

Questions for Prof. John Brueggemann & Prof. Lindner

Wednesday, July 29, 2020 12:00pm EDT

Brueggemann, although the pandemic will have harrowing effects on the alternative food movement, would you say the growing movement to defund the police will positively influence the alternative food movement? The possibility of defunding the police has invited many people to explore mutual aid communities.

Submitted: Adèle F. '18

ANSWER

JB: Hi Adele. I think the short-term effects of the pandemic, economic decline and political turmoil will be very hard on lots of institutions, communities as well as social movements. But the naked greed and corruption at the highest levels of government have triggered a massive wake up call for expanded neighborliness, which I believe in the long run could be amazingly positive.

My social movements class is reading your dad's book, Hard Work again, which I think is terrific.

For Brueggemann - Of the people you interviewed, what was the breakdown of age? Did you interview lots of young people, and is the movement on the whole carried by young people?

Submitted: Adèle F. '18

ANSWER

JB: I interviewed people from 20 to 80. As a demographic group, farmers are much older than the general population. But the movement I am studying is disproportionately young. There is a subgroup in this movement of young farmers. I'm not really talking about naïve environmentalists who want to live off the land for a few years. But the folks who make a real commitment, either as a vocation or significant avocation. It entails a lot of hard physical work, which people like me have never really done before. But also a great deal of fulfillment.

Not really a question: just wanted to share how much I appreciate Professor Lindner's visuals. They really help demonstrate the disparities you're seeing in your research.

Submitted: Julia D. '15

ANSWER

JB: Andrew is very sophisticated in many ways, and that is one of them. It is amazing to have a colleague from whom you learn something almost every single time you speak with him.

AL: Thanks, Julia and John! In recent years, there's a growing consensus that social scientists have tended to over-emphasize tests of statistical significance (i.e., given what we've observed in a sample, how likely is it to be true in a wider population). Using data visualization is a good way of putting the emphasis back where it belongs: on the magnitude of a given effect. Each year, I'm trying to teach more data visualization to Skidmore students.

Are the alternative food businesses almost always successful/profitable? If not, what keeps them going/growing?

Submitted: Arden P. '17

ANSWER

JB: Hey Arden! I've been astonished to find how often people are making a decent living by farming an acre or two. Many folks in farming have someone in the household who does something else too (e.g., teacher). Folks working in

food hubs, including traditional farmers markets and more innovative food distribution businesses or non-profits, are working hard to find the right balance between maintaining strong green standards, paying the bills, and not having to work all the time. The right location is key too. Successful farms or food hubs need to be near population centers that have a growing market for fresh food but are not oversaturated with suppliers. Many are trying to figure out how to scale up to a larger size, greater market share, more take home pay, without losing their integrity. It is not easy. But a lot of them are so fulfilled and engaged that their strenuous endeavors feel worthwhile.

When this book sees the light of day as a publication there will be an acknowledgment of your good work in helping me conduct and transcribe some of the interviews.

I have heard of education as a "silver bullet" to solving inequality. While there many not actually be one particular thing that can fix inequality, could improved education on nutrition, food origins, and financial management play a large role in helping inequality? Are there roadblocks (e.g. lobbyists) that may or have already come in the way of such education?

Submitted: Mike L. '11

ANSWER

JB: Hi Mike. Good to hear from you. As hugely important as education is and as proud as I am to be a teacher, I don't really think a "silver bullet" is a helpful way to think about it. There are too many variables, too many entrenched interests. The journey is complicated and hard. Everything you name is an important part of ameliorating the problems for so many people. Some folks have an easier time imagining the world falling apart than they do corporate power being reigned in at all. Big Food and Big Ag are formidable obstacles to this movement, and to the larger cause of equality and social justice. Two super smart books – Salt, Fat, Sugar by Michael Moss and The End of Food by Paul Roberts – portray such corporations in a harsh light. As large as the obstacles are, though, the hopefulness, energy and genuine progress I've witnessed in this movement in terms of incrementally doing something with integrity and value that improves people's lives is truly amazing. Following Wendell Berry, these folks think they can change the world one acre at a time. Extrapolating from that, I think there are vast possibilities when we take one step. One student at a time, yes! Also, one meal at a time. I consider it a powerful, subversive act of conscience to gather fresh ingredients, carefully prepare a meal and share it with loved ones slowly. If we all did that a little more, who knows what would happen?

Lindner: I'm from Eugene, Oregon — a liberal city in a liberal state with *huge* issues with race (both historical and current) — which is a very white college town. What stands out to me is that a significant number of the Black people in Eugene are NCAA athletes at the University of Oregon — football players and basketball players mostly. In D1 NCAA programs, race is an essential piece of the conversation — do you see this conversation evolving? What is the future of the NCAA with regards to inequality?

Submitted: Ileana P.B. '15

ANSWER

AL: Hi, Ileana! It's worth starting off by pointing out how different DI football and basketball are from, say, DIII sports. At a DIII school, our "student-athletes" really deserve both parts of that hyphenated term. At elite DI schools, basketball and football players are really much more like professionals except without the pay. Some of them take the academics seriously, too. But, honestly, it's like having a full-time job and going to college on top of that. In terms of intercollegiate sports, several legal cases (especially O'Bannon v. NCAA) have opened the door to limited stipends for DI college athletes. However, many – myself included – believe that there is still way too much exploitation in DI sports. That brutal reality is only deepened by the fact you note in Eugene. In many places, the exploited players are disproportionately Black, while the student body is disproportionately White.

I try not to make predictions about the future. However, we have seen this summer extreme frustration from a broad coalition of people, but most especially communities of color, about continuing racial injustice that cuts through so many institutions. It's been moving to see the leadership that athletes have taken in standing up for social change. At the college level, several groups of student-athletes have refused to play until universities can promise safe conditions in the midst of the Covid-19 Pandemic. It certainly feels like a moment where many changes at all levels are possible.

How and what can social media and traditional media (publications, tv, newspaper, radio) contribute to movements on raising awareness on food and environment? Are there studies on this area?

Submitted: Allen H. '18

ANSWER

JB: Great question. They can and are helping a lot. Many of the people I interviewed are very sophisticated about social media. There is a new body of growing research about this. My friend Richard Ocejo (John Jay CUNY Sociology) is a smart sociologist who writes about related issues connected to consumption. Successful farmers have become quite savvy about marketing, education, and networking. But there is also an element of this movement that recognizes how pernicious screen time can be. It cuts in different directions. I guess what struck me most among the folks I interviewed is the odd combo of reverence for ancient practices of farming and cooking combined with fearlessness about innovation and creativity. Using technology astutely is a part of that forward-looking orientation

For Professor Lindner: Given the massive public de-investment in universities and subsequent increases in tuition, have youth sports become more important over time in terms of offering access to college for disadvantaged populations?

Submitted: Erin J. '98

ANSWER

AL: Hi, Erin! The trend you note – the declining public support of higher education – is an incredibly important and under-recognized one. For a number of reasons, I think the way we tend to regard sports scholarships is pretty misleading. First, in raw numbers, a majority of sports scholarships are going to people who are not from disadvantaged groups. Picture lacrosse, soccer, or tennis, which tend to disproportionately include affluent, White students. Second, too many youth sports operate under “pay-for-play” systems where parents pay exorbitant amounts for their kids’ teams. By the time they complete college, the parents of most athletic scholarship recipients will have spent more on the sport than they would have for college. Sure, there are some sports at some schools that offer access to college for first-gen and BIPOC students. But, as I’ve noted above, at DI universities where they can give scholarships for athletics, the “student-athlete” experience is more like exploited labor than like the college experience Skidmore athletes enjoy.

Organizations, like the Aspen Institute and their Project Play, have a laser focus on expanding free and affordable youth sports for all kids. Children can gain a lot from participation in sports, so we ought to encourage participation. We need to stop connecting sports with college access. In my opinion, colleges and universities should prioritize increasing access to young people from disadvantaged groups over other things ... including their athletics budget.

JB — In NYC, there are a lot of free community fridges that have popped up since the coronavirus began — where should and does the responsibility for feeding the community lie? Should it be a government initiative? Should individuals be responsible for their neighbors?

Submitted: Ileana P.B. '15

ANSWER

JB: Hi Ileana! I think you're asking a layered question. From a moral and political perspective, is there any doubt that in the most powerful, wealthiest nation in human history our elected leaders have ultimate responsibility for making sure that our citizens have reliable access to healthy food? Of course they do and of course they have failed big time. Among the people I interviewed, though, they glide right by that disaster and get to work – like a mother (it's so often a mother) who wades through chaos to do what has to be done for a child in need. I attended an extraordinary conference of people trying to do school meals in a smart way in a city (Philadelphia) where many schools do not even have a kitchen and therefore are not really prepared to provide actual food to students. So, this is a place where young people who are food insecure because they live inside of food apartheid are expected to learn on an empty stomach. The people at this conference have come up with all kinds of creative solutions (e.g., food trucks, fresh food that is prepared elsewhere, partnerships with other organizations) to take care of things. It's clear they see the larger failure, but they nevertheless roll up their sleeves and collaborate with whoever in government, the private sector, the non-profit sector and the neighborhood will work with them. I'm trying right now to write about this dilemma between advocating for systemic change and treating the symptoms of the crisis. It's not easy but the people who impressed me most (e.g., Steveanna Wynn of Philadelphia Share, Hans Kersten MD of St. Christopher Children's Hospital, Chris Boldon Newsome of Sankofa Community Farm) see it as false dichotomy: you have to do both.

**In addition to food and sports, what other cultural manifestations of inequality are "hiding in plain sight" ?
Education? Housing? etc.**

Submitted: Eileen L.

ANSWER

JB: Hello Eileen – the other Dr. Lindner! I think the question answers itself. Most of our major institutions – yes, housing and education as well as markets, government, law, medicine -- have the fingerprints of elites all over them. Institutional authorities have a stake in gathering up, enhancing, and securing their power. How about criminal justice? Any evidence of systemic inequality in that cluster of institutions? People who are marginalized often understand this much better than well educated people who are privileged. Hence W. E. B. DuBois's famous observations about "double consciousness". But we know change happens. Part of what is happening right now is that the bigotry built into our criminal justice system, which has been well understood by people of color and experts for a long time, is becoming more visible to many others. Many of us have realized that what we are seeing right now, what we have been seeing for a long time but not understanding clearly, is in fact racism. That realization has led to the most widespread pattern of social movement activity in human history.

AL: Hi, Mom! Culturally, inequality sticks around because it hides itself. Racial and economic residential segregation is a great example of how something like housing choices allow us to avoid seeing social inequalities. Economic inequalities tend to sort homebuyers and renters into more homogeneous neighborhoods. In affluent enclaves, higher income people further segregate into local school districts and peer networks, which perpetuate inequality.

Since I'm also a media sociologist, one form of inequality "hiding in plain sight" is how news consumption (what type? From what source? How much?) is deeply unequal by social class, race, gender, age, and, of course, political party. Imagine how different the world looks if it comes from some mixture of the New York Times, PBS, The Economist, and NPR than if it's 20 minutes of local TV news or if it's self-selected social media.

Where do race/ethnicity/immigration fit into the Alternative Agro-Food movement? How inclusive is it?

Submitted: Caren A. '02

ANSWER

JB: Hi Dr. Arbeit. I think we talked about this during our presentation. This movement is much more inclusive and diverse than most institutions and organizations connected to agriculture and culinary arts are in general. But it does not always live up to its ideals. Perhaps the hardest part of that involves affluent white people who care about the

earth, nutrition and treatment of animals but have a hard time seeing the exploitation and exclusion associated with some institutions and practices. That said, there are some amazing organizations led by people of color integral to this movement: farms focused on Black culture, educational centers, community farms, farmers markets. There is a growing number of Latinx agricultural workers who have become farm owners. Their agricultural practices and community relations in general are very much aligned with the movement, but they do not generally think of themselves as movement activists, like some others do. See *The New American Farmer: Immigration, Race, and the Struggle for Sustainability* by Laura-Ann Minkoff-Zern, which I reviewed for *Contemporary Sociology*.

In the second chart Andrew displayed - why is HH wealth by race decreasing (and projected to decrease more) beginning around 2010?

Submitted: Hope S. '15

ANSWER

AL: Good question, Hope. In that chart, all household wealth dropped around the time of the Great Recession (2008-2011). But because White households have so much more wealth on average, they have can lose a lot more. So, in the Great Recession, the average White household went from about \$160,000 to about \$100,000 in wealth. The average Black household went from \$10,000 to almost \$0. Relatively speaking, the loss for the average Black household is more financially devastating but, in actual dollars, the White household lost more money. The ironic effect of most recessions is to reduce the racial wealth gap because when everybody loses money, the people with the most money, lose more. At the time the chart was made, future projections were approximately flat. The Covid-19 Pandemic has had highly unusual effects on household wealth because the stock market has largely recovered, even as many families are having to draw on whatever assets they have. The likely outcome is an increase in the racial wealth gap in 2020.

AL: Thank you all for tuning in! If you are interested in learning more about my research I discussed in this webinar, you can read a working paper here (<https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/xgscj/>). As both an alumnus and a faculty member, I love being part of a community where alumni and friends of Skidmore are so engaged with big ideas and thorny problems.

JB: It was so great to hear from many of you and to see all the folks who signed up. It made me smile to think of Judy, Alison, Dave, Reagan, Kerry, Joelle, Caren, Jessica, Annie, Lilly, Lauren, Karina, Chelsea, Jessie, Tara, Ali, Tara, Sarah, Emily, Teshika, Mike, Emily, Nicole, Ben, Hector, Rebecca, Julia, Ileana, Hope, Hannah, Tashawn, Shannon, Hadley, Megan, Arden, Keara, Ruby, Tongtian all tuning in to spend time with Andrew and me. I hope this finds all of you healthy, safe and happy.