

"What the World Needs Now": Sociology and Social Change for Activists Who Turned to Sociology When Revolution Wasn't Enough (or Possible); the Would-be Fall of Neo-Liberalism and Austerity Politics; and Radical Nomadism, Two Wheeled Observations, and the Sociological Imagination of of C. Wright Mills

A Sociology of Sociology Sabbatical Report

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A. Introduction

Sociology is well known for having attracted and been significantly shaped by the sons (and later daughters) of Protestant ministers. Less well known are the significant number of former revolutionaries, national liberation movement leaders, and other radical democratic activists who followed their political work by also turning to sociology, and being shaped by and shaping the field in the process. With their social movements waning, repressed, or, in some cases successful, activists who had dedicated themselves, at times jeopardizing their lives, to the radical restructuring of their societies, now sought to better understand and contribute to them through the prism of sociology.

With the world turning from a period of mass upheaval to more stable, if often oppressed, conditions in the late 1970s and early 80s, a number of former activists applied and were accepted to sociology graduate programs in the U.S. In many cases they were attracted by the recent (1960s and early 1970s) infusion of progressive faculty coming from 'the new left', the women's movement, the civil rights movements, among others. The University of Oregon Sociology Department is known for having attracted a significant number of former revolutionaries and radical activists from around the world during this period. Among those joining the department were activists in the Iranian revolution, Bangladeshi and Venezuelan national liberation movements, Middle Eastern Arabian and Turkish democracy movements, U.S. anti-war, student, and New Left movements, among others. Members of these movements, having then decided to study sociology in graduate school, have now moved on, many becoming sociology professors, most remaining politically active.

In this sabbatical project I planned to study this phenomenon and these students as representative of a broader phenomenon occurring at other universities around the U.S. and elsewhere, including accomplishing several complimentary goals, including completing a traditional sociological research project that will contribute to our sociological understanding of the impact of sociology on these student's lives and vice versa; to better understand myself and my connection to sociology in so much as I significantly shared this path; and to see how these former activists turned sociologists (mostly) now see and teach our discipline, how they see our world today, and how they are using sociology (or not) to try to change it. I accomplish this by traveling to conduct in-depth interviews of these former activists turned sociologists (mostly), analyze the 'results', and then reflect on and share my findings.

Goals & Research Objectives

My research project had three disparate but integrated original goals:

- A. Contribute to an understanding of the history and sociology of sociology during a very formative period, by studying radicals-turned-sociologists and how they see the world today and what it needs;
- B. Complete a *personal* sociological exploratory journey* in the spirit of C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (which seeks to understand the links between individuals and their societies and history) by exploring my own experience in coming to and then participating in the sociological endeavor, as informed by others on a similar path; and
- C. Connect with like-minded and located sociologists in the U.S., Europe, Middle East, and Asia to see what they are teaching, how they are engaging their students today, and how they are trying to *apply* sociology to their and our worlds, in order to reflect on and inform my teaching and that of others.

As my project developed, these goals took on two new related dimensions:

- D. Studying the effects of neo-liberal policies on Western, Northern, Eastern, and Southern Europe
- E. Exploring the similar explorations of C. Wright Mills, the leading radical American sociologist of the 20th century, including his explorations of sociology, life, American and European society and politics, and the insights obtained from doing so on two wheels at high speeds

B. Methodology

In order to conduct the interviews and maximize the benefits of the leave, I spent the summer and fall of 2011 traveling Europe and Asia, to interview former activists / University of Oregon Sociology graduate students where they currently reside and work. Cities of interviews include, in chronological order: London, England; Oslo, Norway; Ankara Turkey; Famagusta, and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and Tunis, Tunisia; I had planned to visit Tehran, Iran and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, but due to difficulties in obtaining travel visas, my interviewees from Tehran visited me in Turkey and in Eugene, and I later traveled to Dhaka, Bangladesh to complete interviews that I was unable to accomplish during the sabbatical term off.

My 'target sample' for my interviews consisted of ten former activists that studied sociology at the University of Oregon in the 1970s and 1980s, two visiting professors at the university in the period, and a more recent 'radical activist turned graduate-student' from Western Africa, as well as others that would be added to the list using a 'snowball sampling technique.' In the end I was able to interview seven of the ten planned interviewees, and did

add a number of informal interviewees using the snowball technique, including both colleagues and current and former students of the interviewees.

While preparing for the interviews, two unexpected developments occurred that added the additional goals and focus:

- A. Austerity politics dominated responses to the Great Recession, especially in Europe, leading, along with other factors, to significant forms of popular resistance (and actual revolution in Tunisia)
- B. I made contact and became friends with C. Wright Mills' son, who kindly provided access to his father's private papers and other materials, and who loaned me the family home in Majorca, Spain, which I used as an ideal location to analyze my findings, reading and writing Mills' work from his own copies of his books, in his family's summer home in Europe

C. Results

It is impossible to fully describe the results of six months (not including the many months of work preparing for the main research, nor the many months building on this work upon returning home) in a concise sabbatical report, so a short summary will have to suffice. I will briefly identify core results of the three separate, but related, goals of the project:

A. I successfully interviewed seven (of the original ten) members of the target sample, I found some variation in the paths their once similar sociological interests had taken them, but they largely traveled since paths. All seven of the interviewees (all former revolutionaries) were now professional sociologists, six working as university professors, one a managing partner in a social research company. All but one remained genuinely committed to both 'understanding and changing the world', in the spirit of the Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, and all having largely maintained their general sociological world views from the time they were in graduate school (e.g. the deconstructionists were still deconstructionists, the radical populist was still a radical populist, those interested in development and anti-imperialism remained largely in the same intellectual camps, etc). All but one remained 'radical', in one way or another, and all but (the same) one continued to integrate researching/publishing with undergraduate and graduate teaching.

B. I kept a 'personal sociological exploratory journal' throughout my sabbatical, in a variety of forms, reflecting the nature of the work that I was doing. It's providing me a wealth of material, on a large number of subjects, to mine as I proceed with my sociological endeavors

C. Perhaps the most rewarding component of the project was the contact I made with my former colleagues, and their colleagues and students. In Oslo I debated the significance of C. Wright Mills with sociologists who knew him; I explored how sociology functions and is impacting the back and forth secularization process in both Ankara Turkey and Famagusta, Northern Cyprus with sociology graduate students and faculty; I sat in classes and talked for long hours over coffee about economic development with social work students in Dhaka,

Bangladesh. I talked with unemployed former students in rural villages of Tunisia, living through a revolution that offered political change, but not economic or social.

D. Conclusion

It is fair to say that this project has been *the* most interesting and moving academic experience of my last 20 years, and allowed me to both bring together threads of work and ideas I've been dealing with throughout my career, while starting numerous new threads, that have inspired me to new directions, that no doubt will sustain me for many years to come.

- An introduction that includes a summary of the purpose, goals, and objectives of your project.
- A discussion of the methods and/or processes you used to complete your project. This is where you provide the details of what occurred during your project. Please note any changes you had to make from your original action plan in your proposal.
- A description of the results and/or outcomes of your project. Please include any supporting documents, creative works, or products that you feel are relevant to the outcomes.
- A final reflection on the significance of this project to your work at Lane, to your Division, to the College as a whole and to your discipline.