On Pedagogical Violence & the Martial Art of Reflexivity

by: Christopher J. Fries

“All pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power”

- Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, 1977: 5 -

My teaching has always been a way to express my commitment to social justice. I believe that teaching students about the dual process wherein society affects individual behaviour, which, in turn, in its totality affects society, can help them better understand the broader sociocultural forces that affect their individual lives. This understanding can serve as the basis for greater self understanding; reflexivity, which reflexively, facilitates individual development. Allowing individuals to develop their potential is the best way I know of realizing a socially just world, while minimizing the symbolic violence all too often adhered to teaching and learning.

Over forty years ago one of my favorite sociological authors, Peter L. Berger in his 1963, *Invitation to Sociology: a Humanistic Perspective*, offered what I think is still a poignant expression of sociology’s place in the modern North American mindset:

There are very few jokes about sociologists. This is frustrating for the sociologists, especially if they compare themselves with their more favoured second cousins, the psychologists, who have pretty much taken over that sector of American humour that used to be occupied by clergymen. A psychologist, introduced as such at a party, at once finds himself the object of considerable attention and uncomfortable mirth. A sociologist in the same circumstance is likely to meet with no more of a reaction than if he had been announced as an insurance salesman. He will have to win his attention the hard way, just like everyone else. This is annoying and unfair, but it may also be instructive. The dearth of jokes about sociologists indicates, of course, that they are not as much part of the popular imagination as psychologists have become. But it probably also indicates that there is a certain ambiguity in the minds that people do have of them (Berger, 1963: 1 sic).

Responsibility for this lack of public understanding of sociology must, of course, be borne by sociologists. Unlike our “more favoured second cousins, the psychologists” we in sociology have by and large not done a good job of demonstrating our popular relevance for people’s lives. This is the major goal of my teaching of the discipline of sociology. I attempt to help students realize the relevance of the sociological perspective for their own lives. My desire is that they may use this as intellectual self-defense, challenging the stupefying world of the taken-for-granted. My pedagogy, assignments, and evaluation criteria reflect this commitment to reflexivity through the realization of the task of the promise of the sociological imagination.

On my undergraduate course syllabi, I inform my students that I expect them to become “sociologists of life!” That is, I expect my students to think about and discuss course material with others outside class. Class discussions make frequent reference to contemporary controversies and debates, and I provide students with media reports to facilitate sociological reflection on the issues raised. When I teach introductory students about the “nature / nurture controversy” for example, I
play a selection of popular music and encourage students to identify the biological determinist ideology present in the songs they listen and dance to in their own lives. In my second year health and illness course, I have students complete a “Health Diary Project”, which asks them to think sociologically about the factors influencing their daily health and health care behaviour. In my second year course on the sociology of the body, I require students to prepare a “Reflexive Sociological Photo Essay”, in which they use photographic images of their creation to illustrate course concepts that they have applied to understanding their own socially constructed embodiment and bodily practices. Part of the final grade for my third year health care systems course is based on a “Culture / Media Watch File Assignment” that asks students to use their sociological imaginations to demonstrate an awareness of “medical consumerism” as a pervasive feature of their social world, which influences health care delivery, through the collection of a semester long file of cultural items relating to the debate. Similarly, in all my courses, I use narrative illustrations of course material from my own biography to make sociological concepts “come alive” for my students. So while lecturing on Marx’s concept of alienation, I share how I felt while working part time at a liquor store when I was a student and having to wish a “Merry Christmas” over and over and over again to each customer who came unceasingly through my till line.

At the graduate level, my orientation to supervision is influenced by the perspective of Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology:

There is no manner of mastering the fundamental principles of a practice – the practice of scientific research is no exception here – than by practising it alongside a kind of guide or coach who provides assurance and reassurance, who sets an example and who corrects you by putting forth, in situation, precepts applied directly to the particular case at hand… One can really supervise a research project… only on condition of actually doing it along with the researcher who is in charge of it… It is clear that under such conditions, one can supervise only a very small number of research projects and that those who pretend to supervise a large number of them do not really do what they claim they are doing (Bourdieu and Wacquant, An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology, 1992: 221-222, my emphasis).

I believe that effective graduate teaching warrants an apprenticeship relationship between professor and graduate student focused on a dialogical presentation of the craft of sociology. My graduate seminars are conducted as research workshops in which all participants, including myself, dialogue on the research and writing process. For instance, assignments center upon the formation, drafting, presentation, and re-drafting of original sociological research. Final grades are based primarily on one major research paper, which is drafted, presented to the seminar, and then revised for final submission. I participate fully in this pedagogic exercise by presenting my own current scholarship and sharing peer reviews, which I have received for my own work. This is undertaken in order to model the craft of the sociological construction of research objects. I would rather mentor a select few than “supervise” many.

Sociology uniquely entails the potential of helping students better understand the circumstances of their own biographies. It is this reflexive potential that first attracted me to the discipline as a student and which continues to attract me as a practitioner and teacher of sociology. This commitment to reflexivity and challenging the taken-for-granted is a burgeoning scholarly ethos for me. Yet, I am aware of the limits of reflexivity. There is a danger introducing students to “the subtle erosion of critical thought”, as Berger describes it (1963: 174). It is the danger associated
with challenging the “recipe knowledge” upon which our “taken-for-granted world” rests. Often students who are considering pursuing their sociological studies further come to me to ask for my advice. When this happens, inevitably, after we finish talking about academic interests and career plans, we talk a bit about the sociological perspective; about sociology as a form of critical thought / consciousness. Sometimes during such meetings, after witnessing the relish with which developing minds can seize upon this subtly eroding critical thought, I become a little cynical about always being the cynic; about always being the guy who is saying, “Says who, why?”, and about encouraging others to embrace my critical perspective. Commitment to reflexivity and independent thought in a scholastic universe wounded and scarred by dogma and orthodoxy, I have learned, to my heartbreak, invites bullies and symbolic violence into one’s lifescape. During one such conversation, in one of these hyper-reflexive moods, I wondered aloud to two former students, “Maybe it would be better to just be ignorant and to live happily in the taken-for-granted world?” What happened next reminded me of what I like best about being a sociology professor.

My students challenged me on my “meta-cynicism” and reminded me of something I had earlier said to them in one of our classes: “Ignorance is bliss only until the moment that, ‘BANG’, the bullet leaves the gun. Then suddenly, the ignorance of the taken-for-granted world isn’t bliss, it just sucks.” In our world of such rapid social change and upheaval, being able to understand the processes “whereby social phenomena produce individuals, individual behaviour, and individual personality”, having the ability to “grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (as C. Wright Mills poetically describes it in his famous treatise on the sociological imagination), or “the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved” (as Berger, 1963: 176 puts it) is not only a good thing; it’s essential to individual and collective social survival and success. It is, as Bourdieu has famously remarked, “a martial art”; a form of intellectual self-defense in a dogmatic battlefield prowled by ‘clones’. Sociology should be about challenging commonsense. When it is at its best, it denaturalizes the taken-for-granted. As Berger writes, “Sociology is justified by the belief that it is better to be conscious than unconscious and that consciousness is a condition of freedom” (1963: 75). This justification, perhaps more than anything else, informs my teaching sociology.

Christopher J. Fries

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