

## What Makes Johnny Gay?

“Opposite-Sex Twins and Adolescent Same-Sex Attraction” by Peter S. Bearman and Hannah Brückner, in *American Journal of Sociology* (Mar. 2002), Univ. of Chicago Press, Journals Division, 1427 E. 60th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

It’s commonly supposed these days (and enshrined in many textbooks) that biology plays the main role in determining an individual’s sexual orientation. Sociologists Bearman, of Columbia University, and Brückner, of Yale University, have found some evidence that suggests otherwise.

In a 1994–96 national study, 18,841 middle and high school youths were asked if they had ever had a “romantic attraction” to a person of the same sex; 9.5 percent of the boys and 7.8 percent of the girls said they had. (Far smaller percentages reported having an actual romantic or sexual relationship.)

What caught the authors’ attention was that 16.8 percent of boys with a twin sister reported romantic same-sex feelings, while less than 10 percent of boys with a twin brother did. Genetic influences could hardly explain that seven-percentage-point difference, they say.

Why are boys with a twin sister so much

more likely to show signs of a same-sex orientation? Bearman and Brückner suggest that because the twins are so similar, parents and other adults are more inclined to treat them alike—to give them a “less gendered upbringing.” Parents in such a situation may tend to be a little more permissive about behavior that might otherwise be branded “sissy.” (Boys with a sister who was not a twin were actually less likely than average to report same-sex romantic sentiments.) This may allow a genetic predisposition to a homosexual orientation, if such a predisposition exists, to come to the fore.

What about the girls with twin brothers? Only 5.3 percent of them reported a same-sex attraction. The authors argue that the twins’ “less gendered upbringing” has less impact on girls than on boys because “tomboy” behavior among girls is not normally considered as socially unacceptable as comparably unconventional behavior by boys is.

## Sociology’s Sad Decline

“Whatever Happened to Sociology?” by Peter L. Berger, in *First Things* (Oct. 2002), Institute on Religion and Public Life, 156 Fifth Ave., Ste. 400, New York, N.Y. 10010.

In 1963, Berger published a book called *Invitation to Sociology*. Still in print, it has attracted many students to the discipline over the decades. Alas, says the author, an emeritus professor of religion, sociology, and theology at Boston University, the picture he painted then of sociology “bears little relation to what goes on in it today. The relation is a bit like that of the Marxian utopia to what used to be called ‘real existing socialism.’”

Sociology enjoyed “a sort of golden age” in the 1950s, he says. At Harvard University was Talcott Parsons, who, despite his “terrible prose,” was erecting an imposing theoretical system that addressed the “big questions” that had preoccupied sociologists since the discipline’s birth in the late 19th century—“What holds a society together? What is the

relation between beliefs and institutions?” At the University of Chicago, there was “the so-called ‘Chicago school’ of urban sociology, which had produced a whole library of insightful empirical studies,” as well as the blend of social psychology and sociology fathered by George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). At Columbia University were two powerhouses of the discipline: Robert Merton, who espoused “a more moderate version” of Parsons’s “structural functionalism,” and Paul Lazarsfeld, “who helped develop increasingly sophisticated quantitative methods but who never forgot the ‘big questions.’” All of these thinkers had something to say that non-sociologists might find interesting and useful.

Unfortunately, other sociologists even

then were starting to let the “useful tool” of statistical analysis become a fetish, Berger says. They wanted the prestige of the natural sciences—as did the government agencies and foundations that provided sociologists’ research funds. The result: “increasingly sophisticated methods to study increasingly trivial topics.”

A second, even more “severe deformation,” Berger writes, came with the cultural revolution that began in the late 1960s. “The ideologues who have been in the ascendancy for the last 30 years have deformed science into an instrument of agitation and propa-

ganda,” alienating all who do not share their beliefs and values.

There still are some sociologists doing excellent work, according to Berger. And some, such as Harvard’s Orlando Patterson, address the “big questions.” But unlike the giants of the 1950s, these sociologists have created no new schools of thought.

As the public has become aware of the devastating changes, reports Berger, sociology has lost the prestige it once enjoyed, “lost its attraction to the brightest students, and lost a lot of its funding.” Can its demise, he wonders, be far off?

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

# *The Totalitarian Puzzle*

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

When Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* appeared in 1951, the West had only recently prevailed over Hitler’s Germany and now faced the menace of Stalin’s Soviet Union. *Origins* was the first major philosophical effort to deal with totalitarianism, and more than a half-century later it remains perhaps the most significant. But, as several of the 13 scholars who consider Arendt’s magnum opus in *Social Research* (Summer 2002) observe: *Origins* is as difficult and disjointed as it is erudite, imaginative, and provocative. The masterwork of the German émigré writer (1906–75) “defies any simple attempt to state a key thesis or argument,” notes Richard J. Bernstein, a professor of philosophy at New School University, “and it is difficult to find coherence among its various parts.” The book’s title itself is misleading, in that Arendt did not seek to uncover the immediate causes of totalitarianism. “It is even difficult to determine just what she means by totalitarianism and its distinguishing characteristics,” says Bernstein.



*Hannah Arendt in 1954*

The explanation for *Origins*’ confusing structure is simple, according to Roy T. Tsao, a political scientist at Georgetown University. “Arendt arrived at her basic views on totalitarianism only after she had already written nearly all” of the book’s first two parts, on anti-Semitism and imperialism. A third part was to deal with Nazism, which at the time she saw as the direct successor to imperialism. But her views changed sometime around 1947, and she came to regard Nazism and Bolshevism as species of totalitarianism. Arendt simply grafted her new theory onto the trunk of the old, revising the earlier parts only enough to avoid blatant contradictions. To further complicate matters, in later editions she added a chapter, “Ideology and Terror,” that represented a still newer phase in her thinking, “displacing without fully dislodging the arguments of the one before,” writes Tsao.

Totalitarianism, in Arendt’s philosophical appraisal, represented a new kind of government, says Jerome Kohn, director of the Hannah Arendt