



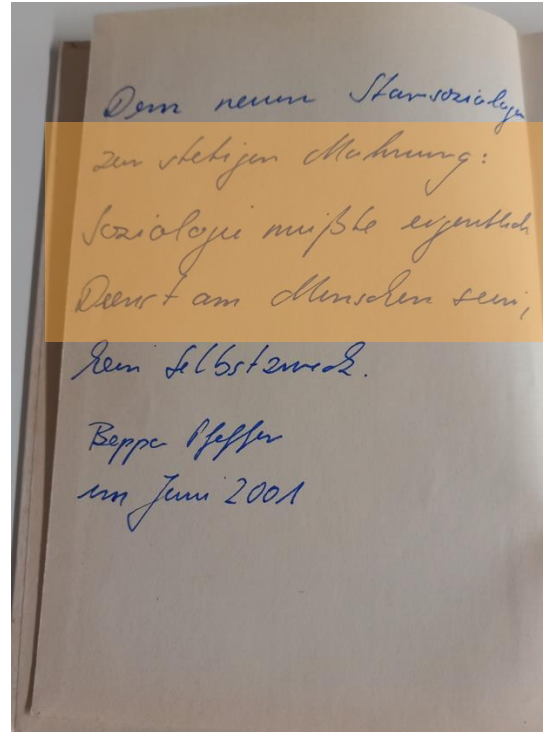
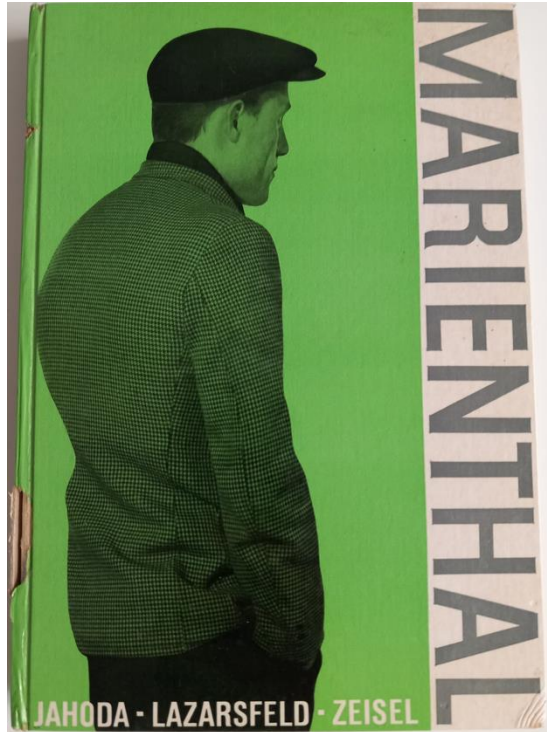
**Economic Inequality.**  
**Social Science *for* the Public Interest?**

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# Social Science in the Public Interest

An initial personal reflection



*“as a constant warning:  
Sociology should be in  
service to people”*

# Social Science in the Public Interest

From the outset, ISR has built the cornerstones of the U.S. data infrastructure for the measurement of inequality, e.g.

- 1946: Survey of Consumers (Economic Behavior Program)
- 1968: Panel Study of Income Dynamics

Creating knowledge about the economic well-being of its population is of obvious importance for the nation and, thus, **in the public interest**

# Social Science **for** the Public Interest?

But ... is the creation of knowledge through data enough?

1. We need to work harder to make our knowledge accessible  
**Accessible Description**
2. We need to go beyond creating knowledge of what is and bring our scientific methods to questions of what could be  
**Beyond Description**

# Accessible Description

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Examples today from research on wealth inequality

based on **ISR-produced/initiated surveys**

SCF

PSID

done by **ISR-researchers and collaborators**

Pfeffer / Dvir-Djerassi (2022, *Socius*)

Pfeffer / Velikov / et al. (2023, *Youtube*)

Pfeffer / Killewald (2019, *Socius*)

# Wealth Inequality

Just the facts

- Top 1% hold about 40% of all wealth
- Bottom 50% hold about 2.5%
- Median wealth of Black households is about 10-15% that of White households

But can you really imagine it?

# Wealth Inequality: Accessible Description

1. The distribution of wealth  
[An interactive approach](#)  
[An animation](#)
2. The intergenerational persistence of wealth  
[An animation](#)



# Accessible Description: What can ISR do?

1. It's easy (at least compared to what we normally do)  
Hire a data journalist
2. It's cheap (at least compared to what we normally do)  
It's the final 10 yards of a marathon that spans grant writing, data collection, and data preparation
3. It's important that **we** do it  
Data collection profits from deep scientific expertise, so does data visualization since we shape the narrative

# Beyond Description

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We are increasingly expected to provide more than the description and analysis of inequality

We should also state and analyze visions of a more equal future

One potential frame: Envisioning Real Utopias (E.O. Wright)

1. Define a vision of an emancipatory future irrespective of political feasibility and current policy discourse (utopian)
2. Use our standard social scientific tools to study the implications of these imagined states (real)

# Beyond Description: What ISR can do

1. Invest in international collaboration & connections  
It turns out that many, more emancipatory institutions that sound utopian are already real in other places
2. Invest in a diverse next generation of social science scholars  
Visions of more emancipatory solutions often come from lived experiences of inequality  
(and fresh ideas often come from fresh minds)

# ***“Constant Warning”***

Social Science **for** the Public Interest

- makes our knowledge accessible to educate the public
- provides a vision and analysis of a less unequal future

# ***Not our Job?***

Yes, it is

- If we don't do it, others provide (mis)information, shape the narrative, and offer a “vision”
- This is happening and is a direct challenge to the survival of democracy

It's in ISR's DNA

- Supporting democracy is the bedrock tradition of ISR (and central to UM's vision 2034)
- And “ISR always has been and always will be a place for dreamers” (Grace Noppert, Oct 14 2024)

**Thank you**