

HOMEGROWN, HOME-GROWING ACTIVISM

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Angela and Earl in front of the bus

YES, there is much to examine and study in Brazil, in Africa and Latin America. And, YES, we agree about the urgent inequalities between the US and much of the rest of the world, but we maintain that there are urgent inequalities amongst us. We need only to look “across the street,” and also see that in many of our institutions in the US there remain broken and unfulfilled dreams. Sociologists need to leave their classrooms, the computer labs, and their university campuses, and get out with their students and take a hard look at where we are headed in this country with its Bush agenda that stifles opportunities and frustrates aspirations. It is time for sociologists to pick up on an activist and critical stance. Yet activism takes many forms. Activism can be boycotting corporations and products; it can involve political work; it can involve organizing at the grassroots level. Though we are both involved in many forms of activism, we find that our most successful activism is that which draws on our strengths and our training: activism in the classroom.

Each semester we can look out into our classrooms and we can see our students as a drudgery—how many exams to grade before we’re free on the next break or how many hours must we spend before we can get back to our “real” work, the production of scholarship. However, we choose to look at our students as the leaders of the next century: they will be the doctors and managers and lawyers and politicians. They will shape policy, deliver direct services as social workers and teachers, they will raise children. If we can engage our students in discussions of the inequities that we live with daily in our United States and equip them with ways for working toward social justice, then our “activism” will be the production of activists: citizens who vote, who

raise progressive children, who develop social and political policy that advances a social justice/ social change agenda.

Last year we took this activism to a new level by engaging our students in an examination of inequity OUTSIDE the CLASSROOM. We took 20 students, including a photographer, with us on a bus and taught the class using observation, lectures, documentaries (shown on the bus) to look at the issue of wages among casino workers in Tunica, Mississippi, housing in Alabama and Mississippi, the state of HBCU’s (we stayed at the historic Tuskegee Institute), the issue of justice (we went inside the 2nd most notorious prison in the US – Parchman Penitentiary located in the in the Mississippi Delta) and stayed at a former slave plantation (The Shack Up Inn) to ignite discussion among our class as to the legacy of chattel slavery.

Once incident in Greenwood, Mississippi will last for all of them and that is experiencing first hand the social segregation of eating establishments as we were poorly greeted as a multi-racial group at a place that the author Richard Rubin (CONFEDERACY OF SILENCE) dared us to enter, knowing that the reputation of the Crystal City Grill was not to let African Americans eat there.

We would like to begin this essay by noting that our course has been described in the media as a Civil Rights Tour of sorts, which in an of itself is an important undertaking; however, this was not simply a tour. This was a research based course centered on social stratification and that encouraged students to examine the main tenets of social stratification in the American South. During the course students investigated the profound structural changes that have altered the American political economy over the last twenty-five years, and assessed the impact of these changes on individual and group opportunity and mobility.

In the year and half planning process for this upper division Sociology course entitled “Social Stratification in the American South” we deliberately set out to provide our students with an opportunity to explore the outcomes of race, class, and gender stratification as they occur in the Deep South. Early on, this planning included a 6-day, 2,300 mile trip during the summer 2002, without the students, which allowed us to explore the possible cities, states and sites that would have the most impact for a course on stratification. The lived experience, we reasoned, would have to be coordinated and planned in such a way that readings, lectures, documentaries, guest speakers, and visits to civil rights sites would coincide with the focus of the syllabus.



Class picture at Tuskegee

For example, our course began with a stop in Atlanta. In addition to visiting the usual civil rights sites we had a lecture by Dr. Gus Cochran, Professor of Political Science at Agnes Scott College. Professor Cochran is a well-known scholar, having published a recent book on southern politics and the disenfranchisement of poor Americans and minorities. That evening, the class had dinner with Dr. Cochran, who continued his discussion and later upon arrival at our hotel, students were required to write critical reflections about the state of southern politics based on the lecture by Professor Cochran as well as begin to learn to use census data, which they were able to access by using their IBM Thinkpads and connecting to the Internet, to explore voting patterns as they related to race, ethnicity, social class, and region of the country.

Because Wake Forest is situated in the south, and because the south remains the poorest region in the country, with a particular history of class relationships augmented by race and gender antagonisms, we decided to choose a series of southern sites where we would examine the current state of inequalities of race, class, and gender, which began with chattel slavery and continued through Jim Crow to the present day. Specifically we designed the course in order to create a specific frame; one based in part in the civil rights movement in the states and or cities of Atlanta, Alabama, Memphis, New Orleans, and Mississippi.

What the students learned was that in the mid-1970s it became apparent that the United States faced severe challenges to its post-World War II global dominance of the world economy. Part of the reasons for this is the result of international competition for markets and vital resources and the unexpected consequences on the economy by the ever changing and emerging technologies. The subsequent decline in the US aging industrial economy, and the rise of a new post-industrial and knowledge-based service economy, has redefined the US system of social stratification. Technical knowledge and “soft” skills have replaced hard work, dedication and loyalty as the prime avenues to personal mobility and success.

Students learned that parallel changes in the American family and many of the community structures have accelerated the growth in inequality between rich and poor, male and female. These changes posed for them many complicated questions about the rights and responsibilities of US citizens in a democratic society and unequal access to the opportunity structure -- i.e. to jobs that provide a living wage, to safe and affordable housing, adequate health care, decent schools, and even the viability of social security pensions in old age.

To take the course on the road and get at these questions students read the classics in social stratification, such as the very powerful essay by Kinsley Davis and Wilbert Moore entitled “Some Principles of Stratification” (1945) and to comprehend the current social relationships in the American south they also read the book by Richard Rubin entitled Confederacy of Silence: A True Tale of The New Old South (2002) which focuses on issues of criminal justice and race relations in the small city of Greenwood, Mississippi.

When our bus stopped in Greenwood, Mississippi we were met by Ms. Carol Anne, the owner of the Dancing Rabbit bookstore, one of the only stores to sell the Richard Rubin’s book. Ms. Carol Anne, in the best southern hospitality fixed the class sausage balls, coffee and for those older than 21, mimosas. She then sat with us for two hours telling us all about how the Rubin book was received in Greenwood. The stories were compelling. At the end of the visit, she boarded the bus with us and showed us around town and then directed our driver, Wilbert, to take us to the Crystal City Grill, an eating establishment that Rubin, a New York based writer, talked with the class about when he visited Wake Forest in April for a two-day workshop as a part of our preparation for the course.

At that time Rubin told us that African Americans did not eat at the Crystal City Grill. What the students found was the following: a place where white women served, but did not cook, and a place where African Americans were relegated to the tasks of bussing tables and cleaning up, but did not dine.

Our class was steered to a back dining room. All persons that passed were amazed as were all-White patrons who looked on in shock as this multi-gender, multi-ethnic group of approximately 22 young men and women sat to eat lunch. The kitchen staff, faces pressed to the glass separating the kitchen from the dining rooms, was amazed and looked on in glee as we passed them to be seated. Most were African American.

All staff and some patrons made it their business to come look into our room to see what we were doing. One bubble gum chewing waitress, a white woman, was so annoyed that she gave her pad to the other waitress and

left, never to return as we were waited on one by a single highly flustered waitress.



Parchman Penitentiary

PARCHMAN: The tour guide included statistics such as 85% of the 6,000 inmates are black and almost all of them male. There are currently 69 prisoners on death row. It is structured and classified by a ranking system where each level has its own set of privileges. She seemed to be fully aware of the inhumane practices that take place in this presumably corrective facility. The inmates live overcrowded, highly regulated lives. They are told when to wake up, when to pee, what to read, when and what to eat, how long they can exercise, and how to spend the rest of their lives. They are locked into a system that does not encourage free thinking or rehabilitation, but instead squelches all hope of change. Every day is the same and every day includes exploitation as if it were a necessary component of punishment. The prison administration seems to know what really occurs inside the cells but fails to prevent any of it. The institution was just recently accredited after being in place for almost 100 years. It provides over 1,400 jobs to community residents but the wages are low, they have few benefits, and they require little skills. There is no upward mobility in these positions and the prison serves to keep employees as working poor instead of empowering them towards success. The violence inside the unit walls is unfathomable. (—Allie Lintz)

Part of any good social stratification course is spending time trying to understand the US system of justice. Students who take sociology classes and especially survey courses in criminology will engage readings that either discuss or demonstrate the way that all facets of the criminal justice operate—from the committing of a crime through the adjudication of the case. In this class students engaged this literature by reading, and debating on the bus, Erik O. Wright’s “Class Counts” a piece that identifies the ways in which certain segments of the US population are “cordoned off” and thus denied access to

employment, political and social power, and other facets of the opportunity structure. Wright identifies prisons, which are in population disproportionately African American and male as one institution that serves this function. We also read and discussed the work of sociologist Orlando Patterson, who in a book chapter from his new book (Rituals of Blood) is especially concerned with the over representation of African American males in these same prisons camps. Ironically, they are also sometimes referred to as institutions. We decided to include a visit to the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman as a way to give students an opportunity to see the inside of a maximum security prison. We were reminded that Parchman is one of the most notorious prisons in America and recently an Op-Ed in the New York Times (August 26, 2003) notes that a federal court as recent as May, 2003 ruled on the conditions at Parchman “where inmates are held in dirty, dangerously hot cells and denied basic health care. The conditions are so abysmal, the court ruled, that they constitute cruel and unusual punishment.” This visit gave us the opportunity to speak with officials and inmates at Parchman. It was a lesson most will never forget, including us.

Entering the gates of the prison we were required to lock all Thinkpads, digital cameras, and walkman CD players in the storage area underneath the bus and in an office in the welcome center. Before we could start the tour we were required to be frisked (patted down...men by a male prison guard and women by a female prison guard). We were also required to leave all of our money locked under the bus or in the welcome center. Why? Because any prisoner caught with money, even a penny, will be punished by time in lockdown: where inmates are locked up 23 hours a day and allowed one hour for recreation in a 4X10 foot fenced kennel. Inside the prison they have a moneyless economy.

We were taken on a tour of this 20,000 acre former plantation where prisoners work from sun up to sun down, engaged in old fashion agricultural labor growing okra and other vegetables as well as picking cotton. At the end of the day they return to their non-air conditioned, 6X8 foot cell which they share with 4 other inmates. Parchman continues to thrive off the agricultural production of “un-free” labor just as it did during slavery; off the backs of African Americans.

In the middle of our tour, we stopped for lunch, (which we paid for in advance since we were not allowed to have money while on the “farm” as they call it). The staff in the dining hall are all inmates and they engaged the students in a lively discussion of life on the inside and life in the “free world”, as this is how they refer to life on the outside.

One of the core pieces of a course on stratification has to do with the mechanisms for upward mobility. One of the places where this was visible was Clarksdale, Mississippi, the generally accepted “Home of the Blues”. Visiting the Delta Blues Museum, we were able to see the role that the entertainment industry played in allowing African Americans during Jim Crow to move up and out of the persistent and abject poverty that began with slavery and persists with sharecropping in the Mississippi Delta region.

Poverty in Mississippi:

As sociologists we’re mindful of the fact that every time pollsters ask Americans what is their class standing, the predominate response, whether in California or New York or Idaho, is middle class. Our students, observing several counties and states in the south, came to this observation equipped, based on their course readings and lectures, with the knowledge that 33 1/3 of Americans are poor. This fact became much more vivid as we drove deeper into the south. For example, in Mississippi, one of the poorest states in the nation, the poorest residents are not spread around the state in a haphazard or random fashion. Rather, the poorest Mississippians are those living in counties that are almost entirely populated by African Americans. Poverty is indicated by factors such as median home value, income, and educational attainment. These indices were visible in several of the Delta counties we visited, for example, students learned that the median home value is only \$37,000 (about the same as the price of a new SUV we routinely see in student parking lots on our campus). In terms of education, a major mechanism for upward mobility, only half (53%) of residents in most Mississippi Delta counties have graduated from high school. In one of the end of the day assignments, students connected to the Internet and used Census Data in order to ascertain data about access to health care. One finding that generated much discussion on the bus had to do with the number of hospital beds in a county. At least 3 of the counties we visited, all in the Mississippi Delta, had no hospital beds nor any active physicians.



The Shack Up Inn

Whereas these statistics are grim and startling, it is not until one drives through the Mississippi Delta, as we did with our students this summer, that one can truly see the impact of these statistics. Living deep in the Mississippi Delta can mean living 2 or 3 counties (75-100 miles) away from another area where people graduate from high school, are employed most of their lives, have access to health care and are able to put their sons and daughters through college. This concentration and isolation of poverty may be even more severe than we see in urban areas and its consequences are just as severe if not more so. Therefore, our course allowed students to witness first hand the conditions about which they had read and studied. These discussions continued “after” class in their hotel rooms.

Each night we stayed in a different hotel in a different community. The accommodations were generally comfortable if modest. We intentionally assigned roommates for the class and students slept 4 to a hotel room, in such a way as to create diverse learning groups. At the end of each day, they spent time completing reading assignments, writing reflections, doing research gathering census data on the internet, and having informal discussions. Each morning learning groups would report back to the rest of the group about the previous night’s assignment. Our syllabus was structured in such a way to achieve the most impact in a each geographical location. For example, we deliberately did not tell the class until just before arriving in Clarksdale, Mississippi that they would be staying in a place called the Shack-Up Inn. In planning for the course several colleagues shared with us their own experiences on vacations and wanting to have meaningful family discussions about the social history of the south. One such discussion pointed us in the direction of the Shack Up Inn which has a variety of explanations as to exactly what it is. Some refer to it as former slave quarters. A local reporter, who we invited to dinner, explained to the class that the Shack Up Inn was actually former share cropper shacks where poor African American and white laborers had to live. This dinner in a local eatery, which also didn’t seem accustomed to serving mixed race groups, elicited perhaps the most animated discussion of the trip. Students, African American and white, anticipated the night ahead. Needless to say, the night spent at the Shack Up Inn proved to generate much discussion of the social history of the American South. Lessons that could never be learned in the classroom.

Following our trip to Parchman, we then headed to the “shack-up” inn, the source of much of my anger, angst, frustration and sorrow so far on this trip. However, my emotions stem from something somewhat unexpected. We went to a place that appears to resemble the rustic “shotgun shacks” that housed former slaves and/or sharecroppers. To make matters worse, one of first

images that Will and I saw as we entered our “quarters” was a portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr... I felt that if the only thing that I was suppose to get out of this was that everything that goes on economically in this country indirectly contributes to the hundreds of years of black oppression and how the United States economy was built on the backs of so many blacks, then there was no reason for me to be at this horrible place because I already knew that. Furthermore, I was convinced that I could have learned all of this without actually having to pay for the “experience” ... I realized that it was actually good for me to visit and stay. When I got off the bus, I was actually a little scared for the first time this whole trip. Being from the south, I know where to go and when not to go to avoid the persisting racism today. However, the difference is that those places while backwards in ideology, still resembles 21st century America. The inn represent this evil anachronism in the middle of nowhere, Mississippi and I actually began to realize that I may have taken my “blackness” for granted and that even I could learn a thing or two about what life then was really like... I realized that it was actually good for me to visit and stay. When I got off the bus, I was actually a little scared for the first time this whole trip. Being from the south, I know where to go and when not to go to avoid the persisting racism today. However, the difference is that those places while backwards in ideology, still resembles 21st century America. The inn represent this evil anachronism in the middle of nowhere, Mississippi and I actually began to realize that I may have taken my “blackness” for granted and that even I could learn a thing or two about what life then was really like. (--Jarrett Heard)

Whether in Birmingham or Philadelphia, Mississippi, we began with the social history, and then we asked the question: what has happened since the time of the civil rights movement in this particular place? What is the state of race, class, and gender equality and inequality today? And, as our students learned, though some things have changed, many have not. The George Washington Carver Housing Project was the site where the Selma-Montgomery March that ended in “Bloody Sunday” was organized and began. It stands as a visible example of this lack of change as it remains racially segregated and impoverished. Knowing that marchers were beaten and murdered as they attempted to cross the Edmund Pettis Bridge, the students again had to confront the reality that not much has changed in Selma, Alabama since “Bloody Sunday”.

In conclusion, the structural changes in the American political economy have also altered the ways in which we see ourselves relative to others and how we actually “embody” social class. We attempt to manage these perceptions through our choice of clothes, cars, the colleges we attend, neighborhoods, friends, partners, associations, and all other aspects of our lives.

Teaching while traveling created an intense and innovative teaching and learning environment in which students were challenged in all the traditional ways and then they were pushed further as we got off the bus to meet with local residents, to see important civil rights sites, and to examine the contemporary state of affairs in the US. At the end of the day, rooming with each other they were forced to confront the issues of the day with their peers. Thus, they were learning and reflecting on what they learned almost 24 hours a day. The outcome was unlike any either of us have had in the traditional classroom. We hope to make this a bi-annual class, thus offering through the department of sociology a credit-bearing course that is literally on the road!