Sociology of Self-Knowledge: Course Topic as well as Pedagogical Strategy

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Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol3/iss1/1
Editor’s Note:

Sociology of Self-Knowledge:
Course Topic as well as Pedagogical Strategy

This is the fifth issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* since its inception in Spring 2002, and the second issue published at UMass Boston. Aside from many fine papers by students at UMass Boston enrolled in my courses and those of Anna Beckwith, an adjunct lecturer of Sociology at UMB, and an insightful article on the topic of alienation by Jorge Capetillo-Ponce, Assistant Professor of Sociology at UMB, it is a great pleasure to have as guests in this issue a first symposium of exemplary essays from Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota, made possible through the initiative of Khaldoun Samman, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Macalester College—a close friend and colleague.

Khaldoun Samman took the step recently of turning his senior seminar into a course on the sociology of self-knowledge—in fact entitling it as such—and encouraging his students, all graduating seniors at Macalester, to subject their own lives and “troubles” to their sociological imaginations. I am so happy to see that a course on the sociology of self-knowledge, with that title actually, was held so well and productively at another fine institution of higher learning at the U.S. Reading the serious and engaging papers by Samman’s students along with his own autobiographical account inspired by his recent academic trip to Istanbul, Turkey, provides the reader with a sophisticated exposure to the complexities and challenges facing undergraduate students attending another college, as well as the personal strategies adopted by them to turn both their familial and academic homes into warmer and supportive liberating landscapes. Khaldoun Samman has provided an eloquent introduction to his students’ papers in this issue, so I won’t take too much space here to provide an additional introduction to the voices of their symposium.

The papers by UMB students included in this issue are also highly representative of how self and socially critical and liberating the sociology of self-knowledge can be. They use a variety of class and outside readings, as well as films and documentaries, to explore in-depth a currently unresolved issue in their lives, while making every effort to move in-depth to relate their personal troubles to broader public issues. Again the very titles and abstracts of student papers give the reader a glimpse into the explorations students carried out throughout one semester. So, I invite readers to glance through the table of contents and their abstracts (located at the end of the volume), and not hesitate to proceed to read these papers—as they are quite engaging and thoughtful, providing us with ample opportunities to reflect on our own lives in a simultaneously reflective and global framework.

An interesting aspect of the collection in this issue is that students from a variety of courses engage with the sociology of self-knowledge. Five papers are authored by students in courses on “Elements of Sociological Theory,” and “Socialization” taught by Anna Beckwith, and eight by students enrolled in my courses on “Elements of Sociological Theory” and “The Self in Society: Studies of Autobiographies” across both semesters during the Fall 2004 and Spring 2005 semesters. In the previous issue, a paper from a course on “Race and Ethnic Relations” taught by Anna Beckwith was included, and several papers by students in
Professor Jorge Capetillo’s theory class were done on the topic of drugs and society. I have previously published student papers from my courses (at both SUNY-Binghamton and SUNY-Oneonta) on “Introduction to Sociology,” “Social Policy and the Life Course,” “Ideas and Ideologies,” “Symbolic Interaction,” “Society and the Individual” “Social Change: Sociological Frameworks,” “Issues in Human Development: Dialectics of Knowledge and Society,” and “Sociology of Global Self-Knowledge” (Spring 2000). In fact the earliest I taught a course on the sociology of self-knowledge was in Spring 1997 (“Sociology of Knowledge: Mysticism, Science, and Utopia”) which resulted in a collection of student writings self-published by students and myself under the title “I in the World-System: Stories From an Odd Sociology Class. Students came up with a name for their “fake” publishing company: “Crumbling Façades Press.”

The reason I am mentioning the above course titles is to note the ways in which the sociology of self-knowledge can be adopted as a pedagogical strategy in a variety of course offerings, whether or not the course is titled as such. It will be simply wonderful to have courses offered under the title of the sociology of self-knowledge, but the point here is also to note that, as in the case of Mills’s sociological imagination, sociology of self-knowledge can be treated as much as a course topic of its own as also a pedagogical and research strategy to teach and explore a variety of topics. This other approach is quite liberating as far as the existing curricular structures in our colleges and universities are concerned, for one could pursue the substantive concerns of the sociology of self-knowledge in the context of a variety of course offerings in and outside the traditional sociology curriculum. After all, we owe to C. Wright Mills the legitimacy offered to such a pedagogical strategy in our efforts to teach relevant and committed sociology in applied settings. To note how the sociology of self-knowledge overlaps and builds upon Mills’s sociological imagination, I have included in this issue, a working outline of the sociology of self-knowledge for further discussion.

The Macalester College Symposium in this issue is a wonderful example for future symposia to follow, encouraging faculty and students across colleges and universities to pursue the pedagogical strategy of the sociology of self-knowledge in their courses and publish their work in Human Architecture. Whether labeled as such, liberating autobiographical research can only enrich the liberal arts experience of both students and faculty at our colleges and universities.

Recently, Ingrid Heller, a student of mine from back in Binghamton, NY, sent me an unexpected e-mail, which once again pointed to the value of the sociology of self-knowledge and human architecture inspiring and framing this journal. Ingrid, in fact, was the student who came up with the idea of the publisher name (“Crumbling Façades Press”). It was simply a joy to hear from her and her deepening interests. In her e-mail she wrote:

Dear Mr. Tamdgidi,

Hi. I took your course at Binghamton University back in 1997. I will never forget how amazing a time I had. We each were to write an essay on a topic of our choosing, and you published a book of selected essays. Mine was titled, “Motivation, Self, and Society: An Exploration.” You included my essay in the book.

I am sure you have had many students since, and do not expect you to remember me, but I will always remember you ... Unfortunately, I have lost that book in one of my many moves out here in San Francisco—my new home as of 1998.

I am currently writing a book titled “Project Integrity: One Message; Infinite Mediums,” along with a screenplay, “The Little Red Poem” .... I would much appreciate it if you could send me a copy of that book, if you still have it. If I remember cor-
I hope all is well in your life. Look forward to hearing from you! You have triggered the spark of genius in many students. (Ingrid K. Heller, Feb. 14, 2005)

I can’t think of anything more rewarding than Ingrid’s comments and that she is back in touch. I know this also because I have done the same to one of my beloved teachers from my days back at U.C. Berkeley, where I majored in Architecture. In fact the very title and spirit of human architecture designing and inspiring this journal dates from my undergraduate days in Professor Jesse Reichek’s classes, where I began to question where I was coming from and where I was heading to. From August 2005 to December 2006, for about a year and a half, Jesse’s amazing paintings will be exhibited in Petaluma, CA (www.reichekretrospective.org). What a wonderful occasion! I had dedicated the first issue of Human Architecture to him. Here is another presentation of art works, done on the fabrics of their real lives by many student architects of various generations—another dedication to Jesse, to Ingrid Heller, and to all the students who, through their courageously self-examined lives, have helped make the sociology of self-knowledge a reality.

I’d like to take this moment to warmly welcome the joining of new members to the Editorial Advisory Board of Human Architecture.

Behrooz Tamdgidi
UMass Boston
July 2005

PS - Below is the cover “painting” of the book we self-published in class back in 1997. Ingrid is second from the right.