by Peter V. Marsden, Harvard University

In early 1971, at the age of 22, Arne Kalleberg was mismatched. About to graduate from Brooklyn College, the first member of his immigrant family to earn a college degree, he experienced some difficulty entering the labor market for his “first real job.” In a clerical position at an insurance agency, his primary responsibilities were to retrieve claim files, many of which had not been consulted in years. The job demanded little of him. Indeed, since Arne’s supervising father Theodor had emigrated from Norway many years earlier with his Norwegian-born wife, Arne later would meet their daughter, Judith, at church; they would marry in 1972.

The Kalleberg family—Arne, his parents Theodor and Anna, and his brother Paul—settled in Brooklyn, where Arne remained until 1971 when he began graduate study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He describes his parents as some-what overtrained for their clerical and supervisory jobs in grocery stores and delicatessens, as well as overworked. His father Theodor’s plans to attend business school had been curtailed by the Nazi occupation of Norway during World War II, and his job opportunities in the United States were correspondingly limited. Arne recalls his childhood and adolescence in essentially assimilating terms. His parents stressed the virtues of hard work. Much more Norwegian was spoken in their home, his parents helped their two children adapt to and succeed in U.S. society. Arne graduated from Stuyvesant High School, one of New York City’s superb public institutions specializing in science and technology education.

During high school and college, Arne held a variety of positions. A cashier in the grocery store his father then managed, a warehouse worker, a camp counselor, and he sold newspapers on the ferry between Staten Island and Brooklyn, until the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge eliminated the ferry and hence his job. He even obtained a taxi license!

Drawn to Sociology

That Arne would spend his work life as a sociologist—or even as an academic—was not foreordained. He considered many futures, including a career in the ministry. He was drawn to his college major in sociology because it provided him a perspective for understanding the volatile social world of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most of Arne’s undergraduate sociology term papers centered on work, and he recognized that his experience with over- training was far from unique. After his college graduation he opted to continue his studies at Madison—with the firm goal of studying overtime.

At Wisconsin, Arne learned much through his interactions with a faculty and graduate student body active in research, inequality, and stratification. Three sociologists—only one of them then at Madison—had especially formative influences on him:

Ivar Berg, C. Wright Mills, and Aage B. Sorensen.

Berg—author and co-founder of The New Left Review and Jobs: The Great Training Robbery, notably The Sociological Imagination and White Collar—encouraged Arne’s impulse to examine critically the intersection of individual lives with societal structures. Sørensen, who became Arne’s adviser—and later his long-term collaborator and mentor—reinforced Arne’s inclination to emphasize the structural side of the life of the micro-macro puzzles that captured his interest.

Sørensen

The theme, “Is Another World Possible?,” paring his academic career is Arne’s sustained record of service to the discipline, which culminates in 2007-08 with his term as the 99th President of the American Sociological Association.

In the Beginning

Arne’s brief postgraduate experience with overqualification, together with his observations of the work lives of others around him, left a lasting mark on his observations of the work lives of others with overqualification, together with his academic career is Arne’s sustained record of service to the discipline, which culminates in 2007-08 with his term as the 99th President of the American Sociological Association.

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The Biggest Meeting Happened in the Big Apple

In addition to sociologist attendees, the 102nd ASA Annual Meeting drew record-breaking media numbers on New York City’s WBAI Radio. President Frances Fox Piven’s Presidential Address, “Can Power from Below Survive? The Future of Cuba,” which aired on August 27, 2007. The producers look forward to future interview opportunities with sociologists.

Tackling the Controversial

Among the extensive press coverage of the meeting, InsideHigherEd.com, The Chronicle of Higher Education, and Inside Higher Ed both covered the U.S. government’s denial of South African scholar Adam Habib’s entry visa, which prevented him from speaking at the Annual Meeting.

Inside Higher Ed also reported on several sessions, including the session on “Challenges Facing Sexualities Researchers,” the Presidential panel, “Academic Freedom Under Attack,” and the workshop on “Guidelines for Tenure and Promotion Reviews of Public Sociology.” The Chronicle of Higher Education also published an article on ASA President Frances Fox Piven’s Presidential Address, “Can Power from Below Survive?”

Local print media left their stamp on the meeting. Gary Shapiro from The New York Sun wrote a piece on the theme “Why Did Crime Decline in New York City?” and Alborz Raza from The New York Daily News covered “The Future of Cuba.”

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ASA President Arne Kalleberg Prepares for Worlds of Work


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Going International

With the expansion of Arne’s structural lens came growth in the geographic scope of his research. Because of the roots of many work-related structural arrangements to non-U.S. contexts—such as legal regimes and historical legacies—he regards comparative research as an essential focus. Following his studies centered on the United States, Arne collaborated on a major project that compared work structures and work orientations across U.S. and Japanese manufacturing firms, seeking the consequences of “welfare corporatist” organization in Japan for job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1998). From 2001 until 2004, Arne served in the vital role of Secretary, which he relished because it allowed him to see and understand the scope of ASA operations. As the 2008 ASA President, he went on to bring the fruits of sociological scholarship to the attention of the policy community.

Looking Forward to 2008

In designating “Worlds of Work” as the 2008 ASA Annual Meeting theme, Arne likely surmised no one who knows him or his work. He speaks of the theme as “a topic, rather than a point of view.” By selecting it, Arne underlines his views that the institutions surrounding and shaping work are central in social life. Although his theme is analysis is essential to understanding contemporary work. The 103rd meeting in Boston will provide an occasion for critical inquiry and debate about work, and its scope promises to exceed even that of the long-standing and well-regarded scholarship. Planned feature sessions will engage issues of employment policy, the fate of the U.S. economy, and the impacts of globalization on migration and work.

Looking forward, Arne Kalleberg hopes to further engage public issues through his academic and professional activities. Especially in the East Asia: How to Restore the American Dream, his most recent book (co-edited with John Edwards and Marion Crane, 2007), represents one step in this direction. His aspirations include using a sociological perspective on the institutions of work to improve our understanding of issues of globalization, immigration, and non-employment. Arne maintains that the important insights offered by other disciplines into the consequences of work arrangements, Arne’s scholarship provides a unique, indispensable structural understanding of work arrangements, evidence and capabilities. His enthusiasm for sociology’s vital role in comprehending and interpreting 21st-century worlds of work remains as strong as it was when Arne began his journey in Brooklyn over 35 years ago.

References


