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## CONVERSATION

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### THE VIEW FROM BELOW: A STUDENT'S RESPONSE TO *Profscam* \*

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I confess. I am one of the simpletons. I am one of the “frustrated readers who like simple explanation” whom Teresa Sullivan (1990, p. 397) identified as the immediate audience for Charles Sykes’s (1988) *Profscam*. Indeed, I was so frustrated with my experience as an undergraduate in sociology at UC-Berkeley that I stayed up all night devouring Sykes’s comedic exposé of “higher” education. I was amazed to find out that the problems I experienced were not unique, though it did seem that my experience embodied problems in higher education generally.

I was excited when *TS*—a journal that I saw addressing my nascent concerns about undergraduate education—published two reviews of *Profscam* (Gilderbloom and Donald 1990; Sullivan 1990). My excitement faded quickly, however. Although I agreed with many of the reviewers’ criticisms of Sykes’s rhetoric and style—his argument is indeed reductionist, one-sided, muckraking, sensational, alarmist, inflammatory, bombastic, breezy, gossipy, hyperbolic—I was dismayed that neither review confronted head-on what I took to be the core problem raised by Sykes: in a system that rewards research over teaching, undergraduate education is compromised. All Sykes has done is to popularize what scholars have been saying throughout the 1980s (e.g., Boyer 1987, 1990).<sup>1</sup>

In coming to his conclusion that the current reward system impoverishes undergraduate education, Sykes covers a number of concerns. Of particular interest here are three questions—

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<sup>1</sup> Because of space limits on “Conversations,” I make only limited reference to all of the literature that supports my arguments throughout. I am happy to supply by electronic mail a complete list of the nearly 100 works that I would have liked to cite. Send requests to YAMANE@SSC.Wisc.edu (INTERNET) or YAMANE@WISCS (BITNET).

two empirical and one analytical—that Sykes and others raise about higher learning: 1) Is there a “flight from teaching”? 2) Is there a “crucifixion of teaching”? 3) What is the root of these problems? The aforementioned reviews fail to address adequately any of these three questions. Indeed, I argue that by using what Alexander Astin (1976) called “academic gamesmanship,” the reviewers sidestep the first two questions and thereby obviate their need to consider the third.

Astin maintains that academics play a variety of games to fend off potential student-oriented changes in the academy. A major function of “academic gamesmanship” is “to relieve the player or the audience of any responsibility to act on a given task or problem” (Astin 1976, p. 75). Both of the reviews of *Profscam* play these games with Sykes’s commentary. My goal is to demonstrate the reviewers’ displacement of Sykes’s criticisms, and to answer the three questions posed above on the basis of my own experience and of available data.

### IS THERE A FLIGHT FROM TEACHING?

Sykes (1988, pp. 33–50) states that the emphasis placed on research in universities results in a reduction of time spent on teaching. This diminution of classroom time constitutes “a flight from teaching.” Though Sykes doesn’t take advantage of data collected by the Carnegie Foundation in its National Survey of Faculty, these data support his conclusion. Thus in 1984, for example, at institutions like reviewer Sullivan’s, fully 61 percent of the faculty taught undergraduates *five hours or less per week*; only 21 percent spent as little time on research (Boyer 1987).<sup>2</sup>

This pattern represents what Sykes rightly identifies as a zero-sum game between “teaching

<sup>2</sup> Although liberal arts colleges still show a marked commitment to teaching—only 16 percent of their faculty members report teaching five hours or less per week—there is always the threat that the desire for prestige associated with research will trickle down from the multiversities to all institutions. Indeed, Clark (1987) notes the “unguided imitative convergence of universities and colleges upon the most prestigious forms.” Barnett (1992) characterizes this phenomenon as “academic drift”; Smith (1990) simply calls it “aping.” Not surprisingly, the “big 50” liberal arts colleges, led by Oberlin, have banded

loads and research opportunities," to borrow the words of the Association of American Colleges (1985, p. 10; AAC's emphasis). This *inverse* relationship, however, is magically transformed by the reviewers into a *symbiotic* relationship. Both reviews would have us believe that students benefit in some direct way from their professors' research. Gilderbloom and Donald (1990, p. 401) contend, "A sense of excitement is added to the class when a professor shares his/her current research with students. Moreover, a productive scholar is also a valuable teacher because he/she is on the cutting edge of research and can share this with a student." Similarly, Sullivan (1990, p. 398) reasons, "Not for Sykes is the thrill of discovery, whether savored alone or with an excited class." These assertions are without foundation.

The excitement and thrill of research findings do not translate in any significant and consistent way into learning and achievement by students (presumably a goal of teaching beyond excitement itself). Though data on the relationship between research and teaching are scarce, the existing data indicate that most often there is either a "uniformly small" relationship between the two or none at all (Finkelstein 1984, p. 122). Even if undergraduates did benefit immensely from research, this would be of little consequence in many universities because, as demonstrated above, the most productive researchers teach undergraduates the least.

Moreover, even granting that a professor's own research might be exciting *if* it were well presented, I question the extent to which any professor's *own* research can create excitement over the course of a 10- or 15-week class. In this age of hyperspecialization, most professors couldn't fill one week of lectures with their own research without entering a level of detail of interest only to other specialists. Without exception, teachers must synthesize and present sources other than their own research.<sup>3</sup> This synthetic work is not the domain of the researcher; rather, it is the historic task of the *scholar*.

Although it is usual to contrast *researchers* with *teachers*, I believe it is more fruitful to

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together and are considering calling themselves "*research colleges*" (Cheney 1990). It seems that the trickle down is in progress.

<sup>3</sup> This argument should not be taken to mean that research is unnecessary for higher education. It is necessary; as Barnett (1992) argued recently, however, no relationship necessarily exists between research and any particular institution of higher learning.

distinguish between those who simply conduct *research* and those who engage in *scholarship*. If we understand scholarship as an art that involves not simply "original" research but also the integration, synthesis, application, and teaching of ideas, it should be obvious that even though higher education needs research, not all persons in higher education need to be *researchers*, narrowly defined. In fact, the great majority of faculty members in higher education should be *scholars*, broadly defined (Barnett 1992; Boyer 1990; Smith 1990).

Thus far I have tried to establish two points. First, Sykes's claim about the flight from teaching for research is supported by such data as are available. Second, the reviewers' insistence that the flight to research is beneficial to students is baseless. Next, I ask, "What happens when professors do enter the classroom?"

#### IS THERE "A CRUCIFIXION OF TEACHING"?

Sykes (1988, pp. 51–78) contends that bad teaching is endemic to and rampant in the academic villages. That is, there is "a crucifixion of teaching." Sykes does not present a strong case against the impoverishment of pedagogy, so it is fortunate that his view is not novel. This ground has been covered thoroughly by other scholars.

Perhaps I can convey my own understanding of bad teaching most clearly through some anecdotal evidence. In about mid-April 1990, I attended several sociology classes, one or more a day for four days, in a typical week at Berkeley. For each class I entered a hall and sat down among 50 to 150 people in fixed parallel rows of seats facing a podium at the front. Generally the professor approached the podium and arranged her or his notes, offered a nominal salutation, and began to lecture. The lecture commanded the attention of the audience for five, 10, perhaps 15 minutes. After that, my armchair ethnography began. I observed my classmates sleeping, daydreaming, giggling, whispering; some also were scribbling hurriedly on their notepads. Were they taking notes? No, they were *writing* notes (short letters) as well as filling out forms, making lists, doing crossword puzzles, and especially drawing (often elaborate) pictures. Some simply left before the end of the lecture; surely more would have done so were it not for potential sanctions against such behavior. Altogether there was widespread disregard for the information flow-

ing from the lectern. This finding is nationally replicable (see Boyer 1987, p. 149).

Smith (1990, p. 214) offers a telling anecdote about students' sentiment toward lecturing. While he was encouraging his students to explore Dante by thinking about modern hells for modern sins, two students suggested that an appropriate hell for professors who neglected their students would be that they listen to lectures for eternity. From my experience in paper sessions at the annual ASA meetings, having seen professors' boredom at other professors' droning presentations, I would amend that suggestion to say that negligent professors should have to sit through paper sessions for eternity. Such a punishment would not be too different from the hell to which undergraduates are routinely subjected. The fact is that lectures are mind-numbing, not educational, if we understand the term *education* according to its origin in the Latin *educare*, "to rear" (derived in turn from *educere*, "to lead out"). Lectures owe little to this understanding of education.

Although they do not deny that poor teaching exists, the reviewers seek to avoid the criticism that this problem is widespread. Gilderbloom and Donald (1990, p. 401) assert that poor teaching is exceptional: "The problem that is most troublesome to administrators is how to get rid of the *one or two percent* of the faculty who are doing a poor job" (my emphasis). Sullivan agrees, explaining that some faculty members teach sociology poorly, just as there are poor performers in every occupation. Essentially, both reviews insist that we shouldn't let a few bad seeds spoil the Garden.

Although this "bad seeds" explanation undoubtedly accounts for some poor teaching, it cannot possibly explain the *extent* of bad teaching experienced by students. Statistical portraits of professors' pedagogical practices are hard to obtain; one survey conducted by the Carnegie Foundation, however, suggests that across all disciplines, *lecturing* was the predominant teaching method, occupying an astounding 80 percent of overall class time (Thielens 1987; also see Boyer 1987, p. 149). I have no reason to suspect that sociologists lecture much less frequently; in my own experience at Berkeley, they lectured more than 80 percent of the time.

The educational consequences of heavy reliance on lectures are worth considering. Lectures involve the transfer of information by the

professor to passive students, whose task it is to receive, retain, and regurgitate that information. Such a method of teaching and learning involves remarkably low-level intellectual work (Bloom 1972). At the ASA meetings in 1990, Theodore Wagenaar (then editor of *TS*) defined a "lecture" as *transferring information from a professor's notes to a student's notes without going through the mind of either*. This definition is disturbingly brilliant.

The lecture treats students as empty vessels that need to be filled rather than as agents capable of being challenged to take an active role in learning.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, theory suggests and research has shown that alternative pedagogical techniques which seek to treat students as active participants (e.g., group work, collaborative learning) have positive effects on learning (Boyer 1987, pp. 150–51; Jackson and Prosser 1989; McKeachie 1986, pp. 69–70). The reflections of those who are notably good teachers augment systematic research on lecturing. For example, Kenneth Eble (1976, p. 42) notes that the "best general advice to the teacher who would lecture well is still, 'Don't lecture.'" He argues that the lecture is an outmoded pedagogy, perhaps useful when printed information was less widely available than it is today, but now persisting simply "because it is the easy thing to do; it is the accepted thing; it is the safest" (Eble 1976, p. 42; also see Boyer 1990; McKeachie 1986).

For those who wish to go beyond the easy, accepted, nominal, and safe, plenty of helpful information is available. An excellent starting point is the lists of the 10 best sources on teaching and learning, compiled by Maryellen Gleason (1984, 1985). Those concerned with the burden of reading the works on Gleason's lists should know that to be included on the lists, the articles must be (among other things) practical, nontechnical, and short.

<sup>4</sup> An early reviewer of this essay suggested that students and professors have a tacit agreement in which professors don't demand much of students so that both can pursue their own ends (research and fun or social development, respectively) (see Moffatt 1991). Even if this were universally true, it would be neither right nor irreversible. Where it is true, professors are abnegating their proper role as leaders in the university community. Boyer (1987, p.119) rightly points out that although professors do not determine the intellectual and social environments of a college, they significantly affect the students' orientation through their demands, and sustain or weaken the environment through their priorities.

On the basis of the long list of materials I just received from the ASA's Teaching Resource Center, I must conclude that a *lack of will* to teach well is more of an issue than a lack of available information on how to do so. The question, then, is *why*? What motivates the will to research to the exclusion of the will to teach?

#### WHAT IS THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM?

Given what *seems*, when viewed from below, to be an obvious problem in undergraduate education, I was surprised that the reviewers didn't take Sykes's work as a starting point from which to critically engage the issues of research and teaching in the profession. Of course, because their gamesmanship avoided the first two questions posed at the outset—on the flight from and the crucifixion of teaching—they weren't compelled to confront the third question: What is the root of these problems? In closing I turn my attention to this question.

I think it is safe to say that we are approaching a consensus that undergraduate education is being impaired by the academic reward structure, which leads faculty members away from teaching and toward the more prestigious realm of research. A most succinct summary of this structural obstacle to good teaching was published recently in *VUES*, the newsletter of the ASA Section on Undergraduate Education. There Reece McGee (1992, p. 1) wrote, "Prestige, both personal and institutional, is, of course, the great currency of the academic profession today.... We—both personally and departmentally—live and die by professional prestige. Not only do we perceive our rewards and opportunities being structured by its possession or lack, we evaluate self-worth in the same way. It is not surprising, then, that the variable of prestige should play through our activities concerning undergraduate education."

Wilshire (1990) criticized the professional necessity of staying away from that which is low in prestige (teaching undergraduates) lest one becomes "contaminated" (stigmatized as merely a "teacher"). It is almost as if Wilshire had McGee's representation of the sociological profession in mind when he wrote

The academic person all too easily pursues professional objectives compulsively—frantically, numbly, fearfully. He or she is in no position to see the "irrational" side of the pursuit—particularly that the need for recognition from the professional peer group is so immense that the group acquires the numinous authority of a tribe. One's identity is engulfed in the identity of the group; those who fall outside it are *other*, and their presence within it contaminates both it and its members. Students are *other* (p. 170).

Wilshire is not alone in recognizing this archaic purification process in the professions; it is an alienating process that I and many fellow low-prestige "others" have known very well.

Perhaps I'm too naive about the operation of prestige systems, but should I ever have to "live and die by professional prestige," as McGee suggests, I think I would rather allow my sociological self to die. I pity those who are so fearful that they "evaluate self-worth" on the basis of professional prestige. I had always hoped that a reflexive sociology would be able to apply its own insight, namely that such stratification regimes are part and parcel of inequality, underlie much injustice, and thus are impediments to a more humane future for human communities. Instead sociology seems to be enslaved to academia's status hierarchies, perhaps because of its collective insecurity about its questionable status as a "science." Whatever the reason, the prestige of research seems to have become the opiate of the mass of sociologists, who are trapped in the "tyrannical machine" (James [1903] 1987) of a professional stratification regime gone astray.

#### CONCLUSION

Given this problematic situation, sociologists as academic professionals need to ask themselves, "What is to be done?" The first solution that comes to my mind suggests applying incentives to shift the professional stratification regime away from a narrow focus on research and toward a broader focus on scholarship. The broad definition of scholarship given above needs to be encouraged in graduate training and rewarded in professional life. Along these lines, Boyer (1990) argues that increased attention to indicators of teaching effectiveness and dedication should be taken into consideration in decisions on hiring, ten-

ure, and promotion. We should harness the tyrannical machine and redirect it to promote *teaching scholars* instead of *lecturing researchers*.

I am uneasy with this solution, however, because it accepts implicitly that status seeking among faculty members is inevitable. In my mind, the incessant focus on prestige, exemplified by McGee's frank comment, is precisely the problem. This first suggestion—like many incentive-based, rational choice type solutions—attempts to use the disease to cure the disease. As I said above, I expect more from sociologists.

That I hold sociologists to higher standards than other human beings doesn't sit well with some people. A reviewer of this paper commented: "It seems as if the author is complaining that we [sociologists], of all people, should know better than to accept such a stratification system—but isn't the whole point of much of our sociological work that the individuals are 'locked in' by the logic of the system?" Perhaps in some mechanistic conceptions of society it is characteristic to believe that individuals have no agency, but this view strikes me as an outdated understanding of human action in the social world.

A second possibility—the notion that sociology should be practiced reflexively and can be liberating for those who choose to do so—was articulated at least as early as three decades ago by Peter Berger (1963) in *Invitation to Sociology*. Berger, conjuring up the image of society as a puppet theater, concludes his treatise on this note:

We see the puppets dancing on their miniature stage, moving up and down as the strings pull them around, following the prescribed course of their various little parts. We learn to understand the logic of this theater and we find ourselves in its motions. We locate ourselves in society and thus recognize our own position as we hang from its subtle strings. For a moment we see ourselves as puppets indeed. But then we grasp a decisive difference between the puppet theater and our own drama. Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom. And in this same act we find the conclusive justification of sociology as a humanistic discipline. (p.176)

It is my long-term hope that sociologists will stop, look up, and perceive the tyrannical machine which moves us. Then, perhaps, we will recognize that the mindless pursuit of pres-

tige is harmful in and of itself, whether it is allocated for research, for teaching, or for scholarship. It is harmful because it reduces all of these activities to mere instrumentalities.

Whichever path we choose, it must be some path other than the one we are currently following. Unfortunately, before we can reach the stage where we are willing to critically examine our own practices in an effort to improve them, we must acknowledge that a problem exists and needs to be addressed. We must move beyond the academic gamesmanship displayed by Sykes's reviewers. First and foremost, we must be honest with ourselves. On the basis of the reviews by Sullivan and by Gilderbloom and Donald, I don't know whether the profession is ready for such honesty.

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