

What Happened, Sociologically-Speaking, During the Twentieth Century?

*Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years*, by **Claude S. Fischer** and **Michael Hout**. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. 424pp. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780871543523.

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*Century of Difference: How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years* by Claude Fischer and Michael Hout is a notable contribution to the long and venerable tradition of sociological scholarship on long-term social trends. In the 1930s, William Ogburn and Howard Odum were the leading authors of the volumes published by the President's Research Committee on Recent Social Trends. In the 1960s, Otis Dudley Duncan, Eleanor Sheldon, and Wilbert Moore were among the leaders who launched the social indicators movement.

*Century of Difference* is a broad, empirically informed survey of social change in twentieth-century America. With a century of decennial census data, the authors measure trends in educational attainment, ethnic composition, family structure, work, socioeconomic status, and residential mobility. Fischer and Hout also mine survey data to address questions about wealth holding, consumption, religious beliefs and affiliations, and the changing cultural landscape of popular attitudes and beliefs. Each chapter begins with a discussion of a significant social topic which draws upon the relevant literature in sociology, economics, social history, and related disciplines. In addition to the scholarly literature, they often turn to the popular press (such as newspapers and magazines), especially from the early twentieth century, to convey a vivid portrait of how much American society has changed.

Although the volume is deeply empirical, readers are not overwhelmed by statistical tables and graphs. In addition to interesting theoretical and historical setups in each chapter, the authors have cleverly designed compact charts to convey the essence of long-term social change. The standard presentation consists of a plot of the 80<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> percentiles for each decade of the twentieth century (or for shorter periods if data are lacking). This allows for simultaneous consideration of trends in central tendency (the median) and variance, so that readers can see whether gaps between the top and bottom have narrowed or widened. The result is an interesting, and often compelling, sociological account of major social trends. The authors modestly state

that their primary goal is to “describe historical trends, not explain them” (p. 8), but the overall weight of the study casts new light on many sociological debates.

There is much to praise in this volume, including the authors’ ambition and analytical skills as well as their contribution to sociological knowledge. Very few sociologists have the bravado, let alone the competence, to knowledgeably analyze and interpret social trends on such a broad variety of topics. The authors do not hesitate to develop new methods (or adapt methods from other fields) to summarize complexity and to illuminate underlying patterns. These methods are carefully described (and additional data presented) in almost 100 pages of endnotes and three methodological appendices.

There are many original findings sprinkled throughout the volume. Here are a few of my favorites:

- The decline of adherents in mainline Protestant faiths and the growth of evangelical religions are primarily due to differential fertility rather than conversion.
- The rapid rise of income and wealth inequality in recent decades has been accompanied by greater universalism of consumption of many commodities that were once considered luxury goods.
- The largest secular increases in tolerance and interfaith marriage occurred among those who were reared in the “long 1960s.”

More than most analysts of social change, Fischer and Hout pay systematic attention to changes in the metrics of measurement. For example, they demonstrate how changes in census and survey questions (as well as popular understandings) of race and ethnicity have shaped sociological studies of American diversity. The chapter on cultural fragmentation and conflict is path breaking. The authors revise the old debate between cultural convergence and polarization with a model of diffusion of how polarizing ideas often become the conventional wisdom. In the early stage of diffusion of cultural change (e.g., whether married women should work or willingness to vote for a minority running for president), there is often a widening divergence between groups, but eventually a narrowing of differences as controversial attitudes become normative.

With the mandate to survey social change over the twentieth century within the confines of one volume, not every topic could be included. But overall, I think that Fischer and Hout have focused wisely—they have selected topics of social significance for which reliable time series

data are available. My only lament is that they did not present a systematic conceptual framework for the study of social trends, but give us a sociological potpourri. Perhaps my complaint should be directed at the state of our discipline more than the authors of this volume. If sociology is more than an ad hoc list of topics in introductory textbooks or unrelated chapters in a book on social trends, there needs to be a conceptualization of how different institutions and social phenomena are related to one another. I am not calling for a return to grand social theory or even any of the new “one variable explains everything” schools of sociology, but rather some “middle range” conceptual framework, perhaps in the form of a heuristic diagram, to suggest how technological progress, demographic trends, social structure, and public policy are connected. The authors do offer many insightful ad hoc observations along these lines throughout the volume and, in the concluding chapter, they begin to pull it together with a discussion of emerging social themes. It would have been useful if a conceptual framework, however tentative, had been introduced early in the volume and linked to the trends in subsequent chapters.

Social change can be viewed from a period or cohort perspective. Actually, aggregate social trends reflect the interaction of age, cohort, and period influences. Age enters into the process in two ways: changing age composition and changes in age-specific behaviors over the life course. Period measures conform to the common sense temporal perspective and also allow for the identification of historical events (wars, depressions, elections, etc.) that have diffuse effects. The cohort, or generational, perspective is premised on the assumption that the impact of history (period events) will vary by stage in the life span (child, adolescent, young adult, etc.). Fischer and Hout are clearly aware of the age-period-cohort framework, but they do not directly explain its relevance to the study of social change nor do they apply the logic consistently across the chapters in the volume. In one case (Figure 5.3), they illustrate the approach beautifully in an analysis of change in women’s labor force behavior over the twentieth century. This diagram shows the age-specific labor force participation curves (from age 20-64) for successive birth cohorts of women with years of the twentieth century along the x-axis. The differential impacts of age and period are evident for each cohort.

Trends in educational attainment in chapter 2 are analyzed by birth cohorts (cleverly indexed by the year reaching age 21), which makes sense given that completed schooling is generally invariant after reaching adulthood. However, changes in family and household structure in

chapter 4 are analyzed by period within broad age groups. Although data limitations probably constrained the analysis, the magnitude of social change in family structure is obscured because current status measures are presented rather than cohort measures of cumulative experience. For example, the proportion of children who will ever experience a single parent family is much greater than the proportion of children (age 0-17) currently living in a single parent family. Most of the charts that describe occupational attainment, earnings, unemployment, and related topics in social stratification in chapters 5 and 6 are straightforward temporal period comparisons without consideration of age composition or of how these patterns varied by stage of career for successive cohorts. The analysis of changes in religious affiliation (in chapter 8) is particularly impressive because the authors were able to measure the relative magnitudes of intra-cohort (switching from religion of origin to religion of adulthood) and inter-cohort change.

I also wished that Fischer and Hout had consistently clarified the differences between measures of process and structure (composition). The composition of population by household type is the consequence of processes of marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and separation (as well as of fertility and mortality). In this volume, social indicators of structure and processes are presented, but there is little discussion or analysis of their logical and empirical interdependencies. As Norman Ryder argued, if social change occurs, because successive cohorts behave differently than earlier generations, then simple models could illuminate the mechanisms of change. Figure 4.3 shows that the course of American fertility over the twentieth century (such as secular decline, baby boom, and baby bust, etc..) reflects the pervasive impact of period on all cohorts

Fischer and Hout are sometimes more innovative than they need to be. In chapter 7, they measure residential segregation with an index of "Theil's H." Although I am not an expert on measures of segregation, I can see some of the attractive properties in the H index that allow for decomposition of different levels of geography (region, metropolitan areas, places, neighborhoods, etc.) on residential segregation by race, ethnicity, SES, and life cycle status. The problem, however, is that the cumulative tradition of research on residential segregation is built on two alternative measures: D (index of segregation) and P\* (index of isolation) that represent broadly understood interpretations and that have yielded significant findings. Classical sociological studies by Stanley Lieberson, Douglas Massey, and Nancy Denton report that white ethnics (from South, East and Central Europe) were initially more segregated than African

Americans in late nineteenth-century northern cities. Following the Great Migration, African Americans became more segregated (indexed by D) in northern cities because most whites desired to preserve their “isolation” (indexed by P<sup>\*</sup>). The consequence was the construction of black ghettos in every major American city by force and institutional fiat. In an otherwise competent chapter, this key dimension of American race relations was obscured.

In spite of these minor limitations, Fischer and Hout have produced a sociological landmark that belongs on the bookshelf of every sociologist who conducts research, teaches, or just thinks about the course of social change in America over the twentieth century