

Comment on ASA theme
Scott Feld
Professor of Sociology
Purdue University

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I expect you must be deluged with email, requests and advice in general, and especially in the context of the ASA Presidency, so I will try to cut right to the chase.

I have long identified myself as a sociologist of the possible, rather than someone who just describes (or criticizes) what is, and I am delighted by your using the bully pulpit and more of the ASA presidency to encourage sociologists to think more and explore more about how things could be made “better.” However, I am very concerned that the form you are taking may bring out the worst, not the best, in sociology. It is too simple to advocate a simple-minded ideal, and very challenging to recognize the inherent difficulties-- and sociologists often talk the simple talk. Economists and political scientists have a greater tradition re of exploring utopian thinking, and have long recognized that notions of ideal societies are generally internally inconsistent and therefore impossible. In sociology jargon, the primary question must first be:

Utopia for Whom?

Because people do NOT agree on the nature of what is ideal.
A related question is:

Equal “opportunity” for what?

Because equal pay for equal work means more pay for people that work more, and less pay for people who produce the same with less “work.” Maybe that is just, but that would be contested by many.

Would it even be good for everyone to value the same ideal?

Economists and political scientists already recognize the impossibilities of social utility functions that meet a few simple desirable criteria. Sociologists have hardly begun to think about these dilemmas.

So, you are promoting a showcase for sociologists to display how naïve sociologists can be, and how self-centered and oblivious sociologists can be to the REAL world.

Some sociologists have thought about these issues, and I like to consider myself one of those. James S. Coleman was one of the founders of the Public Choice Society, which routinely wrestles with these issues. Economists can be naïve too, especially in mindlessly promoting markets, but most do recognize social dilemmas and public goods problems.

Your program proposals seem to encourage ideologues to promote their favorite values, to the exclusion of others, rather than taking seriously human variation and inconsistency.

I think that it is challenging enough to make things better in particular ways in the real world—and the sociology of “making things better” is much more practical and more likely to draw constructive ideas and work from sociologists. I think it would be a great step to include consideration of ideal worlds in the program, but especially in the context of variation in values and inconsistencies, if we are not to appear foolish in front of one another, our social science and philosophical colleagues, and the larger world of thoughtful people.

Just my concerns as a sociologist, long time member of ASA, and as a concerned citizen.

Reply
Erik Olin Wright
President-elect, ASA
November 1, 2010

Thank you so much for your thoughtful email. The kinds of concerns you raise are precisely why I refer to "real utopias" rather than just "utopias" -- the issues of trade-offs, dilemmas, inconsistencies, and so on, are at the center of such discussion. I am not sure, however, if you are really right that economists in general exemplify the kind of thinking one ought to do about these issues. More damage in recent decades has been done by the economist's form of simple-minded thinking than, I think, the sociologist's version of such thinking. In any case, I am completely with you on the need to take seriously the problem of variation and heterogeneity, both of the ideals in play in trying to make for a better world and in the trade-offs among the values that any given ideal embodies.

Where I think my framing of the issue differs from the way Coleman and most political science public choice analysis would approach these things is by not restricting the analysis to incrementally achievable alternatives and the trade-offs involve in accomplishing them. I like to distinguish three dimensions in the discussion of alternative institutions -- desirability, viability and achievability. Achievability is obviously important, and many of the trade-offs and dilemmas center around this issue, since the political realities and path dependent contexts of social reform often impose such constraints on practical change. Nevertheless, I think it is valuable to think seriously about the viability of alternatives abstracted from the problem of achievability, even though ultimately one needs to bring achievability back in. This helps to bring into focus those issues of trade-offs and contradictions that are inherent in the character of different sorts of proposals rather than those that are imposed by contexts.

Hope this clarifies a bit how I think about the theme. And again, thanks for your comments.