Since ... people variously located in the social structure differ in their appraisal of a particular situation as a social problem, we should be prepared to find ... that the “solutions” proposed for coping with these problems also differ.

Robert Merton and Robert Nisbet, *Contemporary Social Problems*, ix–x

1.1 A Sociologist’s World?

At first glance, the 1961 collection *Contemporary Social Problems* is indistinguishable from dozens of similarly named textbooks. The volume, edited by Robert Merton and Robert Nisbet, was the latest installment in a long-running genre of works aiming to orient American sociology undergraduates to a range of “social problems.” Like its predecessors, the Merton and Nisbet collection featured a chapter-by-chapter march through a succession of named problems such as crime, drug addiction, and family disorganization. So the 1961 textbook was, in its form, unremarkable.

But this was no ordinary social problems textbook. The first clue was authorship: Columbia’s Robert Merton and the Berkeley-trained UC Riverside Dean Robert Nisbet were both theorists, known for grappling with European intellectual traditions. Merton was no stranger to empirical work, but his famous alliance with Paul Lazarsfeld at Columbia’s Bureau of Applied Social Research epitomized – even symbolized – a postwar shift away from sociology’s commitment to social problems in a reformist key. For his part, Nisbet’s only other book, *The Quest for Community*, was a dense and idiosyncratic work of intellectual history. In short, Merton and Nisbet were among the least likely American sociologists to take up the genre.
A second clue, linked to the first, was the editors’ first-paragraph claim that a comprehensive theory of social problems was still lacking. What unified their book’s chapters was merely a “theoretical orientation.” That common framework was a loose-fitting version of Merton’s functionalism: The volume’s contributors, and the editors themselves, stressed consequences over causes, pointed to latent social problems, and placed “systemic interdependence” at the center of analysis.¹

The book’s table of contents was the third clue. Many of the usual problems were represented, with chapters on juvenile delinquency, mental disorders, and race and ethnic relations. But there were a number of unusual inclusions – chapters that had rarely, if ever, appeared in social problems textbooks. One was devoted to traffic and transportation, and another, dropped in the third edition (1971), to the “military establishment.”² Most surprisingly, Merton and Nisbet commissioned a “disaster” chapter, focused on calamities such as tornadoes, floods, and earthquakes, which seem only glancingly social.

The 1961 collection was, in short, a surprising intervention. The phrase itself, “social problems,” was a token for an approach to sociology from which Merton and Nisbet had distanced themselves. The “social problems” course, the “social problems” textbook: These were the hallmarks of an older, “amateur” phase of the discipline’s history, the kind of sociology that Merton and his Harvard teacher Talcott Parsons had, after World War II, helped expel to the margins. The whiff of reform and Midwestern starch hung about the phrase. The discipline’s new elite, forged in shared wartime service, favored systematic theory, sophisticated quantitative methods, and value-free scientific rigor – very much like its counterpart in economics.

It was around this time, indeed, that some of these new-style economists – notably Gary Becker – were claiming rights over those social problems Merton and Nisbet meant to make their own. So the appearance of Contemporary Social Problems in 1961 – on the edge of the decade’s social unrest – was a revival of a peculiar kind. Merton and Nisbet, having won the battle for the discipline, were now claiming the vanquished tradition’s core domain. They were likely aware of the economists’ nascent and still-marginal enterprise. But their aim was redemptive, not defensive: to introduce sociological theory into a social problems literature that was,

¹ Merton and Nisbet, Contemporary Social Problems, vii, viii, x.
² Merton and Nisbet, Contemporary Social Problems, 3rd ed.
in their view, theoretically impoverished and hopelessly fragmented. Economists interested in “noneconomic” problems would have endorsed the critique, but their remedy was of a different, and more auspicious, character.

Though these economists were not cited, references to psychologists abound throughout the book. The relative prominence of psychology can be explained by its more constructive relationship with sociology, as exemplified by the expansion of interdisciplinary social psychology after the war. But arguably more important still was what Ellen Herman has described as a shift “toward a larger jurisdiction for psychology.” With deep roots in the cross-disciplinary projects of the war, that shift marked psychology’s increased involvement with a wide range of social problems during the early postwar decades. The discipline’s protean character encouraged its broad application, and helped to spread its language to the other social sciences. By 1961, psychology’s expanded remit had registered with sociologists studying social problems, as an individualistic complement to their approach. The result was that psychologists’ efforts to expand their jurisdiction over social problems found a more receptive audience, at least initially, than did economists.

The appearance of psychologists and, more tentatively, economists on the social problems terrain was, in its way, a reminder that their study has always had a double character. The vocabulary of “social problems”

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3 Merton and Nisbet’s charge was itself, arguably, unfair: The prewar social problems textbooks, and other works by their authors, were steeped in theory – albeit of a distinctive mode (“history of social thought”), with its own touchstones, referents, and Spencerian residues. See Turner and Turner, Impossible Science, 121–28; and Hinkle, Developments in American Sociological Theory, 7–12, 186–90. Still, Erwin Smigel, in the preface to his 1971 Handbook on the Study of Social Problems, admitted that “[w]e have not been able to find a unifying theory for the study of social problems.” Smigel, “Preface,” vii.


5 Herman, Romance of American Psychology, chap. 11. Herman’s title, as she notes herself, is inspired from Abraham Maslow’s title of part 1 in Toward a Psychology of Being.

6 On the protean nature of psychology and its implications for the discipline’s relevance to a wide range of issues, see Capshew, Psychologists on the March, 54.

7 See Merton’s comments on the “bridge-building game” between the two disciplines, delivered at a 1955 conference on juvenile delinquency: “The tactic that could be most helpful, it seems to me, would be for us to join together and fuse our respective sensitivities from time to time but, in the main, to continue to develop the conceptions most pertinent to each field.” Merton, “Concluding Comments and an Example,” 79.
developed primarily within sociology, but the study of the problems themselves was always and already a transdisciplinary endeavor. Sociologists have claimed the social problems label, but scholarship on the problems of society – the alternative phrase we adopt to signal this ecumenism – has featured the other social sciences too. In the decades after Merton and Nisbet’s volume, sociology’s always-partial claims for jurisdiction, if anything, weakened further.

The social problems literature in sociology had been ushered in fifty years earlier, in *Sociology and Modern Social Problems*, a 1910 “elementary text” authored by Missouri’s Charles Ellwood and designed for sociology courses centered on “current social problems.” The volume treated the family as the main locus of social challenge, though a handful of late chapters addressed a series of related domains: population growth, immigration, the “negro problem,” the “problem of the city,” crime, and “poverty and pauperism.” The text’s basic orientation – even its reformist politics – would remain a staple of the social problems textbook for decades. The volume’s chapter-per-problem format as well as its catalog of named problems were embraced by the many competing texts published in the 1920s and 1930s to service sociology’s undergraduate curriculum. Ellwood himself became the chief interwar proponent of “social problems” as the discipline’s anchoring orientation.

American sociology was, in organizational terms at least, built on the idea of “social problems.” The phrase supplied a practical scheme to organize the would-be discipline. Even its subfields and journals began to mimic the problem-by-problem “sociology of” schematic pattern. The “social problems” construct, in short, helped sociology establish its distinctive identity – and its institutional foothold in the US academy. By the 1930s, however, advocates for a more rigorous, and resolutely quantitative, science of sociology took aim at the social problems paradigm. They lumped its textbooks and leading figures, Ellwood included, together with social work, public edification, settlement houses, and moralizing do-goodism. This Depression-era assault on the social problems approach was, in its way, new.

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Introduction

But the rhetoric of science – the boundary work with reform – had been a staple of the proto-discipline from its late nineteenth-century origins. What made the 1930s different was that sociologists turned on themselves. The rhetorical demarcation had, in preceding decades, existed in uneasy admixture with ongoing reform commitments. Now advocates of a scientific sociology drew the border to exclude not just “outsiders” such as Christian temperance activists and social workers, but also those fellow sociologists insufficiently weaned from the discipline’s reformist past. The sometimes-belligerent campaign was waged by evangelists for statistical methods. Ellwood and his reform-minded allies answered in kind. There was an organizational flashpoint – the mid-1930s fight over the American Sociological Society (ASS) and the Chicago-based American Journal of Sociology (AJS). At the time, some of the discipline’s oldest and best-established outposts were scattered across the country’s non-elite universities and colleges, with particular strength in Catholic institutions. Many of these programs retained an ameliorist orientation, with close ties to social reform movements – Christian and nominally secular – long

12 Sociology, together with its barely differentiated siblings in the American Social Science Association, was baptized in applied social reform during the last decades of the nineteenth century. There is an extensive literature on the proto-discipline’s engagements with, and resistance to, “reform” in all its typical (and often feminized) meanings. On the late nineteenth-century context, see, for example, Furner, Advocacy and Objectivity and Haskell, Emergence of Professional Social Science, esp. chaps. 9–10. On the settlement house movement, see, for example, Deegan, Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School and Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, “Back to the Future.” On the social survey movement, see, for example, O’Connor, Poverty Knowledge, 26–44 and Gordon, “Social Survey Movement and Sociology.” On social work in particular, see Lengermann and Niebrugge, “Thrice Told.”

13 Calhoun, “Sociology in America,” 10–19. Early figures in the discipline, such as Lester Ward, Albion Small, and Franklin Giddings, had made claims for sociology’s scientific character, even as they remained variously entwined with reform groups and initiatives. Second-generation sociologists like W. I. Thomas and Robert Park – indeed, Ellwood himself – adopted a similar rhetoric of scientific distance, likewise belied in practice by their on-the-ground alliances with philanthropists and Social Gospel reformers. The main strategy to square the science/reform circle – a tack also adopted by the social problems textbook authors of the 1920s – was to insist on a division of labor: The sociologist supplies the analytical guidance, while the reformers and politicians are on the hook for implementation. Turner, “Origins of ‘Mainstream Sociology’ and Other Issues,” 56–58.

14 The backdrop to the struggle was mounting frustration with sociology’s apparent public ineffectuality as symbolized by its virtual exclusion from the New Deal bureaucracies that employed so many economists and political scientists. See Camic, “On Edge.”

15 See, for example, Ellwood, Methods in Sociology.
after Chicago’s department had rejected its reformist roots. In 1936, they won control of the ASS and launched a rival, ASS-sponsored flagship, the *American Sociological Review* (ASR). It was, however, a Pyrrhic victory: Soon enough the ASR itself became a platform for the very brand of rigorous, quantitative empiricism that Ellwood and his allies had earlier resisted.\(^\text{16}\)

The Depression-era struggle over the discipline’s future was not, however, resolved by the manifestos for quantification penned by advocates of a more scientific sociology. The key factors, instead, were generational turnover and World War II.\(^\text{17}\) By the end of the war, when the academic job market picked up in earnest, many of the quantitative insurgents were nearing retirement. The result was a vacuum in disciplinary leadership that a younger cohort – figures such as Samuel Stouffer and Robert Merton – soon filled. The wartime mobilization was decisive for a number of mutually reinforcing reasons: Shared service in Washington and overseas, with all its agency-spawning cross-pollination, helped to connect young sociologists with each other and with like-minded social scientists from other disciplines. The team-based work itself, some of it employing new survey methods, was widely perceived as a down payment on a postwar social science of on-the-cusp promise.

There were other factors. Some members of the new elite, including Parsons (an erstwhile economist) and Lazarsfeld (an applied psychologist), were disciplinary outsiders with few commitments to prewar American sociology. There was, too, explicit postwar Congressional concern (buoyed by natural scientists) about the social sciences’ alleged reformism, even before the “social”/“socialism” conflation became an early Cold War staple.\(^\text{18}\) The post–World War II upstarts were, moreover, over-represented at Ivy League schools, maintained close ties to the New York foundation

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16 Lengermann, “Founding of the *American Sociological Review*”; Turner and Turner, *The Impossible Science*, 60–62, 81 n23; Abbott, *Department and Discipline*, 106–17; and Bannister, *Sociology and Scientism*, chaps. 14–15. As Lengermann’s meticulous anatomy makes clear, the conflict was multi-dimensional, though it centered on a populist revolt against a perceived elite. The targets of the populists’ ire included the Chicago department – in all its methodological diversity – as well as the discipline’s leading evangelists for “scientific” quantification.


18 Solovey, “Riding Natural Scientists’ Coattails.”
world, and served as key brokers in the government/foundation patronage network of the 1950s.\footnote{On the early Cold War brokerage and patronage networks, see Crowther-Heyck, “Patrons of the Revolution” and Solovey, \textit{Shaky Foundations}, chaps. 2–3.}

The relevant point is that sociology’s “east coast fraternity,” hitched to a cross-disciplinary movement to accent the science in social science, had displaced sociology’s already-battered, teaching-oriented majority.\footnote{Abbott and Sparrow, “Hot War, Cold War,” 296. The standard story of mid-century American sociology treats the changes outlined here as (using the department shorthands) a displacement of Chicago by Harvard and Columbia. Chicago, in these accounts, is treated as a bastion of textured and qualitative empiricism then smothered by an alliance of quantitative technicians and high functionalists at Harvard and Columbia. This account is caricatural. Columbia’s department, for instance, was already prominent decades before the fateful 1941 meeting of Merton and Lazarsfeld. For its part, the interwar Chicago department was both more plural, and less dominant, than the typical interwar account allows. (As Andrew Abbott has shown, the idea of the “Chicago School” was a retroactive creation of the early 1950s, when the department briefly embodied the traits it projected onto its past. Abbott, \textit{Department and Discipline}, chap. 2.) But the main problem with the Chicago-Harvard-Columbia emplotment is that most of the country’s interwar departments and programs, and many of its sociologists, are left out.}

Clearly, the “postwar settlement,” in its paradigmatic mix of survey methods and functional theory, was never accepted by the full discipline.\footnote{Steinmetz, “American Sociology before and after World War II,” 339.} But the social problems tradition, in particular, was widely discredited.\footnote{In a soon-famous 1943 \textit{AJS} study, a young C. Wright Mills surveyed interwar social problems textbooks to sketch out what he called American sociology’s “common style of thought.” He treated the books (over thirty of them) as a proxy for the discipline’s “professional ideology” – as a more-or-less faithful register of its commitments. The texts, he added, are “empirically confused,” fragmentary, and indifferent to structural patterns – and thereby leave out the “larger problems of social structure.” The typical sociologist, in Mills’ wartime portrait, was provincial, small-minded, and Babbitt-like. Mills, “Professional Ideology of Social Pathologists,” 165–66. A similarly caustic account, published two years later, came from criminologist Edwin Sutherland: “The textbooks display a minimum of abstraction and a maximum of the commonplace.” Sutherland, “Social Pathology,” 430. See also Emil Bend and Martin Vogelfanger’s quarter-century textbook survey, “New Look at Mills’ Critique.”} Indeed, it served as a symbolic and field-defining rejected past. The movement to remake sociology as a science was won, in other words, through a series of repudiations, articulated in a litany of pejoratives: speculative, edifying, reformist, Christian, and impressionistic. Methodological rigor and theoretical sophistication were the proposed substitutes. For the theory, the Ivy departments turned to European sociology as an alternative genealogy, with such remarkable success that the field’s classical pantheon was – after
the war – almost completely repopulated by European figures like Max Weber and Emile Durkheim.\footnote{See, for example, Connell, "Why is Classical Theory Classical?" and Scaf, "Max Weber and the Social Sciences."}

The discipline’s new, Eastern seaboard mainstream did not, crucially, rule out problem-oriented work. Indeed, many of its core commitments – around methodological rigor and theory-building, for example – were forged in the wartime mobilization. The lessons of the war, in turn, helped guide the self-identified “behavioral sciences” movement among sociologists and other social scientists during the early Cold War: Problem-oriented work, funded by foundation or government patrons, was especially well suited to the large-scale, team-based empirical projects that general theory-building required.\footnote{The best overview of the “behavioral sciences” movement – the self-understood clustering of sociologists, social psychologists, and political scientists (the latter with their own, complementary “behavioralism” moniker) in the early Cold War, with participation from some anthropologists and a handful of economists – remains Crowther-Heyck, \textit{Herbert A. Simon}, chap. 5. For a history of the label including the crucial role of the modern Ford Foundation, see Pooley, "‘Not Particularly Felicitous’ Phrase.”} So work on problems, even those within the traditional social problems array, was perfectly compatible with the postwar formation – even if, in practice, the early Cold War mix of projects was heavy on overseas propaganda and morale topics. The point is that applied work was welcomed into the house of the ascendant behavioral sciences while the meliorist social problems tradition was not.\footnote{This distinction helps explain our interpretative difference with Arnold Rose. In his posthumous 1971 history of social problems research, Rose discerned a drop-off of sociological interest in the interwar period, with a postwar revival linked to the war’s boost to applied research. Rose, "History and Sociology of the Study of Social Problems," 7–9. Our own review of the primary and secondary literature, however, suggests that the interwar period represented the heyday of self-conscious sociological engagement with “social problems” – and that, by the early postwar years, that tradition was marginalized. Rose’s postwar narrative conflates a broader problem orientation, or openness to applied work, with the reformist social problems tradition.}

The Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) was founded in 1951 as a protest against the postwar marginality of that meliorist tradition.\footnote{On the SSSP, see Skura, “Constraints on a Reform Movement” and Abbott, \textit{Department and Discipline}, 78–79.} The new group openly defined itself against the behavioral sciences vanguard. Its aim was to shelter a reformist alternative to the apolitical mainstream by then ensconced in the ASS leadership. The SSSP’s founders, and its early membership, were largely drawn from the same Midwestern departments.
that had long incubated the discipline's undergraduate substrate.\textsuperscript{27} Especially in its first decade, the SSSP was the organizational redoubt for the discipline's half-vanquished social problems tradition.

The SSSP was a backlash organization. The group took aim at the rising generation of Eastern seaboard sociologists who had refined and tested new quantitative methods, as well as affirmed the primacy of disciplinary issues – taken as “scientific” problems – over the older, reform-tainted social problems formulation. But the SSSP was not, by its own self-definition, bounded by a putative “social problems” subfield. The group, instead, represented an alternative – and besieged – orientation toward sociology as a whole. It was fitting, then, that Alvin Gouldner, Merton's former student, delivered the group’s presidential address at its annual meeting in 1961.\textsuperscript{28} The speech was an unbridled attack on the postwar sociological establishment. Gouldner assailed sociologists’ claims to value freedom, in a line of critique that would – by the end of the decade – find wide appeal among student protesters.\textsuperscript{29} The mantle of objectivity, to Gouldner, was a license to neglect real human problems in the service of professional self-interest. “In return for a measure of autonomy and social support,” he wrote, “many social scientists have surrendered their critical impulses.” The “dominant drift” of American sociology, he concluded, was a self-chosen segregation, a moral abnegation.\textsuperscript{30} The antiseptic detachment of Merton and Nisbet’s \textit{Contemporary Social Problems}, published the same year, was a case in point.

By the early 1960s, then, the discipline's erstwhile social problems tradition had weakened, and alternative bids for the domain were gathering momentum. The SSSP claimed the interwar legacy, though with a leftward, minoritarian pitch. That claim was not, however, honored by the postwar mainstream.

Over the subsequent, turbulent decade, American sociology settled into a

\textsuperscript{27} The founders enlisted the University of Chicago’s department as a symbolic ally, with cooperation from notable Chicago figures Ernest W. Burgess (the SSSP’s first president) and Herbert Blumer (its third), Skura, “Constraints on a Reform Movement,” 71. Alfred McClung Lee was, however, the organization’s real leader, and he assumed, from the beginning, a defiant posture toward the discipline’s elites. Lee, based at Brooklyn College, positioned his pugilistic 1954 presidential address as a David-and-Goliath rejoinder to Harvard’s Samuel Stoufer’s speech as ASS president the year before. Lee, “Sociologists in an Integrating Society.”

\textsuperscript{28} Gouldner, “Anti-Minotaur.”

\textsuperscript{29} If the social problems tradition had supplied, for the early postwar elites, a useful symbolic contrast, the idea of an establishment-cozy “mainstream” furnished something similar for post-1968 sociologist-dissidents. See Calhoun and VanAntwerpen, “Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Hierarchy.”

\textsuperscript{30} Gouldner, “Anti-Minotaur,” 206, 207.
pattern of joint custody of the social problems terrain. The social movement activism of the early 1960s, at places such as Greensboro and Port Huron, had mushroomed into nationwide protest and unrest – including conservative backlash – by the decade’s end. Many of the demonstrations and disturbances centered on the “classic” social problems: race relations, urban life, crime, the family, poverty, education, and war. The political system registered the public clamor around these issues, by way of campaigns, commissions, policy proposals, programs, and legislation. The qualified interventionism of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society platform was only the most visible stimulus.

One result was an efflorescence of sociological work on the conventional social problems, some of it sponsored by government agencies and the big foundations themselves. On the heels of the vast postwar expansion of the US university system, and sociology in particular, the discipline produced a massive wave of scholarship – much of it consciously policy-relevant. The 1960s unrest helped to yoke the behavioral sciences – the sociological elite included – to domestic problems. The RAND Corporation’s turn from war-gaming to urban poverty was, in that decade, a highly visible instance. Radical interventions, allied with the New Left student movement and growing black militancy, cohabitated with the cross-tabulated sobriety of the discipline’s mainstream. This was, taken as a whole, a lively postscript to Merton and Nisbet’s improbable claim on the discipline’s social problems tradition.

But the main result of the 1960s for sociology was, if anything, the unraveling of the discipline’s claim to sovereignty over the “social problems” domain. By the end of the decade, sociology’s hold on social problems had weakened. The fall-off looked steeper still by the close of the twentieth century, at least as registered in political and policy impact. By contrast, psychologists and economists won a larger jurisdiction for their disciplines in the wake of the 1960s. Psychologists benefited from the growing belief that problems of society could be approached with the techniques of individual diagnosis, while economists capitalized on the pervasiveness of the market metaphor. More generally, their work seemed congruent with the intellectual assumptions of the last third of the twentieth century. In Daniel Rodgers’ words, the disciplines contributed to and built upon “conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire.”

31 Light, From Warfare to Welfare.
32 For a merciless account of sociology’s general loss of policy influence in the two decades after 2000, see Turner, “More American Sociology Seeks to Become a Politically-Relevant Discipline.”
33 Rodgers, Age of Fracture, 3.