[5] Jürgen Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," Theory, Culture & Society 39, 4 (2022), 145-171.
[6] Ibid., p. 168.
[7] Ibid., pp. 157 and 167.
[8] Ibid., p. 165.
[9] Ibid., p. 167.

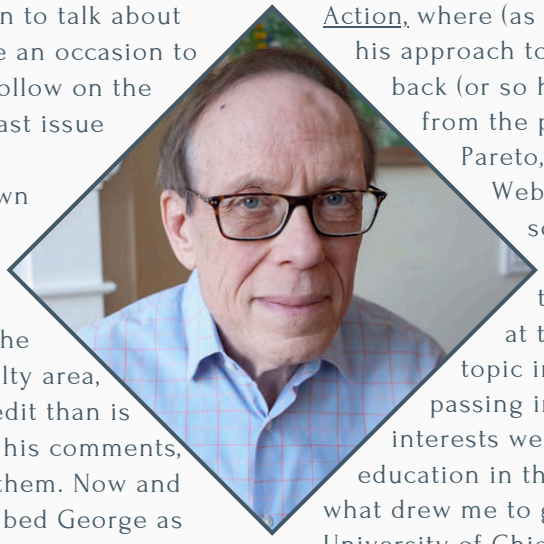
A Conversation with Charles Camic

PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF SOCIOLOGY AT NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY, CHAIR OF HOSST 2008-2009 AND 2011 HOSST LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD WINNER

Interviewed by John Mirsky on February 26th

JM: You've really played a pivotal role in establishing the contemporary, historical theoretical tradition of sociology. Can you reflect a little bit about how you got started with this project, and then how has your work evolved over time?

First off, let me thank you for inviting me to sit for this interview. It's always fun to talk about oneself, so thanks for giving me an occasion to do so. Second, I'm honored to follow on the heels of your interview in the last issue of this newsletter with George Steinmetz, who discusses his own development as a historian of sociology. In doing so, George makes some very kind remarks about my own role in shaping the history of sociology as a specialty area, but he gives me much more credit than is warranted. Still, I'm grateful for his comments, considering he's the source of them. Now and again over the years, I've described George as "one of the world's great sociologists": So to hear from a scholar of his stature the generous (if exaggerated) things he says about my role is something I really appreciate.



JM: Whether George's comments are excessive or not, can you just tell me a little bit about how you got started studying classical sociology and the history of the discipline?

I came to the area via a somewhat circuitous route, which I guess I would divide, in retrospect, into four episodes. Episode 1 happened when I was an undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1970s. For no particular reason, I enrolled during my first semester in an Introduction to Sociology course, which made me curious to learn more about the subject (and to eventually major in it). Following that first course, I took a course on Sociological Theory, which was taught by Robert Avery, who had gotten his PhD at Harvard in the 1950s, working with Talcott Parsons. The first book Professor Avery assigned was Parsons's 1937 classic The Structure of Social Action, where (as you know) Parsons laid down his approach to sociological theory by looking back (or so he said) to four social thinkers from the past – Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. This book made me think of sociological theory and the history of social thought as two sides of the same coin. But at that point in time neither was a topic in which I had more than a passing interest. Instead, my main interests were in the study of poverty and education in the U.S., and those topics were what drew me to grad school in sociology at the University of Chigago.

And this led to Episode 2, because here – after a first quarter introductory course (and two courses in the sociology of education) – I took another theory course, this one taught by Donald Levine, who, like Robert Avery, had a great interest in Talcott Parsons's The Structure of Social Action and who also treated theory and intellectual history in tandem. Levine, however, began his history a century earlier, with 18th century thinkers, including figures such as Kant and those from the French Enlightenment.

Episode 3 involved my expanding interest in higher educational institutions, which took a

historical turn when I took a course with visiting Israeli sociologist Joseph Ben-David, who studied the early history of European universities, and also introduced me to the sociology of science.

Out of this mix came my dissertation, which dealt with the relationship between education and the ideas of the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment.

My move in this direction did not occur for another few years. By this point, I was a newly tenured member of the sociology department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, teaching required courses on classical theory, with a heavy emphasis on the texts of Durkheim and Weber (and Marx, of course) and their immediate forerunners.

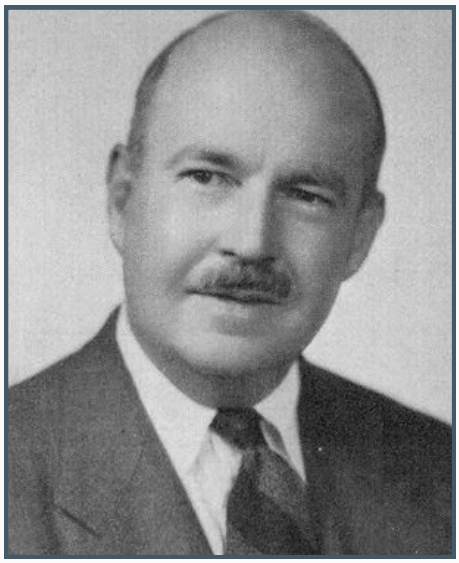
Teaching these courses was what I'd describe as Episode 4. As I read with my students these canonical texts against the background of Parsons's almost universally-accepted history of sociology in The Structure of Social Action, I came to feel that Parsons's view of the history of social thought was way off the mark: that it was what we would call "teleological," a pseudo-history in which a social theorist construes previous social thinkers to say exactly what that theorist wants them to say in order to build a narrative in which wrong-headed theories from the past slowly give way to the right-headed ideas, cumulating in the theorist's own superior theory. (In rejecting this approach, I found support in the contextualist, dialogical approach of Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School of intellectual history.) In the instance of Parsons, the theory he presented as superior centered on the claim that all human action is guided by shared norms (as opposed to purely rational factors).

From teaching about Durkheim and Weber via their actual writings, it struck me that only by a big stretch were they saying what Parsons's book wanted them to say. But why would Parsons choose the four thinkers he did and why would he magnify their insights about the role of norms, while eliding other features of their analysis of human action. My answer (to make a long, complicated story short) was: because he wanted (as an assistant professor of economics at Harvard) to establish a department of sociology on Harvard's map of recognized disciplines, at a time when the big faculty influencers on campus – men from other disciplines – opposed doing so, but were (for other reasons) smitten with Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber. So these specific earlier thinkers became the "reputation-building" figures who Parsons artfully "selected as his predecessors" and whose texts he cherry-picked to make the case he needed in order to establish at Harvard a department of sociology, erecting his case on the kind of norm-focused theory that the local heavyweights would accept.

At one level, I saw this argument as a theoretical intervention into ongoing sociological debates about the nature of human action. (I viewed Parsons's emphasis of norms as wrongly eliminating the role of "habit" in social action). In addition, I saw my account as replacing Parsons's teleological history with the non-teleological form of history espoused by most intellectual historians of the time – while also adding to it a more sociological dimension that intellectual historians (with the partial exception of those associated with the Cambridge School) shrugged off, as these scholars largely underplayed the role in intellectual life of meso-level social forces, such as departmental organizational maps, local reputation-seeking, institution-driven predecessor-selection, etc.: factors I was not yet linking with Bourdieu's notion of "fields," but would soon do so. This sociological component of my argument also

borrowed tacitly from the nascent area of Science Studies, though more borrowing was still ahead for me.

In any event, it was through this research on the early Parsons, and through my tentative effort to approach his theory (and its shortcomings) historically and sociologically, that I began thinking of myself as (in part) a historian of sociology, which was an identity I didn't previously have and scarcely knew existed. I just kind of gravitated to it via these various episodes, as they were reinforced over the years by several empirical projects of mine that may seem to be disconnected. These include projects on: the marginal role of sociologists during the Depression and New Deal; the development of statistical methods in the American social sciences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; and the transformation in the way American sociologists analyzed the family as their focus shifted from the study of "social disorganization" in the first half of the 20th century to the study of "social inequality" since that time.



Talcott Parsons
(1902-1979)

JM: That's very interesting, especially interesting to see how it was not your intention from the outset to study, you know, poverty, but then just over time, you just kind of got pushed in these various directions, and that's ended up where you are today. I'm curious, in documenting the kind of development of different sociological threads, whether it be how Parsons's book came to be or how sociology came to be during the depression, or how the family is a social unit is viewed over time. I'm thinking about your take on the role that you think of the history of sociology and social thought more generally, should play in the ecosystem of sociology today. Something that comes to mind is documenting what actually has happened. But then, of course, the more the sociological take is trying to understand things that are presented as perhaps being teleological or coming for certain reasons, actually have other motivations and reasons behind. Could you discuss the role that kind of history of sociological thought and the discipline should play in our ecosystem today?

This is an important question, which doesn't have only one answer. But I'd point to two core junctures in sociology's current ecosystem where scholarship on the history of sociology and social thought can (and, to some degree, already does) play an especially significant role. In your interview with George he brings out both of these points, so he and I are in agreement, though I'd couch these points a little differently.

The first of the junctures is in the study of social fields. A long time ago, I grew frustrated with the tendency of sociologists who do not study the history of sociology to hold to the stereotype that scholars associated with the "history of sociology," as a subspeciality of the discipline, mainly occupy themselves with the marginal task of expositing some notable ideas from the past and describing the biographies of the individuals who formulated those ideas. Period.

Following up on what I said before, I myself view the discipline of sociology as (among other things) a field: a social space distinguished from other spaces in that it is where sociological texts or ideas (or what contemporaries at any one time regard as "sociological" theories, concepts, methods, empirical findings, and public policies) are produced and disseminated, but which is otherwise characterized by many of the same structural and dynamic features that other social fields (political, economic, philosophical, etc.) exhibit -- making due allowance for each field's particular focus and its internal organization, composition, practices, and practitioners in different times and places. Further (and again like George), I see the discipline of sociology as a site with porous boundaries, and operating, therefore, in relation to other fields, intellectual and not, as well as in relation to (facilitating and constraining) macro-level political, economic, and other factors, plus the biographies of sociological writers. (I use the Boudieusian word "fields" here mainly because the expression has become so familiar and well theorized. But "networks," as that term is used by the great sociologist and historian of sociology Randy Collins when he discusses intellectual life, would do as well, as would a number of other words.)

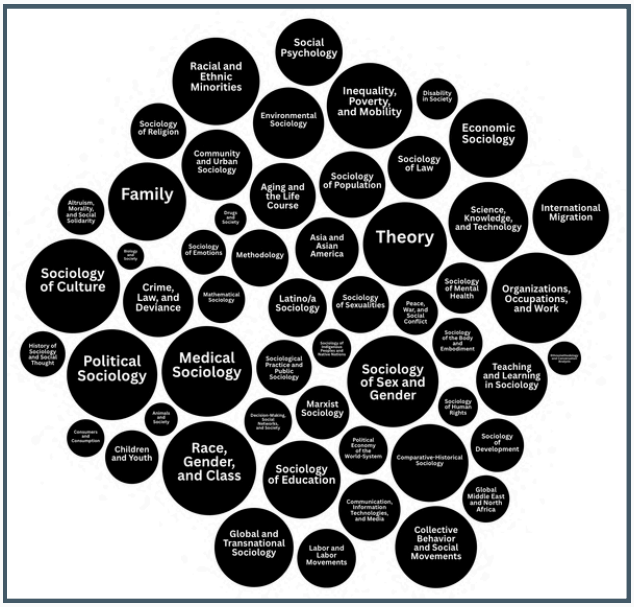
What this overall conception of the discipline of sociology means, in terms of the ecosystem of sociology today, is that (as a specialty area) the "history of sociology and social thought" is – and should be, in significant part -- the analysis of the origins and development, across time and space, of a larger disciplinary field (sociology) that produces and disseminates sociological ideas and texts, as these are constituted and interpreted in historical context. This viewpoint of the "history of sociology" removes the specialty from the sidelines and essentially places it on par with substantive specialty areas where sociologists study the political field, the economic field, the field of philosophy, and so on. Moreover, this viewpoint and opens the door to a comparative analysis of fields, because studying the history of sociology and social thought through a field-lens uncovers meso-level processes – like reputation-building – that, despite their importance, often go unnoticed in the study of other fields, and vice versa.

But let me now turn to the second juncture where studying the history of sociology and social thought fits (and should fit) into the ecosystem of the wider field of sociology. This juncture has to do with the contribution that knowledge of history of sociology and social thought can make to reflexivity throughout our discipline more broadly – a point George's interview develops at some length. Just as individuals better understand themselves and what they are doing – or might be doing instead -- when they reflect on the genealogy and trajectory of their personal biographies, so research on the history of sociology enables sociologists to reflect on and thus take better stock of their own practices as scholars.

And in this respect it useful to realize that reflexivity is a practice that can take many forms. Most generally, as in most historical research, history teaches that what exists and is presumed to hold at any one point in time is not pregiven and permanent, but mutable across time and space. In regard to sociology, this fact amounts (among other things) to recognizing that the discipline's theories, methods, concepts, and empirical findings – indeed, even the notion of "sociology" itself – are the products of history: that what and who the discipline includes come with exclusions; that topics and concepts that were once invisible have gained visibility; that concepts that were once salient have been accidentally forgotten or purposely abandoned; that (as Andy Abbott has shown) a lot of sociological scholarship consists, unknowingly to its practitioners, of reinventing old theoretical wheels under new names, rather than as movement in novel directions; that a great deal of research revolves around debates that have long since become timeworn strawmen; and that

sociology's practitioners and their audiences differ demographically from what they were in the past.

Some of these observations pertain to sociology as a whole (Sociology capitalized); but (as I've argued in a previous issue of this newsletter) Sociology is largely an amalgam of more delimited sociological specialties, such that some of these different forms of reflexivity may be more relevant in some specialties than in others. Then, too, the historian of sociology needs to be modest, for some sociologists whose work shows great historical reflexivity are not label-bearing "historians of sociology and social thought" but researchers in other subfields, though their contributions to our own subfield have been substantial nonetheless. (Consider the work of sociologists who study gender, race, class, sexuality, intersectionality, law and medicine, the life course, economic sociology, and historical sociology.) But this complication does not alter the fact that, explicitly or implicitly, cultivating historical reflexivity about sociological subfields is increasing becoming, for the good, a part of the ecosystem of Sociology and various sociologies within it.



Visualization of ASA sections by membership counts, as of April 1st, 2026. Created with Flourish.

JM: Yeah, exactly. This newsletter is aimed at people at very different places in the career trajectory, from undergraduates to folks that are emeritus. I'm just curious for the young scholar, whether someone in graduate school or a newly minted Assistant Professor, what advice would you have for a young scholar who wants to study the history of social thought in their research today?

Here I think I can give a less convoluted answer than I did to your previous question. I feel strongly that, however interested a young sociologist is in the history of sociology or the history of social thought, he or she or they should pursue that interest in conjunction with a genuine interest in one or more other specialty area(s) of research.

I say this because it would be unusual to find a sociology department that had an opening for someone interested, more or less exclusively, in studying the history of sociology and social thought (and, consequently, able and willing to teach sociological theory). That's true not only today, but it has always been true. I don't necessarily mean that as a critical comment. But the hard fact is the most job openings in sociology (and the other social sciences) state: "We want to hire someone who studies and teaches this, this, this and this" – i.e., someone who works in more than one specialty area. This applies not only to scholars interested in the history of sociology, but across the board; few deans can afford to hire a scholar wedded to only one disciplinary subarea – let alone a specialty perceived, as the history of sociology typically is, as esoteric.

In this respect, I myself was fortunate. As I mentioned, as a grad student (and ever since) I have had an interest not only in sociological theory and its historical development, but also in the workings of educational institutions, primary, secondary, and graduate-level – an interest that has carried over into my research on the history of sociology. So although teaching classical theory courses was what my department mainly expected

of me, I was also in a position to advise grad students interested in the sociology of education, as well as in the sociology of science, a specialty area that, in due course, led me to develop an interest in Science Studies, as the field was taking off in the 1980s.

But my own case was not unique. I've observed cases like it many times over the years. So, to repeat myself, I think it's extremely important for junior (as well as senior) historians of sociology and social thought to have other substantive areas which they're really committed to studying. As well, in the best scenario, these other substantive areas would overlap with the areas they wish to research as historians of sociology and social thought.

JM: Let's talk a little bit about the history of science studies and how sociology is related to that. Because discussions I hear about sociology tend to think its approaches can be quite parochial. But actually, there's been quite a lot of rich work studying the kind of scientific procedure from a sociological perspective, I just wonder if you could, you know, kind of tell some readers who might not know about that a little bit.

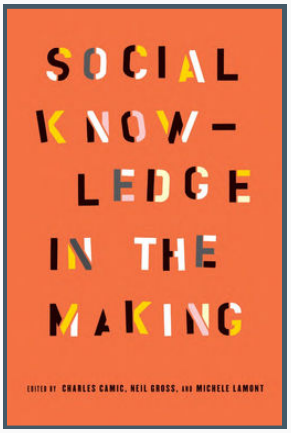
Now I'm going to get a little convoluted again, because there are several fields and subfields involved in your question.

To compress a long story: Science Studies as an semi-independent field emerged as such in the work of sociologist of science Robert Merton (who worn many other hats as well) and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn. Despite their different disciplinary locations, the two scholars shared an interest in wresting the study of the history of science from the hands of old-fashioned, teleological and asociological views of the content and historical development of the natural sciences and, instead, to offer historically-researched, sociologically-informed studies of the subject. Taken together, the work of Merton and Kuhn inspired the growth of the subfield of the sociology of science, plus fresh approaches to scholarship in the history of science and the philosophy of science – as carried out also by anthropologists, historians of medicine, and scholars in such diverse fields as communications, economics, political science, law, and environmental studies. By the 1990s this interdisciplinary field of Science Studies was an intellectual goldmine, rich in novel theories, concepts, and unexpected empirical findings. To be sure, there were inevitable quarrels over these issues among the field's members; but these scholars were nevertheless united by an abiding interest in the natural sciences and, thus, in the complex social processes involved in the production of scientific knowledge in laboratories and other local research sites, in the rhetoric of scientific writings, in how scientific institutions are structured and funded, in how scientists are trained, and in the uses of natural-scientific knowledge "outside" the domain of the sciences, especially its mobilization in the realm of social policy – in short, in diverse scientific "practices," as they vary across time and space.

Largely left out of this consortium (by choice and/or exclusion), however, were historians of sociology and social thought, whose primary interests, obviously, were not in the natural sciences, but in practices within the social sciences. (A caveat: sociologists of science were not left out of the consortium). Because of this split in focus, a fundamental asymmetry arose. For while historians of sociology and social thought were often open to the theories, concepts, etc. of scholars who studied the natural sciences, a similar openness did not hold in reverse – despite the fact that Science Studies, as it was (and is) practiced, often centered (and centers) around the social dimensions of the natural sciences. (The only slight exception to this asymmetry is the more recent inclusion in Science Studies of research on the field of economics, an inclusion I attribute to the fact that economics so often postures as a natural science.)

I'm not sure why this stubborn difference took hold. My guess is that, whereas Science Studies aims to demonstrate that, counterintuitively, the study of nature entails social practices – e.g., that the construction of "facts about nature" involves the "social construction" of those "facts" – for a scholar to say that the construction of "social facts" involves their social construction is too obvious to even bother saying. This attitude stops sociologists of science who identify with Science Studies from interrogating the reach of their theories and concepts, and it prevents them as well from taking account in their research of theories and concepts that, although these tools may first come to light when studying the history of sociology, they have analogues in the study of the natural science. (Consider the concept of "predecessor selection," as revealed by studying Talcott Parsons's early work).

Let me elaborate. As you may or may not know, several years ago, Michelle Lamont, Neil Gross, and I brought out an edited volume where leading scholars from different social sciences examined these fields for the purpose of comparing and contrasting the knowledge practices of natural scientists (as studied by Science Studies) with the social practices involved in knowledge-making in social science disciplines, present and past. But, with their singular focus on the natural sciences, Science Studies scholars showed little interest in this research and in any reflexive back-and-forth comparative discussion.



Book cover: Social Knowledge in the Making. Edited by Charles Camic, Neil Gross, and Michèle Lamont. Published 2011

So my advice to historians of sociology and social thought is to beware: Stay familiar with the valuable work of Science Studies scholars and regularly reflect on how this work may apply outside of the natural sciences, but don't expect much in the way of a warm welcome or intellectual reciprocity. And don't, for now at least, regard Science Studies as the main audience that your work as historians of sociology should be targeting. That said, however, sociological historians of sociology and social thought can often put to considerable use much of the work that Science Studies scholars have produced.

JM: Absolutely. Yeah, and then, just to round out, what are you working on now? And is there anything else you'd like to say?

I guess I would bring out that, despite my issues with how scholars who study the history of sociology and social thought have sometimes carried out their research, and my concerns about how scholars outside the subfield sometimes misunderstand or simply ignored its contributions, I regard myself as very lucky to have gotten to spend much of my career working in the area – and to find myself in sociology departments that have been encouraging and receptive of my research.

Relatedly, I've been very fortunate that working in the subfield has enabled me to range farther and wider than I ever imagined. Throughout this interview, I've referred to the history of sociology and social thought as a specialty subfields within the larger field of sociology – and so it is. It is, however, one the few subfields where a specialist has the opportunity to simultaneously be a kind of generalist. Most sociologists, as I have said, wisely situate themselves in more than one subfield and, for this reason, carry out research on more than one topic. Even so, few of these specialists would regard themselves or be regarded as generalists. But the historian of sociology inherently has more latitude: she, he, or they can (if they chose) study the history of the discipline as a whole (Sociology,

with a capital S) and/or they can study multiple subfields located inside as well as outside the discipline.

To take a random example, I myself (as I mentioned) have done research on Parsons's early theoretical work, the early development of statistical methods throughout the social sciences in the U.S., the role sociologists played in policy debates during the Depression and New Deal, changing sociological views of the family, and the relationship between sociology and the field of Science Studies. I've also had the opportunity to study Max Weber's theoretical views on social action and his methodological views on ideal types, the different conceptions that early American sociologists had of the discipline of "sociology" itself, and, more recently, the early career of Thorstein Veblen as an economist and proto-sociologist. Along the way, I've needed to study not only Sociology proper, but also 18th and 19th century European philosophy and psychology, as well as a wide range of economic theories – plus the evolution of higher educational institutions in Europe and the US. I offer this list not as an effort to summarize my cv., but to signal the large space that the historian of sociology and social thought has to roam without committing to the study of a more delimited list of specialized topics: to be, if you will, a generalist in the specialist clothing of the subfield of the history of sociology and social thought. This is one of the reasons the subfield has been fun for me over the years.

And I'm looking forward to more fun in the future. At the moment, the main project I'm tooling up for and may do, in conjunction with my dear colleague Aldon Morris, is a project on the early development of W.E.B. Du Bois's ideas about race, class, and colonialism. For whereas most biographical accounts of Du Bois begin when he was, to a significant degree, already mature intellectually, these same accounts compress into 2-3 pages what came before during roughly the first two and a half decades of his life, especially during his three years at Fisk University, his four years at Harvard, and his two years at the University of Heidelberg, as if very little of consequence happened to him at these institutions to furnish (in negative and, occasionally, in positive ways) some of the ideas about race, class, and colonialism that he subsequently advanced.

But I don't think this intellectual-biographical approach is the correct one to take. And, as I said, Aldon Morris and I are trying to think through and perhaps collaborate on a project that would dig into what really went on at these educational institutions, where Du Bois wasn't just sitting bored in classrooms but actively learning about the state of contemporary knowledge on topics that he later engaged.

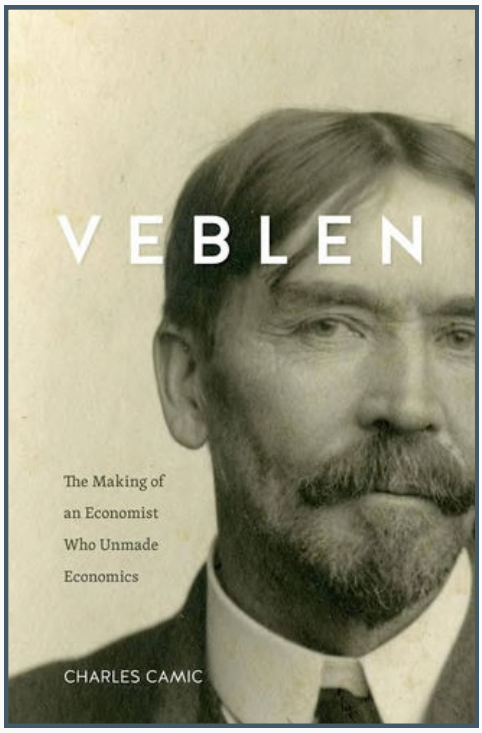
Another project that I'm contemplating, and which slightly overlaps with the research on Du Bois, concerns the impact on the emerging American social sciences of the classics, not in the sense of our disciplinary classics from the 19th and early 20th centuries (i.e., the work of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim), but the classics of antiquity. If we examine the education of the social thinkers who were especially formative of sociological thought and practice, we find that all of them – including Durkheim, Weber, and Du Bois -- had classical educations, inasmuch as the institutions where they studied often required 2-3 years of Latin and Greek as languages and as the birthplace of "civilization." There was an ancient canon, and the founding generations of sociologists were all steeped in it – despite many differences otherwise in their educational trajectories and subsequent ideas.

This fact is interesting for all sorts of reasons, one of which goes to the heart of my tentative argument (still to be documented by historical research) that the circumstance that the founding figures – and those who came after them in the early 20th century -- were all historically- and comparatively- oriented has a lot to do with their classical training. If this proposition is correct, then

the standard critique of discipline of sociology, which emerged in the 1940s (and is still reiterated in some quarters), that faults the discipline at large for treating all societies as essentially similar and undergoing similar changes, to the neglect of historical and comparative analysis, is a critique that is historically off the mark. For Durkheim, Weber, Du Bois and many of their sociological contemporaries knew better; they knew from their study of the classics that not all societies were in the same boat, that there were fundamental differences between societies of the 19th century and those in another world which was far off in the past, and which sociologists couldn't overlook. However – and this is the other part of my tentative argument – as the requirement to study the ancient classics was increasingly dropped from the curriculum of more and more American colleges, the previously ingrained historical-comparative sensibilities of early generations of sociologists did atrophy, until the uneven return of those sensibilities in the last four decades, including through the study of the history of sociology and social thought.

JM: Thank you so much.

And thank you, John, for this reflexive conversation, which I've enjoyed.



Book cover: Veblen: The Making of an Economist who Unmade Economics. Published 2020.

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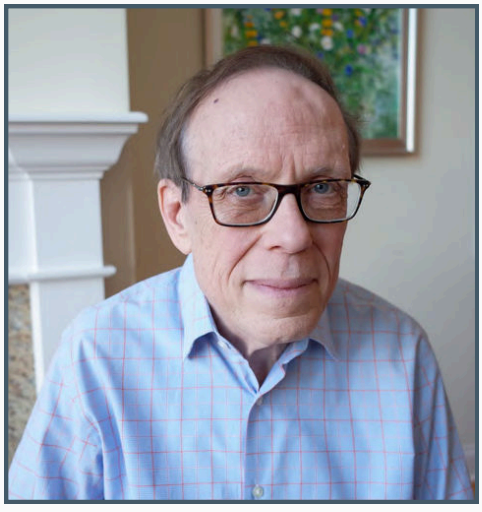

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ISSUE 34 · APRIL 2026

TIMELINES

Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's
History of Sociology and Social Thought Section

Thank you for reading!

Interested in contributing to the next issue of Timelines?

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