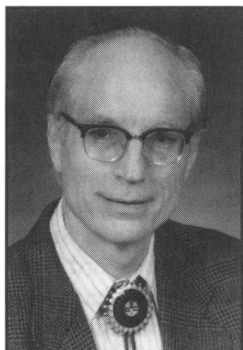


# SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIOLOGY: AGENDAS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY



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*The world's peoples face daunting challenges in the twenty-first century. While apologists herald the globalization of capitalism, many people on our planet experience recurring economic exploitation, immiseration, and environmental crises linked to capitalism's spread. Across the globe social movements continue to raise the issues of social justice and democracy. Given the new century's serious challenges, sociologists need to rediscover their roots in a sociology committed to social justice, to cultivate and extend the long-standing "countersystem" approach to research, to encourage greater self-reflection in sociological analysis, and to re-emphasize the importance of the teaching of sociology. Finally, more sociologists should examine the big social questions of this century, including the issues of economic exploitation, social oppression, and the looming environmental crises. And, clearly, more sociologists should engage in the study of alternative social futures, including those of more just and egalitarian societies. Sociologists need to think deeply and imaginatively about sustainable social futures and to aid in building better human societies.*

**WE** STAND today at the beginning of a challenging new century. Like ASA Presidents before me, I am conscious of the honor and the responsibility that this address carries with it, and I feel a special obligation to speak about the role of sociology and sociologists in the twenty-first century. As we look forward, let me quote W. E. B. Du Bois, a pathbreaking U.S. sociologist. In his last autobiographical statement, Du Bois (1968) wrote:

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[T]oday the contradictions of American civilization are tremendous. Freedom of political discussion is difficult; elections are not free and fair. . . . The greatest power in the land is not thought or ethics, but wealth. . . . Present profit is valued higher than future need. . . . I know the United States. It is my country and the land of my fathers. It is still a land of magnificent possibilities. It is still the home of noble souls and generous people. But it is selling its birthright. It is betraying its mighty destiny. (Pp. 418–19)

Today the social contradictions of American and global civilizations are still immense. Many prominent voices tell us that it is the best of times; other voices insist that it is the worst of times. Consider how the apologists for modern capitalism now celebrate the "free market" and the global capitalistic economy. Some of these analysts even see modern capitalism as the last and best economic system, as the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). In contrast, from

the late 1930s to the 1950s many influential economists and public leaders were committed to government intervention (Keynesianism) as the way to counter the negative effects of capitalist markets in the United States and other countries—effects clearly seen in the Great Depression of the 1930s. The view that a capitalistic market alone should be allowed to make major social and economic decisions would then have been met with incredulity or derision (George 1999; also see Block 1990). Half a century ago, Karl Polanyi ([1944] 1957), a prescient economic historian, critically reviewed the history of the free-market idea: “To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment, indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society” (p. 73).

Since the 1960s, conservative business groups have pressed upon the world’s political leaders, and upon the public generally, the idea of a self-regulating market mechanism, thereby organizing a successful counter-attack against Keynesian ideas (Steinfels 1979). These new apologists for capitalism have heralded the beneficial aspects of a globalizing capitalism and have exported the free-market model in an economic proselytizing project of grand scope. Free marketeers have persuaded many people across the globe that class conflict is in decline and that capitalism and its new technologies will bring prosperity to all countries. Similarly, other influential supporters of the status quo have argued optimistically that major forms of social oppression, such as racial and gender oppression, are also in sharp decline in Western societies.

### THE DOWNSIDE OF A CAPITALISTIC WORLD

Nonetheless, many people in the United States and across the globe insist that this is *not* the best of times. Karl Marx long ago underscored the point that modern capitalism creates bad economic times that encompass both social injustice and inequality. Looking at the present day, I will briefly describe a few examples of the troubling conditions currently being created or aggravated by modern capitalism:

### *MANY OF THE WORLD’S PEOPLE STILL LIVE IN MISERY*

First, while it may be the best of times for those at the top of the global economy, it is not so for the majority of the world’s peoples. The pro-capitalist policies of many national governments and international organizations have fostered a substantial transfer of wealth from the world’s poor and working classes to the world’s rich and affluent social classes. Social injustice in the form of major, and sometimes increasing, inequalities in income and wealth can be observed across the globe. Thus, in the United States income inequality has reached a record level for the period during which such data have been collected: The top one-fifth of households now has nearly half the income; the bottom one-fifth has less than 4 percent. Moreover, the top 1 percent of U.S. households holds more in wealth than the bottom 95 percent, and the wealthy have doubled their share since 1970. Moreover, more Americans live in poverty than a decade ago. As of the late 1980s, 31.5 million people lived at or below the officially defined poverty level, while in 1999 the figure had increased to 34.5 million (Collins, Hartman, and Sklar 1999; Oxfam 1999). In recent decades the number of millionaires and billionaires has grown dramatically. Yet many ordinary workers have seen their real wages decline—even while the costs of housing, transportation, and medical care have increased significantly in real terms.

Of the 6 billion people on earth, a large proportion live in or near poverty and destitution, with 1.2 billion living on less than one dollar a day. The numbers living in poverty are increasing in areas of South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Today one-fifth of the world’s people, those in the developed countries, garner 86 percent of the world’s gross domestic product, with the bottom fifth garnering just one percent. In recent years the world’s richest 200 people, as a group, have doubled their wealth, to more than 1 trillion dollars for the year 2000 (Oxfam 1999). While there has been much boasting about economic growth among those pushing global capitalism, between 1980 and the late 1990s most of the world’s countries saw sustained annual growth rates of less than 3 per-

cent per capita, and 59 countries actually experienced economic declines (*Toward Freedom* 1999). Moreover, in most countries great income and wealth inequalities create major related injustices, including sharp differentials in hunger, housing, life satisfaction, life expectancy, and political power.

Viewed from a long-term perspective, the high levels of wealth and income inequality, and the increase in that inequality, signal yet another critical point in human history where there is a major foregrounding of social justice issues.

#### **WORKING FAMILIES ARE EXPLOITED AND MARGINALIZED**

Second, global capitalism may bring the best of times for corporate executives and the well-off, yet for many of the world's people it brings recurring economic disruption, exploitation, marginalization, and immiseration. The international scene is increasingly dominated by highly bureaucratized multinational corporations, which often operate independently of nation states. Working for their own economic interests, these transnational corporations routinely "develop" their markets—and destroy and discard regions, countries, peoples, cultures, and natural environments. For example, transnational corporations now control much of the world's agricultural system. In developing countries small farmers are shoved aside by large agribusiness corporations or are pressured to produce crops for an international market controlled by big transnational corporations—thereby reducing the production of essential foodstuffs for local populations (Sjoberg 1996:287).

Today there are an estimated 1 billion unemployed or underemployed workers around the world, with 50 million unemployed in the European countries alone. Hundreds of millions, including many millions of children, work in onerous or dangerous workplaces. Some 30 million people die from hunger annually in a world whose large agricultural enterprises produce more than enough food for every person (Ramonet 1999). The real effects of expanding capitalism for a large proportion of the planet's inhabitants are not only greater inequality but also job restructuring, unsafe working con-

ditions, low wages, underemployment or unemployment, loss of land, and forced migration. Ordinary working people and their families—in most nationality, racial, and ethnic groups across the globe—face significant negative social impacts from an encircling capitalism.

#### **CAPITALISM IMPOSES HUGE ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS**

Third, the global capitalistic economy generates profits at the huge cost of increasing environmental degradation. Since the 1970s, the levels of some greenhouse gases (e.g., carbon dioxide) in the earth's atmosphere have grown significantly because of the increasing use of fossil fuels, widespread deforestation, and industrial pollution. Global warming, which results from this increase in greenhouse gases, is melting polar ice packs, increasing coastal flooding, generating severe weather, creating droughts and reshaping agriculture, and facilitating the spread of disease. In addition, as a result of human actions, the earth's ozone layer is severely depleted in some areas. This alone results in a range of negative effects, including increases in skin cancer incidence and major threats to essential species, such as phytoplankton in the oceans (M. Bell 1998; Hawken, Lovins, and Lovins 1999).

A lack of sufficient water and poor water quality are large-scale problems in many countries. Half the world's wetlands and nearly half the forests have been destroyed in just the last century. The destruction of forests is killing off many plant species, including some supplying the oxygen we breathe. The consequences of these environmental changes will be the greatest for the world's poorest countries, many of which are in areas where the increasing heat of global warming is already having a serious impact on water availability, soil erosion, destruction of forests, agriculture, and the spread of disease (Sachs 1999).

Today, some environmental experts are seriously discussing the possibility that most of the planet's plant and animal species will be gone by the twenty-second century. Jared Diamond, a leading physical scientist, has reviewed the evidence and concludes that movement toward an environmental catas-

trophe is accelerating. The only question, in his view, is whether it is likely to “strike our children or our grandchildren, and whether we choose to adopt now the many obvious countermeasures” (Diamond 1992:362). And there are yet other related problems facing humanity, such as those arising out of the new technologies associated with worldwide, capitalist-led economic development.

#### **GLOBAL CAPITALISM REINFORCES OTHER INJUSTICE AND INEQUALITY**

Fourth, in addition to the economic and environmental inequalities generated or aggravated by contemporary capitalism, other forms of social injustice and inequality remain central to the United States and other societies. I only have space here to note briefly such major societal realities as racial and ethnic oppression, patriarchy, homophobia, bureaucratic authoritarianism, violence against children, and discrimination against the aged and the disabled. These persisting forms of discrimination and oppression generally have their own independent social dynamics, yet they too are often reinforced or exacerbated by the processes of modern capitalism.

#### **WHAT KIND OF A WORLD DO WE WANT?**

The world’s majority now lives, or soon will live, in difficult economic and environmental times. By the end of the twenty-first century, it is likely that there will be sustained and inexorable pressures to replace the social institutions associated with corporate capitalism and its supporting governments. Why? Because the latter will not have provided humanity with just and sustainable societies. Such pressures are already building in the form of grassroots social movements in many countries.

A few of the world’s premier capitalists already see the handwriting on the wall. The billionaire investor George Soros (1998), for instance, has come to the conclusion that free markets do *not* lead to healthy societies:

Markets reduce everything, including human beings (labor) and nature (land), to com-

modities. We can have a market economy, but we cannot have a market society. In addition to markets, society needs institutions to serve such social goals as political freedom and social justice. (P. 24)

As Soros sees it, without a more egalitarian global society, capitalism cannot survive.

In a recent interview, Paul Hawken (Hawken and Korten 1999), an environmentally oriented critic of modern capitalism, has recounted the story of a business consultant who conducted a workshop with middle managers in a large corporation that makes, among other things, toxic chemicals such as pesticides. Early in the workshop the executives discussed and rejected the idea that creating social justice and resource equity is essential to the long-term sustainability of a society such as the United States. Later, these managers broke into five groups and sought to design a self-contained spaceship that would leave earth and return a century later with its occupants being “alive, happy, and healthy” (Hawken and Korten 1999). The executives then voted on which group’s hypothetical spaceship design would best meet these objectives.

The winning design was comprehensive: It included insects so no toxic pesticides were allowed on board. Recognizing the importance of photosynthesis, the winning group decided that weeds were necessary for a healthy ecosystem, so conventional herbicides were not allowed. The food system was also to be free of toxic chemicals. These managers “also decided that as a crew, they needed lots of singers, dancers, artists, and storytellers, because the CDs and videos would get old and boring fast, and engineers alone did not a village make.” In addition, when the managers were asked if it was reasonable to allow just one-fifth of those on board to control four-fifths of the ship’s essential resources, they vigorously rejected the idea “as unworkable, unjust, and unfair” (Hawken and Korten 1999).

Note that this example spotlights the critically important ideas of human and environmental interdependence and of social justice. Even these corporate managers, when hypothetically placing themselves in the closed system of a spaceship, rejected environmental degradation, a boring monoculture, and major resource inequalities.

As I see it, social justice requires resource equity, fairness, and respect for diversity, as well as the eradication of existing forms of social oppression. Social justice entails a redistribution of resources from those who have unjustly gained them to those who justly deserve them, and it also means creating and ensuring the processes of truly democratic participation in decision-making. A common view in Western political theory is that, while “the people” have a right to self-rule, they delegate this right to their representatives—to the government leaders who supposedly act in the public interest and under the guidance of impartial laws (Young 1990:91–92). However, there is no impartial legal and political system in countries like the United States, for in such hierarchically arranged societies those at the top create and maintain over time a socio-legal framework and political structure that strongly support their group interests. It seems clear that only a decisive redistribution of resources and decision making power can ensure social justice and authentic democracy.

The spaceship example explicitly recognizes the interdependence of human beings and other living species. For some decades now central ideas in physics and biology have stressed the interconnectedness of what were once thought to be discrete phenomena. Thus, the “gaia theory” in biology suggests, according to Lovelock (1987), that

... the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts. (P. 9)

This is more than a metaphorical description, for in fact we live on a planet that, we are increasingly realizing, is truly interwoven. All of earth's aspects—from biosphere, to soils and oceans, to atmosphere—are seen as parts of one interconnected living system with important cybernetic features. Thus, environmental irresponsibility in one place, such as the excessive burning of fossil fuels in the United States, contributes to negative effects elsewhere, such as to global warming in Australia.

Perhaps there are clues in the gaia theory for a broader sociological framework for viewing the development of human societies. We human beings are not just part of an interconnected biosphere, but are also linked in an increasingly integrated and global web of structured social relationships. This complex “sociosphere” consists of some 6 billion people living in many families and communities in numerous nation states. Nation states and their internal organizations are linked across an international web. Indeed, we human beings have long been more interconnected than we might think. According to current archaeological assessments, we all descended from ancestors who migrated out of Africa some millennia in the past. Today, most human beings speak related languages; about half the world's people speak an Indo-European language. In recent decades the expansion of telecommunication technologies has placed more people in potential or actual contact with one another than ever before. For the first time in human history, these technologies are rapidly creating one integrated body of humanity (Sahtouris 1996).

Yet, this increasingly interconnected sociosphere remains highly stratified: Great benefits accrue to those classes dominant in international capitalism. Today most of the globe's political and business leaders, as well as many of its academic experts, have come to accept capitalism as the more or less inevitable economic system for all countries. However, at the same time, growing numbers of people are recognizing that, because of globalizing capitalism, the earth is facing a massive environmental crisis, one that has the potential to destroy the basic conditions for human societies within a century or two. Issues of ecological destruction—as well as broader issues of social inequality and injustice—are being forced to the forefront not by corporate executives but by some 30,000 people's groups and movements around the globe. These include environmental groups, indigenous movements, labor movements, health-policy groups, feminist groups, anti-racist organizations, and anti-corporate groups (Klein 2000). Such groups agree on many critical environmental and political-economic goals.

Indeed, many people in other regions of the world seem to be ahead of us in the United States in their understanding of the damage done by the unbridled operations of multinational corporations. These groups are pressing for meaningful international declarations and treaties, such as the various United Nations declarations on the environment and human rights. In the United States awareness of the negative impact of globalizing capitalism is now substantial and may be growing. A 1999 U.S. poll found that just over half the respondents said they were sympathetic with the concerns of activists who had aggressively protested a recent World Trade Organization summit in Seattle (*Business Week* 1999). In many places in the United States today there is growing opposition to the economic and environmental decisions of those executives heading transnational corporations.

Unquestionably, social justice appears as a recurring concern around the globe. For that reason alone, we sociologists must vigorously engage issues of social justice or become largely irrelevant to the present and future course of human history.

### A LONG TRADITION: SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Given impending national and international crises, sociology appears to be the right discipline for the time. Sociology is a broad interdisciplinary field that draws on ideas from other social sciences, the humanities, and the physical sciences. Our intellectual and methodological pluralism, as well as our diversity of practitioners, are major virtues. Such richness gives sociology a particularly good position as a science to examine the complexities and crises of a socially interconnected world. Those sciences with diverse viewpoints and constructive conflicts over ideas and issues have often been the most intellectually healthy. As P. H. Collins (1998) has put it, "Sociology's unique social location as a contested space of knowledge construction allows us to think through new ways of doing science" (p. 10; also see Burawoy 1998).

Views of sociology's goals have long reflected a dialectical tension between a commitment to remedy social injustice and the

desire to be accepted as a fully legitimate discipline in the larger society, especially by powerful elites. The lead article in the July 1895 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*, written by Albion Small, founder of the first graduate sociology department (at the University of Chicago), listed among the major interests of the journal editors the analysis of "plans for social amelioration" (Small 1895:14). A decade later, Small presented a paper at the American Sociological Society's first meeting in which he argued vigorously that social research was not an end in itself but should serve to improve society (Friedrichs 1970:73). Small was not alone in this commitment. In the first decade or two of U.S. sociology, leading scholars advocated the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake *and* the assessment of that knowledge in relation to its current usefulness to society.

Moreover, from the beginning there has been a robust "countersystem" tradition within U.S. sociology—a tradition whose participants have intentionally undertaken research aimed at significantly reducing or eliminating societal injustice. The countersystem approach is one in which social scientists step outside mainstream thought patterns to critique existing society (Sjoberg and Cain 1971). From the perspective of this research tradition, social scientists have all too often accepted the status quo as their standard. It is noteworthy too that much countersystem analysis develops ideas about alternative social systems. For instance, any serious exploration of the countersystem tradition must acknowledge the past and current influence of Marx's critical analysis of capitalism, which included ideas about an alternative social system. Marx's countersystem analysis has, directly or indirectly, influenced many social scientists, including several of the sociologists to whom I now turn.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of white women, black men, and black women sociologists—as well as a few white male sociologists—did much innovative sociological research and at the same time took strong informed positions in regard to ending the oppression of women, black Americans, the poor, and immigrants. Among the now forgotten women and black

male sociologists were Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Emily Greene Balch, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and W. E. B. Du Bois. All were practicing sociologists, and all developed important sociological ideas and research projects. Most were members of the American Sociological Society (Deegan 1987).

Jane Addams was a key founder of U.S. sociology. Head resident of Chicago's pioneering Hull-House complex, she was an active sociologist and charter member of the American Sociological Society. She interacted professionally with other leading sociologists and intellectuals. During the 1890s and later, there was great intellectual ferment at Hull-House. Not only were union leaders, socialists, and other social reformers welcomed there, but a few major male social theorists, such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, regularly interacted with the women sociologists there (Deegan 1988:5). Addams was one of the first U.S. sociologists to deal conceptually and empirically with the problems of the burgeoning cities, and she was advanced in her sociological analysis of justice and democracy. She viewed democracy as entailing more than fairness and legal equality:

We are brought to a conception of Democracy not merely as a sentiment which desires the well-being of all men, nor yet as a creed which believes in the essential dignity and equality of all men, but as that which affords a rule of living as well as a test of faith. (Addams 1902:6)

In her view ordinary Americans had to participate actively in major decisions affecting their lives for there to be real democracy.

Addams and the numerous women (and a few men) sociologists working at Hull-House not only accented a cooperative and democratic model of society but also used their sociological research and analysis to ground their efforts for tenement reform, child-labor legislation, public health programs, feminism, and anti-war goals (Deegan 1988). They worked in immigrant and other poor urban communities and sought to build a grassroots base for social change. Moreover, working in collaboration, they did the *first* empirical field research in U.S. sociology. Like Harriet Martineau earlier in the nineteenth century (see below), Addams and

her colleagues accented a new sociological tradition that developed empirical data in order to better deal with issues of both social theory and public policy. Their 1895 book, *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (Residents of Hull-House [1895] (1970)), reported on the sociodemographic mapping of Chicago's urban areas well before that statistical approach became important for the University of Chicago's male sociologists. Interestingly, these sociodemographic data were used to help local residents understand their community patterns, not just to provide data for publications in academic journals. Moreover, one indication of the disciplinary impact of these early women sociologists is that between 1895 and 1935 they published more than 50 articles in what was then the leading sociology journal, the *American Journal of Sociology* (Deegan 1988:47).

In 1896 W. E. B. Du Bois became an assistant in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Du Bois was hired to do a study of black Philadelphians using, as he noted, the "best available methods of sociological research" (Du Bois [1899] 1973:2). His book, *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1973), was the first empirical study of a black community to be reported in sociological depth and at book length. Therein Du Bois not only analyzed sociological data on patterns of life in the black community (including racial discrimination) but also assessed what he viewed as the immorality of discrimination. The last part of this path-breaking book includes a study of domestic workers by Du Bois's white colleague Isabel Eaton, a former Hull-House sociologist. The research collaboration of these early black and white sociologists is also part of the now forgotten history of sociology. Moreover, in spite of Du Bois's stellar qualifications—major sociological research, a Harvard Ph.D., and work with leading European social scientists—no white-run sociology department offered him a regular position. Over time, Du Bois would make very important contributions to the sociological study of community, family, social problems, and class relations, as well as to the historical study of slavery and Reconstruction.

We should recognize too that in this early period there were important black women sociologists, such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett

and Anna Julia Cooper, whose work has recently been rediscovered (Lemert and Bhan 1998; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998). Though neither was affiliated with academic sociology, both were practicing sociologists and theorists of society. In their work they were among the earliest social scientists to analyze data on the conditions of African Americans and of women in U.S. society in terms of social "subordination" and "repression" (Cooper 1892; Wells-Barnett 1895).

By the 1920s and 1930s leading white male sociologists were downplaying or ignoring the pioneering sociological work of the early countersystem sociologists. For example, the dominant introductory textbook of the interwar decades, Park and Burgess's (1921) lengthy *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, views sociology as an academic and abstract science. This text contains in its 1,040 pages only a few bibliographical references to the work of Du Bois, but no discussion of his research work, and only one terse sentence on, and two bibliographical references to, the work of Addams.

Park and other prominent sociologists were increasingly critical of an activist sociology and were moving away from a concern with progressive applications of social research toward a more "detached" sociology. Their work was increasingly linked to the interests of certain corporate-capitalist elites, such as those represented by the Rockefeller family foundations. While they frequently researched various types of urban "disorganization," usually in qualitative field studies, they rarely analyzed deeply the harsher realities of social oppression—especially gender, class, and racial oppression—in the development of cities. Park and several of his colleagues played a major role in shifting the emphasis from a sociology concerned with studying and eliminating serious societal problems to a more detached and academic sociology concerned with "natural" social forces—without the humanitarian attitude or interpretation of what Park sometimes called the "damned do-gooders" (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998: 15–18; Raushenbush 1979:96).

Moreover, during the 1920s and 1930s support for a detached and instrumental-positivist sociology increased at major U.S.

universities. This approach is "instrumental" in that it limits social research mainly to those questions that certain research techniques will allow; it is "positivist" in that it commits sociologists to "rigorous" research approaches thought to be like those used in the physical sciences (Bryant 1985:133). A pioneer in this approach was Franklin H. Giddings at Columbia University. In an early 1900s' *American Journal of Sociology* discussion, Giddings (1909) argued, in strongly gendered language,

We need men not afraid to work; who will get busy with the adding machine and the logarithms, and give us *exact studies*, such as we get in the psychological laboratories, not to speak of the biological and physical laboratories. *Sociology can be made an exact, quantitative science*, if we can get *industrious* men interested in it. (P. 196, italics in original)

By the 1920s the influential William F. Ogburn, who trained at Columbia University under Giddings and was later hired at the University of Chicago, aggressively argued for such a detached and quantitative research approach. In his 1929 presidential address to the American Sociological Society he called for a sociology emphasizing statistical methods and argued that sociologists should not be involved as sociologists in improving society; instead they should focus on efficiently discovering knowledge about society. Whoever is in power, "some sterling executive," might then apply this objective sociological research (Bannister 1992:188–90). Survey methods and statistical analyses were gradually becoming the emphasized and preferred research strategies in mainstream sociology.

Over the next few decades, most mainstream sociologists, including those in leading departments, did not research major public events and issues, especially from a critical perspective. One study of 2,559 articles appearing in the *American Sociological Review* from 1936 to 1984 examined major social and political events for five periods within this time frame—events such as the Great Depression and McCarthyism—and found that overall only 1 in 20 articles dealt with the major events examined for these periods (Wilner 1985). Moreover, from the 1920s to the 1940s remarkably few of the



leading U.S. sociologists researched, or spoke publicly and critically of, the growing fascist movements in the United States and Europe, some of which would soon help generate a catastrophic war. Apparently, one reason for this neglect was the increasing emphasis on a “value-free,” “pure-science” approach to sociology (Banister 1992:175–89).

Still, some important critics emerged. Writing in the early 1940s in an appendix to his *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal ([1944] 1964) specifically criticized the move by Park and Ogburn toward a more detached sociology:

The specific logical error is that of inferring from the facts that men can and should make no effort to change the “natural” outcome of the specific forces observed. This is the old do-nothing (*laissez-faire*) bias of “realistic” social science. (P. 1052)

Anticipating later discussions and debates, Myrdal developed a critique of the new accent on a “value-free” social science:

Scientific facts do not exist *per se*, waiting for scientists to discover them. A scientific fact is a construction abstracted out of a complex and interwoven reality by means of arbitrary definitions and classifications. The processes of selecting a problem and a basic hypothesis, of limiting the scope of study, and of defining and classifying data relevant to such a setting of the problem, involve a choice on the part of the investigator. ([1944] 1964:1057)

As Myrdal viewed the matter, value neutrality in social science is impossible, for in making choices about how to assess and research society there is always something of value at stake. While scientific conventions provide guidelines for choices, they necessarily involve value judgements, and no one can avoid value judgments simply by focusing on just social “facts.”

By the 1930s and 1940s the critical, countersystem approaches of sociologists like Addams and Du Bois were losing out to a politically safe, academic, and distancing sociology. Sociology was increasingly becoming a discipline whose college and university departments were dominated by white male sociologists and often linked to elite interests—including ties such as grants

from corporate foundations and government agencies. As Deegan (1988) has noted regarding the dominant sociologists at the University of Chicago,

These later men therefore condemned political action for sociologists, while the ideas of the elite, in fact, permeated their work. . . . Rather than condemn the exploitation and oppression of daily life, the later Chicago men described it. They justified it through their acceptance of it. (P. 304)

In the decades after World War II, many mainstream sociologists continued the move toward the pure-science ideal and away from the concerns for social justice and the making of a better society. There was a great expansion of federally funded research in the physical sciences, and leading sociologists worked aggressively to grasp a share of the new federal money, often by stressing an instrumental-positivist sociology that attempted to imitate those physical sciences. In the late 1950s some 15 prominent social scientists, including leading sociologists, signed onto a statement, “National Support for Behavioral Science,” which pressed the U.S. government for funds for social science:

We assume the probability of a breakthrough in the control of the attitudes and beliefs of human beings. . . . This could be a weapon of great power in Communist hands, unless comparable advances in the West produce effective counter-measures. (Quoted in Friedrichs 1970:88)

Contrary to their statements elsewhere about value neutrality, the political orientation of these and other influential social scientists of the time made transparent the centrality of values that were then shaping social science research.

Also evident is the strong interest of leading social scientists in state-funded research. These researchers were largely successful in their efforts, and substantial bureaucracies have developed to fund social science research under the auspices of the federal government and private foundations. This government and corporate underwriting of much mainstream sociological research has fed the emphasis on a quantitatively oriented or instrumental-positivist sociology and on soci-

ologists as research entrepreneurs. Not surprisingly, social scientists who have secured major funding from federal government agencies and large corporate foundations have rarely done research that draws on the countersystem tradition and is strongly critical of established institutions in the corporate or governmental realms. From the 1930s to the present, the accent on academic grant-getting, the heavy emphasis on certain types of quantitatively-oriented research, and the movement away from the social justice concerns of earlier sociologists have been associated trends (see Cancian 1995).

A detached-science perspective has been influential in many areas of sociology for some decades now, but not without strong countering perspectives (e.g., see Vaughan 1993). Since the late 1960s there has been a periodic resurgence of interest in an activist sociology, including an increased concern with research on (and the eradication of) institutional discrimination and other forms of social oppression (e.g., see Omi and Winant 1994). Significantly, the recent history of sociology has been dialectical, with supporters of the detached-science perspective often being central, yet regularly challenged by those advocating a sociology committed to both excellent sociological research and social justice.

### AGENDAS FOR SOCIOLOGY: THE NEW CENTURY

Looking toward the next few decades, I see important conceptual, empirical, policy, and activist tasks for which the rich diversity of contemporary sociology can help prepare us. These tasks often relate to questions of social justice. Indeed, one major reason that some subfields of sociology are periodically attacked by conservative, and often ill-informed, journalists and media commentators is that analyses of discrimination, domination, and social justice are generally threatening to those who desire to maintain the status quo. Moreover, we should keep in mind that sociologists have already had a broad impact. Sociological ideas and research are frequently used in public discourse by those grappling with societal problems, and sociology books are more widely reviewed (and perhaps even read) outside the discipline

than any other social science books except history books (Bressler 1999:718).

Let us now consider a few of the socially-relevant agendas for the twenty-first century that can be inaugurated or accelerated by sociologists with many different research perspectives and methods.

### **BRING SOCIAL JUSTICE BACK TO THE CENTER**

First, it is time for the discipline to fully recover and celebrate its historical roots in a sociology committed to social justice in ideals and practice. In recent decades no sociologist has published even one substantial article in a major sociology journal (e.g., the *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Sociological Theory*) on the sociological ideas of the women sociologists in the founding generation (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 2001). It is time for us sociologists to remedy this neglect and help to reclaim the important ideas of those women sociologists and sociologists of color who are among the founders of our discipline.

A strong case can be made that the British social scientist Harriet Martineau (1802–1876) is the founder of empirical sociology in the West. She was apparently the first social scientist both to use the term sociology and to do systematic sociological research in the field (Hoecker-Drysdale 1992). She helped to invent a new sociological approach that brought empirical data to bear on questions of social theory and public policy. She wrote the first book on sociological research methods (Hill 1989), in which she argued—preceding Emile Durkheim by half a century—that research on social life is centrally about studying social “things” accurately and should involve research on “institutions and records, in which the action of a nation is embodied and perpetuated” (Martineau [1838] 1989:73). She was a contemporary of Auguste Comte and translated his major work on positive philosophy (sociology) into English. Martineau’s first major sociological analysis was based on observations from a field trip across the United States—a multi-volume set titled *Society in America* (1837). In that work she developed sociological insights as

penetrating and original as those of her more celebrated male counterpart, Alexis de Tocqueville. Martineau was also a feminist theorist and anti-slavery activist, and wrote extensively and sociologically on social issues for the general public.

Contemporary sociologists should also recognize the importance of, and draw more from, the ideas of early U.S. sociologists like Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois. As I noted previously, these pioneering U.S. sociologists offer solid role models in their dual commitments to social-scientific knowledge and to social justice, equality, and democracy. They gave central attention to the theoretical, empirical, and policy dimensions of sociological research. The work of the early women and African American sociologists, as well as that of progressive white men, may well point us toward a new conceptual paradigm for sociology. Such a paradigm would accent the centrality of differences, oppressions, and inequalities—as well as recurring movements for social justice—within societies like the United States.

It is also time that we recognize these social justice themes in the writings of some of the classical “founding fathers” of sociology. For example, Emile Durkheim has often been portrayed in relatively conservative terms, as being principally concerned with social order and stability. Yet Durkheim wrote eloquently about the impetus for social justice in societies. He argued that a forced division of labor, like that found in a class-riven society, was pathological and made organic solidarity impossible. Social inequality, created by such social mechanisms as routine inheritance across generations, compromises organic solidarity. For Durkheim ([1893] 1933:384–88) organic solidarity and social justice require the elimination of inequalities not generated by variations in personal merit:

If one class of society is obliged, in order to live, to take any price for its services, while another can abstain from such action thanks to the resources at its disposal which, however, are not necessarily due to any social superiority, the second has an unjust advantage over the first at law. . . . [The] task of the most advanced societies is, then, a work of justice. . . . [O]ur ideal is to make social

relations always more equitable, so as to assure the free development of all our socially useful forces. (P. 387)

A successful movement to complex organic societies requires ever more social justice,

. . . and we can be sure that this need will become ever more exacting if, as every fact presages, the conditions dominating social evolution remain the same. (P. 388)

**NURTURE THE COUNTERSYSTEM APPROACH**

Second, contemporary sociologists need to enlarge and cultivate the long-standing countersystem approach, not only in regard to investigating social inequality and injustice but also in regard to assessing alternative social systems that may be more just.

Today, the sociology handbooks and encyclopedias on my bookshelves have little to say about the concept of social justice. One significant task for social scientists is to document empirically, and ever more thoroughly, the character of major social injustices, both nationally and internationally. We also need more conceptual work that develops and enriches the concepts of social justice and equality. In my view, social justice is not only a fundamental human right but is also essential for a society to be sustainable in the long term. Even the corporate executives in the aforementioned spaceship example developed some understanding that justice and equity are essential to the long-term sustainability of a social system.

As I have suggested above, social injustice can be examined not only in terms of the maldistribution of goods and services, but also in regard to the social relations responsible for that maldistribution. These social relations, which can range from centrally oppressive power relations to less central mechanisms of discrimination, determine whether individuals, families, and other groups are excluded from society’s important resources and decision making processes. They shape the development of group and individual identities and the sense of personal dignity. In the end, social justice entails a restructuring of the larger frameworks of social relations generally (Feagin and Vera forthcoming).

We sociologists have made a good start toward understanding certain types of social injustice and inequality. Some of us have done considerable work to document the character and impact of class, racial, and gender subordination. In the United States and in Latin America some sociologists using participatory-action-research strategies have honed countersystem ideas and methods and worked interactively with people at the grassroots level seeking assessments of, and alternatives to, an onerous status quo (e.g., Fals-Borda 1960). The commitment here is to get out of the ivory tower and to help build a resource and power base for the disenfranchised in their communities. The legitimacy of this type of sociological research must be enhanced. As one group of participatory-action researchers has put it, "To map and analyze the dimensions of social problems . . . is seen as scientific research. To discuss and describe alternative practices and develop solutions is seen as moving toward politics and advocacy—areas that are perceived as a threat to the objectivity of research" (Nyden et al. 1997; also see Stoecker 1996). Collaborative research between sociologists and community groups seeking solutions to serious local problems of housing, work, education, poverty, discrimination, and environmental pollution should not be shoved aside, as it sometimes is, with cavalier comments about sociological "do-goodism," but should be placed in the respected core of sociological research—where it was at the birth of U.S. sociology.<sup>1</sup>

In everyday practice all sociology is a moral activity, whether this is recognized or not. In a society deeply pervaded and structured by social oppressions, most sociological research will reflect these realities to some degree, and attempts to deny these realities or their impact on research are misguided at best. All social science perspectives have an underlying view of what the world ought to be. As Moore (1971) noted,

[Questions] that arouse human passions, especially in a time of change, have had to do with the forms of authority and justice, and the purposes of human life. . . . It is impossible therefore to avoid taking some kind of a moral position, not only in writing about politics but also in *not* writing about them. (P. 3)

A countersystem approach attempts to assess the status quo from a viewpoint at least somewhat outside the frame of the existing society and/or nation state. In practice, social scientists can accept the prevailing nation-state or bureaucratic-capitalistic morality or they can resist this morality by making a commitment to social justice and human rights. Contemporary countersystem approaches often accent a broad human rights framework in which each person is entitled to fair treatment and justice simply because they are human beings, not because they are members of a particular nation-state. Moreover, some social scientists (e.g., Sjoberg 1996) have suggested that the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights—with its strong array of social, political, and economic rights—may be a good starting place for developing a robust human rights framework for social science research.

We should seek a sociology that is grounded in empirical and theoretical research *and* that hones a critical perspective less restricted by established institutions. Careful data collection, reasoned argument, and critical moral judgments are *not* incompatible. The great sociologist of race and class, Oliver C. Cox, underscored this point:

Clearly, the social scientist should be accurate and objective but not neutral; he [or she] should be passionately partisan in favor of the welfare of the people and against the interests of the few when they seem to submerge that welfare. (Cox 1948:xvi)

Numerous sociologists, from Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois, to Robert and Helen Lynd and Gunnar Myrdal, to more contemporary scholars as diverse as Alfred McClung Lee, Jessie Bernard, James Blackwell, Robert Bellah, and Orlando Fals-Borda have accented the importance of bringing moral discourse and research on "what is the good society" into the center of sociological

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, one 1990s survey of 12,000 Ph.D. sociologists revealed that over half spent at least 10 hours a week doing what they view as "applied" research (Dotzler and Koppel 1999:79).

debate and analysis. Even more, today we need to look beyond the borders of the nation-state to address the possibility of a world moral community.

### **BE MORE SELF-CRITICAL**

Third, as part of an ongoing self-renewal process, I see the need for accelerated self-reflection in sociology. This is a task closely related to my last point. The communities, colleges, universities, agencies, companies, and other settings in which we practice sociology are shaped in part by the oppressive social relations of the larger society. We need a liberating and emancipating sociology that takes risks to counter these oppressive social relations in our own bailiwicks.

As social scientists, we should regularly examine our research environments, including our metascientific underpinnings and commitments. Critical social perspectives, such as those of feminists, gay/lesbian scholars, critical theorists, anti-racist scholars, and Marxist researchers, among others, have been resurgent since the 1960s. Scholars researching from these perspectives, as well as symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists, have called for more internal reflection in the social sciences. In one such disciplinary reflection, feminist sociologists Stacey and Thorne (1996:1–3) argue that, while anthropology and history have incorporated feminist ideas better than sociology, the questioning of androcentric concepts and structures is finally beginning to have a broader impact in sociology. In an earlier critical reflection, Dorothy Smith (1987) argues that mainstream sociology has historically been part of the dominant ideological apparatus, which focuses on issues primarily of concern to men. Mainstream sociology's central themes are "organized by and articulate the perspectives of men—not as individuals . . . but as persons playing determinate parts in the social relations of this form of society . . ." (p. 56). Feminist sociologists have pressured the discipline to view and research the social world from the perspective of women and thereby greatly expand its fund of knowledge.

African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American, gay/lesbian, and other formerly excluded sociologists also have

pressed the discipline of sociology to view and research society from their standpoints and thus to broaden sociological knowledge. For instance, in an introduction to the reprint of her pioneering book, *The Death of White Sociology* ([1973] 1998), Ladner notes numerous ways in which the presence of scholars of color, as well as women and gay/lesbian scholars, has forced issues of social subjugation to be considered seriously in both the academy and the larger society. Similarly, racial-ethnic feminists have forced the academy to consider seriously multiple statuses and the intersectionality of oppressions (Baca Zinn and Dill 1994). The goal of all these scholars is not just to develop alternative funds of knowledge, but also to push this knowledge in from the margins, where it too often resides, toward the central trends and debates in sociology. Inside and outside the discipline, this accumulating knowledge can then become part of the process of eroding the historical relations of social oppression.

Hopefully, more self-reflection among sociologists can also lead us and other social scientists to destroy the insidious boundaries we often draw around ourselves, such as the artificial dichotomy of quantitative versus qualitative research, the ranking of basic over applied research, and the valuing of research over teaching.

### **RECOGNIZE AND STRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING SOCIOLOGY**

Fourth, we need to recognize and accent the importance of teaching sociology—especially the kind of quality teaching that will prepare present and future generations for the coming social, economic, technological, and environmental challenges. Indeed, many of us were recruited into sociology by first-rate teachers. Our graduate programs need to recognize that most people who secure Ph.D. degrees in sociology do not become professors in research universities, but rather become applied sociologists or faculty members with heavy teaching loads in a diverse array of public and private educational institutions (see Eitzen, Baca Zinn, and Gold 1999:57–60).

The majority of undergraduate and graduate students in sociology are looking for

meaningful ways to contribute to making a better society. Thus, it is disturbing to hear reports from some of these students at various colleges and universities that their professors are asserting that there is no room in sociology for idealism and activism. Social scientists who attempt to avoid social betterment issues often defend themselves with phrases like, "We are not out to save the world." C. Wright Mills (1958) once suggested,

Sometimes this is the disclaimer of a modest scholar; sometimes it is the cynical contempt of a specialist for all issues of larger concern; sometimes it is the disillusionment of youthful expectations; often it is the posture of men who seek to borrow the prestige of The Scientist, imagined as a pure and disembodied intellect. (P. 133)

As teachers of sociology, we should make clear to the coming generations of sociologists not only that there is plenty of room for idealism and activism in the field but that these qualities might be required for humanity to survive the next century or so. We need to communicate the excitement and importance of doing sociology. Alfred McClung Lee (1978) was eloquent in this regard:

The wonder and mysteries of human creativity, love, and venturesomeness and the threatening problems of human oppression and of sheer persistence beckon and involve those with the curiosity and courage to be called sociologists. Only those who choose to serve humanity rather than to get caught up in the scramble for all the immediate rewards of finance and status can know the pleasures and lasting rewards of such a pursuit. (Pp. 16–17)

In my view, sociology students should be shown how the diversity of theories, methods, debates, and practitioners in sociology is generally healthy for the field and for society. We also should strive to help our students think critically about their social lives and about building a better society. Wendell Bell (1998) has underscored the importance of showing social science students how to engage in debates about important issues, critically assess necessary moral judgments, and explore possible social futures for themselves and their societies.

#### STUDY THE BIG SOCIAL QUESTIONS

Finally, contemporary sociologists need to spend much more effort studying the big social questions of the twenty-first century. Interestingly, Kai Erikson (1984:306; also see Wilner 1985) once suggested that a review of leading sociology journals over several decades would likely find that many decisive events had been ignored there by sociologists. When social scientists become too professionalized and too narrowly committed to a discipline or area of study, research issues tend to be defined from within their dominant professional paradigm. They rely heavily on a narrow range of theories and methods. Only those research topics and interpretations are accepted that do not threaten the basis of the profession and its established intellectual capital. However, technological and other knowledge developments are now moving so fast that a social scientist who is too narrowly trained or focused may be incapable of making sense out of the ongoing currents of change.

In many U.S. colleges and universities the administratively sanctioned goal of generating grant money—often for its own sake—still distorts too much social science research in the direction of relatively minor social issues. This heavy focus on grant money reduces the amount of research on key public issues and diminishes the potential for colleges and universities to be arenas for critical debate and discussion of those issues (Black 1999).

C. Wright Mills (1958) called for social scientists to challenge dominant ideas:

If truly independent ideas are not even formulated, if we do not set forth alternatives, then we are foolishly trapped by the difficulties those now at the top have gotten us into. (P. 137)

Sociologists need to formulate more original and independent ideas, and to illuminate and directly and critically address recurring national and global crises. We need to implement Gans's (1989) call for more sociologists to become public intellectuals who will speak critically, and from data, about major societal issues. Especially in our journals, many social scientists need to break from the conventional style of research presentation

and jargonistic writing that targets a specialized audience and move to a style accessible to broad audiences and to an approach that addresses the big social questions and the implications of research for society. At the same time, we should recognize that there are numerous sociologists who write well and accessibly, yet often face the censorship of ideas that are seen as too critical—an experience still common in this society. Thus, we also should insist that the relevant publishing outlets consider and publish important critical analyses of momentous social issues, and not rule them out as “too controversial” or as “only thought pieces” (Agger 1989:220).

Yes, some sociologists do work on the big and tough questions; yet we need many more to ask major questions about such societal trends as the huge and ongoing wealth transfers from the working classes to the rich, the social impact of environmental crises, the impact of globalizing capitalism on local communities, and the human costs of racism, sexism, and other social oppressions.

One major research question requiring much attention relates to the international impact of multinational capitalism and its “free markets.” We hear much today about the global capitalistic economy, but all too little social science research is examining its deep structure and broad range of human consequences. Half a century ago, in a foreword to Polanyi’s book, *The Great Transformation*, sociologist Robert M. MacIver ([1944] 1957) noted that some research on capitalistic markets already indicated that formulas like “world peace through world trade” were dangerous simplifications:

Neither a national nor an international system can depend on the automatic regulants. Balanced budgets and free enterprise and world commerce and international clearing-houses . . . will not guarantee an international order. Society alone can guarantee it; international society must also be discovered. (P. xi)

Other major research questions deserving more attention from sociologists center on the character, costs, and future of contemporary racism. While some sociologists have pressed forward in researching the white-generated oppression targeting Americans of color, more researchers should address the

ways in which racial oppression becomes disguised or subtle in its character and practice, the ideological defense of that oppression, and the social costs for its targets and the larger society.

We should also encourage similar sociological research on other major forms of social oppression that pervade this and other contemporary societies. In recent years sociologists and other social scientists have undertaken significant empirical and theoretical work on sexism, homophobia, ageism, and discrimination against the disabled, yet today these areas cry out for much more research and analysis.

In addition, more sociologists should study societal futures, including the alternative social futures of just and egalitarian societies. The United States spends several million dollars annually on the scientific search for extraterrestrial life, yet very little on examining the possible or likely social futures for terrestrial societies. Today, we should encourage more sociologists and other social scientists to investigate societal probabilities and possibilities, and assess them for the general public. Social scientists can extrapolate critically from understandings of the trends and possibilities already apparent in various societal arenas, as well as probe an array of societal alternatives with imaginative research approaches.

Major societal transformations loom ahead of us. There are, for example, the demographic changes well described by some sociologists, such as the graying of societies. Such trends will likely be associated with other societal changes: Aging societies, for example, may have less interest in war, experience less street crime, and focus themselves more on issues of health care, social services, and euthanasia. Another demographic shift already underway is an increasing racial and ethnic diversity in some national populations. According to some U.S. Census Bureau projections, in the year 2050 the U.S. population will reach about 383 million; just under half will be Americans of color (Murdock 1995:33–47). And by the 2050s, it is estimated, Americans of European descent will become a statistical minority. For the most part, in-depth analysis of the social significance of this demographic trend has been left to journalists or popular

commentators, most of whom have limited sociological knowledge. There is ample opportunity right now for sociological research into the possible or likely societal futures associated with trends such as these, particularly assessments from a countersystem framework accenting the goals of social justice and multiracial democracy.

In addition, more sociologists should be doing research on, and showing the public the social consequences of, the likely technological advances in biomedicine, artificial intelligence, genetics, and telecommunications. A central aspect of human societies is the ability to collect, amass, and analyze information. Today new developments in information generation, storage, and application are emerging at an explosive rate. For instance, technological optimists predict that over the next few decades the biomedical revolution will greatly extend the human life span and augment our mental and physical capacities dramatically. What are the social consequences of such striking biomedical developments for the world's many peoples? A leading medical expert on immunology, Jerome Groopman (1999), has speculated on the inequalities likely to emerge:

I don't see the wealthy western nations rallying to make major inroads into the developing world, where infant mortality is still high and life expectancy is much lower. Will you have this very lopsided set of populations, where people in America and Western Europe are playing tennis and taking Viagra at 115, while in Zaire people are still dying at 15 from HIV, malaria, tuberculosis, and Ebola? (1999:n.p.)

Moreover, in a provocative article, "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us?" Sun Microsystems' co-founder and chief scientist Bill Joy (2000) has warned of a major technological threat to human beings—the new technologies of robots and other human-engineered organisms. In Joy's informed prediction, uncontrolled self-replication by robots with artificial intelligence could pose a serious threat to human beings in the coming decades. A number of computer scientists have predicted that by the 2030s computers will be ever more human, "conscious," and intelligent (Kurzweil 1999). They predict that computers will have capacities a million times greater in the future

than at present, and that computerized robots will be much "smarter" than human beings. A generally cautious computer scientist, Joy (2000) does not see himself as writing science fiction, but as one who asks tough questions about social futures: "Given the incredible power of these new technologies, shouldn't we be asking how we can best coexist with them? . . . [S]houldn't we proceed with caution?" (n.p.).

Reviewing policy options, Joy (2000) suggests the almost unthinkable solution of humans giving up entirely the development of this robotic technology because of its likely negative consequences for human societies. Physical scientists like Joy are questioning the modern faith in the benign character of new technologies. They are asking tough questions about the failure of physical and social scientists, policymakers, and ordinary citizens to be centrally concerned with the social consequences of technologies. Critical assessments of possible or probable social futures for technologically "advanced" civilizations are natural research and analytical tasks for contemporary sociologists.

## CONCLUSION

In an 1843 letter, the young Karl Marx suggested that critical social analysis should lay bare the hidden societal realities. The goal must be the "reform of consciousness not through dogmas but by analyzing mystical consciousness obscure to itself, whether . . . in religious or political form" (Marx [1843] 1975:209). Marx added that the task for involved social scientists, as for other citizens of the world, was the clarification of the "struggles and wishes of the age" (p. 209).

For many millennia human beings have been tool-makers, yet in just a few decades we have created economies and technologies—such as polluting industries, fossil-fuel consuming engines, and nuclear weapons—that may well threaten the survival of our species and of our living planet itself. It seems likely that the fate of our planet and its many species will be decided within the next few generations by just one of its species. As moral beings, we need to ask insistently: What would alternatives to our self-destructive societies look like? And how do we get there?



Much of humanity might agree on a new global social system that reduces injustice, is democratically accountable to all people, offers a decent standard of living for all, and operates in a sustainable relation to earth's other living systems (e.g., see Korten 1999; Sahtouris 1996). Determining whether this is the case and how such a just global society might be developed are enormous questions that sociologists—and other citizens of the world—should be tackling.<sup>2</sup> In a pioneering book, *The Image of the Future* (1973), Fred Polak argued that we need a new generation of visionaries who can think clearly and deeply about sustainable social futures:

Social scientist, intellectual, artist, leader, middleman of any breed, and the Common Man (and Woman) to whom, after all, this century belongs—each must ask himself [or herself], what is my vision of the future? And what am I going to do about it? (P. 305)

While social science analysis can help us to understand our ailing societal dreams and decide what dreams to accept or reject, such analysis is beneficial only if it frees us to decide on a better future. Let me conclude by closely paraphrasing Polak (1973:305): Human beings have the ability to dream better futures than we have yet succeeded in dreaming. We have the ability to create much better societies than we have yet succeeded in creating.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, visualizing the path to a better future for the world's poor is not difficult. The 1997 *Human Development Report* of the United Nations indicated that for about 15 percent of the U.S. defense budget, or about \$40 billion a year, the basic needs for health, nutrition, education, reproductive health, safe water, and sanitation could be met for the entire population of the planet. Another \$40 billion would be enough to bring the poorest residents of the planet out of extreme poverty (Williamson 2000).

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