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NOVELS, THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS, AND HUMANIST SOCIOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM: MARI SANDOZ AND CAPITAL CITY

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Based upon teaching Mari Sandoz' allegorical novel, Capital City, as part of Introduction to Sociology for three semesters, this report outlines the characteristics of sociologically useful novels from a humanist perspective. A key characteristic is the extent to which novelists not only conduct thought experiments but also stimulate student thinking and research. The pedagogical dimensions of thought experiments are explicated and the positive outcomes of using a novel—and group study projects based on a novel—are reported.

Appropriate novels exemplify and motivate thought experiments in the classroom. Novels also generate questions for empirical investigation by students. These are my pedagogical reasons for combining novels with a humanist perspective in introductory courses. Thought experiments encourage examination of alternative institutional patterns and social futures, thus meeting a primary goal of humanist sociology.

Mari Sandoz' (1939/1981) *Capital City* illustrates the characteristics of a sociologically appropriate novel. I discuss specific procedures, including group projects, that I use to incorporate Sandoz' work in my introductory sociology course. This report concludes with a brief review of positive outcomes from adopting both a novel and a humanist perspective in Introduction to Sociology.

The foundation for a humanist introduction to sociology is solid. Teaching a humanist perspective involves focus on the principles of emancipatory social projects—including research, analysis, critique, and action (Deegan 1983; Habermas 1970; Hill 1984a). The humanist tradition is firmly established in sociological work (Fishman and Benello 1986; Lee 1986; Mills 1959), but utilizing literary materials in sociology classrooms is not so well grounded.

LITERARY MATERIALS IN THE SOCIOLOGY SYLLABUS?

Teaching introductory sociology from a humanist perspective invites focus on the insights, paradigms, and materials of the traditional humanities—including novels, essays, poems, drama, film, music, and the arts (Coser 1972; Deegan and Stein 1984; Nygren and Deegan 1980). Earlier sociologists welcomed both the

products and methods of the humanities. Waller (1932, p. 2) urged, for example, that "where fidelity to the inwardness of social behavior is desired, we shall not hesitate to borrow the technique or the materials of the realistic novelist." Despite clear precedents, however, use of literary materials in sociological pedagogy is not widespread. I do not analyze this hiatus here, but I do demonstrate a positive and productive pedagogical role for novels in sociology classrooms.

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Emancipatory principles and humanities paradigms are powerfully combined when novelists conduct sociologically-grounded thought experiments. These cerebral exercises explore alternative social futures based on plausible assumptions about social institutions and human agency. Novels help bring thought experiments into the sociology classroom.

ERNST MACH AND THE HISTORY OF THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Formal analysis of "thought experiments" originated in the physical and mathematical sciences. Most writers attribute initial discussion of the *Gedankenexperiment* to Mach's (1897/1973) short essay "On Thought Experiments." His exposition continues to spark debate on methodological problems in science and logic (Cole 1984; Krimsky 1973; Kuhn 1964; Rehder 1980; and Witt-Hansen 1976).

Mach (1897/1973, p. 451) observed that "experimenting is innate" and that conducting thought experiments involves a researcher who "conceives circumstances and associates with these the idea, expectation, or supposition of certain results." He concluded that experimental exercises in the mind are "on a higher intellectual level" than actual physical experi-

¹ Copies of the course syllabus and reading schedule are available from the author. Please enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope with each request.

ments. He noted also the fiscal and practical economy of thought experiments. Finally, the question-answer exchanges generated by proposing and discussing thought experiments gave Mach an outstanding way to assess students' intellectual capabilities. These features of the *Gedankenexperiment* are especially useful in sociology.

"Thought experiments" encompass a "family" (Cole 1984) of scientific procedures wherein more restricted "types" (Kuhn 1964; Krimsky 1973) can be identified. There is no *a priori* reason why "types" useful in physics will be appropriate in other settings. Chanan (1972), for example, argues that whereas "experiments" share many similarities in both physics and art, the expected result in physics is predictive control, while in art one seeks the opposite, i.e., results that are unpredictable and unmeasurable. For the social sciences, I advocate thought experiments involving disciplined exploration of emancipatory alternative futures (Giddens 1986) and the transformational routes between existing social patterns and desired social structures.

NOVELS AND THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Fictional networks of social constraints and possibilities are highly malleable. The "pedagogic license" of the classroom enables discussions wherein characters' roles and institutional patterns are hypothetically deleted, added to, simplified, or made more complex for the purpose of playing out theoretical scenarios and critically evaluating the results. Class discussion becomes a thought experiment.

The novelist's world opens with minimal resistance to a pedagogically useful barrage of "What if . . . ?" questions lodged in alternative institutional structures. Students are prompted to ask what happens to a fictional character's role *if* political institutions were more repressive, or *if* present institutions were undermined by nuclear war, or *if* education was non-hierarchical, or *if* families were bureaucratized, and so on. This frame of fictional discourse is easily transformed or "keyed" (Goffman 1986, pp. 40-82) to become theoretical discourse.

Discussing alternative possibilities sets loose imaginative theoretical play in the classroom and a central feature of humanist teaching is more easily accomplished: students are challenged to invent variations in role patterns and institutional structures that embody emancipatory characteristics. In this way, humanist teaching moves from critical analyses of past and present social patterns to active, theoretically-grounded hypotheses and evaluations of alternative social arrangements.

NOVELS MOTIVATE STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

Novelists' characters and depictions inspire and motivate empirical investigations by students. At the micro level, they can ask how particular characters know (or, often more importantly, fail to know) about the roles and institutions in which they are enmeshed. Students who face these questions more easily execute interviews investigating the social-psychological processes of knowledge acquisition in the mundane world. Particularly able students have thus confronted the empirical veracity of Schutz' (1971) and Goffman's (1986) observations on the nature of knowledge in everyday life.

Other questions provide reality checks at the macro level. Has the novelist plausibly depicted institutional patterns? Are the novelist's assumptions reasonable, humane, practical? Can the student find extant social settings resembling the novelist's fictional world? If the novelist describes historical settings, do the patterns still exist today, in the same form? If changed, what is the nature of the transformation, and how did it occur?

Students who investigate novelists' depictions and assumptions through interviews, observation, self-reflection, and library study are introduced to research in an unusually engaging way. They also understand better the great variety of pathways to epistemological discontinuity and uncertainty in everyday life and sociological inquiry. Well-chosen novels not only illustrate major sociological insights and act as catalysts for classroom thought experiments, but they also motivate subsequent research.

CHOOSING A SOCIOLOGICALLY RELEVANT NOVEL

Incorporating a novel into an introductory sociology course requires care and good fortune. A careful choice is more easily introduced to students who expect novels only in "literature" courses. The significance of a given novel for teaching sociology is directly proportional to the novelist's astuteness as social observer, analyst, and critic.

Sociologically relevant novelists provide sets of ideal types, enlivened with names, characterizations, and coordinates in hypothetical social milieus. Based on my classroom experience, I find the following traits important in a sociologically useful novel:

1. It describes an array of major social institutions.
2. It represents both genders, multiple races, and distinct social classes by well-defined characters.

3. It clearly illustrates processes of social change, cooperation, and/or conflict.
4. It provides accurate geographic and environmental descriptions.
5. It is authored by a known and respected writer.
6. It describes social interactions and situations empirically accessible to students.
7. It provides linkages to existing studies in sociology.
8. It utilizes actual historical situations and events.
9. It provides "take off" points for thought experiments.

Sandoz' work will not meet every instructor's needs, although I do recommend using her novels in social science courses. My advice to instructors who want to find an appropriate novel is to review the novels they have read and admired in the past and then test them against the suggested list of traits above. Consulting colleagues in departments of English and modern languages is another avenue for discovering sociologically useful novels.

Including novels in more specialized and topical courses is also possible. I have used Leonard Wibberley's (1955) whimsical but politically astute *The Mouse that Roared* in a course exploring the international politics of micro nation-states. The course culminated in a mock meeting of United Small Nations with study groups representing Andora, Vatican City, and so forth, as well as the fictional Duchy of Grand Fenwick. Ken Kesey's (1962) *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is appropriate for courses focusing on deviance and "total institutions" (Goffman 1962). Both Wibberley's and Kesey's works are available in cinematic versions, a point especially relevant to Marilyn French's (1977) feminist novel on life in the suburbs, *The Women's Room*.

Blum's (forthcoming) comparative analysis of the novel and television film versions of French's work reveals the nature of anti-feminist transformations in contemporary mass media. Blum's work illustrates the objective, but critical analyses instructors can bring to the classroom through novels and other media. The list of possible novels to consider for adoption is obviously too long to consider here. The specifically literary possibilities are enormous in themselves and the permutations resulting from combinations with other media such as film, television, theater, and radio are indeed staggering.

My recommendation that instructors consider adopting novels in their courses is deeply embedded in the specifics of *Capital City* as a sociologically relevant work of fiction. While each instructor's theory preferences and local

setting will frequently point to choosing a novel other than *Capital City*, a robust portrait of what makes a novel "sociological" is seen in the key features of *Capital City*.

CAPITAL CITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL NOVEL

Mari Sandoz (1901–1966) was a Nebraskan who often saw her work as sociological both in purpose and methodology (Greenwell 1977; Stauffer 1982). Her 1939 novel, *Capital City*, is a vibrant exemplar for humanist sociologists. I outline *Capital City* in this light, briefly explicating the framework of her sociological analysis of the Great Plains during the Great Depression.

Capital City exhibits clear insight into fundamental sociological problems and contemporary methodological issues. Sandoz reveals an active sociological imagination and explores the structural mechanisms through which fascism could become entrenched in a democratic state. The novel is thus a major and complex sociological thought experiment. As a novelist, Sandoz forcefully outlines her perceptive theoretical understanding of institutionalized power.

Capital City is an allegorical contest between the forces of democratic socialism on the one hand and fascism on the other. Here is an ideological confrontation of the first order. Sandoz, alone with other "proletarian" authors of the 1930s (e.g., Hicks, North, Gold, Peters, Schneider, and Calmer 1935; Lewis 1935), anticipates more recent American sociological concern with systematic ideological conflicts and the active role of powerful elites in creating and manipulating popular ideologies toward their own needs.

The central social conflict in *Capital City* takes place in a state capital on the Great Plains in the midst of the Great Depression. The resemblance of Franklin, the urban setting of the novel, to Lincoln, Nebraska is uncanny. Although reportedly drawn from an amalgam of nearly a dozen Great Plains cities, Franklin's neighborhoods, parks, university, and public buildings find ready counterparts in Lincoln's cityscape. The ease with which Lincoln (or any other major plains city) comes to mind is a tribute to Sandoz' understanding of urban social and physical structure.

INSTITUTIONAL PORTRAITS

The story of Franklin is a tale of enduring, coercive, institutionalized social patterns: class, family, race, and patriarchy. Sandoz' sensitive descriptions of these patterns show her exceptional observational skill. Her portraits of each institutional pattern are explorations of complex

linkages between social structures and community processes.

Many sections in the novel connect with contemporary sociological work. No comprehensive list of such links is attempted (the bibliography would be too long), but a few selected works are indicated to illustrate the way a sociologically useful novel readily connects to recent as well as classical statements in sociology. The foundational, pervasive framework which Sandoz most clearly articulates is social differentiation and the subsequent establishment of distinct social classes in a capitalist economy.

Social Class. The great divisions between Franklin's social classes are brought home early in the novel. Old-money, upper class life at the top brings a home on the Blue Ridge and a central part in an exclusive high society event complete with a royal coronation (resembling Nebraska's annual Ak-Sar-Ben fete in every major detail).

Franklin's middle class goes about business as usual and hangs on Father Coughlin's every word—a serendipitous point providing an unusual opportunity to introduce the Lees' careful propaganda analysis of Coughlin's speeches (Lee and Lee 1939). The middle class vigorously opposes cooperatives, labor union activities, and the "undesirable element" living in Franklin's Hooverville. Proletarian efforts to work and solve problems cooperatively outside the orbit of Franklin's middle class, capitalist framework meet with hostility at every turn.

Male working-class immigrants become entangled in labor disputes while females in this class seek escape by competing in beauty pageants. The unemployed, the dispossessed, the Okies find shelter and community in a Hooverville. Recent work such as Rader's (1986) fits nicely here by illuminating the plight of today's urban homeless. Terkel's (1971) depression era oral histories provide a dramatic introduction to life history interviewing and anchor Sandoz' characters within the realm of lived experiences.

Class lines and their consequences are strongly drawn by Sandoz. The difficult and frequently disappointed search for upward social mobility is vivid and poignant. Tie-ins to more complex analyses of "class" (Giddens 1973) are easily effected at this point. Less sophisticated students easily interpret Franklin's social structures in terms of Mills' (1956, pp. 30–46) discussion of "local society." Other accessible studies include those of Domhoff (1983) and Sennett and Cobb (1972).

Family. Interaction between class, ideology, and the family centers on a character named Hamm, a son of the town's leading family. He rejects home and family wealth to become a left-wing journalist. He is physically disfigured

from beatings received while reporting on eastern labor struggles. He returns to Franklin, adopts a new name, runs a cooperative store, lives in a Hooverville, and chooses to remain estranged from his family. Nonetheless, his death results when he risks his life to save his mother from a fascist mob. Family ties run deeply here, crossing but not healing the ideological gulfs which lead to Hamm's violent and undeserved death. Rubin's (1976) study of family and social class helps students to place these interactions into an analytical framework.

Patriarchy. Franklin is a prime example of a contemporary patriarchy. Women's wealth and social status are gained through marriage or kinship to men. Men run the important businesses, men run the university, men make the important decisions. Women are sex objects, paraded as beauty contestants for the lower class, escorted as queens of society for the upper class. Students are often unwilling to accept the point that patriarchy still exists today, and thus Scott (1984) and the readings found in Deegan and Hill (forthcoming) are useful resources to assign at this point.

Sandoz offers a variety of alternative female models that are striking for their modernity. Abigail is a quiet but persevering scholar who makes her own way on her own merits, despite organized political opposition to her scholarly research findings. Stephani is a labor organizer who understands the horror of fascism. She is the model radical. Neither Abigail nor Stephani seeks marriage or family as ends in themselves. Both show the bond of interpersonal friendship to be at least as worthy as the "family claim" (Addams 1910). These characters point to alternative models for relationships as fresh as any proposed by Bernard (1982) or more radically outlined by Barrett and McIntosh (1982).

Racism. Anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, and racist behavior show another mean and festering side of Franklin. A leading Jewish family is tormented, Polish-Americans are demeaned and belittled, and the town's black family is constrained to a marginal social existence. This is a good place to introduce Davis' (1981) multi-institutional analysis of gender, race, and class.

EXPERIMENTS IN INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Within each institutional realm—class, family, racism, capitalism, and patriarchy—Sandoz presents clear, understandable portraits of pattern and power. The active and latent coerciveness in each institutional pattern is shown, often painfully, but accurately. Sandoz demonstrates the subtle ways in which institutions overlap and interconnect to reinforce each other. She uses

this knowledge to explore the problem of social change, to examine what might happen when fascism runs head-on with democratic socialism in a capitalist society where power is differentially distributed in favor of the upper class. Her explication of the process of fascist takeover in a democratic state is sharp, sobering, and not overdrawn. Gross (1980) is recommended to students interested in a contemporary perspective on fascism in a democracy.

Capital City presents an unusually complete, well-developed social system of a particularly American type. Given a set of defining conditions and hypotheses concerning ideology and power, Sandoz provides a major, complex thought experiment in which she works out the consequences of a chain of relationships between power, ideologies, and institutional patterns. *Capital City* concludes in violence and many students ask if nonviolent alternatives are possible. Bruyn and Rayman (1979) prove helpful here and provide an affirmative answer.

METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH

Sandoz confronts students with questions about the morality of deceptive sociological research. Specific research procedures are outlined when a character in the novel covertly poses as a journalist to gain information on a semi-secret, right-wing farm organization. This technique would be challenged under today's ethical canons, but Sandoz clearly admires her character's resourcefulness and pluck. Her novel outlines a methodology of deception for obtaining data on powerful people and their organizations.

Major ethical questions follow from Sandoz' stance toward power and the powerful. Students contemplating advanced work in sociology often express their interest in—and questions about—social research when this aspect of Sandoz' work is discussed and are thus easily directed to further reading in Reinhartz' (1984) reflexive introduction to research, Bok's (1978) analysis of deception in research, and the papers edited by the Nebraska Sociological Feminist collective (forthcoming).

CONCLUSION

Sandoz explores the consequences of interacting social institutions and illustrates methods of investigation not as a cold, supposedly disinterested "objective" observer, but as a politically situated participant, as a native daughter who not only understands the world she describes, but who also fears for the moral and cultural soul of her society. In choosing the tools of literature and the humanities rather than those of mainstream sociology, Sandoz provides an

alternative model for today's researchers and activists. Sandoz' work stands double duty: serving as an insightful introduction to powerful social institutions and their consequences for everyday life on the one hand; serving as an informed, careful model of humanist social investigation on the other.

INTEGRATING *CAPITAL CITY* INTO THE SYLLABUS

Capital City is but one element in a 15-week, three-credit hour course in which 60 students (the course limit) enroll each semester. Students in Introduction to Sociology are not assigned *Capital City* without first receiving a good introduction to basic sociology concepts. I use Berger and Berger (1975) and my own detailed study guide (Hill 1984b) for this purpose. This foundation is strengthened by a close reading of Rubin's (1976) empirical study, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family*. The structural rationale of the assignments follows the logic that (a) the Bergers first provide the concepts, (b) Rubin then shows how the concepts are applied in a major study, and (c) Sandoz challenges students to initiate conceptual thought experiments and execute studies of their own design. Students learn thereby to think sociologically.

STUDY GROUP PROJECTS

Following their independent reading of *Capital City* and a short objective quiz to reinforce their understanding of its major events and characters, students are assigned to study groups of from six to ten members. Each group investigates an institutionalized pattern described by Sandoz in 1939 (for example, family, religion, sports, economy, class, patriarchy, racism, education, beauty pageants, high society events, etc.). Each study group's initial task is to clearly outline Sandoz' description of the assigned pattern. This is followed by an assignment to discover if the pattern is the same today. Each group develops a research protocol in consultation with me and then begins investigations.

Study groups adopt a wide range of methodologies. For example, various groups have mapped and photographed housing conditions; interviewed relatives who lived through the Great Depression in Nebraska; scoured newspaper files, the conveniently available Sandoz archives, and the records of the state historical society; interviewed faculty members; talked to union leaders; asked to interview—and were usually denied access to—chief corporate and political executives; observed manager-to-employee sex ratios in banks, fast food restaurants, and department stores; surveyed

business income due to football games in "Big Red" country; interviewed fans at Nebraska football games; executed content analyses of newspaper advertising; examined corporate gifts to university departments; determined the representation of various socio-economic and racial groups on the university's Board of Regents; located and interviewed the managers of Nebraska's cooperatives; and so forth. Approximately five weeks are allocated for these study projects.

While group projects are underway, the class as a whole reviews major points illustrated in the assigned novel and sees films (in this case, documentaries on the Great Depression and a videotaped interview with Sandoz). A portion of each class meeting is allocated for brief coordination meetings by the groups. During the final week of class, study groups make 15-minute oral reports on their findings and submit 10-page written summaries.

STUDY GROUP GRADING POLICIES

Study group projects are graded 50 percent for oral presentation and 50 percent of the written report. All students in each group receive whatever score their group earns as a whole. This study group grade represents 20 percent of each student's work in the course, the remainder is earned through conventional examinations. This grading policy is effective in that group members quickly realize (or are quickly reminded) that they have responsibilities to each other to do their "share" of the work.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

A group learning model replaces the usual individual format with the happy result that student presentations are outstanding. Good students accustomed to individual work are initially nervous about receiving a "group grade," but they subsequently evaluate the group experience as one of the course's strongest points. Students work with surprising diligence on each project and produce polished, interesting reports. Students generally boost their overall grade, and many report a new and favorable appreciation of academic work resulting from their classmates' cooperative challenges.

Students are often shocked that their research discovers little fundamental social change since 1939. Students are genuinely sobered (and not a few outraged) when their own data corroborate virtually unchanging institutionalized patterns of class, race, and gender. Initial student skepticism about the accuracy of Sandoz' observations gives way to respect and admiration for her observational acumen.

Women students respond with special favor to Sandoz not only as a Nebraskan, but as a Nebraska woman who made her mark in the world of letters. Two major roles for women in humanist sociology are brought forward in *Capital City*. First, they are investigators who study the status of women and explore the web of institutionalized social patterns which define their everyday lives. Second, they are change agents who apply their understanding of social institutions toward the betterment of society. Discussing novels with strong feminist import offers instructors a clear way to make the classroom a more emancipatory place for women students, a point recently emphasized by Malhotra (forthcoming).

Capital City is a strongly partisan book espousing an unabashedly left-wing political message. This partisanship is a surprising pedagogical strength in a state characterized by politically conservative students who quickly take issue with the veracity of Sandoz' observations. Insofar as Sandoz was a Nebraskan, it is an easy matter to challenge Nebraska students to go "look for themselves," to become researchers on the contemporary scene.

Assigning a politically provocative novel also enhances the potential for general emancipatory development and exploration in the classroom. Emancipatory results occur when students confront their own research findings. When they realize from their own empirical studies that classism, racism, and sexism are still solidly in place, it is possible to underscore with much greater import the need to conceptualize alternative futures; to take thought experiments seriously; and to propose, identify, and work for institutional changes which have a reasonable and significant chance to eliminate or reduce the pernicious inequalities in American society that rest on class, race, and sex.

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