Russia Inspires Sociological Examinations

Russia has been very much in the news, with its 2014 annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula, its support for Bashar al-Assad’s brutal regime in Syria, and evidence that its government interfered in the 2016 US elections. Professor Theodore Gerber has studied Russian society since the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union still existed. As focus on Russia has grown, Gerber has shared insights with public audiences, appearing on BBC World News, Wisconsin Public Television, and Madison’s “Live@5,” and has also spoken to other groups in Madison and Washington, DC. Gerber says his sociological perspective distinguishes him from many commentators because it pushes him to dig beneath the headline-grabbing events of the day to develop deeper understanding of Russia’s long-term dynamics based on analysis of topics such as patterns of social inequality, demographic change, and trends in public opinion on domestic and geo-political issues. He is completing a five-year, $3.1 million project (in collaboration with Jane Zavisca of the University of Arizona) examining the socioeconomic and political dimensions of housing in Russia and three other former Soviet societies. This has involved several rounds of focus groups and large sample surveys in these countries, and provided funding to train four PhD students. While he appreciates how a sociological approach has enhanced his understanding of Russia, he also values the interdisciplinary environment provided by UW’s Center for Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia (CREECA), which he directs. He recently obtained a $1 million grant from the Carnegie Corporation to bolster social science research and graduate training about Russia; the grant will provide funding for UW postdoctoral researchers and PhD students. Gerber hopes the recent crises involving Russia inspire more social scientists to recognize Russia’s intrinsic interest as a site for sociological inquiry. Says Gerber, “More sociologists should invest the time and effort to learn enough about Russia to undertake the deep analyses that sociology does best: rather than scramble to address the crisis of the day, sociological knowledge can provide a longer-term, holistic perspective.”

Evicted Continues to Garner Awards

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City by Matthew Desmond (PhD ’10) won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-fiction and the 2016 National Book Critics Circle Award, and was named one of the best books of 2016 by The New York Times. It also was selected as the 2016 Go Big Read book for UW’s common-reading program promoting campus dialogue on social justice. The Pulitzer Prize citation reads, “For a deeply researched exposé that showed how mass evictions after the 2008 economic crash were less a consequence than a cause of poverty.” The research focuses on eight Milwaukee families.
From the Chair

We live in an exciting and important time to study and practice sociology. The skills developed by undergraduates majoring in sociology are increasingly important for making sense of the world around us. Research conducted by sociologists makes fundamental contributions to our understanding of many vital issues such as growing social polarization, the experiences of immigrants and receiving communities, broader health disparities, the social implications of climate change, and the consequences of mass incarceration, to list but a few. We remain one of the top-ranked sociology departments in the world, reflecting our broad training and career preparation for undergraduates, rigorous graduate training, and cutting-edge research.

Among the many ongoing initiatives in the department is our push to provide a wider range of internship experiences to undergraduate majors. In addition to the research internships associated with the long-running Concentration in Analysis and Research (CAR) program, sociology majors now have access to internship opportunities in public service through the Badger Reach program, and to government internships via the Wisconsin in DC program. The department has also instituted an annual award competition to support undergraduates taking rewarding though otherwise unpaid summer internships. The many skills that sociology majors develop—critical thinking, communication, data management and analysis, and the ability to understand the context in which human behavior occurs—are in high demand, and the department’s increased investment in internship experiences is a valuable component of preparation for success after graduation.

The sociology graduate program remains highly selective, attracting top students from around the world and preparing them for high-profile careers. Our training program increasingly emphasizes interdisciplinary research and enhanced investment in professionalization opportunities to prepare students for an ever-more-diverse labor market. Recent PhDs have taken positions in top-tier research universities, elite teaching colleges, think tanks, state government, and a range of other fields.

This past spring, the department partnered with the UW Foundation and Alumni Association in a very successful fundraising campaign to support continued investment in undergraduate teaching and internship experiences. On behalf of the department, I would like to express our collective gratitude to our generous alumni for helping the department remain strong while pursuing new initiatives in a challenging time. Thank you to all of our alumni for your continued support!

On, Wisconsin!
James Raymo, Professor and Chair

How you can support internship experiences

Interested in supporting our undergraduates’ internship experiences? Consider donating to the Joann and Joe Elder Undergraduate Fund in Sociology (account 132751323).

From The New York Times:

Check out the article “What if Sociologists Had as Much Influence as Economists?”

Sociology Department Welcomes Two New Members

We welcome two scholars—Jordan Conwell and Michael Light—this fall. Light, whose research focuses on immigration, racial inequality, and crime, earned his PhD at Penn State in 2013 and subsequently was an assistant professor at Purdue. As an assistant professor here, he will hold a joint appointment with Chicano and Latinx Studies. Conwell studies race and class inequality in education and earned his PhD from Northwestern University this year. He will hold a one-year postdoctoral fellowship in sociology before advancing to a tenure-track position with a joint appointment in Sociology and Educational Policy Studies. Welcome, Jordan and Michael!
2017 Undergraduate Commencement

Dozens of graduating seniors accompanied by family and friends joined faculty and staff in May for our second departmental undergraduate commencement. After a breakfast reception, Chair James Raymo welcomed everyone, and Emerita Professor Cora Bagley Marrett (see p. 6) addressed the assemblage with reflections and encouragement. Raymo called the names of our graduates, and advisor Ellen Jacobson joined in congratulating them as they crossed the stage. A noon ceremony for all UW graduating seniors followed at Camp Randall.

Follow us on Twitter @UWSoc

Our undergrad communications specialist, Elana Roth, captured this very popular view last winter, and it was retweeted hundreds of times!

2017 Graduate Commencement Celebration

Do you remember the 8th-floor conference room in the Social Science Building—the large room with the breathtaking view of Lake Mendota? Perhaps you tried to study there but got distracted every time you looked out the window. This is where the Sociology Department holds its annual celebration for those earning a PhD. On May 12, graduate students, their faculty advisors, and a host of well-wishers filled the standing-room-only space. The PhD candidates and their advisors wore traditional academic regalia—an ankle-length gown whose wide sleeves have three velvet bands, a colorful velvet and silk hood, and a mortarboard or round-brimmed velvet cap—signifying attainment of a university degree. The clothing is a legacy inherited from clergymen who taught in the (unheated) medieval universities of Europe. The spring weather, the crowded room, and all that velvet made for a warm but nonetheless joyful ceremony. Despite the terrific view, the audience focused attention on the front of the room as each graduate student was recognized for years of hard work, creativity, and self-discipline. The advisor placed the hood over the student’s head and around his or her neck to acknowledge successful completion of the doctoral program and induction into the community of scholars. Then the faculty member spoke about the candidate’s teaching, research, accomplishments, and postgraduation plans. Afterward, the new PhD alum had an opportunity to reflect on his or her experiences in Madison and to thank family, friends, staff, and faculty for their support.

Congratulations to all who completed doctoral degrees in 2016–17:

Zachary Baumgart
Daniel Blocq
Katharine Broton
Katherine Fallon
Michael Halpin
Matthew Hollander
Jerrett Jones
Matthew Kearney
Kellea Miller
Johanna Quinn
Michelle Robinson
Emma Shakeshaft
Ian Wall
Amanda Ward
James Yonker

Emma Shakeshaft thanking family and friends
“When I conceived of this course, my feeling was that the university doesn’t communicate the great things it does for the public as well as it could. While I still feel that way, I have learned that we as UW faculty and staff don’t fully appreciate the legacy from which we have grown, either. I think we need to become reacquainted with what it means to live the Wisconsin Idea, and it won’t be easy. This course is an attempt to reinvigorate a broader, multidisciplinary conversation about how we, within our specialties, can re-engage with the people of Wisconsin. I had not expected people to come out of the woodwork the way they did—students, citizens, former faculty, and administrators all had something to say about the Wisconsin Idea and we started some really powerful conversations. I look forward to another year of important conversations and connections.”
– Patrick Brenzel, Sociology staff member and creator of the course

Wisconsin Idea, Past and Present: Second Fall Course and Public Lecture

In an innovative pilot launch, an idea that blossomed during staff member Patrick Brenzel’s volunteer work morphed into a course that will be offered again this year, with collaboration among UW campuses and citizens across the state. “Forward? The Wisconsin Idea, Past and Present” examines the origins of the Wisconsin Idea and its historical application across Wisconsin and beyond by engaging students, staff, and faculty from the UW System into a broader public conversation with the citizens of the state. Brenzel continues working with Emeritus Professor Joe Elder and Professor Chad Goldberg, and Professor Eric Sandgren will join the team as lead instructor for the second offering of the course. This special topics class features subject matter experts from across the state and from a multitude of backgrounds examining the topic from a breadth of perspectives. Open for credit to undergraduates, the course again will have a student lecture component on Thursdays and an on-campus public lecture every Tuesday evening during fall term. Each 2016 lecture attracted roughly 100 guests, and more are anticipated for the 2017 offering. The lectures are recorded and broadcast. Says Brenzel, “My father graduated from the UW, my two sisters and I are graduates, and two of my nieces are graduates. We agree that our time here not only contributed to our career success, but it also made us good citizens. I think this is an important component of the course, this concept of transforming a student into a citizen, not simply training a future worker. We have a rich legacy and tradition of citizenship in our state, and this course will explore where we’re going as well as where we’ve been.”

“I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the university reaches every home in the state.”
UW President Charles Van Hise, 1904

Awards, Accolades, and Recognitions

In recognition of his contributions to the UW, primarily his recent creation of “Forward,” Patrick Brenzel was awarded both the L&S University Staff Excellence Award and the campus-wide University Staff Recognition Award during the 2016–17 academic year. Writes Emeritus Professor Joe Elder, among one of many of Brenzel’s nominators, “Over my five decades [at the UW], I can think of no other member of the staff who has contributed as much in terms of effectiveness, innovation, creativity, and originality as Patrick.” Two separate awards committees agreed with Elder that Brenzel and his course are indeed worthy of significant recognition. Print articles about this course have appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education, The Cap Times, and in the previous edition of this publication; it also was the topic of multiple tweets. In addition, Brenzel and his collaborators appeared live on Wisconsin Public Radio’s “Joy Cardin Show” and The Devil’s Advocates Radio Network, and held many talks with local individuals and groups.
Sandgren of Vet Med to Lead 2017 Course

With Professor Chad Goldberg setting a high standard as instructor of the pilot course, Professor Eric Sandgren of the School of Veterinary Medicine has stepped up to lead the second offering in fall 2017. Says Sandgren, a native of Janesville, Wisconsin, “I learned the Wisconsin Idea as an undergraduate, and am grateful to have this chance to help spread the word. I enjoyed great years as an undergraduate at UW–Madison. That training was excellent preparation for subsequent veterinary and PhD degrees at the University of Pennsylvania, and in 1993 I was delighted to be able to get a position back here, where science first became exciting to me.” Sandgren adds a component of experience and perspective from another of UW’s prominent disciplines.

“I wish I had thought of proposing this course, and I am very pleased to continue as a participant. The Wisconsin Idea in higher education is one of the signal contributions of Wisconsin to the entire US higher education sector. It transcends public universities so we now find community service as an ideal of nearly every university, college, and community college in our country. From the time I read an article in The Capital Times about the course, I knew this was a very timely offering. Governor Walker woke us up when his proposed UW System budget draft stripped the idea of public service from the mission of the University of Wisconsin and all its parts. The ‘killing’ of the Wisconsin Idea has been front page news. The faculty and staff in the University of Wisconsin System had taken as an established public expectation that their mission included public service. Patrick Brenzel brilliantly championed the course as an urgent need for the university and for the wider community and state. Developing the course topics and speakers on short notice demonstrated the capacity to respond almost immediately to a learning opportunity highly related to sociology. The course syllabus is a strong foundation for the next version of the class. I personally believe this course has a strong future because its subject remains relevant beyond the current political review of the university.”

– Gerry Campbell, Professor Emeritus, UW–Madison/Extension and former Provost and Vice Chancellor, UW–Extension

“One of the unique things that I enjoyed about this course is that it demonstrated how the Wisconsin Idea fosters collective efficacy. Split between a discussion and guest lecture format, this course was highly appealing and unlike any I had taken before. It not only teaches the underlying beliefs of the Wisconsin Idea, but also practices what it preaches. Many of the guest lecture forums were presented by current and past alumni demonstrating how they provided service and outreach in the community to exemplify the Wisconsin Idea. Also in the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea, these lectures were free and open to the public. Students in the course came away with not only a better understanding of what the Wisconsin Idea stands for, but also how to actively partake in executing those principles. I feel that this is perhaps the most beneficial aspect for students, as I think it has become increasingly common for students to feel disconnected from circumstances outside of the classroom. I believe the Wisconsin Idea course does more than just teach students what we “should” know about the topic: it actively fosters a mutually beneficial relationship between the university and the community. Further, it begs the question of why this progressive ideology hasn’t expanded to other states and universities. I hope everyone will either attend this course’s lectures in person, or follow them online. If you are like me, you will enjoy every moment learning about what the Wisconsin Idea stands for!”

– Deavon Connaher, BA ’17

“I think this is an important component of the course, this concept of transforming a student into a citizen, not simply training a future worker.”
When Dr. Cora Bagley Marrett—recipient of a 2017 UW Honorary Degree—was four years old, she fell down the stairs, hit her head, and was briefly unconscious. Her mother, worried about a brain injury, asked, “Cora, how do you spell elephant?” To her relief, the girl promptly responded, “E-L-E-P-H-A-N-T.” Cora had learned to read when she was a toddler and by age four could spell several words. It was her mother, Clorann Boswell Bagley, who taught her to read and instilled in her a love of learning that she’s carried throughout her life. From that auspicious beginning, Cora Marrett went on to do great things.

In 1963, Marrett earned a bachelor’s degree from Virginia Union University, followed by master’s (1965) and PhD (1968) degrees from UW–Madison. Subsequently she forged a career marked by stellar teaching, respected scholarship, and exemplary leadership. Honorary degrees recognize individuals whose careers comprise extraordinary accomplishment, and Dr. Marrett’s does. She served on several National Research Council committees, directed programs for the United Negro College Fund, and was appointed a Fellow of the National Academy of Sciences. As Deputy Director of the National Science Foundation, she proved influential in advancing science nationwide through advocating for funding for basic research, integrating social and physical science to address environmental and technological problems, encouraging institutional change to nurture scientific talent in people of all backgrounds, and promoting K–12 science education as well as scientific literacy in the general population. Because she views science as “what human beings are curious about,” her public outreach emphasized that the NSF is composed of “people who have a commitment to excellence and want to help address the curiosity about the world around us.”

Dr. Marrett’s mother was, in contrast, primarily self-taught but nonetheless a leader in her own right. Her formal education ended with sixth grade because schools for African American children in rural Lunenburg County, Virginia, went from first through sixth grade only. She later “moved to town” and became a maid in nearby Kenbridge, a small tobacco-farming community where she met her husband, created a home for their 12 children, and played an active role in the Baptist church. Because no public kindergarten existed, she established a preschool in her home for the neighborhood children and, drawing on her skill with language, wrote plays for them to enact and composed poems that they memorized and recited. A voracious reader with a curious mind, Clorann Bagley also frequented the town library whenever possible. In segregated south-central Virginia, the building was open to Black residents only one afternoon each week. Thus on Wednesday afternoons, she walked there with her children so they could spend a few happy hours lost in books.

These early experiences laid a strong foundation for Cora, a shy child who thrived in school. Because her mother advocated on her behalf, she was able to start first grade a year early and found teachers who encouraged her and offered her more challenging work once she’d completed daily assignments.

In 1959, upon graduating from her segregated high school (a protracted campaign of “massive resistance” had postponed integration, despite the 1954 Supreme Court decision declaring segregation unconstitutional), Cora was awarded a scholarship to Virginia Union. She was valedictorian, class president, and one of only three students in her class to attend college. When an acquaintance mentioned that she planned to major in sociology, Cora announced, “I am, too,” although she wasn’t precisely certain what sociology was. It turned out to be an ideal fit, so she pursued graduate work in organizational sociology, even though the VU department head urged her to get a master’s in social work instead because of the many available positions in that field.

Clorann, concerned that training as a sociologist wouldn’t enable her daughter to land a job, supported Cora nonetheless. And after earning her PhD, Cora did get jobs—initially at the University of North Carolina (which hired her in 1968 “as an experiment” because they weren’t sure how their first African American woman would fare in the department) and then at Western Michigan University, after which UW Law professor Jim Jones persuaded her to return to Madison, where she held a joint appointment in Sociology and Afro-American Studies from 1974 to 1997.

Now Professor Emerita, Cora Marrett has an office in the Social Science Building once more. We’re excited that she’ll participate in department activities and mentor students. She’s already had conversations with several who are grateful for her wisdom and insight. Cora, in turn, says she’s “indebted to her mother”—clearly an outstanding role model—who encouraged her to make the most of her educational opportunities and who shared her curiosity and “great passion for learning.” To thank her, Cora makes contributions to the Kenbridge library in her mother’s honor, ensuring that it will always be open to all the town’s children.
Jee Hyun Kim Selected as L&S Teaching Fellow

Compelling. Supportive. Passionate. Knowledgeable. Amazing. These are a few of the adjectives undergrads use when describing Jee Hyun Kim, one of fifteen graduate students chosen this year as a College of Letters & Science Teaching Fellow. The department nominated her for this honor based on her outstanding success as a student and a teacher. Kim describes herself as “a first-generation college student and multi-racial immigrant” who, as an undergrad, was profoundly affected by extraordinary professors who demonstrated the empathy and respect that create safe but robust learning environments. Remembering her own aspirations and vulnerabilities, she works to challenge students without overwhelming them.

Jee Jee will have an opportunity to mentor other TAs later this summer when she leads a workshop titled “Engaging Controversial Subjects in Discussion.” The College of Letters & Science holds training workshops during Welcome Week for hundreds of teaching assistants employed in departments across campus. These workshops—which focus on topics such as crafting successful lesson plans, developing strategies for increased student involvement, fostering productive and thoughtful conversations, and improving teaching practice through reflection and experimentation—are led by the Teaching Fellows. Jee Jee looks forward to sharing the legacy she inherited from the exemplary professors who inspired her. She says she’s still learning from them.

Fujimura Earns Campus Award

Joan Fujimura, professor in the Department of Sociology and the Holtz Center for Research on Science and Technology, was one of six UW–Madison women selected as Outstanding Women of Color. The award recognizes women of color for their commitment to the campus through their service, research, community building, and work toward social justice. Fujimura did not always consider herself a woman of color. Growing up in Hawaii, she was, instead, a Japanese American. Although as a grad student at UC Berkeley she formed a Women of Color group in order to explore racism, she and a colleague eventually focused their research on other power dynamics, though they did so with some ambivalence. “I don’t know if either of us made the right decision,” Fujimura commented. “I have eventually returned to the study of race through the study of science.” Fujimura stated that she “appreciat[es] the UW Women of Color award” for bringing her “back to the sisterhood” of the UC Berkeley graduate Women of Color group. “I deeply appreciate the sisterhood of the other Women of Color who have won this University of Wisconsin award,” she said. Congratulations, Joan!

Recent Faculty Books


Bob Hauser Appointed Executive Officer of the American Philosophical Society

The American Philosophical Society, the oldest learned society in the US, appointed Emeritus Professor Robert M. Hauser as its executive officer. Founded in 1743 by Benjamin Franklin for the purpose of “promoting useful knowledge,” the APS has carried out Franklin’s spirit of inquiry by providing opportunities for interdisciplinary, intellectual engagement and supporting research and discovery through grants and fellowships, lectures, publications, prizes, exhibitions, and public education.

During his 40 years here, Hauser developed a model of intergenerational status attainment challenging the concept that inequality stems from market factors and demonstrating that it originates instead in processes rooted in the family. His work, supported by the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, has led to greater understanding of the ways that social status is transmitted and persists across generations. From 1968 to 2010, Professor Hauser directed the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, a multi-disciplinary exploration of the life course and aging that follows more than 10,000 men and women who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. WLS data have become a major resource for investigators around the globe. Hauser, a Vilas Research Professor, also served as director of the Center for Demography & Ecology, the Institute for Research on Poverty, and the Center for the Demography of Health & Aging. In 2002 he won the American Sociological Association award for distinguished contributions to teaching.

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Questions? Want to discuss other ways to support sociology? Contact Abby Bergeron at abby.bergeron@supportuw.org or 608-308-5346.