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Report on Sabbatical Activities
Spring 2020 Sabbatical

Given the unexpected emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic early in the Spring 2020 semester, the focus of my sabbatical research shifted away from the in-person human subjects research I planned toward what could safely and ethically be done in the context of a global pandemic and the attendant restrictions on social life. I'm pleased to report that I was able to make substantial progress on each portion of my research pipeline – published research, in-progress research, and new research.

First, regarding research that was in-progress prior to Spring 2020, my colleagues and I revised a conference paper from the 2019 Political Economy of the World-System conference for publication. This paper, “Right-Wing Authoritarianism, American Style: The Rise of Trump in a Global Commodity Chain Framework” is now forthcoming in an edited volume on Routledge Press (Ciccantell, Smith, and Sowers Forthcoming-a).

Next, where research in progress is concerned, I worked with these same co-authors to develop two new papers, both of which we presented at conferences. At the 2020 Political Economy of the World-System conference, we presented our paper, “Reconstructing Commodity Chain Analysis as World-Systems Analysis.” This paper is now forthcoming as an invited submission in an edited volume on Routledge Press (Ciccantell, Smith, and Sowers, Forthcoming-b). At the American Sociological Association 2020 meetings, we presented our paper, “Trade Wars and Disrupted Global Commodity Chains: Hallmarks of the Breakdown of the U.S. World Order and a New Era of Competition and Conflict?” This paper is currently being prepared for publication.

In regards to new research, I worked again with colleagues to collect data on Amazon warehouses, focusing on their spatial distribution across urban areas, working conditions, and challenges to labor and political organizers. This data collection effort has already turned into two separate conference papers, to be presented in 2021. We will present “Amazon: Epitome of 21st Century World Capitalism? A Global Commodity Chains Approach” at the American Sociological Association 2021 meetings, and we will present “Amazon: The Face of 21st Century Capitalism and Impact on Global Labor” at the Society for the Study of Social Problems 2021 conference. We are currently preparing both manuscripts for publication as well. With these colleagues, I also began data collection on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on commodity chains. We have previously published on the impact of trade wars on commodity chains, and we view this new effort as consistent with that prior scholarship. The impacts of COVID-19 are still emerging, but we will be well positioned to report on these outcomes as the dust settles.

Finally, it must be noted that while my sabbatical productivity was high and well-distributed across the different portions of my research pipeline, I did not complete the proposed project of in-depth human subjects research. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic was immediately recognized for its disruption to all forms of scholarly research, but particularly so for qualitative research (ASA 2020). In-person qualitative research simply could not be conducted within the parameters of stay-at-home orders. I did consider moving my intended research into the “new” electronic spaces facilitated by technologies like Zoom, but in the end I decided that this was not an ethical research decision.

I came to this conclusion after searching for guidance about what considerations must be undertaken as a researcher considers these issues, but I quickly found the extant literature lacking (which newly published work acknowledges (Roberts and Pavlakis 2021). However, relevant discussions were and are available in the field of “disaster research” (research centering on disasters themselves or that which might occur during a disaster), which suggest that researchers must weigh

the new costs and vulnerabilities for participants of research during a disaster against the potential benefit of new knowledge (Tansey et al. 2017, but see also Buckle 2020 for a wonderful summary re: the COVID-19 context specifically). My intended research involved logistics workers (mostly blue-collar truckers and warehouse workers), and I weighed the costs of asking individual who may not have the necessary access, facility, and comfort with technology to spare time for in-depth interviews while simultaneously working at the front lines of the pandemic as far too severe to impose upon my research participants. To say this differently, I could not have carried out my intended research in good conscience or in accordance with the spirit of the ethical obligations outlined in the *American Sociological Association* “Code of Ethics.” Instead, I chose to follow the key recommendation of disaster research, which is that “if the research question could be answered in non-disaster circumstances, it should not be carried out during or shortly after the crisis” (Tansey et al. 2017).

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