FROM THE CHAIR

Friends,

This has been a hard week, but also one that has been a long time coming. Repeated police violence against Black people, including the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, and the depth of systemic inequalities laid bare by the pandemic have triggered widespread protest. These protests and the reactions to them erupted in more violence, including here in Seattle. Many of us in the Sociology Department are in pain and grieving, and many among us are actively involved in seeking change. For resources that may be useful to you in the moment, please see our most recent blog post, Solidarity with BLM & Undergrad Resources. And yet, we are also facing a complex public health crisis that means we are largely isolated from one another, many organizing tools are unavailable, and the movement is fragmented.

Social media is cacophonous, but there are voices that will break through and new leaders will emerge. UW's President Ana Mari Cause may be one of them; if you haven't, I encourage you to read her recent blog post, Lifting the Veil.

The work sociologists have been doing for decades could help us understand this moment and should help us structure what comes next, but we must make sure that the frameworks we bring to today's conflict do not simplistically mirror our analysis of the past. Personally, I have been thinking a lot about power of late, a topic that has been sort of out of fashion in sociology. But, it certainly merits a great deal more serious theoretical — and empirical — attention. We are watching (okay, more than watching) people-led movements claim power, and right wing politicians brazenly use it to further their interests. Democratic theorists have long argued that institutions can check unfettered power and distribute rights, but as we are reminded again and again, institutions rest on fragile informal norms and commitments. For this moment to mean something, we need to better understand the dualities of power, and harness that knowledge to re-infuse power into reinvented institutions.

In the meantime, we are trying to bring this most challenging of quarters to a close. It has been an exceptionally tough one, and if you are teaching I ask you to be compassionate, generous — and even proactive — with assistance and accommodations for your students. Uncertainty, disruptions, and trauma make concentration nearly impossible. Learn from this experience we will, but remember that traditional grades are unlikely to reflect this most untraditional moment.

Before I close, I want to highlight one good thing: last week's wonderfully supportive SocSem! It was a joy and a pleasure to learn about the exciting and important work our first year students are doing. The comments and feedback were incredible, and reflected the intellectual support and generosity that has come to characterize our department. Major thanks to our colleague Bob Crutchfield who helped us reinvent this seminar and made it a vital part of our intellectual life. It will continue.

Peace to you all,
Kate Stovel
Professor and Department Chair
June 1, 2020