Social Science and the Public After Mumford*

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Social Science and the Public After Mumford

I feel honored to give the Lewis Mumford lecture. Few, if any, in the twentieth century bestrode the borderland between social science and the public as Lewis Mumford did. The author of many influential books on urban development and the history of technology, a leader in the planning profession, a critic of American literature, Mumford, through his books, his columns in *The New Yorker*, and his essays, shaped discussions about cities and technical modernization. Mumford accomplished this feat as a largely untrained, un-credentialed generalist as a journalist. He crossed into the academic terrain and brought back ideas and research which he was able to summarize and synthesize in ways that opened the eyes of specialist and layperson alike.

Mumford s way of bringing social science into public debates is difficult to follow today. Most expertise today lies with specialists who toil, as I do, in the ivory towers. And yet, the need to build bridges between academic social science and the public is even more important although more harder to accomplish today than in Mumford s prime years.

In this talk, I want to consider the problems of accomplishing this goal today, 63 years after the publication of *The Culture of Cities*. I will draw, in part, on my own, limited experiences on crossing the academic-public borderlands. And I will close by discussing a new experiment that sociologists are launching to bring social science to the public after Mumford.

The Mumford Model

Lewis Mumford was a self-taught intellectual. He never received a B.A., much less a Ph.D., and did not seem to do all that well in the college courses he took. He spent critical years of his early adulthood living on an inheritance, wandering the streets of New York, making copious observations, reading voraciously, and relentlessly firing off articles to magazine editors, who shot as many rejections back.[1] Even as he began to succeed, Mumford worried about his place in the intellectual system. In 1920, when he had published about 15 articles on topics

[1] I draw largely from Miller (1989).

including urban history, Napoleon, politics, the Tate Gallery, and fiction (Newman 1971: 10-12), he wrote: What *am* I? A journalist? a novelist? a literary critic? an art critic? a sociologist? . . . MUST I TAKE A DEFINITIVE LINE? (Miller 1989:230). Overcoming this anxiety, Mumford eventually reached such pinnacles of recognition as a cover on *Time* magazine in 1938 (for *Culture of Cities*) and the National Medal of the Arts in 1986 precisely because he mastered all of these roles and became a supreme generalist.

To be sure, specialists quarrel with many of Mumford s summary generalizations and his relations with the academy were sometimes tense (see, e.g., Morely 1985; Lewis 1980; Stunkel 1999).[2] Nevertheless, Mumford played a critical role in many fields in the humanities, for example, bringing Melville to wide appreciation. As an outsider, he provoked much thought among the specialists in the academy by addressing public issues of policy, philosophy, and morality. And by his reading, synthesis, clear standpoint, and forceful writing, he brought to the general public much of the scholarship that had been effectively quarantined in the academy.

The question I raise is whether and how such border-crossing can happen today in particular, how social science can enter public discussions.

Impediments

The obstacles to retracing Mumford s path are many. On the academic side, the mere volume of research is many-fold larger than when Mumford absorbed the scholarship of his day. In 1920, America s universities sent out 15 Ph.D.s in Anthropology and Sociology to be fruitful and populate the libraries; by 1970, the universities matriculated almost *fifty* times as many. In the two decades between 1950 and 1970 alone, books in sociology and economics proliferated over eight-fold (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1977: 388, 808). Specialization accompanied the expansion of scholarship, requiring extensive training in distinct methodologies, theories, and perspectives. Mumford s command of the literature in, say, urban history, would be, I suspect,

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[2] More urban sociologists, I suspect, agree with Jane Jacobs prescription of density and functional diversity than with Mumford s vision of more pastoral new towns. Most students of technology, I estimate, find Mumford s mega-machine synopses overly grand and under-detailed. Historians may well consider some his writings to be, as Alan Trachtenberg (1980:34) put it, revisions of the past in the form of imaginative inventing.

even beyond him today.

On the public side, also, new circumstances impede a would-be Mumford. The audience is vaster in size, not only because of population growth, but also because a higher proportion of Americans are in the audience. In 1920, fewer than three percent of American adults had graduated college; today about one-fourth carry a B.A. degree or better (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1977: 385; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000: 169). More Americans expect to have a voice in decisions. In the early part of the century, with policy under the control of expert commissions and the voter turnout depressed by Progressive reforms, one could more easily address the small group whose decisions would matter on, say, a new housing policy. At the end of the century, the number of players agencies, review boards, lobbyists, non-governmental citizen groups, and so on is much greater; the laws in place, as in environmental impact requirements, give standing to many more interests; and the culture of rights emboldens a far more diffuse public to demand its prerogatives. Many more Americans must be addressed. And at the same time, Americans are increasingly distracted with many new forms of entertainment and education.

Certainly, some scholars break through the clutter and find their own platform from which to address the public. The hard sciences have figures such as E.O. Wilson and Stephen Jay Gould. Sociology can point to people such as Daniel Bell, Robert Bellah, and William Julius Wilson, who have gained enough attention to warrant book reviews in the major media and visits to the White House. But none, I think, has had the sort of broad audience that Mumford and his breed once did. Moreover, none can convey to the public the breadth of scholarship that Mumford did, because the scholarship is just too broad and the audience too diffuse.

Yet, many of the very changes that make it difficult to replicate Mumford today, such as the depth of research and the pluralism of decision-making, make it important to serve the same end: to inform the public of what social scientists know about issues of concern. Much of value remains largely sequestered in the academy when it should be exported to the wider public.

Take as a random example the work of John Logan. In a series of studies conducted with various colleagues, notably Richard Alba of SUNY Albany, the director of the Lewis

Mumford Center has explored in great detail the dynamics of neighborhoods. Logan and Alba and their colleagues have shown that, even in the post-modern era of jet planes and the internet, *location matters.* Where people live affects their economic fortunes, their cultural assimilation, and their life chances such as the risk of falling victim to crime. (Ironically, average people seem to understand this more than pundits and policy-makers do, as they continue to care deeply about where they live.) And the Albany studies show that *race matters* in determining location. After many have declared that discrimination is over and only reverse discrimination is a problem, being black is still carries a unique cost in America. In one telling statistic, Alba, Logan and Bellair (1994:413) concluded that, even if one takes into account all sorts of differences between blacks and non-blacks other than simple fact of race, blacks are still especially disadvantaged in location. [E]ven the most highly educated black homeowner with the highest income has . . . [an] exposure [risk] to violent crime no better than that of the least educated white renter with the lowest income. Finally, Logan s work also reveals how communities work to reinforce advantage and disadvantage and thereby shows that *politics matter*. Residential segregation by race and class is not simply a matter of the housing market nor even of individual prejudice, but made possible by how we structure politics in the American metropolis.[3] I have simplified the work. But this research showing how public decisions shape residential patterns which, in turn, affect race relations and individual lives is important. This example can be multiplied many, many fold.

More of this sort of work needs to penetrate pubic debate in America. To be sure, some has: Some sociologists have noted and certainly critics of the discipline have that in the twentieth century more Americans adopted a somewhat sociological understanding of human action. That is, Americans today are likelier than their grandparents to explain people s fates by social circumstances, rather than by innate character or personal will. Americans became more inclined to explain delinquency or economic failure by family conditions or inadequate schooling than by evil or innate traits. Indeed, this perspective on crime is mocked in the classic 1950s

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[3] See Alba and Logan (1993), Alba et al (1994, 1997a, 1997b), Liska et al (1998), Logan (1997), Logan and Alba (1993), Logan et al (1996), Logan and Schneider (1984), Logan and Zhou (1989), Logan and Molotch (1987), and Zhou and Logan (1989).

musical, *West Side Story*, when gang members sing to Officer Krupkie that they are not bad, just the victims of bad families.

In a more specific and recent example of sociological influence, two reviewers of the research on the death penalty conclude that scholarship *has* shaped that debate, albeit marginally. Clearly, this is one area of public policy where social science research is making a slow but perceptible impact, they write (Radalet and Borg 2000:57). The death penalty example points toward a common role of sociologists in public policy: being called in to advise policy-makers on specific social problems. Examples include criminology, welfare reform, teen pregnancy, and school integration. While making valuable contributions, sociology plays very delimited and technocratic role in these spheres and, some practitioners complain, an often frustrated role, as well. More generally, what social research appears in the media is overwhelmingly 80 percent in a 1980s study (Singer 1986) presented to the public by partisans, government, or journalists, not academic scholars. Even when bits of research make it into the media, they often lack the frame that would make them comprehensible.

The sort of framing I have in mind was exemplified early in the last century by the newfound authority of Freudianism. Human behavior, educated Americans came to understand, is driven by urges and impulses which, in turn, spew up from infant experiences or even more primordial wells. Late in the century, it was neo-classical economics that ascended to authority. Humans are cost-benefit calculators, economists explained, and operate most efficiently in a system that assumes this of people and permits them to operate that way i.e., in a market.[4]

But most social sciences are a long way from these sorts of influence. And yet, the public needs the input of sciences such as sociology, anthropology, and political science. It needs the input for the facts and for the general perspectives they provide. By facts, I mean established findings that seem news to the educated lay public and even to non-specialists in the academy

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[4] I have occasionally wondered at what enabled economists to gain the intellectual high ground. Is it that economists deal in money, a topic even more arousing than the sexuality Freudians traffic in? that they garnered authority from the government s role in managing the economy? that they successfully campaigned for a Nobel Prize? that they were provided pulpits by well-funded foundations and media columns? or that they have had particularly effective spokesmen, such as Milton Friedman?

such as the continued importance of place shown in work by Logan and others; or the fact that Americans of the twentieth century were more religiously active than their ancestors; or that fluctuations in rates of unwed motherhood are less a matter of sex and more a matter of the ability to marry. As to providing a general perspective, I mean an understanding that social structures, institutions, and cultures are real and significantly constrain human action.

Analyzing Failures to Communicate

Why haven t both the findings and the perspective of the social sciences here, I focus on sociology failed to pass from the academy into the general public discussion? Sociologists often complain that the media is uninterested in what they have to say and that when journalists do cover the field, they sensationalize and distort.[5] Some also complain that the public is too distracted or dense to attend to or to understand good sociology. There is also political resistence. Sociology is, by its nature, a debunking discipline; it searches for the reality behind official interpretations of society. Those on the Right get irritated by sociologists insistence that our society is socially constructed, that it could be other than what it seems naturally to be. Sociologists also annoy many on the Left when they challenge its ideology or political correctness. [6]

Another communications problem social scientists face is general readers desire for conclusive and summary judgements.[7] We all more easily assimilate texts that fall neatly into

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[5] An infamous example in 1986 involved Newsweek magazine s misunderstanding of demographic research which led them to feature the claim that women over 30 were more likely to be killed by a terrorist than to get married.

[6] To be sure, sociologists irritate the Right much more than the Left, in part because the debunking is a more fundamental threat to conservative understandings of the world and in part because sociologists themselves are overwhelmingly on the Left.

[7] Undergraduates often complain that a reading they have been assigned does not say whether the subject was good or bad; that the author did not tell us whether he was for it or against it. The fact that a subject say, suburban growth or urban gentrification may be good for some people and bad for others or mixed for both, or that all the necessary evidence may not be in yet, or that the outcome may be contingent on still other factors, or that the development may be good if one most values say, individual liberty, and bad if one values more, say, equality these notions are hard for them to absorb.

pro or con: Is the movie worth seeing or not?; should I be for an idea or against it? In this respect, too, Mumford communicated well. He never lacked for taking strong positions, which fueled his writing and assisted popular understanding.[8]

But these grievances against journalists, distracted audiences, political prejudices, or naive readers are irrelevant. As I tell graduate students in my course on professional writing, the customer is always right. If people do not understand or appreciate or absorb what we write, we have to write better, explain more, and more aggressively export what we have to say. In this endeavor, journalists, as gate-keepers to the public, should be our allies and we theirs. If we fail, we need to redouble our efforts. We cannot retreat to the redoubt of the ivory tower. It is a dereliction of duty and a misuse of the public s funds upon which we draw.

Success is possible. I think, for example, of three of my own colleagues at Berkeley, Robert Bellah, Arlie Hochschild, and Harry Edwards, who have been able to deliver their ideas to many fora in diverse ways.[9] While encouraging, these examples depend on rare talents in communication. Also, these works tend more to represent the vision of *a* sociologist rather than the cumulative work of sociologists.

Another occasionally successful type of exportation is evaluation research. Sociologists provide a steady stream of technical studies to policy-makers at the federal, state, and local levels. The American Sociological Association recently began organizing seminars for congressional staffers on specific policy concerns, such as youth violence. As valuable as

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[8] The issue of whether social scientists should take stands is highly controversial among practitioners today and I will not explore that issue here, except to note this: The more social scientists mix their evaluations with their research reports, the more we run into another complaint that naive undergraduates reflecting a general suspicion frequently voice: Social science is just a matter of opinion. If so, then different opinions i.e., the gut feelings of an 18-year-old freshman and the weighty tome of a researcher are both of equal merit and, in a free society, should have equal voice.

[9] Robert Bellah and his co-authors of *Habits of the Heart* found a wide reception to their study and criticism of individualism in America (Bellah et al 1985), with great sales, course adoptions, and use by groups such as bible study classes. Arlie Hochschild s books, notably *The Second Shift*, have worked their way into popular magazines and into the very language used to discuss family life in our times (Hochschild 1989, 1997). Harry Edwards has had a major influence in the sports world by lecturing and on the sociology of sports and consulting withe professional organizations.

policy research and its reporting are, they do not solve the difficulty that I have described as the post-Mumford problem: inserting social science knowledge into the general public debate and public understanding.

A few sociologists energetically write in the general media, some not only as public intellectuals, but as popularizers of sociological research. Richard Morin writes a column for the *Washington Post* called Unconventional Wisdom: New facts and hot stats from the social sciences, in which he reports on the latest often quirky items of research from across the behavioral disciplines.

All these efforts help join scholarship to public discussions. But much more needs to be done and can be done. And even if we can overcome these problems, there are additional barriers. I have learned a few lessons from my own experience in this regard. That experience includes work in the area of urban studies, social networks, the history of technology, and inequality.

Some Eyewitness Testimony

I have learned that it is relatively easy to get ink on the quaint or the unexpected. My book on the social history of telephone (Fischer 1992) has, with minimal effort at publicity, received a surprising amount of attention in the general media, including significant air time on National Public Radio. The book discusses old-timey telephones and includes colorful stories about rural party lines items of nostalgic human interest. And, because that book deals with communications technology, albeit an old one, journalists repeatedly invite me to comment on contemporary, glitzy technologies such as cell phones and the internet. I probably beg off at least two such requests a month. As to the reporting the unexpected: My man-bites-dog example concerns residential mobility. Twice over a quarter-century, I have written minor papers that made a simple point, a point long familiar to historians and demographers: residential turnover in the United States has been going *down* for more than a century; Americans are *less* residentially mobile today than ever (Fischer and Stueve 1976; Fischer 2000). Again, with minimal publicity, that story garnered media attention in 1976 and in 2000, even though it was news each time only in one sense it challenged popular impressions.

These examples of easy publicity also share another, important feature. While the surface story traveled easily from academy to media, deeper, theoretical issues remained behind. The telephone book deals with how we understand the nature of technology. It argues against a kind of technological determinism. The mobility papers challenge the stereotype of modern society as fractured and unstable. These ideas did *not* travel.[10] The greater difficulty is not in conveying what Morin calls new facts and hot stats especially if the facts and stats are theatrically novel but in conveying more basic concepts and paradigms.

Another illustration from my own work: At one time, I conducted research and wrote about people s social networks (e.g., Fischer 1982). This brought some occasional interest and invitations to write for the general media (e.g., Fischer 1983). In a few conversations with journalists, however, I found myself struggling to explain with mixed success the basic sociological approach to personal relationships. Typically, the journalist would ask a question such as, Why do people *want* to have friends of similar social background? I would try to answer that most of the explanation has nothing to do with what individuals *want* or even consciously choose, but instead with the social circumstances in which they live. For example, children grow up with neighbors, classmates, and church-mates of similar social position; adults work in settings that typically expose them overwhelmingly to others like themselves. No wonder, then, that close friends are similar. Whatever people s intentions, their choices are strongly limited by social structure. This proves a difficult idea to get across to lay people in general or, at least, to American lay people who share a world-view that individuals largely have free reign, wide choice, in determining their lives.

The next example raises a host of similar issues about communication; it concerns a book I co-authored, *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth* (Fischer et al 1996). To review the background: In October 1994, the late Richard J. Herrnstein and the conservative essayist Charles Murray published *The Bell Curve*, to media attention amazing for book devoted to presenting statistical analyses and including about 100 pages of computer printout. Many will

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[10] Indeed, the mobility story so runs against the common schema of modernity that people who hear and understand the story one day are often back to tossing off phrases like our ever more rootless soc iety the next day. That includes socio logists.

recall the stir the book caused by arguing that inequality in life outcomes is largely decided by genetically-determined differences in intelligence and also by forcefully implying that racial differences in life circumstances are explained by inherent racial differences in intelligence. The bulk of *The Bell Curve* is statistical analysis purporting to show that how youths scored on a supposed test of intelligence largely determined how their lives would turn out.

Many scholars were dismayed at the attention the book received, because its basic claims had already been refuted by a previous quarter-century of solid and well-known research. Unfortunately, in the early days of the media buzz, the critics who first appeared in the general press did not challenge *The Bell Curve* on its shoddy scholarship, but instead assaulted the character of the authors or dismissed statistical research. In those weeks, the authors of *The Bell Curve* gained an image of objective scientists under assault by luddites of political correctness. It took a while for academics it always takes us a while to respond as scholars. Our book was the first full-length rejoinder to *The Bell Curve* on grounds of social science although far from the last (e.g., Devlin et al 1997; Dickens et al 1996; Knapp et al 1996; Neisser 1997). Suffice it to say that, among the vast majority of sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists give *The Bell Curve* no credibility and consider it pseudo-science.

Six of us at Berkeley Michael Hout, Martín Sánchez-Jankowski, Samuel Lucas, Ann Swidler, Kim Voss, and myself met to discuss *The Bell Curve* within a week or two of its news-making splash in 1994. We had a few motivations. One was to respond to consternation among many black students. They awoke one morning to find the national media publicizing a supposedly scientific study that showed them to be inherently inferior. The unease in the classroom was palpable. Another motivation was professional pride. A piece of ideological propaganda had usurped that the mantle of social science. And most importantly, as sociologists, we had a *duty* to correct the record. We decided to respond by writing what became *Inequality by Design.* We divided up the topics and the work. One main component was statistical re-analysis of the survey upon which *The Bell Curve* relied. Some pieces involved reviewing literature on key questions. Yet other tasks entailed developing the conceptual issues: What do aptitude tests really measure?; how should we think about inequality?; what accounts for racial differences?

As we researched and wrote, we also explored venues for publication and publicity. We even hired an agent. In the end, we published with Princeton University Press, commercial presses passing on the opportunity an early sign of problems to come.

The book appeared in mid-1996, an unusually quick production for scholarly work, but perhaps not quick enough. It received some good notices. It garnered some publicity items in the *Boston Globe* and *The Economist*, for example, a television interview on a Bay Area cable station, radio interviews on a few leftist stations, a few public lectures, and the like. Our book sold reasonably well for a scholarly work, particularly as required course readings. But: *Inequality by Design* did not get the breakthrough attention it would need to confront *The Bell Curve*. It did not get reviewed in the *New York Times* or similar newspapers, or in the newsweeklies. The six of us look back on the intense 18-or-so months of work with satisfaction, but it was an incomplete project. Why did the arguments of *Inequality by Design* not enter the public discussion nearly as much as we had hoped?[11]

One simple answer is the power of public relations money. Word has it that *The Bell Curve* enjoyed a six-figure budget for publicity. In addition, strong-willed and well-heeled ideological organizations made sure the media knew about that book. And the Free Press management pushed it vigorously. Cover stories in *Newsweek* and *The New Republic* are not accidents. While Princeton University Press made special efforts to publicize *Inequality by Design*, it was a matter of pennies to dollars. But money and power aside, there are deeper issues this story raises relevant to the general topic of social science and the media.

One is timeliness: To many journalists, *The Bell Curve* was old news by 1996. The issues had been hashed out, fairly or not, in 1994. (One cynic in the media suggested that some

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[11] These arguments were basically of three sorts: First, the ability test at the center of *The Bell Curve* is not a test of native intelligence at all, but of learning. Second, the statistical work in *The Bell Curve* is in fraught with basic errors. Doing the analysis correctly yields the conclusion that test scores, whatever they measured, were not as important as social factors in predicting outcomes. Third and most important, *The Bell Curve* misstates the problem of inequality. The key question to ask about class is *not* who ends up on top or on the bottom, but why a society structured the way it is. Why, for example, does America have the largest gaps among the have-nots, haves, and have-lots in the western world?; why has that spread widened in recent decades? The answers, we documented, were not in the distributions of citizens natural abilities, but in the policies of different times and different nations.

publications did not want to advertise their gullibility with respect to *The Bell Curve*.) In retrospect, perhaps we should not have devoted the time we did to correct the statistical errors of *The Bell Curve*. A few months may have made a difference.

Another was writing: Although we made great efforts to be lucid and engaging, the ideas and the evidence we presented were difficult and we or *I*, as the final redactor did not do well enough. Many sociologists consider *Inequality by Design* clear enough to assign to freshman, but it is still heavy slogging for general readers. (We may have been misled, also, by all the technical paraphernalia including scores of tables in *The Bell Curve* which did not inhibit its sales. Some have suggested, however, that many more copies of that book were sold than ever read.) In retrospect, a thinner, simpler, more anecdotal book might have gotten the media attention.

In the end, more money, more time, more contacts may have led to more visibility. But, we have to accept that, as hard as we tried, we did not try hard enough to be novel to make news and to communicate simply.

Despite the frustrations, we need to continue trying to introduce our work into the public discussions. (I suggested some ideas for doing so in Fischer 1990.) Some sociologists dismiss the endeavor or just find it to exasperating. But, we have the civic responsibility to try. And that means making special efforts to descend from the ivory tower. I turn next to one such special effort.

The Contexts *Experiment*

The American Sociological Association has embarked on a major publishing experiment that will, in part, test whether sociologists can contribute in greater volume and with clearer voice to public discussions. This time next year will see the premier issue of a new publication, *Contexts*. It is designed, in the words of its official mission statement, as a magazine for diverse readers who wish to be current about social science knowledge, emerging trends, and their relevance. It will look, feel, smell, weigh, and, we hope, read like other serious general-audience magazines one finds at major newsstands and book stores but *not* like a dusty, academic journal. Sociologists will contribute articles to *Contexts* that synthesize key findings, weave together diverse strands of work, draw out implications for policy, and debate issues of

controversy. One target audience for *Contexts* set by the Association is social scientists themselves who want to keep up with research and ideas outside of their own specializations. In this role, *Contexts* could help mend the fracturing of the academy that has accompanied its growth. More ambitiously, it seeks to reach a second audience of non-academics seriously interested in social topics readers such as policy-makers and -advisers, journalists, social studies teachers, community workers, business planners, and the generally curious. Directed to *anyone* interested in the latest sociological ideas and research, the mission statement reads, *Contexts* seeks to apply new knowledge, stimulate fresh thinking, and disseminate information [italics added]. Simply put, *Contexts* s articles will spell out in plain English what sociologists know about topics of public interest. And we hope thereby to bring social science into public fora.

This is a venturesome experiment, largely unprecedented for an academic association. The American Sociological Association is making a large investment of its funds and the energies of its staff. So is the University of California, Berkeley, which is housing and supporting the project. I, as the initial editor, am devoting a major part of my next several years. The experiment consists of two tests. One, is there an audience for public sociology sufficient to support such a magazine? Two, can sociologists can write for such an audience?

As editor, I focused particularly on the second test. In the first several months of preparation, I have been soliciting ideas and essays. We have approached perhaps two dozen sociologists so far, asking them to formulate short essays largely on topics that we suggest. A board of consulting editors, student editors, a managing editor with a journalism background, and I review the ideas and the draft articles, editing them, working with authors to fashion them into the sorts of pieces that will engage many kinds of readers. Our procedures mix academics and journalism. Drafts must be vetted by the editorial board for their scholarship. But we develop and rework them in a fashion more common to general magazines, in a back-and-forth between editors and authors. Articles in *Contexts* will bear the content of academic rather than journalistic work descriptions and analyses of studies rather than anecdotes or interviews, for example but not the accouterments of the academy such as citations and footnotes.

So far, I have found sociologists generally willing, sometimes enthusiastic, and

occasionally wary of treading into this new terrain, of trying to address a wider public. (Only one has said, in effect, If people don t understand this stuff, the heck with them.) Most have responded to our sometimes drastic editing with surprisingly good cheer, understanding that this is a new effort for all of us. As editor, I am learning more about the challenges of writing for a wider audience. These challenges include matters of content, structure, and language.

By content, I mean the need to address the interests of the wider public. We do not have to chase headlines, pander, or focus on the popular crises of the day. Sociologists typically truck in topics of wide interest that lay readers do care about. But such readers do not care about inside baseball, the internal theoretical and methodological discussions. So, *Contexts* will publish few, if any, pieces that explore the latest developments in structuration theory or debates over interpretations of Weber. We expect to publish articles on what sociologists know about the assimilation of immigrants, sexual activity among teens, religious belief and behavior, former welfare recipients, the effects of divorce, differences among neighborhoods, work in high-tech industries, and the audiences for high culture, for examples. Nonetheless, even when writing about such topics, sociologists often find it hard to shake their fascination with internal matters. An article draft on, say, crime, can easily drift into paragraphs about methods and further research. If we want to reach general readers, we need to engage *their* interests, not ours.

Such engagement often fails also because of the structure of an article. Sociologists, like other scientists, typically build an academic article with the following sequence of questions: What is the issue? What do scholars know so far about it? How did I do my research? What were my results? And how do the results answer the question, with what implications? What further research should be done? Sociologists typically withhold the punch line what the news is and why it matters until near the end. Sociological readers expect and appreciate that structure. But general readers do not. The basic reason is simple but fundamental: Readers who do not *have* to read an article (for their jobs or their schoolwork) *have* to be enticed to start and to keep reading. We must hook them with an opening that attracts them, that tells them what the news is and why they should care about that news. These principles, in turn, mean that at *Contexts* we sometimes suggest to authors that they invert the whole structure of their articles, craft a dramatic opening, and build the piece around their news. Thus, one eminent sociologist

recently interpreted our editorial suggestions to him as an instruction to turn his article upside down and he was quite agreeable about doing so.

And *Contexts* faces a language problem. As critics have long noted (e.g., Cowley 1956), sociologists seem addicted to jargon and neologisms, to the passive voice, to elaborate and unneeded constructions (it is important to note that), to weak verbs, and abstract nouns. This style not only puts many readers to sleep, it obscures logic and substance. Cause and effect hide behind qualifiers and shadowy actors; details swamp key arguments; assumptions lie deeply buried in text.[12] In the articles *Contexts* is getting, we see sociologists struggling with writing habits developed over many years. Sometimes, the early paragraphs are crisp and vivid, but as the author tires, familiar habits reappear: abstractions where concreteness is needed; many and long words where the few and the short will do; wind-up phrases instead of quick deliveries (e.g., the experience of being a worker . . . instead of being a worker . . .; a number of . . . instead of several); static verbs like is when the reader needs action; belts and suspenders redundancy where the author should get on with it; and metaphors aged into clichés (e.g., spread like wildfire) where plain-speaking would be clearer. All these habits some of which I share are the targets of Writing 101. But professional schools do not teach Writing 101 and the profession does not discipline its members to write well. All this must be put aside if we mean, in the post-Mumford age, to enter into public dialogues.

These issues of content, structure, and style, are just a few of the initial challenges *Contexts* faces. There are many others, from finances to staffing to marketing. But the important point I want to make here is that *Contexts* represents a major institutional effort to shorten the distance between the academy and the public realm.

Conclusion

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[12] I occasionally lead a workshop for graduate students at Berkeley in professional writing writing for other sociologists. And more than once, a student has confessed to feeling that writing plainly is unprofessional, that sociology *had* to be difficult to be thought sophisticated. Students also admit sometimes that their convoluted prose can be a device for camouflaging their confusion. If the writer is unsure as to who did what to whom, a passive-voice construction in which something just happened to somebody conceals their uncertainty.

If sociologists work this right, the public should see over several years a slow but steadily increasing presence of sociological research and sociological perspectives. Just as medical logic, psychiatric logic, and market logics have a role in public discussions, so should a more broadly social science logic, one that introduces ideas of social structure and culture into our understandings of the world.

No institutional solution, like a *Contexts*, can substitute for personal skills that a figure Mumford had in deploying scholarship to capture the imagination of millions and redirect their thinking. In this age of a knowledge explosion, it becomes harder for someone to do that and do that well. But we those of us in the social science academy are obliged to find new ways to join and assist the public discussion.

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