

THE CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF IRVING LOUIS HOROWITZ

A Discipline in Transition

Irving Louis Horowitz remains to this day an erudite generalist in a discipline increasingly dominated by specialists. In 1963 he helped establish the journal *Transaction*—renamed *Society* in 1970—which publishes a mix of politics, theory, social research, and book reviews. He is chairman of Transaction-Aldine Publishers and founder of the Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy. In dozens of books and countless articles, his writing has covered an enormous variety of topics and theorists, from renaissance philosophy and Georges Sorel to international development and public policy.

Although Horowitz does not share the view of the “vast hand-wringing literature bemoaning the present state of the social sciences” in general, he is strongly associated with the claim that *sociology* is in particularly dire straits. The title of his 1993 book, *The Decomposition of Sociology*, echoed the well-established trope of “crisis” in sociology that was made famous by Alvin Gouldner in 1970.¹ Between 1964 and 2002, at least 150 articles and books were published on sociology’s putative crisis.² Gouldner warmly welcomed what he called “the coming crisis of western sociology,” believing that it would break up the entrenched hegemony of Parsonian theory and positivist-empiricist methods. Pierre Bourdieu, writing some eighteen years after Gouldner,³ celebrated the incipient erosion of consensus in sociology as a form of liberation. But the majority of these entries understand the “crisis” in terms of a brain drain to other disciplines, a decline in the quality of research, or a loss of the professional respectability that was

associated with the erstwhile more homogeneous discipline prior to invasion by Young Turks who are more diverse in political, epistemological, and "demographic" terms. I have heard sociologists grumbling about the discipline's "dilapidated" condition in ways that seem to betray a fear that the next stage, following crisis and decomposition, will be utter ruin—an apocalyptic vision of sociology as the academy's Chernobyl or Pompeii. In his 1993 book Horowitz decries the influx of "left wing fascists," Marxist "demonologists," moral relativists and "subjectivists," "ideologists and special interests," and defenders of marginal groups like homosexuals who "argue the case for deviance" rather than "urging individuals to find their way back" into the "mainstream." The book ends with a call to resist "the political barbarians at the gate" of the discipline and "the professional savages who have already gotten inside."⁴

However shrill the rhetoric—as when Horowitz speaks of a "barrage of the bobble heads"—real and important changes in the discipline are being addressed here. On the negative side, sociology *has* declined in terms of research funding and student interest since the early 1970s, and a few departments have been closed while others have been scaled back.⁵ Sociology has largely lost the ear of the king to economics and political scientists since the 1960s.⁶ There is also some evidence (though it is not unambiguous) for an exacerbated fragmentation of interests: the American Sociological Association has forty-three sections and some 200 journals.⁷ In some cases applied specializations like criminology, demography, and organization studies have hived themselves off from sociology departments, surpassing their parent discipline in numerical terms while becoming enmeshed in an atheoretical quantophilia. In other universities these subareas have taken over entire sociology departments rather than exiting from them.⁸

Other developments in sociology are rebarbative to some but not all. Horowitz intimates that sociology has recently seen a rise in incredulity toward the venerable doctrine of "value-neutrality" (*Wertfreiheit*). Explicitly social-critical and normative discussions are less off limits nowadays than they were before. There is widespread agreement that "values" shape researchers' choice of subject matter and theory and

their construction of the "facts." Even the most dispassionate description of social conditions carries political implications. According to the outgoing president of the American Sociological Association, Michael Burawoy, "the 'pure science' position that research must be completely insulated from politics is untenable since antipolitics is no less political than *public engagement*." This erosion of agreement about *Wertfreiheit* is a relief to some and threatening to others. What is clear is that sociologists' own particular value orientation puts them increasingly at odds with the dominant political mood in the U.S., underscoring the collapse of the cozier relationship with government that prevailed from 1945 until the 1970s. It is also clear that this divergence is due not simply to a rightwards shift by the state but also to a leftward movement by the discipline. For example, "75% of voting U.S. sociologists opposed the war in Iraq at the end of April, 2003, while at the same time 75% of the public supported the war"; in 1968 54% of sociologists opposed the Vietnam War compared with only a slightly lower level of opposition in the general public.⁹ Other changes are methodological and philosophical in character. A leading quantitative sociologist remarks that "The discipline as a whole . . . is looking more qualitative than ever before," although others fear a resurgence of methodological narrowness.¹⁰ Positivist epistemology has not gone unchallenged or unchanged but neither has it yielded to a "postpositivist" condition that Horowitz himself saw emerging more than two decades ago.¹¹ There is thus considerable agreement about the surface features of sociology's current condition among both supporters and critics.

Horowitz against Horowitz

Horowitz' critique of "ideological" sociology is more detailed and specific than the ritualistic attacks in the *New York Times* mocking the annual American Sociological Association meetings.¹² He attributes the field's decline to a widespread politics of advocacy that is so myopically self-absorbed that it cannot even perceive changing social conditions. In short, "You do not get good social science by being politically correct."¹³ Interestingly, Horowitz suggests that these

"ideological" strands tend to reinforce sociology's empiricism and positivism.¹⁴ From the start U.S. sociology has been torn between the motives of social do-gooder-ism and truth seeking. The ancestors of the current "professional savages" are therefore the Protestant meliorists who founded sociology departments at places like Michigan (Charles Horton Cooley) and Washington University (Roger Nash Baldwin). Sociology's current malaise has thus been programmed into the discipline from the start. This is an "internalist" explanation of the current crisis, if we define that term broadly to include accounts that focus on dynamics internal to the scientific field while downplaying broader historical and social influences.¹⁵

Yet this account is problematic both as a description of the relation between "values" and (social) science and as an explanation of the present condition. First, although he insists that he does not want to "turn the clock back, to retreat into the void of sociological positivism,"¹⁶ Horowitz overlooks the fact that antipositivist philosophers on the political right (e.g., Leo Strauss) and center (e.g., Thomas Kuhn) agree that science is thoroughly political and value-laden. Rather than dealing with the most influential contemporary writing by sociologists on "constructivism," those for whom the very essence of the discipline lies in demonstrating the social constructedness of phenomena that seem natural,¹⁷ Horowitz refers to only one significant contemporary example by a sociologist (*The Construction of Homosexuality* by David Greenberg). The other members of his rogues' gallery include a linguist, several historians, a political scientist, and a former ACLU director. Since his target is sociology rather than the social sciences in general, this seems to be a significant flaw.

Nor does he discuss any serious treatments of the ethical turn in sociology.¹⁸ Horowitz ignores sociologists who combine post-Kuhnian relativism about the historical development of science with "judgmental rationalism" about criteria for choosing among alternative theories.¹⁹ And in fact, as Horowitz himself suggested with regard to an earlier generation of "scientific" sociologists, "ethical and political neutrality is simply a manifested pose which reveals a latent antipathy or sympathy for certain movements and ideals."²⁰ In another recent essay, for example, he is quite willing to titillate his readers by emphasizing the benefits that European colonists

supposedly brought to Africa or the possible eugenic implications of Charles Murray's work on race and intelligence.²¹

To some extent, then, the "contradictions" Horowitz attributes to sociology are found within his own reasoning. Sociologists are accused of being irrationalist "prophets of the subjective will," and yet the leading representatives of the power of "subjective will" in the discipline today are rational (!) choice theorists. Sociologists are said to worship the "benevolent state," but at the same time they see "the ultimate evildoer, the central criminal," as "the state itself."²² Horowitz rejects the entire subfield of the sociology of knowledge as stemming from the irrationalist tradition, even though he himself has made important contributions to that area.²³ He argues that because the same issue of the ASA's newsletter carrying the resolution against the Iraq war also included a call to "design a homeland security alert system," it is unclear "just what master" the discipline serves. Yet Horowitz criticized Project Camelot for impinging on sociologists' scientific autonomy.²⁴ Doesn't he want sociology to be autonomous from *all* masters? Doesn't the coexistence of these two voices simply indicate that sociology, like almost all social fields, is internally heterogeneous, even if certain positions function as symbolic capital (Bourdieu), bringing more field-specific recognition than others?

The greatest irony is that Horowitz himself was identified during the 1960s and '70s with the position he is criticizing here. Horowitz disparaged American sociology's "scientism" and "mimesis of the natural sciences," empiricist "ideology," and "suppress[ion] of values at the expense of facts"; its "chauvinistic" focus on the United States; its "professionalization," quantomania, and "conformism." He characterized all of these traits as an *anti-sociology*. He praised Mills for his effort to develop a cultural relativism that went beyond the "intellectual commitments of the West."²⁵ And he continued to distance himself from "positivism" until quite recently. But in the present essay Horowitz attacks those who "speak contemptuously of . . . positivism" and "empiricism" and insists against all sociological odds that those in the higher-prestige main disciplines experience "envy for the upstarts" in the applied fields.

Horowitz's Internalism and the Historical Conditions of Scientific Change

It is correct that there is a broad division between "meliorists" and more "scientific" sociologists inside U.S. sociology, even if this is just one of many lines of differentiation. What is much less clear is the relationship between this split and the field's current "decadence." After all, the discipline was characterized during the Great Depression and New Deal by a very similar political/epistemic polarization, but there was no comparable level of professional malaise at the time.²⁶ Horowitz's account is a resolutely *internalist* one, ignoring the relations between the timing of shifts inside the scientific field and events outside. But the influx of radicals into the discipline since the late 1960s cannot account for the decline in student numbers, both because the decline in enrollment had already set in by the early 1970s, and also because enrollments subsequently rebounded.²⁷

In fact, something much larger was going on at this time. The year 1973 is the date most frequently given to mark the beginning of the end of the "Fordist" era—that is, the era in which capitalist expansion was organized around mass production and the mass consumption of homogenous goods; a rising standard of living; a welfare state buffering workers and consumers against the vagaries of markets; fiscal policies that softened the blows of economic cycles; and cooperative labor-management relations. The boom in sociology during the 1945–1973 period was thus tied closely to the consolidation of the Fordist mode of societal regulation, which created a "huge penetration by social psychologists and sociologists of the federal bureaucracy."²⁸ Ever-increasing numbers of sociologists received research funding (and research topics) from government agencies such as the Department of Defense, the NIH, NIMH, and the National Science Foundation, and from corporate donors as well.²⁹ The hegemony of positivism in U.S. sociology was buttressed by the ways in which Fordism actually encouraged relatively uniform patterns of social behavior and homogenous forms of subjectivity and corralled social practices within the boundaries of the nation state. This permitted researchers to ignore the historical, cultural, and geographic boundedness of their empirical findings, theoretical claims,

and even their policy prescriptions. The rest of the world was not entirely ignored, although there was a marked retreat by most U.S. sociologists into the national shell during most of this period, until the mid- to late-1960s. Even with the greater internationalization of the discipline in more recent decades the field has remained predominantly U.S.-focused.³⁰ The world beyond the U.S. was mainly understood as being inhabited by Americans-in-the-making who would follow that universal example in their march toward modernization and development.³¹

By the same token, sociology's relative decline after the 1970s can only be understood against the backdrop of the crisis of Fordism and the emergence of a post-Fordist world of flexible, specialized production, niche markets, self-promotional forms of individualism, neoliberal privatization, hollowed-out state functions, and a recharged U.S. imperialism untempered by competition with the U.S.S.R. Economics, and, to a lesser extent, political science, have replaced sociology as the main social science knowledge providers for the state.³²

It is certainly possible to imagine ways in which sociology could remap itself into this changed state of affairs and make itself once again more highly relevant to those interested in understanding their current social predicament. Interpretive sociology could prove invaluable in a society where seemingly incommensurable cultures coexist side by side and people feel compelled to continually reinvent themselves, rather than comfortably slipping into a single predefined social role. The wrenching transformations of the present could be better addressed by a historically attuned sociology than by the ahistorical variants that prevailed in recent decades. The venerable subfield of the sociology of knowledge could help sociologists situate themselves within this morass. Social theory would need to become prominent again.³³ But these shifts would require that the field's current gatekeepers would stop allocating recognition mainly to those sociologists who emulate an imagined version of the natural sciences. The field's decline, if it is more than a perennial anxiousness, will have more to do with its ongoing scientism than with any influx of subjectivist idealism.

NOTES

I would like to thank Howard Kimeldorf and Loïc Wacquant for input into this essay, although all opinions expressed here are my own.

¹ Irving Louis Horowitz, *The Decomposition of Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1970). The trope of a crisis in sociology was not inaugurated by Gouldner. Siegfried Kracauer had spoken of a crisis during the 1920s; see his "The Crisis of Science: On the Foundational Writings of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 213. Horowitz himself spoke of a "crisis of empiricist sociology" in his "An Introduction to *The New Sociology*," in his brilliant edited collection of essays in honor of C. Wright Mills, *The New Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 12.

² For this count and further discussion of this issue see George Steinmetz and Ou-Byung Chae, "Sociology in an Era of Fragmentation: From the Sociology of Knowledge to the Philosophy of Science, and Back Again," *Sociological Quarterly* 43 (2002), 111–137. Johannes Weiß argues that because sociology was spawned by the "great crisis" that produced modernity it continually reproduces the conditions of its birth, leading to a "state of permanent crisis" within the discipline. This is ingenious but difficult to reconcile with the field's stabilized condition, at least in the U.S., during the 1945–1965 period. See Johannes Weiß, "Negative Soziologie," *Ethik und Sozialwissenschaften* 6 (1995), 241–46.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, "Vive la Crise! For Heterodoxy in Social Science," *Theory and Society* 17: 5 (1988–89), 773–87.

⁴ Irving Louis Horowitz, *The Decomposition of Sociology*, 13, 15, 65, 218, 222, 252; *Winners and Losers: Social and Political Polarities in America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984), Ch. 17.

⁵ The most prominent case was at Yale, which has one of the oldest sociology departments in the U.S. and which was attacked in 1982 (the department has since been reconstituted). By contrast, the sociology department at Washington University, which was founded at the beginning of the twentieth century and where Horowitz and Gouldner once taught, remains closed.

⁶ Horowitz, *Winners and Losers*, 258. In *The Rise and Fall of Project Camelot* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), Horowitz is cautious, but his book with James Everett Katz, *Social Science and Public Policy in the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1975, 119) speaks of a "ruling class" as dominating policymaking in the U.S., and in 1964 he spoke of a "mutuality of interests between sociologists and businessmen"; Horowitz, "An Introduction to *The New Sociology*," 7.

⁷ Michael Burawoy, "Provincializing the Social Sciences," in George Steinmetz, ed., *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and its Epistemological Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 519. Despite the proliferation of subfields and research topics, this surface froth in sociology seems to mask a deeper level of agreement on a set of positivist assumptions about social ontology, epistemology, and method; see my essay "American Sociology's Epistemological Unconscious and the Transition to Post-Fordism: The Case of Historical Sociology," in Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, and Ann Orloff, eds., *Remaking Modernity: Politics, Processes and History in Sociology* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 109–157.

See also Christopher Bryant, *Positivism in Social Theory and Research* (New York: Macmillan, 1985).

⁸ An outside review at Michigan in the latter half of the 1990s, for example, was surprised to find that "the vast majority of sociological inquiry is assigned to one wing" of the department, including the areas traditionally considered to be at the discipline's core, while the subfields of demography and social psychology made up two-thirds of the department even though they were "fairly narrow programs." This has since been partly remedied.

⁹ Michael Burawoy, "Public Sociologies: Contradictions, Dilemmas, and Possibilities," *Social Forces* 82:4 (June 2000), 2.

¹⁰ Charles Halaby, former University of Wisconsin-Madison sociology department chair, in *Yale Daily News*, February 10, 1999, online version <<http://www.yaledailynews.com/article.asp?AID=681>>. For an opposing view of the field see Margaret Somers, "Beware Trojan Horses Bearing Social Capital: How Ideational Power Turned Gdansk into a Bowling Alley," in Steinmetz, ed., *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences*, 233-74.

¹¹ Horowitz, *Winners and Losers*, 294.

¹² For one of his earliest discussions along these lines see Howard Becker and Irving Louis Horowitz, "Radical Politics and Sociological Research: Observations on Methodology and Ideology," *American Journal of Sociology* 78:1 (July 1972), 48-66; See also Walter Goodman, "Thinkers Who Would Be Doers See Social Injustice Wherever They Turn." *New York Times*, August 19, 2000.

¹³ "Are the Social Sciences Scientific?," *Academic Questions* 9 (Winter 1995-1996), 54.

¹⁴ Horowitz, *Decomposition*, 28. The lack of any necessary correlation between the political left and the "epistemological left" is more familiar in sociology than in history and the humanities. On the latter see Peter Novick, "My Correct Views of Everything," *American Historical Review* 96:3 (1991), 703.

¹⁵ Traditionally, "internalist" accounts were focused on the relationship between scientists and their objects of inquiry, but I have proposed broadening the definition as specified in order to distinguish between two broad approaches in the sociology of science; see my "Scientific Authority and the Transition to Post-Fordism: The Plausibility of Positivism in American Sociology since 1945," in Steinmetz, ed., *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences*, 275-323.

¹⁶ *Decomposition*, 39.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); William G. Roy, *Making Societies: The Historical Construction of Our World* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2001).

¹⁸ E.g., Andrew R. Sayer, *Realism and Social Science* (London: Sage, 2000), Part IV.

¹⁹ See Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson, and Alan Norrie, eds. *Critical Realism, Essential Readings* (London: Routledge, 1998).

²⁰ "An Introduction to *The New Sociology*," 11.

²¹ "Are the Social Sciences Scientific?," 57.

²² *Decomposition*, 26.

²³ *Decomposition*, 11; but see Irving Louis Horowitz, *Philosophy, Science, and the Sociology of Knowledge* (Springfield, IL: Thomas, 1961).

²⁴ Horowitz and Katz, *Social Science and Public Policy*, 108.

²⁵ Referring to sociologists' increasingly microscopic focus, he wrote "we

now have 'atom smashers' in the form of data processing equipment but we find ourselves using them only to crack walnuts." All quotes from Horowitz, "An Introduction to *The New Sociology*," 3–48.

²⁶ I reconstruct the interwar field in broad strokes in my article "The Genealogy of a Positivist Haunting: Comparing Prewar and Postwar U.S. Sociology," *boundary 2*, 32:2 (Summer 2005), 107–33.

²⁷ Personal communication from Howard Kimeldorf; also Anthony Giddens, "In Defence of Sociology," *New Statesman and Society* 8 (April 7, 1995), 18.

²⁸ Horowitz, *Winners and Losers*, 258.

²⁹ Horowitz and Katz, *Social Science and Public Policy*, 172–75; Horowitz, "An Introduction to *The New Sociology*," 8–9.

³⁰ Michael D. Kennedy and Miguel A. Centeno, "Internationalism and Global Transformations in American Sociology," in *History of Sociology in America: ASA Centennial Volume*, edited by Craig Calhoun (Washington, DC: American Sociological Association, forthcoming 2005).

³¹ See my chapter "Culture and the State," in George Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture. Historical Studies of the State in the Social Sciences* (Cornell University Press, 1999), 1–49; and Harry D. Harootunian, *The Empire's New Clothes: Paradigm Lost, and Regained* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2004).

³² Howard Kimeldorf, in a personal communication, hypothesizes that the ranking of "critical thinking" among the main social science disciplines would correlate negatively with rankings of disciplinary prestige (measured by average salaries or intellectual cachet), and that sociology would be at the extreme "critical" (and low-prestige) end of this spectrum.

³³ Of course, the center of gravity of sociological theory moved back to Europe after Parsons's domination gave way to empiricism in the U.S. When sociologists look for their contemporary theorists nowadays they are likely to turn to Pierre Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, Ulrich Beck, or Niklas Luhmann, or to look to the more distant past (Weber, Durkheim) or to other disciplines. A small number of U.S. sociology departments nurture theory as a legitimate activity in its own right, but graduate students writing purely theoretical Ph.D. dissertations are still unlikely to find employment.

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