



- [SSSP Home](#)
- [About SSSP](#)
- [Special Problems Divisions](#)
- [Membership](#)
- [Annual Meeting Awards & Scholarships](#)
- [SSSP Newsletter](#)
- [- Newsletter Archive](#)
- [Social Problems Journal](#)
- [Links of Interest](#)
- [Job Announcements](#)

34.2 SSSP Review: Critical Essays and Commentary (cont.)

John Lofland, *Demolishing a Historic Hotel: A Sociology of Preservation Failures in Davis, California* (Davis, CA: Davis Research, 2003). Paperbound, 378 pp. \$25.00.

Joel Best

The emergence of the constructionist stance toward social problems began in the 1970s, with theoretical statements by Herbert Blumer, Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse, and others, followed quickly by a still-growing empirical literature.

John Lofland, *Demolishing a Historic Hotel: A Sociology of Preservation Failures in Davis, California* (Davis, CA: Davis Research, 2003). Paperbound, 378 pp. \$25.00.

Joel Best

The emergence of the constructionist stance toward social problems began in the 1970s, with theoretical statements by Herbert Blumer, Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse, and others, followed quickly by a still-growing empirical literature. Typically, researchers produced case studies of the social construction of specific contemporary, American, national problems. In part, this research agenda was what the theorists had recommended; both Blumer and Spector and Kitsuse suggested the natural history as an appropriate approach to studying social problems. However, researchers also had a variety of practical reasons for favoring national case studies.

For one thing, national-level data are far more accessible. In 1980, when constructionist research was taking off, a well-stocked university library probably offered access to the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature (which indexed about 250 popular magazines -virtually all aimed at national audiences), the New York Times Index (the only newspaper indexed with enough detail to allow a researcher to reliably locate stories), Vanderbilt's Television News Index and Abstracts (allowing researchers to locate stories on the three network evening news broadcasts), and reasonably well-indexed federal documents; all the indexing, needless to say, was compiled in bound volumes, shelved in library reference rooms. In other words, it was far, far easier for researchers to find information on the construction of some social problem on the national stage - through the national media and within the federal government - than to examine the construction of local, or even regional problems. Even today, with the extraordinary expansion of electronic indexes and data stored at Web sites, national-level data are easier to locate, more complete, and better indexed.

There were also careerist reasons for favoring studies of national campaigns to construct social problems. Sociologists are judged and

rewarded by their research contributions. In general, scholars who study big problems are thought to have made bigger contributions; they find it easier to get published in the major journals, and get better jobs, more recognition, and so on. But what is a big problem? Obviously, one could invoke various principles - a big problem is one that affects lots of people, or that has especially serious consequences, or whatever - but it is hard to predict whether others will ratify those judgements. However, we can suspect that, in general, topics "ripped from the headlines," that are the subject of national attention, and that seem to offer many instructors examples that will be of interest to their students should fare better in the competition for disciplinary attention. The sociological literature features many solid, local case studies but, perhaps for these reasons, relatively few achieve wide recognition.

Demolishing a Historic Hotel is a study of claimsmaking surrounding the preservation or demolition of the Terminal Building (a.k.a. the Terminal Hotel or the Aggie Hotel) in Davis, California. John Lofland, a leading sociologist of social movements and qualitative methods, taught at the University of California's Davis campus for most of his career; he now holds emeritus status, and has begun publishing books on Davis's history (e.g., Lofland and Haig 2000). His new book ought to interest sociologists of social problems for several reasons.

Lofland's subject, the Terminal Building, was erected in the 1920s near Davis's railroad terminal. It was a two-story brick structure, built to house a restaurant and other commercial space on the first floor, and hotel rooms on the second. Built at a central intersection in what was then Davis's downtown, it remained in place even as the city's social and business center shifted several blocks away. Once the setting for Chamber of Commerce events, the Terminal Building evolved into more marginal status (e.g., for some years it had Davis's only bar offering live music without a cover charge). In 1999, a couple of people rented apartments - the hotel had long closed - upstairs, and a natural-foods store, a women's clothing store, a hairdresser, and a Mexican restaurant occupied the first floor. And, in 1999, its owners announced plans to demolish the building; a year later - after much debate in Davis - it was gone.

This is, one must concede, not a big story: a minor building in a small city was torn down. No lives were lost, and it would probably be difficult to measure how many lives were changed. Lofland understands that this poses a problem for an author; the first section of his first chapter is entitled "To Whom Is This an Interesting Story?" In my view, sociologists - and particularly those interested in social problems construction - can profit from the book in three ways.

First, this volume reveals new ways in which sociologists can exploit computer technologies. It contains an astonishing 405 "figures" - documents that Lofland scanned and inserted into the book (which I assume was laid out on his own computer). These figures include: maps; articles, columns, and letters to the editor from the local newspaper; photographs old and new; and copies of letters, official documents, and e-mail messages. Lofland begins with evidence (from old insurance maps) of the structures on the site before the Terminal Building was built, and follows the building's rise and lengthy decline. He includes an extensive set of documents tracing the debate over whether to preserve or destroy the building. Of course, it was not - is not--economically feasible to produce this sort of lavishly illustrated volume using traditional publishing technology, but this book hints that things may be about to

change. Thanks to his experiences with earlier, much smaller local history volumes, Lofland has obviously mastered some complicated computer skills. This is a generally attractive, readable volume - and it may suggest all sorts of possibilities to people working on other, very different projects.

The rich documentation provided by his figures also conveys a sense of the everyday complexity of social affairs. One can trace particular claims in the Terminal Building debate - Who first presented the idea? Who picked it up? How did the local paper handle it? Did community members respond in letters to the editor? Did it find its way into official deliberations? What finally happened? Lofland devotes two chapters to photographs of the demolition process; destroying a building and disposing of the debris turn out to have their own, surprisingly complicated social organization. For some reason, reading these chapters reminded me of little sequences of academic politics that I've been involved in over the years: when these events are unfolding, they seem - and are--incredibly complicated to participants, but later the complexity washes away, and people remember only the outcome, or perhaps the whole struggle gets forgotten. Lofland's methods allow an analyst to tell a much fuller, more complicated story than traditional publication practices permitted. Thus, one reason to examine this volume is to learn how technology may help sociological researchers write differently and present their work in new ways.

Second, this book illustrates the local construction of a social problem. To be sure, Lofland makes no references to the constructionist literature. In contrast, other local studies, such as Ruth M. Mann's (2000) study of the struggles over a Canadian women's shelter, are firmly located in constructionist theory. Lofland does locate the debate over the Terminal Building within a larger context, but it is historical preservationism. He argues that different communities are more or less resistant to preservationist claims. What comes through the book, at least to a reader interested in constructionism, is the extent to which participants in the Davis debate had difficulty linking their claims to larger principles or causes. This struggle revolved around specifics: Could, should this building be saved? On the one hand, by the standards of California's Central Valley, it was relatively old - a piece of the past. On the other, it was not especially attractive, nor was it linked to great historical figures or events, and it was unquestionably deteriorating; people in Davis had, at various times, failed to award it some official designation as a landmark worth protecting. As a consequence, the claimsmaking rhetoric invoked by the various participants tended to be long on localized specifics and short on appeals to grander values. And, once again, Lofland's extensive display of the evidence allows us to appreciate a very broad range of claims raised around this issue. Constructionist sociologists will have no difficulty locating this case study within their framework.

Third, sociologists should welcome this as a study of failure. We are naturally attracted to stories that illustrate how social movements succeed. The impact of the civil rights, feminist, and antiwar movements were largely responsible for the revival of sociological interest in social movements, and this many account for a tone of optimism that seems to run through much of this literature. (Lofland [e.g., 1993, 1996], it should be said, has always been careful to document movements' limitations.) But the campaign to save the Terminal Building failed - as, of course, do many claimsmaking campaigns that usually go unstudied. In his final chapter, Lofland attempts to account for this failure, but he rejects the sort of

simple, monocausal explanations that many analysts favor. Instead, he tries to show the many contingencies that contributed to the ultimate outcome and, importantly, he suggests that people can learn from thinking about the process of failure. The demolition of the Terminal Building taught Davis's preservationists some important lessons that may contribute to some future victories, although they probably cannot hope to forestall additional defeats as well.

SSSP members like to invoke the label "scholar-activist." In [Demolishing a Historic Hotel](#), John Lofland displays how mastering new technology can create new opportunities for melding scholarship and social action. His subject is small; it is unlikely that much will turn upon the destruction of the Terminal Building - or would have been different had the building been saved. But this book has implication for sociologists that extend far beyond the intersection of second and G in Davis, California.

References

- Lofland, John. 1993. *Polite Protesters: The American Peace Movement of the 1980s*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- . 1996. *Social Movement Organizations: Guide to Research on Insurgent Realities*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- , and Phyllis Haig. 2000. *Davis, California, 1910-1940s*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia.
- Mann, Ruth M. 2000. *Who Owns Domestic Abuse? The Local Politics of a Social Problem*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

[Print this article](#)