

September 17, 1999
Wayne E. Baker
Professor of Organizational Behavior
University of Michigan Business School

"Economic Sociology Section Under Formation in the United States"

As chair of the organizing committee to create a new Section on Economic Sociology in the American Sociological Association (ASA), I am delighted to have this opportunity to communicate with our European colleagues. Our field of economic sociology spans national boundaries. We hope that the new Section will be a resource for economic sociologists wherever they may be. Our vision is that the Section will be part of a network of centers of economic sociology around the globe, promoting the exchange of ideas, research, visiting scholars, and other endeavors that will enhance the vitality of our field.

A Brief History

In February 1998, Neil Fligstein (University of California, Berkeley) and Brian Uzzi (Northwestern University) hosted a conference at Berkeley on "Economic Sociology and Market Dynamics." This conference was attended by a number of economic sociologists from around the United States. During the conference, I suggested that perhaps it was time for us to create a formal Section on Economic Sociology. (Sections are the formal organizational units of the ASA.) Of course, this was not a new idea; many others had made the same suggestion before. It seemed, however, that interest in economic sociology had grown to a point where a new Section was a logical step in the development of our field. Since I suggested the idea, several of the participants challenged me to take on the task of leading the effort. I was glad to volunteer, but I note that any of the participants would be as qualified (if not more qualified) to lead the effort.

The next step was the formation of an organizing committee. I was soon joined by a number of prominent economic sociologists: Nicole Woolsey Biggart (University of California, Davis), Neil Fligstein (Berkeley) Mark Granovetter (Stanford), Brian Uzzi (Northwestern), Fernanda Wanderly (a Ph.D. student at Columbia University), and Harrison C. White (Columbia).

With the organizing committee in place, we began the long and laborious process of becoming a Section. This included a "kick-off" event held at the San Francisco Hilton during the 1998 annual meetings of the ASA. This event was a great success, with an estimated 170 participants. We distributed our petition at the event, collecting many more than the 100 signatures required by the ASA.

Our next step was to write our proposal. This included (1) a mission statement, (2) discussion of the relationship between the proposed Section and other Sections (to avoid conflicts and duplication), (3) an overview of the field, (4) additional evidence of the vitality of the field of economic sociology (such as majors, Ph.D. programs, centers,

workshops, conferences, etc. around the country), an extended bibliography, and the signed petition.

In February 1999, the ASA Council approved the proposal to create a new Section on Economic Sociology. In accordance with ASA policy, Economic Sociology is now an official Section-in-Formation. Economic Sociology will become a full-fledged Section as soon as the by-laws are approved and the membership of the Section reaches 300. The Section-in-Formation has two years to achieve this goal, but I hope that we will reach the 300 mark by this September-October (the period in which ASA members renew their memberships in the Association and join Sections).

Our first official business meeting was held at the 1999 annual meetings of the ASA in Chicago. This event was also very well attended, and we had an energetic discussion of the Section, our mission, and the ways in which the Section could contribute to the advancement of our field. Richard Swedberg gave us an excellent overview of the extent and growth of interest in economic sociology in Europe, and many of your exciting developments.

The Mission

The mission statement, as approved by the ASA, describes the broad outlines and intent of the Section: “The mission of the Section on Economic Sociology is to promote the sociological study of the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of scarce goods and services. It does so by facilitating the exchange of ideas, information, and resources among economic sociologists, by stimulating research on matters of both theoretical and policy interest, by assisting the education of undergraduate and graduate students, and by communicating research findings to policy makers and other external audiences. Economic sociology is a distinct subfield. It is ecumenical with respect to method and theory. Economic sociologists use the full range of qualitative and quantitative methods. No theoretical approach dominates; the field is inclusive, eclectic, and pluralistic.”

Our complete mission statement and related matter can be found at the Section’s web site (<http://www.asanet.org/sections/economic.html>).

Building Bridges

I hope that this short essay will contribute to the building of bridges between our communities of economic sociologists. We would like our new Section to be open, creative, and innovative. We invite your ideas, comments, suggestions, and participation. Please feel to contact any member of the organizing committee. And thank you for this opportunity to share with you some the developments in economic sociology in the United States.

Organizing Committee

Wayne E. Baker (chair) (wayneb@umich.edu)

Nicole Woolsey Biggart (nwbiggart@ucdavis.edu)

Neil Fligstein (fligst@uclink4.berkeley.edu)

Mark Granovetter (granovet@leland.stanford.edu)

Brian Uzzi (uzzi@nwu.edu)

Fernanda Wanderly (fw36@columbia.edu)

Harrison C. White (hcw2@columbia.edu)