



Sociology's Response to the Trump Presidency: Views from the 108th ASA President¹

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In this essay, I discuss the ways in which a national organization like the American Sociological Association can fight against government policies that threaten conditions essential for knowledge production.

KEYWORDS: inclusion; politics; public policy; social activism; strategic action; Trump.

INTRODUCTION

For the past 15 years, sociologists have been engaged in a lively conversation about the place of public engagement in our discipline. This topic gained renewed salience after the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in November 2016. While many (but not all) sociologists reacted negatively to his political platform, the American Sociological Association (ASA) was particularly concerned with his policies that threatened conditions essential for knowledge production³—to take only one example, Trump's executive order declaring a ban on travel from seven Muslim countries. The ASA responded by signing a multisociety letter of protest,⁴ as this constituted a direct hindrance to freedom of movement and thus to the free exchange of ideas. As I was serving as president of the association starting in August 2016, it fell on me to take a leadership role in defending our professional interests. This short essay describes some of the actions the ASA took during my presidency.

TAKING ACTION

Immediately after Trump came into office, I collaborated closely with the new ASA executive director, Nancy Kidd, in crafting letters responding to various policies (for instance, a letter in support for administrative policies on sex segregation that treat transgender students as members of their professed gender for all

¹ *Editor's Note:* This essay is part of a five-article feature in *Sociological Forum* 33(4) titled, "The Sociologist as Activist." For the other contributions, please see Blau (2018), Catone (2018), Daniels (2018), and Jorgenson (2018).

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³ <http://www.asanet.org/news-events/asa-news/statement-american-sociological-association-concerning-new-administrations-recent-and-future>

⁴ <http://www.asanet.org/news-events/asa-news/multisociety-letter-immigration-executive-order>

school-sponsored activities).⁵ In other cases, we created new committees whose role would be to defend our interests or the production of sociological knowledge. For instance, it became imperative to create a committee charged with the defense of federal data after we learned of pressures to restrict geospatial and racial disparities data at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).⁶ We mobilized ASA members for important events such as the March for Science, in which our professional organization had a strong presence and during which we hosted various social science organizations in our offices in downtown DC.⁷ I welcomed these involvements because, like many sociologists, I was eager for opportunities to push back against various initiatives from the new administration. The ASA provided me with both a unique outlet through which to channel my energies, as well as a much-needed and generally enthusiastic audience.

During winter and spring 2017, I traveled to meetings of the regional sociological associations to discuss sociology's responses to the current political situation at town hall-style meetings. Such invitations quickly multiplied, as there was such a sense of urgency in the air. These town hall meetings invariably brought together sociologists (graduate students, faculty members, and practitioners) eager to become more actively involved. These meetings were often the occasion for vigorous calls for action.

Sociology Action Network

At the town hall meeting held at the Eastern Sociological Society in Philadelphia in February 2017, Akos Rona-Tas (University of California, San Diego) advanced the idea that the ASA should connect members interested in creating change with organizations in need of sociological expertise. I liked this proposal very much and decided to take on the suggestion. We developed it with the input of a small committee of ASA members (including Rona-Tas) and Nancy Kidd. This is how the idea of creating a Sociology Action Network (SAN) took root and eventually was brought to the ASA Council in August 2017. The current plan is to launch it in 2019. The stated goal of SAN is "to leverage our sociological expertise to empower various sectors of civil society to intervene in current sociopolitical contexts in meaningful ways. SAN will do this by providing direct support to organizations with missions related to issues that can be informed by sociology" (quoted from an August 2017 council memo). Organizations with not-for-profit missions, including nonprofit and public sector organizations, are eligible to request SAN sociologists.

More concretely, the ASA will be able to connect sociologists wanting to volunteer their time and expertise with labor unions, organizations supporting social movements, and other nongovernmental organizations. It will serve as a clearing house and create happy matches (like a dating website of sort). We can anticipate

⁵ <http://www.asanet.org/news-events/asa-news/asa-writes-letter-president-trump-protest-executive-order-transgender-access>

⁶ <http://www.asanet.org/news-events/asa-news/federal-statistics-working-group>

⁷ <http://www.asanet.org/news-events/asa-news/asa-partnering-march-science>

that this new network will become popular in the years ahead. It will contribute to facilitating and routinizing the public involvement of interested sociologists.

One of the advantages of SAN is that it does not pit “professional” sociologists against “organic intellectuals” who wish to mobilize their knowledge on behalf of progressive groups; it is open to all ASA members and is premised on the idea that various forms and types of contributions are valid. As such, SAN will contribute to legitimating public sociology and to making it everyone’s business. It will also help us reconnect with the mission that C. Wright Mills defined for our field: that of helping people see the connection between their individual problems and broader social dynamics.⁸ By providing assistance to civil society organizations, we will contribute to diffusing sociological knowledge to the population at large. We may even be able to fight back against the turn to individual solutions that are now being featured in the media in this age of neoliberalism—solutions centered on the mind and the body (meditation, mindfulness, healthism). Social problems require social solutions. Finally, we will respond to the sense of urgency felt by so many of our graduate students who are looking for outlets for their political energies. The ASA will provide a medium where this goal can be appropriately pursued, while grounding interventions in sociological knowledge.

These transformations are taking place against the background of the increased legitimation of various forms of public interventions for sociologists, such as the publication of articles and blogs oriented toward a wider audience. The ASA report “What Counts? Evaluating Public Communication in Tenure and Promotion”⁹ (in which I participated as an expert on peer review) is playing an important role in giving to departments guidelines on how to factor in such contributions in promotion decisions. It recommends that decisions continue to be based on excellence in research, teaching, and services, and that other types of publications be considered as complements to these essential activities. Thus, social media contributions will not replace the publication of peer-reviewed sociological research but should be an important complement in the diffusion of such work.

Under the Trump presidency more than ever, we need to recognize that our discipline is a big tent that includes a wide range of types of professional sociologists and graduate students. It is with this in mind that during my term as ASA president, we did the background work to create a task force on “first-generation and working-class persons in sociology”¹⁰ (formalized in August 2017) and started the silent leadership phase for a fund-raising campaign for the newly created Annual Meeting Travel Fund (AMTF). In addition to the long-standing Minority Fellowship

⁸ To quote C. Wright Mills (1959:226), “Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles—and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time.”

⁹ http://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/tf_report_what_counts_evaluating_public_communication_in_tenure_and_promotion_final_august_2016.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.asanet.org/news-events/asa-news/task-force-first-generation-and-working-class-persons-sociology-0>

Program (MFP), AMTF will facilitate the participation of low-income members and international scholars at the meetings.¹¹

These new initiatives were in line with the 112th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association I organized around the theme of “Culture, Inequalities, and Social Inclusion Across the Globe”¹²—a focus that became ever more timely as Trump multiplied policies and executive orders that stigmatized or excluded immigrants, Muslims, LGBTQ, and other groups. There, I delivered a presidential lecture (now available in *American Sociological Review* [Lamont 2018]), on “Addressing Recognition Gaps: Destigmatization and the Reduction of Inequality.”¹³ This paper draws attention to “recognition gaps,” defined as disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society. It describes how neoliberalism promotes growing recognition gaps and analyzes how experiences of stigma and destigmatization are enabled and constrained by various contextual factors and actors, including institutions, cultural repertoires, knowledge workers, and social movement activists. Finally, I propose a research agenda for the sociology of recognition and destigmatization, and sketch how social scientists, policymakers, organizations, and citizens can contribute to the reduction of recognition gaps.

CONCLUSION

In this age of Trump, promoting inclusion is more important than ever. Much of my scholarship has focused on the transformation of group boundaries and the broadening of inclusion. I have been fortunate that the timing of my service as ASA president allowed me to push for social changes that are so closely lined up with my research agenda.

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¹¹ www.asanet.org/SAN

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¹³ <http://www.asanet.org/news-events/asa-news/asa-writes-letter-president-trump-protest-executive-order-transgender-access>