Preface

As a career sociologist I first became interested in neurosociology around 1987 when a graduate student lent me Michael Gazzaniga’s *The Social Brain*. If the biological human brain was really social, I thought sociologists and their students should be the first, not the last, to know. As I read on I found little of the clumsy reductionism of the earlier biosociologists whom I had learned to see as the archenemy of our field. Clearly, reductionism does exist among many neuroscientists. But I also found some things that were very social and quite relevant for sociology. After reading *Descarte’s Error* by Antonio Damasio, I learned how some types of emotion were necessary for rational thought – a very radical innovation for the long-honored “objective rationalist.” I started inserting some things about split-brain research into my classes, mispronouncing terms like amygdala and being corrected by my students. That instruction helped me realize how much we professors needed to catch up with our students. I also wrote a review of Leslie Brothers’ *Fridays Footprint: How Society Shapes the Human Mind*. I thought if she could write so well about social processes maybe I could attempt to do something similar in connection with my field. For several years I found her an e-mail partner with a wonderful sense of humor. She even retrieved copies of her book for the use of my graduate students when I had assigned it for a seminar. Soon, after attending an ASA session on the social aspects of the brain, I was lucky enough to gather together the few people working in the area of social applications of neuroscience for a spontaneous dinner meeting. It was agreed that the name for our embryonic field would be “neurosociology.” It was also then that I learned that the first person who wrote under this label was Warren TenHoughten who published *Science and its Mirror Image* with Charles Kaplan as early as 1973. Warren also published a news bulletin devoted to the brain and the social process. He is clearly the father of this new field. At that time I was editing an annual on the sociology of emotion and wanted to devote the next volume to social aspects of the brain and emotion.

In 1999, the year I retired from regular teaching, *Mind, Brain and Society* came out which I edited with Thomas Smith. One reviewer who was generally positive about the collection ended up saying that all sociologists should read this book, but that sadly, they would not. Needless to say he was accurate enough, but some positive signs were around the corner. One was the publication of Jonathan Turner’s *On the Origins of Human Emotion* in 2000. Other encouraging signs had to do with a
symbolic interactionist, David Maines, who invited me to write about neuroscience in his special issue of the *Journal of Symbolic Interaction*. When Professor Maines followed up on that and gave me the opportunity to write a section about neurosociology in Ritzer’s 2007, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* I thought we had “arrived” as an accepted part of sociology. This was confirmed when Stets and Turner requested a chapter on the neuroscience of emotion in their 2006 *Handbook on the Sociology of Emotion*.

In the Spring of 2008 I taught what I believed was the only course in neursosociology in this country, but I was wrong. Anne Eisenberg at SUNY Geneseo had been teaching a neursosociology course devoted to mental disorder for several years. One of the things which attracted me to teaching this course was that neuroscience could be seen as a hub which could be related to so many disciplines of the liberal arts.

Growing up a minister’s son I had never been able to involve myself in many of the ecclesiastical separations – or better said – walls like the one between high church and low church and whether the communion wine actually turned into the blood of Christ. Certainly there were more important things to put one’s mind to!

But I have learned that in respect to walls, academia was not that much different. Within my own department the division was between social structuralists and social psychology as if there could not be a cybernetic relation between the two. To me, Winston Churchill described the situation well in one of his remarkable sound bites to the effect that in academia, never have so many fought for so few over so little. This book is an effort to work toward breaking down the walls between sociology and neuroscience to the benefit of both.

While studying for my undergraduate and graduate degree I was exposed to symbolic interaction and at the University of Minnesota I had the good fortune to study with Arnold Rose and Gregory Stone. There I met a group of colleagues who have provided me with intellectual stimulation and challenges for all these many years. But this does not mean that I could only think within the confines of that perspective, and later on I especially took issue with the postmodern solipsism and the extremes of social constructionism that ignored Mead’s insistence on maintaining an epistemology which had retained the value of possible error. Without this possibility words could define anything in any way and one narrative was as good as another. My concern about this has been eloquently voiced by Carl Sagan as quoted by the neuroscientist, Gazzaniga (1985):

> It’s a foreboding I have – maybe ill placed – of an America in my children’s generation... when clutching our horoscopes, our critical functions in steep decline, unable to distinguish between what’s true and what feels good, we slide, almost without noticing, into superstition and darkness.”

If Carl Sagan were alive today he might not be so concerned about horoscopes. He might be more concerned about some things covered in this book like the fragility of the self that makes us defensive and prone to violence and the unconscious forces that power structures use to blind us into becoming uncritical believers with the same resulting idiocy.
This book represents a long path for me, much longer than I, and my editors expected. Hopefully, this work will make this path sizably shorter for my readers.

References


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