

## **The Interdisciplinary Hybrid: Some Discussions on the State of Political Sociology**

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Political sociology has often been considered as a link between the disciplines of political science and sociology (Sartori 1969; Rathore 1986; for a more recent historical overview, see Mitra and Pehl 2010 and Botelho 2014). Yet, scholars disagree on the state of this linkage and the extent of the field's relevance to either of these disciplines. In this brief article, we present how some scholars discuss the field of political sociology to provide some points for further discussion among the general membership of the Committee on Political Sociology.

### **What Is Political Sociology?**

Professional organizations and major statements from leaders in the field have defined political sociology, albeit vaguely. According to the Political Sociology section of the American Sociological Association (ASA), the study of political sociology encompasses the “sociological understanding of political phenomena.”<sup>2</sup> The Committee on Political Sociology (CPS), a multidisciplinary organization that joins the political sociology sections of both the International Sociological Association (ISA) and the International Political Science Association (IPSA), has yet to offer a stronger definition. CPS organization was born out of the idea that political sociology should be about “the interrelationships between political and social forces in the light of transnational and interdisciplinary comparisons.”<sup>3</sup> According to its current statutes, it is an

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<sup>2</sup> <http://asapoliticalsoc.org/section-information/>, accessed June 17, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> <http://rc06.ipsa.org/pages/About-us> Accessed October 25, 2016.

organization designed “to establish a community of scholars in universities and elsewhere who have scientific interests in examining the relationship between political and sociological phenomena.”<sup>4</sup> The massive *Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies and Globalization*, edited by Thomas Janoski and colleagues and published in 2005, offers 32 chapters and over 800 pages in its attempt to provide an “integrated overview of major theories and findings” in political sociology (Janoski et al. 2005: 4). Perhaps wisely, political sociology itself is not specifically defined beyond the vague, “social bases of politics” (4).

### **The Interdisciplinary Hybrid**

Sartori (1969) argued that “political sociology” is a consciously interdisciplinary enterprise that should be set apart from other society-and-politics studies. Sartori (1969) thought that, to understand what political sociology is, we should first distinguish it from the “sociology of politics.” The sociology of politics is a mere “sociological reduction” (Sartori 1969: 200) that “unmistakably indicates a sub-field” of sociology (Sartori 1969: 195). There is nothing inherently interdisciplinary about a sociology of politics. From this, we can surmise that the ASA’s Political Sociology section definition – “sociological understanding of political phenomena” – places political sociology as a subfield of sociology. Hicks (1995: 1219) argued that the relationship between political sociology (which implies that it is a subfield of sociology) and political science has been called “deeply interdependent” and very similar in “metatheory and method” (Sartori

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4 <http://rc06.ipasa.org/pages/G%29-Statute>, accessed October 25, 2016. Note also that the Political Sociology research network of the European Sociological Association wrote: “The ESA Political Sociology research network is a site for debate on the ongoing transformation of political order and authority in Europe and beyond.” <http://www.europeanpoliticalsociology.eu/>. Accessed June 22, 2014.

1969: 198 made a similar point). Hicks (1995) went on to write that “political sociologists live off political scientists’ reprocessings of politically raw sociological materials” (1220)<sup>5</sup>.

What makes the field of political sociology special is that it is, or should be, a combination of the disciplines of sociology and political science. “Political sociology,” Sartori (1969: 200) wrote, “is an *interdisciplinary hybrid* attempting to combine social and political explanatory variables” [emphasis in original]. One can define interdisciplinarity, in its general sense, as the synthesis of disciplinary research that produces emergent knowledge (e.g. Wagner et al. 2011; Jacobs 2014).

Is political sociology an interdisciplinary hybrid? First, it would be good to know if the field remains central to its disciplinary partners. Political sociology was once a vibrant area of political science and sociology, one that inspired a number of analyses of its present and speculations on its future (Sartori 1969; Botelho 2014). Today, there is little agreement about the popularity and importance of political sociology to either sociology or political science. Using data from the late 1990s, Hicks et al. argued that political sociology was a major area in sociology (2005: 1)<sup>6</sup>. Hicks et al. (2005: 1) argued that the field of political sociology has been “stimulated” by several “processes and theoretical transformations.” However, van Deth (2010: 106) argued that “political sociology is no longer treated as a very important subdiscipline in sociology or political science”. According to a recent book on the “state of the art” in political science, “Political Sociology, once a leading or flagship subdiscipline in the evolution of political science, no longer plays such a central disciplinary role” (Stein and Trent 2010: 7). On the popularity of

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<sup>5</sup> Hicks went on to co-edit the massive *Handbook of Political Sociology* (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Hicks et al. (2005) write, “in 1999, 17 to 20 percent of the articles in the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review* and about 20 percent of the books reviewed by *Contemporary Sociology* ... dealt with political sociology” (1). They do not write about how they derived those figures.

political sociology nowadays, van Deth (2010: 105) wrote that “The heydays of political sociology are over.”

In the 1960s the field was envisioned to be an interdisciplinary hybrid, but as of the 2010s, political sociology may not have integrated the disciplines after all. As of 1969, Sartori surmised that political sociology had not lived up to its interdisciplinary potential: “the establishment of political sociology as a real interdisciplinary approach, as a balanced cross-fertilization between sociologists and political scientists, is more a task for the future than a current achievement” (200). Political science and sociology share some concepts, but mutual adoptions of concepts are rare and slow (Sigelman 2010). As Sigelman (2010) points out in his comprehensive analysis of the conceptual relationships between sociology and political science - “despite [political sociology’s] historic ties to political science, the two are by no means coterminous” (884). L. S. Rathore (1986: 119), writing in the mid-1980s, thought that the field of political sociology was vague and adrift: “Despite the flurry of interest and exuberance of social scientists, the precincts of political sociology are still vaguely defined, and its sub-themes flow out in all directions, having an endlessly varying form.” Writing almost 25 years later, van Deth (2010: 105) argued that major concepts in political sociology became their own subfields, leaving political sociology without much focus or direction.

If political sociology is not the great interdisciplinary hybrid as envisioned by Sartori (1969), it could be due to the trend toward specialization in science. Specialization – a consequence of many factors in the organization of higher education, academia and the proliferation of research outlets – is an ineluctable force when science is the goal and complexity becomes the norm (Sartori 1969: 197). Writing about the negative consequences of specialization for the development of interdisciplinarity, Jacobs (2014: 4) argued that specialization is a natural consequence of

managing growing output of scientific knowledge: “With over twenty-eight thousand peer-refereed journals currently being published and hundreds of scholarly societies convening regular meetings, no new organizational arrangement for academia can hope to avoid some form of specialization.”

### **What Now?**

Research Committees of major academic professional associations can be drivers of positive change in their field of study. The Committee on Political Sociology – comprised of RCs of sociology and political science – has a long, rich history that we all have inherited. We can build on this history and do more to encourage research in our field. We, the authors, wish that this short note, published in the CPS newsletter, will spur continued discussions on the state of the field and its future. One fundamental question we would like scholars to discuss is, “What is political sociology today?” We should also like a debate on the extent and climate of intellectual communication between sociology and political science. If political sociology’s interdisciplinary potential was, in the 1960s, “more a task for the future than a current achievement” (Sartori 1969: 200), as of the 2010s, how have we fared in this task? We hope for a vibrant discussion from many voices across the disciplines and across the world.

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