

Sociology in the 21st Century: Facing a Dead End

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This is a working paper, a part of a larger work on the future of sociology, titled "On the Wrong Road", itself a part of a larger issue that I have been pursuing for over a decade now. As a part of this quest I have already published other papers like "American Sociology: Crisis in Isolation" and the "End of Sociological Theory". Much of these deal with the paradigm problem that has affected sociology, particularly its theory building process, since its inception as a new discipline. Thus, this a metatheoretical exercise in which I try to assess the future of the discipline. In these exercises I deal with the discipline as a whole and not its substantive areas or issues relating to any of these areas.

To an outsider, what follows might seem like an overly harsh criticism of the discipline and to the members of the discipline I might sound like a "prophet of doom". Neither need be true. When I talk of the "dead end" faced by the discipline in the 21st century, I merely claim this as the logical consequence of the growth pattern of the discipline and indeed, as the most probable eventuality. Although in a rather sketchy fashion, I present my arguments in relation to a) the history of the discipline, b) coverage of its subject matter and methodology, c) the administrative structure of the discipline, d) its financial position and e) its relation to other disciplines. In itself, no single factor would be strong enough to cause the downfall of a discipline but when all of these regress together the fall becomes inevitable.

Before I move further, a note on the domain of sociology is in order. Here sociology is treated as an American discipline. Most scholars would agree that at least since the 1920s sociology could be treated as purely an American discipline (Ritzer 1996). Gouldner (1968) defined sociology as an American discipline as opposed to socialism that became dominant in Russia and Eastern Europe. Although sociology had its origin in France, Britain and Germany its growth since the 1920s, mainly due to the rise of Fascism and the World War II in Europe, has been exclusively an American enterprise. Most European sociologists migrated to the US during this period and some stayed back after the war. Thus, the sociology that we get since the 1920s, and definitely since the 1930s, has been purely American.

However, I like to go further back in time to call the discipline as American. In the USA sociology originated in the works of Graham Sumner, Albion Small and a host of other scholars during the 1875-95 period in response to the works of the French founder of the discipline, Auguste Comte, and the English philosopher Herbert Spencer. Because his works were in English and easily available to the Americans, also because he was living at this time and was considered to be one of the greatest of the living philosophers, Spencer's influence was paramount in the development of the discipline (Hostadter 1962). A large part of the influence was in terms of the evolutionary principles and the organic analogies, which so influenced 19th century thought in general both in Europe and in America. Although the impact of these two concepts on sociology died out by the turn of the century (Hofstadter 1962), Spencer's other concepts, as I shall show later, continued to have a lasting influence on sociology in the US.

However, even during these early times sociology in the US began to develop in ways that were quite distinct from those of its European counterpart. From the very first course taught by Sumner in 1875, sociology in the US, unlike in Europe, grew up in the university setting. The first US sociologists were either religious preachers or sons of preachers. This factor had a major impact on the guiding principles and sociology in the US turned out to be basically reform oriented, pursuing issues of social problems, maintenance of law and order and problems arising out of rapid urbanization, industrialization and migration.

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Sociology in the US was also blessed with huge donations from the church, philanthropic organizations and the state governments for research in these problem areas. While sociology in Europe had a difficult time getting established in an academic setting, the first department of sociology at the Chicago University was funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. European sociology never enjoyed the luxury of such disposable funds.

The focus of European sociology was on nations and civilizations and macro level generalizations. But this sociology came to an abrupt end in the 1920s because of the growth of fascism and later the World War. Further developments in Europe took place from the 1950s onward but mostly as a reflection of the developments in America. So, when I refer to American sociology I refer to sociology quite different from the sociology the founding fathers in Europe intended to establish. All of such differences, however, turned out to be liabilities for American sociology and crippled the discipline from the start.

In this paper I take a look at some of these issues and try to show how sociology has gone down a wrong road that has lead the discipline to a dead end.

Although many of these issues noted above are very close to each other and connected in ways that defies separate treatment, for the sake of clarity, I shall treat some of these separately. First, the universities as site for the growth of the discipline. In Europe the "university revolution", which heralded in the rise of secular universities had already run its course in France, England and the much of Europe before the same began in the US (Collins 1994). USA had numerous colleges teaching religious ethics and philosophy. During the second half of the 19th century these colleges, mostly Protestant in origin, began to open up for secular education and graduate studies (Collins 1994). Sociology (in the US) was at the right time and the right place to take advantage of this opportunity and within a span of thirty years set itself up as a formidable discipline with a regular journal, the *American Journal of Sociology*, a professional organization, the "American Sociological Society" and a large number of departments teaching numerous courses.

All that was necessary to set up a department was a faculty member willing to teach a course and a group of graduate followers who together took care of the undergraduate teaching. Much of the Protestant enthusiasm for secular learning of a subject originating in the works of declared atheists came from their zeal to solve social problems. Both the students and teachers taking up sociology were fired by this zeal (Ritzer 1996). So department after department teaching sociology sprung up all over the country. Much of these became possible because of the liberal grants from various institutions, which were also interested in the amelioration of the social problems. So that, like today, much of the university education then also relied on student fees and research grants. Thus, from the very beginning sociology in the US became dependent on student enrolment and research grants.

These factors have led to two different but interrelated problems. First and the obvious one is that once the student enrollment declines or the research fund dries out sociology as a discipline would be in dire straits. That's exactly what has happened to the discipline from the 1970s on ward. In spite of some fluctuations now and then, the over all undergraduate student enrollment continued to increase from the beginning of the twentieth century and reached a peak of about 35,000 in 1976-77 and then it began to decline very rapidly and by the mid 1990s dropped to less than one third of that, to around 10,000 and continues to decline. I have explored some of the reasons elsewhere (Islam 1999).

The rise of enrollment all through the first half of the century was directly related to the numerous social problems, including those arising out of migration to the US and to the cities from the rural areas, rapid industrialization and the two World Wars. The social problems reached its peak in the 1960 and early 1970s in the form of Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam movements. Sociology and sociologists were in the greatest of demand then. But as society began to settle down the enrollment also began to drop. It has been noticed earlier that when US society is in a comparatively peaceful situation, student enrollment in sociology declines so that, it may be argued that, *what is good for the society is bad for sociology*.

Sociology in Europe was also born as the aftermath of the French revolution but its growth was arrested for a while until it picked up again in France with the Dreyfus affair, and in Germany and Italy with the industrialization and the unification process of these countries. So, when at the beginning of the 21st century US is enjoying great economic prosperity and a comparatively peaceful atmosphere at home, *who needs a sociologist anymore?*

The second part of the problem damages the very fabric of the discipline. As the student enrollment decreases universities tend to cut funds for the departmental activities, including jobs. The faculty, in order to retain jobs, tries to attract more students by offering ever-newer courses often, exotic ones. In an attempt to create new courses the teachers continue to invent new specialty areas, thereby dividing the discipline into ever-finer specialty areas often with little or no relation to the discipline in general. The discipline soon becomes an unrecognizable mess of courses with no visible core (more on this later).

Funds for sociological research began pouring in almost from the very inception of the discipline. I noted earlier that the very first department of sociology was established through such funds. Like the Rockefeller Foundation, most such donors were either various philanthropic organizations, including the church or the state and many corporations. Fund from the state sources, particularly federal funds, were poured into the discipline during and after the World War II. Such funds continued to increase to the end of 1970s.

Research conducted through such funds were obviously directed to the issues of law and order, solving social problems, offering community services and in general maintaining the status quo. These never added to the growth of the discipline in any coherent manner. Research moved into areas where there was research money. This may have developed research methodology but no theoretical breakthrough was even attempted with this money. The focus of all research remained with reform and the maintenance of status quo.

However, at the time when the need for law and order and the maintenance of status quo were at a premium, during the Civil Rights and the Anti-Vietnam movements, the sociologists unfortunately failed to deliver (the reasons of which I shall discuss shortly).

It was not only their failure to explain these problems, but as one commentator noted, behind every protest march, meeting or picket there was a sociologist, as sociologists also joined in the movements. Many sociology teachers and graduate students got involved in these protests. Naturally, neither the philanthropic organizations nor the corporations, and definitely not the state, took this calmly. The result was a gradual but definite drying out of the funds. Some of the faculty actually lost their jobs and others were transferred to safer departments. Of course, some research fund is still available but these, as those of the earlier times, do not add much to the growth of the discipline. This scarcity of fund has also affected the discipline in ways similar to the loss of student enrollment.

These issues are of course not unique to sociology. Any discipline in a similar predicament would face a similar future. What is unique to sociology is the problem with its subject matter, its crisis with theory building, the lack of a paradigm and the very organizational structure of the discipline, all of which complicate the situation further.

When it began as a discipline in the US, sociology did not have a clearly defined subject matter. It set out to work on topics that were normally "rejected or ignored" by established disciplines, like family, social problems, crime, urban and rural communities, ethnic groups etc. It was, what Robin Williams Jr. (1976) termed as, "rag-picking on the periphery of the intellectual market-place". C.W. Mills (1959) saw this as garbage collection. During its formative years such choice of subject matter helped sociology to survive because there was very little challenge from other disciplines (Ritzer 1996).

As sociology grew it continued to look for such exotic subjects not studied by other disciplines but at the same time, more for the sake of earning credibility on the intellectual market place, it began to encroach on other disciplines. The argument was made that since sociology deals with society, anything and everything that has to do with society is its legitimate subject matter. Thus, economics, politics, administration, and psychology were all included in its list of inquiry. Anthropology was seen virtually as sociology of the "tribal" peoples, often combined in one academic department.

More than anything else, this unrestrained growth has done the greatest damage to the discipline. The "rag-picking" continues unabated as is clearly seen in the immense interest with which sociology took to the study of the gay and sex life. And women studies have now been complemented by "Men Studies".

But it is the opposite trend of selecting everything under the sun as the topic of study that is at the root of much of the trouble. Neither the numerous departments of sociology nor the professional organizations within sociology ever set a boundary within which the discipline is to operate. Much of this has to do with the absence of an operative paradigm. However, this lack of control over its subject matter is endemic to American sociology. Although a few textbooks appeared quite early (Small's *Introduction to the Study of Society*, 1894; Giddings, *Principles of Sociology*, 1896), American sociology never quite got hold of its subject matter.

And in recent years, due mostly to the "survival instinct" noted earlier, sociology has divided and sub-divided into numerous specialty areas. Sociologists, in their attempt to attract students to the classroom, have begun inventing ever-new areas of specialization. The academic departments have tacitly promoted such sub-divisions of the discipline. After all, the decline in enrolment affects the departments as much as it affects the individual faculty members. American Sociological Association today recognizes more than 60 specialty areas and many sub-sub-areas within each, and new ones are being proposed with increasing regularity. The process has deteriorated to such an extent that Jonathan Turner and Stephen P. Turner (1990) feel that this has allowed each sociologist to have his or her own "field of specialization!" American Sociological Association, which could and should have taken a lead to stop such unwarranted proliferation, has, on the contrary, encouraged the process by looking the other way (Islam 1999). So that, the discipline offers a free hand to the sociologists to pick their choice of area, and there are more than 200 specialty area journals which will publish these specialty area papers, thereby giving legitimacy to such works (Islam 1999).

Of course, in and of itself, such proliferation would not have mattered so much, except for the fact that there is nothing to unite such an endless array of specialty areas. Sociology has nothing comparable to paradigms of the natural sciences (Kuhn 1970). Nor are there any over-arching theoretical models to unite even a few of the specialty areas. For a while some so-called "schools of thought" (Martindale 1961) were identified to exist within the discipline. These schools, most importantly the "functionalist school", for a time, seemed to unite parts of the discipline with their own varieties of theories and methodologies.

But functionalism based on positivist philosophy faced numerous challenges and since the 1960s has lost all credibility and adherence. The other schools were small judged by the number of sociologists who identified themselves with each, and actually helped in furthering the division of the discipline. Thus, for a long time now, and definitely since the 1960s, sociology has been facing a "crisis" situation in terms of paradigms and theory building (Islam 1984). Such crisis scenario was prophesized by Mills in the 1950s (Mills 1959) and by Gouldner in the 1960s (Gouldner 1968) and is now a recognized fact (Udhen 1986; Mouzelis 1995; Turner, J. 1994; Turner, J. and Turner, S.P. 1990). In my recent work (Islam 1999) on my part, I have already declared the "End of Sociological Theory".

Jonathan Turner (1994) argues that the only way out of such a crisis situation is the building of "grand theories, the armchair variety" with which the discipline began in the works of the European grand masters. Unfortunately, sociology has moved too far away from such theories. American sociology started with the theories of Comte and Spencer. But for the next fifty years sociology in the US failed to develop

any major theory of its won. It was *atheoretical* if not outright anti-theory. American Sociological Society did not even have a session of theory in its deliberations till 1915. Maclver was the first President of the Association (in 1930s) with any background in theory. Although in later years Max Weber and Emile Durkheim became known to American sociology and Talcott Parsons tried to combine these works into a "grand theory" of his own, theory building and respect for theory never became the hallmark of the American scenario.

Some micro level theories, like exchange theory, ethnomethodology and phenomenology, were attempted by the Americans during the later part of the 20th century. Also based on the works of George H. Mead, a philosopher at the Chicago University, another brand of micro theory grew up as the "symbolic interaction" theory. However, except for the last all the rest remained at the periphery of the discipline. Symbolic interaction theory did acquire some respectability but its focus, like the others, on the micro level seriously limited its applicability to the broader questions and it never had a very large audience either.

The only theory that ever had a major impact on American sociology was Functionalism (often, Structural Functionalism), particularly through the works of Parsons and Merton and their followers. But this theory was so flawed and so much criticism was launched against it that by the 1970s the term "functionalist", almost amounted to an insult.

In any case, Functionalism never really went beyond the works of Comte and Spencer. All the ingredients of the theory were already present in the works of Comte, including those of "action" and "system", the key concepts of Parsons. The concepts of "structure" and "function" were fully developed in the works of Spencer. It required very little imagination to fill in the rest, as Merton did with his concepts of manifest, latent and dysfunctions. Thus, American sociology contributed very little by way of theory building. At least one critic, Andreski, correctly declared that Spencer was the last sociologist.

It is this lack of capacity to build theory and a general apathy towards theory that spells the real doom for American sociology. Without an overarching theory and concepts that have meaning across the numerous sub-sub-specialties, sociology can never have the control over its subject matter or any conceivable boundary. The organizational structure in the guise of associations and the academic departments have almost totally failed to organize sociology into a coherent discipline. For these reasons Jonathan Turner, and Stephen P. Turner (1990) defined sociology as an "impossible science". Thus, in spite of the promises with which the discipline started in Europe, it failed to "take off" in America as a fully functioning discipline and toady its future seems bleaker than it's past.

But does it have to be so?

Yes!

In my opinion, American sociology never had a chance to develop into anything special. *It started on the wrong road.* American sociology never addressed the real issues. It never looked at other societies and other times, it never sought to understand social change, or look at the impact of politics and economy on society. All that sociology achieved from its limited studies of communities and social problems was a narrow, myopic view of the world. In this view of the world the (American) society was a wonderful place to live in except for one or two social problems, arising now and then, which can be taken care of easily. It is a very naive view of the world with which sociologists in the US continue to live. In this world very little exists beyond the two oceans and the sociologists need not concern themselves with those and what happens within this boundary is all nice and tidy.

Thus, it is very interesting to note that, in spite of the various subjects it tried to tackle in the past sociology never looked at its most important concept. From "rag-picking" to being encyclopedic, sociology dealt with numerous issues and in its present form an endless list of topics has been included as specialty areas. *Yet, American sociology never, never in its 125 years, sought to study society! Neither society as*

an abstract concept nor real societies in time and space. (see also Collins 1994). Open an Introductory textbook, which is supposed to tell the beginning student what sociology is all about, you'll find a few basic concepts like culture, or stratification and institutions like the family, religion etc. and community studies like the urban and rural communities and a few stray topics like environment or population. But not a single textbook has topics like "Chinese society", "Indian Society", "Inca Society", "Ancient Greek Society" and not even "Modern European Society" or a chapter on "American Society" itself. With the exception of occasional references to industrial, pre- industrial or post-industrial societies, the subject society is simply not there in the American Sociology texts or anywhere in American sociology either.

The only society it ever studied is American society in the form of its communities and problems but not as a *Society*. Even Canada, its neighbour and similar in many ways, rarely figures in its deliberations. Also, that the only time, in the 1950s-60s, American sociology went out to study "other societies", allegedly to help "modernize" the third world, it made a mess of the whole issue (see Frank, 1969). Thus, although introductory textbooks continue to define sociology "as the science of society", sociology as a study of society, or of societies in time and space never existed. *So that American sociology is a misnomer, there never was a sociology in America!!*

I have noted elsewhere (Islam 1987) that the US is a unique society and very little about it, if at all, can be generalized from or will have parallel in other societies. Sociology is a generalizing science but one can never generalize from unique experiences, so that a science of society based on American life only is an impossibility. A handy example can be given from the various generalizations drawn from the urban studies in the US, like the "concentric zone theory", which was built on the model of Chicago city, fell flat on its face when the "theory" was used to study Latin American cities.

A generalizing science like sociology, of necessity, must not only look at other societies, it must refer to societies in time as much as in space. It must study history. Failure of American sociology in this regard is *criminal*. American sociology modeled itself on Comte, who divided the subject matter into the study of "social static", meaning the structure and function, and the study of "social dynamics", meaning the study of change, development, and the comparative study of societies in time and space. Sociology got bogged down with its numerous studies of the structure and function but it never bothered to study change or social dynamics. Although some have claimed that the study of change is built-in in the functionalist theory, which dominated sociology for over thirty years, there is very little evidence of that. In any case, all that functionalism was concerned with was to maintain equilibrium in society and change was seen as deviance to be corrected and attain a new level of equilibrium.

It is this excessive concern with status quo, arising simply out of the demand for maintaining law and order that did away with the study of social change. Change is deviation from the normal and hence bad and undesirable. If change is taken off the menu, so is the study of history.

However, I feel that there is more to it than this. American society is composed of peoples coming from other societies and, in almost all cases, after a bitter experience with life in the previous society. By the third, if not the second, generation the painful reminder of the past society is obliterated from the mind. Thus, along with the past society, the past, which was bad even in the new society in the beginning, is also forgotten. Thus, there arises a general apathy towards things of the past and of other societies. These are best forgotten or left aside. So history or the study of history, particularly of other societies, is completely ignored. Other than a very few but notable exceptions like Barrington Moore, Smelser, Bendix, Lensky, Skocpol, Wallerstein and the world system wallahs, history, particularly of other societies, has never been a part and parcel of American sociology.

The cause of the failure of the modernization studies was this complete ignorance of the history of the third world (Frank 1969). Without the study of history of thousands of years and of thousands of societies beyond the two oceans, there can be no sociology. American sociology so far has proven to be totally incapable of dealing with either time or space and there is no reason to believe that it can do so in the

future. So that, there *never was a sociology in America and there cannot be a sociology in America in the future. Not in the 21st century!!!*

Fortunately for me, I am not the only one sounding the death-knell of sociology. If the postmodernists have a say in this, they have already nailed and buried sociology. Postmodernism does not allow for generalizations, or build theories and laws. It believes in individual experiences set as narratives. (Ritzer 1996; Turner, B. 1997). It deals with the unique. Sociology, the generalizing science, has no place in this scheme of analysis. Indeed, one postmodernist has put it most succinctly when he argued that sociology was a science of the modern era and in a postmodern era sociology is at best redundant.

So that in the 21st century there may not be any sociology. It may die a natural death because there may not be any students left to read the subject and there may not be enough funds to pursue research in the area. Or, it may give rise to more and more specialty areas so that we may have the largest department in the universities all teaching some variety of sociology. Or, it may develop into an entirely new discipline and we would not even know it, women studies is a case in point, because of a lack of a paradigm or proper theories. But the most likely scenario is that, unless sociology in the US begins to take account of other societies in time and space, it is going to stagnate as it has already reached a dead end.

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