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Symposium on the Implications of the ASA Human Rights Statement for Research, Teaching and Service

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Symposium on the Implications of the ASA Human Rights Statement for Research, Teaching, and Service

Mark Frezzo

The University of Mississippi

This symposium is based on a Special Session at the 106th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA), held in Las Vegas on August 21, 2011. Sponsored by the ASA and Sociologists Without Borders (SSF), the session evaluated the significance of the “Statement Affirming and Expanding the Commitment of the American Sociological Association to Human Rights” (2009) for research, teaching, and service in the discipline. In this light, the essential contents of the text merit reflection:

“The American Sociological Association recognizes the full equality and dignity of all peoples and supports the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons, people with disabilities, and vulnerable children and adults” ([http://www.asanet.org/about/Council_Statements/Council%20Statement%20on%20Human%20Rights%20\(August%202009\).pdf](http://www.asanet.org/about/Council_Statements/Council%20Statement%20on%20Human%20Rights%20(August%202009).pdf)).

In addition, the

“[ASA] recognizes the rights of all peoples to social and personal security; to gender equality; to freedom from discrimination; to join trade unions and otherwise assemble; to an adequate standard of living, including a decent job and a just wage, health care, housing, food and water, education; and to a sustainable environment” (ibid.).

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Finally, the “[ASA] recognizes the freedom of all people to participate in and benefit from scientific advancement and reaffirms the principles of ethical scientific conduct embodied in the Association’s Code of Ethics” (ibid.). Accordingly, the ASA advocates the concrete implementation of Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), which advances the universal right not only to benefit from science, but also to be protected from the excesses of scientific research (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>).

It is worth noting that both the ASA and SSF participate in the Science and Human Rights Coalition (SHRC) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science—an international non-profit organization devoted to the promotion of collaborative and innovative research in both the natural and the social sciences. In promoting Article 15, the SHRC argues that the “protection and advancement of human rights require the active engagement of scientists—their knowledge, tools, and voices” (<http://shr.aaas.org/coalition/>).

In the aftermath of the ASA Special Session, the speakers were invited to formalize their insights for possible inclusion in a future issue of *Societies Without Borders: Human Rights and the Social Sciences (SWB)*. The resulting articles differ significantly from the original presentations. Notwithstanding instructive differences in approach and tone, the authors share an interest in two recurring questions: (1) How can we reconcile scientific rigor with a commitment to the implementation of human rights in the real world? (2) How can we reconcile an appeal to universalism with a commitment to cultural rights? Far from finding definitive answers in the symposium, these questions merit sustained consideration. The editors of *SWB* hope that the symposium will spark further reflection on the utility of the ASA Human Rights Statement as a reference point for sociologists.

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The ASA Statement on Human Rights

Judith Blau

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Once upon a time, we sociologists professed objectivity, neutrality, and detachment. And then along came Sociologists without Borders (SSF), that opened the blinds to let the sun shine in and tore off the blindfolds. “Ah ah!”, sociologists said, with relief and a renewed sense of mission and, even, joy, to be free and unfettered. Sociologists returned to their work with greater honesty. They contended – while still doing honest and careful research – that poverty is hideous, racism and sexism are atrocious, and soaring economic inequalities cause fundamental harms to individuals and society. They took the side of inclusionists and pluralists. (Now sociologists had always believed these things, but they dare not speak their beliefs, and, for that matter, confess their beliefs, or even hint at them, in their publications.)

I exaggerate somewhat because SSF is a relatively small organization. But here comes the *big story*. In August 2009 SSF proposed to the American Sociological Association (ASA) that ASA Council adopt a Resolution on Human Rights. Indeed, ASA Council did adopt the Resolution. There were no riots in colleges, in university departments, and in research centers. No insurrections. None threw chalk at blackboards in protest.

My own sense is that there was a big sigh of relief among American sociologists that they had the license to be human beings, even if they were rigorous social scientists. This is reason to celebrate. Sociologists may now openly profess that they believe in equality, human dignity, nondiscrimination, and, yes, human rights, even while they do complex research .

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Only A Monster: Neutrality and Ethics¹

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The first time our car was pulled over by the Colombians, I had not yet fully grasped what I had gotten myself into. We had accompanied people who were delivering food to striking workers: rice, beans, and everyone's favorite, *panela*.³ The workers held hostage eight large plantations, not allowing anyone or anything past their picket. The police held us for over an hour, peering at our documents and copying any relevant items into the docket. They inspected the car, all of our belongings, and interrogated us. Learning that I was from New York, one officer said with a revealing smile, "You were born in Manhattan! What's it like?" I eased up, though not too much, thinking that while they likely had little desire to interfere with my research, they clearly wished that I were elsewhere.

In the midst of the police search, one of the Colombian Senator's staff present in the car said to me, "Realize this, Louis. This is how they treat the senior staff of a Senator of the Republic--in the presence of an international observer, no less. Imagine how they treat the common worker in this struggle." Just then, one officer had the Senator's driver raise the hood so that they could confirm the serial number on the vehicle's chassis.

A CHANGED REALITY

Human rights, as well as their proponents and detractors, have become decentralized. States are only one mechanism by which human rights are extended, protected, violated, enforced, created or obtained. Towns, movements, and community groups pass human rights ordinances, provide services, distribute resources and protect rights from belligerent agents. The ASA resolution is a reflection of this changed reality. It does not compel sociologists to lobby for human rights. But neither does it allow us to conduct our work in ignorance of them.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not the sole articulation of human rights. Through their actions, activists in grassroots campaigns create indigenous definitions of what human rights are. Human rights are not exclusively a legal idea, but are

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deployed in a sociological space. Advocates sometimes take illegal action in defense of human rights, and states other times employ violence to defend human rights. This reality requires sociological parsing, rather than wholesale celebration. “Human rights” is a mobilizing discourse, activated by agents, institutions, states and movements. Grassroots human rights movements sometimes bypass the state, and use a human rights framework to mobilize around bread and butter issues rather than channeling this energy through states or global human rights institutions.

One of the epistemological values of human rights research is that it has the potential to explain the lives of people living in conditions that, while difficult, constitute the majority of our global population. If we are to understand how societies work, we will need to capture how individuals and communities behave under the entire experienced range of contemporary life. Too often, sociologists rely on data that is easily accessed. While all data is important to access and to understand, this pattern of data determinism makes human rights research that much more valuable and worthwhile to conduct.

The 2009 Statement Affirming and Expanding the Commitment of the American Sociological Association to Human Rights reads, “Human rights and the violation of human rights are embedded in societies and communities which are fundamental subjects of sociological study.” If we are to take this statement seriously, as I believe we should, then the way in which students of human rights investigate their creation, defense and violation, also must be embedded. We already operate under a basic code of ethics which prohibits us from engaging in certain harmful activities and which oblige us to certain moral principles. Our responsibilities to those who we study, however, are not exhausted in the ASA Code of Ethics. Human rights, and their violation, are embedded in the very societies and communities that compose the totality of our research.

Human rights are reproduced through indigenous bases of knowledge in local communities, they are used as mobilizing frames, and they intersect with struggles to eliminate inequality such as race, class, gender, religion, nationality and so forth. Among these is the right of LGBT peoples. That this ASA statement recognizes the rights of LGBT peoples is but a logical extension of the Code of Ethics, which protects our research subjects. That responsibility to protect

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extends to minorities, ethnic, sexual and otherwise. It nonetheless merits specific mention. Despite our advancements in the area of LGBT rights in many parts of the US and the major cities throughout the world, LGBT peoples are still discriminated against and persecuted in most other places.

A CHANGED METHOD

Western sociologists trained in analytical objectivity, as I and some other readers of this journal are, have a certain understanding of the researcher-subject relationship. However complicated that understanding may be, it does not necessarily prepare us for the challenges of fieldwork in conflict zones. The intention to deploy our tools on the ground may produce frustration, particularly when a researcher faces the same risk that activists face, even trusting activists with their own life. Access to and security within a conflict zone can depend on the indigenous experience of local activists, who best understand the dangers that compose their contexts. If it was ever possible to enforce the researcher/subject boundary, it is not so when access and safety depend on a shared identity.

In an environment in which one group is violating the human rights of another, to be “neutral” means to take a position other than the full acknowledgement of the human rights of a certain population. During fieldwork, this has real implications and is not a morally defensible position.

Even in cases where researchers do not feel such a “normative” pressure, the very nature of research with human subjects within the context of a human rights movement presents challenges that contest this boundary between the researcher and subject. Human rights movements often occur in conflict zones, in which it is very difficult to maintain a neutral stance. Such conflicts force actors into one of two camps: the aggrieved and the aggrieved.

As much as our fieldwork in human rights is in need of some thoughtfulness, so to should existing methods be applied to further the normative cause of human rights.⁴ The ASA Statement reads “the ASA recognizes the freedom of all peoples to participate in and to benefit from scientific advancement.” Traditional methods have been used to estimate body counts in mass killings, to measure air pollutants in a community, and other applied approaches made

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possible by scientific knowledge. As sociologists begin to undertake qualitative research in conflict zones with increasing frequency, an accounting of the ethical challenges this poses might be considered.

What kind of studies matter? Studies matter if they contribute to our understanding of how a social phenomenon operates. But this is not sufficient. It is also important to understand where the levers of change are in these social phenomenon where those social phenomenon in question are undesirable. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the study of human rights.

A CHANGED SOCIOLOGY

Sociologists studying human rights investigate violators of international law, of common understandings of secular and religious ethical principles, of democratic processes, and structures that perpetuate inequality. As we inevitably engage with these actors during the course of study, we have to know that certain methodological preferences may cause us to inadvertently violate the word or spirit of one of the ASA Statements on human rights, or even the Code of Ethics. Our role in a context where harm is being inflicted upon persons ought not be neutral. Only a monster would be capable of indifference to suffering.

There is an alarming increase of social scientists being hired by the military, defense contractors, and certain tasks within development agencies, in order for these bodies to understand the “human terrain” as they expand markets and impose western standards on people who don’t want it. This has happened most notably in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East, among indigenous populations, but is in practice in many other places.

Human rights are already a vast sociological phenomenon in many countries. It is what people organize around. It is how people make sense of their relationship to their governments. It is how they make sense of international interventions in their own and their neighboring governments. Like many social phenomenon, human rights are interpreted and mis-interpreted, re-interpreted, applied, misused and abused.

And American sociologists are being left behind as well. This HR Statement is by no means a radical one. The American Association for the Advancement of Science, and other professional

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associations in our disciplinary family have already taken this step.

Other professions have been moving in this direction, particularly in the applied setting. The American Statistical Society has many people who do statistics work to identify victims of human rights, and to identify who perpetrated these human rights. It has many applied settings. AAAS also has incorporated many of the sciences to participate and enter into partnership with NGOs in the applied setting. Political Scientists have for some time now elaborated the structures of global human rights norms, a field that has crossed over into Sociology, leading to the Global and Transnational Sociology section and the Human Rights section. Anthropologists, particularly forensic anthropologists conduct work in developing countries to identify bodies. But all of the work I just mentioned, though important, is applied work. The role of the Sociologist, as stated earlier, is also to explain these phenomenon.

Endnotes

1. A previous version was presented at the 2011 Annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.
2. Louis Edgar Esparza is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Latin American Studies at California State University, Los Angeles.
3. Solid, unrefined evaporated cane juice
4. I want to thank Margaret Vitullo for this point. See, for example, the work of Patrick Ball and Christian Davenport

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Here We Go Again: The ASA Statement on Human Rights and the Debate of “Value Neutral” Scholarship, or Why Do We Do What We Do?

Davita Silfen Glasberg
University of Connecticut

The ASA statement on Human Rights implies not only methodological and ethical issues for sociologists; it also implies and resurrects an ongoing discussion in the discipline: What is the relationship between research and activism in the Sociology of Human Rights and in the discipline?

First, at the risk of stating what would appear to be the obvious, as sociologists we are members not only of a community of the academy, but also of the wider community. It's worth noting, certainly in the context of this conversation, that a community is a social arrangement of stakeholders in pursuit of mutually beneficial goals, but also sometimes of competing goals; members of the wider community include people in the academy as well as people outside the academy. All stakeholders have rights, and all bear some responsibilities. As such, while there are clear advantages and privileges accruing to those of us in the subculture of the academy, we also bear a responsibility to contribute to the well-being to those in the wider community. The very nature of our research and our teaching has the potential to make that contribution.

Rigorous debate has erupted once again over our role as scholars in that community in the wake of the ASA's adoption of its statement in support of human rights. Some in the discipline insistent that we restrict our scholarship to a “value-neutral” sociology in which we step outside our values and dispassionately review, analyze, and report out data. Some go so far as to brand as “ideological” and “unscientific” sociological research that carry a clear perspective or that are applied to goals such as those embraced in the ASA affirmation of human rights. Critics of this position not only challenge the very possibility, much less the desirability, of stepping outside our values systems to be “neutral” data gatherers; they challenge the notion that simply reporting out data ignores one of the three basic pillars of Sociology long ago identified by Augustus Comte: theory, empirical observation, and practical application. Indeed, a spirited

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exchange flared up once again over the summer of 2011 on the Human Rights listserv among sociologists concerning these points.

While many perhaps thought these debates were well-articulated and reiterated decades ago, if not settled, clearly the exchange obviated the need to revisit them through the prism of human rights and sociology. The ASA statement on Human Rights offers a useful frame to resume the conversation with a fresh lens.

The ASA statement indicates that we as an organization and as a discipline recognize “the freedom of all peoples to participate in and to benefit from scientific advancement and reaffirms the principles of ethical scientific conduct embodied in the Association’s Code of Ethics. These principles include respecting the rights, dignity, and worth of all peoples and striving to serve the public good, including the advancement of human rights and freedoms.” At the risk of provoking the same vociferous objections raised in the online exchange, I suggest the ASA statement implies the ugly sociological question regarding our research: When all is said and done after we report out the data we uncover, *so what?* Why is our research important? What does it matter?

We are not alone as a discipline in pursuing knowledge and insight that has real potential for improving people’s life chances and their existence in this world. Research, for example, on HIV and other diseases is important in its potential to significantly improve prevention, diagnosis, and treatment, not only by altering individual’s behaviors but by altering the organization of health care and of social structures that give rise to the spread of disease, thus saving lives. Is that “real science” or activism? I suggest it is both, and rightfully so. Otherwise, why do the research at all? Simply speaking to each other in the academy is useless, does not advance knowledge in any real sense, and has no significance in the real world.

A sociology of Human Rights, and I would suggest most if not all of sociology, is quite similar: we study the human condition, and the social arrangements that give rise to the all-too-often unequal patterns of that condition in order to understand the dynamics that produce it and to discern some guidance on how to improve it. Otherwise, why bother? Our discipline matters a great deal, to the academy and to the world outside our hallowed halls, precisely because our research opens great possibilities for application in ways

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that can make a sincere and significant difference in people's lives, to empower people to access basic human rights.

Some argue that in our pursuit of positive rights—the right of freedom *to*—we ignore negative rights—the right to freedom *from*. And here is where our insights into the power structures and social arrangements that give rise to disparities of opportunity and life chances become crucial: the ASA statement implies that as a discipline we embrace the rights of equality and freedom, particularly of those who are systematically denied these. Those members of society who have access to disproportionate power and advantage hardly need our help to protect these. Our responsibility lies in “leveling the playing field” by identifying why some are systematically denied these and how they might challenge and resist the structures that do so. In that regard, the right to a living wage and safe working conditions, for example, trumps the right of an employer to freedom from government interference in the guise of regulations. The right of targets of racism, and discrimination to equal access to education, gainful employment, housing, health care, and fair treatment before the law trumps the “right” of freedom from government interference of schools to admit who wish and bar admittance to others based on unfair criteria, employers to systematically deny jobs to people for reasons other than their skills, banks to deny access to fair mortgage instruments, medical practitioners to deny health care, or courts to unfairly imprison or even execute individuals. The rights of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals to enjoy the same rights as all other citizens trumps the right to freedom from governmental interference of individuals or states who would deny they are citizens at all.

There are many excellent examples of a productive relationship between academic researchers and activists outside the academy, relationships that are mutually beneficial, and that illustrate the very best of public or activist sociology of human rights without the “taint” of ideology. Witness, for example, the many successful efforts around the country to move cities to declare themselves Human Rights Cities. Eugene, Oregon; Chapel Hill, NC; and NYC are just a few examples of this effort, aided by academics, particularly sociologists, who bring to bear our insights about human rights, social movements, social relationships, and social structures in collaboration

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with community activists. Another example is the Economic and Social Rights Research Group, initiated by social scientists including Sociologists, at the University of Connecticut's Human Rights Institute. The group holds annual research workshops that include not only other academics but non-academic human rights activists from around the world, such as internationally-known human rights advocate Cathy Albisa of the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative. The Economic and Social Rights Research Group is now working on developing networks between human rights scholars and activists to facilitate shared and mutually beneficial collaborative efforts to gather and apply data.

These efforts represent sociology's third pillar of practical application that Comte identified. And they represent the spirit and the letter of the ASA statement on Human Rights. We do research not just to publish so as not to perish: we do research because it matters, because it helps us to understand who we are, how we are organized as a society and how these shape others' lives; and because it holds the tremendous potential to empower people to access real, equitable, and meaningful life chances. That is the promise of Sociology. The ASA statement reinforces that by explicitly stating its commitment to public sociology in the name of Human Rights.

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SCIENCE: ACKNOWLEDGING CONTEXT

Bruce K. Friesen
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In the 2011 ASA Special Session on the *ASA and the Human Rights Statement*, the question was posed whether or not the embracing of human rights principles represented an *epistemological* rupture in the discipline; a question first posed by Blau (2011). Panelists generally indicated that, no; respecting human rights posed no significant challenges to the current methodological techniques used by sociologists. In fact, current methodologies were viewed as being useful to assess when and where human rights were violated. This type of information could then be used to influence the powers-that-be to engage in positive social change. I deliberately use the value-laden word “positive” here; as measured against the standard of human rights supported in the statement adopted by the ASA.

Discussant Mark Frezzo noted that the adoption of ASA’s human rights statement has expanded dialogue over the facts-value dichotomy; a legacy of Weber’s. Kevin McCaffree (2011) presented an example of this dialogue in a human rights roundtable session at the same conference. McCaffree argued that Weber’s facts-value dichotomy is in many ways false, since value positions in society are often based upon truth-claims of social and economic life that are indeed testable and – potentially – falsifiable. This in turn opens possibilities for a credible sociology of morality based on realist precepts.

There is value in examining the impact of a human rights statement on issues of epistemology. I argue here, though, that a human rights focus is ultimately *ontological*. This is true for both the practice of sociology and science as a whole. Ontology, of course, deals with life’s great unknowables; the untestable assumptions that ultimately frame and inform the questions we ask in our disciplines and the methods used to answer them. Those with scientific training recognize that certain assumptions regarding the nature of the universe must be accepted – a priori – if one is to meaningfully engage in scientific inquiry. These include (Sjoberg and Nett 1968):

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- there is a “real” world (perhaps multiple realities; such as material world, a psychological world, a social world, and the like)
- the real world is knowable
- the real world has order

Science includes more than these three assumptions, but rejecting any one of these renders much sociological activity; quantitative or qualitative, as essentially meaningless. One can certainly choose to reject these assumptions and resort to using logic alone as way of knowing, but doing so makes one, for all intents and purposes, a social philosopher rather than a sociologist per se. Logic is the primary epistemology of philosophy. Sociology is directed by a key premise that intentional sensory input is also critical in the search for knowledge.

One cannot ultimately determine if there *is* a real world without first affirming faith in a set of methods used to determine such. By accepting these assumptions and gaining expertise in the use of method, professionals offer quality information to society that others cannot. Indeed, the prime hallmark of a full profession is a monopoly over a given body of knowledge. If the methods sociologists use to study society do not elicit **better** information than anyone else, we have nothing to offer as a profession.

The ultimate goal of scientific endeavor is to *explain* and *predict*... so that we might ultimately *control*. That is, that we might become authors of our own destiny and create *better* outcomes than those that might otherwise occur. As sociologists, we have opportunity to provide information that will potentially help to create a better social outcomes; better societies; healthier and happier lives. Isn't this what society expects of us? Why grants and funding and academic positions are made available? Indeed, it was this very question gave birth to the discipline of sociology. What we do is ultimately expected to serve some higher collective purpose. In the tradition of science, then, we owe it to the world and ourselves to make explicit the assumptions that have long guided the search for knowledge: that the ultimate purpose of scientific inquiry is to create a better world.

And how shall a “better world” be defined? In a manner

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similar to the way in which the people of the world have increasingly embraced the notion of democracy. The world has already defined -- and the ASA embraced -- a respect for human rights. This does not mean that human rights cannot be problematized. More open societies typically encourage open speech and ongoing critical evaluation of the status quo. Tenure is offered to an intellectual class so that educated citizens can speak their truth without fear of personal reprisal. But, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointed out in her 2011 UN Day address to the United Nations, there is a difference between what we can say and what we can do. Science as an institution, and science as practiced by individuals, works with the standing assumption that human rights are to be respected.

Respect for human rights, both individual and collective, has always been a key assumption of the discipline of Sociology. From an ontological perspective, then, the question, "*Should sociologists respect human rights in their work?*" is moot. It denies the core ontological assumptions of science and of our discipline, and indeed, our own humanity. Turning the question on its head helps reveal the inherent bias in a presumed more neutral stance: Why *wouldn't* a sociologist respect human rights in her or his work? Or this question: Is it possible -- if undesirable -- to conceive of a Sociology that doesn't respect human rights?

Because there are gradients (some use the term *generations*) of rights, some sociologists may want to embrace certain rights yet violate others. Negative rights are rights that ensure freedom from harm or unnecessary restrictions, such as torture and wrongful imprisonment. Positive rights involve protecting personal freedoms, such as the right to develop a personality, or to self-determination. Collective (i.e. social and cultural) rights reside in a group rather than in individuals. Particularly relevant to the plight of the world's indigenous peoples, collective rights involve the right to collective self-determination, to preserving a way of life that enhances meaning for a group yet without violating the rights of its individual members. While perhaps alien concepts to some disciplines, these notions have long guided sociological inquiry and action. For many (if not all) sociologists, these concepts have become part of the "common sense" culture of the Discipline.

Finally, consider what individual sociologists have to gain by

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making explicit our human rights assumptions. The manner in which sociology and other disciplines have been institutionalized in the West promotes alienation. In the supposed pursuit of knowledge for knowledge' sake, careers become measured by the sheer number of publications in reputable journals. Complex vocabulary and concepts often serve to obfuscate more than clarify sociological insights for the general public, while the audience able to appreciate our work inversely declines. Sociology, as it has been institutionalized, is in danger of turning its brightest and best into Mertonian ritualists. Making explicit the core human rights assumption of the Discipline may not eradicate this problem, but it can free individual sociologists both to articulate and evaluate their work within a humanistic framework. Others, Flyvbjerg (2001) among them, have made similar arguments for the social sciences in general.

To conclude, I have attempted to illustrate how respect for human rights has always been part of the ontological underpinnings of both science and sociology. The ASA statement on Human Rights simply makes this assumption explicit. At the same time, it frees and challenges us to more overtly engage the public with the knowledge we generate in order to create a better society. It is at once a move that grasps at the core of our craft and gives direction to our future endeavors. In short, it puts us back in touch with ourselves.

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