

## SOCIOLOGY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE: LEARNING AND CHALLENGES

Jack A. Goldstone  
George Mason University  
USA

Let us start with a paradox. Political Science is generally a larger, better-supported, and more prestigious field than sociology. No doubt, part of this attaches to the subject matter – people seek power, particularly through effective control of states and political office, and therefore turn to the science of power in search of answers. Similarly, economics has prestige and support not because economists are particularly good at predicting or explaining things like inflation, interest rates, and economic growth (they are not), but because people seek money, and therefore turn to the science of economics for insights on how money is made. Sociology has been seen as having a ‘residual’ subject matter – deviance, gender, religion, race/ethnicity – and such things are not high on the agenda of things that mainstream establishment groups or individuals wish to acquire.

Given this institutional relationship, one might expect that political scientists would receive more deference, respect, and recognition from sociologists than vice-versa. Yet this appears not to be true. At least two sociologists that I know of – my predecessor as Hazel Professor at Mason University, Seymour Martin Lipset, and my mentor at Harvard, Theda Skocpol – have been elected Presidents of the American Political Science Association. Sociologists such as Dietrich Reuschmeyer and James Mahoney have received major prizes for their work from the APSA. Although there have been many distinguished political scientists whose work is read and admired by sociologists, I am not aware of the same degree of sociologists’ electing political scientists to be their leaders or win their prizes.

I think the reason for this is obvious. Sociologists study power *in general*, organizations *in general*, and social behavior *in general*. Thus for sociologists, political power, states, and political behavior are just special cases in their field – or more accurately, political sociology, the sociology of the state, and studies of political mobilization are subfields of specialization in sociology. But the converse is not true – it is hard to think of any subfield of Political Science that would correspond to a major field of inquiry in sociology!

I make these introductory comments not because I wish to offer another lecture on how sociology is the “queen of the social sciences.” It is not – at least empirically, it clearly is not. And it is precisely on empirical matters of fact that I wish to focus. In this regard, I wish to point to the somewhat embarrassing failures of economics, political science, and sociology, and to ask what lessons one can draw from these as to how to build on sociology’s strengths, make it more productive, and restore (or claim for it) a primary position among the social sciences, on par with economics and political science.

### What Sociology can Learn to Do

Both Economics and Political Science have relatively simple structures to their academic fields. Economics divides itself, roughly, among micro-economics, macro-economics, trade or international economics, and economic history. Of course there are myriad specialties that cross these lines: labor economics, price theory, general equilibrium theory, development economics, finance, welfare economics, experimental economics, health economics, environmental economics, the economics of public goods, the economics of innovation/R&D, etc. etc. Nonetheless, economics gives itself great coherence as a field by having a simple four-fold division to guide its basic undergraduate and graduate foundation courses, and its staffing of departments.

Political science similarly has a four-fold division: American (or other home country) politics, comparative politics, international relations, and theory (actually the history of political thought). This can be even more simply conceptualized as the politics of my country, the politics of other countries, the relations among various countries, and the intellectual history of the field. Again, political science has myriad subfields that operate within and across these divisions: comparative democratization, legislative politics, the presidency, deterrence, political psychology, opinion research, public administration, etc. etc. But the basic four-fold division gives a certain coherence to structuring pedagogy and hiring.

Sociology, sadly, has no such internal structure. There is no reason for this, except for the history of the field as succumbing alternately to grand unifying visions (Marxism, Weberianism, Functionalism) and fractioning into various specialties. Sociology certainly could set itself up as having four basic fields: American society (or whatever your society), comparative macro-sociology (the sociology of other societies and their relationships, including most of development and political sociology), micro-sociology (social psychology, small-groups, social identity, race/ethnicity/gender), and organizational or meso-sociology (professions, organizations, networks, business, religion, education, medicine, etc.). Of course sociology, like economics and political science, could retain its hundreds of sub-specialties that cut across these divisions. But requiring all students to take a course in each of these four areas, and specialize in one of them, would give much greater coherence and institutional structure to the field. Right now, sociology is one vast intro survey course and an unstructured mass of specialized courses that have little intellectual organization.

But no, you say. Economics has prestige because of its advanced methods and models, and political science follows precisely because it is borrowing from economics.

### **What Sociology should Learn *NOT* to Do**

In fact, sociology has more sophisticated methods and models than economics or political science – they are just not perceived as central to the mission of sociology as they are in these other fields. For example, most economics models remain based on comparative statics and econometrics remain focused on regressions. Sociology has innovated with various log-linear analyses, markov analyses, network analysis and block-modeling, path analysis, and event-history analysis. Indeed, sociology faculties have many ‘methodological specialists’ devoted to developing and improving formal models and statistical analyses that have been as innovative and broad ranging as any counterparts in political science or economics.

In addition, it must be realized and appreciated that the models of economics and political science are *NOT* like the models of the natural sciences. The natural sciences focus on

measurement and classification, and develop models and theory only to explain, very precisely and exactly, empirical data. Economics and Political Science typically develop models as heuristic devices, to elaborate relationships, and then use anecdotes or plausible 'stylized facts' to illustrate the models. This is because such models aim, unrealistically, to explain 'economic behavior' or 'political behavior' *in general* rather than the behavior of any particular, concrete, empirical economies or states. The result is models that cannot be falsified, and that therefore do not describe, much less explain or predict, any real phenomena.

Political scientists in particular often struggle to measure such basic features of political life as democracy, state power, political mobilization, or revolution. Economists, by contrast, are able to quite accurately measure such items as unemployment, inequality, economic growth, and interest rates. Yet despite this accuracy, they are unable to explain, much less predict, them to more than an order of magnitude, often missing even the direction of these crucial outcomes. Economists cannot explain or tell us, with any empirical verifiability, how to create economic growth; what interest rates will be; or when financial crises will occur. Political scientists, similarly, cannot tell us, with any empirical verifiability, how to create democracies, avoid state crises, or end corruption.

Sociologists clearly do not have much to gain by following in the path of economists and political scientists, who are developing more and more abstract models that tell us less and less about what is happening, or what is going to happen, in the actual societies in which we live.

Therein lies the challenge for sociology – how can we build on the methodological and substantive strengths of our discipline to do what economics and political science are not doing, namely to better analyze and explain behavior within and of actual empirical societies?

To a surprising extent, I would argue, sociology already in fact does this. It is therefore no accident that political science departments raid comparative sociologists for their knowledge of welfare states, revolutions, or development; or that business schools hire sociologists for their knowledge of organizations, or that sociologists lead the way in empirical studies of religion, education, the professions, race, poverty, and many other aspects of social life. What is distressing is how little sociology *as a whole* is able to exploit this advantage, and make it evident to the world of scholarship in general.

To sum up, I would offer three pleas or prescriptions for sociology to improve its place in the academic and practical world:

- (1) Adopt a simple internal organizational framework for all departments and programs, with no more than four divisions. This will present a cleaner, stronger 'face' of sociology to the world.
- (2) Do not go overboard in generalized ambitions for universal truths or abstracted models remote from any reality. Explanations of "society" as such are less important than explaining the forms, trajectories, similarities, and differences among *actual*, *historical* societies and sub-societal units.



THE 37<sup>TH</sup> WORLD CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SOCIOLOGY  
STOCKHOLM SWEDEN 5-9 JULY 2005

- (3) Measure and gather data as carefully as possible on as many aspects of social life as possible, in many different countries, and use the best statistical and modeling tools that can be devised to arrange and explain *that empirical data*.

I believe that if we build on these strengths, already widespread in our field, and present them more effectively to those outside our discipline, we will not only continue to be looked to by Political Science and other fields for leaders, we will be widely recognized as a leading discipline among the social sciences.

