

Talk given to the First Year Graduate Student Proseminar
at the University of California, Berkeley, Sociology Department, Fall 2007.

I'm happy to be here and have a chance to say something I've wanted to say for ten years.

1. The biggest problem facing Berkeley students is Berkeley students. Specifically their suicidal culture that they manage to reproduce. I speak **as** a Berkeley student who participated in much though not all of this negativity, and followed a very typical Berkeley path. In fact, if I'm correct, I am as Berkeley as you can get—I am a Berkeley professor who got his PhD at Berkeley under a Berkeley professor who got her PhD at Berkeley under a Berkeley professor who got her PhD at Berkeley. So you know that when I say this stuff I am talking about myself, not you. You won't mistake me as giving **you** a hard time—because you haven't even had a chance to do the things I'm talking about. Instead, this is a confession that I hope will be of use to you.
2. This is what I think happens in a simple form. An unusual and very cool type of student comes here, ready to be socialized in a particular way. The first year cohort is largely socialized by the second year cohort, although I think they spontaneously could re-invent a lot of these ideas on their own.
3. They will then go on to socialize the next year's cohort. That would be good except for the fact that the socializers basically have no idea what's going on. Even worse, they have a view that is less accurate than a random guess. In five years or so they will have a pretty good idea of what's going on, but by then they're not around the department. We'll get back to that.
4. So there's this self-replicating graduate student culture which varies but is pernicious in many ways. I can only tell you how I saw things when I arrived, fresh as a daisy, in my first year. I'll tell you how I saw things.
 - a) There were two types of sociologists and sociology, like everything else. These were good, and bad.
 - b) Good sociology was theoretical and historical and like what Max Weber, blessed be his name, would do if he were here. It also would contribute to the lifting of various forms of oppression.
 - c) Bad sociology was atheoretical, done by stupid people. It was very easy, because you sit in front of a computer which churns out numbers and ASR articles. People who did that were very good friends with capitalism.

Yes this sounds stupid but I was that stupid. I swear to you. Stupid things can happen to smart people and a lot of them did. In some cases class discussions could degenerate into something that was a lot more like one of the less inspired days in China's cultural revolution than a supposedly theoretically sophisticated set of adults. It was people

throwing around value-laden labels hoping they'd stick to others basically to strip away others' right to have their own ideas.

5. And a lot of students were made to feel second class citizens, or to apologize for themselves, because they were doing bad sociology work, like by studying what leads poor folks to stop being poor. No one ever tracked earlier cohorts to see to what extent thinking one way or another really did what everyone imagined it did.
6. Sociology is the only field in which as a matter of principle, we are supposed to uncritically accept people's own boasts as actual truth. Before I go on, let me make clear that in no way am I ragging on particular students I have known and certainly not this faculty, and that's not because I wouldn't if they deserved it. OK? This is a much more general issue. It is amazing, but the way we think is like this: "This person is a feminist, a Marxist, a whatever, therefore he or she must be good." End of story.

One of the most amazing things for me breaking me out of this has actually been reading obituaries in the ASA's *Footnotes*. Because someone will die that I thought of as a "conservative" because he was basically just some ol' regular Democrat and all that and did regular ol' sociology, but then I read folks saying things like "This guy was just the most wonderful person in the world. He fought hard to protect women graduate students at a time when they were being ridiculed, or he made sure that admissions were opened up to poor folks who'd had poor educations but had a lot of promise." And you couldn't have guessed that from the titles of his books. Because there's no necessary relation between what someone studies, or even what they say about it, and his or her character.

I'm not that old, but once you've been around a bit you learn of Marxists exploiting wage-workers, including their own graduate students, and feminists who hate women, or at least those who want to have families. I've seen people who study immigrants be cruel to immigrants, and indeed, people whose claim to fame is a critique of abuse of a certain kind of person abuse precisely that kind of person, systematically, repeatedly, and unrepentantly. I'm very pleased to say I haven't seen that here or I wouldn't be here. But I have learned that you can't let people tell you how great they are in their books. And we don't make ourselves great by adopting a theoretical perspective, but in how we actually treat other people.

And since I'm on a roll, let me say the other thing I painfully learned over the years and once I did so much was clearer. You may have heard the expression "All politics is local"? That is the single most intelligent thing anyone ever said about politics. The same goes for intellectual politics. Not only should you not imagine that someone's theoretical orientation is an accurate theory-of-themselves, but you should not imagine that people's rhetoric is the same thing as their motivation. You don't need to guess what their motivation is. But people's actions **are** what they **visibly do do**. Not the "thinking globally" part. That's the packaging, the framing. But what they are actually doing. The acting locally, incredibly, microscopically, and depressingly locally. When academics fight, they are not fighting over what the status of poor people will be in the year 2010.

They are fighting over what they are actually fighting over, things like jobs, teaching relief, salary.

Of course they believe and convince others that these are merely stepping stones to the greater good. Them getting a raise or their friend tenured will contribute to a critique of the hegemony of this or that, and this will affect the consciousness of the next generation of students, and this will ripple through the universe and so on and so forth. No one ever checks up on folks to see what actually came of such plans. Did the institutional turf that one group managed to carve away from another actually serve as the cornerstone of social change? Or intellectual regeneration? Or was it just what it was, namely some middle class institutional workers making an incremental increase in their control of the chump change that constitutes state universities?

In general, academic politics are over small things that aren't very interesting and don't compel the allegiance of a rational bystander.

7. But in Berkeley, students tend to come predisposed to assuming they know what's up because we are intellectuals and lefties and—I don't mind admitting it—on both counts there's a lot of know-it-all-ism here. We age out of it, but we're in it for some very dangerous years, namely those when we socialize the new cohort.

I don't know if you saw this recent graduate student letter about what they wanted. It was not at all stupid and a very good place to start. But it was 100% Berkeley in that it went something like this: “We were terrified to realize that the people Berkeley interviews for assistant professor jobs are really different from us—we suddenly realize we are totally unprepared for this and we don't know anything about how the field works. Oh, and you should give us a lot more control over who gets hired and fired here.”

Now what's up with that? Not even realizing there's something fried about demanding to have input in decision making processes when you realize you don't understand what's going on in your field. But that's a classic Berkeley student thing. You know those movies where someone bursts into the main cabin yelling “does anyone here know how to fly a plane?” Well, we were the kind of folks who'd say “absolutely not! Give me the controls.”

8. Berkeley students almost always mobilized for hiring and firing questions as if we had some idea as to how you make a top department, even though we didn't. Sometimes we wanted to hire and fire according to protected statuses which means those you're **not** allowed to hire and fire by, i.e. doing things that lead to huge-ass lawsuits as well as being unethical (that is, getting the faculty to violate their sworn duty). But even more often it was about ideology, personal style, or whatever. The funny thing is, there are lots of departments out there that **do** hire just this way. But no Berkeley student wanted to actually **be** at those departments. They wanted to be at the department that was made by the Berkeley faculty the way that the Berkeley faculty operated, which isn't a single way, but is still a way. Going to Berkeley and then insisting that they become like a different

department you would never actually go to doesn't make much sense, but that's what we did.

9. Often we thought we knew something about what was happening. In fact, we often thought we knew **everything** about something, because we all heard the same thing. Sometimes there might have been a source in the faculty that had made the error of letting slip something they shouldn't have and violating our rules of confidentiality. Those rules are important but when we're really worked up, we can err. But if you hear something about confidential faculty business, you're probably hearing it 9th hand or so and the chance that it is right is slim. If you're hearing it first hand, you know one thing, and that is that whoever is telling you is out of line. If they're emotional, they're not likely to be giving you the whole story. If they're not, they're using you and you should be intensely distrustful. Fortunately, I've never ever heard of that at this department though I have heard of it at others.
10. This gets to another point I wanted to make about the Berkeley student culture. And it was this: Berkeley students were famously unable to recognize who their friends and enemies were. To some extent it was because we believed anyone's self-presentation, and to some extent it was because our true friends played by the rules and didn't spill secrets. So if they were—and I am making this up, this is not a real case, okay?—if the faculty were busy firing someone who exploited graduate students, they wouldn't say this because they're not allowed to, and we would be up in arms trying to protect this person.

So because Berkeley students would charge off and attack basically decent people for basically doing their job, this is what happened: they were treated in the same way that student activists at expensive private colleges are treated nowadays. Namely they are "handled"—you make sure there's nothing but padding for them to hit so no one gets hurt and eventually they run out of steam and pay their bill for next semester. There's no incentive for any faculty member to actually respond to the students and say what they're thinking, because all they get in return for it is crap. So they say "yes that is very important" blah blah blah and try to defuse things by letting the students yammer things out of their system.

There's three problems with that. First, it's insulting to the students. Second, if the students don't realize they're being humored, they have a totally crazy idea of the rightness of their own ideas, because they're not eliciting real dialogue from people who know a different part of the story. Even when there's more than one side to the story and the students actually were on to something. And third, one of the weaknesses of student training here is not working closely with faculty. Well, the faculty who've devoted two afternoons in a row to being subjected to poorly thought out lecturing on the part of overly righteous students aren't up for serious mentoring at the end of the day. They just want to crack open a beer and watch basketball. Related to this, by not getting to hear from faculty what they actually think, students here were missing the chance to learn about how the field actually works.

11. But now let me wind around to the main theme and how Berkeley's student culture was self-defeating. So we get here, and most of us, the most Berkeley of us, get absorbed into a number of very intense situations. We care about how others see us and want them to see us as proper Berkeley people. What emerged is what is known as a purity regime—it's a social environment in which your status is linked to your ability to distance yourself from stigmatizing things, whatever they are. In our case, it was careerism. So we would egg each other on into rejecting the normal careerism of bad sociology—none of which we actually knew anything about, by the way.

So for two years or so, we would re-affirm each other on how bad mainstream sociology sucked, how dumb the ASR was, and so we didn't have to know anything about it. Sometimes the faculty would try to tell us that we had to think about this hated mainstream a little differently, and we smugly thought to ourselves, "sell-out." I mean, I don't mind being unemployed since posterity will be reading all my works anyway. Then we wandered off for six years to do our dissertations. We had babies and dissertations and then we came back and found we weren't really willing to wait for posterity. We wanted someone to like us now. But we were so used to scorning other people and indeed taking for granted that they would never be interested in what we did that we hadn't learned to communicate it to them. We couldn't imagine that regular people, which is what sociologists are, and what we are too, we never imagined that regular people could would or should care about what we did. And so we actually had been holding ourselves to remarkably low standards.

We were f****d and we knew it. At which point, we would turn on the faculty, and say "why didn't you tell us about all this?!?" Now truth be told, the faculty **do** have work to do in figuring out how to work more closely with graduate students here. Berkeley students are independent but that doesn't mean they won't profit from greater interaction with faculty on research projects. But the biggest problem is students not taking advantage of what is here, indeed, refusing to accept it until it is too late.

12. There's been so much talk about do you need to be a professional or an intellectual and all that and the answer is yes. You have to be everything. The way to do that is to do what you love and be really sincere. Take seriously your responsibility to be right and let folks learn something about the world. The one thing you need is to be a strong, independent scholar with a recognizable identity. That's the most important thing.