2019 RSS Annual Meeting Theme

***Justice and Tyranny: Mobilizing Rural Sociological Imaginations***

Richmond, VA August 7-10, 2019

In the current polarizing political climate, what constitutes *just* and *ethical* has become increasingly questioned and debated in the public arena. The recent rise of authoritarian populism across what were considered robust democracies (e.g., Trump in the US, Le Pen in France, Abe in Japan), and its persistence in parts of Africa and Latin America, is undermining fundamental assumptions about the resilience of democracies and citizenship that are central to building and sustaining just societies. Often polarized political discourse on justice is grounded in the greater socioeconomic inequalities of the past and present.

As vast and growing inequalities have shaken the promise of global neoliberal political economy over the last three decades, social unrest has offered fertile ground for authoritarianism and tyranny to take root. Tyrants are shaping people’s understanding of who belongs in a communities and nation-states and, therefore, who should be given a voice and what should be valued. The rural sociological imagination is our tool to unpack the mechanisms of tyranny and the pursuit of justice. Our careful investigation of rural places and marginalized groups enables us to explain many factors driving greater polarization and inequality. This helps us to replace simplistic caricatures of, for example, “disfranchised rural voters” and “angry white working-class voters” as the main drivers of the 2016 US presidential election. By listening to the voices of those who are marginalized, rural sociological imagination***s*** help to identify new opportunities to reframe the political dialogues necessary to bridge socioeconomic and cultural chasms in democracies under threat of tyranny.

At the 2019 Annual Meetings of the Rural Sociological Society (RSS), we will explore a myriad of theoretical perspectives, sociocultural practices, and political actions concerning justice and tyranny. This theme is timely because many RSS members are involved in various research, curricular, and outreach initiatives nationally and internationally to understand the justice and ethics of agriculture, the food system, natural resource extraction, healthcare, government, and criminal justice to name just a few. Community-based organizations are applying the rural sociological imagination to bridge chasms in communities and disrupt the us-versus-them mentality at the heart of tyranny. Many colleges and universities have begun offering justice programs and courses (e.g., “Environmental Justice,” “Food Justice”). Let us use the 2019 meeting as an intellectually engaging space to share our stories from the field, theoretical and methodological innovations to interpret the social world, and community action to address political and socioeconomic polarization.

**RSS 2019 Program Committee Contacts:**

Elizabeth Ransom, Pennsylvania State University & Dani Deemer, USDA Food and Nutrition Service, RSS Program Co-Chairs

Keiko Tanaka, University of Kentucky, RSS President

Mary Hendrickson, University of Missouri, RSS Vice President