

## Sociology in Australia

Why study Sociology in Australia? Here are three good reasons.

First, Sociology is a robust field of research and teaching in Australia. Nearly all Australian universities include Sociology Departments, undergraduate courses and postgraduate courses. Australian sociologists routinely contribute to the international literature across the spectrum of sociological fields. The Australian Sociological Association is a thriving professional peak body, which includes Thematic Groups on Applied Sociology; Crime and Governance; Critical Disability Studies; Cultural Sociology; Environment and Society; Families, Relationships and Gender; Health; Media; Migration, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism; Risk Societies; Rural Issues; Social Stratification; Sociology of Economic Life; Sociology of Education; Sociology of Indigenous Issues; Sociology of Religion; Sociology of Youth; Teaching Sociology; and Work and Labour Studies.

Second, Sociology in Australia draws upon the best of sociological traditions around the world. Although Sociology in Australia is robust, it was a late developer. Sociology as a discipline was forged in Western Europe during the nineteenth century, and elaborated in the United States during the early twentieth century. The European and American sociological traditions are in many respects very different. Most obviously, they often draw upon different theoretical perspectives and writers. The American tradition is also more oriented towards quantitative research, and the European tradition is more sympathetic to qualitative research. Sociology only established roots in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s. From its beginnings, Australian Sociology has drawn heavily upon both of the major sociological traditions. It is also increasingly engaged with Sociology as it has developed in other places, including the Asia-Pacific, South America, the Middle East and Africa. For a path-breaking book by an Australian sociologist on the global dynamics of knowledge in the social sciences, see Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory* (Allen & Unwin, 2007).

The third reason to study Sociology in Australia is that Australia itself is a unique social environment. In the early twentieth century there was a vision of Australia as a 'social laboratory', grounded in the early enactment of progressive measures on the secret ballot, female suffrage, industrial arbitration, old age pensions and government enterprise. The vision faded during the course of the twentieth century, but still found its imprint in later initiatives; notably, in multicultural immigration policy, equal opportunity legislation, and the effective containment of HIV/AIDS through public health partnerships with affected groups. During its short history, Australian Sociology has been actively engaged in each of these later initiatives. More generally, Australia is one of the most urbanized societies in the world, and one of the most multicultural societies in the world. Australian sociologists routinely study Australia in comparison with other societies, and ask how it came to be what it is. A comparative outlook imbues Australian Sociology, making it a much richer field for social and cultural understanding.

It is often said that when we travel far from home, we better appreciate and understand it. Why study Sociology in Australia? It provides a unique vehicle for international students to better understand their own societies and what makes them special.

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