

THE SOCIOLOGY OF STEIN

by Carol Tavis



A term-paper from the Brandeis University
undergraduate Sociology course 106-B
taught by Prof. Maurice Stein in May 1966

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Sociology 106b
Mr. Stein
May, 1966

SOCIOLOGY 106b. SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE.

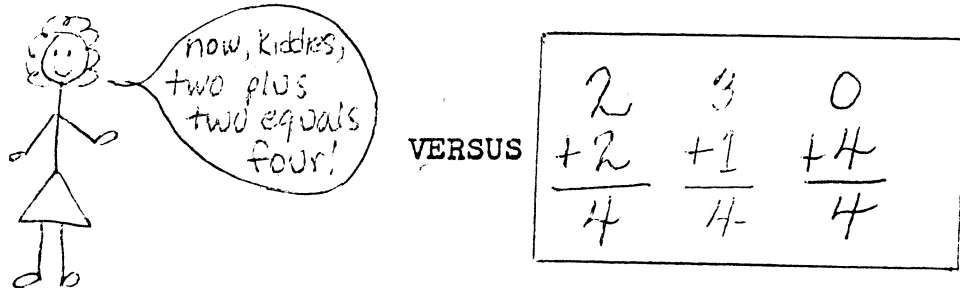
The relations between society and literary forms in selected historical periods. Emphasis on the relations between problems and methods in inquiry as presented by sociological and humanistic students of man.

Admission by consent of the instructor only.

Sociology 106b is not, contrary to this impressive blurb from the catalogue, the sociology of literature. It is not literature, and it is not even sociology. The instructor consents to admit anyone who wants to take the course. The only selected historical period is now. It is not a course which can in any way be described concisely for a catalogue. In fact, it is not a course - it is a man. Proof of this point is evident from listening to the way the students talk about the class: they do not say, "Well, I'm off to sociology of literature today," or "how are you liking sociology 106b?" They say "I'm taking French, art, politics, bio. sci. and Stein," or "How are you doing in Stein these days?" I therefore feel free to use the words "Stein" and "Sociology 106b" interchangeably, for the course is inextricably linked to the gentleman who conducts it. My aim is to describe some of the aspects of Stein which may in turn convey what the experience of the course has been for me; coming as it has the last semester of my academic career at Brandeis, it has been extremely instrumental both in "wrapping up" my four years here and in giving me a new perspective and framework with which to confront the next grueling years of graduate school.

Stein is ... the blackboard

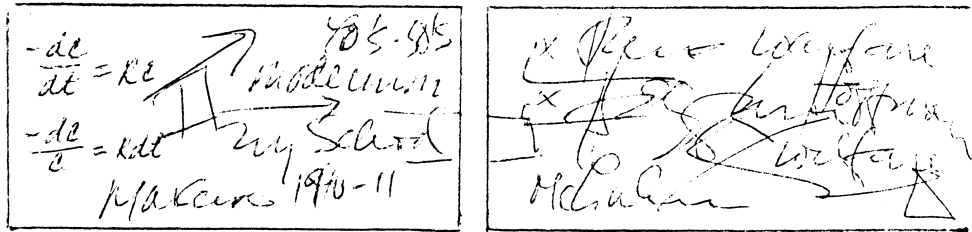
The blackboard is a device long used by teachers and professors at all levels of education, from kindergarten through graduate work. It fulfills a number of purposes: visual aid to the pupils, allowing them to see what the teacher says:



and thus helps provide a form of visual coherency for the chaos of symbols that the pre-literate child experiences. Then of course there is the erasable quality of the board; it can be used time and time again, but whatever is written on it will stay put as long as necessary. The blackboard serves also to get the class' attention, since it is always at the head of the room; it provides a central point of focus for the pupils. Announcements, assignments, important words to remember, reading and spelling lessons, and decorations are some of the things the teacher will write on the board, to which the students may add their own selection (when teacher is out of the room) of dirty words, names, "x loves y," doodles, libelous accusations, and so on.

As the child progresses through the hierarchy of educational institutions, the lessons on the blackboard become even more complicated,

(apologies for the total inability to reproduce this amazing phenomenon, but then, no one could):



is, however, curiously related to the Marcuse-McLuhan polarity (the board itself, appropriately, is divided in two sections), as well as to the whole concept of implosion. That board veritably implodes - and from all directions at once. The warfare-welfare Marcusian dichotomy is obliterated by the words, names, slogans, concepts, symbols and etc. which Stein writes wherever there is room; the result is a McLuhanian bombardment of the senses only equalled by the outside world itself. It becomes a non-board: it says nothing and everything; it has no beginning, middle, or end; and like a work of contemporary art, (in terms of both its size and its contents),^{it} immediately involves the unwitting observer. Like a work of art, it lets the observer project on to it what he thinks and feels and, more importantly, what he chooses it to mean.

Steinboards thus represent the culmination and the perfection of blackboardness in the education schema. Boards have progressed from usefulness to the student to usefulness to the professor, and Stein has made boards significant to both of them. At the same time, steinboards have reached the zenith of complicatedness; in so doing, they have regressed to the chaos and unreadability that boards were for the pre-literate child.

Stein is ... the suitcase

Before the beginning of any lecture there is the Set-Up, or as some call it, the Unpacking. This phenomenon is the careful if hurried unloading of a black suitcase (discount), the exact contents of which may vary, but only to a limited degree. The experienced stein-watcher will note 1) the New York Times 2) Life (four weeks straight, a record this semester), alternating or concurrent with Newsweek, Time, Studies on the Left, etc.; at least one magazine, and often two or three 3) the tape recorder 4) other 5) anywhere from five to ten books (or more, or less). Of the last, several will be by the author Stein intends to "talk to" that day, and specifically one which no one in the class has read; one or several by the author Stein intended to talk to the week before but which we never got to; one or several by the author Stein intends to talk to next week and wants to warn or encourage us about; one or several unrelated to anything in particular (but to everything in general), usually on art (op, pop, and other).

Once unloaded, the suitcase is placed on the floor and its contents carefully spread out, arranged and stacked on the table. While we are usually shown some of the articles and ads from the magazines, and while some of the more pithy selections from the Times are read to us, most of the books are never referred to again.

Stein is ... the tape recorder (sometimes)

"Well, " someone told me after the first session of the class (which I had missed), "he's very good and all but he seemed somewhat rushed and nervous and spoke very rapidly, but that may be because he had this tape recorder and next time when he doesn't have it he will probably speak slower and not be so nervous."

"Next time," however, he still had the tape recorder and still spoke hurriedly, and we soon learned that the the tape was irrelevant, since when he didn't have it he spoke exactly the same way and just as rapidly. We did discover, though, that when he turned it off we were going to have "class discussion." Some have interpreted this act as significant, i.e. he obviously does not consider our comments as worthy of posterity as his; but the counter-argument is that 99% of the time our comments aren't as worthy as his. Be that as it may, the tape recorder remains a minor but integral part of Stein.

Stein is ... the "class discussion" which isn't

The "pattern of student-professor interaction" would show that the class is unquestionably the professor's, but unquestionably. Stein is not only sociology 106b, he is the discussion. "Today we will discuss _____," he often begins, but everyone knows that he will discuss _____, and they love it that way. The first hour and a half belongs exclusively to him; then the tape is turned off and "class discussion" begins: i.e. a question or comment is directed to Stein, and he replies.

Once we actually simulated a class discussion, even going so far as to arrange the class in a circle, on the subject of class discussions. A class discussion on class discussions is as equally McLuhanian and twice as ridiculous as the sociology of sociologists teaching sociology etc., but no one seemed to notice that. In any event, we might illustrate what transpired at this unique session by a crude diagram,

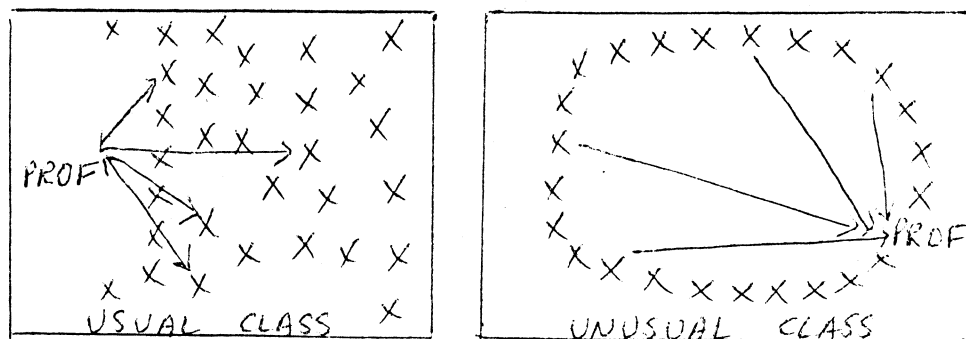


TABLE 1: INTERACTION PATTERNS, students - teacher

which we might subtitle, "So what's the difference?" The point is that the undisputed center of attention is Stein, no matter how the chairs are arranged, and that the students who want to talk, will talk, also no matter how the chairs are arranged. That class said a great deal about education in general, as well as about our class in particular: students simply have been trained 1) to let the teacher lead 2) to get a pretty B.A. and not to rock the boat in so doing 3) to think as much as possible within the confines of a course, but not to follow the logical conclusions of too much radical thinking 4) to expect their education to come exclusively from the classroom. It was an unfortunate premise of both Bob Penny's paper and the group discussion that the majority of students come to college to learn, and that they will use any means of furthering this aim; in

fact, however, this is true of a minority, even at Brandeis. What I think also might have been evident from the session was that more education goes on in this course via the contents of Stein's suitcase alone than in any 27 "class discussions" organized because they are ideally "educational." In either case, "education" is where you find it, and what you make of it.

Stein is ... the New York Times

Rivalling the blackboard for illustration of polarity (both in terms of Marcuse versus McLuhan and Marcuse's warfare-welfare state) is the New York Times. Stein is never without it, and stein revolves around it. The Times is the literature of today, so perhaps the course is not so deceptively titled as it might seem.

JOHNSON DENIES MINDLESS ESCALATION OF THE WAR, announces one headline; McNAMARA HINTS CALL-UP OF RESERVES, chuckles the one below it; while the education-civil rights-medicare-war-on-poverty slot assures us that at least within our bournes all is well (or will be). The course could well be called "the sociology of the New York Times," for almost (but not quite) single-handedly it reflects and illustrates the themes and messages of stein. It is impossible to comprehend all of the news of that paper, as it is to comprehend all that is currently going on in the world. It is impossible to relegate to "slots" the overlapping events of the daily news, as increasingly it is to relegate to distinct "fields" the means of studying and ana-

lyzing those events. The Times is the world: both bombard us with items of pure terror, pathos, tragedy, humor, barbarity and humanism. The Times gives us Catch-22-type war announcements that are so incredibly unbelievable, ludicrous, and frightening that our only response can be laughter - if hysterical laughter at that. We see them all, from bumbling officials to stupid generals to draft-card-burning Yossarians who just want to live. The Times on occasion portrays the Tin Drum-type of little men we are becoming and the society that is even sicker than the dwarf Oskar. The Times is growing up absurd, repressive tolerance that misquotes and misunderstands Marcuse, the power elite. It is also the railroads taking over the war slot, "college teachers' salaries rise 7.3%, reports AAUP," (!) U.S.-Russia cultural exchange programs, the Berkeley riots that weren't riots but all the papers will forever call them so, the affluent society and the poverty stricken.

Like the blackboard, the Times is everything and nothing. There is no cataloguing it, analyzing it, listing its articles. (it is greater than the sum of them), or defining it. It is, and its existence is its message. It is the best of all possible non-texts for a non-course.

Stein is ... Life magazine

Closely related to the Times as a text for Stein is LIFE magazine (read Newsweek, Time, Look, Harper's, Studies on the Left, or any other). Here we are confronted with another variant of the news media, the non-daily magazine, and here we

are subjected to perhaps an even more surrealistic collage of information. Vietnam - Swanson dinners - the Romans (in four parts, no less) - living girdles - Batman - phallic Fiat ads - McLuhan (the "character of the week") - living bras - colorful pictures of birds - phallic Coke ads - astronauts and colorful pictures of the space race - Johnson, pro and con - POP art, and so on: each article and ad is carefully juxtaposed so that the reader will experience horror followed by delight, misery followed by humor, war followed by Swanson dinners (both are disgusting), and a cheerful "miscellany" to conclude the whole thing, and not leave the poor reader with a distasteful sensation. "The mag provides the message," and thus magazines are an important part of the message of Stein.

Stein is ... a paper that you can write on anything you want as long as it is related to the course, which means you can write on anything you want.

Stein is ... the reading list

Appropriate to a non-course is a non-reading list, i.e. one without a beginning or an end (but a hell of a large middle), one which suggests approximate writers and approximate works they have written, and one which is totally flexible. If it is impossible to read all the books in the world in one's lifetime (even with Evelyn Wood's Reading Dynamics), it is equally impossible to read all the books "suggested" for this course in the time-span of this semester. Hence the unassuming college student is given his first major taste of educational frustration (which he should by now have experienced anyway: you just

cannot learn "everything," even if you safely hide in your field and become an "expert"). Aside from the content of the reading list, its true greatness lies in the fact that it is so huge, so frustrating, so non-mandatory, so selectable.

Stein is ... the reading

Books, along with lectures, are the backbone of almost all courses, and Stein is no exception. The reading (whatever one has chosen to do of it) falls basically into three categories: almost everything, everything else, and McLuhan.

In the first category belong those works which many may have read in a previous context, and which are read as books (i.e. literally; from beginning to end) and comprehended according to what they say; Erikson, Goffman, Riesman, Mills. The "everything else" category includes everything else, i.e. those more unconventional works which are not immediately accessible - Fingarette, Marcuse, Brown - and which are read as "total systems" (i.e. figuratively; from beginning to end, but at least twice) and comprehended according to what they mean, the world, language, system or totality they convey. Goodman, as an "angry middle-aged man," is a fringe member of both of these groups: he is accessible, yet radical; specific, yet general; he writes a non-book book (his thoughts are sequential, but oh those digressions).

Lastly, there is McLuhan, in a class by himself. McLuhan is prototypically a non-book, and must be read as such (i.e.

projectively - you read on to it what you see, what you wish, what you are; from beginning to end, or vice versa; or from middle to end, or vice versa; or from middle to beginning or vice versa, etc.), and it is comprehended according to what he says he means, means to say, or what you say he means or what you mean him to say.

But a curious thing happens as the semester progresses. The categories dissolve, and you discover you are reading all of the books the same way. All of them are read somewhat literally, even more figuratively, and most of all projectively. The Eriksonian stages that people used to memorize carefully (1=oral, 2=anal, etc.) and believe in rigidly and firmly ("O my god, when will I resolve my identity thing?") become no less accurate, but more personally as well as socially meaningful - and flexible. The Power Elite that people used to dismiss with a "Pshaw, it's full of holes," is seen not only in its relation to Mill's intellectual development on the whole but also in terms of what he means for a value sociology.

(I must digress here a moment. This last point represents another "message" of the course which has coincided with my own view of and plea to sociology and sociologists: forget the pseudo-scientific verbosity and be human already. The tragedy of sociology is that a field which by its nature is a non-field, encompassing as it does so much; a field which has the potential to be radical, creative, political, and human; a field which by all rights should be run according to the

values, goals, and ideals of its constituents: the tragedy, I feel, is that it should try to narrow its borders, confine itself as a specific "discipline" - a word which itself is punitive and constraining - discourage radicalism and creativity, and suppress values and ideals in favor of a value-free and neutral "science." A science of society that can carefully measure, quantify, and analyze the amount of suffering in that society, and yet experience no outrage at the cause of that suffering and attempt no elimination of that cause - is to my mind not worth the paper its graphs are printed on.)

The readings all have in common, then, the attaining of the highest of Stein's three "levels of interpretation": after encompassing the "common-sensical" dimension and the "sociological" dimension, they reach the realm of values, radicalism, "implosion." I do not care if Marcuse misreads Freud for his own purposes: I like those purposes. I don't care if Mills oversimplifies (he does), or if Riesman is no longer on all the coffee tables of suburbia (he isn't). I want to see indignation, anger, warmth, opinions, and concern: and all this is evident in the "readings."

Another curious thing happens as the semester progresses: not only are you reading the course books the same new way, you are also seeing their relation to other books (and non-books) you read. You discover perhaps the truth of "For every sociological treatise and/or classic, there is a novel which says it better." Case in point: The American Soldier versus Catch-22.

If you want to capture the sense of what the American soldier really was like in the war, what he really felt, what the hierarchy really was like, Catch-22 is the book to read, not the four-volume "classic." And the novel is even more applicable today, whereas the classic is dated, and narrowly so at that.

Stein is ... the lectures

The lectures and the readings, of course, are in a sense inseparable, since the former (usually) depends on the latter. As many different kinds of books that there are, there are kinds of lectures. The Lecture is the Basic Staple of education, and as such the university student is exposed to a great variety of them. There is, for example, the Pompous Lecture, where the professor knows everything, knows he knows everything, and therefore sees no need to let students interfere. There is the Meek Lecture, where the professor knows very little, knows he knows very little, and therefore cannot afford to let the students interfere. There is the I Won't Lecture, which is a lecture but the professor thinks it isn't; the Casual Lecture (no notes); the Organized Lecture (which terminates thirty seconds before the bell); the Pacing Lecture, and Mumbling Lecture, the Maybe If I Don't Look At Them They Won't See Me Lecture, and as many other kinds and combinations as there are people to deliver them. In addition, there is the Non Lecture, often affectionately called the Ramble, the Mutterance, or What The Hell is He Trying To Say?

Needless to say, Stein belongs to this latter type, and the non-lectures he expounds are a truly major part of the stein experience. Whereas in most classes students looking out the window is a sign of boredom, this is not true for stein, mainly because he looks out the window as much as they.

The "lectures," as already indicated, are extremely flexible, depending on what is happening in Viet Nam, television, Washington, LIFE, or Brandeis; on how the Times is laid out that day; on what was on the radio as he drove to school; on anything else that particularly strikes him. As might be expected, they do not begin, nor end; one always has the feeling he has come in on the middle of the session and has to leave before it is over. Like the fluidity of the readings, the lectures give one a sense of the ongoing educational process; and once one has figured out what the hell he is trying to say, all the experiential components of the course fall into place, and stein has become a totality.