SECTIONCULTURE

ASA Sociology of Culture Section Newsletter Spring 2026, *Vol. 42, Issue 2*

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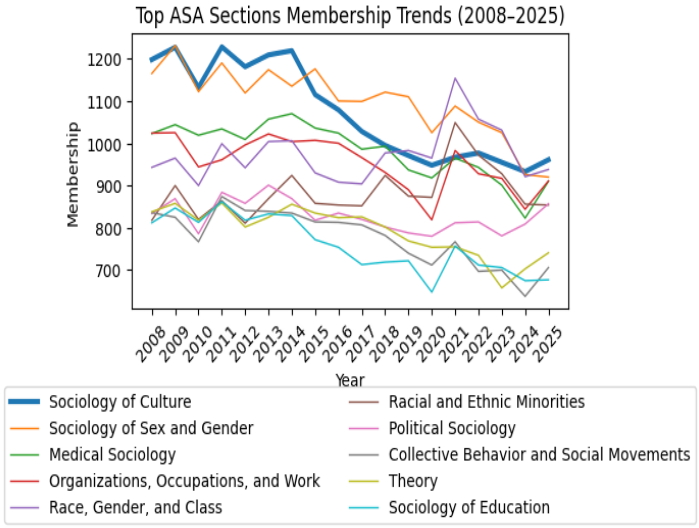
Letter from the Chair

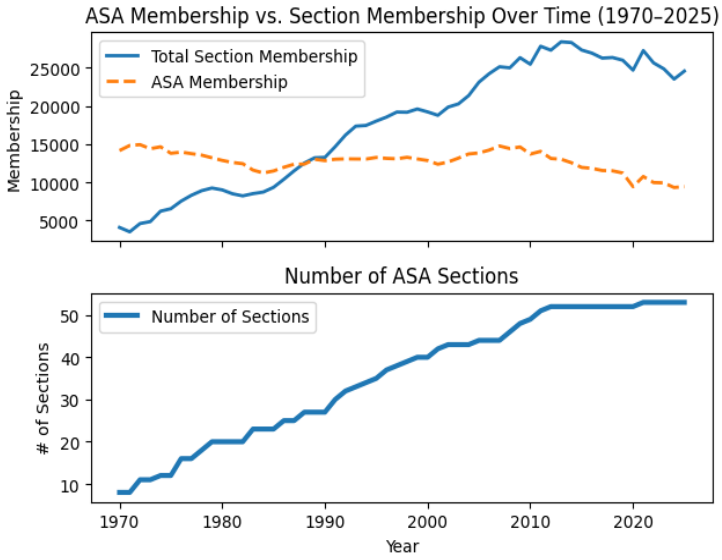
Hannah Wohl

Many of us belong to more than one ASA section—sometimes several. But this hasn't always been the case. I recently fell down a rabbit hole in the membership data page of the ASA website and started plotting some of the trends out of curiosity, so I thought I would share one for fun.

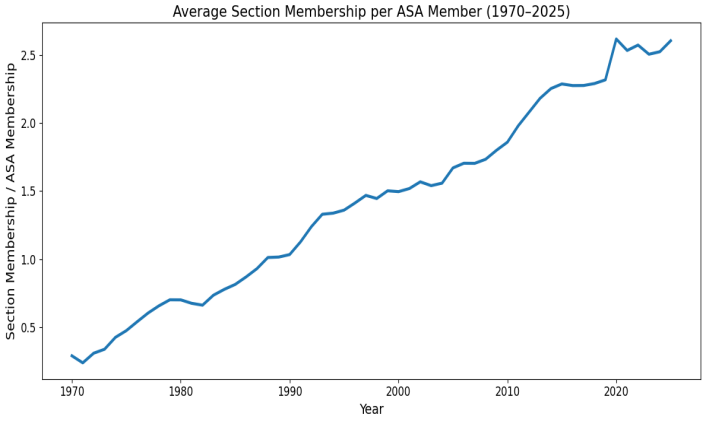
It's probably not news to many of you that ASA membership has been declining for many years. Membership peaked in 1972 (14,934 members) and then again in 2007 (14,757 members). Since then, it has been on a long slide that has stabilized only recently (current membership is 9,412). The Culture Section is currently the largest in ASA, with 961 members. Like other large sections, it has followed this trend.



But while ASA membership as a whole is declining, the organization continued to generate new sections for members to join. ASA began institutionalizing sections in the early 1960s, and they continued to multiply until the early 2010s. By 1970, there were 8 sections. Today, there are 53.



What I found particularly interesting was the relationship between ASA membership and total section membership over time. As the number of sections has increased, individual members have also joined more sections. In 1970, the average section membership per member was .3; by 2025, it was 2.5. As each section needs to maintain a certain number of members to continue to exist, the proliferation of sections has been sustained not by growth in the number of ASA members, as ASA membership has actually declined, but by members increasingly joining multiple sections.



What does this pattern tell us about the intellectual evolution of the discipline? This may simply be an organizational story: Sections are subject to organizational inertia. Once they are created and staffed, people work to keep them in existence. As new sections are created, members opt into them because they are available.

But I also think it could reflect an epistemic reorientation, suggesting a shift from having one's intellectual and professional identity rooted around this generalist orientation or a single subfield (i.e. "I study culture") to increasing engagement across multiple subfields at the same time (i.e. "I am a cultural and economic sociologist" or "I am a cultural sociologist who studies religion and gender"). Perhaps this reflects the increasing cross-fertilization of ideas or, more cynically, a need to prepare for a ruthless job market with a more sprawling network and flexible intellectual identity.

I count myself first and foremost a cultural sociologist, but—like many of you—I never introduce myself as "just" a cultural sociologist. In fact, I am guilty of being a current member of 7 sections. It's interesting for me to think about how my intellectual identity has been shaped by the organizational structure and culture of ASA itself.

Civil Sphere Theory in the Shadow of Authoritarianism[1]

By Jeffrey C. Alexander

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Among his recent publications are *Civil Repair* (2024, Polity), *Frontlash/Backlash* (2025, Polity), "The Civil Sphere in War and Peace: From Athens to Kyiv." *Dialogues in Sociology* (2026: V. 2, No. 1), and "Dreaming of Peace amidst the Nightmare of War: Responding to my Interlocutors." *Dialogues in Sociology* (March 2026. Https://doi./10.1177/29768667261426085).

Western democracies are facing the most serious crisis since the end of the Second World War. Nowhere more so than in the United States, where a freely elected representative of that nation's civil sphere has turned against its culture and institutions. President Donald Trump's authoritarian gestures are morally repugnant and politically dangerous, but the crisis they have triggered can be productive intellectually.

What are the lessons of this crisis for theorists of the civil sphere? The first and most important, in my view, is that the relation between "backlash" and civil repair must be conceptualized more systematically.

CST is based on the premise that widespread solidarity is possible, that democracy depends upon universalizing feelings for others that create mutual obligations beyond self-interests, material and ideal. Such a widely encompassing solidarity is conceptualized as *contingent*. It is not something objective but, rather, depends on generating feeling and moral commitment; it is a matter of meaning and motivation. In "actually existing civil spheres," how solidarity is defined, and how far it extends, generates conflict and contention.

Because the discourse that structures the civil sphere is binary, democratic solidarity is diabolically dialectical. The very discourse that stipulates the qualities that allow horizontal authority and democratic self-regulation – such as altruism and reciprocity -- is ineluctably connected to a discourse that delineates motives and relations – such as selfishness and aggression -- that make self-regulation seem impossible and vertical, authoritarian control necessary.

The *cultural* tension between civil and anti-civil qualities provides the framework of meaning within which the contradictions of actually existing civil spheres play out, the *social* contradictions of space, time, and function (Alexander 2006: Chapter 8). The utopia of civil inclusion is compromised by the primordial qualities of the groups that have established an actually existing civil sphere in real historical time – qualities of race, class, gender, sex, religion, and region. Every established civil sphere also faces continuous pressures from the non-civil spheres that shape its boundaries, discourses and institutions that define "spheres of justice" (Walzer 1984) which conflict with the mandates of democracy.

These contradictions trigger the dynamics of civil life. Civil spheres have cores and peripheries, their solidary commitments belied by myriad exclusions. When these exclusions are *societalized* (Alexander 2018, 2019) – when they come to be seen and experienced as "destructive intrusions" into civil life – progressive movements emerge demanding civil repair. If progressive performances are felicitous, the movements become emancipatory, extending the civil hermeneutics of faith (Ricoeur 1970). The instantiated culture of civil spheres becomes less primordial; the institutions that distribute ideal and material recognition are reformed. Exclusions are ameliorated; civil spheres expand.

[1] An earlier version of this essay was presented at the third biannual Civil Sphere Theory conference, Vienna, Austria, October 22, 2025.

Theorizing how democracy provides such possibilities for progressive social change is one of the principal achievements of civil sphere theory. It is a fundamental corrective to the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1970) that has informed sociological understandings of modernity from Marx and Weber to Foucault and Bourdieu.

CST has not, however, spent enough time conceptualizing the *reactions* to the progressive social and cultural changes that civil spheres *enable*. For wherever there is civil repair, there is also the effort to undo it. Yes, civil repair is emancipatory, but it is also deeply unsettling. It is not just forward looking but fron*tlash*, which triggers defensive, nostalgic, and aggressive resentments in its wake (Alexander 2025a). *Back*lash is the reactionary effort to undo civil repair, in the name of tradition. In the memorable terminology of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1946 [1842]) the "Party of the Past" fights against "the Party of the Future." Its members wish to return to more primordial understandings of civil qualities; to less egalitarian distributions of material goods; to narrower boundaries of the we. To "Make America Great Again" is to make it more exclusive.

Backlash has been a significant *empirical* focus of my research since my earliest investigations into the dynamics of democratic societies. Looking back at these discussions, it's clear they have implications for the crisis that our democracies face today.

In my work on Watergate (e.g., Alexander 1984, 1988), I attributed Richard Nixon's resurgent popularity to anxious swaths of American society wanting to be "saved from the sixties," from its culture of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, from what Spiro Agnew, Nixon's Vice-President, called the "nattering nabobs of negativism" who protested the Vietnam war, supported the movement for Black rights, feminism, and expansive immigration. It was this inflamed and defensive backlash movement -- *anti*-civil, not *civil* conservatism -- that gave Nixon license to order covert actions that undermined democratic liberties. These dangerous maneuvers were exposed and polluted by Watergate, a civil ritual that drove the reactionary Republican President from office.

Is it possible to generate another Watergate-like cleansing ritual today? Or will the Trumpian backlash against civil repair block the desperately needed process of civil renewal?

In theorizing populism "from within the civil sphere to outside it," I conceptualized democratic social change as a back-and-forth swinging pendulum (Alexander 2021). Populism threatens democracy, I suggested, only when this pendulum moves so far to the right or left that it gets stuck, and cannot swing back to the center again. Whether the current rightward swing has got stuck is precisely the question that democratic citizens are asking themselves today.

More than a decade ago, I theorized the "backlash against multiculturalism in Europe" (Alexander 2013), a reactionary movement that has only deepened in the years since. Rightwing movements have become so hell-bent on re-establishing the assimilative mode of incorporation that they have launched massive ideological and sometimes even physical attacks on those outside the mainstream (Lund and Lund 2026). The politics of this intensifying backlash are perilous. Today, civil spheres in Europe are giving authoritarian parties access to state power.

In theorizing what makes a social crisis, I described backlash as a reaction that brings episodes of societalization to a close, allowing social strains to be enfolded back inside their non-civil institutions, to be handled, once again, by their respective institutional elites (Alexander 2018, 2019). What if the backlash against societalization is so strong that it not only brings an end to episodes of civil repair but actually prevents a return to the putative "steady state"? If backlash negates equilibrium rather than re-establishing it, a new vital center becomes impossible to achieve.

Examining the struggle over the 2020 presidential election in the United States, I reconstructed the backlash that fueled Trump's 2016 victory and the policies that marked his first-term efforts to primordialize the post-Obama civil sphere (Alexander 2023). Trump's coordinated attack on the 2020 election was defeated, I argued, because civil conservatives in key positions of political and legal power upheld office obligations to the Constitution over their own party-political commitments.

With Trump's re-election in 2024, the backlash movement against civil expansion has been given new life. As he has solidified his control of the Republican party apparatus (Alexander 2025b), conservatives controlling the Senate and Supreme Court have allowed the new President to staff key positions with loyalists who would rather bend the knee than uphold their office obligations. The effects of these efforts to undermine office – another core regulative institution of the civil sphere -- remain to be seen.

Modi's India provides a glimpse into one possible future (Alexander 2025c). Fueled by the backlash movement of Hindutva, the BJP party has tampered with India's electoral and legal institutions, sought control over fictional and factional media, and placed loyalists in positions of state and national authority. Even so, Modi has failed to establish one-party rule. Despite its third consecutive electoral victory, the BJP has been forced into a coalition government for the first time. The Indian civil sphere today is suspended between vitality and suppression.

While I have come back time and again to backlash as a troubling *empirical* problem, however, I have not effectively *theorized* it. If we are to advance civil sphere theory in the shadow of authoritarianism, this becomes a most pressing task.

Building upon Anne Taylor's theory of active audiences (Taylor 2022), I offer the following proposition: Backlash occurs when significant segments of a citizen-audience engage in powerfully arresting "performances of de-fusion."[2]

When social problems are successfully societalized, there is a new sense of progressive consensus, an apparently widespread sense of societal well-being. But hidden just beneath the surface of this new vital center are festering feelings of opposition and unease. Not all whites, even in the North let alone in South, were fans of Martin Luther King. Many men, and many traditional women, refused to get on the feminist bandwagon (Sachs and Alexander 2023). As multicultural pedagogies were celebrated in response to massive non-White immigration and Black Lives Matter, many Americans engaged in strident nativism and celebrated "Blue Lives" -- meaning those of the police (Ostertag 2020).

Even as significant segments of the American citizen-audience fail to fuse with progressive performances, their antipathy remains under the radar, the coldness of their reactions hidden by the roseate glow of civil success. A tipping point is reached when de-fusion becomes *performed*. Talented reactionary leaders, intellectual and political, emerge to crystallize the roiling but inchoate discontent, happy rightwing warriors like Ronald Reagan, William F. Buckley (Tannenhaus 2025), and George H. Bush, bitter and revengeful far-right evangelists like George Wallace, Steven Bannon (Alexander 2017), and Donald Trump.

Backlash is the successful performance of defusion.

Decades of progressive rulings by the American Supreme Court generated steady outrage among conservatives, but it took the creation of the Federalist Society – with its public membership, widely publicized meetings, and steady stream of publications -- to create the "conservative legal movement" (Telles 2008). Judges promoted by

[2] Taylor's work on active audiences is part of a growing effort to conceptualize cultural pragmatics in a manner that emphasizes negative audience responses and how audience reactions to the same performance may conflict with one another (Malacarne 2021, Bittner 2023, 2024, Revers 2023, Revers and Coleman 2025, Morgan 2025: 125-148).

the Federalist Society became increasingly influential. Eventually, they formed the majority of the Supreme Court, neutering the Voting Rights Act and allowing President Trump -- under the legalistic guise of the "unitary executive" theory -- to exercise an unprecedented level of personal authority.

For decades, opposition to federally sponsored health care was a mainstay of Republican politics. It crystallized into a forceful backlash movement only after a Southern Republican Congressman shouted, "You lie!" during President Obama's primetime healthcare address to a joint session of Congress in September 2009. This extraordinary and widely publicized breach of decorum was the match that lit the explosion of the so-called "Freedom Caucus," the far-right group of Congress persons that became the most fervent and best organized opponents of government-sponsored civil repair even as they continued to evoke the discourse of civil society (Braunstein 2017). A red line runs from the Freedom Caucus to Donald Trump's far-reaching attacks on what backlash ideologues term the "Deep State."

A more fully elaborated conception of backlash points to other new pathways for civil sphere theory.

Following the lead of Jason Mast (2025), we need to understand how, in the wake of backlash, communicative associations and media -- both fictional and factual – can stoke resentment and anti-civil antagonism, and how key regulative institutions can be made to do the same.

Elections bring collective representations of civil sphere sentiment into the state, yet, in the very act of doing so, they provide a symbolic enemy for electoral losers to hate, as Vanessa Bittner has explained in her theory of "dialectical icons" (Bittner 2023, 2024).

While law instantiates civil coding in everyday life (Koh 2026), this regulative institution is also responsive to the dynamics of backlash to civil repair. Just as statutes can be interpreted in a more expansive manner – to include, for example, the right to privacy – so can legal meanings be understood more rigidly – according to the tenets of "originalism," for example – with the effect that civil obligations become narrowed and vertical authority given free reign.

If the depersonalized, constitutionally mandated procedures of office are designed to exercise civil control over power, the corruption of office – via familial or ideological loyalty – represents an ever-present form of anti-civil deviation in democratic life.

In closing, I want to shift the theoretical spotlight from the institutions of the civil sphere to its discourse.

The intensity of backlash sentiment suggests that understanding the "anti-civil" in terms of binary coding is not sufficient. We need to know, not only how evility is *coded*, but how it is *weighted* as well (Alexander 2006: 31-33, 109-120). To assess this "weight," we need to bring narrative into play. Many years ago, in a contribution to CST *avant la lettre*, Ron Jacobs and Phil Smith suggested that intertwining narratives of romantic optimism and ironic reflexivity facilitates pluralistic civil spheres (Jacobs and Smith 1997). Smith later argued that war-making requires a very different narrative form -- an anti-romantic story about imminent apocalypse: only an aggressively divisive, do-or-die story can motivate collective violence and the mass sacrifice of human life (Smith 2012).

What seems clear today is that the apocalyptic narrative can nourish a movement from agonism to antagonism on the *domestic* scene. As backlash intensifies, politics can become war by another means. Enemies coded as anti-civil become engorged with evil, represented so venomously that they and the civil repairs they initiate come to be experienced as threats to the very existence of the nation's collective life. Take, for example, a speech act performed by Steven Miller, a top Trump aide, at a televised memorial ceremony for Charlie Kirk, the assassinated President of the far-right group Turning Point USA:

> We are the storm… And our enemies cannot comprehend our strength, our determination, our resolve, our passion … You have nothing. You are nothing. You are wickedness, you are jealousy, you are envy, you are hatred. You are nothing … You have no idea the dragon you have awakened. (Miller 2025)

In the face of such foundational fears, it is hardly surprising that apocalyptic narratives so often conceptualize their enemies as conspirators. Backlashed right-wingers perceive progressives as launching a frightening and dangerous conspiracy against liberty. Their response is that the reformers, and the inclusive institutions they have created, must be destroyed if civilization is to be saved.

Conspiracy narratives pitting power against liberty are endemic to struggles for liberation against anti-civil powers, whether these powers are seen as emerging from the left or the right. In a book that became a transformational text in the historiography of the American Revolution, Bernard Bailyn (1967) famously demonstrated that America's revolutionaries believed they were waging their democratic struggle against an evil British conspiracy, retooling a narrative that had earlier been evoked by English radical whigs. In 1776, the American *Declaration of Independence*, citing "a long train of abuses and usurpations," claimed that the British king was conspiring to establish "an absolute Tyranny" over his colonies. Indeed, civic republican thought has narrated threats to democratic order in the language of conspiracy for millennia, going all the way back to ancient Rome.

In these perilous times, we are engaged in a collective intellectual struggle – to advance civil sphere theory in the shadow of authoritarianism. As Lenin said, nothing is more powerful than a good theory.

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Review of *The Death and Life of Gentrification: A New Map of a Persistent Idea* by Japonica Brown-Saracino

By Federico La Bruna

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Sociological concepts are anything but static, yet few have travelled as far from their disciplinary origins as *gentrification*[3] has in contemporary public discourse. Coined by Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe the displacement of working-class urban populations by an incoming middle class in London, the concept was imported into the United States in the 1970s. Neil Smith, a neo-Marxist geographer and student of David Harvey at CUNY, published in 1979 *Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People*, focusing on the historicity of the urban restructuring process. Over the years, the concept gained traction and consolidated into an established research field. However, the term now also circulates across journalistic commentary, literary fiction, television, visual art, and political activism, invoked with equal facility by novelists processing narratives of upward mobility, activists naming the structural roots of racial inequality, and commemorators mourning the loss of subcultural spaces. How this proliferation has occurred and what it means is precisely the questions that Japonica Brown-Saracino takes up in *The Death and Life of Gentrification: A New Map of a Persistent Idea*.

Brown-Saracino is well-positioned for this inquiry. A prominent sociologist in urban studies, she has dedicated much of her career to studying literal gentrification ethnographically across American cities. It is this familiarity with the concept in its technical register that gives the book its particular authority. Brown-Saracino does not approach *gentrification* as a discursive object from the outside, but as a scholar who has watched the concept transform from within; she has lived through the scholarly debates over its application, and she is therefore attuned to the structural ambiguities of the term that made it available for figurative elaboration in the first place.

The mechanism under scrutiny cannot be reduced simply to conceptual stretching (Sartori, 1970) – whereby a concept, extended to encompass new cases or contexts, gains breadth of application at the cost of analytical precision. It is not simply a concept being put to new use, but a far more complex process of transformation. *Gentrification* has indeed ceased to function exclusively as a descriptor of urban processes. It has become, in Brown-Saracino's perspective, a semiotic device that performs social functions largely autonomous from its original referent. As she writes, "this book reveals how *gentrification* has come to occupy space rendered vacant by the absence of a shared language for directly addressing structural inequalities and concomitant social change" (p. 2, emphasis in the original). The term has become a cultural container – versatile, morally charged, affectively resonant – into which heterogeneous social actors deposit narratives of loss, claims of identity, and political arguments that would otherwise lack a culturally effective form. The book's self-described aim is to provide a cultural map of the many facets the idea of *gentrification* has acquired, by examining how the concept operates across contemporary media, artistic forms, and political practice. Even though this is clearly a non-representative and non-exhaustive map, the author offers us a piece that fits into several puzzles at once: that of gentrification, that of the circulation of ideas in social movement activism, and that of the reception of scientific production.

This reorientation of perspective – from concept as analytical instrument to concept as communication tool – is the volume's most significant theoretical move, and it locates the work squarely within the sociology of cultural production. Brown-Saracino's inquiry is not classificatory. She is not interested in interrogating the improper uses of a term, nor in determining between legitimate and illegitimate semantic extensions. The questions she poses

[3] Throughout this review, I follow Brown-Saracino's own terminological conventions. *Gentrification* in italics refers to the term itself and its discursive uses; gentrification without italics, or preceded by literal, refers to the process as understood in urban sociology; and "gentrification" in quotation marks signals metaphorical extension.

are processual rather than normative: how is the meaning of a concept produced through its usage, by whom, within which institutional and creative contexts, and what social implications does that process have? Rather than confining herself to a single artistic field or a discrete cultural industry, Brown-Saracino constructs her analysis by following the traces of an object that is more transversal and elusive. *Gentrification* circulates simultaneously across journalism, literary fiction, activist discourse, television, and commemorative practice, and in each of these domains, it is used and resignified, producing distinct implications for the communities that receive it. Holding that object steady across such varied terrain, without collapsing into either nominalism or over-generalisation, is methodologically demanding work, and the care with which Brown-Saracino manages it is among the book's main virtues.

The author identifies three primary modalities through which *gentrification* is put to work in contemporary discourse. In the first, artists and activists deploy the term as a metonymy for communal dissolution, using it to represent the fragility and value of communities presumed to share a defining trait. In the second, cultural producers, as novelists, turn to *gentrification* as a metaphor and parable of personal upward mobility, depicting a transformation of the self that is accompanied by a loss of authenticity, and the dissolution of ties to the natal community. In the third, journalists, academics, and activists mobilise the concept as a heuristic for the structural roots of social inequality, treating it as an argumentative shorthand for conveying how systemic political-economic factors produce social harm. These modalities are neither mutually exclusive nor sequential, but rather overlap, contaminate one another, and are unified by the fact that they are, in varying degrees, operations of social construction that use language as their primary material.

Among the book's most compelling analyses is an illustration of the first modality: an extended treatment of how LBTQ+ activists in American cities use *gentrification* to commemorate lost *dyke bars* and, through that commemoration, build social bonds among individuals who, in many cases, never patronised those spaces. What Brown-Saracino describes is not simple nostalgia but a sophisticated cultural practice:

> "Although dyke bar commemorators remember bars both critically and nostalgically, they create a sense of shared lineage for their audiences and for themselves by gathering people together to remember the ghosts of bars, of the lesbian identity politics they nurtured, and, crucially, of the neighborhoods that once housed dyke bars and their clientele" (p. 71).

Gentrification, in this context, functions as a semiotic device that makes possible the construction of a community of shared vulnerability without requiring the rigid specification of who belongs and who does not.

Equally instructive is Brown-Saracino's analysis how *gentrification* entered the vocabulary of recent political activism. In the summer of 2020, at the margins of Black Lives Matter protests, signs reading "*Gentrification = police brutality*" appeared in multiple cities; in Brooklyn and Louisville, demonstrators chanted "*Fire, Fire Gentrifier*" (p. 208, emphasis added). As Brown-Saracino shows, in these contexts, *gentrification* operates as an intersectional heuristic, capable of evoking in a single linguistic gesture the connection between class, race, urban space, and state power without reconstructing the argumentative chain each time. "For some journalists and academics, *gentrification* operates as a heuristic that efficiently conveys concerns about how facets of political-economic systems contribute to social inequalities" (p. 178, emphasis in the original). This communicative efficiency comes at a cost, as each deployment of the term as shorthand risks a further sedimentation of meaning in which analytical precision is sacrificed to affective and mobilizing force.

This observation points to the book's most productive internal tension and to the space it opens for further inquiry. Brown-Saracino documents with rigour how the proliferation of figurative uses of the term responds to genuine social needs: building community under conditions of atomisation by giving narrative form to losses that might otherwise remain inarticulate, and making structural analysis of inequality accessible beyond disciplinary boundaries. However, the thesis that *gentrification* has come to fill a conceptual void left by the absence of a

shared language for urban change invites a reflection the book does not pursue. The vacancy that *gentrification* fills has been produced, at least in part, by the discipline's difficulty in generating analytical languages robust and portable enough to travel beyond its own boundaries while retaining their critical force. Brown-Saracino documents the consequences of that vacancy with remarkable precision, though the question of how it came to exist in the first place remains outside the scope of her project. Situating her contribution within a broader theoretical conversation, however, helps clarify what is genuinely novel in her approach.

Mieke Bal's book, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002), offers a partial precedent. Bal too recognised that conceptual transformation is productive rather than degenerative, and that it proceeds through rhetorical operations. Concepts oscillate between ordinary words and technical tools, and in that oscillation, both the concept and the object it constructs are simultaneously remade. However, what Brown-Saracino's analysis adds is a shift in the register of the question itself. For Bal, the travel of a concept is fundamentally an epistemological problem, concerning how scholars produce and share knowledge across disciplinary boundaries, with productivity measured by what the concept does to analytical practice. For Brown-Saracino, by contrast, it is a sociological phenomenon that concerns what social actors do with words in the world, and its productivity is measured by its social implications: rebuilding communities, shaping collective subjectivities, fostering political mobilisations. This distinction becomes sharper if Brown-Saracino's three modalities are read alongside Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár's (2002) account of symbolic boundaries as resources for creating, maintaining, and contesting institutionalised social differences. Across all three modalities, a consistent pattern emerges: *gentrification* functions as a symbolic resource for drawing boundaries of shared vulnerability, belonging, and political opposition.

A further dimension of the project deserves notice. Brown-Saracino is explicit that she is not building a generalisable model for all concepts that migrate from academic to public discourse. Nevertheless, the implicit invitation to comparative reflection is difficult to resist. The reader attuned to the history of sociological concepts will find themselves asking whether the dynamics described here are particular to *gentrification* or whether they index something more general about how ideas travel in contemporary knowledge economies. The case of *social distance* (which I have explored in my own doctoral work) offers an instructive parallel. The concept has its roots in the sociology of Georg Simmel (1903) and Gabriel Tarde (1903), where it was designated geometric separation in social structure. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was retrieved in public discourse with the radically different meaning of physical separation as a form of epidemiological protection. Reading through many regulatory texts from the pandemic period, we can observe how the concepts of *social distance* and *social distancing* were employed to regulate how close individuals were allowed to come to one another in order to interact, rather than as a tool for managing social status (La Bruna, 2025). Applying Brown-Saracino's framework, the pandemic use of *social distance* can be read as a heuristic shorthand that mobilises the historically sedimented relationship between physical and social space for an entirely new communicative purpose. Brown-Saracino does not engage these comparisons, and the absence of that broader theorisation is perhaps the book's most visible limitation, though also its most generative opening. Hers is a deliberate choice of depth-over-reach, and it is precisely the thickness of the case that gives the framework its broader theoretical potential.

There is a structural irony at the heart of this book that deserves to be named explicitly. Brown-Saracino does not articulate it as such, but her analysis makes it visible. *Gentrification* – a concept coined to describe the displacement of working-class urban populations by an encroaching middle class – has itself undergone an analogous transformation. The urban scholars who forged it as a precise analytical instrument have been progressively joined by, and in significant respects displaced by, artists, journalists, activists, and cultural producers who inhabit its language with different purposes. *Gentrification*, in other words, has "gentrified". The parallel is instructive. Just as the neighbourhoods the term originally described were remade by a new class that reshaped their meaning and use, so too the concept has been remade by cultural producers and public intellectuals whose appropriation has carried it far from its origins. What was once a technical term belonging to a restricted

scholarly community has been transformed through figurative elaboration. It has acquired new meanings – loss of authenticity, communal dissolution, imposition of structural inequalities – that are no longer anchored to urban space. The term has gained in affective resonance and political utility precisely what it has ceded in technical specificity. And just as the gentrified neighbourhood becomes more exclusive and less accessible to its original inhabitants, the concept has acquired some costs in its new life. It becomes a cultural product with its own aesthetic appeal, narrative conventions, and entertainment value. In this way, the book's subject and its implicit argument converge. As Brown-Saracino shows, something is gained in that passage, and something is irreparably lost.

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The Case for Dialogical Sociology: An Interview with Prof. Sari Hanafi

By Muhammad Amasha

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Sari Hanafi is a Professor of Sociology at the American University of Beirut.

Introduction

In times of crisis, people seek critical diagnoses and innovative prescriptions. Our discipline, sociology, is no exception. As many of us try to understand the current moment, it should be clear that a Eurocentric perspective will always overlook the global nature of our contemporary conditions. Here, the work of sociologist Sari Hanafi, the former president of the International Sociological Association (2018-2023), proves insightful. Hanafi, a professor of sociology, director of the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies, and chair of the Islamic Studies program at the American University of Beirut, offers a bold, thought-provoking vision for sociology today in his new book, *Against Symbolic Liberalism: A Plea for Dialogical Sociology*. Building on decades of sociological research on religion, the connection between moral philosophy and the social sciences, (forced) migration, and the politics of scientific research, Hanafi urges sociologists to embrace their role as mediators in an increasingly polarized civil society, among other roles. In this interview, I ask Prof. Hanafi about his book, how he diagnoses the current moment, what alternatives he proposes, what role sociologists should play, and how to apply this vision in practice. I hope this can enrich our discussions about the current moment.

Amasha: Can you tell the reader the background that shaped the book?

Hanafi: The book is the result of many local and global conversations. Locally, in the Arab region, I saw the lack of liberalism and dialogue between the leftist and religious elites, which had serious negative effects after the Arab Spring, as I showed in my book *Studying Islam in the Arab World*. But looking globally, I also understood that this chilling polarization is a worldwide issue. So, this project gradually developed, almost stubbornly, from ten years of research and reflection during my work with the International Sociological Association (ISA), first as Vice-President and then as President. During that time, I made three rather ambitious calls. The first was for a "global sociology." The second was to reconnect sociology with moral philosophy, because sociologists cannot forever pretend they have no moral vocabulary. The third, at the Melbourne Congress in 2023, was for what I called "Dialogical Sociology."

This call to dialogical sociology came as I was observing something unsettling: a deepening crisis of liberal democracy, an increasingly frozen public sphere, polarization among elites, and ordinary citizens drifting to the right, sometimes out of frustration, sometimes out of fatigue. I also realized that our discipline, which is supposed to be a space for reasonable debates, is actually part of this polarization.

Amasha: You attribute this to what you call symbolic liberalism. How do you define symbolic liberalism, and why do you think it is the problem of late modernity?

Hanafi: Symbolic liberalism is a fascinating contradiction. It describes individuals who sincerely espouse classical liberal principles—freedom of expression, tolerance, pluralism—yet sometimes act in politically illiberal ways when confronted with disagreement. In an era of deep polarization, some social scientists unintentionally reproduce the very exclusions they critique, taking entrenched positions while dismissing alternative perspectives, occasionally with impressive moral certainty.

This distortion is also clearly present in contemporary liberal theory. The book explores classical liberalism, John Rawls's political liberalism, its critiques, and the distortions introduced by symbolic liberals into liberal thought.

Rawls correctly promoted a pluralist approach to the good and a universal approach to justice, where the good relates to preferences about dress, food, leisure, personal character, family, and broader life ideals. A significant distortion committed by symbolic liberals is elevating their particular conceptions of the good to universal conceptions of justice. For example, France's ban on the Muslim women's veil in public institutions treats it not as a personal conception of the good but as a matter of justice, forcing women who want to wear the veil to conform to the symbolic liberals' view of the good. Another distortion is how symbolic liberals inflate the universality of deculturized human rights and identity politics. This is achieved not through dialogue and persuasion but through laws, regulations, and state coercion. Finally, a major problem with symbolic liberalism is its diminishing emphasis on social justice and its distortion of the concept of intersectionality, leading to the neglect of social class and global inequality in research.

Amasha: To address these problems, you propose dialogical sociology and the dialogical liberal project. What do you propose sociology should do to establish your dialogical liberal project?

Hanafi: Let me start with the late Michael Burawoy, whose preface to my book was among the last things he wrote. Burawoy's public sociology advocates that sociology should be committed to civil society, just as economics is to markets and political science to political institutions. The limitation of Burawoy's proposal is his assumption of the progressive nature of civil society, given his American context. But this is not the case in the Middle East and other places, where civil society has diverse orientations. So, if you disentangle liberalism from progressivism, I argue that sociology has a two-level commitment to civil society. First is the level of mediation, where sociology produces knowledge for and to engage in dialogue with everyone, even those with whom we disagree. Second is the level of strong normativity, where sociology engages with civil society to advance an emancipatory ideal that stands for the marginalized, including the poor, women, and sexual minorities, among others. So, we still maintain normativity, but on two different levels that will help us reach an audience beyond our bubble. Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* has an important lesson for us; we should listen to people before we rush to denounce them. They sometimes share similar goals but expressed in different discourses.

The dialogical liberal project I propose has these features. First, we need to reestablish the primacy of justice over the good. We cannot operate with emotional capitalism anymore without bringing social class analysis back to the center. For example, a universal basic income should be at the heart of our discussions. Second, the dialogical liberal project is attentive to power, not just culture. One way we address this is by encouraging political participation from below, as in the Democracy Voucher Program in Seattle or participatory budgeting initiatives. Third, we should take the ecological crisis seriously. Consumerism, which is one conception of the good, should be taxed because otherwise it is against environmental justice for our generation and future generations. Fourth, we should balance the individual and the community by studying the many initiatives that foster social love with neighbors or refugees, for example. Five, we must enhance dialogical spaces, not just in forums, but also by urban reorganization that overcomes segregation. Finally, there must be a cultural mediation of what could be abstractly considered to belong to universal human rights.

Amasha: In the book, you provide concrete case studies that show how symbolic liberalism produces social problems and how the dialogical liberal project proposes to resolve them. Can you share some examples?

Hanafi: Let's consider secularism and religion, with France as a flagrant example that other European countries appear to be following more and more. If you define religion in a reformed Christian way—focused on individual conscience, the private sphere, and church rituals—then the Sikh turban can be seen as a violation of secularism. This is how France excludes newly arriving religions. Muslim women's veil incidents are now common, but it's not just about the veil. Every few months, there's a debate over whether girls can wear long dresses in school and if that counts as a religious symbol. The burkini is also heavily debated. Unfortunately, this is spreading to

Belgium and Denmark as well. Allowing Muslim soccer players a few-second pause to break their fast during Ramadan is opposed for being "against the republican values." Nowadays, "republican values" are less about justice and more about lifestyle. They reflect hegemonic conceptions of the good, imposed by symbolic liberals. To address this, the dialogical liberal approach supports a multicultural secularism that doesn't impose a Christian understanding on other religions. I see secularism as a tool for achieving liberal values, not a value itself.

Amasha: Another case the book dedicates a chapter to is polarization and academic freedom. Can you elaborate on that?

Hanafi: Academia is supposed to be a place of reasonable debates. Yet, this is directly threatened by the current chilling climate of polarization. Part of this polarization entered campuses through the question of power: Who really owns the university? The donors, the pro-arm lobby, the pro-Israeli colonial lobby, or who? But that is not all. The cancel culture on the cultural left against opposing views is a real problem. The book shows campus disintivations campaigns as an empirical measure of cancel culture, and the data show a clear increase. This is a new phenomenon that has occurred in the last twenty years and has come from both the left and the right. Many incidents are against speakers on the left by those who are more left than they are.

In the last two years, we also witnessed the flagrant case of the weaponization of antisemitism against the pro-Palestinian social movement, with the expulsion of professors, intervention of the police, and budget cuts for universities that don't comply. This is not just in the US but also in France and across Europe. Self-censorship is even slowly taking place at my own university, the American University of Beirut, to avoid losing USAID scholarships. Violations of academic freedom have reached an unprecedented level in the history of Humboldtian academia, the model in which academia has autonomy from the state, the city, and the church. The university is a place for critical thinking, where young people learn how to address corrupt politics, and if we don't teach them that, they will enter the labor market only with materialist, individualist, private interests.

Amasha: The state is one of the most powerful actors in many contemporary societies and play significant role in shaping the world we live in. How would the dialogical liberal project view the state?

Hanafi: While the state is increasingly powerful, this power is also trickling down to different levels. Today, if you go to a theatre or reserve a restaurant, you need to fill out a form that asks for your age, gender, and so on. It is no longer only the Ministry of Interior that does that. So, state centralization also paradoxically distributes power. We need to disentangle the state into its different actors, rather than viewing it as a block. In the book, my critique of symbolic liberals on the question of the state comes in the case of Swedish compulsory child removal. The Swedish Social Service, which was established for the noble cause of protecting children and adolescents, has become an industry of removing children from their biological families to foster families. Every year, Sweden has around 3,500 removals, most of which do not return to their biological families. Kids' education is part of the conception of the good, and here the state is imposing by force one conception of the good. While this is justifiable in cases of systematic violence against kids, for example, ethnographic research shows that removals happen for trivial things: a poor Indian woman feeding her kid with her hand rather than a spoon, or a Black African pastor telling his kids that homosexuality is a sin in Christianity, without inciting against homosexual people. (The book also has a chapter on the question of the LGBTQ community and how different conceptions of the sexual good do not and should not mean discriminating against those who hold different conceptions.) The consequence in Sweden is disastrous, as they try now to lower the age of criminality below 17 to combat drugs among adolescents. Let me be clear: I have no nostalgia for the traditional family. However, dissolving the family's role in a neoliberal age is a destruction of an enduring structure that provides emotional and material support in the face of state and market coercion.

Amasha: If there's one main point you want sociologists to take away from the book, what would it be?

Hanafi: In a nutshell, I want sociologists to be humble, listen, and talk to everyone. Before distributing labels and taking positions, I want sociologists to serve as mediators between polarized groups. We need to listen to how people formulate their moral reasoning and think of tolerance. Moral reasoning and tolerance are not merely philosophical, but also sociological concepts. If people do not want migrants, we need to ask why people sometimes become xenophobic, before we rush into labeling them as such. This is dialogical sociology.

Report on the Inaugural Stuart Hall Award Lecture by Ben Carrington

By Ran Wang

Ran Wang is a joint PhD student in Sociology and Communication at University of Pennsylvania.

On Wednesday, December 10, 2025, the ASA Culture Section hosted a landmark event: the inaugural Stuart Hall Award Lecture. Dr. Ben Carrington of the University of Southern California (USC), the first winner of the Stuart Hall Award in Cultural Sociology which recognizes a mid-career sociologist whose work holds great promise for advancing the cultural study of racial or ethnic inequality, delivered a provocative lecture titled "'The University is a Critical Institution, or it is Nothing' - Stuart Hall, The Elephants' Graveyard and the Sociology of Race." Moderated by Dr. Bin Xu (Emory University), the talk drew a significant online audience and fostered productive discussion about the discipline.

Carrington began by grounding the lecture in the biography and intellectual generosity of Stuart Hall. Carrington identified Hall as "Britain's leading black public intellectual" and the "W.E.B. Du Bois of Britain," and traced Hall's journey from Jamaica to Birmingham and eventually to the Open University. He emphasized that Hall was not merely an academic but an intellectual who "created an entirely new academic discipline" (cultural studies) to provide a space for those previously treated as "mere objects of sociological curiosity".

Carrington shared a personal anecdote regarding a correspondence he had with Hall, highlighting that Hall treated junior scholars as equals. This served as a sharp contrast to what Carrington described as the "gatekeeping" prevalent in contemporary American sociology.

A central pillar of Carrington's critique was the "closing of the American sociological mind," a trend he has observed since moving to the U.S. two decades ago. He argued that dominant currents in U.S. sociology remain indifferent or "openly hostile" to the engaged, politically interventionist work associated with Hall.

Carrington highlighted the "elephant's graveyard of redundant sub-disciplines," a term borrowed from Paul Gilroy to refer to the space where intractable policy issues go to wait for their expiry. He noted that graduate students are frequently "disciplined" by their supervisors to avoid reading figures like Hall or utilizing cultural studies frameworks, often being told that such work "is not sociology" because it lacks a certain kind of quantifiable rigor. Carrington countered this by citing Hall: "I'm inclined to prefer being right but not rigorous to being rigorous but wrong."

Carrington suggested that mainstream sociology often sacrifices nuance and social reality for fixed static categories that allow for regression analyses but tell us little about the world as it exists. This "conservative shift" in the sociology of race, according to Carrington, deliberately ignores the contributions of critical race scholars and instead offers a sanitized version of the world that fails to challenge the status quo. He warned that when sociology prioritizes fixed static categories over the lived complexities of racial formation, it loses its ability to remain relevant in a world facing a profound conjunctural shift.

While acknowledging the recent "rediscovery" of W.E.B. Du Bois within the ASA, Carrington warned of a "Du Boisian moment" that risks being performative. He cautioned against "adding Du Bois to the canon" in a way that depoliticizes his socialism, Pan-Africanism, and radical activism to make him "proper" for sociology. "The honor was all yours," Carrington said, echoing Du Bois, and suggested that the discipline's belated recognition of Du Bois says more about the failures of sociology than it does about the brilliance of the scholar.

The lecture concluded by situating these academic debates within the urgent context of the global "reactionary moment." Carrington described a world where the neoliberal-democratic order is collapsing and white nationalist

politics have become normalized. He criticized the supine response of many academic institutions to the shrinking space for critical scholarship, particularly regarding race and ethnicity.

Carrington's call to action was for a "renewed form of imaginative sociology." This imaginative sociology would require a reorientation toward a more critical and politically engaged project, one that is capable of challenging rather than succumbing to the present reactionary forces. He reminded the audience that for the university to mean anything at all, it must remain a site of critical inquiry and social transformation.

When asked if sociology as a field is still capable of this work, Carrington's answer was telling: "Sociology is too important to be left to the sociologists." Ultimately, Carrington reminded the audience of Hall's enduring words: "The university is a critical institution, or it is nothing." To remain relevant, he argued, sociology must move beyond the "elephants' graveyard" and embrace a more "courageous, imaginative, and less defensive" project that engages with the world as it actually exists.

Report on CCL panel: Diversity in Culture

Report by Yijie Fang

Yijie Fang is a PhD student in University of California, Santa Barbara

The Culture and Contemporary Life (CCL) series hosted a panel titled "Diversity in Culture" on February 27, 2026. It was a timely discussion about how we as cultural sociologists should understand changes in the term "diversity" in cultural scholarship and, more broadly, in the socio-political landscape against the backdrop of strong pushbacks against DEI under the current administration. This panel, moderated by Jiwon Yun (PhD candidate at Yale University) and Yuchen Yang (Assistant Professor at the University of Birmingham), invited three speakers whose work engages heavily with the concept of diversity and (in)equality: Natasha Warikoo (Tufts University), Ellen Berrey (University of Toronto), and Laura Garbes (University of Minnesota).

The session started with the three speakers discussing how diversity becomes a common thread in their respective research agendas. Dr. Garbes studies how racism and voice intersect in cultural industries, focusing on how voices become racialized across the industry. Specifically, she asks how employees of color navigate the audio industry, which has been white-dominated, using interviews and archival data. Dr. Berrey studies the gentrification of politics in Chicago neighborhoods, focusing on how diversity represents very different political interests. In her study, she views "diversity" as rhetoric, as a word attached to people, organizations, and institutions. The most important questions she asks in her research are: "What is being accomplished through the word 'diversity,' and what and who gets silenced in this process?" Dr. Warikoo studies the ways people think about race, diversity, and meritocracy (deservingness). In her research, diversity configures the meritocratic system. She first explores this connection at the university level, examining how higher education systems reward and select college students from diverse backgrounds. She later explores high school settings, focusing on how ideas about meritocracy circulate at the administrative level and how they are imposed on students. She continues to ask the fundamental question of how meritocracy has shifted today and how it continues to shape educational systems.

After that, Jiwon Yun (the moderator) asked a question about the relationship between diversity and affirmative action. Dr. Berrey, who studies diversity as a discourse, said that affirmative action in the 1960s U.S. was a very narrow concept, derived from a court decision in a lawsuit against the UC Davis medical school admissions program. It was then built into university identity as a way to express institutional commitments to supporting students from underrepresented communities. However, she notes that affirmative action has been limited in its capacity to build multiracial environments in higher education, especially in elite institutions. Today, diversity and affirmative action have become much more controversial than they used to be, as they are increasingly monitored and curtailed to prevent such discussions.

Dr. Warikoo argues that diversity has never been a racial justice frame, but has been elevated as such by those attacking it. She refers to two major moments when diversity has been seen as too "critical" to sustain as a political agenda: first, during the first Trump administration, when critical race theory was targeted, and second, in current pushbacks against DEI. More than its social justice intentions, diversity today has become a framework onto which people attach meanings beyond politics; it has become disconnected from the empirical realities of DEI programs and now serves as a broad characterization of many contemporary public debates.

The three speakers reached a consensus that diversity today has become a "bogeyman" within the current political-ideological divide in the U.S. For example, all mentioned the discourse of "we need viewpoint

diversity," typically articulated by those who frame DEI as problematic. They caution against such uses of "diversity," arguing that it is not about achieving left-right balance but about repurposing the term to legitimize certain Republican views perceived as having been "silenced."

Jiwon Yun then asked a second question about DEI as a program and its achievements. Dr. Warikoo suggests that these achievements are partly the result of affirmative action. She notes that empirical research shows that affirmative action helps diversify college environments and has positive impacts on students. Dr. Garbes argues that DEI does contribute, to some extent, to diversifying "elite" spaces, such as the public radio industry. For example, by expanding pathways into the field and increasing the number of people of color in these spaces. This has led to more employee resource groups in which people of color strategize how to pitch to the "white gaze" or "white ear," orienting themselves within a white-dominated industry. However, challenges remain. Drawing on her research in the radio industry, she notes that there are still not enough people of color in the workplace. Following this, Dr. Berrey points out an important gap in DEI research: more work is needed to examine the trajectory of diversity from education to the workplace. For example, what changes when people leave universities and enter professional settings?

The second part of the discussion focused on the backlash against DEI and diversity. The three speakers agreed that backlash has always existed historically. Dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, discourses such as "emancipation is going too far" emerged in opposition not only to affirmative action but also to broader civil rights movements. At that time, diversity and DEI were used as "witchwords" to build reactionary power and repress social justice movements. In this context, Dr. Berrey recommends Frank Luntz's book *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*, noting that "diversity" is among the terms that can be strategically shaped in political communication. Dr. Garbes also emphasizes that the vilification of DEI has long been present in public media. In fact, despite being portrayed as "crowding out" public resources, DEI programs have never been funded enough and are being cut every cycle.

Against the cultural warfare of diversity, what does it mean to advocate for diversity today? In addressing this question, the speakers agree that sociologists should work to reclaim the term "diversity": to move away from its use as a buzzword and toward a more precise, analytically grounded usage that reflects its social justice implications. Referring back to examples of how "diversity" has been misused in the context of viewpoint balancing, they argue that such "sugar-coating" is unhelpful for addressing real-life inequalities and often result in reinforcing them. Therefore, it is important for us sociologists to develop a more precise language to characterize diversity and to translate its sociological significance for broader publics. This, they suggest, aligns with cultural sociologists' longstanding interest in language and discourse.

The session concludes with reflections on what these discussions mean for cultural sociologists. The three speakers emphasize a dual mission: political and intellectual. Intellectually, we must recognize the cultural dynamics of diversity and its backlash and, to study this, we need to broaden the tools offered in sociology of culture scholarship. Politically, as mentioned above, we could do a better job of translating sociological terms into accessible language for broader audiences. The classroom can be the most relevant setting for us: seeing your classroom as a "public" and making discussions about diversity a central topic in students' learning objectives. Ultimately, we as sociologists should play a key role in shaping public imagination about the present and future of diversity.

What is Cultural Sociology?

Compiled by Risako Yang and Ran Wang

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For the Spring 2026 issue of the ASA Culture Section Newsletter, we are excited to introduce an informal space designed for collective reflection on the core of our subfield.

Our goal with this section is to explore the diverse ways that sociologists currently navigate and define the topic of culture. We envision this as a mini showcase of the subfield that highlights the breadth and richness of perspectives that make our community so vibrant.

To gather these insights, the editorial team reached out to a range of scholars via email, inviting them to contribute brief reflections (approximately 3–5 sentences) on two foundational questions:

- *How do you define "culture"?*
- *What does "cultural sociology" mean to you?*

What follows is a collection of voices that range from historical abstractions and materialist frameworks to symbolic resources and relational networks. We hope these reflections spark further conversation about the tools we use and the meanings we make in our shared scholarly project.

Vincent Yung (Northwestern University)

How do you define "culture"? I define culture as I learned in Wendy Griswold's course on the subject: a socially constructed abstraction that we can understand by situating the term historically, by examining how it has been used and put to work for particular purposes. For example, before "culture" became a noun, it was a verb referring to animal husbandry and soil cultivation. This history matters because it frames the "scientific" or "sociological" senses of the term, especially as we have standardized and applied it in North American anthropology (symbolic systems) and archaeology (material production). Situating these uses within and against their practical origins reveals much about their assumptions. That is not to say those of us who take such a diplomatic (or bemoaned) "big tent" approach do not have biases or cognitive shorthands we use to define culture on the spot—shared norms, values, beliefs, symbols, practices. But it does suggest that when we study culture, we study the expression of something else: relations for Marx, collective representations for Durkheim, meaning for Weber. It also requires us to think about the conceptual bricolage that occurs when we define and put the term to use. Personally, I find it difficult to put culture to work without cultural objects (Griswold 1986) and the cultural diamond (Griswold 2013), which formalize aspects of sociological uses of the term but leave enough unspecified to put us to work.

What does "cultural sociology" mean to you? A broad range of scholarship on culture that shares productive affinities with fields outside sociology, including new areas of inquiry as well as debates.

Yucheng Liu (University of California, Santa Barbara)

How do you define "culture"? I see culture from two perspectives: the material and the immaterial. The study of material culture examines the social processes through which objects are made, circulated, evaluated, and priced—a perspective often taken by sociologists working within the "production of culture" framework. On

the other hand, immaterial culture refers to symbols, myths, beliefs, norms, i.e., the unspoken rules that regulate people's daily lives.

What does "cultural sociology" mean to you? Cultural sociology, then, is about "culture in action": how immaterial, intangible forces shape people's feelings, attitudes, decisions, and actions—hence, a cultural theory of practice.

Bonnie Siegler (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

How do you define "culture"? Culture is a set of symbolic resources that people use to make sense of the world. This definition differs from non-technical use of the world, where culture can sometimes mean things like creative outputs (art, music, literature), but the technical definition overlaps somewhat with the understanding that culture is a shared set of stories, ideas, or ways of interacting among a "group" of people who have a shared history of interaction.

What does "cultural sociology" mean to you? Cultural sociology is the study how symbolic resources such as narratives, frames, boundaries, or "habitus" impact social interactions and whether deploying similar cultural resources leads people to similar life outcomes.

Denise Milstein (Columbia University)

How do you define "culture"? Culture is what allows us to act together or in relation to each other, and to communicate. Culture is also constituted relationally through action and communication. It links micro, meso, and macro levels, and circulates in institutions, in families, large and small groups, dyads, and within individual relational imaginations. Culture sometimes lags behind structural transformation, and other times precedes it. In metaphorical terms, I might say that culture is the color that fills in the outlines of institutions and relations. And thinking about different cultures is not unlike recognizing different types of palettes or color schemes.

What does "cultural sociology" mean to you? Cultural sociology is the study of culture using a variety of tools -- but the most effective tools in cultural sociology are interpretive ones that may be applied to qualitative data.

Yuchen Yang (University of Birmingham)

How do you define "culture"? I will cite from Sewell's definition of culture: a loosely coherent system of signs and meaning that is continually transformed in practice

Announcements

Publications

Netta Kahana, Hillel Schmid, Negation claims: insights from elite philanthropists' responses to moral devaluation, *Social Problems*, 2026 (online first), https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spag007

> Recognition of one's positive qualities is fundamental to human dignity. Research in the cultural sociology of morality, worth, and evaluation has explored how individuals respond to stigmatization and moral devaluation, emphasizing the recognition claims that they formulate. However, less attention has been given to what happens when such claims are rejected. This study addresses this gap by examining elite philanthropy: a practice that forms part of claims by economic elites to moral worth, but which is also challenged by a critical public view. Analyzing how elite philanthropists account for such challenges, we identify a sequence of evaluations and devaluations whereby philanthropy is evaluated, the critical public view is devaluated, and the focus of the moral debate is shifted to other social issues. This sequence results in a recognition claim about the moral worth of philanthropy and in what we refer to as a negation claim, whereby social actors discredit the public view. Recognition and negation claims reflect two distinct, but not necessarily incompatible, ways in which social actors wrestle with moral devaluation. This distinction, we argue, is conceptually and analytically important for analyzing the responses of social actors to moral devaluation, and has implications for the study of dominance and symbolic inequality.

Valle, Melissa M. 2026. Decoding race, racialization, and racism: Making meaning through interviews, photo–elicitation, and visual resonance. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, pp. 1-41. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-025-00278-4

> This article offers three methodological and analytical insights to enhance scholars' analyses of how everyday social actors make meaning of race, racism, and the process of racialization. These insights highlight the value in: (1) operationalizing concepts related to race, racism, and racialization in interview questions (2) applying visual research methods such as photo–elicitation interviews, especially those that incorporate images of celebratory and other ritualistic cultural events, and (3) employing visual resonance as an analytic device to delineate the schemata interpreters mobilize to evaluate the legitimacy of racialized imagery. The paper draws on qualitative research conducted in Santiago, Chile and Cartagena, Colombia. The strategies discussed in both cases are beneficial for unpacking how people make meaning of race, racism, and the process of racialization in places where cultural narratives suggest that society is not mired by systems of racial oppression and where people claim to be less wedded to white–black dyadic notions of racial identity, such as Latin America.

Yurdakul, Gökce, Jean Beaman, Liza Mügge, Sarah Scuzzarello, and Sirijit Sunanta, eds. 2026. *The Oxford Handbook of Intersectional Approaches to Migration, Gender, and Sexuality*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/60559.

Frenette, Alexandre. *Blame the Intern: On (Not) Breaking into the Creative Economy.* Princeton University Press.

> While generations of young adults used to spend their summers working as lifeguards or camp counselors, college students today are more likely to seek office experience as interns. Blame the Intern takes readers into the workspaces of the music industry to show how internships, especially unpaid ones, are problematic introductions to the working world that often provide little valuable training and are unlikely to lead to a job.
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> Since the 1980s, shifts in labor markets and careers have made employers less prone to invest in training entry-level employees who may quickly change jobs anyway. In recent decades, higher education has filled the gap, fueling an explosive growth of internships to facilitate the transition from college to a career. Drawing on in-depth interviews with interns, record label employees, and college personnel, as well as participant observation as an unpaid intern at two music industry firms in New York City, Blame the Intern sheds light on who benefits from the intern economy, who suffers, and why. Frenette finds that internships are rife with ambiguity because employers are neither trained nor greatly rewarded to mentor and colleges are ill-equipped to provide workplace guidance. As a result, there is little consensus about what interns should be doing or what benefits they should be gaining from their experience, which can often lead to inequality, exploitation, and disappointment.

Roudometof, V. (2026) "Religion and nationalism in the Orthodox religioscape: Southeastern and Post-Soviet Europe in historical perspective," (2026) *Social Sciences.* 15, 101 https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci15020101

> This article analyzes the historical relationship between Orthodox Christianity and nation formation. In past centuries, most adherents to the faith lived in the Ottoman and Russian Empires, under the Moscow and the Ecumenical Patriarchates. These

two empires followed different historical trajectories as they entered the modern world of nations, and their ecclesiastical institutions evolved very differently. This article uses historical experience, and the model developed in 19th century Southeastern Europe (SEE) to interpret the relationship between faith and nation in post-Soviet Europe. In SEE, the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (EP) fragmented because of rising national movements. Over the 19th century, as Greece, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria became independent or autonomous states, they adopted a new blueprint for the relationship between church and nation. In contrast, the USSR superseded Holy Russia. Abolished in 1721, the Moscow Patriarchate was revived in 1917 but faced Soviet persecution for decades. Within the post-Soviet nations that emerged after the USSR's 1991 dissolution, ecclesiastical institutions duplicated the model originally developed in 19th century SEE. National and religious conflicts became intertwined, and national antagonisms were disguised as ecclesiastical disputes. This article offers a guide for understanding post-1991 religious conflicts in Estonia, Moldova, and Ukraine, as well as the 2018 schism between the Moscow Patriarchate and the EP.

Roudometof, V. (2026) "Orthodox Christianity in a Global Context: Nationalization, Transnational Communities, and Geopolitics," pp. 287-302 in J. Cesari (ed.), *Wiley/Blackwell Companion of Religion, Nation, and Politics.* Wiley-Blackwell,

Roudometof, V. (2024). "How should we think about globalization in a post-globalization era?" *Dialogues in Sociology*, 1(1), 13-26. https://doi.org/10.1177/29768667241293053

This article critically examines the challenges to the globalization paradigm observed throughout the world in the twenty-first century. While empirical evidence suggests that the policy-oriented globalization project of the 1990s has been superseded by different tendencies and policies, social-scientific scholarship in areas other than economics has not engaged with the notion of 'post-globalization'. The principal reason appears to be the employment of different conceptual lenses, whereby globalization appears as a long-term process largely unaffected by short-term shifts. The article interrogates the conceptual terrain of globalization scholarship, arguing that several important developments require the adjustment of theoretical lenses and a greater flexibility in the use of globalization as a master concept. In order to perform such a task, the article outlines a series of ideas that could facilitate the development of a perspective capable of addressing the question of how we should think about globalization in a post-globalization era.

Frontier(s) of Health: The Rural West Texas Study.

Joseph A. Kotarba, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology at Texas State University, was awarded a research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, as administered by the Endowment's affiliate: Humanities Texas. The title of Dr. Kotarba's project is: "The Frontier(s) of Health: The Rural West Texas Study." The study is a collaboration between the Department of Sociology at Texas State University and the Department of Nursing at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas. The study involves a series of interviews conducted by the 19 senior class students at the Department of Nursing. The focus is on the practical decisions and activities a wide range of residents and visitors to the Big Bend area engage in to manage health, illness, and injury care. A singular trope that ties practitioners' and patients' strategies together analytically is distance that frames the understanding, meaning, management, and overcoming of various cultural, political, geographic, communications, and technological impediments in responding to health issues in an increasingly post-rural environment. Dr. Kotarba's collaborating principal investigators include Dr. Minerva Gonzales, Chairperson, and Dr. Veronica Arredondo, Assistant Professor, in the Department of Nursing. Contact Dr. Kotarba at: jk54@txstate.edu.

Dr. Kotarba's research in the Alpine/Big Bend area is one component of a more comprehensive study of the many ways healers and individuals approach situations in which the circumstances of illness and injury, appropriate and available treatments, prognosis, and knowledge progress are unknown or even mysterious. As a medical sociologist, he has been committed to exploring the social, organizational, and cultural processes by which healers of many kinds attempt to control, if not master, the frontiers of health. Other topics in Dr. Kotarba's comprehensive study include NASA space medicine, professional sports medicine, emergency care in complex public event/concert settings, the medical and political frontiers surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, battlefield medicine, rodeo cowboy injury care, and aging.

Bryant, Jesse Callahan. 2025. "Front-Stage Politics: Visual Identity and Discourse on the Far Right." *The Sociological Quarterly*. Doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2025.2581317.

This article investigates how visual and textual practices together sustain collective identity in contemporary movements, shifting attention from ideology and identity to the mechanisms of collective binding and showing how integrating visual with textual data offers a richer, multimodal understanding of collective identity-related processes. It approaches this topic inductively through a multi-study visual analysis of avatars on the most prominent white nationalist forum as persistent front-

stage "props" in Goffman's sense of the term. A preliminary analysis of textual references to "avatars" shows that these user images anchor recognition, project self-presentation, and serve as sites of audience policing. Next, using a Vision Transformer (ViT), an analysis of a novel dataset of more than 8,000 avatars reveals a broad distinction between portrait-based and symbol-based avatars that corresponds to charismatic and ideological forms of collective identification. A third analysis examines how these patterned divides correspond to differences in textual discourse across more than 300,000 posts of user text. By integrating computational visual tools (ViT) with traditional qualitative analysis, these studies contribute to sociological understandings of collective identity by showing how "masks" vary within movements, how charismatic and ideological forms of belonging predominate, and how everyday visual and textual performances of self align.

Regla-Vargas, Alejandra, A.J Alvero, & Hajar Yazdiha. 2026. "Racial framing contests: How anti-Asian racism and its resistance enacted racial projects during COVID-19." *Big Data & Society*, 13(1). https://doi-org/10.1177/20539517261424160

This study examines the dynamics of racial framing contexts taking the case of anti-Asian hate speech and counter-hate speech on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the COVID-HATE dataset (n = 2,491,405 tweets posted 15 January 2020 to 26 March 2021), we analyze racial framing contests between movements and counter-movements. Through a mixed-methods approach, we find that: (1) hate frames deployed racial projects characterizing Asians as public health and national security threats, while counter-frames either directly challenged these characterizations or bypassed them to focus on systemic racism and (2) hate and counter-hate movements often "spoke past" each other rather than engaging in direct frame–counterframe dynamics as prevailing theories would predict. Counter-movements did not consistently produce opposing frames for each hate frame but rather developed independent messaging focused on combating racism itself. This study advances our understanding of how both hate and resistance operate through racial projects, with implications for theories of social movements, social media, and racial formation.

Brandt, Emma E. S. 2025. "Environments of Disbelief: Serbian Youth, Conspiracy Theory, and Practices of Digital Distrust." *Qualitative Sociology* 48: 637-663. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-025-09610-3

Conspiracy theories are often understood as resulting from a lack of proper skepticism or an inability to approach narratives critically. This paper argues that we should instead see conspiracy theories as resulting from an excess of skepticism. Interviews with Serbian youth show how conspiracism coincides with other skeptical media practices, including fact-checking with Google, averaging for objectivity, and a preference for unmediated information. Living in an environment of disbelief, where institutions and official narratives cannot be trusted, young Serbians deploy conspiracy theories and related skeptical media practices as methods of political and social critique. More generally, this case study demonstrates the need for scholars to focus on conspiracy theories as part of a broader repertoire of media consumption practices characteristic of environments, rather than as pathologies of individuals.

Koh, Steven A. 2026. "Communicative Legitimacy: The Supreme Court's Hidden Cultural Binaries in the US Civil Sphere." *Cultural Sociology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755251399753

How does the US Supreme Court establish its legitimacy? Over the last two hundred years in US society, the Court has interpreted the US Constitution on watershed issues such as slavery, segregation, and marriage equality. And yet the Constitution is just 7591 words. A puzzle thus emerges: how does the Court intelligibly interpret this short text for US society? This article develops a new theoretical and empirical cultural sociological account of such Supreme Court decision-making, which it calls "communicative legitimacy." According to this theory, which draws on Jeffrey Alexander's civil sphere theory, the Court consistently and inevitably draws on a shared American cultural discourse, thus rendering Constitutional values intelligible and legitimate to the broader civil sphere. This article shows this through two historical case studies.

First, it explores the cases guaranteeing and then overturning the right to abortion, from Roe v. Wade (1973) to Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization (2022). Second, it reviews the cases guaranteeing the right to bear arms, beginning with District of Columbia v. Heller (2008). The two sets of cases, at first blush, appear diametrically opposed: Roe is a triumph for the left, Heller a victory for the right. But, in fact, these cases reveal the same pattern: the Court's defenders draw on the discourse of liberty to hail the decision as a restoration of the Constitution, while the opposition draws on the discourse of repression to accuse the Court of "creating a Constitutional right out of nowhere." This article thus unveils a hidden Supreme Court meta-language, contributing a new cultural sociological understanding of the Supreme Court as a societal institution with unique communicative authority and symbolic power in US society.

Loy, Loredana, and Rachel Wetts. 2026. "'Let them Eat Kale!': Appeals to Class-Based Resentment in American Conservative Opposition to Climate Change Solutions." *Social Problems*. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spag003

> How do conservative media commentators provoke public opposition to climate change solutions in the US? We provide evidence that appeals to class-based resentment against cultural elites are one prominent strategy to urge publics to reject climate mitigation strategies, particularly individual-level changes in diet and consumption. Analyzing media coverage of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change from 1988–2021 across liberal, centrist, and conservative American outlets (N = 1788), we examine how commentators discuss the consumption of meat and animal products as contributors to climate change and dietary transition as a climate mitigation initiative. We find conservative rhetoric around this topic features class-based populism and ridicule of plant-based diets and vegetarianism as displays of cultural capital. Rather than relying on spreading misinformation or promoting scientific counter-claims, conservative commentators discredited these proposals by associating them with a rejected out-group, using moral and emotional language to stoke anger, resentment, but also humor. These findings suggest conservative rhetoric about dietary change as a climate solution appeals to class-based resentment, a strategy that may be becoming more prevalent as the Democratic Party becomes the party of highly-educated Americans. Our findings shed light on the important but often overlooked role of identity appeals in contemporary strategies of climate obstruction.

Ore, Peter D., and Daniel Menchik. 2026. "The Global Chicago School: Cases and Currents." *The American Sociologist*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-026-09683-9

> The Chicago School of sociology is often described as narrowly focused on casework, departmental life, and the city of Chicago. These internalist accounts obscure the Chicago School's exchanges with places like Kansas, Ohio, Mexico, Canada, the Philippines, and Poland. They also overlook the ways Chicago School research has been appropriated and extended by sociologists working in countries from China to France. Rather than dismiss these international ties as outliers, this special issue conceptualizes them as currents flowing around a coherent whole, demonstrating the value of examining the Chicago School as a case of global sociology. This paper thematizes the currents identified in this special issue's works in a four-fold relation flowing into, out from, through, and against their case — the Chicago School. Interpreting global scholarship in this way suggests that externalist accounts of intellectual life can be thought of in terms of the relations between cases and currents. It also shows that the global Chicago School has been there all along.

Ozgen, Zeynep. 2025. *Pious Politics: Cultural Foundations of the Islamist Movement in Turkey*. Cambridge University Press.

> What explains the rise and resilience of the Islamist movement in Turkey? Since its founding in 1923, the Turkish Republic has periodically reined in Islamist actors. Secular laws denied legitimacy to religious ideas, publications, and civic organizations, while military coups jailed or banned Islamist party leaders from politics. Despite such adversity, Islamists won an unprecedented victory at the 2002 national elections and have continued to rule since. 'Pious Politics' explains how Islamists succeeded by developing a popular, well-organized movement over decades that rallied the masses and built vigorous political parties. But an equally formative-if not more significant-factor was the cultural groundwork Islamists laid through a remarkably robust model of mobilization. Drawing on two years of ethnographic and archival research in Turkey, Zeynep Ozgen explores how social movements leverage cultural production to create sociopolitical change.

Rekenthaler, Nick. 2026. "Looking for Myself: A Qualitative Study of Choice Homophily in Psychotherapy." *Social Psychology Quarterly*. https://doi.org/10.1177/01902725261418324

> Although homophily is a widely studied phenomenon, less is known about how choice homophily forms at the micro level. Leveraging identity theory, this article uses qualitative methods to trace a four-stage process of identity matching within the case site of psychotherapy. Drawing from 90 interviews with therapists and 30 interviews with clients of therapy, I show how client and therapist (1) make salient certain identity meanings and (2) attempt an initial identity verification. Then, as client and therapist enter the therapy room, they (3) negotiate this perceived identity verification toward an identity match. This process generates safety and trust and leads to a final stage in which therapist and client (4) deepen their identity-based connections and generate satisfaction by mutually enacting their shared identities. I conclude by proposing a spectrum of homophily from thin homophily to thick homophily.

Xie-Gupta, Vineet. 2026. "Bibliometric (in)Visibilities in the Global Social Sciences: Revisiting Regional Dynamics across Web of Science, Scopus, and OpenAlex (1980–2023)." *Current Sociology*. doi:10.1177/00113921261434021. [Preprint]

The global structure of the academic social sciences is often theorized as a center-periphery system dominated by a North America-Europe duopoly. In 2014, Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras provided influential bibliometric evidence for this model, analyzing publication, collaboration, and citation patterns from 1980 to 2009 using Web of Science data. Since then, both bibliometric database coverage and research capacity in the Global South have expanded. Drawing on three major bibliometric databases—Web of Science, Scopus, and OpenAlex—I revisit and extend Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras' analysis through 2023. I show that exclusive reliance on the Web of Science Social Science Citation Index has distorted our understanding of global social science publishing, obscuring the scale, centrality, and autonomy of knowledge production outside North America. My findings indicate that the dominance of United States and Canada is increasingly unstable, while the centrality of Europe, the rise of Asia, and the autonomy of Latin America and North Eurasia have been systematically underestimated. These results challenge prevailing accounts of global social science hierarchies and pathways of academic dependency, underscore how bibliometric infrastructures shape perceptions of power, and demonstrate the declining usefulness of categories like North-South and center-periphery for characterizing today's academic landscape.