

Organizations, Occupations, and Work

FROM THE CHAIR

by **Barbara Reskin**
Harvard University

With semesters ended and quarters winding down, many of us are looking forward to spending less time writing lectures and more on scholarship. Many of you are writing papers that you are going to present in a couple of months at the ASA meetings, and the papers scheduled for the OOW sessions sound like a set of winners.

Six of our sessions focus on specific areas within the section's general theme for the 1998 program, "Gender, Race, and Other Forms of Inequality in Organizations, Occupations, and Work." They focus on wage inequality within organizations; equal employment opportunity and employment restructuring; inequality in legal careers; gender, race, and social networks; and inequality within scientific and medical occupations. Because we strongly encouraged members to submit to ASA (as opposed to the section's) sessions, OOW should be mainstreamed (perhaps even dominate—at least in terms of quality) throughout the regular sessions.

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Author Meets Critic:

Julian Orr's *Talking About Machines*

Ethnographic studies of work have gained increased prominence in our field. One important expression of this trend has been Julian Orr's Talking About Machines (ILR, 1997), which studied the occupational community formed among field service technicians working for Xerox. Conducted in the shadow of Silicon Valley, the study debunks commonly held assumptions about the lone technician and his routine tasks, bringing to light a rich occupational culture—a "community of practice"—that few observers would expect to find. Below, the editor of the OOW newsletter develops a brief critique of Orr's book; Orr has graciously agreed to respond.

Julian Orr's *Talking About Machines* is an engaging book, lucidly written, and filled with insightful interpretations of the culture of technique these workers have formed. It penetrates beneath managerial assumptions about the nature of work. It reveals that "skill" is a collective attribute rather than an atomized trait. And it makes a plea for greater attention to the technical contours of work itself. While the book is provocative and commands careful attention, it is also open to question on several grounds.

To the outsider, the work of the copy repair technician seems rote and routine. But as Orr's research suggests, the work is fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity: Workers must cope not only with notoriously idiosyncratic and poorly documented machines, but also with the behavior of the customers who use (and often abuse) the machines they lease. To cope with these uncertainties, technicians have fashioned a rich culture based on the circulation of narrative accounts—stories—about the machines they seek to maintain. At restaurants, team meetings, and during field visits, workers take care to relate a wealth of technical tales, often describing the service histories of particular machines, the (un)reliability of certain models or parts, as well as the diagnostic adventures they've had that seem especially revealing. Managers are wont to dismiss such narratives as merely the telling of "war stories"—exercises at self-aggrandizement or the mere wasting of time. By contrast, Orr stresses the practical functions of such narratives, which in effect provide a form of strategic knowledge—"living documents"—that workers would not otherwise possess. In this way workers are able to build and maintain a shared "community of practice" that is vital to the performance of their jobs.

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Sociology in Action **Scholars, Artists, and** **Writers for Social Justice** **(SAWSJ)**

by Dan Clawson,
University of Mass., Amherst

The weekend of April 24-26, a new group, Scholars, Artists, and Writers for Social Justice (SAWSJ, pronounced sausage) held its first annual meeting in Washington, D.C. The group aims to bring together academics and the labor movement. Participants at the opening plenary included John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, Julian Bond, chair of the NAACP, Robin D.G. Kelley, professor of Africana Studies and History at NYU, Juliet Schor, professor of economics and women's studies at Harvard, Steve Fraser, executive editor at Houghton Mifflin, Kimberle Crenshaw, professor of law at Columbia and UCLA, and rank-and-file workers from Avondale Shipyards in Louisiana, asbestos workers in New York City, and adjunct faculty organizing at George Washington University.

SAWSJ grows out of a nationwide teach-in movement that began at Columbia University in the fall of 1996, and spread to more than thirty other locations in the following year. It envisions a movement that can reshape the nation's political culture and foster the growth of a vibrant, militant, multicultural working-class movement. Unions, SAWSJ believes, need an academic, cultural, and intellectual community that helps shape the terms of public debate, contesting corporate dominance of politics and culture. At the same time, academics need the labor movement -- need it not only for general principles, but to address the changes taking place

in higher education.

The organization was started by labor historians, and they still figure prominently in its membership. Sociologists are, however, increasingly important. Sociologist panel participants included Ellen Starbird, Tom Juravich, Stanley Aronowitz, William DiFazio, and Lynn Chancer.

SAWSJ events typically require that panels include both union representation and academics or cultural workers, in keeping with the organization's aim of bringing the two groups together. Thus a panel on the Teamsters included Ken Paff, head of Teamsters for a Democratic Union; a panel on workfare included people on welfare as well as those organizing welfare workers, a panel on cracking the solid South included a representative of Black Workers for Justice, and so on.

As with many groups committed to social action, there are tensions inside SAWSJ. They seem, however, to prompt dialogue and debate, and thus serve a creative function. Some creative tensions that one senses within the group concern its relationship to the labor movement, the importance of elites versus a mass membership, and issues of diversity.

SAWSJ has been supported by the AFL-CIO: through the presence of top leaders at major national events, through regular involvement in leadership by union staff, and with limited financial support. Members of the organization are committed to a close working relationship, but also want to maintain their independence and capacity to engage in spirited critique of the established labor leadership. Recognizing the need for such a stance, both John Sweeney and Linda Chavez Thompson specifically encouraged SAWSJ to maintain its independence, and noted they expect the organization will be critical of numerous labor policies.

"SAWSJ brings together people who need each other. Labor people often want to connect to students, and students and faculty want to hook up with activists..."

Debates over how best to foster greater diversity in SAWSJ leadership --i.e., moving beyond the usual preponderance of white males-- were also apparent at the meeting. Such debates seemed indicative of a young organization committed to fostering practices that are consistent with its larger goal of social justice. This observer is impressed with the group's promise, in that it brings together groups that want and need each other: Labor people, for example, often want to connect to students, to tell them about local strikes or organizing drives. Separately, students and faculty want to hook up with activists, and don't know how to do so.

OOW members can join by sending your name, email, address, etc. and \$40 for high income, \$10 for student, membership to SAWSJ, 2565 Broadway #176, New York NY 10025.

Orr, Talking About Machines

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Orr wants to redress the imbalance of sociological analysis, which he believes has paid scant attention to the actual practices that workers perform during the course of their jobs. He laments the tendency of social scientists to pass lightly over the technical details of the work itself, seeing this as imposing a barrier between scholars and the workers whose worlds they seek to understand. Only by privileging the technical practices in which workers engage, he suggests, can ethnographers overcome the misconceptions of managers and administrators regarding the real contours of workers' jobs.

Here is where my difficulties with his argument emerge. First, I suggest that sociologists have been rather better at unearthing the practice of work than Orr allows. Early students of work (e.g., in the Chicago school) often developed painstaking ethnographies of particular occupations that were based on intimate knowledge from the insider's point of view. More recent scholarship, too—see the studies of Kornblum, Halle, Juravich, Burawoy, Graham, Kusterer, and Noble, as well as Abbott's recasting of research on the professions—is quite mindful of the question of technique. I therefore reject Orr's thesis regarding the putative "invisibility of work" from the sociological point of view.

Perhaps Orr means to suggest that students of work have forced "practice" to share equal billing with other matters, such as authority relations, the expressive aspects of workplace culture, or the employment relation as well. On this score, sociologists must plead guilty—but with ample justification. To narrow our concerns to the study of practice alone—as Orr's approach insists—is to indulge a phenomenology of work that banishes the very objective, structural processes that surround the conduct of work and lend it shape. Indeed, because Orr fastens on the conduct of the technician's work, he alludes to but does not fully explore key issues—most notably, Xerox's effort to bring the technicians to heel, or the workers' ongoing effort to protect the boundaries of their occupational community. Wedded to the primacy of technique, Orr cannot do justice to these vital themes.

A final issue concerns the book's treatment of conflict and community at work. I see Orr's work as an instance of the "new communalism" that has spread so rapidly of late. (Other expressions are Saxenian's *Regional Advantage*, on Silicon Valley, as well as the

network studies of Woody Powell and Brian Uzzi.) From this point of view, effective organizations typically employ workers whose loyalties spill over organizational boundaries (as, for example, among Silicon Valley engineers). Now surely, the study of occupational communities warrants much more careful research than it has received. Yet I suspect that research on manual workers will find substantially greater organizational tension and conflict than the communal approach allows. This is the case in the telephone industry, for example, where field service workers often engage in subtle yet determined campaigns against the thrust for managerial control. Likewise, in many factory contexts, occupational groups often bring sharply contrasting forms of knowledge to bear on the conduct of their work, sparking ongoing conflict over legitimate methods of work. Is this not the "normal" condition of occupational communities—an implicitly embattled stance, wherein workers must patrol the borders of their world against outside infringement? Perhaps by investing so heavily in the primacy of technique, Orr has shortchanged the social and political character of the worlds in which his workers are employed.

Julian Orr Responds:

When I wrote that most professional literature is not concerned with work as practice, I did not mean sociology particularly, although sociology is certainly included, along with anthropology, organizational behavior and theory, and managerial writings nominally about work. The fact remains that studies of practice are uncommon, and, for the most part, as David Welman wrote, how work gets done remains the best-kept secret in America.

As an anthropologist, I take the goal of ethnography to be the description of what the people in question do and, to the extent possible, what sense they make of their doings and the world in which they do them, to paraphrase Geertz. This focus on doing seemed particularly germane as I discovered how little was known of technicians' work within the company which employs them.

My intent is not to privilege practice. The question which frames the book is what does a detailed understanding of practice contribute to studies of work, and my argument is that the understanding of practice changes the perspective of other questions

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Orr, Talking About Machines*(Continued from Page 3)*

about work. Management initiatives sometimes look even stranger when one knows how alien they are to the way work gets done.

My intent is not to privilege practice, but I do not privilege organizations either. Organizations only exist as they are enacted by their members, a position I take to be the gist of Bittner's "The Concept of Organization" (1965). Therefore, I am concerned with technicians' practices with reference to managers' practices, but managers' practices are only available through the effects of their actions on the technicians. There is no ethnographic study of the practices of service management.

Vallas raises the question of whether corporate attempts to control the technicians get lost in my consideration of technicians' practice. Such efforts are certainly less visible than if they were the focus of the book, but the realities of such attempts play out at the level of work practice. One of the most basic ways in which control is asserted is through the provision of directive documentation to the technicians, but to understand the nature of this move on management's part also requires understanding the practice for which it is intended. One needs to contrast the documentation's focus on hard component failures with the observation that service work is really about maintaining a triangular relationship between the customer, the machine, and the technician. Some service calls occur when there is nothing demonstrably wrong with the machine; the most difficult technical problems are intermittent failures of the interaction between two otherwise healthy components. Understanding the technicians' practice makes the directive documentation appear more clearly as a move to declare the technicians' work unskilled, to credit their diagnoses to the documentation, to argue that "all" they do is follow instructions.

Observation of practice contributes another point about the corporation's efforts at control: Technicians' work appears uncontrollable, in that it cannot be predicted or scheduled, and technicians work apart from their immediate supervisors. Management asserts control, and technicians either comply on paper or ignore the directives, depending on their perception of management's seriousness. Because of their real independence, technicians feel no incentive to contest management's mischaracterization of their work. This

avoidance of conflict seems likely to work to their disadvantage in the long run, but the technicians cared most that their practice was undisturbed.

Vallas overstates the communalist nature of my work. The community exists because people are working together, much as Kusterer also described. They are a resource to each other in doing the work, but in this case they actually work alone. The technicians, in fact, have a choice of somewhat overlapping memberships and identities from which to choose on any occasion; this does not make the community of technicians less important in their lives and practice, but it is less of a feature on the social or corporate landscape.

I do not wish to privilege the study of practice; I wish to insist that it is basic to questions of work, questions which seem to have a presumption about the nature of the work built in to them. If this presumption is not based on an understanding of practice, whose understanding of the work are we using? Far too often it seems to be management's descriptions of the work which are shaped for their ends. Why should we privilege their accounts, given that we recognize the work site as a location of contest and struggle? I would not want to see all writing about work limited to descriptions and analyses of practice; I would, however, like to see that such writings derive from a detailed understanding of how the work is done.

--Julian E. Orr, Work Practice and Technology
Xerox Palo Alto Research Center
orr@parc.xerox.com

Reskin, From the Chair*(continued from Page 1)*

Coming attractions: Last year we used the hour before our business meeting to hold a successful workshop on publishing. This year we're going to devote that hour to networking. Since I haven't come up with a name for the event, you'll have to settle for a description. At each of about 16 roundtables will be stationed a section member who has expertise that will be of interest to section members: data sets, research strategies, professional roles, substantive areas, and teaching ideas. The object is to create structured opportunities for conversation, exchange of ideas, sharing resources, and a chance for members—especially those new to our section—to meet some more senior members of the section people who share your interests. I don't know how much detail the ASA program can provide

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Reskin, *From the Chair* (Continued from Page 4)

about these tables, but come to the room listed in the program and we'll have charts and signs that will help you find the ones that interest you.

Among featured topics/people are these: *Serving as an expert witness in discrimination cases* -- Bill Bielby; *Using data from the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality* -- Irene Browne; *Doing research on unions* -- Dan Cornfield; *Masculinity in organizations* -- Patricia Martin; and *Risky work: Qualitative research in Organizations* -- Diane Vaughn. Other topics still needed people are these: *Getting access to organizations*, *Sociologists in business schools*, and *Making the transition from graduate student to professor*.

And more. I look forward to seeing you in San Francisco! --Barbara Reskin, Harvard University

ASA Meetings in San Francisco: Preliminary Listing of OOW Sessions

Below is an outline of the OOW sessions that have been planned for the upcoming meetings in San Francisco. See the Preliminary Program for time and places. Note also the special session on affirmative action listed below.

Organizational Wage Inequality: Causes and Consequences

Organizer: Alison Davis-Blake, University of Texas, Austin
Presider: Nancy Langton, Univ. of British Columbia

Organizational Diversity, Inequality, and Job Mobility
Takako Fujitwara-Greve, Keio Univ., and *Henrich R. Greve*, University of Tsukuba

Organization and Inequality: Changing Patterns of Income Inequality in the Chicago Bar
Rebecca L. Sandefur and *Edward O. Laumann*, University of Chicago

Organizational Resources and Earnings: The Nonspurious Results of Loose Coupling
Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, North Carolina State University

Education, Overeducation, and Youth Employment in the United

State and Germany: The Mechanics of Restructuring
James Witte, Northwestern University

Discussion: Nancy Langton, University of British Columbia

Organizations, Professions, and Inequality, I

Organizer and Presider: William Bridges, University of Illinois Chicago

From Borders to Barriers: Strategies of Occupational Closure and the Structure of Occupational Rewards
Kim Weeden, Stanford University

The Changing Organizational Context of Professional Work: Implications for Gender Representation in Corporate Law
Mary L. Fennell, Brown University and *Kevin Leicht*, University of Iowa

Assimilation, Choice, or Constraint? Explaining Gender Differences in the Careers of Lawyers
Kathleen E. Hull and *Robert L. Nelson*, Northwestern University

When Does Feminization Increase Economic Equality?: The Case of Lawyers
Charlotte Chiu, University of California-Berkeley

The Ghettoization of Women Within Law Teaching
Debra Branch McBrier, Ohio State University

Discussion: Terrence C. Halliday, American Bar Foundation

Organizations, Professions, and Inequality, II

Organizer and Presider: William Bridges, Univ. of Illinois Chicago

Employment of Women: The Case of Scientific Institutions
Jutta Allmendinger, *Stefan Fuchs*, and *Nina von Stebut*, Munich University,

Not Just for Old Boys: Forms of Economic Organization and Gender Inequality in Life Science Careers
Laurel Smith-Doerr, University of Arizona

Engineers, Craftworkers, and the Reproduction of Workplace Inequality
Steven Vallas, Georgia Institute of Technology

Informal Learning in the Workplace: The Case of Female Technicians
Kathy Borman, *William Goddard*, *Kirsten Pomerantz*, and *Ellen Puccia*, University of South Florida

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OOW Sessions at ASA*(Continued from Page 5)*

The Effects of Increasing Competition in Health Care on Physicians: Gender and Alternative Work Arrangements Among Radiologists

Chloe Bird, Brown University, *Jocelyn Chertoff*, Mary Hitchcock Medical Center, *Bejamin Amick*, New England Medical Center, and *Jeanette Downing-Park*, Brown University

Gender, Race and Social Networks at Work

Organizer and Presider: Karen E. Campbell, Vanderbilt University

Women's Participation in the Labor Force: The Role of Social Networks

Jennifer A. Stolloff, *Jennifer L. Glanville*, and *James H. Johnson, Jr.*, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and *Elisa Jayne Bienenstock*, Stanford University

When Gender Matters: Gender Differences, Sex Composition, and the Quality of Men's Work
Sharon R. Bird, Washington State University

Offering a Job: Meritocracy and Social Networks
Trond Petersen, University of California-Berkeley; *Ishak Saporta*, Tel Aviv University; and *Marc-David L. Seidel*, University of Texas Austin

Homophily, Legitimacy, and Competition: Bias in Manager Peer Evaluation
Ray E. Reagans, University of Chicago

Equal Employment Opportunity by Race and Sex in a Time of Economic Restructuring

Organizer and Presider: Marcia Bellas, University of Cincinnati

'I don't feel right-sized--I feel out-of-work sized': The Unequal Effects of Downsizing on Women in the Workforce

Roberta Spalter-Roth, American Sociological Association and *Cynthia Deitch*, George Washington University

Two Steps Back? The Consequences of Nonstandard Work Arrangements for Sex and Race Inequality
Naomi Cassirer, University of Notre Dame

The Effect of Local Labor Market Conditions on the Growth of Work-Conditioned Poverty Among Female-Headed Families
W. Richard Goe, Kansas State University and *Anisa Rhea*, North Carolina State University

Gender Segmentation, Union Decline and Women Workers: Changes in the AFL-CIO Policy Agenda, 1955-1993
Daniel B. Cornfield and *Melinda D. Kane*, Vanderbilt University "

Discussion: David J. Maume, University of Cincinnati

The Dismantling of Affirmation Action

(organized under ASA auspices, by President Jill Quadagno)

The Role of Affirmative Action in Controlling Employment Discrimination
Barbara Reskin, Harvard University

The End of Affirmative Action at the University of California
Jerome Karabel, University of California, Berkeley

Racialized Politics and the Politics of Race: the California Vote on Proposition 209

Troy Duster, University of California, Berkeley

Ambivalences about Affirmative Action

William Gamson, Boston College

Federal Judge Dismisses Suit against Labor Scholar

Many OOW members have followed the case of Dr. Kate Bronfenbrenner, the Cornell University labor researcher who was sued for defamation by Beverly Enterprises, one of the nation's largest nursing home chains. The case arose in May, 1997, when Bronfenbrenner, attending a town hall meeting in Pennsylvania, alluded to Beverly's history of unfair labor practices (a record that is well substantiated by various governmental agencies). Beverly responded with legal charges of libel and slander against Bronfenbrenner, even asking the court to force her to produce a decade's worth of confidential information gathered during the course of her research. The case drew coverage in *The New York Times* and elsewhere, and, raised issues of profound importance to sociologists, especially those working in OOW-related fields.

Late last month, OOW learned that Bronfenbrenner had won a partial victory in court.

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Labor Scholar 1, Beverly Enterprises 0

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US District Court Judge Gary Lancaster dismissed Beverly Enterprises's lawsuit, ruling that since Dr. Bronfenbrenner's statements were made in a political forum, in the presence of members of Congress, her remarks were protected by legislative immunity under Pennsylvania law.

Judge Lancaster's ruling lifts an enormous burden from Dr. Bronfenbrenner's shoulders. Still, the case leaves much unresolved. For one thing, the company's lawyer quickly announced plans to appeal the dismissal of the case. Bronfenbrenner's victory may therefore be short-lived. Yet even if Judge Lancaster's ruling stands, it does little to resolve key questions of concern to sociologists and other social scientists. Can even well documented charges of anti-labor activity on the part of corporations, if made in public, leave scholars vulnerable to legal intimidation? Do not scholars have the right --even the moral obligation-- to speak out publicly on important issues involving corporations? Judge Lancaster's ruling has failed to address these issues.

It is disquieting to learn that the ASA has provided little legal or even moral support to Bronfenbrenner, despite the implications of her case for the public role of the sociologist. Apparently, the ASA Committee on Freedom in Research and Teaching (COFRAT) has sought to avoid entanglement in particular cases such as this, and declined to consider filing an *amicus* brief on behalf of Dr. Bronfenbrenner. Perhaps OOW readers might encourage COFRAT to reconsider its stance, whether in the Bronfenbrenner case or future cases like it. Voice your inclinations to ASA's John Kennedy, at kennedyj@asanet.org

1998 Braverman Award to Joseph Blum, Ph.D. Candidate at UC Berkeley

The Braverman Award is given annually to the best graduate student paper written in the tradition of Harry Braverman's research on the labor process. The tradition is defined broadly to include studies of the labor process, work, authority and hierarchy in the workplace, gender/race/class hierarchies and critical organizational studies.

The committee is pleased to announce that that 1998 Braverman Award has been given to Joseph Blum from the University of California at Berkeley for his paper, "Degradation without deskilling: twenty-five years in the San Francisco shipyards." Blum's paper is clearly in the tradition of Braverman's Labor and Monopoly Capital as it interweaves keen sociological analysis with the author's own experiences of nearly a quarter century working in the shipyards. Blum's paper highlights the skills involved in shipyard work showing how degradation, speed-up and increased authoritarianism can occur absent deskilling. Blum's analysis moves seamlessly from participant observation of welding in the hull of a ship to a global analysis of the forces that have buffeted the shipyards and their workforce.

The committee has also awarded an "Honorable Mention" to Pei-Chia Lan of Northwestern University for her paper, "Bodily labor in contemporary service jobs: Cosmetics retailing in department stores and direct selling." This paper compares cosmetic retailing in two different sites, showing how systems of control or the worker and importantly the workers'

bodies occurs in two distinct modes of retailing. The committee was impressed by Lan's ability to extend labor process theory into new areas of gender theory and theories of the body. Lan grounds her work empirically and makes new contributions to theory through her analysis.

The committee this year was composed of Kevin Delaney of Temple University (Chair) Cindy Anderson of Iowa State and Marilyn Chap, of UC-Santa Cruz. The awards will be made at this year's SSSP meetings in San Francisco.

Conference on "Work, Welfare, and Poverty in the Small City."

Call for Papers, Roundtables, and Workshops for the 13th Conference on the Small City and Regional Community, October 15-16, 1998, at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Theme: Abstracts due: July 15, 1998. Contact: Bob Wolensky, Dept. of Sociology, UW-SP, Stevens Point, WI 54481; rwolensk@uwsp.edu.

Position Announcements

Vanderbilt University. The Department of Sociology invites applications for a rank open sociology faculty position, commencing August, 1999. It is expected that the candidate will have expertise in the field of race and ethnic relations, preferably with emphasis in the sociology of education, medical sociology, or the sociology of organizations. Applicants should

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(Vanderbilt position, continued)

submit a letter of interest in the position, vitae, and any supplemental material (e.g. reprints, pending manuscripts, teaching evaluations) indicating promise or evidence of outstanding scholarship and effective teaching. Applicants should have a minimum of three letters of recommendation on file for prompt consideration. The department will begin reviewing candidates as early as October 15, 1998 and will continue the process until the position is filled; expressions of interest should be received by November 30, 1998. Vanderbilt is an Equal Opportunity-Affirmative Action Employer and women and minority candidates are encouraged to apply. Send all materials to Search Committee Chair, Department of Sociology, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37235.

A Final Note from the Editor

This issue, while small in size, holds much importance for our section, not least because of the Bronfenbrenner case reported herein. Note too the "author meets critic" forum, here dealing with occupational communities; as well as the novel roundtable sessions that Barbara Reskin has announced, which should provide ample opportunity for stimulating exchanges among OOW members. Not least, the issue holds particular importance for me, in that it marks the end of my stint as Editor of the OOW Newsletter. Simply put, it's been fun. Thanks are due all of the scholars who contributed their articles, interviews, and news stories to this publication. I am sure that the new editor (yet to be named) will meet with the same spirit of generosity I encountered. Please share your ideas with the incoming section chair, Paula England, at england@U.Arizona.EDU. See you in San Francisco --*Steven Vallas*, Georgia Tech.

**American Sociological
Association
1722 N Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036**

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