

The AGORA

Newsletter of the Rationality and Society Section of the American Sociological Association and the Research Committee on Rational Choice of the International Sociological Association

Winter 2009

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2009-2010

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From the Chair's Desk



I was surprised and honored to be elected chair of the Rationality and Society

section last summer. My own recent work has been more in what could be called "Irrationality and Society": mass incarceration and racial disparities in the criminal justice system. A lot of these policies were justified by cost-benefit analyses that were deeply flawed by narrow and even ideological decisions about which costs and benefits to count in the calculations. In many sociological circles, the term "rationality" has a strong negative association with highly ideological strands of thinking that claim that people act and should act solely out of the narrowest possible conceptions of individualist economic self-interest or hedonism. Perhaps partly for this reason, the Rationality and Society section, never large to begin with, has been declining in size.

Of course, this negative view is based on a false stereotype. What unites sociologists in the rational choice tradition is not adherence to any pre-specified assumptions about how people make choices or ought to make choices. Rather, we share a broad interest in

understanding the relationship between the different logics people use when they make choices and the consequences of those choices. “Rational choice” sociologists have studied the effects of decisions motivated by principles like altruism, adaptive learning, conformity, ideology and identity-maintenance. Much of the work in this tradition focuses not on individuals, but on collectivities, and is concerned with how the structure of relations among individuals affects both choices and the consequences of choices. A more accurate name for the tradition might be “Choices and Society” or “Consequential Decisions.”

The true basis of unity in the sociological rational choice tradition is a commitment to using rigorous methods that permit us to derive clear predictions and learn when our assumptions or theories are wrong, coupled with a willingness to change our assumptions and theories when the results tell us to. Sociologists in the tradition have been able to identify the consequences of different logics of decision-making

and clear instances of decisions that fall outside any well-formed logic of decision-making. Researchers in the rational choice tradition have constructed careful measures of their constructs and careful tests of their predictions, and have been able to identify anomalies that contradict the predictions of theories.

Like most people who work in the rational choice tradition, I do not believe that even broadly-construed rational choice models explain everything about human behavior. I read and appreciate work from other theoretical traditions. At the same time, I believe that work done in the broad rational choice tradition has made huge contributions to understanding complex social processes. I am

particularly excited by the ongoing formal work on collective action that continues to offer new insights. In my current focus on the irrationalities of mass incarceration, I find that the discipline of a rational choice approach guides my thinking about collective decision-making under conditions of inter-group conflict, helps me to understand how such dysfunctional outcomes are possible and, perhaps, may help me to identify ways the dysfunction might be reversed.

Insights from broad rational choice theory and the study of movement organizations can help us to think about the future of the Rationality and Society section. The R&S section has been declining by about 5-10 members per year for some time. Its current membership of 152 is well below the ASA’s official minimum section size of 300. The section meets criteria of viability, and ASA is not threatening any immediate action, but section membership is gradually approaching the absolute threshold of 100 below a section ceases to exist no matter what it does.

Meeting the needs of old members is not enough for organizational survival. All organizations lose even committed members from natural processes. To survive, organizations must recruit new members. We know that many organizations die, while others go through doldrums and then reinvigorate. Both outcomes are possible for the R&S section. Appeals to people to pay dues to “save the section” are not the solution. Even though people can be motivated by altruism and social conscience, the R&S section is not a charity and cannot expect to survive on altruistic contributions. Section survival requires recruiting young scholars who choose among competing sections in allocating their limited resources.

The primary benefit a section offers is intellectual community and the stimulation of connecting with other people working on



similar problems. There are two factors that matter. One is content: R&S is a space united by a common theoretical approach to diverse substantive problems. There are more than enough people in the ASA whose work falls within the scope of broadly-defined rational choice theory to fill a large section. But this does not mean they will want to spend their limited dollars to join the section. Most people make their primary intellectual home in a community united by empirical concerns. For example, my primary intellectual home is the section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements. Nevertheless, I learn a lot from work that addresses similar theoretical problems in different substantive areas, and believe that R&S could be viable as a space for this kind of interchange. But intellectual rationale is only half the issue. The other factor is a critical mass problem: what makes an intellectual community valuable is that it has members. People will want to participate in the section to the extent that they know there are other people in it whose work they find interesting and the structure of events encourages connections and interchanges among them. That is, you need members to attract members, and potential recruits need to find something in the section they cannot find elsewhere.

This analysis leads me to conclude that the section has two

ASA 2010

feasible collective strategies. One is the present course of focusing on meeting the needs of existing members, doing minimal organizational maintenance, and permitting the section to continue its gradual decline. I see this as an acceptable outcome. There is no need to keep putting resources into an organization that has outlived its purpose.

The second collective strategy has a more uncertain outcome. This would be to encourage participation by young scholars pursuing new agendas, to emphasize programs and events that will give young scholars a reason to attend meetings and meet each other, as well as the old-timers. Meetings would be oriented to using the section to foster the ideas and agendas of younger scholars for programming that is of benefit to them. This strategy involves offering the structure of the section to the new generations of scholars in the area to shape as they see fit. If an initial nucleus of scholars creates a community that is viable for them, they will attract other young scholars, a critical mass will be formed, and the section will grow. If not, not.



ASA SECTION AWARDS

Rationality and Society section award for best book published in 2008-2009. Nominations, including self-nominations, are encouraged for theoretical or empirical works in the sociological rational choice tradition broadly construed, including alternative decision theoretic frameworks and applications of theory to empirical problems. Nominators must be members in good standing of the American Sociological Association. Co-authored works are eligible. Deadline for nominations is March 1, 2010. Nominations should be made by email to Pamela Oliver oliver@ssc.wisc.edu and should include the following information: (1) Nominator's name, institutional affiliation, and contact information; (2) Author's name, institutional affiliation, and contact information; (3) Book title, year of publication, and the publisher's name and address; (4) A brief statement (1 or 2 paragraphs) by the nominator of the reason the book deserves this award; and (5) Contact information (name, email address, telephone number) of the person who will make the arrangements to have copies of the book sent directly to the five awards committee members. The Chair of the awards committee will give the names and addresses of committee members to this contact person. Do not send multiple copies of the book to the committee chair.

Rationality and Society section award for best paper by a graduate student in 2009. Nominations, including self-nominations, are encouraged for theoretical or empirical works in the rational choice tradition broadly construed, including alternative decision theoretic frameworks and applications of theory to empirical problems. Eligible authors are students currently enrolled in a graduate program who will not have received the PhD at the time of the ASA meeting in August 14-17, 2010. Multi-authored papers are eligible if none of the authors has a PhD. Nominations should be submitted by email to Pamela Oliver oliver@ssc.wisc.edu by March 1, 2010. Nominations should include two electronic files: (1) A cover page with the paper title, paper abstract, author's name(s), institutional affiliation and institutional address, the name of the author's faculty advisor, and full contact information including preferred email address, telephone number(s) and mailing address. (2) The nominated paper, double-spaced, beginning with title and abstract but with author's name and other identifying information removed.

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Remember to join the rationality and society section when you re-new your ASA membership. Also a section membership for others would be an appreciated gift.

Postdoctoral positions opening

The Center for the Study of Social
Stratification and Inequality
Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku
University, Sendai, Japan



東北大学
TOHOKU UNIVERSITY

The Center for the Study of Social Stratification and Inequality (CSSI) invites applications from excellent scholars for a few postdoctoral positions. (The number of the positions depends on the center's budget for the next academic year.) The center pursues development of new theories and methodologies on social stratification and inequality with emphasis on studies of rational choice theory, minorities (including gender stratification and inequality), East Asia, transnational migration (especially focusing on “newcomers” in Japan), and fairness. Faculty members of the center are sociologists, social psychologists, cultural anthropologists, religious anthropologists, a historian, and economists, and they study social stratification and inequality from various viewpoints. In addition, the CSSI conducts comparative studies of absolute poverty with the Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality.

Applicants should hold doctoral degrees or show academic performance equivalent to holders of doctoral degrees. They should have a good command of English. Postdoctoral fellows of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science are not eligible for this application.

The successful candidates will be expected to work under the supervision of the faculty members of the center from April 1, 2010 through March 31, 2011. (The starting date is negotiable.) Though the initial contract ends on March 31, 2011, the contract will be extended for one more year. The salary of a successful candidate will be 270,000 – 350,000 yen per month depending on his/her academic career. Travel and housing allowances will be paid to those who are eligible for them. Grants for excellent research projects proposed by the successful candidates will be provided. The center also academically and financially supports their presentations at international conferences.

Applicants should send a curriculum vitae, a list of their presentations and publications, a research plan at the CSSI (less than 1,500 words), each copy of three major publications at most, and a letter of reference to:

Dr. Yoshimichi Sato, Director
Center for the Study of Social Stratification and Inequality
Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University
27-1, Kawauchi, Aoba-ku, Sendai 980-8576 JAPAN
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Yoshimichi Sato, President of Research Committee 45 of the ISA

Research Committee 45 (Rational Choice) sponsors eight regular sessions, whose themes are as follows:

Session 1: Rational choice applications to migrations

Session 2: Mechanism of creation and return of social capital

Session 3: Networks, hierarchy and cooperation

Session 4: Personal identity and social identity: Beyond rational choice theory?

Session 5: Rational choice and behavioral game theory: The experimental approach

Session 6: Rational foundations of macro sociology: Bringing Coleman's boat back in

Session 7: Collective decision making and group processes

Session 8: Rationalizing irrationalities

In addition to the regular sessions, RC45 cosponsors an integrative session with RC04 (Sociology of Education) and RC28 (Social Stratification), whose theme is "Rational choice approaches to educational inequality and social stratification."

Detailed information on the sessions is posted on <http://www.isa-sociology.org/congress2010/rc/rc45.htm>. As all the themes are very attractive, I hope many people of RC45 and Section on Rationality and Society of the ASA will come to the sessions.