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American Sociological Association

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American Sociological Association

Michael R. Hill

The American Sociological Association (ASA) is currently the largest and most influential membership organization of professional sociologists in the US. The ASA began its organizational life in 1905 when a small group of self-selected scholars representing several existing scholarly organizations (including the American Economic Association, the American Historical Association, and the American Political Science Association) proposed a separate and independent American Sociological Society (ASS) ("Organization of the American Sociological Society" 1906). The first ASS annual meeting convened December 27–29, 1906, in Providence, Rhode Island, with 115 members and a full program of scholarly papers. In 1959 the organization's name was formally changed from the American Sociological Society to the American Sociological Association. As of 2004, the ASA reported 13,715 paid members and an investment portfolio valued at \$7.1 million.

Corporately, the first ASS presidents comprised the major white, male, intellectual

architects of what became the American sociological tradition and included (with institutional affiliations and dates of ASS presidency): Lester Frank Ward (Brown University, 1906–7), William Graham Sumner (Yale University, 1908–9), Franklin Henry Giddings (Columbia University, 1910–11), Albion Woodbury Small (University of Chicago, 1912–13), Edward Alsworth Ross (University of Wisconsin, 1914–15), George Edgar Vincent (University of Minnesota, 1916), George Elliott Howard (University of Nebraska, 1917), and Charles Horton Cooley (University of Michigan, 1918). The pioneering work of the ASS and its ever-growing membership is chronicled in the 23 volumes of the *Papers and Proceedings of the American Sociological Association* (1906–28) and in the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology* (*AJS*). The *AJS*, founded in 1895 by Albion W. Small and published by the University of Chicago Press, predated the ASS. The *AJS*, under Small's editorship, became the voice of the ASS and reprinted many of the articles and official reports appearing in the *Papers and Proceedings* (Meroney 1930a).

From the beginning, ASS membership grew steadily from 115 in 1906 to 1,812 in 1930, with the largest proportion of members (41.7 percent and 41.5 percent, respectively) coming from the Middle West and the East. In the early years, to 1922, annual meetings focused single-mindedly on a topic chosen and organized by the Society's president for that year, with an average of only 43 members participating on the program of any given meeting. These relatively small gatherings provided maximum opportunities for detailed discussions and face-to-face interaction between presenters, discussants, and the attendees as a whole. When Columbia's Franklin H. Giddings presided at the 1911 meeting in Washington, DC, for example, the program roster included 14 participants, an all-time low. The introduction of separate sectional meetings (organized around special topics) within the ASS began in 1922, resulting in larger total numbers of program participants during annual meetings and, simultaneously, a trend away from extended discussions of the presentations toward the reading of large

numbers of formal papers per se (Meroney 1930b), a pattern that continues today. By 2004 there were 43 separately organized sections, representing such diverse fields as teaching and learning; medical sociology; Marxist sociology; sociology of emotions; mathematical sociology; history of sociology; animals and society, etc.

Despite the existence of numerous female sociologists during the first years of the twentieth century, the ASS was overwhelmingly a male club. When women were invited to participate on the annual programs it was typically as discussants rather than as major presenters (albeit the programs organized by Edward A. Ross (1914 and 1915) and William I. Thomas (1927) were more inclusive of women). Men dominated governance of the ASS during its first 25 years. Women rarely reached the inner sanctum of the ASS Executive Committee. The few who did were Emily Green Balch (1913–14), Julia Lathrop (1917–18), Grace Abbott (1920–23), Susan M. Kingsbury (1922–25), Lucile Eaves (1924–26), and Ethel Stugess Dummer (1927–30). Foreshadowing the end of what Deegan (1991) called the “dark era of patriarchal ascendancy” in American sociology, extending from 1920 to 1965, Dorothy Swaine Thomas became in 1952 the first woman elected to the ASS presidency. Since 1969, members of Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS) have lobbied for wider participation by women in governing the ASA. Subsequent female ASA presidents include Mirra Komarovsky (1973), Alice S. Rossi (1983), Matilda White Riley (1986), Joan Huber (1989), Maureen T. Hallinan (1996), Jill Quadagno (1998), and Barbara F. Reskin (2002). As of 2001, women comprised approximately 52 percent of the ASA membership.

African American sociologists also experienced variable inclusion within the ASA membership and governance structures. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois, America’s most noted and prolific African American sociologist, neither attended ASA meetings nor held any ASA office. Indeed, Du Bois was professionally ostracized due to the ideological opposition of Robert E. Park, an ASA president (1925) and an influential faculty member of the sociology department in the University of

Chicago. Park favored perspectives advocated by Booker T. Washington and this made room for limited African American participation within organized sociology. Partly in consequence, E. Franklin Frazier, with a doctorate from the University of Chicago, became – in 1948 – the first African American ASA president. Nonetheless, Frazier later recounted instances of racial discrimination at ASS meetings. Little changed during subsequent years. In 1968 the Black Caucus, led by Tillman Cothran, was organized to confront the continuing marginalization of African Americans within the ASA. As of 2001, African Americans comprised approximately 6 percent of the ASA membership. Two additional African Americans have been elected to the ASA presidency: William Julius Wilson (1990) and Troy Duster (2005). Compounding sexism with racism, no African American woman has ever been elected to the ASA presidency (Deegan 2005).

When the ASS was first proposed in 1905, Edward A. Ross, then a professor at the University of Nebraska, endorsed the idea but also wrote: “As the *American Journal of Sociology* will no doubt publish the best part of the proceedings, I see no reason for our group doing any publishing.” By 1935, however, a disgruntled faction within the ASS chafed at the editorial control exercised over the *AJS* by the University of Chicago, as well as the Chicago department’s unbroken administrative lock on the ASS office of secretary-treasurer. By a two-to-one vote at the annual business meeting in December 1935, the ASS membership established a new journal, the *American Sociological Review (ASR)* – and it remains an official ASA journal today. Of those supporting this change, Frank H. Hankins (of Smith College) was made the first editor of *ASR*, Henry P. Fairchild (of New York University) was elected ASS president, and Harold Phelps (a non-Chicagoan from Pittsburgh) was elected secretary of the Society. It was a clean sweep for the rebels (Lengermann 1979). Nonetheless, the strong Chicago influence within the ASA continued. For example, of the 25 ASA presidents elected from 1946 to 1969, fully 12 (48 percent) had earned their doctorates at Chicago. Harvard University, the only significant challenger to Chicago’s enduring

dominance, trained six (24 percent) ASA presidents during this period and seven other schools trained but one ASA president each (Kubat 1971: 582).

The 1935 “rebellion” against Chicago exemplifies numerous quarrels characterizing sociology generally and the ASA specifically, among them internal departmental conflicts between powerful professors (e.g., Talcott Parsons vs. Pitirim Sorokin at Harvard; Philip Hauser vs. Donald Bogue at Chicago); elite departments competing with each other (e.g., Chicago vs. Harvard vs. Columbia, *ad infinitum*); academics from large schools vs. small schools; so-called “pure” scientists vs. “applied” researchers; large vs. small ASA sections; radicals vs. liberals vs. conservatives, etc. The fight over Pitirim Sorokin’s nomination and election to the ASA presidency (1965) is an illuminating case study of organizational turmoil (Johnston 1987). More recently, the 1976 ASA president, Alfred McClung Lee, fought heatedly with the ASA Council and subsequently decamped to form the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), a more openly liberal, action-oriented sociological organization (and when Lee discerned that the SSSP had in his view become too much like the ASA, he again bolted to co-found the Association for Humanist Sociology). It is a curious fact that the status, prestige, and power struggles among sociologists are so little studied by a discipline in which such matters are otherwise standard inquiries.

Over the long century since the founding of the ASA, countless former sociologists have been lured away by cognate disciplinary organizations. This silent disciplinary migration includes many who are now identified as social workers, criminologists, urban planners, geographers, anthropologists, demographers, rural sociologists, prison administrators, gerontologists, statisticians, economists, political scientists, high school and community college social science teachers, and the like, who have clubbed together in their own independent groups. As a result, the ASA is neither as intellectually robust nor as professionally diverse as it might otherwise be. For the most part, the ASA today is largely an organization by and for tenured academic sociologists at large universities and elite colleges, not to

mention a modicum of researchers and administrators employed by well-endowed private foundations and large government agencies. The ASA’s professional services, programs, awards, annual meetings, special conferences, and publications directly reflect the needs and interests of this bureaucratically sophisticated, well-educated, upper-middle-class constituency.

The ASA publishes several academic serials and currently requires subscription to at least one major ASA journal as a condition of ASA membership. These serials include *American Sociological Review*, *Contemporary Sociology* (a journal of book reviews), *American Sociologist*, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *Sociology of Education*, *Teaching Sociology*, *Sociological Theory*, *Contexts*, *City and Community*, and *Sociological Methodology*. The association’s professional newsletter, *Footnotes* (begun in 1973), is distributed to all members. Additional publishing projects include the *Rose Series in Sociology* (formerly the *Rose Monograph Series*), an annual *Guide to Graduate Departments*, a bi-annual *Directory of Departments*, a monthly *Employment Bulletin*, a bi-annual *Directory of Members*, the *Final Program* for each yearly ASA meeting, and a variety of miscellaneous publications on special topics.

Day-to-day operations of the association are administered by the ASA Executive Officer, who is selected and hired by the ASA Council (the Council is itself elected by the ASA membership from a slate of candidates selected by an elected Committee on Nominations; write-in candidacies are possible, but rare; and ASA membership is essentially open to anyone willing to pay the annual dues). The first full-time ASA Executive Officer, Gresham Sykes, was hired in 1963 with offices in Washington, DC. From that point forward, the ASA executive office, as a formal bureaucratic organization in its own right – with the vested interests inherent in all such organizations – grew in size, complexity, and influence. Sally T. Hillsman, who became the ASA Executive Officer in 2002, is the ninth full-time appointee to hold the position. As of 2005, the ASA executive office included some 25 paid staff members. With the rise of the executive office, the ASA President has

become much less responsible for ordinary bureaucratic tasks and typically concentrates his or her energies on chairing the Program Committee and presiding at Council meetings. As an ongoing bureaucratic entity, the ASA executive office frequently represents the collective face of American sociology to legislators, government agencies, courts of law, private industry, media, research foundations, other non-profit associations, and to practicing sociologists and would-be sociologists. For good or ill, the ASA executive office has itself become a consequential force in shaping and promoting the public image of disciplinary sociology in the US.

It must be noted that the structure and constraints of the ASA, as an organization, are not congruent with the particular needs and goals of all sociologists as sociologists. A variety of independent organizations serve special interests and agendas not met by the ASA and include, for example, the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, Association for Humanist Sociology, Rural Sociological Association, Association of Black Sociologists, Sociologists for Women in Society, Association for the Sociology of Religion (formerly the American Catholic Sociological Society), the Harriet Martineau Sociological Society, and the Clinical Sociology Association, among many others. These organizations, some larger than others but all smaller relative to the size of the ASA, collectively represent a significant number of dedicated sociologists. Further, whereas the ASA is national in scope, several regional and state sociology organizations provide meetings and professional outlets on a more local level. Many sociologists participate in both the ASA and one (sometimes more) of the smaller sociological organizations or regional societies. Some of these organizations work in tandem, alongside the ASA, some in splendid isolation, and yet others largely within the ASA.

The history, politics, and activities of the American Sociological Association are the subject of numerous short studies and scholarly articles (see Centennial Bibliography Project Committee 2005). Two in-house histories have been sponsored by the ASA itself (Rhoades 1981; Rosich 2005), but no independent

comprehensive studies have yet appeared. A new archival depository for ASA records has been arranged at Pennsylvania State University, but few official records prior to 1950 are extant (save reports published in the *Papers and Proceedings of the American Sociological Society* and materials surviving in the personal papers of various ASS members and officers).

SEE ALSO: British Sociological Association; Chicago School; Cooley, Charles Horton; Du Bois, W. E. B.; Komarovsky, Mirra; Park, Robert E. and Burgess, Ernest W.; Parsons, Talcott; Patriarchy; Small, Albion W.; Sorokin, Pitirim A.; Sumner, William Graham; Ward, Lester Frank

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