

The
Sociologist

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On the Cover: Asian boy taking the Oath of Citizenship, circa 1950-1960. Source: United States Customs and Immigration Services History Office and Library.

Write for *The Sociologist*.

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The Mall is Dead, Long Live the Mall

Briana Pocratsky

I prepared for the obligatory gift-giving of the holiday season by visiting three malls in the suburbs of Washington D.C. I planned to check-off all of the names on my shopping list and not wait until the last minute to find gifts (for once). I did not find many gifts at the malls and instead relied on Amazon Prime to deliver gifts with a few days to spare; however, I was surprised that the malls were busy. The hustle and bustle that I experienced seemed to counter the dominant media narrative of dying and dead malls in the U.S.

Media reports of major retailers, such as Sears, Macy's, and JCPenney, closing their doors have become a regular occurrence. These closures have fed a narrative that the death of the mall—the large enclosed shopping center—is near in this age of online shopping and minimalist millennials. The closing of major anchor stores is indicative of, or at least often conflated with, the death of the traditional mall itself. The oft-used phrase is typically paired with ominous photographs or videos of empty stores and in some cases abandoned buildings. For example, the website deadmalls.com is dedicated to archiving the death of malls across the U.S. with stories and images. Once synonymous with the image of a booming postwar society characterized by flourishing capitalism, unbounded American dreams, and the assertion of the individual through mass consumption, malls now seem to be a remnant of a bygone era.

The Life of the Indoor Shopping Mall

While indoor shopping centers first appeared in the U.S. as early as the first half of the 19th century, large-scale enclosed suburban shopping centers characterized as “the mall” today did not appear until much later (O'Malley 2016). Historian Lizabeth Cohen (1996) explains that in the 1940s and 1950s, there was a large shift in the population distribution of American citizens as predominantly white

families began moving into newly developing suburban areas. With only a small number of local shops located in town centers, these newly developing suburbs were unable to keep-up with the growing demands of a larger population. Many people living in the suburbs had to make trips to nearby cities to buy products until developers began to take advantage of the residents' growing need for a shopping center. Cohen (1996: 1052) describes the emergence of the new postwar marketplace:

“By the mid-1950s, however, commercial developers--many of whom owned department stores--were constructing a new kind of marketplace, the regional shopping center aimed at satisfying suburbanites' consumption *and* community needs. Strategically located at highway intersections or along the busiest thoroughfares, the regional shopping center attracted patrons living within half an hour's drive, who could come by car, park in the abundant lots provided, and then proceed on foot.”

Eventually, the mall as a community center became “too political” for private owners because it was also a strategic location for free speech and demonstrations...

One such marketplace is Southdale Center, which opened in Edina, Minnesota in 1956; it was the first fully enclosed and climate-controlled suburban shopping mall in the U.S. Designed by architect Victor Gruen, Southdale Center was intended to “bring European sensibilities stateside by dramatically blurring the lines between shopping, socialization, leisure, and play” (Newton 2017:6). Gruen's design, although never fully realized, would act as the prototype for what we now identify as “the mall.”

As Cohen (1996) explains, after WWII, the move from “town center” to “shopping center” was an intentional transition to combine both consumption and civic activity into an all-in-one center. Despite the narrative that the indoor mall was a public space where all

members of the community, especially women, could tend to needs and wants (shopping for the family, recreation, and community activities), the indoor mall acted as a regulated and segregated space intended for middle-class whites; those with a low socioeconomic status and people of color were not welcome in *this* space. Eventually, the mall as a community center became “too political” for private owners because it was also a strategic location for free speech and demonstrations (ibid.). Therefore, mall owners transitioned away from the community model to focus more intently on consumerism. Gruen, who is now known as the creator of the modern shopping mall, would later state that his original design and ideas were “bastardized” by modern developments, devoid of rich community life (Newton 2017; O’Malley 2016).



Source: Briana Pocratsky

There was a significant increase in the number of shopping malls and shopping centers in general in the 1960s into the late 1980s (Feinberg and Meoli 1991). O’Malley (2016) writes that the construction of enclosed malls reached its height in 1990 but subsequently decreased through the 2000s. This decline is indicated by the fact that in 2007, “for the first time in more than 40 years, no new malls opened in the United States” (O’Malley 2016:4).

...why are malls now often referred to as town centers? There seems to be a turn back to the town center brand and romanticized notions of community along with it.

According to retail analysts, the decline of the mall is due to factors such as online shopping, the closing of anchor stores, retiring/retired Baby Boomers, more women in the workforce, teens spending less time at the mall, mall saturation, mall consolidation, and outstanding loans from the indoor mall building boom of the 1990s. While some top-tier traditional malls may be able to adapt to changing socioeconomic conditions by incorporating entertainment and technology into the space, other traditional malls may not have the funds to do so (ibid.).

It is important to note that the “death” of the traditional indoor mall is not necessarily an indication that consumers only want virtual shopping experiences. Preferences regarding online shopping and physical shopping are complex. For example, some corporations associated with an online presence, such as Amazon, are opening “brick-and-mortar stores.” This trend is due in part to consumers’ desires to tangibly experience a product before they purchase it in addition to the immediacy of the transaction (ibid.).

From Traditional Mall to Town Center

My shopping experiences for holiday gifts point to larger questions regarding the evolution of malls locally and in the U.S. more generally. Why do malls in the Washington D.C. suburbs appear to be thriving, and why are malls now often referred to as town centers? There seems to be a turn back to the town center brand and romanticized notions of community along with it.

Before the indoor shopping mall, the town center played a prominent role in suburbia where residents would purchase their products

downtown at local shops that were not located in one large building (Cohen 1996). Fung and Safdar (2018) explain that many malls are undergoing makeovers and dropping “mall” from their names, citing Ballston Common Mall in Arlington (Virginia) and its recent renovation plans to become Ballston Quarter in 2018 as an example of this rebranding.

In the Washington D.C. suburbs, town centers may be the eventual future of the indoor mall...

Springfield Town Center (in Virginia) is another local example of this image overhaul. Springfield Mall, which opened in the 1970s, underwent a multimillion dollar renovation from 2012-2014, also dropping “mall” from its name.



Springfield Town Center. Source: Briana Pocratsky

The moniker “town center” signifies how the mall is changing; it is not simply a site of consumption but a place of experiences and particular lifestyles. In explaining the changing image of the mall, O’Malley (2016:17) notes: “Over-the-top, non-retail experiences, from unique restaurants to indoor swimming pools will be as ubiquitous as the stores, and most malls will incorporate apartments, offices and service providers like doctors, barbers, gyms and hotel rooms into or next to their space.”

Town Centers for the Community

An important aspect of the life trajectory of a mall is related to how it serves the larger

community. The turn back to the “town center” tag and the connotations it evokes seems to suggest a move to incorporate malls within the town or the communities of which they are a part, as opposed to operating as isolated and contained consumer locations. For example, Landmark Mall in Alexandria (Virginia), built in the 1960s, is currently undergoing renovations to become the “new Landmark,” described as “a new live-shop-dine urban village” (see the website thenewlandmark.com).

The new Landmark’s homepage emphasizes that the renovations will benefit the community and that the corporate owner “is dedicated to transforming it and bringing back a sense of community” to the area. It is important to consider how these developments affect the surrounding areas in the name of “the community.” What roles are these town centers actually playing in the communities in which they insert themselves? Will they actually foster community cohesion? What does it mean for nearby housing prices? Will these renovated spaces create more jobs or will the number of jobs shrink? How might the arrival of national retail outlets, restaurants, and entertainment venues impact local culture and businesses? In the Washington D.C. suburbs, town centers may be the eventual future of the indoor mall and perhaps even necessary for its survival, but it is also important to consider what incarnations indoor malls or town centers in more rural areas may take, based on (perceived or real) community needs and wants.

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The Magic of Breakfast: Pancake Saturdays

Maria Valdovinos

I was doing the customary end of year decluttering, when I found myself flipping through a magazine with an article on the history of breakfast. It never occurred to me that breakfast would have a contentious history. According to this article, the breakfast meal has “long been the source of medical confusion, moral frustration, and political anxiety” (Garber 2016). At one point or another in history, breakfast has been shunned for being a temptation to commit the sin of gluttony, or an occasion for lavish social gatherings (in the 1800s when it experienced a revival). In our times, new research has cast doubt on the purported health benefits of breakfast (Carroll 2016; see also Anderson 2013).

Normally this type of article wouldn't have caught my attention except that for the last couple of months, breakfast has been an important part of my endeavor to learn more about reentry in the District. Every month *Changing Perceptions*¹, an organization dedicated to enabling returning citizens² in the District to reach their full potential, hosts Pancake Saturday.

The site of Pancake Saturday is a very special row house on 18th Street in Southeast. I say special because this house serves as a home base for many returning citizens in the District, including those participating in the *Aspire to Entrepreneurship* program (see Valdovinos October 2017). Some returning citizens live here. For others, this house is the base for their small business, a safe space, a place to stop by for mentorship, or on certain Saturdays, the site of communal breakfast. Pancakes are usually the star of Pancake Saturdays but there are also eggs, bacon and sausage, sometimes waffles make an appearance, and on one occasion, the sweet potato hash from *Reese's Catering*, even overshadowed the pancakes. *Reese's Catering* is part of a growing network of small businesses owned by returning citizens in the District.

Just like breakfast, pancakes also have a long, albeit much less contentious, history. Pancakes are also ubiquitous throughout the world, known by various names and branded by levels of thinness or thickness. The idea of a “pancake day” is also anything but contemporary (Rupp 2014).

I wonder what a sociological
body of research on the
significance of breakfast, or
meals in general, might suggest?

Pancake Saturday, however, is not just about breakfast or pancakes. It is also about building a healthy community and a positive social support network in line with the principles of the *Aspire to Entrepreneurship* program. Returning citizens in the District of Columbia face many challenges in reentry, some of which are unique to the District (see Valdovinos May 2017). Among the many challenges is securing traditional employment. As I arrived at Pancake Saturday this past October, I noticed that the *Clean Decisions* team³, another business owned and operated by returning citizens in the District, had gotten an early start on breakfast and the staff were on their way out, ready to start a full day's work on a full stomach.

We have all heard the adage, at some point in our socialization that “breakfast is the most important meal of the day.” However, the latest research debunks this aphorism. After looking at the collective body of medical research on the health benefits of breakfast, Aaron Carroll, a journalist, has concluded that: there was “nothing magical about breakfast” (Carroll 2016). And yet, I wonder what a sociological body of research on the significance of breakfast, or meals in general, might suggest? The earliest sociological analysis of our gastronomic experiences I uncovered was Georg Simmel's 1910 essay on the sociology of the meal.

The last Pancake Saturday event of 2017 was an occasion of delicious food, stimulating conversation, shop talk for returning citizen

entrepreneurs, affirmations, reflections on the year ending, and wishes for the new year. And the weather was unseasonably balmy.



Pancake Saturday. Source Maria Valdovinos

For this group, this repast event has become a site of learning and support, serving to reduce anxiety or frustration for many participants. I've never been much of a breakfast person myself, but the meal has become increasingly important thanks to Pancake Saturday. As a student/researcher working in reentry in the District for a year now, Pancake Saturday has provided me entry into ethnographic work, and as a resident of the DMV area, it has connected me to neighbors.

Notes

1. To learn more about *Changing Perceptions* and Pancake Saturday, visit their Twitter page at <https://twitter.com/changingdc?lang=en>
2. The use of "Returning Citizen" as opposed to "prisoner" is reflective of the use of "people first" language which aims to move past the use of dehumanizing and stigmatizing language such as "offenders", "inmates", or "convicts" when talking about people who have come into contact with the criminal justice system.
3. To learn about *Clean Decisions LLC*, visit their Twitter page at <https://twitter.com/CleanDecisions?lang=en>

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Resource for Instructors

As you plan your syllabi for the upcoming semester, consider using the [Few Years' Resolution video archive](#) as a resource.

It contains over 150 (free!) videos connecting the insights of sociology to public conversations about globalization, inequalities, identities, social justice, social change, well-being, and happiness.

Each video is less than 5 minutes long and accessible to high school and college students.

Each video provides vocabulary and analytical tools for students to think about how they might address our most urgent public problems and create change in their communities.

A good place to start is this page:

<https://www.fewyearsresolution.com/resources/>



Re-Centering the Student Voice in the Debate of Free Speech in Higher Education

Emily McDonald

In January 2018, I attended the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) annual conference to gain a deeper understanding of how university administrators and faculty are talking about the recent attacks on academic freedom on college campuses in the name of the first amendment. A theme around student protest emerged again and again during the many panel discussions on the first amendment on college and university campuses. Here I reflect on how student protest is framed, and how a sociological analysis of power can add to the conversation.

In her piece on the right's "weaponization" of free speech, Joan Scott (2018) contends that in this current time: "The university as a place for critical thinking, for difficult dialogue and frank, open debate, has been damaged." She goes on to say that such damage is not simply the result of different subject matter in higher education curricula, but a political choice within the context of the neoliberal university. Rather than encouraging students to engage in debate, colleges and universities tend to encourage students to stay away from difficult subject matter in the name of career preparation. Simultaneously, a resurfaced anti-intellectualism that disregards the importance of academic freedom threatens our mutual capacity for democracy.

This past year, a number of highly-publicized college campus protests flooded millions of social media feeds and TV screens across the country. These protests were against controversial, explosive speakers, Charles Murray at Middlebury College and Milo Yiannopolous at University of California (UC) Berkeley, to name a few. Media frenzy brought

free speech debates to the forefront of what was already an ongoing national conversation, especially among college and university campus communities. These protests also became highly politicized. Donald Trump's tweets, for example, threatened to withhold federal funding from UC Berkeley. With this climate as backdrop, the 2018 AAC&U conference hosted a number of free speech and critical inquiry themed panels and seminars.

Throughout the various free speech panel sessions, I found that speakers, facilitators, and participants mainly addressed three themes: constitutional law, moral obligations of campus communities to uphold respectful dialogue, and student conduct when controversial speakers were headlining an event.

Conversations intended to foster dialogue about best practices in creating democratic and safe campuses focused on the *form* of student protest rather than the *content* of protest...

Constitutional law scholars clarified the limits and bounds of the first amendment throughout the sessions. Ethics experts spoke on the need for education on civil discourse methods to resist the backlash of using disruptive methods of protest. Journalists argued that the realities on campuses responding to controversial or provocative speakers is often much more civil than the many media reports suggest.

However, somewhat lost in the conversations from my view were students' concerns that drove protest (whether deemed violent or not), save for a few voices such as sociologist Linus Owens of Middlebury College. Conversations intended to foster dialogue about best practices in creating democratic and safe campuses focused on the *form* of student protest rather than the *content* of protest or the context in which students engage in protest to begin with.

...the marketplace of ideas is skewed in favor of provocateurs.

As sociologists, we continuously question, observe, and theorize how social inequality transforms our communities. Sociology makes clear that social stratification is not always overt, and is embedded in our interactions and social structures (Giddens 1990; Mooney-Nickel 2013); at the same time, merit and fairness can elevate certain voices over others (Khan 2016). In the context of debating first amendment rights on campus, speakers such as Milo Yinnapolous and Richard Spencer are supported through vast funding networks. During one panel discussion about free speech and critical inquiry, Scott Jaschik of *Inside Higher Ed* argued that provocative speakers on college campuses are not new. What is new is the amount of money spent on these speakers, and the outside funding networks that use student groups to promote provocative speakers on campuses. For this reason, the marketplace of ideas is skewed in favor of provocateurs.

The limits of a constitutional law or ethics argument could be extended by a sociological analysis of networks, power, and the expanse of inequality that could potentially contribute to frustration and protest, even as colleges and universities are changing rapidly. For instance, many students are paying more in tuition, but seeing less support by institutions of higher education (Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson 2017). This reality that contributes to tensions on campuses and unequally gives power and voice to outside influences to reshape campus life often also frequently weakens free speech debates in the context of student demands for corrective actions from administrations.

Sociologists can take a significant role in blunting the right's "weaponized" free speech blade by using our methods and theory to bridge conversations and re-center student voices in three ways. First, sociologists can promote a

more dynamic dialogue as to how constitutional law posits equal access to free speech on structurally stratified grounds. Second, sociology's tradition of power analysis can contextualize explosive speakers as richly funded provocateurs rather than egalitarian colleagues in the marketplace of ideas. Finally, sociologists can challenge the politicized and grossly reductionist notion that college students are immature and coddled, in need of discipline. Rather, the sociological gaze should focus our attention on how a robust education fosters our collective right to citizenship.



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view - NO FEDERAL FUNDS?

3:13 AM - 2 Feb 2017

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Our Meeting Place

Y. Shaw-Taylor

There are hidden, latent, patterns to our social behavior and the way society functions. These latent patterns may be unintended or unconscious (per Robert Merton), but they may also be meant to be deliberately covert or furtive. So, which functions or patterns of society are unintended, unconscious and which ones are consciously hidden? For me, there are three main outlets that allow us to go behind the scenes, so to speak, to uncover the invisible patterns in our social lives and in society. You don't have to be a sociologist or any kind of scientist for that matter to avail yourself of the information offered by these outlets.

The quarterly magazine, *Contexts*, created by the American Sociological Association, is the official channel for jargon-free information about "latest sociological ideas and research."¹ The magazine, perhaps modelled after *Psychology Today*, is meant to be nontechnical (you won't find articles using confidence intervals or p values) and to "stimulate fresh thinking, and disseminate important information produced by the discipline."²

After shepherding *Contexts* for several years, the editors left the magazine to create *The Society Pages*, which is an online only platform that "brings social science to broader public visibility and influence."³ This online sociology 'project', as the proprietors call it, is perhaps the most familiar space for staging what has become public sociology, or sociology that is not confined to the closeted world of sociologists.

The other outlet for publicly disseminating information about sociology is *Hidden Brain*, which uses science and storytelling to reveal the "unconscious patterns that drive human behavior, the biases that shape our choices and the triggers that direct the course of our relationships."⁴ To be sure, this award-winning weekly series of reports broadcasted on National Public Radio covers



Source: pixabay.com

more than just sociology; it brings together research from all the social sciences and links them to neurobiology. On my daily commutes, I have often heard revelations or disclosures about certain unknown patterns of our social lives, such as the fact that the rate of mortality declined during the Great Recession (2007-2012).

Together, these three outlets provide, for me, sociological information that is credible, accessible and available to me as a public consumer. And all three of them offer different takes on the functions and patterns of especially our *latent* social lives. It is already easy to see what is manifest, so we need decoders to help us unpack the latent.

Other than professional journals, what other public outlets do you use to gain credible insights about your social life? Please share your views with us.

In terms of bringing technical social science knowledge to the public, I am convinced that *Psychology Today* has done an exemplary job – by reaching out to the public more than 50 years ago with a publication that made the stuff of the mind and human behavior easy for all non-psychologists to understand.

While *pop* psychology may be derisively used to describe oversimplified concepts, the fact that psychology is on the public stage makes it strikingly more accessible to everyone who wants to be informed about things that do not always seem evident about ourselves, our lives.

There is nothing in the public theatre that resembles anything close to *Psychology Today* for sociology and the challenge remains to let the public in on what sociologists know and talk about. The challenge for any *hub* outlet for sociology meant for the public is that our information technology eco system places at our disposal thousands of online outlets for information; it is the bane and blessing of our world. And although there is considerable consolidation and contraction in print media, *Psychology Today* seems to be thriving after 50 years. What is their secret sauce?

Our rendezvous becomes an occasion for curiosity about our world. Everyone has a story to tell...



Source: pixabay.com

For four years now, the editorial team at *The Sociologist* has wrestled with how our magazine will become like *Psychology Today*; we want to define ourselves as caterers not custodians of sociology. It may seem we arrived at this public square a tad late, showing up at a time when the stage is crowded with a garden variety of online information outlets, fake news, memes, tweets, blogs, *face* news (as in Facebook).

When our regional sociology society was founded more than 80 years ago, it was one of the first regional organizations of sociologists to be formed in the U.S. and so it is now the

challenge for our magazine to be novel in our engagement in the public square where we want to be. When we transformed our newsletter into a magazine for public sociology, we wanted this space to be a meeting place where all sociologists and non-sociologists can gather through an interest in sharing insights about ourselves. The goal remains the same, and the destination is distinct, but the path is not yet clear to us. We want to be like *Psychology Today* by providing insights about your social life and also by becoming a resource to get help with your social life.

We hope that the feature section “Ask a Sociologist” will become a go-to resource for all who want nontechnical answers to life’s vicissitudes, social conundrums and latent challenges about living. So send us your questions and your queries. And we also hope that the new “Resources” section will provide a supply of informed people and agencies that can provide help on a range of manifest and latent patterns in life. We also want to bring you perspectives from the Washington D.C. area; this regional aspect of our magazine is how we stay anchored in a physical, *actual*, space. We are more than a virtual community.

Our rendezvous becomes an occasion for curiosity about our world. Everyone has a story to tell, and we want you to send us your insights for publication – and you don’t have to be a scientist. What we ask of you is that you are earnest and honest in what you write and what you share. It is how we avoid malnourishment in a time of abundance.

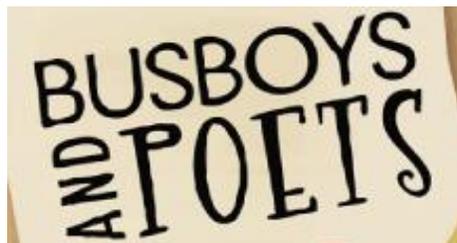
Notes

1. <http://www.asanet.org/research-and-publications/contexts>
2. Ibid
3. <https://thesocietypages.org/#/about>
4. <https://www.npr.org/series/423302056/hidden-brain>



Annual Banquet & Award Ceremony

Thursday, May 24, 2018



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