

ASA President Trip to Mid-South Sociological Association meetings
and Philander Smith College

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One of the activities of ASA presidents -- if they are interested -- is to participate in regional sociological association meetings. The ASA also facilitates presidents visiting under-resourced universities to give talks and discuss the ASA with circles of students and faculty. My first trip involving these activities was to attend the annual meeting of the Mid-South Sociological Association in Little Rock at the end of October. With me on this trip was Göran Therborn, a distinguished Swedish Sociologist teaching at Cambridge University in England who had been giving a series of lectures at the University of Wisconsin in the days just before the Mid-South Meeting. While in Little Rock, I also visited for an afternoon Philander Smith College, an historically black liberal arts college. As things developed, Göran and I also spent a few hours at the Occupy Little Rock encampment where we were asked to lead a discussion around our perspectives on social justice and the occupy movement.

The Mid-South Sociological Association Meetings

The “Mid” in Mid-South refers to the middle states along the east/west axis of the South – basically Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and other southern states to their north. It is the smallest of the regional sociological associations in the United States, but nevertheless has held an annual meeting since its founding in 1974. Because of its location, it is the association with the closest ties to sociologists working in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The meeting was lively, serious and intellectually engaging.

At the conference I lead a session billed as “A conversation with ASA President Erik Olin Wright: diversity in American sociology, the ASA, Real Utopias, and Anything-else-you-want-to-discuss.” I began the discussion with some brief remarks about my changing relation to the discipline of sociology. Here is the gist of what I said:

When I entered sociology in 1971 I had no real commitment to sociology as a discipline. I chose sociology because of all of the social science disciplines I saw it as the least disciplined, the least concerned with policing its boundaries, and the most permissive of fringe perspectives. I was interested in pursuing a Marxist social science and needed a home where I could do this with the least hassle and sociology seemed the best place for that. But I didn't see sociology as such as being of particular value. Indeed, at times I framed my work as Marxism versus sociology more than Marxism within sociology. Now, 40 years later I am President of the ASA and have a very strong identification with the discipline. Over the course of these four decades I have seen sociology become more open, more tolerant of its quirky corners, more pluralistic in its views of methods and topics. While tensions sometimes still surface, most sociologists value the diversity of theoretical orientations in the discipline as well as the diversity of methods. This deepening of a fairly robust pluralism in the discipline is an accomplishment, not just the result of some kind of intellectual drift or indifference. And, I think, the ASA as an

organization is one of the reasons this has happened. The way the association is governed has encouraged representation of different traditions sociological research as well as different institutional settings in which sociologists work, and the structure of the association – with now over 50 sections – has helped legitimate the diversity of niches in the discipline.

I then went on to talk a little about the Real Utopias theme for the 2012 ASA conference and why I thought this was an important agenda for sociological research.

What followed was a lively, engaged discussion over a wide range of issues, including the difficulty in some institutional settings of maintaining the kind of pluralism I described, the problem of sustaining the core values of sociology given the pressures on sociology programs to show that sociology provides preparation for real jobs, the fact that emancipatory ideals embody a variety of different values and how almost inevitably this implies that the design of real utopian institutions has to contend with normative trade-offs, and the issue of cultural relativism in my discussion of human flourishing and real utopias.

Philander Smith College

Philander Smith College is a small predominantly black liberal arts college that was founded in 1877 and remains associated with the United Methodist Church. Like many HBCUs since the end of legal segregation in South it has faced increasing challenges in recruiting its student body and sustaining a sense of purpose, given the opportunities for African American students to attend historically white institutions. In this context, in 2007 the college engaged in a serious process of rethinking its core mission as an academic institution. Its mission now states: “To graduate academically accomplished students, grounded as advocates for social justice, determined to change the world for the better.” Its school motto is “Think Justice.” When I learned of this remarkable mission statement I contacted the newly appointed director of the college’s social justice initiative, Dr. Joseph Jones, told him that I would be in Little Rock for the Mid-South meetings, and offered to come to the college and lead an informal discussion on Real Utopias and social justice. Jean Shin, the director of minority affairs at the ASA Executive Office accompanied me, bringing materials from the ASA that might be useful for faculty and students in the sociology program at the college.



There were about 15 people at the gathering, half students, half faculty. I began by commenting on how extraordinary I thought it was that their college had adopted a mission statement so strongly anchored in a commitment to social justice. I then said that while this was the first time I had ever been in Little Rock, they should know what a salient place the city held in my heart because of the desegregation struggle at Central High School in 1957. I was ten years old at the time, living in Lawrence, Kansas. The Central High battles were the first events of the Civil Rights era about which I have direct memories, not just from later reading, but from seeing

it on television at the time. When I said this, to my surprise, I choked up and for a moment found it hard to speak. The setting – a black liberal arts college, the social justice mission statement which I had just read aloud, the evocation of the civil rights struggles with its promises and disappointments – triggered a much stronger emotional reaction than I had anticipated.

The exchange with students and faculty at the college was extremely interesting for me, and I think useful for them as well. I explained how the idea of Real Utopias was a distinctive way of engaging issues of social justice, different from simply talking about desirable policy reforms. Both of these begin with the diagnosis and critique of existing structures and institutions, identifying the ways in which they cause harms. But they differ in the way they approach the problem of alternatives. The analysis of policy reform looks at the current situation and asks: what kinds of changes can we pursue that would improve things, given the social and political constraints we face? The study of Real Utopias asks: What is the destination we want to get to? It then seeks achievable transformations that move us in that direction, policy reforms that constitute way stations along the path to a more emancipatory future. Sometimes these way stations involve the same actions and policy changes advocated by policy research, but sometimes not. I then gave the example of different kinds of welfare policies all of which may improve the lives of the poor, but only some of which move in the direction of a more fundamental transformation of the system of income distribution (for example, by moving towards unconditional basic income) while others serve to solidify the division between programs for the poor and everyone else. The students and faculty at the meeting raised many



issues which lead to discussions of the Occupy Wall Street movement and the way in which it seemed to exclude much participation from minorities and poor people, the problem of both community activists and protesters taking seriously the problem of inclusiveness, the opposition to Obama's jobs programs and what sorts of jobs program would really work, and many other things.

Afterwards Joseph Jones took me and Jean Shin on a tour of the campus, ending up at the offices of the Social Justice initiative, adorned with photos of the iconic figures of social justice movements from the South and around the world. None of the photos were labeled with names or explanations. Dr. Jones explained that this was deliberate so that when students came to the office they would ask about the photos and this would lead to a discussion. The actual implementation of the social justice mission is still in its very early stages and it remains to be seen how deeply this can be translated in practice into the academic life of the college. The idea is for social justice not to be a "topic" confined to a few special courses, but a theme that becomes integral throughout the curriculum. From my point of view this has the potential to be a real utopian experiment – building an institution in the present that embodies emancipatory values and moves in the direction of their fuller realization in a possible future. It will also be good for sociology, since in any project of this sort sociology would have to be one of the core arenas for academic activity.

Occupy Wall Street

The last session of the Mid-South conference was devoted to a lecture by Göran Therborn on “Dynamics of (In)Equalities: The South and the Rest.” The organizer of the conference, Mark Konty, had issued a press release inviting anyone from the Little Rock Community to come to that session. In advance he had no idea how many people would respond. As it turned out seven or eight people involved in the Occupy Little Rock encampment came. The lecture was just what they wanted – an exploration of both the specificities of the problem of inequality within the South and a discussion of broader trends in equality in the world as a whole. Afterwards they invited me and Göran to visit the encampment and attend the General Assembly (a daily event) at 7pm.



We showed up around 5:00 after visiting Little Rock Central High School and its adjoining museum (now a national historic site run by the National Park Service) and the Clinton Presidential library. The Occupy Little Rock encampment had previously been located in front of the Clinton Library, but the activists had been unable (so far) to get a city permit for that location. The city proposed a different place, across the freeway from the library, where they could stay indefinitely. After discussion, the occupiers decided that this was a reasonable compromise, and so moved a few days earlier.



The encampment was small. Perhaps 15 or so tents and around 30-40 people. Hand made signs adorned the perimeter: This is What Democracy Looks Like; We are the 99%; Sorry for the inconvenience, but we are trying to change the world; No: Weapons, Alcohol, Controlled Substances, Bad Attitudes. Dinner was being prepared and smoke was rising from a portable fire pit surrounded by lawn chairs in an area designed for meetings. A white board listed lectures and discussions in the upcoming week. Soon, Göran and I were ushered over to the meeting area. The audience was not quite what I expected. There were, of course, scruffy young people, but also men and women in their 50s and 60s, perhaps even older.

I spoke about how the idea of real utopia connected to the spirit of the Occupy Movement, and then elaborated briefly what I think of as the three tasks of any systematic account of emancipatory possibilities: the diagnosis and critique of the world as it is, envisioning viable alternatives that embody emancipatory ideals, and developing a theory of transformation for how to get from here to there. Göran talked about the massive irresponsibility of financial elites in gambling recklessly with financial resources derived from pension funds and insurance policies of ordinary people and the global character of the new waves of protest against “casino capitalism”. The protests in the U.S., he explained, were important not only for people here, but

for the wider audience in the world. They signaled the universality of the anger at the destructiveness of the system as it exists.

The discussion which followed focused on the issue of the goals and strategies of the occupy movement. I was asked what I thought of the idea of abolishing the Fed. Apparently there has been a pretty bitter debate within the Occupy Little Rock encampment over this issue. I said that I thought that while it is true that the Fed is basically an arm of the financial sector and seems mainly concerned with the welfare of bankers, abolishing the Fed was not a plausible demand, both for political reasons and for institutional reasons. The demand, I suggested, should be *democratize the Fed* – make it accountable to the people through democracy. Of course this also requires democratizing democracy: if Congress is subordinated to large corporation and wealthy elites, then it is not enough to make the Fed accountable to Congress. This lead to the broader question of democracy itself as a political goal. There are two values, I argued, that continuously animate American politics – *Freedom* and *Democracy*. The Tea Party has anchored its attack on government and progressive policies in the name of freedom. The anchor for critics of the right wing should be democracy. Democracy – power to the people – is a deeply held American ideal and nearly all of the demands and proposals to deal with the present crisis and malaise can be connected to the call for deepening democracy. With democracy as the anchor, I argued, then “freedom” can be re-appropriated by the protesters: a robust democracy is the necessary condition for meaningful freedom. I was asked for more specific ideas of what could be done, so I laid out the basic institutional design of “urban participatory budgeting” and explained how this could be a way of pushing a democratizing agenda locally and building from there. But how, I was asked, can we make any progress on democracy without campaign finance reform? I responded that pro-democracy forces of course had to struggle for reducing the role of money in politics, but that it was just a fact of life that for the next period of American politics unlimited funds were going to pour into electoral campaigns. There is simply no way that progressive political forces can compete on the terrain of funding. What we have is people, time and effort. As Claus Offe has said, the mobilizing capacity of elites depends upon the willingness to pay; the mobilizing capacity of ordinary people depends on the willingness to act. There is no way around it: we have to substitute time and effort for cash – that is where in the end we have an overwhelming potential advantage.

Around 7:00 the forum came to a close so that the General Assembly of the encampment could take place. A film crew from a local TV station was there and asked to interview me. They seemed impressed that the President of the American Sociological Association was in Little Rock leading a discussion on democracy and social change with the participants of Occupy Little Rock.



Some meandering additional observations and encounters

1. *Some issues discussed in the “conversation” session I had at the Mid-South meeting.* I began my discussion of real utopias with what I think of as a foundational empirical proposition of sociology: “A great deal of human suffering and deficits in human flourishing are the result of existing social structures and institutions.” I explained that this was a foundational claim and was unequivocally established empirically. There might be serious disagreements about the underlying causal process through which harms are generated, and certainly disagreements about what can be done to change things, but every sociologist would agree with the claim that existing institutions generate deficits in flourishing. I then argued that claims about social justice revolved around the unequal distribution of the conditions for human flourishing: “A just society is one in which all people have broadly equal access to the social and material means necessary to live a flourishing life.” One person in the audience raised the problem of cultural relativism: How do you respond to the criticism that claims that our institutions are unjust reflect the specific standards of our culture? I explained that there is always an area of ambiguity on these issues, but that I think it is possible to push the problem to the sidelines by showing the relatively limited relevance to many questions. The first step is elaborating the foundational empirical claim. It is a cultural universal that hunger and illness is a form of human suffering. It is also I think a cultural universal that developing ones talents is one of the ways that people flourish, even if different cultures will value different kinds of talents. So, to show the existing institutions and structures generate hunger and ill health and interfere with some people’s ability to develop their talents is to show that these institutions have negative effects with respect to (virtually) universally held values. The next step is to show, empirically, that some groups of people are more negatively affected by these processes than others. The exposure to the harms varies across people. This is the core of the social justice indictment: the moral unfairness of distributions of benefits and burdens of a society. The empirical demonstration of the inequality forces the defender of existing institutions to show that there is some reason why this inequality is not in fact “unfair”. When the people who suffer are children, this is always very tough to do. One response, for example, is that the suffering is God’s will. Another response is that there is some other value in play that is more important than the unfairness of the suffering. The right of people to keep their wealth could outweigh the unfairness of poor children being hungry. These kinds of responses always seem hollow. Separating the problem of the way institutions and structures generate harms from the specific arguments about injustice have the effect of putting defenders of those institutions on the defensive.

A second issue in the discussion that was pretty interesting was the problem of normative trade-offs. One of the ideas I stress in explicating the “real” in real utopias is the fact that any viable institutional design for emancipatory goals will almost inevitably involve trade-offs between dearly held values. As long as one’s moral universe for human flourishing involves more than one value, it is implausible that it will always be possible to maximize on all normatively salient dimensions. The example I discussed was the value of parents doing what is best for their own children and the value that all children have an equal chance in the world. It is simply the case that these values have to be somehow balanced; the unrestrained realization of the first will necessarily undermine the second.

2. *Conversation with security guard at the Clinton Library.* At the Clinton library I had an interesting encounter with an African-American security guard in front of the replica of the oval office. He saw that I was wearing a Philander Smith fleece which I had purchased the previous day, with its motto “Think Justice.” He asked if I taught at the college. I explained that I had given a talk there the day before and was in Little Rock for a sociology conference. He expressed his admiration for the college and all that it has done. I told him about my visit to Central High School and how meaningful that was to me. He spoke of how different Little Rock now was. He also told me that Wal-Mart – whose headquarters are in Arkansas – was Philander Smith College’s biggest donor. Now that is something interesting – certainly an irony given the current mission statement of the college. Wal-Mart apparently is also a big donor to the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum of African American History and Culture, and that museum will have to have quite a lot about freedom struggles and at least the civil rights dimensions of social justice. I suppose one of the issues here is the extent to which “social justice” is identified just with the problem of civil rights and racism or is seen as a more comprehensive egalitarian principle of economic fairness and class oppression. Joseph Jones certainly expressed strong anti-capitalist sentiments in our discussions, but it is also true that on the College website the emphasis is on social justice and civil rights. It would be hard to imagine Wal-Mart endowing a College which it saw as embracing the more comprehensive vision of social justice as requiring a challenge to capitalism.

The guard also told me that Bill Clinton drops by the library every month or so when he is in Little Rock. His Little Rock residence is a penthouse on top of the library, which basically seems to have a park with a putting green and a garden, as well as panoramic views of the Arkansas River and the whole city. When he comes into the library he is dressed casually, often in sweat pants, and mingles with people, hanging out, answering questions. The secret service folks blend into the background unobtrusively.

3. *The Library.* The library, which is really more of a museum in homage to Clinton, was pretty interesting. Of course it is a myth-making monument to his administration, but still had lots of interesting things. One exhibit was about Clinton’s sense of humor and included a number of video spoofs that Bill and Hilary made about themselves along with all of the Clinton speeches at the annual Washington press club dinner where presidents get roasted. He was pretty funny, with a real sense of comic timing. In one of them, just after he had broken his ankle after slipping on a step (I think), he said that he just learned that George Bush, aged 72, had just sky-dived from 12,000 feet and landed without a scratch. Clearly this was done, Clinton said, to torment me. I fell six inches and broke my ankle.

4. *Conversation with self-proclaimed right-winger at the Occupy Little Rock encampment.* After the general discussion was finished I was standing on the perimeter of the General Assembly meeting. A man with a grey goatee, a bit older than me, came up to me to talk. He had a confederate flag insignia on his jacket. The conversation went more or less like this:

Goatee: You know, what you said made a lot of sense to me. Now I am a right-winger, but it still made a lot of sense. But I do think the Fed is an abomination and should be abolished. You know who was the last president that abolished the National Banks? That was Andrew Jackson and we did just fine after that.

Me: Well, this a different world now. Things are a lot more complicated.

Goatee: Yeah, I know that, but still the Fed is an abomination.

Me: What I think is that we need to democratize the bank, subordinate it to democratic control. We need a central bank to create credit and regulate the money supply. If we didn't have a public bank like that, then the private bankers would basically set up something on their own and they would be even more in control. So what we need is some way of creating democratic accountability.

Goatee: I'm for less government. We have too much government as is. If you get rid of most government regulation then people will just take care of things.

Me: What about food safety inspection. Do you really want to leave that up to agribusiness? The problem we have is that over the past decades food inspections have been reduced dramatically, the FDA has fewer inspectors. So now we have more outbreaks of food poisoning. Private industry isn't going to take care of that.

Goatee: I'll grant you that. We need food inspectors. But anyway, grapes from Chile taste a lot better than grapes from here.

Me: That may be true, but it doesn't have anything to do with government food inspectors. Anyway, I'm not sure you are as right-wing as you think you are. I think your complaint is not so much about government regulation but about who controls the regulating.

Goatee: maybe so.

Afterwards, thinking about this conversation, it occurred to me that what may have really been in play here was a feeling on this man's part that democratic accountability of powerful institutions was simply not possible, so it was better to simply get rid of them. In a sense this reflects a view of the world in which there are three theoretical possibilities:

#1. The world as it is with powerful corporations and a powerful government, the latter being controlled by the former. Both of these screw the average person. The government screws people both because it is beholden to powerful corporations – the banks control the Fed – and because powerful bureaucrats are mainly out for their own interests.

#2. A world with powerful corporations and a powerful government, but the latter is democratically accountable to the people and is able to counteract the harmful effects of corporate power.

#3. A world with powerful corporations and a weak/minimalist government. The corporations continue to dominate people, but they no longer can also use the government to do their bidding, and government bureaucrats don't have the power to do anything.

We both agree that #1 exists and is harmful. Where we differ is that I think #2 is possible – that an effective government can be democratically accountable and counteract the power of capital, whereas the person I talked to basically think that is impossible. If #2 is impossible, then #3 seems more attractive. It at least isn't so crazy to imagine that #3 would be an improvement over the status quo. I wonder how many Ron Paul supporters and libertarian TeaPartyers really share that kind of view?

5. *Southern politeness.* At the encampment everyone called me “sir.” No one ever calls me sir in Wisconsin. But there in the parking lot across the freeway from the Clinton Library, long haired, bedraggled young people with piercings kept calling me sir. I commented on it and was told it was just the way people talked in the South.

6. *Cabin attendant.* On the flight from Little Rock there was an extremely funny cabin attendant, cracking jokes, teasing the passengers on the loud speaker. I gave her a big grin while she was doing her thing, and then when she passed down the aisle I commented, “I like your style.” Later, as we approached Chicago and she was gathering up cups and trash, she turned to me and said “hope you had a nice flight smiley”.