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

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## SOCIOLOGISTS ON SOCIETY

# Nothing Beyond Its Reach

By LOÏC WACQUANT

**I** feel that I have the best job in the world. For sociology enables one not only to turn the familiar into the wondrous, to enter by proxy into multiple social universes, and to discover new and surprising things about institutions all the time, but it also offers the tools to understand oneself as a social being, to understand one's makeup, location, and trajectory in society.

Sociology suggests that, like many of my colleagues, I entered the field in reaction to a succession of "culture shocks" at key junctures in my life. I was born and raised in southern France, in a lower-middle-class family whose geographic and social mobility sensitized me to inequality in society (I remember vividly the changing size of our bathroom as a beacon on that journey). Riding the bus to school in my preteen years exposed me to a low-grade class struggle between "us," the children of the white-collar families who dwelled in the small village where I grew up, and "them," the rougher offspring of the farmers and factory workers from the older town nearby. But the first genuine sociocultural shock I experienced came with migrating from my distant province to Paris to pursue my education at one of France's *grandes écoles*: Being suddenly thrust among the scions of the country's capitalist and aristocratic dynasties felt like landing in the set of a movie about the Second Empire. I swiftly switched from industrial economics to sociology to puzzle this out after meeting Pierre Bourdieu, whose masterful dissection of bourgeois culture and modern class structure in *Distinction* offered a lucid map of the new landscape I found myself navigating.

The second shock was spending two years as an apprentice researcher (in lieu of military service) on the South Pacific island of New Caledonia. Conducting surveys and field studies on educational inequality, economic underdevelopment, and the arrested urbanization of the native Kanaks in the midst of an uprising against French rule gave me a chance to touch up close the forms and mechanisms of a brutal colonial regime based on suffusive caste scorn, and thus to see the social logic behind the political turmoil. It convinced me that sociology is the discipline best

equipped to disentangle the ramifying webs of action, power, and history of which social reality is made -- and unmade.

The third socioemotional tremor that confirmed my vocation was bumping into the gruesome realities of the disintegrating black ghetto of Chicago in the late 1980s. Collaborating closely with William Julius Wilson on the academic front while learning to box in a gym on the city's South Side for four years was a transformative human experience. It also allowed me to cut through the mist of the scholarly myth of the "underclass," to rethink what makes a ghetto from the ground up, to glimpse the carnal springs of human conduct, and to palpate firsthand the calamitous impact of America's gargantuan penal state on its most marginal citizens.

Along with its omnivorous disposition, sociology holds many other great attractions for me. It has a unique ability to link the minutiae of behavior, thought, and feeling at the microlevel of the individual to the broadest macrostructural factors, such as ethnicity, gender, class, market, state, and even supranational and global forces. It can connect the *longue durée* of societal history to the microhistoricity of particular conjunctures and personal lives. It dispels the fog of common sense and displays the arbitrariness of social arrangements that present themselves as necessary and eternal -- or, conversely, the deep rooting and functional viability of patterns that might seem accidental or ephemeral. It renders intelligible the endless maelstrom of social activity, and suggests alternate paths for social change. The techniques of inquiry it deploys cover the gamut from the natural sciences to the humanities, ranging from ethnographic observation, textual analysis, and historical narration to clinical interviews, large-scale surveys, mathematical modeling, and computer experiments. There is no getting bored with sociology's variegated methods, wide-ranging styles, and endlessly changing topics. Nothing lies beyond its scope and reach.

Yet another virtue of sociology is that it can take itself as object and illuminate the social determinants that bear on its past achievements, its current predicament, and its future promise. As a science barely entering its adolescence, sociology faces a particularly hostile environment in the United States. The radical individualism and pervasive moralism that undergird the national "common sense" are profoundly antithetical to sociology's basic principles and teachings, according to which the constituents of social life are not people or groups but relations, and the determinants of action not individual will but objective forces that operate largely "behind people's backs."

Next, the regulative model of scholarship institutionalized in American academe favors the professional -- an expert producer of technical knowledge wedded to neutrality, in the mold of the doctor or lawyer -- over the intellectual, characterized, as in the European tradition, by the dynamic combination of cognitive autonomy and civic engagement. The grim consequence is that American social scientists are isolated from the milieus they study and are largely excluded from public debate.

Finally, the microcosm of American sociologists is highly hierarchical and morbidly competitive, so that considerations of professional rank and status routinely interfere with honest intellectual discussion and even thwart scientific developments.

But American sociology also has unique assets to overcome these external obstacles and internal infirmities. It attracts students and scholars from around the world and gives them unparalleled means to pursue their work. It has established high standards of technical competency and developed strong traditions of research in the three main strands of social inquiry -- the ethnographic, the historical, and the statistical. And it is surrounded by vibrant sister disciplines with which to cross-pollinate. The United States is also the epicenter of the neoliberal revolution that is now sweeping the globe, and, as such, it offers an extraordinary laboratory for scrutinizing the major social transformations of our age.

I hope that, in its second century, American sociology will draw more fully on those resources to foster methodological polytheism and theoretical reflexivity; become less parochial by recognizing that its dominant position in global space of uneven intellectual exchange gives it a special duty to enter into a constructive dialogue with other national sociologies; and muster the intellectual courage to tackle head-on the core sociopolitical issues of our epoch, as well as the institutional ingenuity to engage that knowledge forcefully within the societies it studies.

The potential of sociology is as vast as its subject matter. But it will be realized only if the profession does not smother the craft, and if the obsession for academic propriety does not sterilize the imagination of its practitioners.

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