

# Sociologists!

*Michael S. Green, Ph.D.*

In February 1984, the American Bar Association met in Las Vegas. Warren Burger, chief justice of the United States, announced, "I, for one, will not be there because it's an unsavory and unsuitable place for me to speak." This prompted a naïve young reporter (me) for a Las Vegas daily, *The Valley Times*, to draft an editorial blistering Burger, whose colleagues were openly contemptuous of him. The newspaper's publisher, Bob Brown, rewrote the editorial, thanking Burger, pointing out that Las Vegas spent millions on advertising. Clearly, he said, it had worked: no less a personage than the chief justice had declared Las Vegas the American equivalent of Sodom and Gomorrah, which was, after all our goal. Why would tourists come to Las Vegas otherwise?

Nonetheless, Burger came to Las Vegas and spoke at the convention. But, not long afterward, Gov. Richard Lamm of Colorado declared that one in every eight women in Las Vegas was a prostitute, setting off another round of community teeth-grinding. Burger and Lamm were neither the first nor the last to make half-baked or half-witted comments about Las Vegas. Some of the American Sociological Association's members described Las Vegas as lacking authenticity, existing only to make money, and "not a real city." The ASA should be concerned that it is now part of a category with Burger and Lamm, much as Groucho Marx wanted nothing to do with any club that would have him as a member.<sup>1</sup>

This is a double-edged sword. The happy part is that the more recent advertising campaigns—i.e., "What happens here, stays here"—clearly are working: Las Vegas appears to be the exciting, kaleidoscopic, sexual carnival the ads suggest. The sad part is that the ads worked on sociologists, who are supposed to be scholars interested in studying subjects like community and society. Instead, they appear to have limited their research to a four-mile stretch of a onetime interstate highway that is like many other urban central business districts, with the exception that its most important hours of operation are at night.

Not that this is anything new. Las Vegas always has promoted itself, sometimes as something it is not. After the railroad that led to the town's creation auctioned off land in the downtown area in 1905, local business leaders advertised Las Vegas as a haven for the ailing, much as Arizona was known as the sanitarium capital of America (even the mother on *The Waltons* went there in hopes of curing her tuberculosis, and if you cannot trust the Waltons, who is left to trust?), and as the next great mining and agricultural center of the West.

After gambling became legal and divorce quicker in 1931, Las Vegas became a frontier town—or "still a frontier town," as it proclaimed. The early downtown casinos bore such names as the Apache, the Boulder, the Northern, the Pioneer, and the Golden Nugget. The first two hotels on the Strip were the El Rancho Vegas, soon to unveil the Chuck Wagon Buffet, and the Hotel Last Frontier, complete with steer horns on the bed frames and saddles for barstools. The annual Helldorado celebration included jails, beard-growing contests, and a rodeo. Never mind that no Old West cowboys could be found among the owners of these casinos or the Elks Lodge, which put on Helldorado, even when they ran around in western clothing. Las Vegas was a western town, ma'am, and that was the public relations law west of the Pecos.

Las Vegas since has become famous for promoting itself—the genius of the Las Vegas News Bureau photographers and hotel publicists in the 1950s and 1960s is a story unto itself—and reinventing itself, going through numerous phases. During the

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1990s, the most recent boom, Las Vegas became known as a family destination, and to this day many inside and outside of the town think Las Vegas redesigned itself in that way. In fact, family attractions always had been available; two decades ago, Las Vegas finally chose to advertise that fact, for logical reasons: family values had become a major political issue, it was a new way to get attention, and Baby Boomers who wanted to go on vacation had to do something with their children while they had fun.

Indeed, Las Vegas is a crucial element in the theming of America, the subject of a book by sociologist Mark Gottdiener of the University of Buffalo. He just received the ASA's Robert and Helen Lynd Lifetime Achievement Award for distinguished career achievements in community and urban sociology last year. Maybe the ASA members who were critical of Las Vegas were unaware that one of his other books, co-written with Claudia Collins and David Dickens, was *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City*.

Las Vegas is, in many ways, a production. It also is, as journalist Marc Cooper called it in a wise and witty book, *The Last Honest Place in America*, because it dares to be open in all of the things that make it dubious, from encouraging unhealthy behaviors and physiques (despite the spas and health clubs that now populate the Strip) to objectifying women—something that, of course, no other city does because no other city has topless clubs or showgirls.

If Richard Hofstadter had come here, Las Vegas could have been a chapter in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning book. But if he were around today, he might have spent time researching his book at local institutions of higher education, talking with Ph.D.'s in history and sociology. He might have checked out the nation's fifth largest public school system (with all of its attendant problems), the many libraries with their art galleries, a vibrant literary community, and unions that have provided models for labor relations elsewhere.

The Las Vegas Strip is not known for promoting the life of the mind; it is known for providing instant gratification and, if Las Vegasans want tourists to keep coming, it always will be. Sociologists need instant gratification, too, and those of us who work for the state and therefore depend on gaming revenues for our salaries hope they lost some money while they were here. They certainly appear to have lost no sleep leaving the Strip and exploring a metropolis with a population of more than two million—very few of whom, they may be surprised to know, live on the Strip.

1 *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 1983. See coverage in *The Valley Times*, February 9-16, 1983, and February 9-16, 1984. See *Las Vegas Review-Journal* and *Las Vegas Sun* coverage, March 1-6, 1984, on Lamm; *Las Vegas Sun*, August 29, 2011.