

EMERITUS PROFESSOR GARY D BOUMA AM

COMMENTS UPON RECEIVING 2013 TASA DISTINGUISHED SERVICE TO AUSTRALIAN SOCIOLOGY
AWARD

My story as a sociologist begins at my birth. I am a second generation sociologist and remember my father struggling with Durkheim and Weber which he had to read in French and German. I was inspired by his trenchant critique of social justice issues and analyses of the location and use of social power. He was also adept at finding gracious alternative readings in the Bible to counter those who would use it to defend their power positions or forms of oppression. Sociology in the 1940s was largely inspired by the traumas of the Great Depression and the holocaust on the one hand and by the optimism of the New Deal, social engineering to build a humane society on the other.

Dad trained me by example to be an activist for social change and social justice. I assisted him in campaigns for civil rights and lost friends during the McCarthy era due to our actions. The Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on our front yard. This occurred shortly after the major 'race' riots (blame the victims) in Detroit. The event etched into my soul a commitment to working to end injustice and oppression. The great domestic concern was the fear of race riots. The answer often given was to impose more repression, control and containment. Those working for civil rights were declared to be naïve, sentimentalists and a danger to good order and the American way; all of which sounds familiar today.

As a child I was at a loss when someone asked me what my father did. To answer, sociology, brought blank stares or charges of socialism. My pressing need to have a clear idea of what defines sociology has deep and abiding sources. It still spawns major conflicts with colleagues.

Some Australian sociologists seem to think that Talcott Parsons dominated American sociology. Not really. Those of us in the mid-west were more of the Chicago School, C. Wright Mills and all that deeply engaged sociology. What good was theory that never touched the ground, did not liberate, or illuminate puzzling areas. We spent much time in the slums of south side Chicago and later I worked in Harlem during the urban unrest of the early 1960s. The consequences of the uneven distribution of social capital and the ways entrenched interests defended their privilege were patently obvious as were some of the creative ways some people found to negotiate a way out of the ghetto. Sadly, drugs claimed more young lives than the numbers of those who got out.

While at Cornell doing my PhD I visited the opening of the offices of the National Organisation of Women as it was being established. According to these women unwanted pregnancies were a serious problem. At this time, for example, the health service at Cornell refused to prescribe the oral contraceptive to co-eds unless they were married and had had one child, lest they promote promiscuity. A critical issue was the lack of avenues to secure safe abortions. A group of us set up the Up-state New York Clergy Consultation on Problem Pregnancy. We operated at two levels. We provided counselling and referral to safe, but illegal, abortions. We also lobbied state and federal politicians informing them of both the number of abortions we had facilitated and the number of deaths due to abortions conducted by unqualified people. At one point I was arrested, but let off when the police saw that we were preventing harm to women.

I have always operated on the assumption that a sociologist should have first-hand familiarity with the subject matter. I learned some of this the hard way when I migrated to Canada. I swore I would leave the USA when Nixon was elected. But I had not given myself the time to learn the new context and made many mistakes. I soon became painfully aware of the yankocentrism of US sociology and how painful it is to try to point out to them that the findings of US research are neither universal nor normative and that there are other realities, other perspectives and other forms of social life.

I was much more careful when I migrated to Australia. I am deeply grateful for the Australian Census which I have used to fuel much of my career. Being able to map the changes in Australia's religious profile has been more fun than I could have imagined. It is great to have rich quantitative data to give structure to my deep involvement in highly diverse religious communities.

I have learned that universities are a great place to work. As all of life they too change. None-the-less, the complaints remain the same, standards are in perpetual decline, the way things were is always better, too much is asked of too few for too little, etc. To survive it is essential to learn what has to be done to satisfy the beast on the one hand and to have time to do the things that keep your mind alive. Sometimes they overlap. Often not. But this has ever been the case. Publish a couple of articles in top-flight journals and then you are free for the rest of the year. I regret not aiming higher for some of my publications; I do not regret the time and energy spent getting my views out through more 'engaged' forms, being a public intellectual and feeding back to those with whom I have done research the results of our efforts.

Sociology is a great profession. It can be, indeed needs to be found in academia and inspired by critical engagement with people, communities, groups, movements, and policy making. It is out of the confluence of these activities that the best teaching and research flow.

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