

## Popularizing Social Science: Sociological Episodes\*

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### Introduction

During the twentieth century the social sciences have become an integral (and indispensable) part of public policy and public discussion. This does not mean that social scientists from outside are brought into the public policy forum on every occasion that a policy question arises, but that the knowledge, assumptions, and the conclusions of social scientists are generally taken into account by policy makers, many of whom have been trained in the social sciences. The most evident indication of this fact today is the ubiquitous presence of economists throughout the federal government, the presence of an economist as head of the Federal Reserve Bank, and the dozens of economists employed by the Secretary of the Treasury's Office. Likewise there are many others trained in the social sciences--economics, political science, and sociology -- as well as statisticians who serve in the Labor Department, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Bureau of the Census, and similar social research agencies run by the federal government. Sociologists, psychologists and economists are continually doing studies for the Department of Education, the National Institute of Health and other federal agencies. Individuals with training in the social sciences are found in the agencies, offices, and departments of state and local government as well. This does not mean that the latest findings of social research always take pride of place in policy discussions, but that they are an integral part of that discussion.

As early as the 1930's the social sciences were called upon to study and elucidate the state of the nation's health -- social, economic, and medical. This occurred because of the great stock market crash of 1929 and the resultant economic depression. President Hoover quickly moved to enlist social scientists to "survey" the country and diagnose its ailments. This was duly done by a team of social scientists under the direction of the Chicago sociologist, William F. Ogburn.<sup>i[1]</sup> I put *survey* in quotation marks because, at the time that President Herbert Hoover enlisted this team, he and others around him, could only think of "surveying" as a physical operation designed to map the geography of the country. Now, of course, it is much more widely understood that a social survey entails a carefully worded questionnaire administered to an equally carefully selected sample of respondents who represent a larger population. Such surveys are now routinely employed to investigate a whole range of economic and marketing questions, political support, and perhaps more dramatically, medical questions that are related to the (uneven) social distribution of illness, unhealthy eating habits, life styles, and toxic substances in the environment. Today barely a day goes by without a reminder of the ongoing work of pollsters taking the national pulse through the administration of national polls measuring the state of public sentiment.

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In this essay I shall outline the broad range of topics that sociologists have investigated, the kinds of intellectuals who have attempted to bring the knowledge of these investigations to public awareness, and the kinds of forums in which these discussions have been carried on. Attention will also be given to popularized sociological studies and those who have written them. Anecdotal evidence often suggests that such popularizing efforts go unrewarded, but I find meager support for such a conclusion. The sociological profession at the moment appears to be moving in a direction that attempts to encourage and reward those who contribute to public understanding of the sociological enterprise.

### **The Spectrum of Social Scientific Discourse**

Social science discourse is far broader than the scope of topics that can be investigated through the techniques of survey analysis. Whatever the topic, sociologists seek to obtain what they consider solid evidence to support the empirical generalizations that they make about the patterns of social life. This requires that, whatever the subject at hand, the sociologist must make an effort to get something approximating a sample of the behavior in question. Good journalists know this technique well, but rarely does a newspaper reader have any idea how the reporter selected the individuals interviewed in his or her report. The important point is that sociologists are keenly aware that whatever the behavior in question is, you cannot generalize on the basis of the knowledge of your next door neighbor. That means that if you are an Anglo-European academic and happen to have an African-American medical researcher as a next door neighbor, you would be well advised not to make generalizations about African-Americans on the basis of your neighbor's conduct. A well-trained sociologist would know not only that African-Americans are a tiny proportion of physicians, a small portion of affluent and highly educated Americans, but also a group that has its own distinctive political, religious, and economic preferences. Likewise, there are significant differences between Black Americans reared in the South and those reared elsewhere.

Given the complexity of social life, most sociologists do not undertake their own empirical inquiries through straight forward sampling. In the general run of things, the best they can do is piece together, "hermeneutically," the bits and pieces of social research that are relevant to their chosen topic. Furthermore, sociologists often engage in uncovering what some would call hidden and disruptive data, that is, data about the lives and social practices of individuals that, if revealed, would point to the gap between appearance and reality, the gap between publicly acclaimed values and actual practices.<sup>ii[2]</sup> In some cases this would severely discredit those about whom the behavior reports. Virtually every aspect of social life harbors such information but one thinks in particular of police behavior and all undercover operatives, the revelations confessed to priests, but also many aspects of human behavior within bureaucracies and business organizations, not to mention the intimacies of marriages and families. Getting access to such behavior generally has to be negotiated, and for all practical purposes, gathering an approximately random sample is impossible. But both the survey research and the interpretative studies (whether based on "participant observation" or historical data) must be subjected to peer review in order to get published in respected journals and by reputable presses. In any event, it should be apparent that sociology by its very nature routinely studies groups and activities that many would consider off limits. Religious

groups (as well as the police and other law enforcement agencies) are particularly sensitive to revelations about the disparity between actual social practices and professed ideals. Accordingly, "going public" with data of this sort poses peculiar problems for social scientists, and extreme tension arises if the vehicle of publication should be some sort of "popular" venue that might attempt to sensationalize the results.

When we turn to the realm of "popular discourse" in the social sciences, it seems likely that we are talking about a range of discourse that is at once *broader* and *narrower* than what takes place in academia. That is to say, it is narrower in the sense that it represents a very small proportion of all academic writing. Yet that tiny slice of academic writing gets projected into the broader audience of public discourse which is represented either by "best sellerhood" or by presentation in the popular media of newspapers and/or radio and TV talk shows. Academics generally feel that such forums are rather lowbrow and lacking in substance, which may be true. Nevertheless, in recent years academics have been increasingly called upon to speak to local, regional, and national audiences on such topics as crime, affirmative action, religious values and community life, work and its relationship to family stress, and a great variety of other topics.

For example, since the mid 1980's, the American Sociological Association's internal news publication, *Footnotes*, has regularly published a column called "Sociologists in the News." This column carries brief descriptions of newsworthy activities of sociologists that have been featured in local, regional and national news media. These include editorials and Op-Ed pieces published in newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and regional newspapers and magazines as well. They also include interviews with sociologists reported in these media, panel discussions that included sociologists, and feature stories drawing upon the work of sociologists, with or without comments by the sociologists involved. Such stories include the appearance of sociologists on radio and TV talk shows, on CNN, on NPR's Talk of the Nation, Larry King Live, The Today Show, CNN Future Watch, CrossFire, and so. The material covered in the editorials or interviews with sociologists include such topics as abortion, child rearing practices, changing family patterns, divorce and marriage, gender issues, teenage suicide, "girl culture," changing sexual patterns, crime and serial killers, healthcare patterns, immigration patterns and policy, population growth, the impact of gambling on local communities, affirmative action, cross-racial dating as well as adoption, paramilitary groups, philanthropy patterns, race and intelligence, entrepreneurship patterns among immigrants and natives, the role of religion in contemporary society, the sociological context of the Challenger explosion, telecommuting, the welfare system, and many other topics. Clearly this represents a formidable range of topics about which the American public wishes to have informed opinions, and for which they look to sociologists. In 1997 the number of such items posted in *Footnotes* reached well over 200.<sup>iii[3]</sup>

In many of these cases, it might be said that an audience "came looking for" an "expert" who was perceived to have published important research on the question at hand. The question of adequate presentation of specialized material then becomes one of standards within journalism which vary according to the journalists involved as well as the standards of the news organization represented.

However, some academics do go looking for the public. Scholars attached to research centers often publish reports (accompanied by press releases) with an eye to

shaping discourse on both local and national issues. The famous "Coleman Report" by the late James Coleman, had a major impact on discussions about the relative influence of public funding, parental values and income, and religious versus public school education.<sup>iv[4]</sup> It was funded by the U.S. Department of Education but Coleman, of course, was responsible for defending the claims of the report. Likewise in cases where a sociologist wrote an editorial or Op-Ed piece, the individual scholar appears to have chosen to engage in the broader public discourse.

Apart from these "interest stories," the work of sociologists frequently come to public attention because they deal with major questions of public policy on a national scale. For example, due to his work in the subfield called the Sociology of the Military, the Northwestern University sociologist Charles Moskos was called upon by the Clinton Administration to help formulate a policy for integrating gays into the military. This gave rise to the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, a policy both hailed and reviled by the gay community. Consequently Professor Moskos was invited to appear on the National Public Radio show, "Talk of the Nation." A national audience such as that, moderated by a highly intelligent and sophisticated staff such as National Public Radio enjoys, is surely more than an occasion for lowbrow emoting. It represents one of the rare occasions when a highly informed social scientist is called upon to face the public, in order to explain his views, and generally to present the public with a more complex picture of social life, and the means by which social scientists come to understand it.

For such work as this on the military and his involvement in public policy discussions, Moskos was awarded the Public Understanding of Sociology Award by the American Sociological Association in 1997. The very existence of this award, established only in 1997, signifies somewhat belatedly, that American sociologists now fully recognize the need to speak directly to the public about sociology's mission and its unique insights into social and cultural processes.

Another example of a sociologist who published significant research on a major social issue is that of the second (1998) recipient of The Public Understanding of Sociology Award: William Julius Wilson. He was granted the award for his many contributions to the public understanding of race relations and the socioeconomic conditions of African-Americans in the United States. Two of his books, *the Declining Significance of Race* (1979) and the *Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) appeared on Herbert Gans' s list of best-sellers in sociology.<sup>v[5]</sup>

A third example of work by an American sociologist, but who drew more upon historical materials than quantitative studies, is that of the Princeton sociologist Paul Starr, author of *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*.<sup>vi[6]</sup> During the first Clinton Administration, Starr was recruited by President Clinton to work on reforming the national health care system-- something that proved to be politically impossible during Clinton's first term in office. Paul Starr's work on the transformation of American medicine (from mid 19th century to the late 20th century) is also notable for its status as a popular best seller, in the range of 100,000 to 150,000 copies sold. And though he was passed over for tenure at Harvard in the early 1980's, he was quickly snatched up by Princeton.

In these three cases we have examples of individuals whose work was perceived to have important public policy implications, and hence had major impacts on public policy discussions. Apart from the usual debates that academics carry on, the work of all

three of these examples is highly regarded and represents the best of its kind. And clearly the professional careers of these individuals were enhanced by their efforts to reach broader audiences and by the consequent recognition that their work gained. Perhaps this is most noticeable in the case of Wilson who, already located at a top tier university, was lured from the University of Chicago to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government (in 1996), where he was expected to continue discussing policy questions and to establish a new program of research. In brief, one aspect of popular discourse in the social sciences is the sort of *popular* that brings an author and his or her writings to public attention. Wilson has recently stated publicly that he intentionally endeavored to write in a style that would appeal to a broader audience, and his strategy worked.<sup>vii[7]</sup> At the same time, his contributions, like those of Moskos, were formally rewarded by the profession--including the Presidency of the American Sociological Association.

### **Public Intellectuals, Popularizers, and Journalists**

Popularizing sociology (and the other social sciences) is a complicated enterprise. On the one hand, during the last half century, a number of sociologists and intellectuals have made their way onto the public scene under the heading of "public intellectuals." Individuals who have been so designated over the years include Daniel Bell, David Riesman, Dwight MacDonal, Seymour Martin Lipset, John Kenneth Galbraith, Betty Friedan, Jane Jacobs, and Robert Reich (who served as a Secretary of Labor in the first Clinton Administration). It should be noted, however, that when Russell Jacoby coined this term, "public intellectual" in 1980's, he lamented the decline of such "writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience."<sup>viii[8]</sup> He was of the opinion that "a public that reads serious books, magazines, and newspapers has dwindled," and that "younger intellectuals no longer need or want a larger public." (p. 6)

But such a sentiment is probably a bit pessimistic. For example, a writer for the *Wilson Quarterly* refers easily to Cornel West, Stanley Fish, Camille Paglia, William Bennett, and Dinesh D'Sousa as the "most public of the new intellectuals."<sup>ix[9]</sup> In a word, intellectuals with verve who feel aggrieved at various trends in public practice and public sentiment are still very much with us. But whether or not sociologists (and other social scientists) should number more conspicuously among them is another question.

If we reflect back on the list of topics that sociologists are now called upon to discuss in the news media that I listed above, it is evident that no single individual can be expected to speak with authority on such a broad range of topics. And one should note that my list above barely mentioned the social implications of the personal computer and the WEB, and contained no references to all the great complications of globalization, and the need to be informed about various non-Western cultures and civilization with whom we now have intense interactions. Hence, the "public intellectual" of the middle part of this century who was thought capable of addressing the whole range of important social questions is doomed to be confined to a far narrower range of issues currently in discussion. This is due to the vastly expanded complexity of modern life. Such individuals would not be expected to be expert on the subject of information technology and its social implications, nor would he or she be expected to know the major social trends of Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, India, China, and other parts of Asia.

But in contrast to those well established intellectuals, usually with university affiliations, there is a class of writers who have written popular books about American

society but who either have not been formally trained in sociology through the doctorate, or if they have, found a niche outside the academy, usually in journalism. By far the most significant writer of this sort from the late 1950's to the late '80's, was Vance Packard, famous for *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), *Status Seekers* (1959), and *Pyramid Climbers* (1962), among others. Through the publication of these books, Packard probably had more influence on the lay public regarding the social dimensions of American society than any other writer or sociologist.<sup>x[10]</sup> Only David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, published in 1950, seems to have had such longevity and influence. Packard's books frequently appeared on best seller lists and young scholars entering college or taking up graduate study in the 1960's were routinely shocked to find that Packard's works were considered beneath respectable discussion in many classrooms. Packard had not been fully trained in sociology but earned a Master's degree in journalism at Columbia, and from there embarked upon a career in journalism. Through the resourceful use of his talents as a writer and his unique insights into American society, he contributed significantly to public understanding of a whole range of topics typically studied by academic sociologists: family and childrearing, sexual patterns, the media, consumerism and wastefulness, isolation and loneliness, and the super rich. But Packard's writings generally displayed none of the more abstract theorizing that social scientists look for in sociological writings. In addition, there was a clash of values represented by Packard's enthusiastic embrace of the "producer" values of middle America versus those of a more urban, literary, and eastern culture, usually identified with New York intellectuals and their leftist commitments. As a result, Packard's writings tended to be disparaged by professional sociologists and public intellectuals.

For example, the sociologist William Petersen "questioned the idealization of an earlier day, as well as the 'doleful picture of America's class system' [and] asserted that Packard combined 'a monumental arrogance with an obsequious deference to authority and money.'<sup>xi[11]</sup> Equally dismissive was Lewis Coser's claim that Packard "frightened 'the jaded reader,' then aroused his 'guilt and anxiety,' and finally reassured him with homilies about the possibilities of individual happiness."<sup>xii[12]</sup>

In a word the writers aiming to popularize the social sciences, as with the natural sciences, are often located outside the academy. Because of their differences in training, affiliation, and value commitments, they occasionally run into opposition from within the academy. But it would be excessive to say that their writings have been excluded from the reading lists of professors. Even if Packard's *Status Seekers* and his other books were criticized by the gate-keeping elite of the profession, his books did appear on many lists of supplementary and recommended reading.

There are other examples of writers who took up clearly demarcated sociological problems, though they were not trained in the discipline per se. For example, Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1963) was not only highly regarded within the academy, but helped to spark the "war on poverty" of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. In the area of media and technology studies, the work of Marshall McLuhan,<sup>xiii[13]</sup> despite its limitations due to his training in the humanities, was clearly ahead of his time in taking up many important issues. Unfortunately McLuhan was so eclectic that he served mainly to alert the literate public to an important set of social issues, not to present a coherent methodology or framework for studying them.

Similarly, in the late 1960's, Theodore Roszak, another eclectic humanistic writer, published a book about the changing commitments of youth in the U.S. under the title, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969). Here again, an insightful and provocative writer brought to public attention a set of issues that had not been sufficiently addressed within the academy, but the work was absent any general theoretical or methodological insights that might contribute to the process of developing a science of social and cultural process. Nor was it clear that his description of youthful behavior and commitments were adequate as an ethnographic record.

A more recent example of an outsider fully conversant with sociological standards and expectations, is Barbara Ehrenreich's, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*.<sup>xiv[14]</sup> Published in 1989, it was an interesting attempt to describe changing self-perceptions among middle class Americans since the 1960's. It was treated with respectful consideration by professional sociologists, some even greeted it by positive comparison (now seen as exaggerated) with David Riesman's classic, *The Lonely Crowd*. Yet even in this genre of widely read books about American society, recent sociologists have made their mark. For example, the sociologist Todd Gitlin's book, *The Sixties*,<sup>xv[15]</sup> appears in all the bookstores and has sold between seventy-five and 100,000 copies. Likewise Robert Bellah and associates published a study of contemporary America culture which is deeply indebted to the intellectual tradition of Alex de Tocqueville, called *Habits of the Heart*.<sup>xvi[16]</sup> It has sold nearly a half million copies.

### **Social Science "Journalism"**

Efforts to bridge the gap between specialized social scientists and an educated lay public was initiated in the early 1960's. This was done by a group of social scientists associated with Irving Louis Horowitz, then at the University of Washington, St Louis. With the launching of *transaction/Society* (later to be renamed *Society*), a new kind of social science magazine was launched that allowed and encouraged social scientists-- sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, and economists-- to address an educated public on major issues of the day.

The editorial policy encouraged short articles, stripped of footnotes and other arcana of professional journals, but grounded in good social science method and solid theoretical understandings. Authors were enjoined to present a "fair statement of a problem or issue that needed public attention"<sup>xvii[17]</sup> in short compass. Over the years, authors in this periodical addressed a very broad set of social issues, similar to the list of topics previously mentioned, and yet sometimes going even further. Not only were all the issues of cultural change, democracy, and political cleavage dealt with across the spectrum, but international issues, developments in Asia, Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, the merits of psychiatry, "repressed memories," feminism, affirmative action, etc., all were treated with seriousness in a manner accessible to a broad educated public. Furthermore, *Society* avoided all the doctrinal, politically correct, formulas of the day. The appearance of this vehicle of popular intellectual discussion was soon followed by *Psychology Today*, that had a similar format but a narrower focus on the work of psychologists. Thus the range of popularizing vehicles for the social sciences today are as broad as the media themselves -- electronic and print-- and, at least in sociology, a concerted effort has been made to reach broader audience through these venues.

In the case of a periodical such as *Society* no effort is made to keep abreast of the fast pace of daily news stories. Instead, bi-monthly issues are devoted to broad topics, while other contributors are encouraged to present the results of their latest findings in an idiom that is accessible to a broad educated public. This is in contrast to the editorial columns of newspapers that attempt to keep abreast of the latest (presumed topical) stories breaking in Washington or other news centers. Scholars who feel a greater urgency to make their contribution to public dialogue, or who see a unique opportunity to contribute to a headline-making story, naturally opt for the editorial pages of their favorite local or national newspaper. But here again the range of specialized language is further restricted from what can be used in *Society*, or a similar publication. Thus “journalism” of this sort stands close to “science reporting” that serves as a bridge for general audiences to the more arcane publications typical of the discipline such as the *American Journal of Sociology* or the *American Sociological Review*. But there is a fundamental difference between this kind of writing and that which appears in newspapers and the weekly or monthly magazines. It has to do with the sociological method. But first let us consider aspects of value conflict that arise in the sciences.

### **Science, Social Science and Value Conflicts**

In the Fall of 1997 an editorial appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* bearing the title, "Science Has Spoken: Global Warming is a Myth." (WSJ Dec. 4, 1997). It was authored by two chemists at the Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine, who purported to inform the public that global warming is a myth and that the policy recommendations to reduce noxious emissions were frequently misguided. Since the appearance of that editorial the evidence has dramatically shifted toward the original global warming hypothesis.

I cite this example to suggest several things. First the value commitments of natural scientists often get in the way of scientific objectivity, just as they do in the social sciences. It is apparent that those who view the implications of global warming from an economic point of view are inclined to believe that the economic costs of attempting to deal with global emissions through public policy will be greater than the benefits. Hence those who adopt a laissez faire view regarding open markets and free enterprise may be inclined, in a situation of some evidentiary ambiguity, to doubt the evidence supporting the thesis of global warming. However, we should be reminded that at any moment in time the experimental evidence in favor (or opposed) to a particular theory may be insufficient to draw a conclusive judgment.

In the social sciences it is rare to find unequivocal evidence on major policy questions. In addition, social formations, distributions of ethnic groups and distributions of education or income amongst them, can change relatively quickly, making public recommendations obsolete. In addition to that, sociological studies often uncover, as noted earlier, patterns of behavior that, if revealed would discredit those who practice them because they point to a discrepancy between official ideologies and everyday practice. When that occurs, the social scientist understandably experiences anxiety and some tension with those groups or individuals whose discrepant behavior his study reveals. Hence it must be recognized that a substantial proportion of the research undertaken by sociologists may be perceived to be threatening to the status quo. This can



easily lead to the polarizing of public discourse, and even the cutting off of research possibilities.

In this context, many ethical and professional decisions must be made, and one of them is whether to publish or not to publish the findings. Likewise, the researcher must decide whether to publish in strictly professional journals, where evidentiary standards are higher, or whether to seek a broader forum where the canons of evidence maybe more relaxed. Choosing the latter forum will in all probability dilute the findings in the process of translating them into more easily understood idiom, and this will most probably be an occasion for further criticism. In addition, some of the material that sociologists gather, especially on offbeat occupations may have titillating qualities, and that is hardly the kind of thing that one wants to be known for as a professional. Much of what sociologists uncover has muckraking and debunking value as well as edifying. In the former case, some sociologists for the last several decades have viewed the investigation of those gaps between official ideology and routine practice as an occasion for inducing change. For example, in the 1960's the many clashes between police and demonstrators regarding civil rights, the war in Viet Nam, and other causes gave rise to a far greater concern about police brutality. As a result sociologists undertook studies of various police departments and gained first hand knowledge of the tensions and everyday experiences of police officers, including the use of unjustified force. But in very few cases did these sociological investigators set out to write a "popular" work that might attract wide readership-- though some did. It was generally judged to be the better part of valor to publish the findings in professional journals and academic presses rather than to risk sensationalizing what could become inflammatory information.

Here then, is the crucial point. When sociologists undertake to investigate any social setting, they generally pledge to protect the anonymity of their informants. If they were to "go public" in a manner that dramatized the situation and named names, they would both betray the confidence of their subjects and risk damaging the reputations of sociologists more generally, as well as close off future avenues of research. Here we see the fundamental difference between social science and journalism: social scientists seek to formulate durable generalizations that transcend the particular while protecting the anonymity of the subject. Journalists, on the other hand, seek to ground their work in the vividness of concrete description, seeking authenticity that relies on "naming names." So-called "investigative journalism," however, also has to adopt the rule of protecting sources, but otherwise locates its investigation in the particularity of the (usually public officials) involved.

An example of the kind of sociological study that required extreme protection of confidence is the study of the divorce process, called "uncoupling" by Diane Vaughan.<sup>xviii[18]</sup> In the process of investigating this topic, Vaughan interviewed 103 individuals about their experience before, during, and sometimes after divorce. In addition she sometimes interviewed both spouses. In the published study she wanted to use direct quotations to corroborate the generalizations that she made, but it was imperative that she not reveal the identity of the individuals being quoted, but instead identified them only by age and gender. This is quite different from the journalist who publishes names and identifiable sources and who is focused on the local community and its actors, not the larger social processes that are the subject of sociological investigation. Thus sociologists must take care to restrain their personal biases (such as favoring one

social or economic program over another in the process of evaluating them), and guard the confidence of those whom they come to know personally.

### **The “Two Cultures”?**

When C. P. Snow used the term “the two cultures,” he was referring to the wide gulf between the habits and attitudes of natural scientists and those of literary intellectuals. Each camp was set off the from other, with a strong antipathy to the classic and seminal writings of the other. Though valuing originality and creativity highly, each had a different conception of how those values were realized. The originality implied by the writing of a noteworthy sonnet or great novel was different from the originality implied by the discovery of a new scientific process, mechanism or entity. But neither the scientist not the literary scholar was apt to cross over from one set of disciplinary perspectives to the other, and unfortunately, the literary scholars seemed just as unlikely to read the works of great science as the scientists to read the classic works of literature. Moreover, C. P. snow characterized the scientists as “optimists” who believed that things could and should be improved, while the “traditional” intellectuals were said to be pessimistic and out of touch with both science and technology.<sup>xix[19]</sup>

If we transpose the terms of analysis to the present situation, it can be seen that scholars in the sciences -- and here I include social scientists as well as natural scientists-- consider the pursuit of “originality” the primary goal of their professional careers. For them, originality and absolute “priority” of discovery is the motivating value. Moreover, as Robert Merton noted four decades ago, it is precisely this conflict over originality and the assertion of priority of discovery that engages an inordinate amount of time of the research scientist.<sup>xx[20]</sup> It accounts for the various disputes in science engaged in by Galileo, Newton, Hook, Leibniz and many others who thought that they were being deprived of their rightful claim to scientific originality. For it is only through such recognition that rewards are given in science, including eponymy -- the naming of discoveries after the original discoverer.

It is easy to see, then, that the move to become a “popularizer” of scientific findings appears to take one out of the race to reap some of the greatest rewards that science has to offer. It is no good to be the second person to discover oxygen. Still, in the absence of a Nobel prize for work in sociology, the rewards of promotion, professional office, and at least, worldly esteem, may not be so unevenly distributed. For no one denies the need for enhanced public understanding of the principles, practices, and findings of modern science, and those who do succeed at the task are rewarded in the usual ways as well as by the new Award for Public Understanding of Sociology. Nevertheless, the cleavage is plain: “mere” popularizers are thought to be spreading the good word while those engaged in basic research create the word, or at least so it is imagined. But these are reasons for doubting this dichotomy. as we shall see shortly.

There is at the moment a new reassessment going on regarding the relationship between sociology, the general public, and the problems of writing for broader audiences. The first stirrings of this recent concern emerged with the publication of Herbert Gans’s study of popular best sellers in sociology reported in *Contemporary Sociology* in 1997, alluded to earlier. Gans’s study alerted sociologists to the fact that fewer than 60 titles written by sociologists had sold 50,000 copies or more since World War II. (The study intentionally excluded textbooks.) Though comparative evidence is mainly anecdotal, the

presumption is that the other social sciences -- economics and psychology in particular-- have done a better job with the task of reaching broader publics.

The second notable reflection of this growing concern about popular writing appeared in the form of a symposium on “Engaging Publics in Sociological Dialogue” published in the same journal in September of 1998. There, four sociologists who have written best sellers or who have been widely engaged in dialogue with the public, presented their points of view and urged their fellow sociologists to join the fray in the service of better public understanding of sociological perspectives. The writers were William Julius Wilson, Pepper Schwartz, George Ritzer, and Donna Gaines.<sup>xxi[21]</sup> Each of these writers urged more sociologists to take up popular issues by deliberately writing for general audiences. But at the same time, and probably apart from Wilson who has received an Award for distinguished contributions to public understanding, three of the writers think that such writing is not sufficiently appreciated or rewarded by the profession. The other point on which they seem to agree is that sociologists themselves deserve some blame for the present state of affairs in that they have not attempted in the past to write for more general audiences.

The third event in this reassessment is the decision made by the American Sociological Association to create a new journal devoted to “general perspectives” that would serve to encourage sociologists to write for general audiences in a lively manner.<sup>xxii[22]</sup> Still, the journal is intended to be addressed to “sociologists across subfields of interest,” and does not appear to be directed toward a broader audience than that already served by *Society*. Accordingly, it does not seem to address the central issue of writing for the general reading public.

Moreover, there is in sociology (and the other social sciences) an even sharper edge to this concern for popularizing sociological perspectives. It is a well recognized and highly commendable endeavor to write works for a general educated audience that presents the *fundamental principles* and insights of any science. However, in sociology the idea of “popularizing” some topic of inquiry often takes on the connotation of studying “popular culture,” which may have a very different resonance. For example, Donna Gaines enthusiastically includes in her topics of inquiry such things as “suburbia, tattoos, guns, cars, rock & roll, pornography, intergenerational love, TV talk shows, and spirituality.” It is difficult to see the study of these subjects as cutting edge sites for the advance of sociological theory. Yet they are important aspects of contemporary social life and it behooves us as sociologists to provide the sociological framework within which these forms of behavior can be more aptly examined and explained. Indeed, it is precisely through the application of the *sociological imagination* to these issues as sociologists that we can demonstrate the broad applicability of our generalizing science. It is through just such an exercise of the sociological imagination that those “personal troubles” can be seen --in the classic phrase coined by C. W. Mills-- “as public issues” tied to social structure.<sup>xxiii[23]</sup> This is no easy matter, for if it were, we would be flooded with just such studies receiving wide acclaim. In a word, the many topics listed earlier in this discussion and those on the list of Donna Gaines could be viewed as “strategic research sites:” that is, as social locations pregnant with “puzzling and anomalous data”<sup>xxiv[24]</sup> that need reconciliation with received understanding. On the other hand, there ought to be room also for the treatment of those topics that appear puzzling to the *lay public*, not just the sociologist. Here again the work of Donna Gaines illustrates the

possibilities. She was sent by the *Village Voice* in 1987 to investigate a teenage suicide pact involving four teenagers. Such an event is surely one that would jar the ordinary reader into a state of bewilderment, even if sociological purists might cast it aside as theoretically uninteresting. Needless to say, Gaines did find this assignment puzzling enough to plunge deeply into it as a sociologist. She studied the many dimensions of teenage culture in Bergenfield, New Jersey, the school system and administration, and found the pronounced cleavages between various subgroups of high school students (“jocks,” “burnouts” and others), and the underlying social tensions among the “upper poor” that led to the high suicide rate. Since the teens in question had indeed made a social pact, a sociological explanation was called for. When her study was published (following its submission as a doctoral dissertation) as a “trade book,” *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia’s Dead End Kids*<sup>xxv[25]</sup> attracted a large audience and enjoyed a laudable review in the major journal of review in sociology. The reviewer wrote that the book “demonstrates what journalists can gain from sociology and what sociologists could accomplish if we learned how to write.”<sup>xxvi[26]</sup> Later the book was reissued by the University of Chicago Press.

Moreover, the study of popular culture as manifested in high schools, for example, need not be remote from major theoretical issues in sociology as a social science. Gaines’ study of teen suicide, for example, can easily be related to the classic study of the social factors shaping rates of suicide by the great French sociologists Emile Durkheim (1864-1917). His classic 1897 study, *Suicide*<sup>xxvii[27]</sup> was a systematic *tour de force* demonstrating how a set of variations in structural arrangements (normlessness on the one hand and too rigid control on the other) served to induce higher or lower rates of suicide.<sup>xxviii[28]</sup> Durkheim’s formulation of the effects of anomie (normlessness) and social integration on social and cultural patterns became a major reference point for dozens of studies within the discipline over the next three quarter’s of a century. Consequently, though Gaines did not set out to test Durkheim’s theorems, her study’s focus on teenagers served to extend the analysis to a younger population. At the same time, it provides a very rich contextual analysis serving to further elucidate the processes leading to social self-destruction. Nor is it fair to say that such popularized accounts are devoid of originality.

For example, in her the study of the process of “uncoupling” that underlies divorce, mentioned earlier, Diane Vaughan developed a model of transition that seems to be intrinsic to the divorce process. Her work was based on interviews with 103 subjects -- divorced, in the process of divorcing, single, married, gay and straight, men, women, etc.-- and her systematic and meticulous analysis of the data seems to be an original contribution to our understanding of this process. Yet the book was written with such care and attention, such empathy, that it became a best seller on the Gans list, with over 200,000 copies sold. Any reader of the book at once catches the empathy of the author and appreciates the sociological integrity of the undertaking that she explains so well. Yet Vaughan did not set out to write a “best seller.” Her success must be attributed to the unique combination of great clarity of writing and unremitting commitment to the theoretical and methodological canons of sociological inquiry.

Likewise, George Ritzer’s study of “McDonalization,”<sup>xxix[29]</sup> despite its off-putting title for academic sociologists, provides a major link to the classic work of Max Weber on the “rationalization” process. In doing so it appears to significantly extend and

specify the conceptual links in a process that has long been thought to be operating in the Western world. The connections may be described as follows.

As Weber's thinking about the relationship between the Protestant Reformation and the rise of industrial capitalism matured, he began to see the much broader effects of rationalization on art, music, law, government, scientific thought and technological development, as well as pure economic life.<sup>xxx[30]</sup> Various students of and commentators on Weber's very broad inquires into comparative civilizations realized that Weber's thought on *rationalization* entailed the ideas of enhanced *efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control* in the various spheres of social and cultural life. What Ritzer showed in his popular best selling monograph was that the ensemble of organizational techniques that have been put together by the McDonald's corporation entail just those elements of efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control that Weber first hinted were at the root of the rationalization process in the Western civilization as a whole. It is of course, counterintuitive to think that all this regimentation and systematization (including the use of assembly line technology) could be applied with such vigor and success to the world of food service. But that is just what the new fast-food industry represents, with hoards of rivals (Wendy's, Burger King, etc.) constantly trying to one-up McDonald's at its own game of fast-food production and distribution.

Moreover, Ritzer's study points to the many other spheres of contemporary life where these techniques of achieving higher levels of efficiency and reduced costs have been applied. These include shopping mall culture, the medical health industry, construction, major league sports, and other areas. But even more significant from this writer's point of view is the great success that McDonald's has had *exporting* its model of highly rationalized food service to all corners of the globe. In *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, James Watson and his anthropologist colleagues, though detached from Ritzer's theoretical model, show how McDonald's has succeeded in establishing large franchises in Japan, Hong Kong, China, South Korea, and Taiwan.<sup>xxxi[31]</sup> In addition to supplying a whole new model of hi-tech efficiency (including new standards of service, hygiene, and queuing), McDonald's in Asia has spawned a variety of imitators who have found ways to offer their traditional food, but with the efficiency, predictability, and western style service typical of "McDonaldization."

In a word, the McDonaldization phenomenon is a world-shaping process with deep roots in the core rationalizing tendencies of Western civilization. Ritzer as a sociologist has managed to discuss all this in a manner highly accessible to general audiences and thereby enhanced public understanding of large and small scale sociological processes. In turn, the book has generated a hearty set of responses, including symposia volumes and numerous critics and supporters.<sup>xxxii[32]</sup> At the same time, it would be difficult to claim that Ritzer's career has been in any sense diminished.

### **Conclusion**

At the present juncture, the sociological profession appears to be moving in a direction that is increasing open-- some would say too open-- to the blossoming of many gardens of inquiry. This includes the encouragement of the popularization of sociological forms of inquiry. This is happening both spontaneously among individual sociologists and at the level of the national professional association. New awards have been created to recognize

the contributions of sociologists to the public understanding of the sociological enterprise.

Throughout this paper I have used the term “popular” to refer to those sociological writings that reached a broad audience of readers. Using Herbert Gans’ standard with regard to books, this means selling 50,000 or more copies of a book. This represents a magnitude of about 50 times greater readership than most scholarly academic books, and serves well for our purposes. Many of the authors whose works appear on the Gans list would (correctly) disclaim intending to be a “popularizer” of sociological ideas. This was, as mentioned earlier, the case with Diane Vaughan’s book *Uncoupling* (and also her more recent book, *The Challenger Launch Decision* [1996], which has not yet reached the critical level very). Likewise, Richard Sennett, with three books on the Gans list (*The Fall of Public Man* [1974], *The Hidden Injuries of Class* [1972, with J. Cobb], and *The Uses of Disorder* [1970]), also declines the title of popularizer. As he puts it, “the act of writing is an effort of understanding; the clearer and more evocatively I can write, the more I feel in touch with my subject.”<sup>xxxiii[33]</sup> Nor does he feel professionally neglected: as he and Diane Vaughan expressed it, reaching a broad audience is a very significant reward of its own. In addition, when books written by sociologists sell to such wide audiences, it means that other sociologists are adopting the book for classroom use, and that use is highly valued as an endorsement by fellow sociologists. In brief, for the half dozen sociologists that I have reviewed, engagement in public discourse through the publication of popular best sellers has served mainly to enhance the writers’ careers. Some have even been formally rewarded by the profession. But there are other venues of popular social science writing, including the regular press, and journals such as *Society* that attempt to reach a broad educated public, as does so with success.

Of course, there are voices within the sociological community who would criticize some of these popularizing efforts. Whether or not the potential disapprobation elicited by such popularizing tendencies has any measurable effect on sociologists generally remains unclear. The academic world (and greatly to the surprise of the lay public) is rife with differences of opinion. As we have seen, scholars who write works that reach large audiences and even become “best sellers,” receive the reward that attaches itself to such acclaim. Apart from the monetary benefits that accrue (generally much smaller than jealous colleagues imagine), writers of popular works gain significant attention in the press, in the journals of review, on the lecture circuits, and generally seem to receive as much or more attention than their more stolid peers who write for the more scholarly (and often arcane) journals or university presses. This is, it seems to me, as close to virtue rewarded as we mortals are likely to come. No book-- scholarly or popular-- escapes the slings and arrows of disappointed reviewers. Even those who take up *classic* problems defined by such pioneers as Max Weber, can find their efforts criticized for extraneous reasons, bordering on political correctness. In my own work on the reasons why *modern* science emerged only in the West and not in Islam or China (and acknowledging the early superiority of Arabic science and Chinese technology),<sup>xxxiv[34]</sup> it was suggested to me early on that I should not make such comparisons of scientific “success” and “failure” between civilizations. For each of them is intrinsically good and ought to be embraced for its own intrinsic worth.<sup>xxxv[35]</sup> Thus the uneven and lagging production of scientists and engineers in the various countries around the world would go unstudied today if one followed such advice.

It is in the nature of sociology (and the other social sciences) to recognize that social groups and social norms have powerful effects on group members, and hence, on the *differential* rates of all forms of human behavior. In other words, sociology *is* the study of categories and groups of people, and it is a truism of sociology that all such groups have unique patterns and traits, conditioned by social and cultural structures. Popularizers and non-popularizers face the criticism of both unhappy reviewers and those who may feel aggrieved by the public exposure of sociological inquiry that paints a image of some group, organization, or institution counter to official ideology. It is an inherent property of the intellectual enterprise to generate discussion, debate, and criticism. Those who write books appealing to a broad audience, however, seem to gather more praise than disapprobation. It remains the case, nonetheless, that many sociologists believe that our discipline has much more intellectual capital to bring to the public. Apparently writing with singular clarity is as important as any other professional asset in accomplishing that task.

If one believes, as I do, that in the medium to long run intellectual trends -- conjectures and refutations-- are self-correcting, then the works of grand theorizing, meticulous empirical inquiry, and popularly presented studies will reach the audiences they deserve.

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<sup>i[1]</sup> See W. F. Ogburn, *Recent Social Trends* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1933). Actual funding came from the Rockefeller Foundation.

<sup>ii[2]</sup> See Gary Marx, "Notes on the discovery, collection and assessment of hidden and dirty data," in *The Sociology of Social Problems*, eds., Joseph W. Schneider and John I. Kitsuse (Norwood, NJ.: Ablex Publishing, 1984), chapter 4.

<sup>iii[3]</sup> It may be pointed out that this periodic listing of the activities of sociologists was not instituted for reasons of public relations, but to provide sociologists with information about the work of their colleagues so that the chances of collaboration would be increased.

<sup>iv[4]</sup> James S. Coleman, *Equality of educational opportunity* (Washington: U.S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education; U.S. Govt. Printing Off., 1966).

<sup>v[5]</sup> Gans, "Best-Sellers by Sociologists: An Exploratory Study," *Contemporary Sociology* 26 #2 (1997): 131-35; and emended, *Contemporary Sociology* 26 #6 (Nov.) 1997: 790-91. It should be noted that Gans excluded all textbooks, assuming that their primary audience was not the general public.

<sup>vi[6]</sup> Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 19882)

<sup>vii[7]</sup> William J. Wilson, "Engaging the Public On Sociological Dialogue," *Contemporary Sociology* 27 # 5 (Sept. ) '98: 435-38.

<sup>viii[8]</sup> Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), p. 5.

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- ix<sup>[9]</sup> David Samuels, "Edmund Wilson and the Public Intellectuals," *The Wilson Quarterly* (1996): 107-12.
- x<sup>[10]</sup> Daniel Horowitz, *Vance Packard & American Social Criticism* (Chapel Hill, No. Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
- xi<sup>[11]</sup> As cited in Daniel Horowitz, *Vance Packard*, p. 186.
- xii<sup>[12]</sup> Ibid.
- xiii<sup>[13]</sup> Among other works, see *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1962) and *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
- xiv<sup>[14]</sup> New York: Pantheon Books, 1989.
- xv<sup>[15]</sup> T. Gitlin, *The Sixties* (New York: Bantam books, 1987)
- xvi<sup>[16]</sup> Robert Bellah et. al., *Habits of the Heart* (University of California Press, 1985).
- xvii<sup>[17]</sup>xviii<sup>[17]</sup> I. L. Horowitz, "Looking, Learning and Living. A 35 Year Celebration of Society on *Society*," *Society* 35 #2 (1998) (Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Issue), p. 35.
- xviii<sup>[18]</sup> Diane Vaughan, *Uncoupling*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986)
- xix<sup>[19]</sup> C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1964)
- xx<sup>[20]</sup> Robert Merton "Priorities in Scientific Discovery," chapter 14 in *The Sociology of Science : Theoretical and Empirical Investigations* (New York: Free Press 1972); originally published in 1957.
- xxi<sup>[21]</sup> See William Julius Wilson, "Engaging Publics in Sociological Dialogue," *Contemporary Sociology* 27 #5 (Sept. 1998): 435-438; Pepper Schwartz, "Stage Fright or Death Wish: Sociology in the Mass Media," *Contemporary Sociology* 27 #5 (Sept. 1998): 439-45; George Ritzer, "Writing To be Read: Changing the Culture and Reward Structure of American Sociology," *Contemporary Sociology* (Sept. 1998) 27 #5: 446- 53; and Donna Gaines, "Resurrecting Sociology as a Vocation," *ibid.*, pp. 454-57.
- xxii<sup>[22]</sup> "Council Approves New 'Perspectives' Journal," *Footnotes* 26 #7 (1998), p. 1f.
- xxiii<sup>[23]</sup> C. W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 8.
- xxiv<sup>[24]</sup> This is the situation that Thomas Kuhn identified as giving birth to conceptual innovation; see *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, enlarged edition).
- xxv<sup>[25]</sup> Donna Gaines, *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids* (New York : Pantheon, 1991).
- xxvi<sup>[26]</sup> Richard Lachman, in *Contemporary Sociology*, 21 #2, p. 261
- xxvii<sup>[27]</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (New York: Free Press, 1951)
- xxviii<sup>[28]</sup> For overview of the conceptual innovation entailed in Durkheim's work, see T. E. Huff, "Discovery and Innovation: Durkheim on Suicide," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 5, (Sept.)1975: 241-257.
- xxix<sup>[29]</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1996, revised edition)
- xxx<sup>[30]</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's, 1958), originally published in 1904-05. See the "Author's Introduction" of 1920 to the latter for Weber's own statement of these issues. For a discussion of these issues in the context of Arabic-Islamic civilization, see



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my Introduction to *Max Weber and Islam*, eds., Toby E. Huff and Wolfgang Schluchter (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1998).

<sup>xxxii</sup>[31] James Watson, ed., *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997)

<sup>xxxii</sup>[32] Among others, *McDonaldization Revisited*, and Barry Smart (ed.), *Resisting McDonaldization* (London: Sage: forthcoming). This is not the place to record my own criticism of aspects of Ritzer's work.

<sup>xxxiii</sup>[33] Richard Sennett, personal communication, October 10, 1998.

<sup>xxxiv</sup>[34] T. E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China and the West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

<sup>xxxv</sup>[35] This was the message I got in the mid-70's on a post-doctoral fellowship at Berkeley.