

**Cornell University and Stanford University**

**Call for Papers**

**The Sociology and Economics of Public Goods, Commodification and Rising Inequality: An Interdisciplinary Conversation**

**Stanford University, November 2-3, 2017**

**Organized by David Grusky, Stanford University, and Ravi Kanbur, Cornell University**

Two striking stylized facts mark the last twenty five years: (i) rising inequality of income and wealth, and (ii) rising commodification of goods which were previously supplied through group membership. Goods supplied through group membership, with elements of non-rivalry and non-excludability, are labeled as “public goods” by economists. Such goods can be provided by the public sector (when the group is the nation as a whole) but they can also be provided by smaller groups such as associations, communities or families. The retreat from such modes of provision, and their replacement by privatized, individualized, modes is labeled as “commodification” by sociologists.

Rising inequality and increased commodification of public goods have happened at the same time. But are they connected? Does one trend feed on and intensify the other? If this is the case, what are the options for breaking the downward spiral? Sociologists and Economists have of course been aware of these trends and spirals, and have been engaged in research on these topics. However, these are quite separate literatures and engagements, with little interaction between them.

Economists have developed the theory of “voluntary provision of public goods”, which explores outcomes when individuals contribute to a good which is non-rival and non-excludable in consumption. The theory is seen as having wide application, in settings ranging from families, through communities, to sub-national or national polities, and collective action more generally. Empirical analysis considers the relationship between group characteristics and the level and nature of public goods provision. There is also a strong strand of experimental work which explores, through “public good games” in laboratory settings, how different contribution, monitoring and sanction rules affect provision. Throughout, the interaction between inequality and public goods is a question of interest, but typically the causality of focus is from inequality to public goods, not from commodification to inequality.

Sociologists have focused on documenting long-run trends in the provision of public goods and the institutional forces that affect whether goods are commodified or decommodified. There is also a vibrant debate on the costs and benefits of delivering anti-poverty interventions in ways that either (a) acquiesce to the commodification of opportunity (e.g., providing “basic income” that then allows for opportunity to be purchased by low-income families), or (b) endeavor to decommodify opportunity via universal or means-tested delivery of services (e.g., childcare, college).

These two literatures have many insights to share, and have much to learn from each other. Yet they have developed quite separately. As a first step in bringing them together, Cornell University and Stanford University propose to hold a conversation between sociologists and economists on Public

Goods, Commodification and Rising Inequality, at Stanford University on 2-3 November, 2017. The conference organizers are David Grusky of Stanford University and Ravi Kanbur of Cornell University.

The organizers invite submissions of completed papers, or substantive paper proposals (around 3-5 single space pages), on any aspect of the conference theme. The papers can be conceptual, empirical, or policy oriented. Submissions should be sent to Ravi Kanbur at [sk145@cornell.edu](mailto:sk145@cornell.edu), by May 15, 2017. Decisions on acceptance will be communicated by July 15, 2017. The conference will cover the travel and accommodation costs of one author per accepted paper.