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The Accidental Sociologist: Fragmented Identities in the 21st Century

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When an actor takes on an established role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it. Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both.
(Erving Goffman *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*
New York: Doubleday, 1956)

I have been delaying writing this piece.¹ It has been over a year since I was asked to comment on my major sociological influences and where I think that sociology will go in the future. The trouble is, and it's taken me a while to admit this, my ambivalence toward the boundaries of the discipline. This is not to say I am ambivalent toward what motivates my work. I agree whole heartedly with what Curtis and Weir (2002:6) describe as the object of the discipline: "the processes in and through which people form and are formed by their social relations." This, I believe, is my "role." At the same time, as I am currently teaching in the criminology side of a department of sociology and criminology, I am potentially among the "entrants" who may be contributing to their fears about the vulnerability of sociology to "pressure from without and to trivialization from within" (Curtis and Weir 2002: 3). They cite criminology as a major marauder given the current trends toward vocational, neo-liberal agendas in university administration.

In this piece, I will attempt to address the issues originally presented to me: the people and works that have most influenced my formation and where I think that these influences will take me in the future. I will do so in the context of the debate on the boundaries of sociology presented over the past year in *Society/Société* (Curtis and Weir 2002; O'Malley and Hunt 2003, Weir and Curtis 2003). As I find myself divided between my role as a sociologist and my front as a criminologist, I am in the eye of the storm.

At the beginning of my graduate studies in sociology I intended to study survey research and social statistics. I have looked back at my first years as a graduate student and thought myself too heavily focussed on sociology as vocational training so that I could get a job in government or as a pollster (exactly the type of motivation that worries Curtis and Weir). I was particularly interested in the debate between "family violence" and "feminist" researchers over wife abuse and women's own violence toward their husbands (Dobash and Dobash 1992a & b, Kurz 1989, Lenton 1995, Schwartz

and DeKeseredy 1993, Straus, M.A. and Gelles, R.J. 1986, Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz 1980). My interest was not so much in whether women were violent but in the nature of this debate and its theoretical and methodological implications. This, I have just come to realise, indicates that I was actually more engaged in what Pierre Bourdieu calls “reflexive sociology,” operating and interrogating the fundamental categories of sociology (Curtis and Weir 2002:4).

As I progressed through graduate school I become more consciously tuned into the enterprise and possibilities of the “sociological imagination.” I read Foucault, did some social history and developed a dissertation research proposal that combined the questions generated through archival research and a newly developed critical lens on “common sense” social categories, including those developed by social scientists.

My dissertation revolved around Judicial Decisions in cases where men had been violent toward an intimate female partner. I found that even when judges applied harsh punishment they often still relied on paternalistic rationales. This led me to interrogate many of the central concepts of the criminological literature and how we have come to use the criminal justice system to help women in violent relationships. This is the work of a sociologist, albeit one also engaged in criminology.

Before completing my dissertation I landed a tenure-track job, to teach in the criminology program of the Department of Sociology and Criminology at Saint Mary’s University. Maybe I got the job because I said that I would write a book called *Statistics for Foucauldians*. Or, maybe not. More likely, the job was available because of the trend for sociology departments to be expanding their criminology curriculum for exactly the reasons outlined by Curtis and Weir (2002). In the current political and economic climate, universities embrace criminology because of the potentially large enrolments and the applied nature of the discipline.

Having said that, I see myself as a sociologist who studies criminology related issues. I am doing so in an increasingly inter-disciplinary way (drawing from, for example, cultural studies). Through my teaching and research on the criminal justice system, I see possibilities for undermining the very neo-liberal agenda that concerns Curtis and Weir. It is precisely because of the rise of the security state that we need to interrogate the meaning of social control and its associated concepts. The discipline of criminology can (and often does) do this. So, while I am ambivalent about the boundaries of sociology I am loath to allow myself to become a servant to the state.

Curtis and Weir (2002:5) describe Bourdieu’s typology of the strategies adopted by “entrants” to the discipline of sociology: successive and subversive. The former supports the status quo in the hopes of having a solid career. The latter is riskier as it attempts to change the field. Essentially successive strategies affirm “conditions of dominance” and subversive strategies work to change them. I am left wondering — into which category do I fall? Had I used sociology to train me to be a pollster and a quantitative survey researcher I would have been, I believe, pursuing a successive strategy. I would have taken existing research in different directions but probably would not have carved out any innovative channels for sociological inquiry. Ironically then, I may well have ended up contributing to the policy oriented vocational agenda that concerns Curtis and Weir and that they characterise, after Bourdieu, as subversive.

From my current position, I would argue that not all subversive strategies in sociology will necessarily erode the discipline. I do not believe that all subversion is aligned with what Curtis and Weir

(2002:5) refer to as “the strand of policy-oriented vocationalism which figures centrally in neo-liberal policy.” There is another form of subversion that can occur within sociology that will be productive, and even fun. It can even happen in criminology as long as we remain committed to the broader aims of social science rather than state service. As a new sociologist, I am committed to this goal.

Curtis and Weir (2002:6) state that the object of sociological research should be the “relation between practice and structural effect.” This is certainly what I pursue in my teaching and my research. It is, indeed, what inspires my interest in the criminal justice system and it is what allows me to reconcile my role and my front.

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