

businesses so that each of his stories, based on interviews, shows the "human dimension" to digitization of media. One example is Scribd, which succeeded, and is rendered dramatically when two Harvard students decided to form a company, overcame lots of obstacles, and ended up with a subscription roster of over one million readers. Along the way they learned that "outside of romance [readers], there was [*sic*] only about 3 per cent of subscribers who were reading more than three books a month" (p. 328), so to cut costs on their "heavy users," they limited future subscribers to the use of three books per month, alienating those three per cent, but satisfying everybody else. The message here is clear: if you are a dedicated partisan in the book wars on the side of voluminous consumption, a subscription service will not serve you well since you become the company's liability. You like their product too much and thereby escalate their costs.

Finally, Thompson also goes through the recent history of audiobooks, the long-haul

commuter's hallowed medium and, like the more recent podcast universe, easier to take in while doing other things than "sitting down with a good book," to use the antique expression. Based on his negative evaluation of the term "mass culture"—so close to the hearts of Adorno and the Frankfurt School generally—and his similar gentle critiques of Habermas and Ricoeur, Thompson seems optimistic about social life. Perhaps this is owed in part to his extraordinary good fortune to be Giddens's student and business partner over the last 40 years, and his dual role as a scholar and publisher. His portrait of "the future of the book," a topic widely debated ever since Marshall McLuhan in the 1950s, is on balance cheering in the face of "the great technological revolution of our time" (p. 484). Future readers, whoever and however many or few there are, may read *Book Wars* either with admiration for its accuracy and thoroughness or with smiling mockery at its baseless optimism. One can only hope for the former verdict.

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## The Enduring Role of Books in Sociology Publishing

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Readers love their books. For example, in his valedictory paean, Alan Sica, former editor of *Contemporary Sociology*, concludes "There are few sensations so stimulating as the smell of a new book" (2014:781). Retired faculty can become quite lyrical about the emotionally fraught task of disposing of their book collections when they have to pack up their offices.

"Read more books" is an exhortation directed to many audiences. Advocates claim books can help parents (O'Connell 2020), prisoners, (Humphries 2019), and those struggling to endure the pandemic (New York Times 2020). Books, it is claimed, can ameliorate a variety of social ills, from

short attention spans (Lau 2020) to racial injustice (Mineo 2020).

While many important questions have been asked about both the historical and contemporary role of books since Gutenberg (Darnton 2009), in this essay we focus on a narrower set of issues, namely the evolving role of books in the field of sociology.<sup>1</sup>

Humanists continue to debate the prospects of scholarly monographs, which remain central to their academic enterprise (Allen 2017; Flaherty 2020). They have voiced concerns about the share of library

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws on a more detailed research report (Jacobs and Habinek 2022).

budgets devoted to journals and the limited audience for scholarly books. How have these trends affected sociology, where traditionally both books and articles have played a role? We suggest that books have continued to play an important role in recent years, yet the way forward remains cloudy. There are good reasons to be optimistic along with some major areas of uncertainty.

One indication of the continued importance of books in our field is that nearly every section of the ASA bestows a “best book” award along with a “best article” award, either annually or biannually, as do most of the regional sociological associations. This institutionalized system of recognition points to the broad recognition of the importance of scholarship written in book form.<sup>2</sup>

Are the vexing financials facing academic book publishers reducing the number of new titles? On the contrary, data from several sources indicate that the number of book titles published in sociology has actually grown since 2000, and especially since 2008. Our analysis of a database used by research librarians to inform purchasing decisions, compiled by GOBI Library Solutions, indicates that the number of sociological books published remained roughly steady in the early 2000s and has grown at a rate of roughly 5 percent since the Great Recession of 2008–2009. The GOBI data sociology titles range far and wide and almost surely go beyond what academic sociologists might consider representative of the discipline. Other sources of data, such as the Library of Congress sociological classification, almost certainly circumscribe sociology’s domain too narrowly. Since both sources point to an upward trend in the number of titles, however, we can tentatively offer this conclusion into evidence.<sup>3</sup>

The number of peer-reviewed journal articles published in sociology has also grown during the same time period, and at roughly similar rates. In short, despite serious protestations of publishers, the number of books published in sociology has in recent years continued to hold its own as compared to journals.

A second issue that we have considered is whether a book or an article is more likely to achieve a high degree of visibility. We focus on citations rather than sales because this is a measure of academic visibility or influence, and it is a metric that is common across articles and books. We focus in particular on very highly cited works because of the skewed nature of scientific visibility.

In one analysis, we examined citations to all of the books reviewed in *Contemporary Sociology* during the period 2014 to 2019.<sup>4</sup> Using Google Scholar citations as a metric, we found that 77 books reviewed in *Contemporary Sociology* during this time frame were cited more than 500 times, and 35 books were cited more than 1,000 times. We compared this to citations of articles in 32 prominent sociology journals during the period 2012 to 2017 (books are often published a year or two before the reviews appear in CS.) On the journal side of the ledger, 18 articles were cited more than 1,000 times and 74 were cited over 500 times.

We have conducted similar comparisons between books and journal articles for books reviewed in *Contemporary Sociology* in 2010, 2000, and 1990, and a similar pattern emerges.

There are many questions that can be raised regarding the definition of the relevant universe of books and articles, but we feel confident in suggesting that books at least hold their own among the most-cited studies in the field.

A third question that we asked concerned diversity and alternative routes to academic prominence. Publishing as an industry has been criticized for its disproportionate reliance on white editors and authors (So and Wezerek 2020; see also Jiménez and Beckert 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The ASA Section on Drugs in Society offers several career achievement awards but none that points specifically to the publication of a book. The only other exceptions are the sections on Sociological Practice and Public Sociology, and Teaching and Learning in Sociology. (See also Allen and Parsons’s [2006] analysis of the social process of formal award systems.)

<sup>3</sup> Lauris Olson, Social Science Librarian at the University of Pennsylvania, greatly assisted this analysis.

<sup>4</sup> The list of books reviewed and submitted was kindly provided by Michael Sauder, former editor of *Contemporary Sociology*.

Again, the question for us is how these broader trends may apply to the field of sociology. We analyzed the publication record of Jessie Bernard Award winners and the Association for Black Sociologists' Joseph Sandy Himes Award. Note that both of these are career achievement awards and thus honorees could have made their mark via publishing books, journal articles, or a combination of both. The question here is whether books or journal articles have been more receptive venues for women and minorities.

The top-cited publication was a book for 19 of 31 Jessie Bernard Award recipients and for 17 of 22 Joseph Sandy Himes Awardees. In a more comprehensive review, we found that 14 Jessie Bernard awardees mostly wrote books, 14 mostly articles, and for three honorees the score was pretty much even. Among Joseph Sandy Himes award recipients, 14 mostly wrote books and 8 mostly articles.

We are thus in a position to tell a set of interrelated "good news" stories about the role of books in the field. Books continue to be recognized in nearly every intellectual corner of sociology as representing a form of scholarship worthy of academic accolades. Books are not disappearing but instead apparently have been growing in number. Books appear frequently (and in all likelihood disproportionately) among the most-cited contributions to the field, and they have represented an important (but not exclusive) route to academic prominence for women and minority scholars.

### Future Prospects

We see both opportunities and risks for books going forward. The biggest opportunity is greater public interest in sociological issues since 2020, a year that saw the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. The COVID-19 crisis shined bright lights on deep structural problems facing our society. The term "essential workers" became a common way to refer to those who continued to commute to their places of work and to face exposure to the virus. Yet many of these essential workers struggled to survive on a minimum wage that could no longer lift a full-time worker out of poverty. Others in

service and hospitality jobs found themselves out of work. The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of a society with unequal access to medical care, especially for marginalized communities and undocumented immigrants. Inequality, which had reached unprecedented levels before the pandemic, metastasized as those in secure middle-class jobs padded their savings accounts. At the other end of the spectrum, millions still face the risk of eviction. It highlighted the vulnerability of undocumented residents.

Black Lives Matter brought renewed public attention to racial injustice. After the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014, the Black Lives Matter movement arose to focus attention on police violence against African Americans. While many other cases were identified in the interim, Black Lives Matter coalesced into a national and multiracial movement in the summer of 2020 following the video of George Floyd's murder. The confluence of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter quickly extended public interest in racial injustice from policing to public health, educational disparities, racial gaps in wealth accumulation, and residential segregation.

And of course COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter are by no means the only topics where sociological concerns now intersect with public interest; consider also the resurgence in violence, the continuing evolution in our understanding of sexuality, the role of social media and other technologies in our lives, the challenge of climate change, and immigration, among many other pressing issues. In short, once public interest returns to the public sphere, there is no shortage of social problems that sociologists are able to illuminate.

The concerns that have come to the fore since the start of the COVID-19 crisis and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter are topics sociologists have much to say about. The medium of books may represent an important avenue for bringing sociological research and scholarship to the general public. After four years of the Trump administration and two years of COVID-19, we wonder whether we might be entering a period in which sociological books become best sellers in the way they were in the 1960s.

If public interest can be viewed as increasing opportunities on the "demand side" of

the equation, greater pressure to produce “public sociology” also has the potential to increase the supply of sociological books. Ever since Michael Burawoy’s Presidential address on public sociology, conversations about the need to connect sociological scholarship with a broader public have continued to grow. We may now be entering a happy confluence of greater public attention coinciding with greater interest on the part of sociologists of reaching that broader audience.

On the other hand, there are also risks for book publishing. University presses remain under severe financial pressure. Among the solutions they have deployed has been to publish just enough books that sell well to cover the academic books that typically lose money. But there are only so many cookbooks and books of regional interest that university presses can muster to cover their operating costs. There is a risk that the resourceful strategies devised and deployed over the last 15 years may not sustain them for much longer.

Another risk is the advent of open-access publishing. This is a development that began in the journal sphere with the legitimate concern to make academic journals more widely accessible not only in the United States but around the world. But while this model has many challenges, even for journals (there are costs in publishing that need to be covered), there is a bigger risk for books. At present, a small number of highly profitable books cover the cost of many books that do not fully cover their production costs. This is a cost-shifting system, sometimes called a tent-pole model (a few high-grossing books represent the poles that keep the entire tent aloft). But open-access means books would be accessible for free. If academic books were published without the opportunity for profit, the poles would no longer exist to prop up the tent. Where will trade books and textbooks fit into this story? Professional societies like the ASA need to contribute to the conversation so the future of books will not be an afterthought.

Sociology is fortunate to have the journal *Contemporary Sociology* devoted to the review of books. Given the share of high-impact publications represented by books, however, there could be, and should be, more

opportunities for book-centered intellectual exchange.

One simple way to expand the role of books in sociology would be to increase the number of author-meets-critics sessions at the ASA meetings. The annual meetings typically include only a handful of such sessions. A book is far more likely to win a section award than it is to be featured in an author-meets-critics session. The easiest way to expand this would be for sections to provide a slot for each award-winning book. We offer this suggestion as a way to begin a broader conversation on the role of books, journal articles, and perhaps other publication channels as well in the field of sociology.

Sociology is a broad field, and its practitioners employ an extensive toolkit of techniques to study a wide range of topics. In this context, the enduring variety of publication modalities is consistent with the range of methodologies and domains of scholarship. We hope this brief essay contributes to a continuing conversation about the role of books in our field and stimulates further inquiries into ways that sociologists use books and journal articles to communicate with diverse audiences.

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