The Status of Scholarly Standards in Sociology

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1 Preface to the Public Version of the Report

The following report is a slightly updated version of the internal report on sociology I submitted as part of the Vanderbilt-WashU Commission on the State of Scholarship in the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences.[1] The bulk of the research for this report was compiled between September 2025 and February 2026. Following submission of the general report in April, I invited several trusted colleagues to read and provide feedback on my internal report. I have also lightly updated my report with additional information that has been published since submitting my original internal report in February.

The Commission was charged with investigating the state of scholarly standards across our respective fields. I was charged with studying sociology. My research question was: to what extent, and in what ways, are political considerations affecting the production and reception of sociological research? This question requires identifying to what extent and in what ways sociology as a field is politicized, what evidence we have that the resulting research is politicized, and the apparent causal effect linking the two. Beyond those points, my report does not provide a larger account of the cause for the current state of the field (or academia), nor does it provide policy recommendations for improvement. Those questions are beyond the scope of the Commission. This report is only intended to provide a state of the field based on available data.

2 Executive Summary of Findings

Sociology, or the systematic study of society, is a vitally important field. However, the field has been compromised, to varying degrees, by the ongoing institutionalization (semi-permanent

[1] **Funding and Conflict of Interest Statement.** I received financial compensation for serving on the Commission on the State of Scholarship in the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences. My compensation was fixed in advance and was not conditioned on the report's findings, conclusions, or recommendations. I retained responsibility for the research, analysis, and conclusions presented in my initial internal field-specific report, the coauthored general report, and this public version of my field-specific report. I revised and published this version of my report after my contractual work for the Commission had ended; it was my own decision to revise and publicly release my findings. I am grateful to Vanderbilt and WashU for publishing it on their website alongside the general report.

In addition, I have previously published work expressing concerns about the relationship between activism and scholarship in my own specialty area of interdisciplinary punishment studies. Readers should therefore be aware that I entered this project with preexisting views on these issues, although the analyses and conclusions presented here are based on the evidence reviewed in this report.

embedding) of a commitment to political goals that override the search for knowledge. By "compromised," I mean these institutionalized political commitments now influence the field's norms, priorities, and evaluation of scholarship.

Sociology contains, and has always contained, a broad range of views about the discipline's purpose and about the relationship between scholarship and politics. While it appears that many researchers across the field continue to uphold strong research practices and produce high-quality research, *field-level norms*—especially those visible in the field's professional associations (such as the American Sociological Association or ASA), broad survey data, and even in a growing portion of published research (including in the field's top journals)—do not, especially when those practices or research are seen to conflict with political goals, values, and assumptions.

This report documents three major ways in which political commitments within the field have compromised research production and reception:

1. there is deep contestation over the discipline's mission as a knowledge-generating endeavor, with a sizeable plurality who believe encouraging political change is fundamental to the discipline;
2. the coverage of relevant topics and research questions is uneven, with a wealth of research on inequality, power, and identity, but leaving other topics, questions, and theories underexplored; and
3. there are both hidden (and thus poorly measured) and high-profile (and plausibly rare) cases of social sanctioning and censorship of scholars exploring taboo topics, theories, and research questions or whose findings are politically unpopular (given the political preferences that dominate in the field).

Each of these trends is to some degree long-standing. However, they have become more significant and visible in recent years.

It is important to emphasize that evidence for these themes appears across different types of data and with varying degrees of strength (see Table 1). The most superficial, easily visible metrics tend to show the strongest evidence of scholars' politicization compromising the scholarly project, while we lack systematic data on less superficial, less visible metrics. As the superficial metrics are highly visible, however, they can convey a stronger impression of the field as overly politicized, hiding some of its important heterogeneity from both external observers and members of the field.[2]

[2] Here, I am distinguishing between two understandings of norms: norms derived from

Most importantly, evidence for some norms that prioritize political commitments is stronger than evidence for their downstream effects on the rigor of research produced, which (to my knowledge) has not been systematically analyzed.

Theme	Types of Evidence
The growing role of activism- or advocacy-oriented sociology, including one version of "public sociology," at times displacing scientific or "professional sociology."	ASA developments, surveys, published sociological research
The field is narrowing its focus on topics to prioritize inequality studies ("monocropping") and suffers from blind spots and taboos.	Published sociological research and documented reception thereof (case studies), surveys, ASA section membership data
The field has witnessed specific, high-profile cases of censorship of and hostility toward published research and its authors.	Published sociological research and documented reception thereof (case studies)

Table 1: Summary of Key Findings and Associated Evidence

Finally, it is important to note that this report evaluates sociology according to criteria and assumptions about scholarship that are themselves contested within the discipline. The Commission operated with the epistemological assumption that it is possible, however imperfectly, to pursue reasonably trustworthy knowledge through careful, systematic inquiry and the normative assumption that academics should primarily evaluate scholarship according to its contribution to knowledge, not its social or political consequences. Undoubtedly, scholars operating with different assumptions will come to different conclusions about the field.

3 Methodological Considerations

Compared to the other disciplines examined by the Commission, it appears no other discipline has been as extensively examined for the politicization of academic research (by academics themselves) and its impact on the scholarship produced. Given this wealth of commentary, I primarily rely on and synthesize published analyses, supplemented with limited original data (due to time constraints). Among the published analyses I use are both systematic empirical studies and writings by well-positioned authors giving their perspectives on the field. Undoubtedly, my search was not comprehensive and, despite my efforts, there is likely additional relevant information I did

actual behavior and norms based on what members of the field perceive the norms to be. The two are not necessarily the same, but they can influence one another.

not know about. I hope the publication of my report induces other scholars to provide their own summaries of the field based on data I did not discover, have access to, or have time to analyze. This report is certainly not the final word on the subject.

My goal is to present the state of sociology as both a field and a larger ecosystem: what happens in one domain (such as the professional association) has consequences for others (such as the norms around what it means to be a sociologist and by what standards their work should be evaluated). To understand the state of published sociological research—or questions about how we have arrived here and where the field may be going—we must also understand the broader developments that create pressures on the production and reception of research, not just the research itself.

In this section, I discuss some methodological considerations, including how I approached the project, some tradeoffs any such study will face, the strengths and limitations of available data (and where future research is needed), and a discussion of other, related challenges sociology faces that are beyond the scope of this report.

3.1 Examining a Heterogeneous Field

> "As many observers have noted, sociology is a fractious, multiparadigm discipline composed of researchers focused on a wide array of problems and employing diverse theoretical approaches and methods." (Gross 2013, 198)

3.1.1 Defining and Characterizing Sociology

Reflecting the breadth and diversity of the field, sociologists offer a myriad of definitions and descriptions of sociology focusing on slightly different subjects, different methodological orientations, and different goals and relation to politics.

The American Sociological Association (ASA), the field's primary professional organization, defines sociology on its website as

> "the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies and how people interact within these contexts. Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to global communities; from deviance to organized crime; from religious traditions to state institutions; and from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture."

Others define sociology by the emphasis on studying *the social*, focusing on relationships and interactions between or among groups (e.g., cliques, families, towns, organizations, fields, or states).

Others place emphasis on the style of inquiry, defining sociology as the "scientific study of society" (Heterodox Academy's Sociology Workshop, personal notes, June 22, 2025; see also the ASA "introsocsite" resource).

Echoing another common take, past ASA president and UC Berkeley sociologist Michael Burawoy (2024) recently called sociology a "moral science," not in the sense that one can objectively study morality (i.e., how groups determine what is moral and what is not) but in a more normative sense (i.e., determining what is truly morally right, not just what is thought to be morally right; what a person should do to be morally good). As another scholar explained after exploring the long history and discussions over what type of "moral science" is sociology,

> "Sociology is not just another science among others, in the sense of reporting upon implacable facts; it answers to the very human call for a need not only to understand or explain the essence of how we currently live but to offer suggestions as to what could be done. And this seems like a *moral* matter" (Halewood 2026, 14).

Summarizing this variation, Cornell sociologist Kim Weeden explains,

> "At the most basic level, sociologists disagree about disciplinary goals: Should sociology be a science that strives, however imperfectly, to identify and empirically evaluate hypotheses about general social processes? Is it a normative project in revealing not what is, but what should be? Or is it an interpretivist project more akin to the humanities than to economics, political science, or psychology?" (Weeden 2023)

This situation is not new. Noted sociologist Donald Black (1995) explained decades ago,

> "Sociologists lack clarity and consensus about their scholarly mission. Some are purely and coldly scientific, some morally or politically critical, and some warmly or sentimentally humanistic. Their ultimate concerns include the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. Others are not explicit or even self-conscious about what they seek to accomplish, and still others combine various styles—scientific, critical, and humanistic—and are difficult or impossible to classify at all. Their discourse is cacophonous. The utterances of some are uninteresting to others, and their assessments of one another commonly seem completely misdirected." (829)

This heterogeneity is both a feature and a bug. A feature because it allows for a wonderful diversity of topics, methods, and theories[3]; a bug because sometimes it is not clear how much we actually

[3] As others have noted, this heterogeneity also makes the field inclusive. As University of Toronto sociologist Dan Silver (2026) recently noted,

"Many of the very features of the field that can be frustrating are also what made it possible for somebody like me to enter it. I do not have a PhD in sociology and have taken exactly one sociology course, an introductory class in my first year of under-grad (Intro with Ann Swidler!). A more unified and self-confident discipline might never have had room for me. Thanks to its fragmented character, and its recurring uncertainty about its goals, methods, and objects, there was

have in common.

As these several examples indicate, key differences in definitions and characterizations of sociology involve not only their focus on topic (e.g., the study of society, "the social," relationships, how to live well), but also their characterization of the manner of study (is it scientific, neutral, and objective, or is it normative, critical, political, and advocating a moral perspective?)[4] and understanding of its goals (is it intended to explain and understand, or to provide suggestions or moral claims?). These differences become important in the various contestations over sociology, including its scholarly standards.

3.1.2 Internal Disagreement over Scholarly Standards

At the heart of this report's charge are scholarly standards, the considerations and criteria we as sociologists use to guide our own research and to evaluate others' research. Fundamental disagreements about what sociology is and does (discussed above) contribute to disagreement about those standards.

On the one hand, there is broad consensus on certain fundamental components of empirical research. For example, the National Science Foundation (NSF) Workshop on Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research identified a set of shared standards across Cultural Anthropology, Law and Social Science, Political Science, and Sociology, several large NSF programs. They summarized these standards as:

- "Articulate a clear research question that is framed in terms of the relevant theoretical and methodological literature both within and beyond their particular discipline
- Define and operationalize key constructs and specify expected relationships between concepts
- Choose the type and source of data that will enable the researcher to answer the research question
- Demonstrate the intellectual, social, or political significance of the project – why the project is important and will have an impact beyond a limited circle of scholars
- Undertake systematic and thorough data collection, gathering an abundance of

room for someone like me to slip in. Even then, the stars had to align in a way that might not occur again. Luck and contingency matter enormously in how a life plays out."

[4] As we shall see, some argue this distinction is a false binary and it can be both.

evidence and triangulating with multiple data sources and data types when possible

- Provide a careful articulation of the connection between theory and data
- Conduct systematic and thorough analysis of data, specifying the particular strategies used to identify patterns and relationships in the data
- Pay close attention to negative cases and explore alternative explanations when available" (Lamont and White 2008, 11; see also p. 13-14)

An appendix to the report also laid out a similar but more elaborated set of standards for sociology specifically (Lamont and White 2008, 142-143).

However, a repeated point in the general report and the sociology-specific appendix was the need for flexibility for qualitative research as some of the standards would be inappropriate (e.g., p. 11-12, 142). Likewise, writing for the workshop on sociology, Columbia University sociologist and qualitative methods expert Mario Small (correctly, in my view) cautions,

> "we need to be careful that we do not overly prescribe 'standards' for specific methodological techniques. Methodological techniques are a class of researcher behaviors that share a common set of core properties but include a range of variations and nuances. The power of a research technique lies in its ability to be adapted to multiple research situations. Truncating the variability around a technique will only make the tool less useful." (31)

He also notes the important variations in standards expected for different research goals, noting the same technique "could be used to explore, describe, compare, or test hypotheses" (31). This flexibility is incredibly important for high-quality qualitative research. However, it speaks to a central challenge in identifying and enacting scholarly standards in the field.

As noted above, sociology is quite epistemically and methodologically diverse. It contains quantitative and qualitative empirical research, as well as some purely theoretical contributions. Among theoretical contributions, there is a wide array of what "theory" means (Abend 2008), resulting in a diversity of published articles understood to be theory (Brint 2025). Very little theoretical work today would satisfy, for example, Donald Black's criteria of "testability, generality, simplicity, validity, and originality" (Black 1995, 847), which would be far too narrow for more generous versions of theoretical quality and rigor.

To accommodate this diversity of approaches, scholars necessarily follow different sets of scholarly standards. As Weeden (2023) notes, "sociology's eclecticism tends to foster a live-and-let-live ethos between various factions within the field." As a result, there is a "low consensus over evidentiary standards in sociology." In many ways, this situation is necessary to accommodate the

rich diversity of the field; however, it also provides an opening for some inappropriate considerations to hold sway.

3.2 How Do We Assess the Field?

3.2.1 Operationalizing Sociology

Operationally, where do we find sociology and sociologists for the purposes of this report? This question is not as straightforward as it may appear. Traditional disciplinary markers include a PhD in sociology, a faculty job in a sociology department, membership in one or more of sociology's professional associations, or publication in a sociology-coded academic journal. However, these markers are neither necessary nor sufficient for identifying a sociologist.[5] Indeed, some scholars believe that much good sociology is "done *outside* of the field of sociology" (Eppard et al. 2025, 463). And even some of the most well-known classic sociology (like the Chicago School) was conducted by "intellectual rogues" rather than trained sociologists, "including Albion Small (Economics), W.I. Thomas (English), and Robert Park (Philosophy, Journal-ism)." As sociologists Joachim Savelsberg and Robert Sampson noted, "Then, as now, the sociological imagination was not limited to a sociology Ph.D." (Savelsberg and Sampson 2002, 102).[6]

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[5] As an illustration and for transparency, I am generally recognized as a sociologist, although I do not hold a PhD in sociology. I have been tenure-track or tenured faculty in two sociology departments (in both cases, I was hired as a "criminologist," although I do not have a degree in criminology either). Additionally, I have been a member of ASA for 17 continuous years, I held several leadership positions in two ASA sections (as well as the American Society for Criminology), and I have stood for election for an ASA-wide office (and lost). I have never published in one of the top four (generalist) sociology journals; only recently have I published in a traditionally recognized sociology journal, which has recently rebranded as an interdisciplinary social science journal. Finally, my primary substantive field (law and society) is often perceived as being dominated by sociologists, who indeed constitute a strong plurality of the field.

[6] Consistent with these points, it is notable that in a recent study, a non-trivial fraction of articles published in sociology journals had low sociology scores while some non-sociology journals had fairly high sociology scores:

> "all English-language articles with abstracts published 1960-2024 in the American Sociological Review (ASR), considered to be one of the top two journals in the field, were collected. Approximately one-third of these articles had either no association or an association score of zero for the concept of sociology. Treating no associations score as zero, the mean sociology association score was 0.26. OpenAlex also generates concept association scores for each journal as a whole, and these were generally more stable. ASR had a journal-level sociology association score of 0.75, the highest association score for any of the eleven target disciplines with this journal. However, journals not generally considered core to these disciplines often had high

Today, a scholar may not hold a PhD in sociology but work in a sociology department and therefore be a sociologist; a scholar with a sociology PhD may work beyond a sociology department. For example, one study found that 32% of faculty in PhD-granting criminology or criminal justice departments held a Sociology PhD (Carlan 2008, cited in American Sociological Association 2010, 46). Many sociology departments are joint departments with criminology or anthropology. In 2006, half of the top 50 liberal arts institutions contained a joint sociology-anthropology department (Kain et al. 2006, 3). An ASA task force on sociology and criminology departments found 47 sociology departments with both sociology and criminology/criminal justice programs (American Sociological Association 2010, 13). 25.5% of these departments offered both a sociology and a criminology/criminal justice major and nearly 30% offered a sociology major and a criminology/criminal justice concentration or minor (American Sociological Association 2010, 25). Measuring by departmental affiliation thus would not always match measuring by PhD.

Moreover, sociologists publish in a range of journals (not just sociology journals), books, and public-facing media, while sociology journals publish a range of scholars. For example, one study found that a majority of the ten most influential historical sociology articles were published in journals that were not purely sociology journals, such as the *European Journal of International Relations, African Affairs, International Relations*, and *Millennium* (Li and Karimi 2025). Another study found that less than half of authors publishing in sociology journals from 2016 to 2020 identified sociology as their primary field, compared to 61% of self-identified economists among authors publishing in economics journals (Lockhart et al. 2024, 22). They also found that sociology authors were less diverse (more often white, male, straight, from higher-education parents, and able-bodied) than sociology PhD holders, sociology faculty, and ASA members (Lockhart et al. 2024, 22-24). However, Lockhart et al.'s analysis did not stratify by journal rank. Using data from a project in progress, I found that the vast majority of articles published in the *American Journal of Sociology* (one of the field's top two journals) on the topic of crime, deviance, social control, and criminal justice between 2000 and 2025 were written by first authors with sociology PhDs (for a recent analysis of the representation of scholars with prestigious PhDs in the top sociology journals, see Cook 2026). Then-current affiliations were slightly more diversified, but sociology remained the strong majority

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> association scores and quantitative indices of journal impact. As an example, Academy of Management Review, which is typically categorized as a management journal, had a higher OpenAlex sociology association score and h-index impact score than did ASR." (Manzi 2026, 24-25)

(see Table 2). Even so, while the field's top journals may primarily publish sociologists, other sociology journals do publish non-sociologists and sociologists also publish in non-sociology journals. Importantly, the field's top journals (and departments) are, surprisingly, not necessarily the most influential in determining topical "vogues" (Yan et al. 2026).

PhD Discipline	**N**	**Percent**
Sociology	86	92.5
Criminology/Interdisciplinary Criminology	2	2.2
Other	5	5.4
Total	93	100
Then-Current Academic Affiliation	**N**	**Percent**
Sociology	70	75.3
Criminology/Interdisciplinary Criminology	9	9.7
Other	12	12.9
NA	2	2.2
Total	93	100

Table 2: PhD Discipline and Then-Current Affiliation of First-Authors of AJS Articles on Crime, Deviance, and Social Control, and Criminal Justice. (Percentages are rounded so they do not add up to 100. Source: Author's tabulations from paper in progress.)

Thus, when asking questions about the state of sociology and sociological research, one will find different answers depending on how they operationalize (define for data collection purposes) sociology, sociologists, and sociological research, as sociology authors, faculty, and PhDs are distinct but overlapping groups. Moreover, one would likely find different answers if they look at the field as a whole or if they stratify by measures of prestige, such as faculty working in highly ranked departments or articles published in the top journals. As much as possible (where data allow it), I try to include multiple measures. Since my goal is to describe the field and field-level developments, it is important to work toward a general overview of the field, with special attention to influential parts of the field as well as those recognized as having or surpassing particularly high standards.

3.2.2 Measures, Data Sources, and Approach

In this report, I include several different measures to inquire into the state of sociology: (1) sociological research published in and beyond sociology journals, (2) developments within the

American Sociological Association (ASA) and sociology's other national and regional professional associations,[7] and (3) developments relating to and surveys of the nation's sociology departments and sociology faculty.

Although our mandate is the state of research standards specifically, I discuss the larger system of research production and reception, which are necessary to explore to understand the sources of and pressures for politicized research standards and practices. As an illustration of why it is empirically or descriptively important to not only examine research, a 2024 sociology podcast distinguishes between the "elite" culture visible in published research (particularly in top-tier venues) and the "street" culture of the workaday sociologist—the conversations and beliefs that shape the teaching norms, the evaluation of research at all stages (including prepublication stages), and the general experience of working in sociology. The two are not aligned; if we only focus on published research, particularly in elite journals, we may miss important developments shaping standards and expectations in sociology as a whole—including standards and expectations that will be shaping behavior in the future, particularly since publications are a lagged indicator.[8]

A second, more theoretical reason to explore field-level trends comes from the concept of the Keynesian beauty contest. John Maynard Keynes argued that individual decisions can reflect less one's own preferences and beliefs but one's expectations about others' preferences and beliefs. In the present case, I expect that in some contexts—such as publishing, or selecting and motivating research agendas—individual scholars adjust their behavior and stated preferences based on what they believe are the dominant norms in the discipline. Because visible claims on these fronts likely hold more weight in that calculation, they effectively matter more for shaping behavior than the harder-to-know norms based on actual behavior. From a more sociological perspective, the added dimension of moral criticism for deviating from the perceived norm can provide further incentive to conform. In either case, the expectation is that as more scholars modify their behavior to fit perceived norms, behavioral norms also begin to change, ultimately approaching the perceived

[7] Although I note the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), I do not systematically analyze developments there, prioritizing developments in the ASA. ASA is generally considered the more central professional association and has often informally been referred to as the more "conservative" of the two, making it a stronger test case for claims of politicization, whereas SSSP has often been viewed as more activist or political in its orientation.

[8] The derivative, or rate of change in the field, appears to be increasing in recent years. Thus, analyses before 2020 are already not reflective of subsequent years, while analyses conducted in 2023-2025 may not be reflective of 2026-2028. The field-level culture seems to precede identifiable changes in published work, especially elite publications.

norm.

Importantly, I do not assume that changes in scholars' stated orientations toward research automatically produce corresponding changes in published research. Rather, I expect there are competing pressures that mediate these orientations. However, I do expect that professional organizations, graduate training, hiring, peer review, editorial decisions, awards, and informal disciplinary culture collectively shape the incentives scholars face. If these practices increasingly communicate that certain political commitments or orientations toward research are professionally expected—or that certain questions, methods, or conclusions are disfavored—we would expect those incentives to influence research agendas and the evaluation of scholarship over time. Thus, my report pays significant attention to the institutional environment that produces and evaluates sociological research.

Where relevant, I also include examples from interdisciplinary, sociology-adjacent fields like criminology, which used to be a subfield of sociology. As we have seen, some departments today are joint criminology and sociology departments and many sociology PhDs get jobs in criminology departments (e.g., Akers 1992; American Sociological Association 2010; Savelsberg and Sampson 2002). While I do not, one could also turn to more critical interdisciplinary programs like Black studies, ethnic studies, and women's studies that are in some ways offshoots of sociology in the sense that many early faculty in these departments had sociology PhDs and many were jointly appointed in sociology, even while sociologists also worked as gatekeepers preventing these programs and other disciplines were also included in their creation (e.g., Rojas 2010).

Far more analyses could be added to this report, including some fleshing out other parts of the social ecology of research production.[9] For example, a historical analysis of job advertisements could help fill in some demand-side pressures that shape research production.[10] However, I did not pursue those analyses. Other analyses may be helpful, but more limited in what they can show. For example, while award winners (for article or book prizes) are often publicly listed, they only show

[9] One area I did not explore was textbooks. However, several studies have systematically analyzed the representation of foundational and more recent social theories in sociological textbooks (see, e.g., Döpking et al. 2026; Manza et al. 2010).

[10] The ASA has posted some snapshot analyses on their Research Repository page. These analyses do allow for superficial changes in specializations in demand (e.g., crime, law and deviance; race and ethnicity; medical sociology), but they do not provide information on signaling words seen in some recent job ads that encourage community intervention or particular slants (e.g., a position looking for an abolitionist would be coded as a criminal justice position, a position looking for a scholar who will work for anti-racism will be coded as a race and ethnicity position).

trends in what wins, not the mechanisms that determine why. For example, if a majority of winning articles are on topic X, we do not know if that is because, year after year, the submitted articles are disproportionately focused on that topic, if the articles on that topic are simply better than average, or if the award committee has a preference for that topic. Even so, such reviews could be helpful because, as in the Keynesian beauty contest, they give subtle signals to the field about what type of work wins prizes, whether or not that is a fair interpretation.

Importantly, there have been significant changes in recent years, such that some older survey data I rely upon is now likely out of date. We need more (and more recent) original research on how faculty understand sociology, dynamics in the field, and what impact, if at all, these dynamics have had on their behavior as researchers, mentors, and reviewers. Indeed, there is a tendency to extrapolate from ASA elections, as one of the few measures of a broad swath of the field, but as noted above, the ASA electorate, and those who vote, are not necessarily (and are unlikely to be) representative of the field at large or of those who produce the highest-quality research.

Finally, a note about what data and analysis would be helpful for falsifying the broader claim in this report. Evidence showing that these trends are confined to isolated subfields, that public statements and apparent field-level norms fail to influence—or reflect—publication patterns or the evaluation of scholarship, and that high-profile events or statements really are not representative would indicate that these trends are simply visible but not impactful. Following such evidence, the interpretation advanced in this report would require substantial revision.

3.3 Scope Considerations: Beyond Internal Politicization

My charge was to explore the extent to which, and ways in which, politicization from sociologists themselves is compromising scholarly standards. This concern has received much attention lately. However, it is important to understand that many factors are contributing to a decline in scholarly standards, not all of which are clearly related to internal politicization—that is, from the field's and individual scholars' political commitments. For example, the increase in expectations relating to productivity (Warren 2019); the (perceived, if not real) increase in administrative, service, and mentorship obligations; the explosion in the number of journals that one can publish in; the increase in research one needs to read to keep up with the field; and the dearth of available, high-quality peer reviewers are all plausible structural factors that may affect both the average quality of published research and potentially a certain permissiveness in norms around the minimum quality needed for a publishable unit. More substantively, there are long-standing concerns

about theoretical stagnation (Besbris and Khan 2017; Black 2000; Brauer and Day 2025; Brint 2025; Cole 1994a;b; Collins 1994; Davis 1994; DiMaggio 1995; Ducate et al. 2026; Hammersley 2025; Holmwood 2009; Liu 2015; Lizardo 2014; Marres 2024; Rubin and Shalaby 2025; Rule 1994; Seperson 1995; Simon et al. 1997; Sorokin 1965; Sutton and Staw 1995; Taylor 2025; Zald 1995) and disciplinary fragmentation (Akers 1992; Akresh 2017; Crane and Small 1992; Ericson and Carriere 1994; Horowitz 1993; Lengermann and Niebrugge 2014; Mizruchi 2017; Moody and Light 2006; Sarat 2004; Savelsberg et al. 2004), much of which are not clearly related to the field's politicization.[11]

Additionally, there are other dynamics that have harmful consequences for the field and scholars' ability to work that do not directly relate to scholarly standards themselves but that are, or at least some scholars have argued, loosely related to internal politicization:

- the "divide" between qualitative and quantitative scholars (e.g., Akresh 2017; Altman and Cohen 2025; Mizruchi 2017);
- the growing gender imbalance in sociology, with the field becoming increasingly female-dominated (in student counts, professional membership, and leadership positions) and the general resistance to discussing this trend or questions about dissolving long-standing efforts to advance the status of women in the field under these circumstances (e.g., Akresh 2017; Cohen 2015; 2018; Lockhart et al. 2024; Turner 2013; 2015);
- methodological issues related to the adoption of open science and other transparency practices, which are also getting more attention in recent years[12];

[11] The original report devoted an entire section to these topics. However, since this concern is only loosely connected to internal politicization, and on advice to shorten the report, I have cut this discussion and only acknowledge the concerns here.

[12] Because these discussions may provide solutions to the problems posed by internal politicization (Savolainen 2025), although scholars have very different views on this question, I offer Kim Weeden's (2023) useful summary of some of these issues:

> "Sociology has lagged behind economics, political science, and psychology in its recognition of a replication crisis, adoption of scientific transparency practices, and participation in the large and interdisciplinary literature on reproducibility (Ferguson et al., 2023; Freese & Peterson, 2017; Moody et al., 2022). Although some individual researchers have adopted open science practices, they are still very much in the minority (Ferguson et al., 2023, especially Figure 1). Similarly, although it is increasingly common for top sociology journals to recommend that authors share data and code, very few mandate replication packages, explicitly welcome replication studies, or encourage preregistration of experiments. Indeed, of the 11 empirical sociology journals from which Ferguson et al. (2023) drew a sample of authors for

- whether sociology has an impact on policy or is taken seriously in the public realm (e.g., Laurison 2025; Mizruchi 2017; Patterson 2014); and
- the vivacity of the undergraduate major (Cohen 2021; Eppard et al. 2025; Mizruchi 2017), especially declining enrollments and the disproportionate regional concentration of sociology degrees.

Having briefly acknowledged these developments and the debates around them, I do not generally discuss them in the main report.

4 Historical Debates Over Sociology's Defining Orientation

The questions at the heart of this report are not new concerns in the field. Instead, they have been debated and studied extensively. A full review of the resulting body of literature is beyond my current capacity; however, I highlight some of the key debates over whether sociology is inherently or should be a "political" or "moral" discipline committed to "advocacy" or "activism," with or without the trappings of science. In doing so, I provide a historical overview of how different views in these debates have been more or less prevalent at different times, as well as the historical origins of the field scholars see as justifying one orientation or the other.

It is important for readers to understand that these debates are core to sociology. In the debates today, scholars often mobilize quotations and support from these older debates. Indeed, even which "founding moment" one invokes in their history of sociology is itself an indication of whether one endorses more of a science, reform, or combined orientation for the field.

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their survey, only one currently requires authors to share data and code (with some exemptions), eight encourage it, and two do not mention it at all; only one encourages preregistration (author's analysis). Even fewer journals, if any, have a process to verify data and code or to check preregistration sites, meaning compliance is on the honor system.

Notably, most efforts to nudge the field toward scientific transparency have been 'bottom up.' The American Sociological Association (ASA), the discipline's primary professional and scholarly association and publisher of some of its top journals, is largely silent on the issue of open science. Although the ASA's code of ethics (1999, section 13.05) includes a statement on data sharing and requires full disclosure of methods and findings, it is not clear how or if this code has ever been applied. A previous executive officer of the ASA issued a public statement opposing open access on the grounds that it would harm the ASA's revenue stream (Hillsman, 2012)."

4.1 A Brief History of Sociology's "Reformer" and "Scientist" Heritage

As many scholars have pointed out (e.g., Abbott 2001; Akresh 2017; Calhoun 2008; Dromi and Stabler 2023; Mizruchi 2017; Romero 2020; Turner and Turner 1990), since its founding, sociology has been home to two competing approaches to social science: one approach interested in the scientific study of society (often with an implicit goal of social improvement, but with an overarching commitment to the rules of scientific inquiry) and another approach explicitly interested in reforming society (with a more explicit progressive bent).[13] The first is often associated with German sociologist Max Weber (1917; 1949) and some Chicago School sociologists, and the second with others like reformer Jane Addams, other Chicago School sociologists, and sociologist WEB DuBois (Morris 2017), with select sociologists added in over time.[14] These approaches are sometimes distinguished as the scientific or professional sociology and critical or public sociology, referring to labels more commonly used after the 1960s (e.g., Abbott 2018; Burawoy 2005). Some sociologists would add to these labels a "positivistic" bent (in the Comtean sense or more generally)[15] or an "interpretivist" or "constructivist" bent, or that sociology is more social scientific or more humanistic. As we shall see, especially recently, these are often overlapping approaches, with scholars arguing you can, for example, simultaneously design scientifically rigorous scholarship to achieve particular social or political goals (e.g., Bourdieu 2000).

In historicizing sociology, many scholars go all the way back to the origins of sociology in the work of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) or Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), their commitment to science and positivism, and how these ideas were later absorbed into American social science, including sociology (Ross 1991; v. Hayek 1941a;b;c; Wernick 2001). A more recent point of

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[13] As part of sociology's reformist heritage, sociology is disproportionately focused on the study of "social problems"—crime, poverty, homelessness, discrimination, group-based disparities in outcomes of interest (variously referred to as inequality or social stratification), etc. Incidentally, one of sociology's primary professional associations is the Society for the Study of Social Problems, which publishes the journal *Social Problems,* generally recognized as one of the top four journals (excluding the *Annual Review*) in the field (typically paired with *Social Forces*). Additionally, the field is disproportionately focused on inequality, which is generally recognized as a defining characteristic and unifying concern for the field (discussed more below).

[14] For example, Robert Merton and Donald Black are often invoked in the "science" camp, with Alvin Gouldner, Howie Becker, and Michael Burawoy for the "reformer" or "activism" camp.

[15] In this report, I am using "positivism" in the general sense found in sociology to mean the belief that the world is observable and knowable, a preference for the scientific method, and a quest for generalizable principles about how the world works (see also Nagel 1979). Notably, some scholars, particularly those who prefer a more critical understanding of scholarship, use the word almost as a slur or insult.

departure is the American origins of sociology and the formation of the professional sociological association in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Lee 2026). Other key moments often invoked when discussing the heritage of the field include the early twentieth-century emergence of the Chicago School and its positivist approach, the more activist work of Jane Addams, and either the scholarship or activism of WEB DuBois.

Perhaps the latest point of departure is the mid-century formalization of sociology associated with Talcott Parsons and C. Wright Mills, both of whom have had a lasting impact on what it means to practice sociology (e.g., Parsons' emphasis on Weber and Mills' (1959) sociological imagination, including its critique of Parsons, have both been influential). This mid-century period also witnessed extensive debates over how political sociology should be. Since then, and spurred on by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, sociology incorporated and expanded critical theories, while improvements in computing power later in the century have led to ever-greater methodological sophistication in both statistical and qualitative analyses.

This entire history can be read selectively to support one narrative or the other; however, the most accurate account appears to be to recognize a mixture of motivations at the field's start, a return to positivism's dominance in the 1950s and 1960s, and then a return to a more reformist and activist strand taking hold in the 1960s onward, growing over time (e.g., Abbott 2018; Burawoy 2005; Iceland 2025; Smith 2014). Yet both strands are core to sociology as a field. As it stands, sociologists exist less on a spectrum of critical reformer to positivist scientist, but rather as containing different combinations of science and reform impulses with different levels of skepticism toward the extremes of each pole.

4.2 Confronting Sociology's Twin Aims: Debates of the 1960s

In the 1960s, there was a debate about whether sociology should be, as celebrated German sociologist Max Weber put it, "value-free." The resulting publications and their content continue to be influential today and used to support either side of the activist-scientist debate. The preeminent sociologist Howie Becker (1967) opened his article, "Who's Side Are We On?" by describing a debate in the field:

> "To have values or not to have values: the question is always with us. When sociologists undertake to study problems that have relevance to the world we live in, they find themselves caught in a crossfire. Some urge them not to take sides, to be neutral and do research that is technically correct and value free. Others tell them their work is shallow and useless if it does not express a deep commitment to a value position." (239)

Becker went on to argue the "dilemma" was a false one because it is not possible to avoid taking sides, "to do research uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies" (239). However, some of what Becker described as political stances—for example, being equal-opportunity skeptics and listeners (240-241)—are simply commensurate with good science. For Becker, "taking sides" to some extent means departing from the then-conventional mindsets that everyone should distrust the socially marginal and trust authority figures. Indeed, in the end, Becker endorses scientific standards as paramount, saying,

> "Our problem is to make sure that, whatever point of view we take, our research meets the standards of good scientific work, that our unavoidable sympathies do not render our results invalid.…By using our theories and techniques impartially, we ought to be able to study all the things that need to be studied in such a way as to get all the facts we require, even though some of the questions that will be raised and some of the facts that will be produced run counter to our biases." (246)

So while Becker is often cited as a significant endorsement of activism in sociology, his commentary is fairly complex and, in my reading, largely consistent with scientific norms, despite sharing his own personal views or political sympathies at times (for a similar argument, see Hammersley 2001).

Another major position came from another giant in the field, Alvin Gouldner, criticizing Becker's just-discussed article. In an earlier address (Gouldner 1962), Gouldner had challenged the idea of value-free sociology, but "only six years later," he wrote,

> "I find myself in the uncomfortable position of drawing back from some who found my argument against the value-free myth so persuasive…. In a nutshell: I fear that the myth of a value-free social science is about to be supplanted by still another myth, and that the once glib acceptance of the value-free doctrine is about to be superseded by a new but no less glib rejection of it" (Gouldner 1968, 103).

Gouldner saw some scholars going too far in challenging the idea of objectivity, instead simply giving up on trying, all while he himself criticized the concept. Despite Gouldner's seeming defense of value-free sociology, he ultimately endorses the importance of values as all important, while, like Becker, often endorsing normative positions. Interestingly, although Gouldner is skeptical of scientific principles, he does not seem to reject scientific values so much as see them as incomplete, explaining, "In affirming that he only seeks the truth for its own sake, the scientist is therefore not so much lying as pledging allegiance to the flag of truth while saying nothing about the country for which it stands" (116). Ultimately, Gouldner's critique is complex and layered, but it is a resource for scholars arguing that scholarship is only as good as its ability to make progressive social change.

Other works around this time also embraced a more moralistic vision of sociology, including

The Sociological Imagination (Mills 1959) and *Invitation to Sociology: A humanistic perspective* (Berger 1963). These earlier works saw sociology as unsettling the taken for granted or commonsense view of the world and instead identifying the role of social structures and power in shaping the world—although in ways that were more agnostic and open than today's mode of assuming ruthless power dynamics are to blame for society's ills. For example, Burawoy (2008) criticized Mills' *Sociological Imagination* for lacking a properly "political imagination," essentially arguing that he didn't go far enough in identifying "personal troubles" as ultimately "social problems" and failed to see the structural in the seemingly individual level.

In contrast, over the years, sometimes in response to sociology's normative positioning, a number of scholars have called on sociologists to be more scientific to ensure better, more accurate, and more defensible findings (e.g., Black 1995; 1972; Merton 1973; Turner 1986; Watts 2014). However, they appear to have been less influential overall.

4.3 Public Sociology in the 2000s

While these debates mostly receded into the background as a value-oriented sociology became ascendant in the 1970s onward (no longer meriting debate), the 2004 ASA Presidential Address of Michael Burawoy was an important moment that both energized the activist approach and revived the debate among those who rejected activist approaches. Burawoy's address is most well known for its promotion of public sociology, which, for some, has become synonymous with activism or advocacy, or otherwise has been used to support such practices.

In his address, Burawoy began by discussing the leftward or "critical" bent of the field that had increased since 1968. In that year, a majority of sociologists opposed passing a resolution against the Vietnam war; by 2003, in contrast, a majority of ASA members supported a resolution against the Iraq war, at a time when most of the country supported the war (Burawoy 2005, 6). Burawoy went on to discuss how the shift in sociologists' politics and demographic changes had shifted the content of sociological studies. By the end of his address, he defined sociology as a "partisan" science that "represents the interests of humanity… in keeping at bay both state despotism and market tyranny" (Burawoy 2005, 24).

However, Burawoy's address is most well known for its call for more "public sociology," which he defined as "bring[ing] sociology into conversation with publics" (Burawoy 2005, 7), one that does not have an "intrinsic normative valence" (Burawoy 2005, 8) but instead reflects sociological knowledge. While those definitions sound innocuously neutral and consistent with

scientific standards, Burawoy did not appear to mean them as such. For Burawoy (2005, 9), "If sociology actually supports more liberal or critical public sociologies that is a consequence of the evolving ethos of the sociological community." Indeed, his description of public sociology reflects that normative valence—and this is how it has been read since. For example, he highlighted works that "bec[a]me the vehicle of a public discussion about the nature of U.S. society—the nature of its values, the gap between its promise and its reality, its malaise, its tendencies." He also described a kind of public sociology that works with the "counter-public" (Burawoy 2005, 7), such as "a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations" (Burawoy 2005, 8). Indeed, he saw public sociology as the public-facing version of critical sociology, a more normatively motivated approach than the science-driven professional sociology or its public-facing arm of policy sociology. For Burawoy, "Critical sociology is the conscience of professional sociology just as public sociology is the conscience of policy sociology" (10). Thus, while Burawoy endorsed all four kinds of sociology as vital, the title of his talk, and its main takeaway, was his support "For Public Sociology."

Burawoy's call for a normative public sociology created an extensive debate at the time and since (Agger 2007; Burawoy et al. 2007; Cohen 2025; Hartmann 2017; Hartmann et al. 2023; Letters to the Editor 2004; Tittle 2004; Turner 2017; 2019; 2007). Notably, while some scholars, like University of Minnesota sociologist Chris Uggen, have championed the public-facing nature of Burawoy's call, they have defined public sociology (and public criminology) more broadly and neutrally to be something akin to translational sociology—bringing sociological or criminological findings to the public without taking a political stance while doing so (e.g., Hartmann et al. 2023; Uggen and Inderbitzin 2010). Thus, today, many scholars engage in and celebrate public sociology, but with different visions of what that work is.

These debates over the founding moments of sociology and how political sociology should be, whether from the 1960s or 2000s, continue to play out today.

5 What Do We Know About Prevailing Scholarly Standards?

The major divisions in the field relevant to the Commission's charge include the activism-science discussion, objectivity, and specific practices, methods, and theories designed to achieve social justice outcomes. Each item provides a window into how scholars understand the appropriate role of politics in their work and what scientific standards mean to them. Importantly, we see significant variation within the field in each of these areas. However, I identify several findings: First,

there is a common perception that "activism" is a dominant (if not the dominant) orientation within the field, both among supporters and critics alike. Second, what this means varies; scholars do not universally see tradeoffs between adopting an activist posture in their scholarship and respecting scientific or scholarly standards. Third, there are efforts to change some scholarly practices for political reasons. Importantly, in this section, I rely on survey and interview data as well as specific claims made by scholars, but I do not systematically evaluate published scholarship for these considerations. Again, my goal is to try to document field-level norms, which are (again) fragmented and varied.

5.1 Terminological Note: What Sociological "Activism" Is and Isn't

A central difficulty in describing major trends in the field's politicization surrounds the terminology used. Some terms (advocacy, activism, critical, public scholarship, objectivity, neutrality, science, positivism) simply mean different things to different scholars. Consequently, scholars describe the same phenomena with different labels and apply the same labels to different phenomena. Moreover, for some scholars, some terms are highly charged, so being labeled an activist or a scientist can feel not only deeply misleading but also offensive. Finally, complicating these discussions, to the extent that there are two major competing strands in the field, as seen above, they can often overlap and intersect while in other cases they are viewed as antithetical. Thus, one can be an "activist" in their orientation, and either be receptive to what they view as appropriate scientific rules or reject them; likewise, one may be a "scientist" in orientation, and either be receptive to allowing political goals to infuse and shape their research or dead set against such infusion. As this short summary suggests, there is a broad spectrum of opinions in the field—indeed, a two-dimensional spectrum is insufficient to capture what may be more accurately modeled after the political diamond (using vertical and horizontal axes to identify one's position on activism-science dynamics).

For the purposes of this report, I use "activism" to refer to the intentional infusion of politics (especially advocating for one's preferred moral, ideological, or political positions) in scholarship (see also Bashiri et al. 2025). Certainly, as others have pointed out, scholarship and performative gestures are not truly activism because they have little chance of effecting serious social or political change. (Thus, some scholars who are particularly politically active in their private lives are offended by descriptions of scholarship as "activism.") Although, as noted above, many scholars believe "activism" and "science" can overlap, I treat them as two competing ideal-typical

orientations in the field.

Importantly, in this report, I do not include as "activism" any political conduct a scholar takes outside of their professional identity. I also exclude individual scholars' political motivations (e.g., conducting research that, depending on the results, could be useful to preferred advocacy groups or to advance particular political policies), though as we shall see, these motivations may account for skews in scholarship when aggregated at the field level. Finally, I am also not including the way in which neutral scholarship can have political implications or be interpreted by others to serve political ends, even against the author's intentions.

Notably, many scholars argue that activism in and through scholarship does not necessarily violate scholarly standards of rigor. Within sociology, there are certainly multiple competing views on this point. One hypothesis many critical sociologists offer is that scholars can engage in high-quality critical, politicized, or activist scholarship without compromising their scholarly rigor.

To be clear, much academic research can have a political dimension without constituting activism.[16] For example, much research is motivated by a general interest in achieving specific social or political goals that the researcher or their funder finds important and desirable (e.g., reducing poverty and hunger, reducing crime, improving educational and health outcomes, reducing discrimination and artificial inequalities, ensuring efficiency). Moreover, it is common for scholars to make policy recommendations on the basis of their study's findings. Neither of these points is necessarily an indicator of activism in scholarship. By contrast, scholars are on more controversial footing when they advocate for particular goals or policies in the absence of data, on the basis of weak data, or when contradicting their own data or when their own moral, political, or ideological assumptions are explicitly or implicitly shaping their interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations. Finally, there are common strategies scholars are expected to use to prevent biases or personal preferences from driving their interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations (e.g., relying on systematic data collection and analysis, submitting work for peer review).

When searching for evidence of activism in a field, there are some possible issues of selection bias. The more an ideological assumption deviates from mainstream ideas, the easier it is to identify as activist scholarship. Thus, scholarship motivated by moderate political views (for example) may be harder to identify than scholarship motivated by radical left/liberal views.

Finally, it is also possible to overidentify activist scholarship, such as when scholars using

[16] I have elaborated on this point in Rubin (2026).

similar or related terms, concepts, and theories but diverge in their use of scientific processes, such that both activist (or otherwise ideological) scholarship and non-activist scholarship use the same terminology, but with different scientific quality. For example, some "feminist" or "critical" scholars can generate useful scientific research, while others writing under the same banner produce ideological and therefore less trustworthy research. Similarly, there are useful perspectives relating to the lasting impact of colonialism (e.g., post-colonial thought) but that do not make ideological statements, whereas a similar and sometimes overlapping field of "decolonizing" scholars openly criticize colonialism for moral/political reasons and call for its demise (generally sentiments that would be irrelevant for producing explanations or understanding, the primary goal of scientific research, and just as problematic as if scholars openly endorsed colonization, for example). Thus, it is important to emphasize the limitations of analyzing scholarship for its activist or political dimensions purely because it is "critical" (again, a term that means different things) or because of its topic alone.

Indeed, much activist scholarship and activism in the field is associated with critical literatures (postmodernist, poststructuralist, postrealist, postmaterialist, critical, Marxist, feminist, postcolonialist, critical race, Black feminist, etc.) from the 1970s–'80s. In these broad categories, the key works by sociologists include Collins (e.g., 1986); Foucault (e.g., 1978); Harding (e.g., 2009; 1986); Yosso and Solorzano (e.g., 2005). Many of these works are quite rigorous and provide useful insights and critiques of key scientific values. However, some of the work that emulates or attempts to apply and extend them suffers from quality issues, particularly where they rely on more superficial readings of the originals (e.g., distinguishing Collins' work from poorer copies, see Al-Gharbi 2024).[17]

To avoid these issues, for the purposes of this report, when discussing "activism" and "science," I focus primarily on the questions of how scholars view the role of politics and advocacy in their scholarship, how scholars approach scientific criteria, and the extent to which scholars explicitly engage political criteria in producing or evaluating scholarship. (Some critics will argue that these considerations are themselves political choices.)

5.2 A General Perception from Supporters and Critics About Activism as Dominant

A growing number of scholars—critics and supporters alike—have described activism as a

[17] This challenge is not unique to critical work. Many interpretations or summaries of classic or mid-century sociologists have been incorrect or overly simplistic.

fieldwide trend such that the activist strand of sociology has become increasingly dominant in the last two decades and even more so recently (e.g., Iceland 2025). Since the 2010s, a growing group of "heterodox" sociologists have criticized sociology as a field for its growing commitment to activism and a general "ideological capture," discussed more below (for typical examples, see Paul 2026). Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith (2014), who specializes in the sociology of religion, wrote *The Sacred Project of American Sociology*, which has become a kind of mandatory citation among this group of critics. Smith argues that a narrow band of left/liberal ideology has taken on a religious-like status in the field, such that sociologists seek to privilege and protect certain political views and policies above and against scientific standards or data that may compromise their preferred policies.

Since the publication of that book, more scholars have issued similar critiques. Georgia Institute of Technology sociologist Martin (2016, 127) has argued sociology's "social problems" heritage has encouraged sociology to drift into activism:

> "This problem-focused view leads sociological studies to flow into social activism, a merger which is problematic unless all participants share the same prospective moral ideals. This problem seems to have been resolved, albeit unintentionally, by the homogenization of the discipline. To undo this problem, one avenue for future sociologists to take is to abjure public sociology, thus removing morals from sociology."

A major focus of critics' concerns includes the consequences for the perception of the discipline. For example, former president of the Midwestern Sociological Society Diana Pike (2025) recently gave a plenary address to that society. I include several excerpts from her address:

> "[W]hy it is that sociology is a particular target of the 'anti-woke' movements?
>
> Part of the answer to that question, I think, is because our front stage presentation of self is that we focus primarily on inequality and race." (10)
>
> "The perception that inequality, DEI, critical race theory and 'woke' issues constitute our primary identity as a social science is having serious negative impacts." (11)
>
> "The risk sociology faces at this moment is that it does not present a sufficiently persuasive image as a unique social science, – and it is seen by some as primarily a social justice discipline." (12)
>
> "If sociology is not first perceived as a credible social science producing relevant broad sociological knowledge, then we are less likely to be effective in informing the very changes activism and advocacy promote." (12)

For similar concerns, see the 2016 Keynote Address for the Michigan Sociological Association by Mark Mizruchi (2017).

Others have focused on the consequences for student recruitment. UC Barbara sociologist

Jonathan Turner (2025, 7) has argued,

> "for over a century, science and advocacy somehow co-existed within departments of sociology, but with an underlying tension. Now, there is a distinct effort by new cohorts of graduate students and professors to disparage science and covert [sic] ASA into a social-movement organization filled with 'justice warriors,' or those motivated to catastrophize problems and demonize adversaries."

Similarly, Cal State LA sociologist Bradley Campbell noted, "The field has become so ideological that we are not even attracting people to the field who are interested in sociology as I would define it" (Eppard et al. 2025, 465).

Relatedly, there have been a number of publications documenting or criticizing the growing politicization of the field, especially the "normative turn" or "normativity creep" in sociology and related fields, and the abandoning of scientific criteria especially when it is politically convenient (Chernilo and Raza 2022; Hammersley 2024; Leroux et al. 2022; Mizruchi 2017; Smith 2014).[18] These recent concerns mirror earlier concerns expressed in the 1990s and 2000s about the move away from scientific approaches and toward more politically favorable ones (e.g. Cole 1995; 2018; Eisenstadt 1980; Hammersley 1995; 2000; Horowitz 1993; Tittle 2004).

Conversely, a number of prominent sociologists have defended scholar activism, rejected calls for objectivity, claimed activist scholarship is not at odds with a commitment to science or objectivity, or have called for greater normativity (Abbott 2018; Asad 2026; Bourdieu 2000; Cohen 2025; Laurison 2019; Pardo-Guerra 2017; Raza and Watts 2025).

One trend that is rather puzzling is the juxtaposition of scientific rigor and activist scholarship. The greatly influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2000) illustrates this tension well. On the one hand, he was quite critical of what he called "campus radicalism" or the tendency "to mistake revolutions in the order of words, or texts, for revolutions in the order of things, to mistake verbal sparring at academic conferences for interventions in the affairs of the city" (41). Thus, today, some scholars invoke Bourdieu to criticize those scholar-activists and activist-scholars who are effectively "armchair activists" who ultimately affect nothing.

However, Bourdieu went on to outline a way that scholars should behave in his view: they

[18] Here, I am defining normativity as ideology imposed on or overcoming data, or generally imposing the author's perspective without data. This is different from policy recommendations based primarily on data conditional on certain motivating goals (e.g., reducing discrimination, efficiency/cost effectiveness, efficacy on some outcome) and closely based on insights from empirical studies.

should simultaneously follow the rules of scientific engagement while making political interventions. He called this approach a "scholarship with commitment": "a collective politics of intervention in the political field that follows, as much as possible, the rules that govern the scientific field" (44-45). Thus, Bourdieu argued "that scholars have a decisive role to play in the struggle against the new neoliberal *doxa* and the formal (and false) cosmopolitanism of those obsessed with globalization or global competitiveness" (44). They should work to "oppose *a new international-ism*," take on environmental issues, economic issues, and "the hegemony of financial capital in the field of cultural production" (44). Bourdieu did not explain how one would follow scientific rules with such outcomes specified in advance of their study, a seeming violation of those scientific rules.

5.3 Empirical Studies of Scholarly Views on Science and Activism

So far, these sources are generally impressionistic assertions or individual (if prominent) examples. What do the systematic data say? Before reviewing the available data, an important caveat bears mentioning: the studies I rely upon (in this section and the following) come from the 2010s and are likely out of date. The field (and the world) has changed dramatically since their data were collected. To adequately assess the state of the field, fresh original data are needed.

Horowitz et al. (2018) conducted a survey (fielded in 2017) of all full-time faculty in sociology departments ranked in the U.S. News & World Report National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges rankings. Of the 479 sociologists who responded, Horowitz et al. (2018, 466) found, "Just over two-thirds agree that sociology should be both a scientific and moral enterprise, while 62% agree with Karl Marx's famous dictum [to change the world] and 59% affirm that a 'central aim' of the field should be to 'analyze and transcend all forms of social oppression.' " Additionally, they found,

> "Questions of 'advocacy and objectivity' appear especially discrepant. Though a solid majority sees no inherent incompatibility between pursuing social justice and scientific accuracy (73%), sociologists are sharply divided over the importance of a 'dispassionate' attitude in research and whether advocacy and research should be kept 'as separate as possible.' Thirty-five percent agrees that an 'excessively activist orientation' is undermining the field, while just over half (51%) disagrees."

Thus, we see a majority of sociologists who believe one can (and perhaps should) pursue activism, defined as taking steps to change the world or advocating for social-political change, in their sociological research. Only a minority (variously about one third, give or take) oppose activism in favor of traditional scientific norms of neutrality, a dispassionate posture, and generally keeping one's activism and science separate.

Notably, these views were correlated with respondents' preferred theoretical frameworks and self-identified politics: Scholars who preferred intersectional perspectives were most likely to endorse activist-oriented positions like blending science and morality, analyzing and transcending oppression, and the mandate to change the world, and most likely to oppose the critique of excessive activism, the need to separate research and advocacy, the need for a dispassionate attitude in research, and the incompatibility of pursuing social justice with accurate research. Symbolic interactionists were more mixed, supporting the blending of science and morality and opposing the incompatibility of social justice and accurate research, but they generally were more moderate or mixed on the remaining questions. Rational choice theorists were the most opposed to the more activist-oriented dimensions in favor of more traditional scientific standards (Horowitz et al. 2018, 471). Similarly, rejection of traditional scientific standards was highly correlated with self-identified political orientation with "radical" scholars most likely to embrace activism in their research, followed by "liberals," and then by "moderates" (Horowitz et al. 2018, 475, 478). These results again illustrate the deep heterogeneity within the field and strong disagreement across groups regarding fundamental scholarly norms and standards.

In her interviews with 27 department heads or chairs for the top 50 sociology departments in 2014, Akresh (2017, 551) found that the splits between "activists" and "academics," or "political v. scientific," were the most commonly mentioned divisions in departments, mentioned by more than three quarters of interviewees. Interestingly, half of the interviewees "stat[ed] explicitly that they think that bringing activism into research is problematic. Another 14 % (n = 3) explicitly stated that activism and 'advancing the public good' is expected in their department; the remainder did not volunteer their personal perspective, but merely pointed to the fault line" (552). At least one respondent explained that in their advocacy-oriented department, advocacy is referred to as "public sociology." The somewhat different proportions supporting or opposing activism in this study may reflect differences in the top programs versus a selection across the field overall.

As these survey and interview responses indicate, to the extent that scholars have systematically studied a broad swath of sociologists' views on the subject, many tend to collapse the question into the debate between activism and science. However, many studies also focus on scholars' views on objectivity as a major dividing line between who supports an activist orientation and who supports a scientist orientation.

5.4 Empirical Studies of Scholarly Views on Objectivity

Among scholars who have systematically studied sociologists, the consensus appears to be that most sociologists do not fully believe in objectivity, but there is a strong split between those who believe objectivity is impossible/a fallacy/an illusion and those who believe it is an ideal we should strive to reach even if it will be imperfect.

In his book *Why are professors liberal and why do conservatives care?*, Colby College sociologist Neil Gross (2013) presents the results of several distinct studies, including an interview study of 57 social scientists, including sociologists, and a broad sample of 1400 academics. He notes,

> "One important dividing line in the field is between sociologists who identify more with the humanities and those who view the discipline as a social science; another is between sociologists committed to an activist agenda and those who have more of a 'professional' orientation. Among sociology interviewees, nearly two-thirds said they did think critically about the notion of objectivity, but only one-third told us objectivity is an illusion. The latter tended to be in either the humanistic or activist camp or both and were remarkably similar in their epistemological views to professors of literature—the difference being that their perspectives seem informed more by "standpoint theories," arguing that scholars' views on the social world are inevitably shaped by their race, class, and gender, than by more philosophically sophisticated intellectual approaches." (Gross 2013, 198-199)

Later, he continues,

> "the majority of sociologists we interviewed said they were aware of the many problems and difficulties associated with the notion of objectivity. Unwilling, however, to descend into what they see as subjectivism, they have forged and now take part in a hybrid epistemological culture in which objectivity as a view from nowhere is seen as impossible to achieve in practice but still held up as a kind of goal, and in which research is understood as being more objective the more researchers acknowledge and come to terms with their own biases and motivations. For most American sociologists, in other words, objectivity remains an ideal toward which they claim to strive, even as they recognize the impossibility of ever fully achieving it." (Gross 2013, 200)

So, by one measure, we find three groups: those who believe in objectivity, those who are critical aspirants, and those who dismiss objectivity.

Using a different measure—overall tenor of sociology departments—another study found a smaller portion of those dismissive of objectivity and larger portions of those who were supportive of objectivity and those who are more mixed. In her 2014 interviews with department heads and chairs, Akresh (2017, 555) found that the 27 departments were divided across three broad categories: 3 departments were generally oriented against positivism (meaning the department was one where most would generally agree "that objectivity is either not possible or not desirable"), 11 were

generally positivist in their orientation (meaning the department was one where most would general agree "research should be objective"), and 13 were mixed (the interviewee did not specify which orientation was preferred). Note that these categories were derived from the data; as the author set out with broad, open-ended questions about division, the author did not ask these questions directly. More direct questions may have resulted in different, more extreme results.

5.5 Efforts to Change Methodological and Theoretical Practices for Political Reasons

Although part of a much longer project, over the last few decades, there have been significant efforts to change the substance and methods of the field in ways that reflect normative, ideological, or political commitments. A common thread unifying these efforts is the perceived inherent discrimination in science and current sociological practices.

For example, there have been moves to "decolonize" syllabi or the field (or be "anticolonial") (Connell 2018), to engage in "citation justice," citing or including scholars because of their demographics to undo what they see as long-standing discrimination, to document or reverse the "exclusion" of scholars from various demographics (Burawoy 2022; Go 2020; 2023a;b; Hughey and Goss 2018; Morris 2017), or to claim that non-positivist/non-scientific scholars are/were historically excluded because of their demographics (see Thomas and Kukulan (2018) for study on representation of early women "sociologists" in classic social theory syllabi; same on early black women sociologists (Stone 2022); Luo et al. (2018) on their scholarly and Wikipedia representation; Headley et al. (2024) criticizing the positivism-not-positivism binary, claiming early Black sociologists combined positivist and non-positivist approaches to arrive at "truth").

One notable episode in the "citation justice" story, an ASA panel in 2019 (archived on SoundCloud), illustrates how the actors involved see their work as a political movement with political rather than scientific goals. As its organizer, sociologist Whitney Pirtle, described it,

> "What started out as a small idea on twitter turned out to be a mini-movement in Philly. On the Saturday of 2018 ASA conference, scores of sociologists were seen donning t-shirts adorned only with simple writing #CITEBLACKWOMEN and the message was clear. It was a call out to cite black women as a tool to fight the intellectual and positional erasure of black women and their merits in the academy. This panel seeks to ensure that the 2018 moment might transition to a larger movement that centers and celebrates black women sociologists."

While Pirtle and others frame the effort as a way to ensure scholars get the recognition for which they have been robbed because of bias, the "movement"—and tools that it generated—ultimately advocated for a litmus test for publication that involved making sure at least some (or enough)

women of color were cited. If an article does not cite or engage Black women scholars (for example), the assumption is not that there are no relevant articles worth citing (a serious possibility given the small number of Black women scholars in some fields), but that the author of the offending work is intersectionally racist and sexist.

Beyond advocating for citing and assigning work by scholars on the basis of their demographics, there have also been moves to implicate identitarian and political considerations in research methods. These moves include efforts to "decolonize" research methods (Smith 2013) or to treat research methods as "Western" or "white" (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Some scholars generally view sociology (or social science) as incompatible with racial equality because, they claim, the fields were founded in contexts of white supremacy or colonialism/imperialism (Carbado and Roithmayr 2014; Morris 2022). Again, we see political motivations shaping the evaluation and preference of research methods and practice.

Relatedly, some rigorous practices have been co-opted from their earlier methodological justifications to serve more political goals. For example, it has become increasingly expected in qualitative work (and sometimes quantitative work) to include positionality statements. Originally, positionality statements were used to comment on how one's presence as a researcher may have shaped the data collection process. Some such discussions were quite nuanced and avoided making simplistic assumptions that shared ethnoracial or gender identity ensured interviewer-interviewee rapport, identifying instead more substantive points of friction or solidarity (e.g., Emerson 2001, Chs. 6, 8, and 9). In recent years however, these statements have shifted into uncritical identitarian discussions of one's demographics, privilege, and vulnerability, divorced from reflexivity and actual connection to empirical data collection or analysis (for both critical takes, see Gani and Khan 2024; Rubin 2024; Savolainen et al. 2023). In fact, some scholars have justified positionality statements in non-methodological terms, calling for positionality statements because of their liberatory potential for scholars (e.g., Chua and Massoud 2024). Despite these trends, it is worth noting that, at least until recently, positionality statements have been fairly rare in top journals and differentially used by different groups of scholars (see Massoud 2024).

Similarly, there is a small but growing group of scholars who uncritically focus on, or otherwise prioritize, marginalized groups' "lived experience" (e.g., Lee and Zhang 2013; McIntosh and Wright 2019). The turn to lived experience, including as a dependent variable (the thing to explain), departs from standard scientific practice of going directly to the source to collect data that one triangulates and analyzes (as with any other data source) when it instead privileges that data as

uniquely accurate and offering an unquestionable version of the truth. Here, there is a distinction between reporting a subject's perception of reality as their rationale for why they behave in some way (valid) and reporting a subject's perception of reality as reality (invalid without cross-verification). Indeed, it is important to clarify that there is a difference between going directly to the source to collect data that one triangulates and analyzes (as one does with any other data source) and privileging that data as uniquely accurate and offering an unquestionable version of the truth. In sociology and many adjacent fields, we are seeing more of the latter.

As part of this move, there is also a general double standard in the field wherein some scholars do not question the truth claims marginal actors make while they continue to be skeptical of the claims made by the powerful (for a critique of this tendency, see Lubet 2018). Contra Becker's point about being equally willing to believe and disbelieve informants, increasingly belief is inversely correlated with one's position in the status hierarchy. So strong is the double standard that some scholars have openly criticized efforts to try to see the world from the perspective of those perceived to be powerful or otherwise oppressive, such as conservatives (see, e.g., Shapira 2017), essentially arguing that their perceptions and explanations do not matter and are inherently invalid. In other cases, scholars simply avoid casting a critical gaze on themselves and their affinity groups (Al-Gharbi 2024). The asymmetry in skepticism, as well as the privileging of some data purely for personal and political preferences, is a major violation of scientific standards.

I am not yet aware of a systematic analysis of how pervasive these tendencies are. When I have searched for "lived experience" in top journals (a very rough proxy for this tendency), its frequency is surprisingly small, whereas the phrase is commonly used at conferences and everyday conversations with other sociologists, and it is more common in subfield journals. (For a word search of AJS articles, see this Substack post.) Likewise, the skepticism toward members from "oppressor" groups seems fairly widespread, but I have not located systematic data to evaluate that impression.

Looking at the consequences of these trends, some scholars suggest that ideology is impacting methodological decisions. For example, Savolainen (2025) claims that left-wing skew is stagnating research methods, discouraging sociologists from embracing important scientific standards relating to data publication and replicability efforts. Likewise, I have claimed that normative concerns are overtaking empirical concerns in determining methods decisions (Shalaby and Rubin, in prep). I include a brief catalogue in Rubin (2025, 796), with examples from sociology, criminology, sociolegal studies, and related fields:

> "Across topic areas and disciplines, normative considerations now shape our research methodologies (especially the rising popularity of community-engaged research or creative methods that do not simply "give voice" to our research "subjects" but that allow our research "participants" or "co-producers" to claim authorship over the research; Aldridge 2015; Bell 2024; Payne 2017), research partnerships (see c. 2020 calls for ending research collaborations with the police; see Haggerty et al. 2024), the rise of superficial positionality statements decoupled from reflexivity (Gani and Khan 2024; Rubin 2024), calls for specific programs of research to support a given agenda (such as anti- or decolonial, abolitionist, anti-capitalist; e.g., Connell 2018; Lewis and Usmani 2024), how we write about our research (e.g., including person-first language; Harney et al. 2022; using "Latinx" as opposed to "Latino/a"; Garcia 2017; García 2018), whom we cite (e.g., making sure we are not failing to cite underrepresented groups, also called "citation justice"; Kwon 2022), and politically motivated article retractions (Savolainen 2024), among others."

Clearly, these developments run the gamut from cosmetic to serious, but they each represent ways in which scholars' political preferences are seeping into their research.

In that article as well, I provided data demonstrating several emerging trends that indicate more serious violations of scientific standards: offering normative-laden jargon as concepts, co-opting existing concepts to make normative arguments, and deploying activist platforms (e.g., abolish X, decolonize Y) as theoretical frameworks. In each way, authors claimed to be theorizing but failed to produce theory, essentially using theory as a synonym for abstract (and in this case normative) claims. In describing the reception of research, I described how book reviews now evaluate books for their political character. For example, in his *American Journal of Sociology* review of five policing books, Alex Vitale (2025, 1031) complained of one book, "Phelps maintains for herself a theoretical outlook shaped more by an acceptance of current institutional arrangements than by an abolitionist analysis rooted in a deeper historical and functional critique of the police." Another review, in the journal *Social Justice*, complained that another book "could have had more liberatory potential" had it essentially pursued an entirely different research question (Piché 2016, 126). I argued that reception like this likely pushes authors to make their work more normative.

5.6 Summary

From these varied (but limited) pieces of evidence, both systematic data and not, we see competing sets of norms in the field. For many sociologists, there is strong support for some traditional scholarly norms; however, these norms are highly contentious. Across the different areas, we see a non-trivial segment of scholars endorsing political considerations in the production and reception of research. Again, we need systematic data to be collected *now* as the field may have (and likely has) changed significantly since previous efforts at systematic data collection. That said, where

we do have recent (if not representative) data, the institutionalization of political considerations and an activist orientation for the field is quite strong.

6 ASA's Recent Activism and Political Activities

Currently, the biggest source of entries into the ongoing science-activism debate is the hypervisible behavior of the ASA, the field's professional organization. Until this year, there has been a general consensus among commentators (critics and supporters alike) that the ASA has moved in an activist direction in recent years, likely more strongly than the average sociologist. As we shall see, this year (after my internal report was submitted), new developments show greater polarization and complicate the picture.

This section describes key developments illustrative of the ASA's recent (and arguably long-standing) activist bent. The ASA plays a major role in shaping what it means to be a sociologist and what is considered legitimate or preferable research, determining what research is presented at the conference (a major marker for junior scholars on the job market), appointing editors of ASA-run journals like *American Sociological Review* (one of the top two journals in the field), and deciding which works receive recognition through field and subfield awards (another important marker for junior scholars). ASA also manages a job bank (which was recently made public instead of for members only), where scholars learned of sociology and sociology-adjacent jobs. What the ASA does publicly and privately is thus an important part of the ecosystem that shapes the production and reception of sociological research.

6.1 Conference Themes

A number of scholars have pointed to the ASA conference themes as an indicator of its turn toward activism or its disproportionate focus on the subject (e.g., Eppard et al. 2025; Keskintürk 2023; Pike 2025; Savolainen 2023; Smith 2014; Turner 2025). For example, in his *Wall Street Journal* article, Wayne State University sociologist and Criminologist Jukka Savolainen (2023) explained,

> "Each year, the association's president chooses a theme for its annual meeting. Next year's theme is brazenly political: 'Intersectional Solidarities: Building Communities of Hope, Justice, and Joy.' The ASA sums it up as follows: 'The 2024 theme emphasizes sociology as a form of liberatory praxis: an effort to not only understand structural inequities, but to intervene in sociopolitical struggles.' "

For Savolainen and others, conference themes are viewed as giving the lie to the field's claim to be a scientific endeavor, in addition to becoming a liability in revealing the field's political orientation in

an unreceptive political climate.

Table 3 collects conference themes from more than a dozen years. As noted above, a number of scholars have read these themes as political or partisan in nature. For example, looking at an earlier period, Smith (2014) summarizes a selection of what he identified as "activist" themes:

> "The ASA has organized a number of 'activist' conference programs for its national meetings. These include the following official program themes, chosen by each year's elected ASA President: 'Real Utopias: Emancipatory Projects, Institutional Designs, and Possible Futures' (2012), 'Toward a Sociology of Citizenship: Inclusion, Participation, and Rights' (2010), 'Discourses of Stability and Change' (2009), 'Is Another World Possible?' (2007), 'Great Divides: Transgressing Boundaries' (2006), 'Public Sociologies' (2004), 'Oppression, Domination & Liberation: Challenges for the 21st Century' (2000), 'Inequality and Social Policy' (1998), and 'Social Change: Opportunities and Constraints' (1996). The program theme for the 2013 ASA conference, which meets a few months from when I am writing this, is 'Interrogating Inequalities: Linking Micro and Macro.' The ASA President's explanation of this theme begins by nothing [sic] that 'Sociologists want more than just to chart patterns of social inequalities. [We want to ask:] How is inequality made and, therefore, *could potentially be unmade*?' The 'theme statement' for 2013 on the ASA website says that 'No set of questions is more fundamental to sociology than those about inequality—what is it, why is it, how does it come about, and *what can we do to change it*? …Through what processes does this work? *How can we intervene in those processes?* …Our task at these meetings is to locate the key junctures among these multilevel processes that *provide the levers by which* different sorts of inequalities among people and groups are systematically made or unmade in the contemporary context. This is the essential first *step towards changing those inequalities*.' " (Smith 2014, 60-61, italics in the original)

Year	Theme
2026	Disrupting the Status Quo: Putting Sociology to Work for a more Equitable Society[a]
2025	Reimagining the Future of Work[b]
2024	Intersectional Solidarities: Building Communities of Hope, Justice, and Joy
2023	Bureaucracies of Displacement
2022	The Educative Power of Sociology
2021	Emancipatory Sociology
2020	Power, Inequality and Resistance at Work
2019	Engaging Social Justice for a Better World
2018	Feeling Race
2017	The Culture of Inequalities and Social Inclusion Across the Globe
2016	Rethinking Social Movements: Can Changing the Conversation Change the World?
2015	Sexualities in the Social World
2014	Hard Times: The Impact of Economic Inequality on Families and Individuals

2013	Interrogating Inequality: Linking Micro and Macro[c]

[a] https://www.asanet.org/annual-meeting/program-highlights/

[b] Themes for 2025–2014 were included in Pike (2025).

[c] This theme, along with themes through 2023, was included in Keskintürk (2023).

Table 3: ASA Conference Themes. Sources: ASA, Pike (2025), and Keskintürk (2023).

For our purposes, the question is not whether one should favor the values or politics included—or even (as some have argued) whether the values included are liberal, moderate, or conservative—but what it signifies when sociological conferences prioritize political goals and values in their themes.

In what sense are these themes "activist," as several commentators have claimed? In a simple sense, to the extent that sociologists are expected to move beyond describing and explaining to challenging specific phenomena they view as problems and intervening to end those problems, they cross the line from science to activism.[19] For example, I can explain the causes of mass incarceration—such a project is both important in its own right for explaining a major social phenomenon and useful as a case study for understanding how large-scale changes in society are possible. Such a project is also useful for those who want to stop mass incarceration and for those who want to keep it going, whatever my own view on the subject. Likewise, I can study what people may view as the positive and negative consequences of mass incarceration; such a study has basic science utility, deepening our understanding how different parts of society link together, and policy utility, as policymakers can determine whether crime control and penal policies are having desirable or undesirable consequences and whether these consequences merit the continuation of such policies. None of those studies require me to share whether I support mass incarceration or not or for me to personally stake steps to advance or challenge mass incarceration, its causes, or its consequences; my personal support or criticism is irrelevant if I follow scientific standards. But if I endorse or criticize mass incarceration, or I call for its abolition or extension, I have crossed the line from science to advocacy.

[19] There is an important distinction between the more technocratic "policy sociology" and "critical" or "public sociology"—policy sociologists pursue research on particular problems of interest to policymakers or other stakeholders. For example, what are the causes of sentencing disparities? In light of the study's findings, what tweaks can we implement to reduce sentencing disparities? By contrast, critical and public sociologists identify the problem themselves and suggest solutions that, in extreme cases, are larger than small tweaks and are less concerned with the practical ability to implement them (e.g., abolition or other society-level changes).

The conference themes also allow the organizers' political preferences to shape conversations in the field. They are making statements about society's most pressing problems based on their views alone rather than on evidence. Stronger rationales for such conference themes may involve citing public survey data suggesting the public identifies inequality, for example, as the biggest problem facing society today, or studies showing that inequality is responsible for a significant outcome like the most deaths in society (hypothetically). (As we shall see below, sociologists' views about the state of these problems in the world do not well track the data—the focus on inequality, for example, has been increasing in the field, while inequality of the kinds sociologists care and write most about has been decreasing.)

6.2 ASA Presidential Addresses and Statements

Presidential addresses traditionally are intended to be a rallying cry for the field and a call to study a new area or to use a new approach. These addresses can be fairly impactful in shaping discussions in the field, while some seem to have little impact. I have already mentioned Burawoy's (2004) presidential address calling for more "public sociology." More recently, ASA presidents have offered other, more political, critical, and normative statements and addresses, particularly in the years before and after 2020:

- 2017: ASA President Mary Romero's candidate statement (as part of the election) in 2017 called for "social justice," prompted renewed debate of scholar activism (Pardo-Guerra 2017). Her presidential address in 2019 and published the next year was "Sociology Engaged in Social Justice" (Romero 2020).
- 2018: ASA President Bonilla-Silva's presidential address set out tools for "challeng[ing] any racial order" and "urg[ed] White sociologists to acknowledge the significance of racism in sociology and the emotions it engenders and to work to advance new personal and organizational antiracist practices" (Bonilla-Silva 2019).
- 2020: ASA President Williams' address focused on "the problems of working for a living" and ultimately "encourage[d] consideration of alternative forms of life support, including expanding the private and the public safety nets, arguing that our existence should not depend exclusively on working for a living" (Williams 2021, 191).
- 2021: Aldon Morris's ASA presidential address claimed traditional European and "white American" sociology is inferior to DuBoisian sociology, which centers

patriarchal, white supremacist, and colonialist structures and ideology, and called for an "emancipatory sociology" (Morris 2022, 1).

- 2022: Cecilia Menjivar's address "propose[d] adopting a critical perspective when using formalized categories in our work, which would acknowledge the constructed nature of those categories, their naturalization through everyday practices, and their misalignments with lived experiences. This lens can reveal the systemic structures that engender both enduring patterns of inequality and state classification systems, and reframe questions about the people the state sorts into the categories we use. I end with a brief discussion of the benefits that can accrue from expanding our theoretical repertoires by including knowledge produced in the Global South" (Menjivar 2023, 1).
- 2023: Prudence Carter's address offered "a forward-looking call to arms, Carter underscores the imperative for sociologists to transcend epistemological and methodological boundaries; and she advocates for robust collaborations across the social sciences and humanities to harness the collective power of knowledge-generation and solution-building for pressing societal issues" (Carter 2024, 6).
- 2024: In her presidential address, Joya Misra "call[ed] for making solution-oriented, community-engaged, and participatory research more central in the discipline" (Misra 2025, 1).

Again, like the conference themes, we see the presidents' political views coming through and, in most of these examples, calls for activism by sociologists.

Although explicit activism has become more common in recent years, political preferences have been visible in presidential addresses for a longer period. The following table (Table 4) lists presidential address titles, the years they were given (typically they were published the following year), and their citation counts as an indication of which addresses were most impactful. As an example, the earliest presidential address I reviewed came from Joe Feagin, the abstract of which reads:

> "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." (Feagin 2001, 1)

Thus, while similar claims have become more frequent in the years before and after 2020, they did not emerge in that era and instead reflect a long-standing vision of sociology well represented in ASA presidential addresses of the last two-plus decades.

Year	President	Title	Cit.
2024	Joya Misra	Sociological Solutions: Building Communities of Hope, Justice, and Joy	10
2023	Prudence Carter	Unrealized Integration in Education, Sociology, and Society	10
2022	Cecilia Menjivar	State Categories, Bureaucracies of Displacement, and the Possibilities from the Margins	120
2021	Aldon Morris	Alternative Views of Modernity: The Subaltern Speaks	88
2020	Christine Williams	Life Support: The Problems of Working for a Living	33
2019	Mary Romero	Sociology Engaged in Social Justice	164
2018	Eduardo Bonilla- Silva	Feeling Race: Theorizing the Racial Economy of Emotions	711
2017	Michele Lamont	Addressing Recognition Gaps: Destigmatization and the Reduction of Inequality	606
2016	Ruth Milkman	A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest	632
2015	Paula England	Sometimes the Social Becomes Personal: Gender, Class, and Sexualities	126
2014	Annette Lareau	Cultural Knowledge and Social Inequality	1004
2013	Cecelia Ridgeway	Why Status Matters for Inequality	1455
2012	Erik Olin Wright	Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias	640
2011	Randall Collins	C-Escalation and D-Escalation: A Theory of the Time-Dynamics of Conflict	246
2010	Evelyn Nakano Glenn	Constructing Citizenship: Exclusion, Subordination, and Resistance	384
2009	Patricia Hill Collins	The New Politics of Community	445
2008	Arne L. Kalleberg	Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition	5185

2007	Frances Fox Piven	Can Power from Below Change the World?	211
2006	Cynthia Fuchs Epstein	Great Divides: The Cultural, Cognitive, and Social Bases of the Global Subordination of Women	338
2005	Troy Duster	Comparative Perspectives and Competing Explanations: Taking on the Newly Configured Reductionist Challenge to Sociology	165
2004	Michael Burawoy	For Public Sociology	4496
2003	William T. Bielby	Rock in a Hard Place: Grassroots Cultural Production in the Post-Elvis Era	63
2002	Barbara Reskin	Including Mechanisms in Our Models of Ascriptive Inequality	872
2001	Douglas S. Massey	A Brief History of Human Society: The Origin and Role of Emotion in Social Life	581
2000	Joe Feagin	Social Justice and Sociology: Agendas for the Twenty-First Century	266

Table 4: List of Presidential Address Titles. Citations collected via Google Scholar.

6.3 ASA's "Advocacy"

ASA explicitly engages in advocacy. Historically, ASA has often described its advocacy as limited to issues directly related to sociologists (or doing sociology). In recent years, however, ASA appears to follow a broader interpretation (sociologists are people affected by harmful political policies), which has led the organization to make broader statements. (Certainly, there are examples from earlier periods of similarly broad statements that weigh into general politics and move beyond the narrow concerns of practicing sociology, like the statement on the Iraq War in 2003, but they appear to be less numerous.)

In December 2025, the ASA "Advocacy" webpage listed nearly 250 statements, letters, resolutions, amicus briefs, etc., issued since 2003 (160 had been posted since January 2020; by contrast, there were just over 60 posted between 2014 and 2019 and 25 between 2003 and 2013). Many of these statements are entirely reasonable for a professional sociology organization to issue, including defenses of open inquiry, academic freedom, free speech, campus protests, funding for scientific research, and defenses of the discipline itself given recent attacks. However, some other statements take explicit policy positions, privileging certain values, certain interpretative frameworks, and particular views of social change, and selectively intervening in some events and not others.

Some recent examples illustrate the point. These include ASA's support for "race-conscious admissions" and "opposing [the] Supreme Court decision on affirmative action" (June 2023), an "Amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court in support of narrowly tailored race-conscious admissions

practices at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina" (August 2022), a "Letter to Congressional leadership in support of the LGBTQI+ Data Inclusion Act" (June 2022), and a "Statement on the white supremacist murders in Buffalo" (May 2022), among others. Notably, many of these statements were not voted on by membership. Indeed, former ASA History of Sociology Section Chair and Bard College sociologist Laura Ford has documented that the ASA's decisions to participate in recent DEI litigation and ultimately to publicly and explicitly celebrate the subsequent ruling against the Trump administration were unilateral (Ford 2025, 8-12).

Although recent political action has gained the most attention, it is worth highlighting that some earlier episodes did elicit concern from scholars that ASA was being more ideological than scientific. For example, in 2011, the ASA submitted an amicus curiae brief in *Walmart v. Dukes*, a U.S. Supreme Court case about gender discrimination. This prompted Harvard sociologist Chris Winship to edit a special issue of *Sociological Methods & Research* (which he edited at the time) on the question "What is Required of Science," focusing on the amicus brief and other ASA actions around the case (Winship 2011).

The resolution that has attracted the most attention recently from sociologists themselves for crossing the line into the political sphere is its "Resolution for Justice in Palestine" (2024) calling for a ceasefire in Gaza (for coverage in the academic press, see Quinn 2024). Notably, this resolution was voted on by the membership after the Council failed to pass the resolution. As some have pointed out, only about 20% of ASA membership voted in favor (34.3% voted and the resolution passed at 58.5%) (e.g., Ford 2025, 12).

Defending the Resolution and writing on the sociologists for Palestine (S4P) website, former ASA President Michael Burawoy (2024) offered this history of the ASA and its resolutions, emphasizing that the Resolution for Palestine was not a significant departure from past practice:

> "The ASA has a long history of Resolutions. Many have concerned national and international politics. To my knowledge the first one was the resolution to end the war in Vietnam, rejected by Council and then also rejected by the membership. That was 1967. Council also rejected the 2003 Resolution against the war in Iraq, but it was then passed by the membership by a two-thirds majority. Among the Resolutions Council endorsed was one calling for divestment from South African companies in 1986 and most recently in 2022 public condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The point is this: voting on such political issues has been a long-standing practice of the ASA and it has often involved a clash between the Council and the Membership."

For Burawoy, there was nothing wrong with passing resolutions on general politics without a clear connection to practicing sociology; indeed, for him, it was a tradition within ASA.

However, Burawoy went on to defend the practice of passing political resolutions as part of practicing sociology:

> "The ASA has explicitly endorsed what it calls 'public engagement'—campaigning for government research funding, opposing threats to academic freedom as in Florida's recent legislation, preparing amicus briefs to the Supreme Court, concerning such questions as affirmative action [based on sociological research], and openly supporting the practice of community engagement. In short, as an organization the ASA not only defends the interests of sociology as an academic discipline, but regularly takes up positions of a broader political character."

Finally, Burawoy defended the practice by arguing that sociology itself has become the victim of external political interference, but scientific expertise will not save us from this interference:

> "This adds up to one thing: sociologists are actors in the society we study. We can no longer—if we ever could—retreat to a dispassionate objectivity within the walls of academia. If politicians can set in motion forces that remove leaders of major universities; if they can remove sociology as a basic education requirement within the university; if they can ban the books we teach and abolish DEI; then merely proclaiming our credentials as a science will be an inadequate defense."

For Burawoy, then, sociologists must be political because they live in a political society.

It is difficult to know if Burawoy's view is the dominant one among remaining ASA members (many who disagree with this direction have simply left the organization over the years). Indeed, it is important to acknowledge some of the public criticism the Palestine resolution inspired as well as a larger conversation about how far into activism the ASA has ventured. For example, the University of Minnesota sociologist (and genocide expert) Joachim Savelsberg (2024) criticized the Palestine resolution for its sloppiness and for violating the ASA's own code of ethics (for additional criticism, see Cohen 2024; Lubet 2024; Savolainen 2023).

One imperfect indicator of the current state of the field will be the attendance counts at the upcoming annual meeting this month (August 2026), where those who support resolutions relating to Palestine and a subsequent proposal to boycott Israeli institutions are boycotting the meeting, while some who previously left the association are planning to attend in order to support ASA leadership in refraining from further action on the topic (discussed below).

6.4 ASA's Land Acknowledgments Policy

Less prominently and less frequently discussed, the ASA has also begun encouraging the use of land acknowledgments in its conferences. Currently, on its website, the ASA maintains a webpage

entitled "Land Acknowledgement" (last updated October 7, 2025). It contains the following text:

> "Before we can talk about sociology, power, inequality, we must acknowledge that the land on which we gather is the traditional and unceded territory of the Lenape (pronounced len-ah-pey, meaning Original People).
>
> The American Sociological Association (ASA) acknowledges that academic institutions, indeed the nation-state itself, was founded upon and continues to enact exclusions and erasures of Indigenous Peoples. This acknowledgement demonstrates a commitment to beginning the process of working to dismantle ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, and to recognize the hundreds of Indigenous Nations who continue to resist, live, and uphold their sacred relations across their lands. We also pay our respect to Indigenous elders past, present, and future and to those who have stewarded this land throughout the generations."

ASA has asked panel presiders at their annual meetings to include a "Land Acknowledgment and Recognition Statement" as part of the panel preamble (e.g., Ford 2025, 4).

In her description of this new policy, Ford shared ASA official Heather Washington's response to Ford's inquiry about it:

> "As you might know, recently a new section, Sociology of Indigenous Peoples and Native Nations, was formed at ASA. You are correct that we've just been doing this [including Land Acknowledgments] for the last couple of years (since 2019), and when we first began we consulted with the folks who were in the process of developing this new organizational group. They led the development of a statement we could use to begin this practice. We were grateful to them and deferred to their expertise as Indigenous sociologists. I've continued to be in conversation with the new section's leadership and we have discussed the question of whether to continue this practice in the future and, if so, whether to amend the language in the future. As I'm sure you know, this is a complex issue." (Ford 2025, 4-5)

In her letter to the History of Sociology Section, Ford criticized the political character and assumptions underlying these practices. For one, Ford described this practice as a form of "public prayer." Ford also pointed out some of the problems with prioritizing "Indigenous Peoples" as an unclear and undefined category that "forms the basis for a political and normative agenda" (7). In sum, she noted, "that the Land Acknowledgment articulates a political platform and normative agenda, an avowal of a particular set of value commitments that not all members of the ASA share" (7).

6.5 Postscript: The Latest Unfolding Chapter (March 2026+)

After submitting my internal report, two new developments transpired that bear mentioning, particularly because they complicate the story of growing activism in ASA and especially with ASA leadership. As these developments occurred after I submitted my report, there is more one could say

on them but I have done my best to fairly describe them with particular attention to the dimensions that challenge my account thus far. Some of these additional developments are detailed in Lee (2026).

First, in March 2026, the sociologists for Palestine (S4P) group submitted a petition with 428 signatures asking ASA leadership to place on the ballot a proposal to boycott Israeli institutions. On March 12, ASA leadership refused to place the question on the ballot, explaining that operations-related proposals could not go on the ballot per ASA bylaws. Their email also noted the harm the Palestine resolution had caused within the field and that some members had left ASA following that resolution. S4P in turn criticized the move as undemocratic and violating its own policy on platforming petitions that reach a particular amount.

Extensive discussions ensued. Several past ASA presidents announced they would leave the association or boycott its upcoming meeting. At least one section officeholder resigned their position to protest the ASA leadership's decisions. Many section leaders solicited feedback (directly or through Google Forms) on how their section should respond. For example, after their Section Chair resigned, the Race, Gender, and Class Section Council sent an email to membership opening with the statement, "Our section is rooted and committed to Black feminist thought and women of color feminisms, which are frameworks that cannot be disentangled from social justice and liberation" (Zerai 2026). It then went on to invite members to share their views on the matter. Some sections further discussed whether to leave the ASA and/or to boycott the upcoming meeting. By contrast, some sections sent out no emails on the subject. Others solicited feedback but ended the discussion after finding either mixed views from their membership or insufficient support for a formal response. In the end, a group of 28 section chairs also wrote a statement condemning the ASA for its move (per S4P).

S4P has since announced a boycott of the ASA's annual meeting in August 2026, citing more than 500 signatures of scholars pledging to boycott (as of April 14, 2026). Also in April, a small group of scholars (myself included) signed a letter of support for the ASA leadership, agreeing with their decision to not put the petition on the ballot; as of July 29, 2026, that letter has been signed by nearly 130 scholars.

In late July, S4P formally announced a counter conference ("Resisting Authoritarianism: Global Solidarity & Democratic Futures") held in the same city as the ASA meeting and provided resources for scholars who wish to protest but are not in a position to forgo the meeting for professional reasons.

Second, a new slate of candidates for ASA leadership positions was announced for the April-May 2026 election. The two candidates for president both advocated viewpoint diversity and have both stated that they do not support calls to boycott academic institutions.[20]

Thus, it is important to acknowledge that current and future ASA leadership may be moderating compared to earlier trends. In recent years, ASA leadership has come into conflict with ASA members who hold more radical views about how activist ASA should be.

Moreover, we lack systematic data as to the relationship between ASA leadership's views and those of the average ASA member and about how large the activist wing in ASA is. One useful datapoint is ASA membership is more than 9,000 members strong (about a third of whom are students). Although S4P has estimated their supporters number at least 1,000, the most recent confirmed counts for the upcoming boycott appear to be 500, suggesting this may represent a small minority of ASA membership.

What impact these developments will have on ASA and the field—and what it means to be a sociologist—are yet to be seen. However, these episodes have been divisive and damaging for the field. Informally, I have heard from junior scholars on both sides of these issues expressing concern about making their positions known one way or the other for fear it will affect their job prospects or make their life difficult in their departments. S4P also promises its signatories that it will not release their names without permission, presumably for fear of perceived career consequences. This is not the sign of a healthy field.

6.6 Using Science as Cover

It is worth noting, as others have (e.g., Savolainen 2023; Smith 2014), that despite the ASA's activist stance, the organization and its spokespeople often continue to embrace science publicly, although some critics suggest this embrace is superficial and used to seek legitimacy at a time when

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[20]Per the ASA's election website, McVeigh's candidate statement noted, "Our success will hinge on our ability to unify under a broad tent that celebrates diversity among our members, including diversity in methodological approaches and orientations toward activism, public sociology, and sociology as science." Wilde's candidate statement noted,

> "We have real disagreements, but also common goals. We are stronger because of our diversity, in substance, method, background and political views; but we need to ensure that all voices are heard. There is much hard work to do.
> If elected, I will convene working groups on critical issues such as: objectivity, positionality, causality, public policy, public sociology, political statements and activism. I will use the conference to help us engage each other productively and chart the future of the discipline, together."

its activism has gotten it in trouble with politicians. For example, following the announcement that Florida had removed sociology from its list of courses eligible for general education credit (Hartocollis 2024; Patel 2024; Pettit and Zahneis 2025; Supiano 2024; see also McMurtrie 2021 for earlier concerns about teaching about race), an ASA representative gave a statement to *The New York Times* complaining that new regulations in Florida stemmed from

> "a gross misunderstanding of sociology as an illegitimate discipline driven by 'radical' and 'woke' ideology…To the contrary, sociology is the scientific study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior, which are at the core of civic literacy and are essential to a broad range of careers" (Hartocollis 2024).

How ASA officials square their emphasis on science while also making explicitly political statements is less clear.

Indeed, the ASA offers a webpage with "Talking Points For Threatened Sociology Departments" (last updated January 28, 2025). In its preamble, the webpage warns of political moves against teaching about "inequality, race, gender, and sexuality." It then states, "The current political movement against so-called 'divisive concepts' is in fact an existential threat to our discipline." The talking points are developed "to help defend against these threats." They begin by discussing how "sociology graduates contribute to the scientific workforce." The first of these points is their training in research and data analysis. The bullet point reminds readers that, "sociology is a STEM discipline, one that builds social scientific skills." Later, it notes, "Sociology provides students with a scientific understanding of the complex issues confronting society, allowing them to analyze public policy issues, develop strong, socially beneficial programs, and help drive better policy decisions in such diverse areas as immigration, healthcare, climate change, housing, law enforcement, and many others." The webpage offers other skills and also explains how "sociology benefit[s] higher education institutions." Thus, from the vantage point of ASA leadership or spokespeople defending sociology against external criticism and political attacks, sociology remains a scientific endeavor that lacks ideological slants.

6.7 Summary

In recent years, across these different episodes, we see ASA leadership taking explicit political stances in ways that signal to the field what it means to be a sociologist, with little public pushback from those who oppose political stances (excepting those in "heterodox" circles). In the most commonly endorsed view in the ASA, being a sociologist means being a political person who

takes public stances, even in their professional capacity, not because of evidence, but because it is the right thing to do—according to one's own moral compass, as long as that moral compass aligns with the field.

Equally notable is the general lack of debate and open discussion on these issues. Where there is debate and pushback, it appears more common in the direction arguing leadership has not gone far enough, as with critiques from S4P (recall they count 500+ supporters compared to the 130+ supporters for ASA leadership). Indeed, open debate in the other direction is harder to sustain.

At the last ASA annual meeting (held in Chicago in August 2025), President Adia Harvey Wingfield invited a group of scholars to answer a series of questions on the state of sociology. To her credit, one question was particularly relevant: "Sociology is a big tent and has always involved tensions and divides over methods, goals, and even our relevance. What do you see as the major internal debate(s) happening in sociology today?" However, the panelists did not engage. Panelist and Swarthmore College sociologist Daniel Laurison (2025) later published his remarks from the panel on his blog, including his take on divisions in the field (which match my own notes from attending the panel):

> "I had prepared some thoughts on this, but I really liked [fellow panelist and Princeton Sociologist] Alondra Nelson's response on the panel, which was basically 'that's not that interesting right now.' We have debates about scholar-activism or the proper role of social science in the political sphere; we have debates about how normative our work is or ought to be, we have big divisions in terms of the kinds of institutions we work at and the security of our jobs and so on. But at the end of the day, sociologists as a group share a lot more values than not, even if we disagree on the best way to do research and/or activism/politics based on those values, or whether a given current arrangement is just or unjust, or etc."

Thus, for a group one step removed from ASA leadership, the debate over science versus activism/normativity is generally unimportant and irrelevant.

6.8 Viewpoint Heterogeneity in the Field Between and Among Non- ASA Members and ASA Members and Leadership

I have argued that the ASA's actions shape what it means to be a sociologist and that ASA activities are one useful indicator of where the field is politically. A reasonable question, however, is whether ASA behavior reflects the field at large. There is evidence that it may not: Lockhart et al. (2024, 20) found that there are half as many ASA regular members (i.e., excluding student and retired members) as sociology faculty, meaning only half of all sociology faculty are members in the

field's professional organization. Additionally, an unknown number of former ASA members have left the organization in recent years because of a variety of disagreements. There is good reason to expect that the views of at least some non-members differ significantly from those of members.

Even within ASA, it is important to recognize heterogeneity, including between leadership and members and between prominent ASA members (whose views are often publicly documented) and ASA members as a group on whom we do not have systematic data (beyond section membership, discussed later). For example, the ASA Council (the organization's primary leadership body) did not pass the Palestine resolution when initially asked by S4P, but after a petition got it on the ballot, the voting members did. However, only a minority of members voted. So it is still difficult to know to what extent even the membership vote was representative of membership views.

Indeed, some prominent sociologists argue that ASA is more radical than its members or the field at large. University of Maryland sociologist and demographer Phil Cohen has offered his insights on this front in several publications. In 2024, following the Florida gen-ed decision, Cohen (2024) defended the discipline as less activist than its professional association makes it seem, writing:

> "the community of sociologists does include a large activist wing, which has successfully mobilized to win elections for leadership positions in the ASA and other groups. This has magnified the target on our back. But that is not the daily work of most sociologists—even the activists among us."

Notably, Cohen went on to promote his own take on how sociologists can be properly engaged with politics and take normative stances in their public engagement as professionals (see also Cohen 2025).

More recently, Altman and Cohen (2025, 3, internal citations omitted) summarized the broader professional context as follows:

> "[ASA's] elected leadership in recent years has leaned markedly left and activist-oriented, apparently reflecting the perspectives of the voting membership. Its positions—which reflect sometimes divergent interests of the elected academic leaders and the professional staff—may appear internally contradictory. Some sociologists have become disgruntled with ASA and publicly quit (including one of us), partly because of opposition to open science and open access. Others see ASA as too politicized or too leftist, too dominated by elite (or non-elite) institutions, too racist (or antiracist), too intellectually diverse (or not diverse enough), and so on. The stakes have risen recently as some politicians and state governments have targeted sociology as part of the problem of 'woke' / DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) domination in higher education. There are a raft of less dominant professional societies in sociology—some regional, and some focused on subject areas or types of research—that are in generally similar positions, and mostly have in common the dependence on revenue from journal subscriptions. Meanwhile, in addition to regional associations, some sociologists have

> fomented a new organization, the Society for Sociological Science, around the open-access journal Sociological Science. In the last year they held a conference that included as one of its defining issues, 'ideas for improving sociological science.' The critique of ASA implied by the journal and its actions is not formally stated, but this may reflect divides in the discipline widening."

From these discussions, it should be clear that ASA does not speak for the field at large. However, ASA is the single largest, if internally divided, sociological entity in an otherwise decentralized field of regional professional associations, university departments, and journals, giving it a level of visibility these other entities lack. Indeed, ASA and its critics highlight important heterogeneities across the field. For some, ASA does not go far enough in its commitment to activism; for others, it goes too far; for yet others, it fails to support basic improvements for scientific development in the field. ASA is thus one important influence in the larger and contentious ecosystem.

7 From Politicized Field-Level Norms to Analyses of Sociological Research

If the field-level developments documented in this and preceding sections meaningfully shape research production, we should expect to observe consequences in the published literature itself. Unfortunately, there is very little systematic research that evaluates the quality of sociological scholarship to determine what impact these fragmented norms have on the research actually produced. What systematic analyses we do have speak to tangential issues, but nevertheless provide insights into the quality of sociological research. These analyses rely on some measures of quality without measures of politicization, some measures of politicization without measures of quality, and topics rather than evaluating the content's rigor. This section explores the first two types of analyses before moving onto the far more numerous topical analyses in the following sections.[21]

7.1 Reproducibility and Replication

Several months ago, a suite of studies was published in *Nature* evaluating articles from several disciplines (published between 2009 and 2018) for their ability to reproduce and replicate different findings, as well as the robustness of those findings. Reproducibility refers to whether another scholar can use the same dataset to recover the same findings. Replication refers to whether a new dataset can recover statistically similar findings. Robustness in this context refers to the

[21]The empirical studies discussed in this section were published after my internal report was written. Given the high-profile nature of these studies, I added this section to update the public-facing report for completeness.

resilience of a finding and the extent to which it holds up across different model specifications. These concepts represent scientific criteria to evaluate the (statistical) trustworthiness of (especially quantitative) studies.[22] Sociology was included in all three studies, but only the reproducibility and replication studies provide sociology-specific findings (note: sociology was defined to include criminology). Importantly, the top journals from the field were used. Thus, these analyses are not fieldwide analyses but analyses of research typically deemed the highest quality in the field.

Miske et al. (2026) examined the reproducibility of articles. They first had to identify articles whose reproducibility could be tested, requiring a specific testable claim made and available data to attempt to reproduce the claim. Notably, in their study, Sociology trailed Political Science, Economics, and Psychology on this front (see Fig. 1). This finding matches what several sociologists have noted previously: Sociology has lagged behind its cognate disciplines on issues of open science, data transparency, and replication/reproduction efforts, despite calls from some scholars to do more (e.g., Cohen 2025; Freese and Peterson 2017; Savolainen 2025; Weeden 2023).

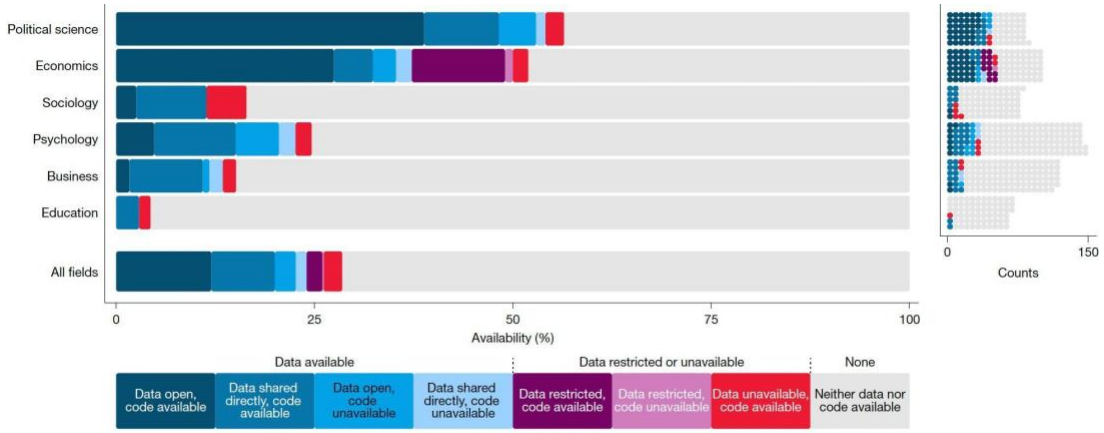

Fig. 2 | Data and code availability by field. Left, data and code availability as a percentage of papers. Right, the raw counts of papers with data and code available and not available. Restricted data (purple) did not count as available data, but might be accessible in principle.

Figure 1: Source: Miske et al. (2026). Screenshot of Fig. 2 in their paper.

[22] With appropriate modifications, these concepts can also be applied to qualitative research. For example, would a different analyst be able to apply an author's codebook to a series of interviews and come up with the same insights and conclusions (reproducibility)? Can a different analyst interviewing a similar but different group of people find similar findings, perhaps with different empirical details but similar theoretical takeaways (replication)? If taking into account different perspectives or ways of interpreting the data, do the conclusions still hold up (robustness)? However, the focus of the Nature analyses was quantitative.

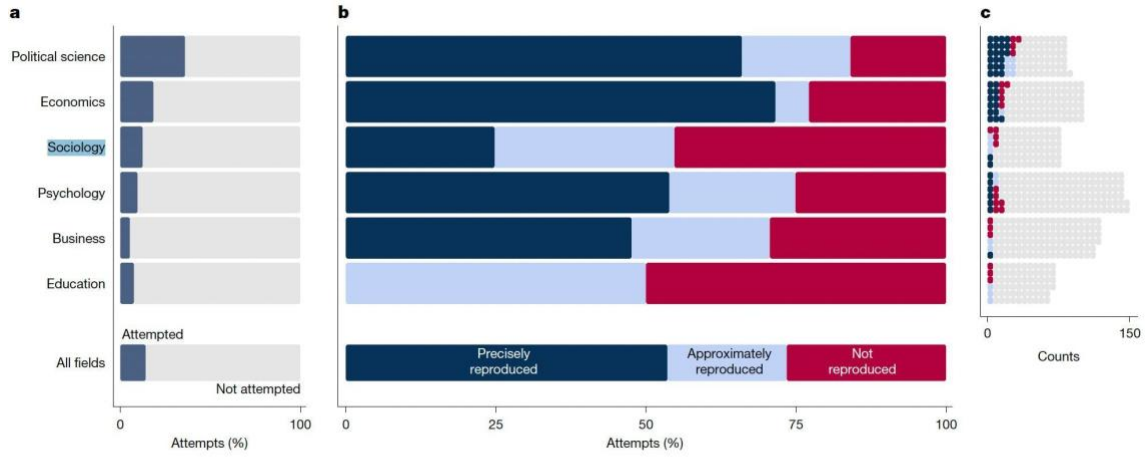

Fig. 5 | Reproducibility by field. a, The proportion of reproduction attempts from the sample of papers. **b**, Reproducibility as a percentage of the attempts. **c**, Reproducibility as counts compared with the sample of papers. Note that (1) papers with multiple claims could be partly reproducible, but the colour coding of the dots showing paper counts in **c** is rounded to the nearest paper; and (2) the weighting scheme in **c** includes claims without reproduction attempts, so the proportions will not exactly match the middle bars.

Figure 2: Source: Miske et al. (2026). Screenshot of Fig. 5 in their paper.

Their findings on reproducibility were similarly lackluster for the field: after Education, Sociology had the lowest rates of precise reproduction and of a combined precise or approximate reproduction. Conversely, after Education, it had the highest rate of non-reproduced claims (see Fig. 2).

Important caveats must be made. The resulting sample size of Sociology papers tested was ultimately extremely small (n=9). Although this sample constraint is understandable given the magnitude of the undertaking and the lack of eligible papers, extreme caution is needed in identifying the implications for Sociology more generally. The results may not reflect the field overall in terms of its quantitative papers and may have no bearing on qualitative papers. Nevertheless, the result was quite striking: nine studies in the top journals made testable claims and provided enough evidence about the data used to allow a reproducibility analysis, but only two were precisely replicated and four failed replication attempts. That simply should not happen for studies published in a top journal. Indeed, no field examined in the study should be pleased with how it fared.

Tyner et al. (2026) explored replication. Replication is a harder standard because an original study may have been competently and fairly executed, but the finding could very well have been a fluke and disappear with different data. For example, had Miske et al. selected a different set of nine sociology studies to analyze, how much would their findings have changed? We would expect the precise numbers to change, but we would want to know if the overall pattern would be the same. Replication thus checks whether the findings hold up under other conditions or settings and

therefore represent a more reliable or generalizable claim.

In the Tyner et al. analysis, sociology fares better, relatively speaking (see Fig. 3). Most disciplines examined replicated at around the 50% level, with a range from 42.5 to 63.1%. For a replication test, that is not bad. Here, sociology had the third highest score of 51.1% (after Education and Political Science). Additionally, all disciplines examined saw a curtailment in the size of the estimate between the original and the replication analysis (e.g., from .29 to .11 in Psychology, .28 to .13 in Economics). Here, Sociology looks a little worse. Sociology's estimates dropped from an average of .10 to .03. These were already the lowest numbers in each category (original and estimate), suggesting sociological studies struggle to find strong effects (either because, in society, the underlying effect sizes of the studied phenomena are simply very small, or because of the difficulty of working with the underlying data and research design challenges in a largely non-experimental field). However, the drop to approximately one third of the original estimate is within the distribution of the other disciplines, if on the low side.

Importantly, these studies only provide measures of the general accuracy of select sociological studies and measures of data transparency, but they do not tell us about the underlying cause of these scientific deficits. Indeed, quantitative scholars tend to lean away from some of the "activist" tendencies documented above. Thus, these analyses may reflect the cleanest section of the field, which is least affected by subjective, interpretivist, or humanistic approaches that are more easily co-opted for political purposes. While some scholars have argued Sociology's failure to adopt open size is correlated with the field's political orientation (Savolainen 2025), we currently lack sufficient data to investigate that claim.

Table 3 | Original and replication outcomes by statistical significance and pattern and by Pearson's *r* effect size for six disciplines

Discipline	Replication attempt statistical significance and pattern		Median Pearson's *r* effect size (s.d.)	
	Counts	Percentage	Original estimate	Replication estimate
Business	17.0 of 36	47.2	0.24 (0.12)	0.10 (0.13)
Economics	10.2 of 24	42.5	0.28 (0.24)	0.13 (0.20)
Education	8.2 of 13	63.1	0.15 (0.28)	0.11 (0.10)
Political science	7.8 of 15	52.0	0.16 (0.22)	0.05 (0.16)
Psychology	28.4 of 58	49.0	0.29 (0.22)	0.11 (0.20)
Sociology	9.2 of 18	51.1	0.10 (0.16)	0.03 (0.17)

Papers are weighted combinations of claims accounting for multiple claims per paper replicated in some cases. The left column indicates the number of successful replications out of the total number of papers with replication attempts. Samples for the right columns are the papers for which a Pearson's *r* could be calculated for the original and replication outcomes.

Figure 3: Source: Tyner et al. (2026). Screenshot of Table 3 in their paper.

7.2 Political Neutrality

Another study allows us to test the political neutrality of scholarship, but necessarily its quality.[23] Using a large interdisciplinary dataset of publicly available articles published between 1960 and 2024 analyzed with several LLM programs, Oxford sociology doctoral student James Manzi (2026) estimated the overall ideological orientation of articles across fields. Manzi generated a political ideology spectrum providing scores (0-10, Far Right to Far Left) and used an LLM to code each article's abstract.[24] Restricting his sample to "politically relevant" articles,[25] he found that,

[23] Certainly, by some traditional scientific criteria, maintaining neutrality is itself a mark of quality. However, for the purposes of this report, given widespread disagreement on that question, I treat the two as separate considerations in this section.

[24] In robustness checks, Manzi varied the scale's measures and also used multiple different LLMs and prompts.

[25] The number of politically relevant articles varied over time with more listed recently: overall, 30% of articles were deemed politically relevant, starting with "about 5%" in 1960 and

overall, social science articles leaned "center-left" and "right-leaning content is rare," and scholarship trended more left over time with a short-term right-ward "moderation" of policy-relevant fields in the 1970s–'80s (24). He also provided discipline-specific scores.

In this scoring, sociology was 6.9/10 (i.e., just shy of Elizabeth Warren and *The New York Times*), following gender studies, ethnic studies, and anthropology, but still in the distribution and not far ahead of communications, psychology, and public health. Indeed, all of the disciplines examined are fairly closely grouped, with the exception of economics (see Fig. 4). Score is an average across the full period examined.

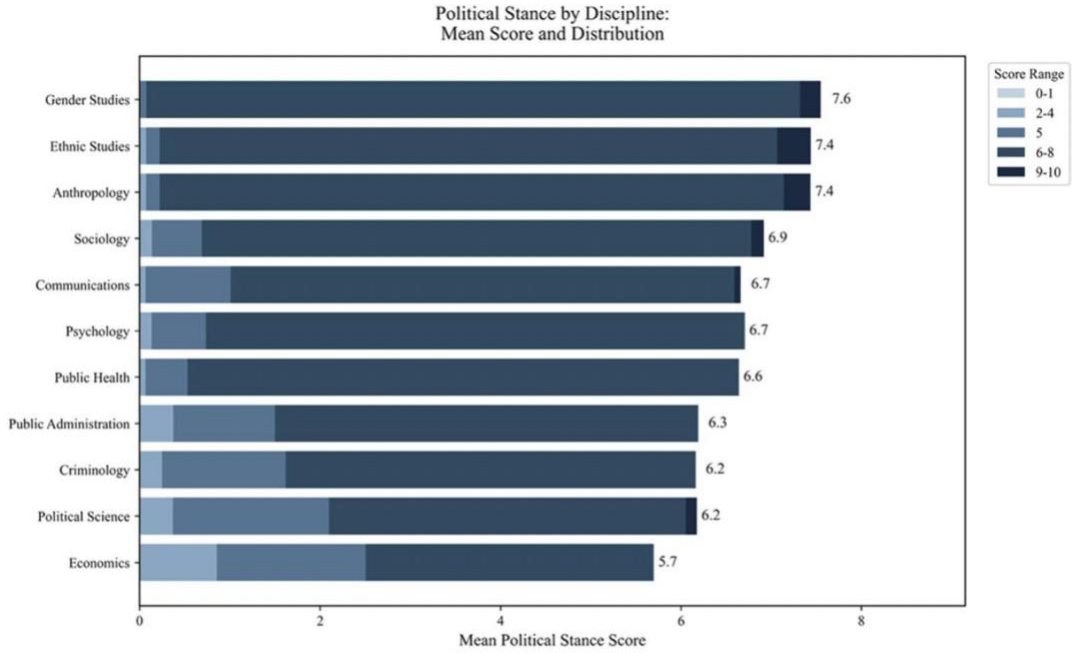

Fig. 1 Political stance by discipline: mean score and distribution
Figure 4: Source: Manzi (2026). Screenshot of Fig. 1 in the paper.

Manzi also explored the overall ideological scores of the disciplines over time. Importantly, the scores are grounded in today's political landscape, so some of this change over time could be an artifact of the scoring methodology as articles approach the present. Even so, all fields are examined by the same scoring, so the cross-discipline comparisons should remain accurate. In each case, we see a rising leftward shift in sociology over time, but especially since approximately 2000, with a fairly constant slope and a more varied and gradual leftward rise before. Additionally, sociology

growing to "about 50% in 2024" (24).

remained in the middle-top of the different disciplines (see Fig. 5).

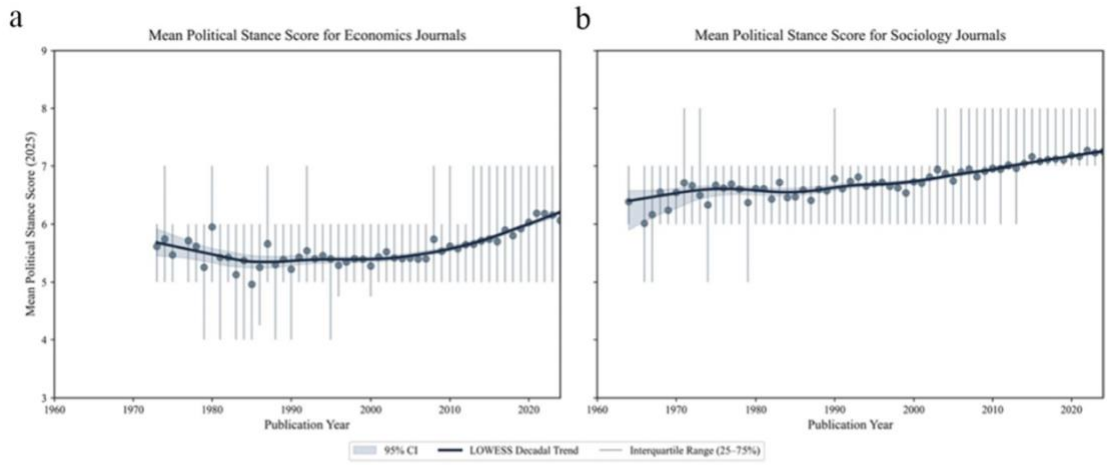

Fig. 2 **a** Mean political stance score for economics journals **b** Mean political stance score for sociology journals

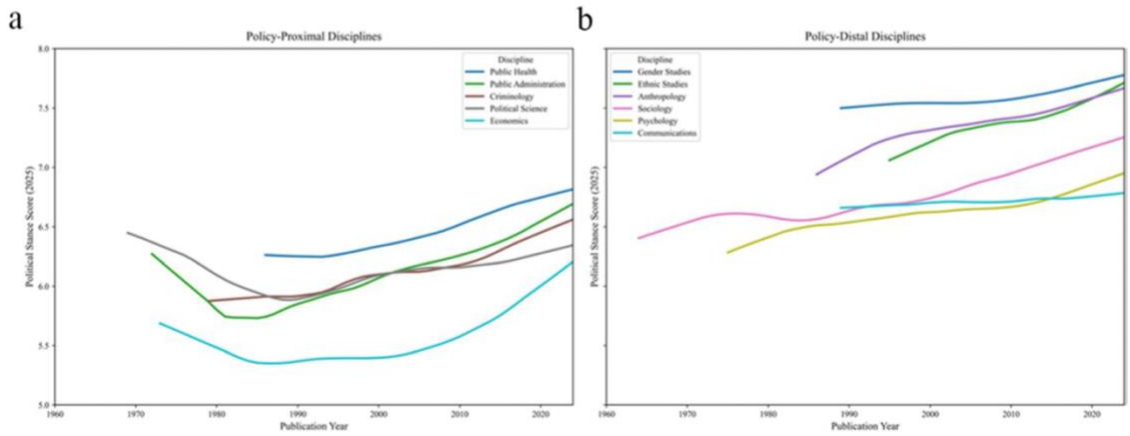

Fig. 3 **a** Policy-proximal disciplines **b** Policy-distal disciplines

Figure 5: Source: Manzi (2026). Screenshots of Fig. 2 and 3 in the paper.

Another noteworthy finding was the overall political homogeneity of the disciplines. Here, sociology was more in the middle of the compared disciplines (by contrast, gender studies, ethnic studies, and anthropology were more homogeneous). In this analysis, the standard deviation, or measure of variation within the discipline, is used as a proxy for heterogeneity or homogeneity: a higher standard deviation means more observed ideological variation. Incidentally, all fields saw greater homogeneity over time; however, of the policy-distal fields, sociology had the second-highest heterogeneity (see Fig. 6).

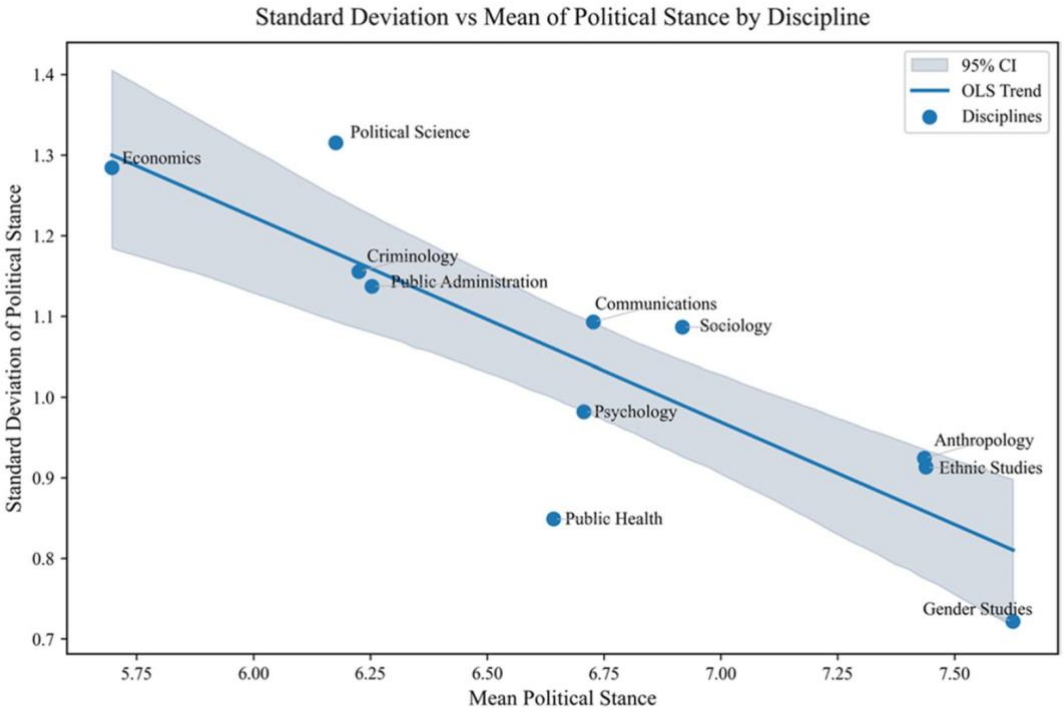

Fig. 4 Standard deviation vs mean of political stance by discipline

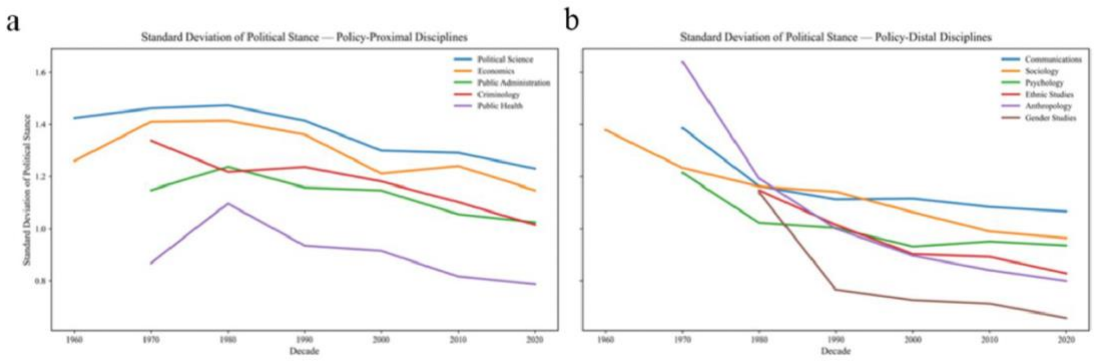

Fig. 5 **a** Standard deviation of political stance-policy-proximal discipline **b** Standard deviation of political stance-policy-distal discipline

Figure 6: Source: Manzi (2026). Screenshots of Fig. 4 and 5 in the paper.

Importantly, Manzi's findings examine a broad sample of sociological articles. We might expect different results if we stratify the analysis by journal prestige. That is, perhaps the addition of more journals over time, perhaps with lower standards, are driving the results. For a pilot study I began after submitting my internal report, I used ChatGPT to produce a Codex program to evaluate

the political neutrality of *American Journal of Sociology* articles. I selected AJS instead of ASR since it is not affiliated with the ASA and thus should be the less political of the two, if ASA's activist bent has impacted its journal. I used a sample of social control, deviance, crime, and criminal justice articles from 2000 to 2025 (n = 93). As evaluated by Codex, I found a long-term decline in political neutrality from .9 to a low of just over .75. The trend line passed the .8 threshold after 2015; 2025 saw a slight tick up to about .78. Importantly, this is not a peer-reviewed study, nor was it preregistered, but the underlying code and methodology are available here. I will be publishing the dataset when I submit the study for peer review. However, the results provide preliminary evidence that the shift in political orientations in Manzi's study is not driven by low- or middling-prestige articles alone.

To reiterate, by some definitions, a political bent to a social science article is not evidence of poor rigor or methodology. However, it can indicate the possibility of blind spots and skews in the discipline, the topic I turn to next.

8 Monocropping Inequality Studies

> "I love you, sociologists, but do all of us have to work on inequality?" (University of Michigan sociologist Beth Popp Berman on Twitter in 2023, quoted in Keskintürk 2023)

Although "Sociology is (in)famous for its far-reaching empirical scope, as there are few topics sociologists can exclude" (Moody and Light 2006, 67), there is a general sense, both among critics and supporters, that sociology's core now revolves around inequality, and has done since about the 1970s; I refer to this trend as "monocropping inequality studies." Importantly, while inequality can be a very broad topic, sociology tends to focus on inequality affecting groups sociologists perceive to be the most vulnerable, including the poor, women, people of color, gender or sexuality minorities, and those identities viewed as intersectionally disadvantaged (e.g., poor women of color); inequalities that favor those groups, by contrast, tend to receive less attention.

This perception that sociology is essentially the field of inequality studies, and a narrow version at that, is fairly common. For example, in their article on professors' politics, sociologists Gross and Fosse (2012, 159) wrote,

> "Over the course of its twentieth century history, for example, sociology has increasingly defined itself as the study of race, class, and gender inequality—a set of concerns especially important to liberals—and this means that sociology will

> consistently recruit from a more liberal applicant pool than fields like mechanical engineering, and prove a more chilly home for those conservatives who manage to push through into graduate school or the academic ranks."

In his book the following year, Gross (2013, 145) elaborated that,

> "as it has come to be practiced in the United States in the early twenty-first century, sociology often leans left, having as one of its aims to understand and help reduce social inequality. In the eyes of many sociologists (not all, of course), the ultimate goal of sociological inquiry is to provide organizations, policy makers, and citizens with theories and findings that can inform the creation of a more equal social order."[26]

Incidentally, in my own qualitative methods book, while offering advice on how to frame one's research question for one's field, I wrote, "Each field has a set of core concerns—for the last several decades in sociology, I would say the most central concern has been understanding inequality (its causes and consequences), but there are others" (Rubin 2021, 79-80).

Summarizing the 2023 twitterstorm following University of Michigan sociologist Beth Popp Berman's tweet, Duke University Sociology doctoral student Turgut Keskintürk (2023) noted, there were

> "some arguing that inequality defines the subject-matter of sociology (much like 'markets' in economics), while others emphasizing the pervasive feeling that inequality per se has become the topic of sociology, broadly construed."

In that post, he also reproduced the ASA conference themes for 2013 to 2023, noting that inequality was explicitly mentioned in four of the eleven years. Explaining the trend, he noted, "Given that there are massive inequalities across class, race, and gender, it would be unexpected *not* to talk about inequality."

Offering a more critical take, Turner (2025, 4) noted that the ASA has

> "over the last two decades been evolving into a social movement organization of mostly academics and their students. Despite the fact that sociology is the broadest of the social sciences in the range of sociocultural forces that it studies, a clear narrowing of interest around inequalities experienced by members of social categories—ethnic/racial minorities, women, and nonbinary sexuality—is expanding to the exclusion of other categories of persons, and indeed, to the exclusion of many facets of human societies that sociologists have always, until recently, studied."

Whether viewed as a good thing or a bad thing, sociologists generally recognize that inequality is or has become core to the field in a way other topics have not.

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[26] It should be clarified that equality here usually means equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity.

Other commentators have pointed to the dominance of topics and theoretical frameworks that are associated with inequality or specific kinds of inequality. Writing about the sociology of law, sociologist Sida Liu (2015, 2) pointed to the dominance of an "enduring focus on power and inequality" since the field's formation in the 1960s and 1970s, and called for a "powerless" approach to studying law, to "resituate itself in classical and contemporary social theories, particularly those theories concerning social structures and social processes." Recall that the ASA's land acknowledgment webpage puts power and inequality front and center, beginning its land acknowledgment with, "Before we can talk about sociology, power, inequality…." Recently, sociologist John Iceland (2025, 912) has written about the dominance of conflict theories "including feminism, critical race theory, and intersectionality, [which] highlight power imbalances and systemic oppression," in sociology. Others use the term "grievance" studies (e.g., Savolainen 2023).[27]

Beyond impressions, some scholars have quantified sociology's focus on inequality and related topics using a variety of proxies. In the above-mentioned blog post, Keskintürk (2023) posted his analysis of *American Sociological Review* articles published between 1936 and 2019 and graphed the fraction that used the words "inequality" or "inequalities" "anywhere in the manuscript." In an update, he repeated the analysis for the field's other top journals (*American Journal of Sociology, Annual Review of Sociology*, and *Social Forces*) from 1940 to 2019. I include his four resulting graphs below in Figure 7; in each case, the portion of articles mentioning inequality dramatically increased from the 1970s or 1980s to 2019. All four journals were at more than 50% of articles by 2019, with *American Sociological Review* at about 75% and the *Annual Review of Sociology* at nearly 100%.

[27] More commonly and less pejoratively, scholars often describe sociology as focused primarily on "social problems," as discussed above, where "problems" will be defined differently by different political groups and sociology's implied job is to pave the way to their solutions. Importantly, as the field becomes more radical, its understanding of social problems shifts: for example, assimilation (whether by immigrants or "social deviants") was a major focus of classic sociology through the 1950s and 1960s, with an underlying political project of making people "normal;" today, the equivalent area would be the difficulties of being an undocumented immigrant or the difficulties of being a system-impacted person, with an underlying political project of identifying injustices, sometimes defined in ways that depart substantially from how the average person would understand the term. The social problems of classic sociology, understood more as governance challenges, have given way to social problems understood as governmental oppression.

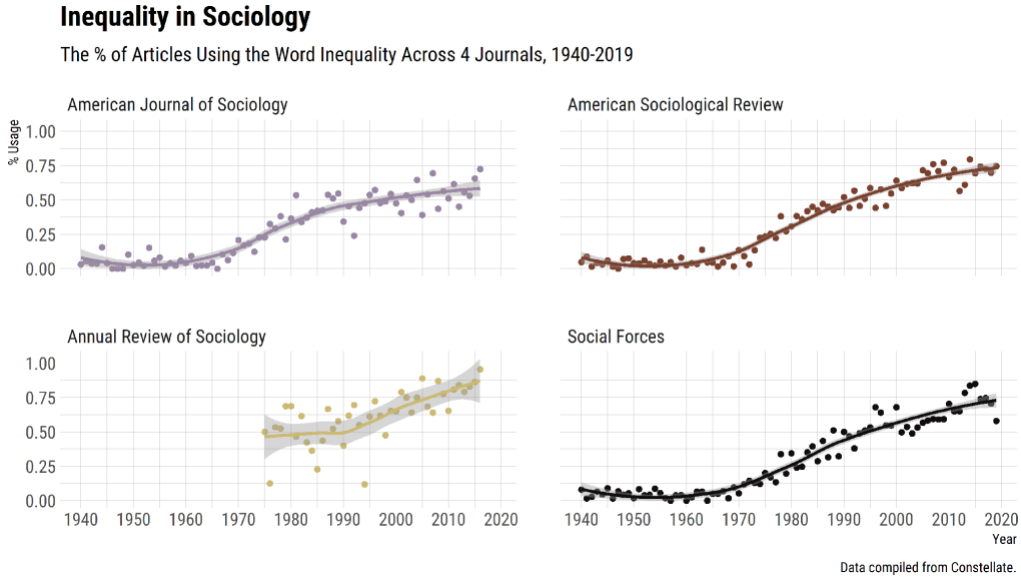

Figure 7: Source: Keskintürk (2023). Screenshot from blog post.

Keskintürk (2023) concluded his blog post by discussing the implications for the field and its future:

> "It is fair to say that sociology has already a reputation, especially in the U.S., for being particularly attuned to the study of inequality. If there is indeed a strong clustering around inequality research as well, this might mean that the disciplinary socialization of the new generations of sociologists will find inequality as the 'principal' research agenda of the field—that is, if this is not already happening. This means that, to put it bluntly, sociology can become inequality studies.
>
> This has strong implications on what sociological theory is, what we mean when we say something is sociological, and what the long-term outlook of our field is. This deserves a discussion."

Keskintürk (2023) thus showed that prestigious sociology journal articles have heavy *mentions* of inequality, but to what extent is this an actual *focus* of the resulting research?

Several studies have analyzed similar questions using different methodologies and datasets, including dissertations and published papers. A working paper by Altman and Cohen (2025) examined 1,872 dissertations submitted by doctoral students in sociology between 2020 and early 2024. They found, "Among the 14 most common substantive topics, inequality was the most common (58%), followed by economic subjects (46%), race (37%), politics and health (35% each),

family (32%), education (30%), and gender (30%)" (Altman and Cohen 2025, 8).[28]

Another analysis of dissertations from 1980 to 2015 by Heiberger et al. (2021) did not include inequality as one of their 60 topical categories; in fact, inequality is only explicitly mentioned as "income inequality" in their category of economic sociology (1172). At first glance, their findings can be read as contradicting the claim of monocropping inequality in sociology (although Keskintürk (2023) pointed to this study as further evidence of the inequality monoculture, for reasons I will discuss more below). Thus, is it important to discuss their findings more closely.

Heiberger et al. (2021, 1178, emphasis added) note,

> "Between 1980 and 2015, the topics of sociological dissertations reflect *a great diversity* of subject matter subfields (e.g., T6 violence, T12 economic sociology, T34 criminology, T38 demography) and methods (e.g., T11 experiments, T14 survey/scales, T36 survey/opinion, T50 modeling, and T40 qualitative methods). Some topics reflect dimensions of social phenomena that span methods, theories, and empirics (T4 race: LatinX, T58 race: African American, T29 gender, T41 social capital). Finally, a group of topics comprise the vocabularies of neighboring disciplines (T5 self-perception, T21 sociolinguistics, T59 health)."

Again, their emphasis on the diversity of topics appears to contradict the claim of monocropping.

Notably, however, they show dramatic change over time in the topics used (see Figure 8). For example, staples in sociology like Theory, Demography, Status/Groups, and Historical Sociology have declined since 1980, while newer topics like Identity, Race: African-American, Social Capital, and Health have become more common. (Some areas that could be consistent with an inequality lens have also declined, including Stress; from its label, "Labor" would seem related as well, but this label is primarily used to explain agricultural and to some extent industrial settings.) The labels used in their study are not the easiest to interpret from the shorthand without reproducing their codebook, making the changes less straightforward.

[28] Another recent analysis by Yan et al. (2026) also uses computational methods to analyze dissertations from 2011 to 2020. While they do not use inequality as a general category, they do find "applied" topics like crime and health as more popular than traditional theoretical and methodological questions.

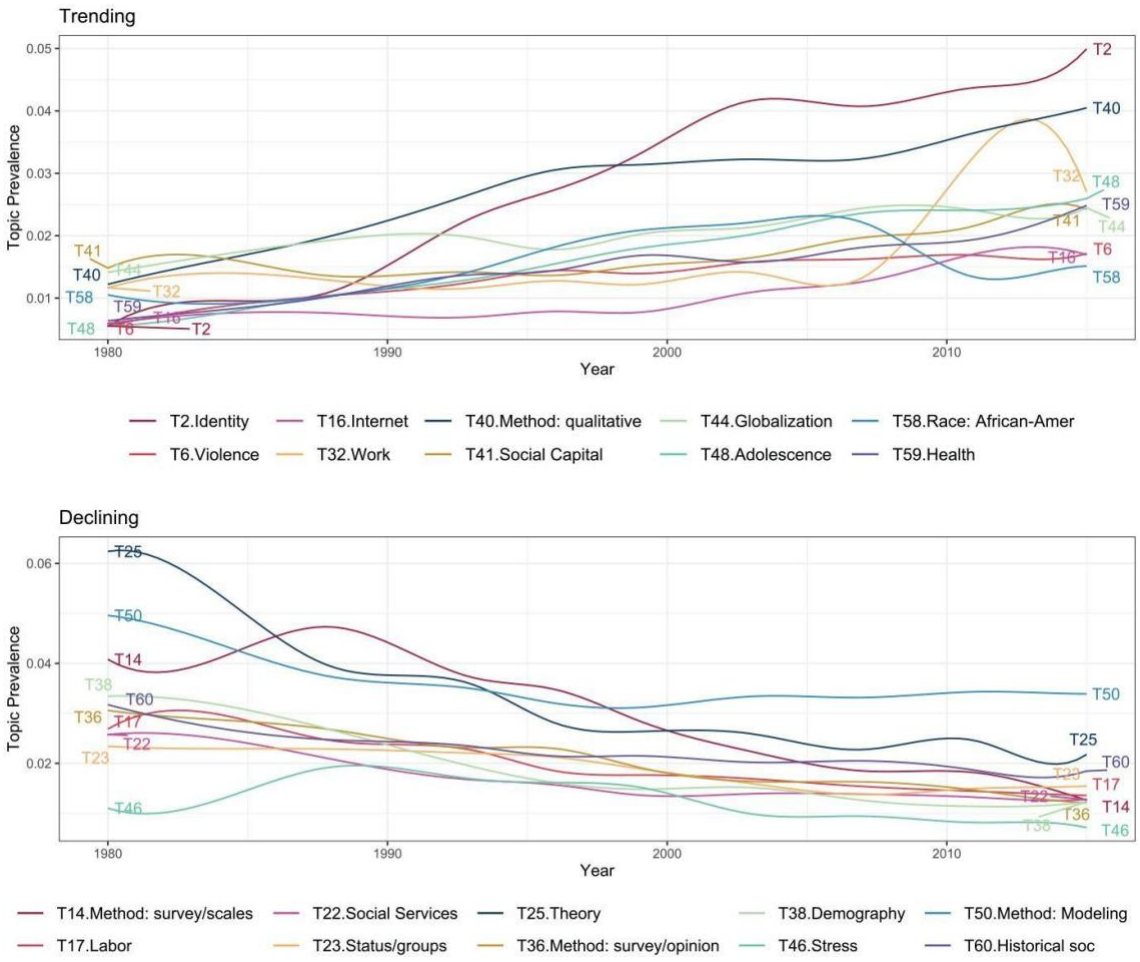

Figure 8: Source: Heiberger et al. (2021). Screenshots from their paper.

However, their discussion of the "identity" category appears to capture significant change related to the inequality/power focus (Heiberger et al. 2021, 1179, internal citations omitted):

> "The topic gaining most in students' popularity is T2 identity, which includes the following as its most distinctive terms: 'identity,' 'negotiate,' 'discursive,' 'construction,' and 'understanding.' T2 identity represents the intellectual movement often dubbed the 'cultural turn' in social sciences. The cultural turn is concerned with processes 'through which people define and express themselves.' Fittingly, T2 comprises concepts of discourse and meaning-making."

Nothing in their paper allows for a direct comparison of inequality-related studies over time, but the focus on identity, self-expression, and social construction is certainly a related trend. However, it is worth noting which topics did not become dominant: Gender: Feminist and Gender: Sexuality had fairly low frequency in the overall dataset and were not listed among the growth topics; with the

field's focus on inequality, one could have expected more from these topics.

The Heiberger et al. (2021) study offers another measure relevant to the question of monocropping: beyond which topics are studied, they explore which topics students specialize in that are most correlated with becoming influential in the field, which they measure as becoming a PhD supervisor (i.e., getting an academic job in a doctoral program and ultimately supervising students). Controlling for other factors (including demographics, number of publications in graduate school, and normal or elite status of their graduate program), they found three promising avenues: a statistical orientation (that is likely to be associated with a positivist orientation), a cultural/identitarian orientation (that is not necessarily, but is more likely to be, associated with a critical or interpretivist orientation), and a focus on race (especially African Americans). They explain,

> "it is not topical focus of a thesis that provides career advantages, but targeted specialization and novel combinations. In particular, theses closely related to the cultural turn (T2 identity), statistical approaches (T50 modeling), and race (T58 race: African American) correspond with rare ascents to mentorship." (1185)

Thus, reflecting some of the above binaries (between positivists and activists, to be overly simplistic), we see a split in the field in the most successful pathways to becoming a doctoral advisor as a measure of gaining influence in the field.

Others have analyzed articles to map the field's ascendent topics. One early analysis used a cluster analysis of "all English-language research papers indexed by *Sociological Abstracts*" from the 1970s to 1990s based on the words used in the title, abstract, and keywords (74). They found that overall, sociology had witnessed "a movement away from general interest topics to work perhaps more responsive to current social problems," consistent with an inequality focus, away from other classical topics (Moody and Light 2006, 81).[29]

More recently, University of Toronto sociologist Dan Silver (2026) analyzed articles published in the field's top journals—AJS, ASR, and *Sociological Theory*—from their origins to 2015 using "structural topic modeling, which identifies recurring bundles of words that tend to appear together across documents and then traces how prominent those bundles become over time and across journals." His analysis labeled each article into a particular topic with the help of Codex.[30]

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[29] Just prior to going to press, I learned of another analysis looking at changes over time: Moody et al. (2022) explore 100 years of Social Forces articles and their topical changes. I have not had time to incorporate their findings.

[30] Silver conducted several interesting analyses including fluctuations in methodological or

Silver found:

> "Early reformist concerns around charity, relief, and welfare have receded, but the reformist impulse remains in later-growing areas, including protest, activism, gender inequality, immigration, ethnoracial classification, and health inequality, which expanded substantially and in some cases continue rising into the twenty-first century. The politics-and-state panel below makes this especially clear: early work on charity, relief, and municipal welfare fades almost to nothing, while later forms of reformist energy reappear in protest, contentious mobilization, and welfare-state social policy."

Thus, it is not the case that the field's reformist impulses have declined or increased so much as changed "form" (see Fig. 9).

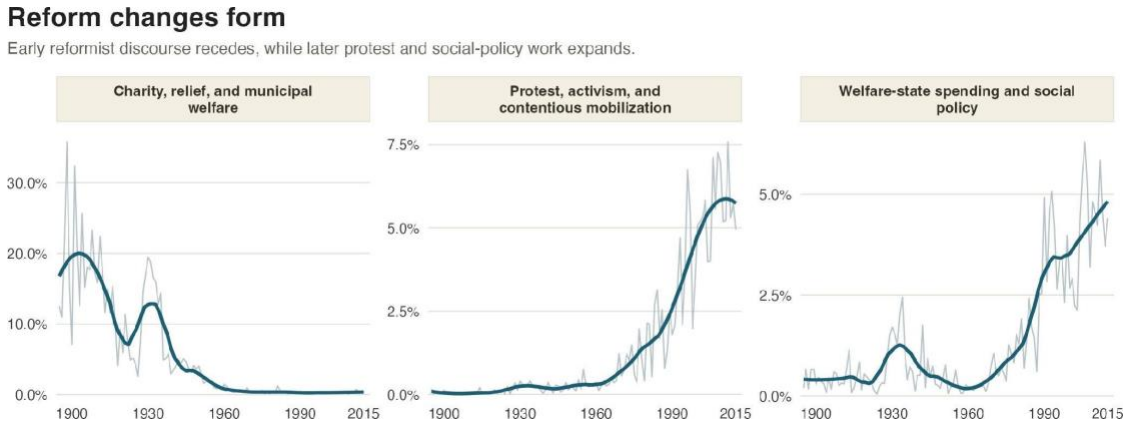

Figure 9: Source: Silver (2026). Screenshot from his blog post.

Using a somewhat broader categorization than some of the other analyses, Silver found a smaller cluster of inequality-related topics, complicating some of the claims about the predominance of inequality:

> "Similarly, topics covering gender inequality, race, segregation, immigration, and ethnic classification occupied 22% of the field's discourse by 2015. This expansion marks one of the major substantive reorientations of the field, and much of it is likely to endure as a permanent part of sociology's core agenda. Within that broader family, the late acceleration of immigration, incorporation, and ethnoracial classification has been especially dramatic—so much so that (as we will see) the forecast for these topics overshot their growth by a lot. These and the afore-mentioned rising areas (along with cultural production, which displaced religion) largely reduced the prominence of mid-century clusters around bureaucracy, mobility, occupations, schooling, and urban ecology, which remain important but more peripheral."

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theoretical focus; I only report some of his findings here.

Thus, for Silver, inequality-related topics were not the majority, but they were some of the most rapidly advancing—and unexpectedly so, in the case of immigration— while other topics more popular in the mid-century fell away (see Fig. 10).

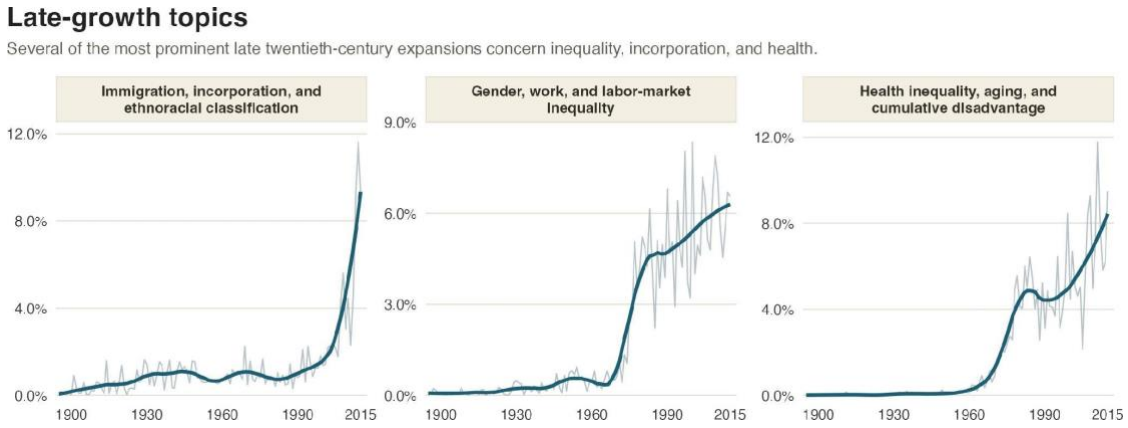

Figure 10: Source: Silver (2026). Screenshot from his blog post.

Importantly for the interpretations of the data presented in this section, Silver's *longue durée* analysis shows extensive variation in the rise and fall of various topics over time, noting "disciplinary history suggests that no ascendance is ever final." Indeed, Silver updated his analyses to include articles published between 2015 and 2025 (see Fig. 11). Silver warns that,

> "at many points in the history of Sociology, advocates of one style or topic or subject had some reason to believe that they were ascendent and had reached the peak of the field. And they had: for that moment. But disciplinary history does not move in a straight line, it is recurrent cycles and branches folding back on themselves, and opening out again."

Thus, he appears to consider the rise to prominence of inequality-related topics a temporary development that may have lasting consequences but not remain the most central focus forever.

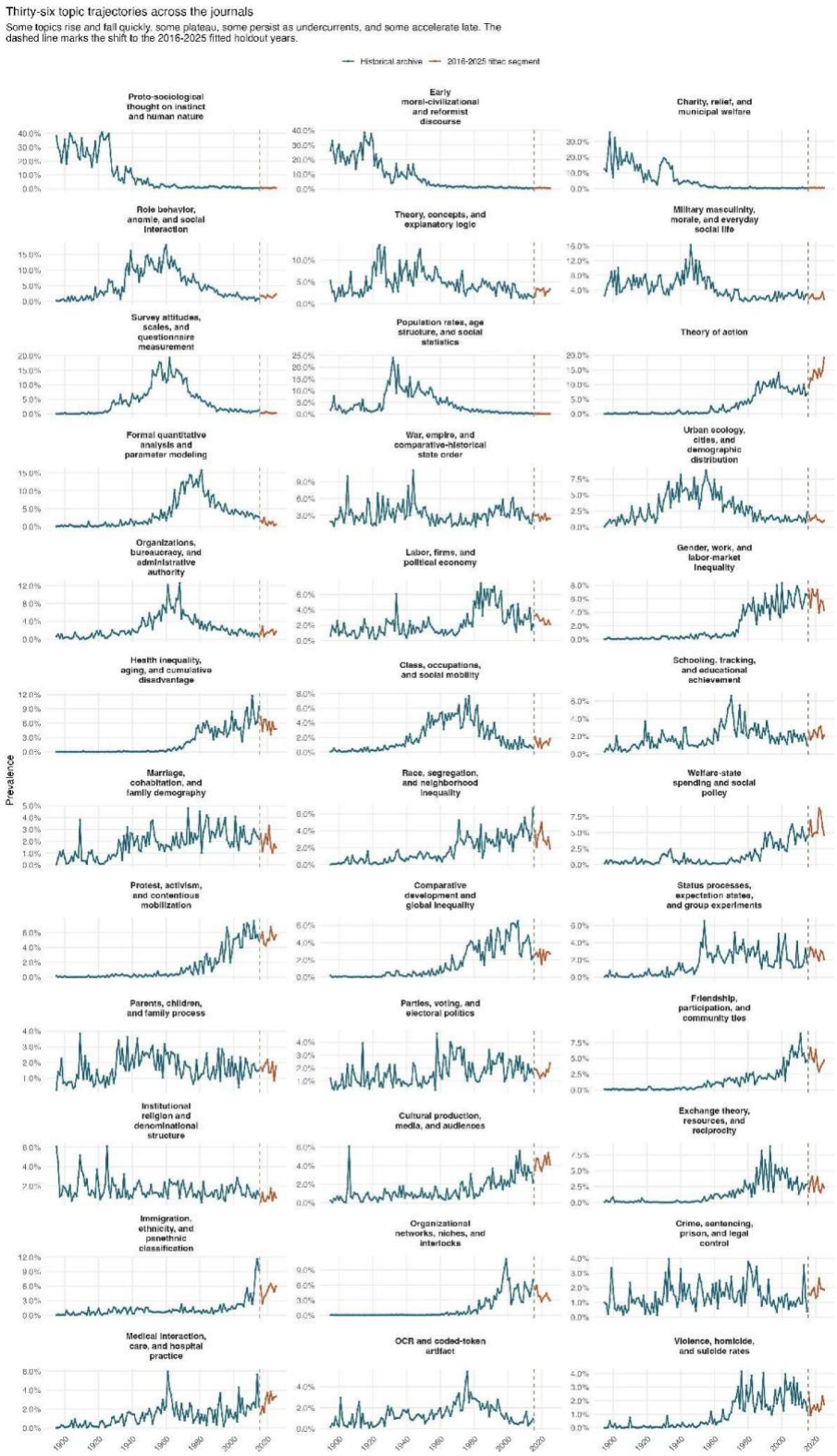

Figure 11: Source: Silver (2026). Screenshot from his blog post.

Moving beyond dissertations and publications, another measure of the popularity of

inequality studies can be found in ASA "section" membership. The ASA is made up of smaller "sections" formed around particular topics or approaches within the field, such as Theory; Methodology; Medical Sociology; Organizations, Occupations, and Work; Aging and the Life Course; Family; Economic Sociology; Sociology of Law; Asia and Asian Americans; and Collective Behavior and Social Movements. While writing my internal report, using the then-most recent section membership counts (from December 11, 2025), the largest sections were Sociology of Culture (990), Race, Gender, and Class (947), Sociology of Sex and Gender (932), Medical Sociology (920), Organizations, Occupations, and Work (918), Political Sociology (871), Racial and Ethnic Minorities (857), and Inequality, Poverty, and Mobility (794), and Theory (764). Thus, we see a mix of core areas (culture, medical sociology, organizations, and theory) and identitarian or inequality foci.

Section membership has also changed over time, reflecting changes in the field, including the growing focus on inequality. In his analysis of ASA section data from 2002 to 2022, Phil Cohen (2023) found,

> "Of the top 10 [sections] in 2022, the only three that grew in the last decade were Race, Gender and Class; Racial and Ethnic Minorities; and Inequality, Poverty and Mobility. I suppose this means the study of inequality is increasingly the core of the association (although Labor and World System are shrinking). The big losers in the last decade were Culture, Teaching, and Religion."

He also showed that "Inequality, Poverty, and Migration" had the largest growth of any section between 2002 and 2012 and the second-largest growth between 2012 and 2022. Notably, although not the "biggest losers," core subfields of sociology—organizations; political sociology; theory; economic sociology; family; crime, law, and deviance; aging and the life course; development; labor and labor movements; and methodology—all lost members between 2002 and 2012 (Cohen 2023).

Thus, while sociology has the potential to be an all-encompassing broad field, it has narrowed in recent decades to focus particularly on inequality, and particular kinds of inequality that affect identitarian groups perceived to be the most vulnerable, or more broadly to distinct social problems that are of interest to members of the field. Different studies provide different measures, but each is consistent with a large plurality of the field focused on inequality and inequality-related topics. This narrowing, of course, has further consequences and corollaries, including the failure to study certain areas that could reasonably be assumed to be core to sociology.

9 Research Blind Spots and Intellectual Narrowing

The above analysis of section membership, dissertation topics, and sociology journal articles already shows a heavy emphasis on some topics and not on others. Indeed, there are multiple topics whose popularity have declined over time for a variety of reasons. Here, we look at why some topics (and theories) are not studied more, focusing on those topics some scholars have argued have declined because of politics and ideology.

9.1 The Unpopularity of Cultural Explanations for Negative Outcomes Like Poverty, Violence, Crime, and Racial Disparities in Outcomes

While the sociology of culture remains a fairly strong subfield in sociology, cultural explanations—as opposed to structural explanations—for negative outcomes (crime, poverty, violence, health) and racial disparities are not commonly used. The underlying logic for this omission appears to be: identifying cultural or other agency-based explanations for bad outcomes may be used to "blame the victim" (or marginalized/vulnerable group). That is, sociologists avoid cultural explanations because they can appear—or be used—to suggest that the responsibility for bad outcomes (e.g., poverty, criminality, obesity, alcohol abuse) lies with the groups who face these outcomes rather than with the larger, oppressive social contexts that—the preferred explanation has it—disproportionately create the stressors that encourage such behaviors. Conversely, if we can explain bad outcomes like poverty or criminality, especially racial disparities in bad outcomes, by pointing to structural inequalities, then poor people, criminals, and minorities are not to blame for their misfortunes. Further, there is a commitment to advancing solutions to these problems that are social or structural rather than individual, i.e., policies and practices need changes to avoid these negative outcomes, while people with negative outcomes should not be the focus of interventions (e.g., Horowitz et al. 2018; Turner 2021). Indeed, on its "What is Sociology" webpage, the American Sociological Association (2025) highlighted one sociologist who explained, "So much of what is going on with our political climate and the rhetoric right now is all about talking about individual people or individual communities. The reality is that these are collective problems that have structural bases." For most sociologists, structure thus generally outweighs individual or cultural explanations, especially when discussing inequality.

Interestingly, this structure-over-culture preference conflicts with another set of preferred arguments that seek to respect/celebrate/highlight the agency of marginalized actors, demonstrating how they can overcome structural oppression. As one commentator pointed out of sociological

debates over culture and structure in explaining the disproportionate concentration of bad outcomes for Black people, "we must note, in a field traditionally attentive to the interplay of structure and agency, it is unusual to witness such categorical dismissals of autonomous behavior" (Horowitz et al. 2018, 483). In reality, it is an empirical question *how much* of the variation in bad outcomes can be attributed to culture, or to individual agency, and how much to structural arrangements (or, for that matter, to interaction effects between culture and structure). Good sociology seeks to theorize and measure those relationships; unfortunately, the expectation in the field is for sociologists to violate scientific standards by eschewing research questions and theories that involve the role of culture because using such questions or theories is politically distasteful.

In 2014, renowned historian and sociologist Orlando Patterson wrote an op-ed for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled "How Sociologists Made Themselves Irrelevant," in which he noted how sociologists had "become distant spectators rather than shapers of policy" (Patterson 2014). Patterson's explanation lay in the politicization of sociology: he called for more public sociology, but importantly, he called for a public sociology that was grounded in the evidence, rather than a public sociology that placed politics ahead of the data. He wrote:

> "Sociologists have shied from such cultural work, fearful of critiques similar to those that greeted 1960s culture-of-poverty scholarship by Oscar Lewis, the policy studies of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and the Parsonian overdetermining emphasis on values. In focusing on ways that impoverished communities perpetuated poverty, such scholarship was criticized for blaming the victim, and for several decades, sociologists have taken pains to distance themselves not only from that approach but from studies of the cultural dimensions of poverty, particularly black poverty."

He noted that Black youth themselves emphasize the importance of cultural explanations, indicating that sociologists' refusal to engage cultural explanations was not grounded in the evidence.

Notably, a few years before Patterson's article, a small number of scholars returned to the question of culture in explaining negative outcomes, but more as a variable that mediates the role of structure (Small et al. 2010); even so, such explanations continue to receive criticism from some sociologists, but in a complicated manner.

A survey of sociology faculty conducted in 2017 gives a broad overview of sociological opinion on this point:

> "Respondents broadly agree (79%) that cultural factors may play a role in black urban poverty, yet two thirds affirm that structural factors 'profoundly outweigh' such cultural factors. A small majority (53%) agrees that the black community has 'some responsibility' to address the problems of violence and out-of-wedlock births, while about one fifth views it as 'culturally discriminatory' or victim-blaming to acknowledge

> as much. About one fifth (19%) agrees as well that those who investigate cultural factors are 'likely motivated to legitimize the racially-ethnically stratified status quo.' " (Horowitz et al. 2018, 467)

These results complicate the picture, showing some openness to a minimal use of culture in combination with structural factors and even agency, but also continued strong opposition to exploring such factors from a small plurality of surveyed sociologists. Indeed, the survey found that those who treated sociology as a "moral mission" (i.e., the more activist-leaning sociologists) were significantly more likely to reject cultural explanations and view them as discriminatory and therefore unacceptable in research (469).

Short-answer responses in the same survey show how sociologists who recognized the role of culture considered structure to be the predominant cause of poverty:

> " 'Cultural factors like hyper masculinity and materialism are the consequences of poverty rather than the cause,' one notes. Another adds: 'Structure causes culture. Change the structure, culture will follow.' This reduction of culture to social structure is surprising in a field generally attentive to the interpenetration of social and cultural forces. Indeed, many respondents suggest that culture and social structure are 'not easily separable;' 'a complex mix;' 'each produces the other dialectically;' and so on. When we examine the range of remarks to the culture-of-poverty statements, the principal view is that structural factors such as poverty, joblessness, and institutional racism largely condition the cultural factors, though the latter have some partial autonomy. As one respondent puts it: 'Even if (sub)cultural factors are, inextricably, a direct product or bi-product of 'structural factors' (my belief), it would still be accurate to say that they 'play a role' because of their proximate connection to attitudes and behavior.' This view, we concede, mirrors our own on the matter. Yet it appears alongside more one-sided and reductionist claims of culture as an epiphenomenon of social structure. Few respondents reverse the causal arrow, for example, by suggesting that culture may drive changes in the social structure." (Horowitz et al. 2018, 482-483)

After summarizing these sociologists' resistance to discussing cultural explanations for urban Black poverty, Horowitz et al. (2018, 483) explained, "Including values, beliefs and practices into the explanatory schema implies that the black underclass may have a hint of agency in perpetuating their circumstances. For some, that empirical possibility is verboten."

Adding another dimension to sociologists' views on the culture-structure question, Horowitz et al. (2018, 483) describe the "highly emotive reactions to the suggestion that the inner city black community has any 'responsibility' for their circumstances" (as cultural explanations are sometimes understood, rightly or wrongly). They include several responses:

- "The idea of 'responsibility of black community' erases or disregards the immense trauma that decades of institutional racism has had on people—the hopelessness was

created, and it has real mental health implications that can't just be solved by taking personal responsibility.

- One cannot call structural factors imposed by external forces 'cultural' factors. If we peel back the layers, we see institutional racism and policies deliberately aimed at destroying African American communities; not culture.
- I qualify my agreement by stating that culture is adaptive and given society's war against the African-American community (especially Black men), is it any wonder that the culture includes violence?
- White people created these problems, white people need to fix them.
- It would be like saying that it is the responsibility of a rape victim to not get raped."

Given some sociologists' intense reactions to the notion of "responsibility," it is easy to understand why some may shy away from culture-based explanations that may be interpreted by peers as ascribing such responsibility.

9.2 The Disappearance of Structural Functionalism

Another theoretical framework generally omitted or viewed skeptically is structural functionalism. Structural functionalism refers to theories that explain social phenomena by the purpose they serve, intentionally or unintentionally, and see society as an organic whole whose parts work together in harmony to produce stability. It became unpopular in the 1960s and 1970s. While there are some reasonable critiques of the approach, as there are of all theoretical approaches, the more popular critique in the field has to do with the approach's perceived politics. As Penn State heterodox sociologist John Iceland (2025, 913, internal citations omitted) explained,

> "it was seen as normative because it portrayed institutional stability as natural and desirable, assumed that institutions fulfill social needs, and downplayed questions of power—particularly who benefits from the status quo. In short, it became associated with conservativism, and thus, to left-liberal sensibilities, suspect."

Even today, "Functionalism's emphasis on stability, order, and institutional integration appeared to be insufficiently critical of inequality or too politically unengaged in an era increasingly focused on documenting and criticizing disparities" (Iceland 2025, 914).

Iceland's account is echoed by less heterodox scholars. A recent *Annual Review of Sociology* article by several well-respected mainstream sociologists noted,

> "At least within sociology, the word [socialization] is most famously linked to the mid-century structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons, and both socialization and Parsons

> lost credibility in the political and epistemological upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s…. [F]unctionalist accounts of socialization came to be understood as cultural downloading, lacking necessary attention to agency, incoherence, and conflict" (Guhin et al. 2021, 110).

The review goes on to advocate for a "postfunctionalist" version of a concept associated with functionalism. Indeed, in the 2017 survey mentioned above, Horowitz et al. (2018, 469) found that functionalism/neo-functionalism was the least preferred of fourteen possible research paradigms (tied with evolutionary theory/biology, discussed below).

There is an important paradox, however: most introductory sociology textbooks begin by elaborating the different families of theories, including functionalism, even while the rest of the text ignores functionalist explanations (e.g., Smith 2014). Similarly, it is standard to begin overviews of sociological and criminological theory (in textbooks and classrooms) with consensus theory (epitomized by Durkheim, a structural-functionalist) and then move on to conflict theory (epitomized by Marx, often joined by later critical theorists). In both cases, after the initial homage to the earlier theory, functionalism largely disappears from what follows. While there are important empirical critiques of functionalism, there are also empirical critiques of other frameworks that are prioritized; to the extent that the subsequent omission of functionalism has more to do with political opposition, however, it is a breach of scientific reasoning.

9.3 Avoiding Biology and Evolution

In a book review essay entitled, "Sociology and Biology: Can't We Just Be Friends?" sociologist Patrick Heuveline (2004, 1500) (then a professor at the University of Chicago) observed that "with few if notable exceptions, mainstream sociology has been slower than other social sciences (e.g., psychology, anthropology, or demography) to see ways to integrate biological models and reasoning into our understanding of social behavior." He further explained, "Sociology's distance from biology appears to be deeply rooted in these disciplines' scientific and political projects." Indeed, paging through sociology's top journals, it is rare to find an article engaging biology. One notable exception bears mentioning: In 2008, *American Journal of Sociology* published a supplemental issue (Vol. 114, No. S1) entitled, "Exploring Genetics and Social Structure" that was guest edited by sociologist Peter Bearman with guest Associate Editors Molly A. Martin and Sara Shostak. Overall, however, biology and related subjects are not popular within sociology. For example, the ASA Section on Biology and Society has fewer than 100 members and is currently the smallest section. Similarly, the Section on Animals and Society has just over 100 members, and is the

second smallest.

Within biological topics and theories, however, there are clear contingencies, indicating that sociologists' avoidance of biology is partial and political. For example, evolutionary theories are unpopular and viewed with great skepticism among sociologists who prefer a "blank slate" view of human nature (Horowitz et al. 2014). As Whitmeyer and Hopcroft (2025, 436) have noted, despite the clear markers of useful and strong theory, the success of evolutionary psychology, and the long history of evolutionary concepts in sociology, the idea of an evolved actor "has always been a minority approach" in sociology. Similarly, McCaffree (2021) has made the case for important similarities between animal societies and human societies, the relevance of animal biology, and evolution, but these topics remain extremely underdeveloped.[31] On the other hand, mainstream sociologists tend to echo left-leaning political activists by endorsing biological explanations when it is politically useful, such as identifying biological bases for sexual attraction (e.g., the idea that gay people are "born this way"). But in most contexts, it is considered taboo to bring in biology.

Sociologists use a variety of justifications for biology's omission from the field. Despite his opening comment that there are key political differences between biology and sociology, Heuveline (2004, 1501) argues that for the most part, biology is simply unnecessary for sociologists: "I would argue that in their everyday work, many can do without." He explains,

> "Sometimes the reaction of some sociologists is one of vehement opposition to biological explanations; while this response may betray a perceived threat, it might also be related to the emphasis that our discipline, in its quest for scientific respectability, has placed on building atomistic, causal, behavioral models. With the proliferation of social survey sampling, predicting a vector of individual outcomes Y from a matrix of individual characteristics X with everything else in a noise vector has become the methodological staple of many sociological investigations. It is not hard to see that the omission of all biological parameters in many such models is problematic. But just as readily found are rather large expanses of sociological investigations that do not have to be concerned with biological factors." (1501-1502)

In other words, our models have normalized the oversight.

Others emphasize political concerns. In his introduction to the *American Journal of Sociology* special issue on genetics and social structure, Peter Bearman (2008, vi) explained sociologists' three objections to genetics, each of which are political and non-scientific objections: First, observation of "genetic expression…serves to legitimate existing arrangements, because, after all, they are 'genetic.'" Second, "borrowing methods and data from disciplines engaged in research on the

[31] Hopcroft and McCaffree are both heterodox sociologists.

genetics of human behavior necessarily legitimizes those disciplines and runs the risk of distorting the sociological project." Third, "the focus on the supposed genetics of behavior is a eugenicist project in (not so veiled) disguise." Bearman dismissed each argument as inaccurate or silly, but he characterized these arguments as standard critiques from sociologists.

In my own conversations over the years, the dominant reason for biology's unpopularity that I have heard (from opponents of biological theories) is the association of biological arguments with conservative arguments. In criminology, for example, biopsychosocial theories of criminality (relating to IQ, brain scans, or DNA differences) are generally viewed as politically conservative fields, although there they surged in popularity in the early 2000s (Wright et al. 2008).[32] In sociology, scholars mostly avoid biology as a source of information or debate or describe it as inaccurate, particularly when it comes to race, sex, and gender: race and gender are viewed as social constructs, while increasingly sociologists reject the idea of biological "sex" and sex differences (for careful discussions, see Burt 2026; Saguy 2025) and it would be extremely surprising to hear a sociologist treat race as a biological reality.[33]

Indeed, biological discussions surrounding the sexes are currently the most controversial, in large part because biology, sex, and gender have become particularly polarizing topics in U.S. politics and general culture. Sociological research on the topic is viewed even within the field as necessarily having political meaning. A particularly extreme example was the response of feminist criminologists in 2021 to research by Georgia State sociologist and criminologist Callie Burt. Her article (Burt 2020) pointed to discrepancies and confusion in the evolving use of the terms sex, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation, and ultimately favored a biological definition of sex. She was labeled transphobic and anti-LGBT in emails exchanged on the ASC's Division of Women and Crime (DWC) list-serve. So extensive was the discussion that it came up in the DWC meeting (documented in their minutes) on April 19, 2021. The meeting minutes note, "After our members' response to an article published in the journal the DWC submitted a statement of inclusivity, which can be found online." The statement declared, "We reject any writings whose argument or foundation claims that

[32] The highest-profile biopsychosocial criminologists are also self-identified conservatives; one was a coauthor on the textbook, *Conservative Criminology* (Wright and DeLisi 2015).

[33] For a sociologist to be able to discuss biology and race—for example, to discuss people of West African or Caribbean heritage's predispositions to certain diseases and health conditions—they would have to first clarify that blunt racial categories are social constructs even if there are biological correlates to genetics that correlate with those categories.

trans women are not women and should not have equal human rights."[34] Finally, Burt was removed

[34] The DWC Executive Board Statement on Inclusivity (March 8, 2021) reads:

"The Executive Board of the Division of Women and Crime (DWC) denounces all oppressions (including, but not limited to racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism and ableism), oppressive language, behavior, or publications that perpetuate and/or uphold structural inequalities. We disavow discrimination based on disability, socioeconomic status, sexuality, age, education, race/ethnicity, nationality, citizenship status, religious affiliation or gender identity or expression. The Executive Board aspires for the DWC to be an intersectional and antiracist feminist space. We acknowledge that we are not there yet and achieving this goal will require sustained resources, time commitments, and critical reflection to move toward a more inclusive, intersectional feminist organization. As a starting point, we want to use this statement to acknowledge and address the problems of racism, cisgenderism, transphobia, and heterosexism as central concerns raised by membership.

First, the Executive Board of the DWC affirms the ongoing need for equity, inclusion and racial justice within the Division and, more broadly, the ASC. The Executive Board commits to ongoing and sustained conversations among a diversity of BIPOC, Queer and Trans scholars. It is important to both listen to these scholars and ensure they are part of the decision-making structures that can affect the necessary changes. While there have been some steps in the right direction, there remains a need for deeper engagement across the DWC membership that is inclusive of a more diverse set of voices and experiences. For example, there has been a lack of meaningful representation of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ scholars in positions of leadership. We are committed to pushing beyond conventional diversity and inclusion efforts that have yet to produce the scale of change needed to truly uproot the white supremacy, white nationalism, racism, heterosexism, and transphobia woven into academia and into our own history as a Division, so we may achieve social justice in the DWC.

Further, we are a trans-inclusive organization, and the Executive Board acknowledges and condemns discrimination and microaggressions against trans and nonbinary individuals in all domains. Succinctly, trans women are women, and trans women's rights are human rights. We reject any writings whose argument or foundation claims that trans women are not women and should not have equal human rights.

The Executive Board is committed to making the changes necessary to achieve an inclusive existence. To this end, the Executive Board has begun the following activities:

- Reconvene the Constitutional Revision Committee with the task of ensuring inclusivity in the structure of the DWC, including in all Committees
- Ensure that leadership positions have a balance of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ members
- Task the Diversity & Inclusion Committee with oversight of inclusivity in representation of the Executive Board and Committee composition and mandate
- Ensure transparency of all work of the Executive Board and review the

from the editorial board of *Feminist Criminology*: despite being told her service on the board had been "exemplary," her presence was deemed to conflict with the journal's "inclusive intent."

However, opposition to studying biological differences between the sexes predates the current controversies over trans people. In 2001, three feminist sociologists were outraged by an ASR study that found biological reasons for male-female behavioral differences and wrote "scathing critiques" of the study that, as one scholar explains, failed to "account" for the findings, focusing instead on the "dangers" of this type of study (Mizruchi 2017, 11-12).

Likewise, the 2017 survey of sociology faculty (mentioned above) found strong opposition to biological explanations for sex differences in occupational choices:

> "Only one third of respondents acknowledges that a biological role in occupational choice is 'plausible,' with 27% open to the possibility that prenatal hormones play a role. Indeed, sociologists overwhelmingly agree (79%) that gender socialization and discrimination 'profoundly outweigh' any possible biological factors; and only a fraction (11%) affirms that political efforts to address the STEM gender disparity may 'fall short of parity due in part to average biological differences.' Finally, a sizable minority (41%) agrees that those who search for a biological component are 'likely motivated to legitimize the gender stratified status quo' (with one third disagreeing)." (Horowitz et al. 2018, 467)

However, they also found that those respondents who treated sociology as a "moral mission" were "significantly less likely to acknowledge any biological component to women's occupational choices" (469).

In discussing the short-answer responses to these questions, Horowitz et al. (2018, 485) distinguish between some rather intense reactions and those willing to engage the question. The

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scope of the DWC Chair to make unilateral decisions

- Create a Feminist Criminology Editorial Board Committee tasked with recommending policies and procedures regarding the selection of an inclusive Editorial Board for our journal (this is the contractual responsibility of the DWC as Sponsor)
- Ensure that all DWC members have a voice by creating outlets such as Town Halls and Casual Conversations
- Ask that each Executive Board release a statement of inclusivity to the membership at the start of each Chair term along with their proposed activities

We invite the Division membership to meaningfully engage with the Executive Board by participating in a public Town Hall on (Date TBA) hosted by the DWC where we hope to discuss additional concrete steps that will be taken by the Division to acknowledge and redress racism, cisgenderism and trans-exclusivity in our organization. We are also committed to increased transparency between the Executive Board and the DWC membership. We view the Town Hall as an opportunity for us to listen to the concerns of the members and solicit additional suggestions for how we can improve.""

intense reactions included, "'Jesus, really?' asks one; 'Are you freaking kidding me?' responds another; 'How. Are. You. Even. Asking. This. Question.' [sic] writes a third." Those who were willing to engage the question generally believed

> "that biology's role is trivial before decisive social and historical forces:
>
> - There are biosocial differences between males and females but the effects of those differences on occupational choice, is [sic] irrelevant.
> - Sure, it's plausible; but the evidence sounds VERY weak and needs to be treated as such. [emphasis theirs]
> - The social OUTWEIGHS the biological, especially when looking at the unrepresentative work done"

Thus, there is an array of responses in the field, but support for biological explanations is apparently rare.

9.4 Race/Racism, Not Class

While scholars continue to be interested in both racial and class-based inequalities, class generally gets less attention. As UC Berkeley sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2026) pointed out recently, social scientists generally do not study class discrimination for many reasons, including because of the invisibility of class relative to race or gender and to some extent because of the normalization of class-based differences. But more generally, there has been a general tendency to explain bad outcomes—e.g., poverty, poor health, crime, education—by biases against demographic groups, especially racism and sexism less so, rather than class or economic inequality (let alone individual choices) (Horowitz et al. 2018; Iceland and Silver 2024).

For example, early sociolegal scholarship that incorporated critical race theory (Calavita 2000; Mack 1999) often emphasized the interplay of race, class, and gender in determining outcomes, such as whether a Black person was able to defy segregation rules or other prohibitions. As critical race theory became more popular around 2014 and later, race (or racism) became the central explanation, particularly as scholars sought to argue against what they saw as the myth of "colorblind" policies (where, for example, class or other inequalities could be used to explain racial disparities) (e.g., Van Cleve and Mayes 2015).

William Julius Wilson has been a prominent sociologist who has received heavy criticism (but also achieved great status) for making what were viewed as controversial claims about the importance of class and race in such works as *The Declining Significance of Race* and *The Truly*

Disadvantaged. Wilson's research demonstrated the importance of class in studies of racial inequality, including the heterogeneous status changes of Black people of different classes over time, and later on race-blind policy interventions, but his work was often dismissed as conservative (Wilson 2011) (and those who rely on it are often viewed as conservative as well). (It should be noted, however, that Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* is also the second-most cited study by *Social Forces* authors (Moody et al. 2022).)When Wilson (1987; 1996) received criticism for pointing to data that showed Black people were doing better over time (even while impoverished Black people were doing worse), he was working against a general trend in the field to not only focus on social problems but to emphasize what was wrong with society.

It is worth mentioning Annette Lareau whose (2003) book *Unequal Childhoods* identifies class as a driving factor in distinguishing parental styles. Some critics argued that her book downplayed the role of race and structural racism. However, overall her book was well received and Lareau was later elected ASA president (presiding over the 2014 annual meeting). Thus, downplaying race in favor of class does not necessarily lead to scholars' ostracization (but see my discussion of James Coleman below).

I have not been able to find broader survey data or systematic reviews of publications on this question. A recently published article explores one university's syllabi generally (not specific to sociology) and finds a similar omission of class relative to race and gender (Shields and Tazzara 2026). However, as one check for sociology, I reviewed past ASA President Christine Williams' 2020 address, "Life Support: The Problems of Working for a Living," which sounds like the type of article that could invoke a class analysis; it does not use the word "class" (one book cited has "class" in the title), but it uses the word "race" 11 times, "racial*" 11 times, and "gender" or "gendered" 37 times. This is only one example (and the only presidential address I checked); a more systematic analysis is of course needed. It would also be worth reviewing how often the articles receiving awards from the Race, Gender, and Class section of the ASA engage class. It would also be worth revisiting whether class becomes a more popular variable in sociology in the coming years given the recently popular anti-billionaire sentiment among sociologists that has reactivated a general animosity toward the rich.

9.5 Whither the Sociology of Religion?

The sociology of religion tends to be a weakening subfield (recall the above discussion regarding section membership). In the dissertation analysis discussed above, reviewing sociological

dissertations from 1980 to 2015, religion was the seventh least common topic of 59 substantive topics; it was more popular only compared to French/Canadian sociology, Race: Latinx, Internet, Illness, Sport/Consumption, and Social Work; it was narrowly beat out by topics like Child Welfare, Violence, Medical, Gender: Sexuality, (Civic) Participation, Gender: Feminist, Fatherhood/ Divorce, Higher Ed, and Poverty, all of which accounted for 1.1 or 1.2% of the sample, in contrast to religion's 1.0% share (Heiberger et al. 2021, table 1). This overview gives us the share of religion-focused dissertations in the aggregate for 3.5 decades.

Looking at change over time, a recent analysis (see Fig. 12) found that the portion of articles on religion was declining over the last twenty years in *American Sociological Review* and *Social Forces*; the portion was increasing somewhat in *American Journal of Sociology*, but in contrast to the other two journals, the portion of *American Journal of Sociology* articles on religion was starting from quite a low point (Pearce 2023). Attempting to explain the decline, the author offered, "[i]t could stem from increasing competition for space in general journals from a wider variety of specialty areas, or it might relate to an expanding number of religion-focused specialty journals that could be drawing submissions away from general journals" (Pearce 2023, 1639- 1640). Another analysis found that comparing 1940-2010 and 2010 to the present, the portion of articles focused on religion had declined across *Social Forces*, *American Sociological Review*, and *American Journal of Sociology* (Kalleberg 2026).

An alternative interpretation held by some (especially heterodox) scholars (e.g., Smith 2014) is that the decline of this important subfield stems at least in part from the stigma associated with being a religious person (especially a Christian) and the assumption that those who study the sociology of religion must be religious. Indeed, recently, the field has been somewhat buoyed by its derisive focus on evangelical Christians and their perceived political power. Critics point out that the field generally fails to explore some of the more positive aspects of religion and generally paints religious people, especially evangelical Christians, in a negative light, particularly under the banner of "Christian nationalism" (Smith 2014; 2024; Smith and Adler 2022).

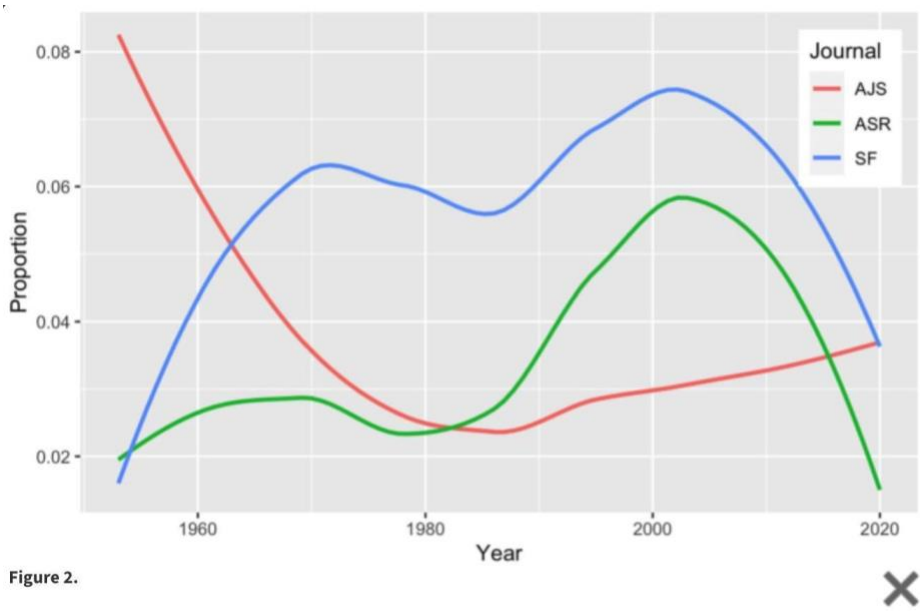

Figure 2.

Use of religious terms in article titles from three US sociology *journals*:: *AJS*, *ASR*, and *SF*(*SF*), 1953–2000. Note: searches were based on the use of any title words starting with the following stems: "Relig," "Christ," "Catholic," "Protestant," "Methodi," "Amish," "Athei," "Buddh," "Saint," "Denomination," "Muslim," "Islam," "Mormon," "Juda," "Jew," "Church," "Faith"; plotted line is lowess-smoothed.

Figure 12: Source: Pearce (2023). Screenshot of the article.

While revising this report, I received a table of contents alert from *Social Forces*, one of sociology's top four journals, featuring an article that fits this characterization. In "The religion of White identity politics: Christian nationalism and White racial solidarity," University of Oklahoma sociologist Samuel Perry (a high-profile sociologist of religion) and his coauthor, "propose American Christian nationalism is best thought of as the religion of White identity politics" (Perry and Grubbs 2025). While this finding may be entirely correct (my point is not to challenge the findings), studies like this—that is, studies that find negative outcomes associated with religions sociologists tend to find distasteful, or even of religion generally—tend to dominate the sociology of religion.

To explore both the number of articles on religion and their content, I reviewed two years' worth of issues of this journal (recall that this journal tends to produce more religion articles than the top two journals). Another article in the same issue ("Institutional anomie, religious ecologies, and violence in American communities," the only other article on religion in this issue), "find[s] that increases in the evangelical Protestant adherent rate are directly associated with increases in homicide rates, while increases in the Catholic adherent rate are directly associated with decreases in

homicide rates" (Stroope et al. 2025). In the previous issue, another article tests a hypothesis "that Republican lawmakers are more likely than Democrats to oppose these [science] policies because Republicans are less likely than Democrats to base policy decisions on scientific authority and more likely than Democrats to base decisions on religious authority" (O'Brien and Johnson 2025). Another article in that previous issue documents the declining religiosity among survey respondents (Voas 2025). The point is not to suggest these are bad or otherwise faulty articles, but that amidst the declining focus on religion, what does get published seems to present a certain narrative, raising questions about how easily other high-quality studies that support other narratives—or that would cover more innocuous questions—would be published in top journals.

9.6 The Negativity Bias: Is Everything Really Getting Worse?

As several scholars have pointed out (e.g., Best 2001; Iceland 2025; Rojas 2025; Smith 2014; Turner 2025), sociology tends to focus on or even exaggerate how bad things are in society. For example, Turner (2025, 5) has shared his impression that "ASA meetings and courses in colleges and universities over-state and catastrophize the magnitude of dynamics like poverty or racism to the detriment of studying the many numerous other aspects of human societies." Primarily, this exaggeration is the result of the failure to discuss what is good in society or what is going well.

This negative focus makes sense for a discipline that specializes in social problems, especially inequality. But as some sociologists have pointed out, it is easy to read sociological research and not realize that the world is getting better in many respects, including core areas of interest for contemporary sociologists like inequality (e.g., Iceland 2025). Indeed, to some extent, sociologists have also turned a blind eye to those aspects of the very social problems they are interested in that are getting better, as with Wilson's work on the improving condition of Black people overall.

Indiana University sociologist Fabio Rojas (2025) wrote a blog post entitled, "Sociology of the Good Society: What Would Our Science Look Like if We Focused on Solutions Rather Than Problems?" He began the post, "One of my criticisms of academic sociology is that is focuses relentlessly on dysfunction. I've often thought my discipline is more akin to a Museum of Horrors rather than a broad inquiry into social life." As Rojas points out, however, the major problem facing sociology is it seems to miss a central fact: "the major story of modernity is a story of improvement." To correct this state of affairs, he called for a new paradigm of sociology:

> "…we need a sociology of the Good that focuses on genuine human improvement, even while admitting improvements aren't evenly distributed and that life is far from perfect. What would be candidates for Good Things for this happy new sociology to

focus on?

Here are my nominations:

- Wealth - Sociologists should understand how culture and social structure lead to material improvements. This could focus on macro-level transformations such as the Industrial Revolution or micro-level processes such as business growth or personal wealth accumulation.
- Tolerance and civility - Sociologists should understand the conditions that lead people to not ruthlessly attack each other. This could be done through studies of free speech, racial and gender diversity, and religious toleration.
- Good Governance - Sociologists should understand how societies develop rules that allow people to interact and resolve grievances in productive ways. This could be done through the analysis of democracies, corporations, and non-profit coops."

What else gets left out as a result of the field's negativity bias? Iceland (2025, 912) offers "social cohesion, stability, and flourishing" (or more generally "social order" and "social progress") as key blind spots created by our "sociology of gloom" (Best 2001). As a point of comparison, Gross (2013, 110) claims, "As a discipline, sociology is very much interested in accounting for social stability: in explaining how and why social structures may remain intact over the long haul despite people's efforts to change them or the random fluctuations of history." How do we explain one scholar stating that stability is underexplored and the other saying it is central? My interpretation is that both are correct if we think sociologists are interested in how inequality and power are maintained (the stability of negatives), whereas sociologists are less interested in how economic growth or democracy is maintained (the stability of positives). Indeed, Gross later (111) explains,

> "Research here is often concerned to explain long-term patterns of inequality in wages and conceives of the underlying processes as having a self-reproducing character: a major part of the explanation for why there is occupational sex segregation at time T2 is simply that there was also occupational sex segregation at time T1, with people repeating the historical pattern via the assumptions it sets up about the gendered nature of different forms of employment. It is here that cultural understandings of gender and work enter in."

Thus, it would be more accurate to say certain kinds of stability are studied while others are not. Certainly, concerns for stability from the 1950s—including studies on assimilation into American culture or cultural cohesion—are generally neither studied nor viewed favorably (see survey results in Horowitz et al. 2018).

So, what "social progress" gets left out? Most systematically, John Iceland (2025, 914) offered a literature review documenting "social progress," focusing on "the increase in living standards—indicative of the performance of the system as a whole—and even declines in racial and gender inequality—two important types of disparities of broad interest." The progress he describes, although well documented—relying heavily on primary sources as well as published works in sociology, economics, psychology, and interdisciplinary studies—would be fairly surprising to many sociologists and readers of most sociology research, which often focuses on the negative. Iceland (2025, 913) explains, "I argue that the field's preoccupation with inequality has led it to understate or overlook important gains, including rising living standards and reductions in racial and gender inequality."

My own read is that Iceland is correct: by focusing on identifying hidden sources of inequality and generally focusing on outcomes typically viewed from progressive politics as a bad outcome, much of sociology and its subfields gives the impression that society is generally getting worse. My own search of *American Journal of Sociology* articles shows that there have been occasional studies that directly offered an alternative account, seeking to explain the decline in overall levels of inequality (e.g., Firebaugh and Goesling 2004; Pandian 2024), but they are few and far between.

Why do sociologists focus on the more negative story? Iceland (2025, 912, internal citation omitted) explains our negativity bias and exclusion of positive sociology as a strategic choice in the field: "acknowledging progress may encourage complacency and undermine calls for fundamental change. Social movements draw energy by emphasizing the broad scope and urgency of these problems." Essentially, and unfortunately, the leftist and activist bent of the field encourages scholars to approach their work—consciously or subconsciously—as they would an activist project. Indeed, one could explain why there is less sociology on wellness by pointing to a popular belief on the left, and among sociologists, that the "wellness crowd" is full of "white supremacists" and there is less sociology on wealth generation because of the common belief among sociologists that capitalism is bad and should be dismantled.

Overall, analyses that have a kind of celebratory tone marking *longue durée* social progress—e.g., on declining violence (Pinker 2012), improved overall mortality rates, declining deaths from global warming or starvation, etc.—tend to come from outside of the field.

Beyond specific theories or topics that are underdeveloped, sociology also lacks a "constructive," "applied," or "engineering" branch of the field (Martin 2016; Rojas 2025; Turner 2025). This is not to say sociologists fail to provide policy recommendations—far from it, but given

their pessimistic bent and focus on social problems, they generally fail to offer frameworks for what a society can do to thrive rather than to avoid a narrow range of bad outcomes relating to inequality. (These should be two sides of the same coin, but they are not.) For an important exception, see Joya Misra's ASA presidential address, which called for "building communities of hope, justice, and joy" (Misra 2025).

Indeed, the pessimistic and political bent may impact what policy recommendations sociologists do offer. Iceland (2025) warns that a disproportionate focus on social problems, and an underlying social justice mentality that prioritizes the members of society perceived as the most vulnerable at all costs, risks generating policy recommendations that ultimately harm other social goods like economic growth and solidarity. Instead, he argues that the field needs a balance between social order and social justice concerns to ensure stronger, more well-rounded, and more credible research and policy recommendations. Ultimately, Iceland (2025, 913) suggests "a more pluralistic theoretical and moral landscape—such as balancing concerns with Social Justice (i.e., oppression and inequality) with an equal concern for Social Order (social cohesion and institutional stability) (Iceland et al., 2023)—could better equip sociology to analyze both social problems and progress."

9.7 Miscellaneous Other Declining or Missing Topics

Other topics have declined over time—some because of changes in society, some because of field-level preferences and some because of other factors. For example, in his analysis of topics published in *Social Forces*, *American Journal of Sociology*, and *American Sociological Review*, UNC-Chapel Hill sociologist and former ASA President Arne Kalleberg (2026, 3) documented the decline in studies of racial segregation, social change, marriage and cohabitation, religion, politics, sex roles and gender, culture, organizations, and migration and refugees. That is, there are many topics that have become less popular over time. In this section, I identify a few other areas where scholars have identified potentially politically motivated blind spots (and skews), but about which there has been less written:

- Studies of authoritarianism are generally focused on right-leaning authoritarianism but generally ignore left-leaning authoritarianism (Smith 2024). Indeed, recent social psychology has demonstrated that liberals have a harder time recognizing left-leaning authoritarianism, while conservatives can recognize right-leaning authoritarianism. Given the field's strong leftward bent, it is plausible that political commitments are blinding scholars to the important social phenomenon of rising authoritarianism on

the left. Examples include opposition to free speech, except when it involves progressive protests or expression; a preference for equity over equality; and a preference for top-down mandates over democratically determined outcomes. In my experience, most sociologists speak extensively about right-coded attacks on academic freedom, which are commonly associated with authoritarianism, but overlook examples of left-coded attacks. In interpersonal discussions, they may also viscerally reject the idea that such attacks exist or argue that discussing them undermines critiques of the Trump administration.

- Sociologist Musa Al-Gharbi (2024) has noted that sociologists have a general unwillingness to critically study allies and peer groups; given their political bent, this means that there are few critical studies of activists, for example.
- There is also a general refusal to study—and criticism of those who do study—any difficulties facing men, especially young or white men. As one example close to home, as Cohen (2015; 2018) has pointed out, sociology is becoming a gender-segregated discipline. Male representation, and especially white male representation, in ASA membership has been declining over the years such that they are a minority group in the field. Similarly, the number of men getting sociology degrees is declining. As Cohen has pointed out, the ASA formed a committee on the status of women in sociology years ago; however, the ASA has not formed such a committee for men, while it has continued to maintain the committee on women, despite their consistently high representation in leadership positions and growth in degrees and faculty positions. However, discussions of unfairness or inequalities affecting men tend to be ignored, despite a growing recognition beyond the field of several crises affecting men and boys and despite the field's stated commitment to studying "inequality." Again, the field is interested in discussing harms or inequalities primarily if they affect groups that the field has deemed (for political reasons) are vulnerable and marginalized, regardless of the empirical reality.
- Studies on socialization, which used to be common in sociology, have generally declined. Linking socialization to other discredited topics and frameworks, (Guhin et al. 2021, 109) explain, "like the functionalists who introduced the concept, socialization has fallen out of favor, critiqued for ignoring power and agency, for its

teleology and incoherence, and for a misguided link to 'culture of poverty' arguments." To the extent that socialization is discussed, it is most often discussed in the context of the "hidden curriculum" and how students are socialized into a particular cultural paradigm (e.g., how grad students are socialized for academia or how wealthy students in K-12 schools are socialized into more culturally beneficial behaviors while poor students are socialized into behaviors fitting their future—note that these are still considered "structural analyses" because the culture is imposed by the unequal structures).

9.8 Closing

Importantly, sociology is not unique in its discomfort with many of these topics or findings, although certainly scholars have argued it is among the most extreme (e.g., Horowitz et al. 2018). As Martin (2016, 118) noted, this discomfort tends to be true across the social sciences, including the more scientific field of psychology. Thus, he states, "Among the taboos in the social sciences are the ideas that 'victims' are sometimes blameworthy, that sexes and races biologically differ from one another, that social beliefs are inborn rather than constructed, and that stereotypes sometimes match average group attributes" (see also Felson 1991). To the extent that many of these discomforts stem from ideology, and to the extent that ideology is shared by academics across disciplines—and is increasingly shared across fields of knowledge work (Al-Gharbi 2024)—it makes sense that we would see other disciplines struggling with findings scholars personally find uncomfortable. Moreover, some of these issues mirror what Jonathan Haidt (2012) has written about regarding political divisions in society more generally. Indeed, several commentators have argued that his arguments about the "sacralization" of particular groups—making anything that appears critical or potentially harmful to those groups—well explain sociologists' reluctance and opposition to research that departs from a central liberatory narrative respecting the groups deemed most vulnerable (e.g., women, racial/ethnic/sexual/some religious minorities, criminals, undocumented immigrants) (Horowitz et al. 2018; Smith 2014).

10 Informal and Formal Social Controls of Politically Unpopular Research

Some scholars warn that ideological motivations—whether actual political biases or worldviews that make scholars more skeptical of research findings that challenge their worldviews—are contributing to actual biases in research and censorship (both self-censorship and censorship of

others) in sociology. More specifically, the field's commitment to activism—whether as a central focus or as a prominent focus—and its focus on inequality and certain kinds of social problems of interest to liberal or left-leaning scholars has led some scholars to argue that sociology has experienced "ideological capture," meaning the field is dominated by a single narrow political ideology in ways that shape the production and reception of research.

In the most expansive version, Smith (2014) argues that sociology is consumed by a "sacred project," with the spiritual connotations intended:

> "American sociology as a collective enterprise is at heart committed to the visionary project of realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally so desire, by constructing their own favored identities, entering and exiting relationships as they choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential, material, and bodily pleasures." (7-8, italics removed; see also Horowitz et al. 2018)

As laudable as those values may be, Smith's point is this project is far afield from "the scientific study of society" (18); he also points out that these values are sometimes contradictory and narrowly interpreted.

Importantly, Smith goes on to argue that these goals animate sociology—what gets published in books or top journals, what receives awards, the content of conference themes, and what merits an ASA section, even at the expense of scientific rigor and quality. For Smith, something that lacks emancipatory potential is less likely to be of interest to most sociologists, let alone receive the sort of career-building recognition often bestowed upon more politically popular work. With weaker evidence, Smith argues that because of the ideological commitment to the "sacred project," any research that seems to deviate from its values—for example, should a study determine that having children outside of marriage is harmful to the children's life outcomes, which could be used to argue that people should only have children when married—becomes intolerable and thus a target for reviewers, retractions, or tenure/promotion challenges, making conformity to these values more important than scientific merit.

This "ideological capture" is thought to have important consequences for research: biases, censorship, blind spots, and taboos. That is, some research is published with an ideological or political bent that prevents the full exploration of explanations, some research is censored because of its findings, some topics are underexplored because they simply are not of interest or do not occur to scholars to study (because of political mindsets), and some topics and explanations are considered taboo or off-limits. While distinct phenomena, in practice they tend to be strongly

related: for example, sociologists may avoid certain questions and explanations because they do not occur to them because of their own political mindset (blind spots), but then they may be critical of scholars who turn to such explanations (bias) or even stand in the way of publication (censorship), which in turn can encourage other scholars to avoid such explanations to avoid possible censorship or unpopularity (self-censorship), contributing to a general sense that a topic is off limits (taboo).

While Smith's claims are popular among "heterodox" critics of sociology, we lack a systematic analysis of sociology testing his claims. Previous sections of this report reviewed areas where we see possible bias, blind spots, and taboos, especially pointing to the lack of systematicity in topical coverage in the field and the rejection of certain theories for political reasons; these trends are traceable to ideological allegiances and echo the pull away from scientific standards in favor of activism discussed above. As such, they provide moderate support for some of Smith's claims.

In this section, I turn to claims of actual censorship and backlash. The evidence for actual censorship tends to be the weakest: Where we have detailed evidence, it is of a small minority's willingness to attack usually very high-profile scholarship for political reasons, but in a very select number of cases (below). Some scholars self-report self-censorship with few documented cases of censorship by others or post-publication criticism for political reasons, especially in studies that fail to put "vulnerable" or "marginalized" groups in a more positive light (LaFree 2025; Rubin 2025; Savolainen 2024; Smith 2014) or that is seen as supporting their oppression (Tetrault 2023). Indeed, such norms are becoming institutionalized in other fields, but they have been less clearly institutionalized in sociology.[35]

And as we saw above, there is general skepticism of a number of topics and arguments deemed "conservative" or reflecting "outdated" or "offensive" beliefs. However, documentation of these examples tend to be anecdotal, coming from senior scholars toward the end of their career (Patterson, Wilson) or who have already been "canceled" and thus have little more to lose (Burt).

[35] For example, Nature's research ethics page notes it will not publish research that could be harmful if published, where harm includes, "for instance, stigmatization of a vulnerable human group or potential use of the results of research for unintended purposes (e.g., public policies that undermine human rights or misuse of information to threaten public health)." Likewise, one of the review criteria for the Journal of Social and Political Psychology is "Does the manuscript show sensitivity to ethical issues, including power dynamics within the research (i.e. reflexivity) and potential political and societal consequences of the research?" Although not clearly (from the outside) a social justice-oriented journal, JSPP also states that it encourages studies that, among other things, "ha[ve] the potential to inspire practical applications towards reducing social and political problems and promoting social justice."

Other evidence is scattered, such as select short-answer responses to the Horowitz et al. (2018, 484) survey, such as "[i]n one extreme case, a respondent exclaims: 'You are a white supremacist and I hate everything about this survey' " in response to a question about "the cultural dimensions of poverty."

Admittedly, this lack of strong evidence may be a function of the available data—I do not know of any studies that, for example, offer an audit-study design that would provide stronger evidence for or against the claim, while claims of censorship are rarely made public and difficult to prove (and are thus disincentivized given potential reputational damage of appearing to be a sore loser). Without fielding a survey, it would be difficult to assess the extent to which these events actually happen; even then, however, scholars may not wish to admit to engaging in censorship or may not realize they are doing it. Alternatively, one could survey sociologists about whether, in their view, reviewers or editors have sought to censor their work (although care would be needed for distinguishing sour grapes from actual cases of censorship).

Before moving on, it is worth noting that some scholars do successfully publish studies that show controversial findings that do not uphold "the party line." Indeed, Dromi and Stabler (2023) use such cases (like Patterson and Wilson mentioned above) to argue that claims of self-censorship are overstated. They reviewed research in five controversial areas (race and genetics, secularization theory, methodological nationalism, the culture of poverty, and parenting practices) and argued that sociologists are able to productively analyze controversial subjects. In my view, however, these outliers—scholars who faced substantial criticism, but carried on—do not provide sufficient evidence about the extent of censorship (by oneself or others), just as my select case studies of backlash to research (below) should not be taken as indicative of widespread backlash. These individual success stories do not give us a sense of the *rate* at which research that should be published is published—for example, one study may be published for every ten viable studies that are not. Given the hidden nature of peer review and the possibility of sour grapes among rejected authors, we simply do not have the data to determine how extensive ideological censorship is in the field. More widespread data is necessary, including on aspects of research production that are often hidden from view—including advice not to pursue particular subjects, article rejections, and audience pushback to presentations—and careful analyses that can distinguish between legitimate criticism (e.g., poor research design, undermotivated research questions, bad writing) and illegitimate criticism (e.g., political objections to research).

Further, it is important to note some scholars have been apparently successful in avoiding or

navigating pushback on controversial subjects by publishing mixed findings. In my subjective view of the field, the most common type of publication that presents results that challenge the party line are those that both uphold and violate that line—for example, one part of a study may demonstrate inequality while another part shows improvement or lack of inequality. (One sociologist even pointed this strategy out to me as a way they got around publishing controversial results.)

Some examples from my own subfield of crime and punishment will illustrate: Robey et al. (2023) show that the black-white incarceration disparities have declined substantially over time—but they still show a disparity (also, their article was published in a demography journal). Studies of health outcomes of prisoners (e.g., Schnittker et al. 2022; Uggen et al. 2023) show that some prisoners actually get healthier in prison with respect to some diseases, but generally are worse on most others. Rudes (2022) notes that some prisoners request transfers into supermaximum-security prisons or secure housing units (which use 23 hours per day of solitary confinement and sensory deprivation), but most of her book also documents the many damaging effects of solitary on prisoners and correctional staff. Some scholars document "sociological ambivalence" or the way in which people can simultaneously feel gratitude or relief and resentment and anger toward certain situations. Comfort (2008) shows that the female partners of incarcerated men are sometimes relieved when their partners are incarcerated, while they also feel anger and sadness, while Clear (2007) shows that residents of high-incarcerated neighborhoods are likewise sometimes glad when local criminals are sent to prison even while they feel the negative effects of heavy policing, high incarceration rates, and the loss of their community members.

These studies are evidence-driven and allow for the full complexity of social life, which does not cleanly map onto any political agenda. Moreover, I do not think these examples were actually strategically included—instead, I think the authors simply worked to provide an honest and systematic discussion of their topic. However, some scholars still see such findings as too conservative or too helpful to conservative agendas and elect to only present the negative consequences of policies they do not like, or (due to cognitive biases) they do not believe or even recognize the positive consequences of policies they do not like (for some examples, see Rubin 2025).

10.1 Backlash for Research

It is worth discussing other cases of politically motivated backlash scholars have faced for their research. I am not familiar with many documented cases and I could not find many cases

(including through my search augmented by GPT). [36]On the one hand, it is reassuring not to find more cases; on the other hand, it is likely that most such cases do not get documented, both because it is embarrassing to be the subject of such backlash and often because they relate to confidential issues relating to one's employment. The cases I did find received a fair bit of publicity and concerned high-profile studies, making them easier to find.

Indeed, the cases I found are not expected to be representative—they often involve scholars doing high-profile work or work that received wider attention before becoming the focus of criticism. The point of this section is not that these cases are common (they are unlikely to be), but that from time to time, sociologists do face criticism for their research because of political opposition to their work (sometimes combined with methodological criticism of their work). Precisely because these cases were high-profile, however, I speculate that they have had a chilling effect on other scholars—future research can empirically test whether that is true.

Finally, as the cases discussed below demonstrate, there are different levels of backlash: informal social sanction from other academics; formal sanctioning at the level of hiring, tenure, or promotion decisions; and job loss following state or federal political intervention. One form of sanctioning I do not document, but that is fairly common, is outrage about research expressed by other scholars on social media. While not as serious as job loss or tenure denial, it can have a significant chilling effect; even when it is not enough to stop someone from reporting their results, it can make doing so more unpleasant.

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[36] There are some other cases of scholars' research being heavily criticized, including research that is fairly political, that I do not discuss. One example I do not discuss in detail but is worth exploring is the reaction to Randol Collins' 2016 ASA presentation that argued better training could be useful for preventing policing killings of Black people; the presentation was widely critiqued for downplaying the role of racism (Mizruchi 2017, 13-14). The FIRE database, Scholars Under Fire, identifies a few other cases that remained fairly small. (Several other cases involve professors being placed on the Professor Watchlist; however, I limit my focus to efforts from academics (students, faculty, administrators). Additionally, many cases involve social media, public comments, or teaching, but I also restrict my focus to research.) In 2020, Colby College sociologist Neil Gross was the subject of a cancellation attempt after he coauthored a New York Times article with a police officer

entitled, "Want to Abolish the Police? Consider becoming an Officer Instead." Students posted a Change.org petition to force him to resign. In 2014, Musa Al-Gharbi was denied entry to the University of Arizona doctoral program following the publication of an op-ed entitled, "How Much Moral High Ground Does the U.S. Have Over ISIS?" sparking much conservative outrage. The U of A, where he matriculated at the time, distanced itself from his comments.

10.2 James Coleman

The case of James Coleman illustrates a clean case of informal social sanctioning that was a politically motivated response to his research. Coleman studied the educational outcomes of Black and white school children in the Civil Rights Era, including the efficacy of the busing programs. The ASA's webpage for Coleman explains,

> "In 1975 Coleman concluded that whites moved out of public schools (in 'white flight') in massive numbers from communities with these programs. Outraged civil-rights leaders, social scientists, and educational leaders responded by sharply criticizing Coleman's methodology and motives. Coleman did not back away from his conclusions, despite pressure to do so."

An OrgTheory blogpost quoted one of Coleman's former students explaining,

> "when his data started showing problems with the educational effects of busing, he was vilified. Although I never heard exactly what was done to him, Chicago faculty members told me that he was 'basically thrown out' of the American Sociological Association (ASA), perhaps analogous to what Ms. Samuel has proposed for Condoleeza Rice. I don't take the claims that Coleman was thrown out literally; probably nothing more was done than open insults, shunning, and expressions that he was not welcome anymore."

Another account explains, "The president of the ASA at the time tried to pass a resolution censuring Coleman, and some members of the profession even attempted to have him expelled from the ASA. Both moves failed" (Mizruchi 2017, 8). Coleman's subsequent research finding (1981) that Catholic schools outperformed public schools was also controversial, according to the ASA webpage. These controversies eventually passed, however, and a decade later, he was elected the president of the ASA.

10.3 Alice Goffman

Another, more recent example of informal social sanction is both much better known and more complicated: the Alice Goffman case. Goffman, a Princeton Sociology PhD and Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (often tied for the field's top department), became particularly famous for her dissertation project, a long-term ethnography of the life experiences and survival strategies of young Black men living with outstanding warrants in Philadelphia's poor Black neighborhoods. Her research was published as an *American Sociological Review* article (2009), a book (2014), and a TED talk (2015). The criticism and controversy of her work was extensively covered in the popular press, including in *Slate* (Betts 2014; Neyfakh 2015), *The New York Times* (Kotlowitz 2014) and *The New York Times Magazine* (Lewis-Kraus 2016; Singal 2015),

The Washington Post (Volokh 2015), the *Boston Review* (Fischer 2014), *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Brown 2017; Campos 2015; Parry 2015), and *Times Higher Education* (Flaherty 2017). Importantly, the political pushback Goffman experienced included public commentators (both non-academics and faculty from other fields), fellow sociology faculty, and students.

Describing this case is difficult because there are many layers to it, which are important to acknowledge. Goffman was accused of fabricating or exaggerating her data (Campos 2015; Kotlowitz 2014; Lewis-Kraus 2016; Neyfakh 2015; Parry 2015; Singal 2015). Following claims that Goffman had fabricated her data, Wisconsin investigated and concluded that, while she made some understandable mistakes given her many years of fieldwork, she had not violated evidentiary standards (Flaherty 2017). Goffman was also accused of potentially engaging in criminal conspiracy when she drove one of her respondents around searching for the man who killed their friend with the intent of harming him (Lubet 2015). She was never indicted for criminal conspiracy (while the statements in her book taken literally would lay the grounds for this charge, there was some speculation at the time that the criminal conspiracy accusation was politically motivated given the lack of comparable claims for other ethnographies and the persistence of the claim). Further coloring the episode, there is a dimension of one academic achieving great acclaim for good but not necessarily stand-out work and the jealousy that follows. Additionally, I cannot rule out a degree of sexism, given that much of the criticism (and commentary generally, including support) came from male commentators. Finally, in 2019, Goffman was denied tenure at Wisconsin as her record was too thin (Parry 2019); although she was allegedly working on a second book project around 2017, by the time of her tenure review, she had not produced significant publications after her first book.

While there were thus multiple sources of criticism, my focus here is on the more explicitly political critiques of Goffman's work, much of which came from popular sources but also from academic sources. A major criticism of Goffman's work was that she was a privileged (Princeton PhD, daughter of academics), white woman studying poor Black men, and thus lacked the appropriate positionality. To be clear, from a standard scientific perspective, positionality, or one's status vis-a-vis their research subjects or data, is itself less important than the reflexivity one engages in to consider how their presence (including research participants' perception of the researcher) affects data collection and analysis. In this case, it was used in a political sense: an insurmountable status that grants one the right to study a group.

Thus, one early review in *Slate*, borrowing an idea from UC Santa Barbara Sociologist Victor Rios (2015) who has publicly shared his experience as a poor criminal delinquent turned professor,

explains the "jungle book trope" as "an innocent white person gets lost in the wild, is taken in by the wild people, survives, and returns to society with a story to tell." The author of this review (like Rios), has the appropriate positionality: "I come from a community, in Prince George's County, Maryland, that's in many ways like 6th Street. At 16, I plead guilty to carjacking and went to prison for eight years." He closes the review by stating, "Goffman has cast home as the jungle and herself as interpreter of the jungle. But the Philadelphia neighborhood she has christened 6th Street is not her home, and it is not her job to turn it into a jungle that needs interpreting." By studying a space that was not her naive social location, the review argued, Goffman had erred.

Another major criticism of Goffman's work was that she exposed the unseemly side of poor Black life rather than showing its joys, that she chose to study criminal Black men rather than non-criminal Black residents, a critique other scholars have also received (for general commentaries on this point, see Irwin 2018; Rios et al. 2017; Small 2015). For example,

> "Unwittingly, Goffman gives ammunition to tough-on-crime politicians who want to believe that urban areas are breeding grounds for crime and lawlessness.…Most young black men are not committing armed robberies and burglaries, are not engaging in armed battle from moving cars, and are not murdering acquaintances at dice games. They are not shooting into homes. If Goffman wants to reveal the abuses of a surveillance state, why not focus on characters that aren't so entrenched in the worst criminal activity? Why not give us a picture of Mike and his friends' lives that is broader than the last felony they committed? Instead Goffman only gives us young men who seem to be committing crimes with relative impunity. If these are the targets of surveillance, is the level of policing in urban communities really a problem as opposed to a solution?…As I read, I was troubled by how many more words Goffman devotes to criminality, violence, and dysfunction than to using data to establish how intrusive and unnecessary the level of surveillance on 6 Street is." (Betts 2014)

Another early review by an English professor (Sharpe 2014) wrote, "I am concerned, but not surprised, that critics have overwhelmingly embraced this book as it abets fantasies of black pathology." As supportive evidence, the review immediately noted, "Indeed, Goffman displays a certain sympathy for and with the police."

While these reviews came from popular sources, they were not restricted to them. A blog-based description of the 2014 American Sociological Association Author Meets Critic panel for Goffman book explained, "A large crowd turned out for the event, many attendees were looking for the opportunity to criticize the book and its author. The hostility was undeniable." In his *American Journal of Sociology* review of Goffman's book, Rios (2015) complained,

> "Yet the book does not systematically explicate how police set up young people; instead, we learn about how young men set up themselves through committing many

> outrageous crimes that Goffman describes in great detail. The saturation of empirically pointless and sensationalist stories of crime and violence in the book distract the reader from the stated objective of understanding policing and mass incarceration [from the men's perspective]. Goffman provides very few details about the role of the state, police, or the courts in creating a fugitive population." (306-307)

To be clear, given the book's vantage point from the perspective of the men rather than from the police or policymakers, Rios's critique supplants the author's goals with his own. For Rios, Goffman's results were politically embarrassing: "Goffman provides in-depth and repetitive accounts about criminality and violence. For example, she describes attending almost 20 funerals of young victims of violence…" (307). (One could just as easily read this detail as part of a sympathetic account of the experience of young men navigating a devastating and violent existence.)

In a more public-facing review, Claude Fisher, a UC Berkeley Sociologist defended the work against this line of critique. However, part of his defense is itself a useful look at the range of views about politics and research:

> "Many researchers begin with reform or muckraking instincts: they in-tend to expose and blame the circumstances. Other researchers may not see themselves as activists but still believe that professional ethics require that they protect the reputations of the people who have let them into their lives. Therefore they smooth rough edges, clean up stories, and cast the best light. Some argue that ethnographers should show their writing to the people they study and even give them veto power over publication. (Whyte followed that policy for a later book and found it vetoed.) Indeed, some researchers have discovered that people whom they thought they had described sympathetically nonetheless felt betrayed or denigrated, even when their identities had been masked. By contrast, ethnographers who instead adopt a more scientific, just-the-facts-ma'am approach face criticism that their writing leads readers, especially those already so disposed, to blame the victim. On this view, simply recount-ing observations, without properly framing them for the reader, only stigmatizes already-vulnerable people." (Fischer 2014)

Perhaps the strongest criticism came from students. In 2017, the Sociology Department at Pomona College extended Goffman an offer of hire to be a visiting faculty member. On April 21, 2017, "a collective of Sociology students, alumni, and allies at Pomona College" published an open letter to the Pomona Sociology Department and others "to express our anger and concern regarding the recent hire of Alice Goffman," to request they rescind the offer, meet with the group of students complaining, and document the process by which she was hired. They explained,

> "Goffman's hire proves the College's failure to wholeheartedly address underrepresentation of faculty of color and Pomona's institutional inadequacy to recognize and advocate for the best interests of students of color. Pomona College prides itself on being one of the nation's finest liberal arts colleges. We rightfully boast

> having exceptional faculty, and providing intimate learning environments. However, the national controversy around Alice Goffman's academic integrity, dubious reputation, her hyper-criminalization of Black men, and hyper-sexualization of Black women does not embrace and align with our shared community values."

In the body of the letter, their first justification for requesting the rescinded offer focused on her research methods. They begin, "Her methods have endangered her research participants, encouraged the hyper-policing of Black communities, and continue to perpetuate anti-Blackness." After noting the allegations of data fabrication, they continued,

> "Additionally, hiring white faculty who engage in voyeuristic, unethical research and who are not mindful of their positionality as outsiders to the communities they study reinforces harmful narratives about people of color. This practice is detrimental to Pomona's goal of supporting students of color; we condemn the harm Goffman's research has caused Black communities. It is especially troubling that Goffman's publications have been critiqued as racist, sensationalist and unethical. If no action is taken, the Sociology Department will knowingly provide Goffman with a platform to promote harmful research methods in Sociology 51: Introduction to Sociology, Sociology 102: Qualitative Research Methods and other courses."

The rest of the letter pertains more to complaints about DEI issues at Pomona.

The Department responded, according to the Pomona student paper, and defended their offer of hire, noting,

> "We reject the premise that Alice Goffman's work hyper-criminalizes and hyper-sexualizes African-Americans," the department wrote. "In fact, her book is widely regarded as a sympathetic and humanizing portrait of an over-policed community, and has been part of the national conversation about racial disparities in crime and incarceration."

It is perhaps noteworthy that the department defended their hire not by stating that the concerns about the political consequences of Goffman's work were irrelevant but by noting that they had the right kind of political consequences.

The students wrote an additional letter documenting the situation and adding the argument that Goffman, an assistant professor at the time, was not qualified for the visiting position, intended for associate or full professors.

Ultimately, the episode received coverage in national and international academic press (Brown 2017; Flaherty 2017), with faculty across the country weighing in to support the students or support Goffman. For example, one critic (a sociology professor at Trinity College) was reported as stating, "When Ms. Goffman goes to Pomona in the fall, he said, 'she needs to own up to the fact that her work helps to perpetuate certain stereotypes' " (Brown 2017). By contrast, Phil Cohen (a

sociology professor at Maryland) "rejected the idea 'that she would cause harm to students through her teaching' " (Brown 2017). Some of the coverage also pertained to the question of hiring practices, particularly since Goffman received the offer over two other finalists who were Black women.

In 2018, the political criticism of Goffman's research continued, this time in an "open letter" published in *Public Seminar* from students enrolled in "Ethnographic & Qualitative Methods" (Spring 2018) at the Eugene Lang College at the New School. (The letter was since deleted, but it is available on the Internet Archive.) Early in the letter, the students wrote,

> "Beyond your research and writing, our concerns speak to the longstanding race- and class-based problematics of research in fields of anthropology and sociology, within which we are also situated, and to those aspects of the politics of knowledge production more generally. We hope you take seriously what we have to say. We invite you to approach your research differently in the future."

They also provided their positionality: "Some of us are older, some younger. We are immigrants, we are locals; We are Global Studies majors, we are fashion students; We are Black, Latinx, white, and variants in between." They further explained,

> "We are writing to you because your book deeply unsettled us all. We are writing to you in hopes that you will consider our call for critical self-reflection and a greater charge to push beyond the scholarly status quo. We are writing this letter as an urgent call for a fundamental shift in knowledge production within the social science fields that have critically acclaimed your work. We—the next generation of scholars, artists and organizers—are writing this letter as a form of protest, as a call to action, as a collective refusal to follow in your footsteps."

After giving a fairly ethnographic account of the day they discussed Goffman's book, they offered their criticisms: They didn't "trust" her, but for unspecified reasons. Moreover, "The book's meager 8-paged introduction does little to contextualize the content of *On the Run* within a larger history of black resistance and dispossession in Philadelphia. The author invokes the full use of the N-word repeatedly with no explicit discussion about her positionality vis-a-vis this word, her intentions behind using it, or any critical reflection on the larger implications of her usage."

After discussing her positionality, they get to the crux of the critique: the political consequences of her book. They explain (all italics in the original),

> "We identify your published, widely lauded, easily obtainable book as *dangerous*, Prof. Goffman, because it divulges tactics that the subjects of your inquiry *intentionally* coded for surviving life under siege. *On the Run* holds the potential to *directly harm* the community in Philadelphia that you merely claim to 'chronicle.' Your book, in effect, translates insider knowledge and decodes painfully developed survival strategies,

> allowing them to fall *into the hands* of police and other state agents. And it does so in a manner that erases the pervasive structures of white supremacy and racial colonial capitalism that created the material conditions described above in the first place. You position your 'findings' as 'new,' largely ignoring decades-worth of Black scholarship that has taken up 'fugitivity,' carceral logics, and militarized surveillance."

It is interesting that her findings can be simultaneously old news and revealing secrets. (It is worth noting that in my discussions with other criminologists and urban sociologists, I have not come across anyone who thought police officers did not already know of the strategies discussed in the book.)

Returning to positionality, they ask,

> "Did you write *On the Run* for people like yourself? For white researchers, scholars, and educators, to provide them a voyeuristic view into realities they never otherwise see? Did you ever consider that people such as these historically have (and continue to) ignore and perpetrate the very same violence against Black communities which you claim to bring to light?"

Later they ask, "Did you conduct any additional research outside of your fieldwork to enhance your understanding of the historical and political contexts of Philadelphia and the carceral state?…How did you demonstrate a *political* commitment to the community?" Finally, "In closing, Prof. Goffman, we pose this question: *should you have ever attempted this book in the first place?*" Their answer was no, but noted that a yes "would require a deep and thorough consideration of whether it's possible to formulate an ethical, anticolonial model of ethnography suitable for a project of this nature." Finally, their closing paragraph was for the book's "Readers—especially those who are white like yourself."

The letter was widely circulated at the time.

10.4 Mark Regnerus

The "Regnerus affair" offers a case of informal sanctioning at the level of tenure and promotion. This episode is often used by critics of sociology's leftist bent and to illustrate the field's bias against conservatives (Smith 2014). As an assistant professor at University of Texas, Austin, Mark Regenerus published a study (2012) testing the life outcomes for adult children of parents in same-sex relationships relative to couples who did not engage in same-sex relationships finding that the former were generally worse off. Much commentary focused on the finding of "no difference" between children of gay and straight couples, but as Regnerus explained, the methods used in these studies were not very good, leaving room for further exploration with methodological innovation. Regenerus was also openly conservative and religious and received funding from a conservative organization. The study was picked up by conservative pundits to promote opposition to same-sex

marriage, a contentious issue at the time.

In a *Slate* article, Regnerus explained his study and its implications. He explained some of the significant problems with the data we have for exploring the questions over differences between the children of same-sex and different-sex couples and the methodological intervention—instead of comparing small samples of adopted children—his team looked at adult biological children of parents who had any same-sex relationships. For Regnerus, the key mechanism seemed to be family instability—that parents with same-sex histories were more unstably married, thus the same-sex histories may have been less important than the lack of stable households. After noting several limitations, including identification issues ("one same-sex relationship does not a lesbian make, necessarily") and the fact that a study about current adult children do not necessarily tell us about the results of current child-rearing practices, he essentially noted that the results were politically ambiguous rather than clearly conservative or liberal:

> "The political take-home message of the NFSS study is unclear, however. On the one hand, the instability detected in the NFSS could translate into a call for extending the relative security afforded by marriage to gay and lesbian couples. On the other hand, it may suggest that the household instability that the NFSS reveals is just too common among same-sex couples to take the social gamble of spending significant political and economic capital to esteem and support this new (but tiny) family form while Americans continue to flee the stable, two-parent biological married model, the far more common and accomplished workhorse of the American household, and still—according to the data, at least—the safest place for a kid."

Given subsequent research on the importance of two-married-parent households on childhood outcomes, Regnerus' study was fairly prescient.

The paper and its subsequent political uses, including in a District Court case against Hawaii's same-sex marriage ban, triggered intense scrutiny. One piece of this scrutiny involved the timeline of data collection and publication. As Phil Cohen summarized it on his blog,

> "August 19, 2011: Data collection start date
> February 1, 2012: Paper received by Social Science Research
> February 21, 2012: Data collection end date
> February 24, 2012: Data file delivered to University of Texas 'containing the collected data'
> February 29, 2012: Revised paper received by Social Science Research
> March 12, 2012: Paper accepted by Social Science Research
> June 10, 2012: Paper published online"

As many pointed out, this is atypical and strange. However, one sociologist wrote to the journal's

editor, who explained,

> "Regnerus's reviewers were quick, and so was he. (For the record, it was obvious to me that the Regnerus submission had been heavily reviewed and rewritten many times before it was submitted, as one would expect when dealing with such a hyper-charged issue.)"

However, the same sociologist noted, others also pointed out issues with the final data collection and revision.

In June 2012, 200 researchers signed a letter to the journal's editor and editorial board "to raise serious concerns" about the study and "to request that you publicly disclose the reasons for both the expedited peer review process of this clearly controversial paper and the choice of commentators invited to submit critiques. We further request that you invite scholars with specific expertise in LGBT parenting issues to submit a detailed critique of the paper and accompanying commentaries for publication in the next issue of the journal." They explained further,

> "LGBT parenting is a highly politicized topic. While the presence of a vibrant and controversial public debate should in no way censor scholarship, it should compel the academy to hold scholarship around that topic to our most rigorous standards. We are very concerned that these standards were not upheld in this issue or with this paper, given the apparently expedited process of publication and the decision to publish commentaries on the paper by scholars who were directly involved with the study and have limited experience in LGBT parenting research. We also have serious concerns about the scholarly merit of this paper[.]"

In addition to the concerns mentioned above, they noted that the commentators on the article had conflicts of interest and were not area experts and thus should not have been selected.

Both the journal and Regnerus's university performed investigations and found no wrongdoing.

As Indiana University sociologist Fabio Rojas put it, "this a modest paper that presents an intuitive result. If one of your parents is gay but is with a different gender partner, then kids may be worse off." Others have pointed out that Regnerus's research design was not particularly good, but then nor were the other studies on the topic at the time (Smith 2014). But the political consequences of the finding appeared to invite additional scrutiny.

All of this, however, is preamble for the main reason for discussing the Regnerus case: challenges to his promotion case. In 2018, Phil Cohen reported that Regnerus would receive promotion: "That decision was made at the level of the central administration, overriding negative recommendations from both the Department of Sociology faculty and the College of Liberal Arts." Cohen's explained his view of the candidate:

> "In terms of research productivity, Regnerus's record is adequate for promotion at a leading research university. His early work was well-cited. His most recent book, Cheap Sex (the only one I've read) is atrocious (as I have written). But the real problem is ethics, and there the protocol is less clear."

The ethical issue related back to his 2012 study:

> "he used crudely biased survey methods to gin up harms attributable to same-sex parenting, to help stop same-sex marriage in the courts, as part of a conspiracy with other right-wing academics (principally Brad Wilcox) and institutions (Heritage Foundation, Bradley Foundation, Witherspoon Institute), which included manipulating the peer review process to plant supporters on the panel and submitting the article for publication before the data collection was even complete, and then repeatedly lying about all that to cover up the conspiracy (including in the published work itself, where he falsely denied the involvement of the funders, and in an ethics proceeding by his university)."

Recall that the University and the journal had both investigated and found no misconduct.

Incidentally, a recent study that uses a "multiverse" approach to replicate older studies replicated the original Regnerus study. Since some of the controversy focused on pre-analysis decisions, a multiverse analysis is useful because it can explore multiple different specifications to test how they vary the findings. They found that some of its findings held up while others were more sensitive to specifications, suggesting the reality was more complicated than either defenders or supporters claimed (Young and Cumberworth 2025).

10.5 Allyn Walker

The only case I found of external interference in response to sociological research concerned Allyn Walker, an assistant professor of Criminology at Old Dominion University who also is nonbinary (which became relevant). Walker wrote a book on "minor-attracted people" (MAPs, or pedophiles). Walker argued that studying MAPs who did not act on their attraction works to disaggregate attraction from behavior and would ultimately help reduce child sexual abuse. Walker also points out that stigma around pedophilia reduces the chances that MAPs seek treatment.

After Walker landed national interviews in 2021, their research went viral, including on *Saturday Night Live*. Conservative news outlets characterized them as advocating child abuse and also took aim at their nonbinary status. Walker and their department and university were flooded with complaints and threats; Walker received police escorts to teach class. Shortly after, Walker was placed on administrative leave. The president of Old Dominion was quoted as publicly stating, "Many individuals have shared with me the view that the phrase 'minor-attracted people' is inappropriate and should not be utilized as a euphemism for behavior that is illegal, morally

unacceptable, and profoundly damaging…. It is important to call pedophilia what it is.…I am troubled by this narrative and its potential consequences for my children and that of future generations" (Pettit 2022). It was also reported that Walker was repeatedly asked to voluntarily leave the university despite their goal of staying. Ultimately, Walker agreed to resign, leaving at the end of the academic year; there were no reported findings of misconduct or accusations of research misconduct. Walker engaged the support of FIRE and the ODU chapter of the AAUP wrote a statement of support (which appears to no longer exist online outside of the internet archive here). Walker took a postdoctoral fellow at Johns

Hopkins's Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse and later became an assistant professor at Saint Mary's University. Walker's case was covered by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Gutkin 2022; Pettit 2022; Shullenberger 2021), although most of the coverage came after they left the university. Interestingly, one early article noted, "it was difficult to find supporters of Walker among those who rail against cancel culture in academe" (Shullenberger 2021). The implication was that pedophilia was too radical even for the most ardent supporters.

10.6 Closing

This section has explored the more social or interpersonal dimensions of publishing politically unpopular research. In sociological analyses, informal and formal social control are means by which society or segments thereof express displeasure with one's choices and behavior, or their deviance, employing responses that vary from jokes about one's choices to state-authorized punishment for criminal behavior. In sociology, conducting research that is politically unpopular (judged by the dominant norms in the field) makes a scholar vulnerable to this sort of social control—from actual censorship (refusing to publish one's work, demanding a retraction) to public expressions of outrage to ostracization and freezing one out of the group. From a sociological perspective, social control is a means for correcting behavior or strongly encouraging deviants to conform to normal behaviors. Indeed, we do not need to hear of many such cases before faculty mentors advise their students to avoid controversial topics to avoid informal sanctioning from the field.[37]

[37] As many sociologists will recognize, a parallel version of this process has been unfolding following federal pushback to what the Trump administration has deemed divisive and controversial topics. The difference is that the process I described here—with the exception of Walker's case—is coming from other scholars, with different politics, but both intending to stop researchers from conducting and publishing the unwanted research.

Again, it is important to emphasize that I do not have systematic data on this kind of politically motivated pushback, or how often it comes from the standard script of the "sacred project" of sociology as opposed to more conservative critiques. Therefore, I cannot say how often they occur. Moreover, while I believe these episodes likely have chilling effects on other scholars, we simply do not have data on that question. An important goal for future research would be to quantify how common these events are—for example, how often tenure or promotion decisions are challenged for political reasons. It will be difficult to get reliable and systematic data on these questions for similar reasons that we have difficulty examining censorship in the peer review process, but despite the limitations, the data will be useful for answering these larger questions about this kind of impact of political views on the reception and production of research.

11 Conclusion

11.1 Summary

This report has sought to provide an overview of the state of sociology with respect to the key areas of interest to the Commission—to what extent have political considerations affected scholarly standards in the field. This report has primarily explored the institutional environment in which sociological knowledge is produced and evaluated. While questions remain over the pervasiveness of some of the developments I discussed, there is strong evidence that conscious and unconscious political commitments are institutionalized in the field in ways that have compromised the search for knowledge. This institutionalized commitment manifests in three impactful ways:

1. explicit statements about the political goals and purpose of sociology, explicit statements deprioritizing traditional scholarly standards to achieve those goals, and explicit statements rejecting traditional scholarly standards (like disinterested objectivity, neutrality, and generalized skepticism);
2. skews in the topics explored and theories examined, leaving significant blind spots for a field often characterized as the systematic study of social phenomena; and
3. both perceived and documented instances of censorship and social sanctioning for violating taboos or informal prohibitions on studying certain topics, examining certain theories, or documenting certain findings.

Together, these trends create a dominant culture in the field that perpetuates and encourages the ongoing use of political considerations to generate, shape, and evaluate research. More concisely,

sociology's institutionalized political commitments have impacted the production and reception of sociological research.

These findings should not be read as suggesting that the entire field is composed of self-identified "scholar-activists" or "activist-scholars." While we lack current systematic data on this question, that does not appear to be the case. Indeed, across measures, the field is not *uniformly* committed to a single political project. Rather, there are numerous high-profile incidents in which high-status, well-respected sociologists, as well as ordinary sociologists asked for comment in news articles or blogging on their own, have made claims asserting sociology's political mission. Some of these claims have caused discussion within the field in which scholars contest the claims, demonstrating that there is not a consensus on these issues. Equally notable, many of these claims receive widespread and visible support, despite endorsing a very different mission from one rooted in knowledge creation. Indeed, at this point, there is a broad spectrum of views about how politicized sociology is and how politicized it should be. [38]However, the reform or activism-oriented commitments and the overall political orientation of the field have become more visible in institutionalized norms, which ultimately shape expectations and behavior, even if some individual scholars privately disagree with these orientations.

11.2 Heterogeneity and Data Limitations

As a field, sociology is heterogeneous. Good research is still produced by some scholars; however, politically popular but poor research is also encouraged, published, and even rewarded, while politically unpopular research faces greater hurdles. Most importantly, outside evaluators or users (e.g., policymakers relying on our research) will not know which sociological research is trustworthy and which is compromised by political commitments.

As an empirical matter, this variation also makes generalizations extremely difficult. As a result of field-level heterogeneities, different metrics or probes show different results—the field

[38] As we have seen, there are those who are quite explicit about their political goals in their scholarship and how they think sociological practice should achieve them, those who are not explicitly or even consciously motivated by politics but who either do not object to or police the former group, in part because they simply believe all work is inherently and unavoidably political, another group who would like to see a more pluralistic set of political assumptions guiding sociology (including conservative, moderate, and center-left), and a final group that supports a strong, apolitical commitment to scientific practices. The current size of each group is unknown, but the strong perception has been that the second group is dominant while the third and fourth groups are very small; there is substantial disagreement (among commentators) about the size of the first group.

looks very different depending on where one is sitting, where one is looking, and how one understands the very goals of academic scholarship. Moreover, field-level norms and expectations—about how research should be conducted or what it means to be a sociologist—are constantly shifting, with different parts of the field subscribing to widely divergent notions of both.

This report has documented the existence of certain trends and their dominance in some parts of the field by some measures. However, there is a difference between establishing the existence of a trend (i.e., proof of concept), quantifying its magnitude in a given context, and making summary claims about its magnitude across multiple indicators of a heterogeneous field. Larger questions about whether it is a small fraction of scholars, or of published research, driving these trends, or a much larger subset, are not yet answerable with existing analyses. For this reason, and because it is a different research question this report did not try to answer, we do not know if the trends described are large enough and institutionalized enough to rule out the field's ability to reform. Indeed, an open question remains whether there are enough sociologists who see these trends as problems for reform to occur.

Future research is needed to understand the magnitude of these developments, how representative some of the high-profile incidents discussed are, and to what extent stated views translate into research behavior. Most of my report is restricted to published analyses others have conducted, limiting what questions I can ask and what claims I can make. Thus, there is still much we do not know about how extensively political considerations supersede scientific principles and how extensively that replacement affects outcomes of interest. But what evidence we do have suggests the trends are common enough and impactful enough that we can no longer call sociology, as a field, a data-driven social science of society—that vision still exists, but in pockets of the field, and it is highly contested.

Finally, this report contains empirical and interpretive claims that can be challenged or extended with additional research, but I acknowledge that many sociologists will find the very assumptions underlying this report controversial or even illegitimate. Some sociologists will challenge the causal claim that scholars' political commitments distort the search for truth, while others will challenge the epistemological assumption that, despite the inevitability of political influences, it is possible to conduct a reasonably trustworthy, meaningful search for truth. Some will also disagree with the normative assumption underlying the Commission's work that the pursuit of knowledge should be the primary, or even the only, goal of academic research and universities. That is, some sociologists will reject the very standards by which I am, in essence, evaluating the field. I

have tried to accommodate these concerns within the report. However, these concerns speak to a fundamental challenge in the field: a seemingly insuperable disagreement about the nature and purpose of our shared scholarly project.

11.3 The Larger Context

In the last decade or so, sociology has of course received more attention than many other disciplines and, especially in recent years, it has been the focus of conservative politicians' efforts to reform academia, often in problematic ways or while using bad-faith arguments. While some defenses of the field have correctly pointed to some politicians' misconceptions about the field, other such defenses have either falsely rejected some of the claims about the role of political projects in the discipline or flat-out embraced them, effectively vindicating some of the critical politicians (see, e.g., Pettit 2026).

Whatever motivations politicians may have for taking aim at Sociology, it is important to understand that concerns about how sociologists' political commitments can compromise the field and the quality of the research it produces are part of a long-standing debate within the field itself. The concerns discussed today are thus not new, nor do contemporary conservative critics hold a monopoly on them. At the same time, this report should not be read as vindicating every political critique of the field.

While some readers may be tempted to use this report to support dramatic policies that regulate sociology in particular ways, it is incumbent on me to raise two cautions. First, as noted above, this report is focused on the state of the field; it does not speak to questions of how we got here or how we change, assuming one agrees with the report's assumptions that politicized research, in the senses used here, are problems to solve. Second, policy recommendations should rarely (if ever) be based on a single study. As noted above, future scholars can use different datasets and methodologies than I did, or pursue research designs different from mine; only after those studies are conducted and the results are compared should policy recommendations be discussed.

Finally, it is important to note that neither Sociology nor the humanities nor other humanistic social sciences are alone in facing the challenges of politicization from within academia compromising the scholarly process. While it is easy to assume the humanities and social sciences are at the greatest peril of internal politicization due to their subject matter or perceived subjectivity, it would be a grave mistake to assume STEM fields are not subjected to many of the same pressures and have not already seen changes due to internal politicization (e.g., Coyne and Maroja 2023;

Huddle 2025; Krylov 2021; Krylov and Tanzman 2023) and even from long-standing external politicization across multiple presidential administrations (Krylov et al. 2026). It would be a mistake to disproportionately scrutinize Sociology, or the other disciplines the Commission studied, simply because we have investigated them, when other disciplines are seeing many similar trends.

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