

Performing collegiality: A tribute to Ron Eyerman

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It is an honor to speak on this happy occasion celebrating Ron Eyerman's retirement. In this tribute, I recall the lessons I learnt from him about the art of the teaching and the craft of research when I worked as his teaching assistant, his PhD student, and his co-editor.

Ron joined the sociology department at Yale University in 2003 and in his first fall semester he was scheduled to teach an undergraduate course entitled "Sociology of the Arts and Popular Culture". Given the perfect fit with my emerging research interests, I was assigned to be a teaching assistant (TA) on the course. It was an eventful time on campus. Shortly before classes started in August, there was a strike by maintenance, food and clerical workers at the university. New and returning students were greeted with picket lines and to move into their dorm rooms they had to carry their boxes past strikers' rallies and police. The *New York Times* reported that at one such rally, 800 demonstrators gathered in front of President Levin's office and that the main speaker, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, led them on a march to the office of the university's chief investment officer (Greenhouse, 2003). The effect on students went beyond dining halls remaining closed and trash bins going unemptied. Many professors, including Ron, held classes off campus so that they did not cross the picket line.

Even with these disruptions Ron's course was every bit the blockbuster it was expected to be with "popular culture" in the title. Enrollments were high enough, and the number of sociology PhD students low enough, that an additional TA had to be found from the department of American Studies. Once the teaching team was in place, our first task was to divide students into discussion groups and determine which TA would teach in which time slots. We drew straws to determine who would be stuck teaching the least desirable slot

(Friday at 9am) and who would get to teach the section attended by the emerging film star, Jordana Brewster. Alas, I drew the short straw and did my best to become a morning person, at least by the standards of a graduate student.

Looking back on this semester, it was not the strike or the celebrity student that made it so memorable; it was Ron's social performance of teaching. His lecturing style displayed both his warmth and his enthusiasm for the subject; he made it look positively easy to convey complicated ideas in ways that were both straightforward and inviting. His pedagogically generous approach extended to meetings with his TAs. To help us prepare for teaching Dick Hebdige's (1979) "Subculture and the Meaning of Style", Ron hosted a screening of "The Filth and the Fury" (Temple, 2003), a documentary about the Sex Pistols which we discussed as enthusiastically as we devoured the pizza delivery he had arranged. To give us a better insight into the issue of authenticity in music, a topic scheduled later in the semester, he arranged to take his TAs to hear the singer-songwriter Gillian Welch perform. This occasion was experiential learning at its best. Even with an extensive background in classical music, this concert experience opened up a new world for me. The music was louder than I was accustomed to, and had I known I would be standing all evening I would have worn flat shoes. But the lesson about the fabrication of authenticity came through loud and clear, and I was quickly, and permanently, converted into a fan of this songstress of Americana.

Several years later, when I got to teach my own course on the Sociology of the Arts, this semester served as my frame of reference. I dug out my copy of the syllabus for clues about how to structure a reading list, and I reviewed my notes from Ron's lectures for inspiration about how to present the material in a way that would pique the curiosity of my students. As helpful as these were in my first year as a tenure-track professor, the most important lesson I learnt as Ron's TA had to do with course evaluations. I remember running into Ron in the department mailroom at the end of the semester after the grades had been

submitted for Sociology of the Arts and Popular Culture. He had just looked over the course evaluations and wanted to know my thoughts. What had stood out to me from the large number of positive reviews was one student's complaint that we were "too into the material", which I took as a compliment. Ron, however, was more concerned about another student's bitter comments directed at him as a lecturer and me as a TA. Sensing that these words had stung Ron, I offered the consoling phrases musicians always hear from their well-meaning supporters after receiving blunt criticism from an adjudicator or a mean-spirited review from a critic. "You can't please them all, Ron," I said. "This person clearly woke up on the wrong side of the bed that morning." My attempts to soothe were appreciated but unsuccessful. At the time I found it hard to believe that a great teacher could possibly be bothered by one grumpy student's thoughtless remarks. Eventually I realized how admirable it was to care so much about one individual's experience.

When Ron became my dissertation advisor, I realized that this sensitivity was the secret to his success as a teacher. He cared for the student's wellbeing at least as much as he cared about the subject matter. Ron truly puts the "constructive" into "constructive criticism": his gift lies in finding advantages to approaches and potential in ideas that their inventors never recognized. In this way he challenges the discouraged grad student while also reviving their faith in themselves as a thinker.

Ron taught collegiality by example, both in more public settings, such as the weekly workshop at the Center for Cultural Sociology, and in more collaborative work behind the scenes. To provide guidance in those areas of academic life that cannot be taught, he was open with his students about his research process, his approach to writing, and how he found inspiration for new projects. And to discourage graduate students from allowing their dissertation research to take over their lives completely and define their sense of worth, he demonstrated his commitment to painting by renting a studio space where he could work

regularly through the semester. New canvases would periodically appear in his office, and it did not take me long to realize that he was as prolific in his painting as he was in his writing because he was so disciplined.

Occasionally these two creative outlets would merge; a painting would be chosen or produced for a book cover when a new monograph or edited collection reached the final stage of the publication process. Ron has generally preferred to work in portraiture, a genre that celebrates individualism by challenging the painter to capture the unique likeness and character of the subject on the canvas. While he occasionally paints personal friends and public figures, most of his paintings depict imaginary people with their facial features exaggerated or simplified through abstraction. I have always wondered whether this is an aesthetic preference or a reflection his theoretical position on the nature of the self and subjectivity.

Simply put, a budding sociologist of the arts like me could not have asked for a better role model than Ron. It is through his example that I have come to terms with the tendency for arts sociologists to be routinely asked if they are themselves arts practitioners. This question used to irritate me a great deal, because sociologists in other sub-disciplines never seemed to be held to the same standard: Were political sociologists expected to have run for office? Should medical sociologists have performed surgery? Can one only become an economic sociologist having traded on the floor of the stock exchange? The answer in these cases was always no, which seemed unfair. Thanks to Ron I have come to see this question differently. If those who study the role of art and music in society are expected to be practitioners, that is because a certain level of artistic proficiency is assumed to be required before the researcher can begin to understand the meaning and social power of the arts.

Thank you, Ron, for all of your guidance and support over the years, and for everything you have done to make the Center for Cultural Sociology – and the sociology of the arts – what it is today. I wish you all the best in every endeavor you undertake in the next chapter.

References

Greenhouse S. (2003) Workers' Strike Hinders Arrival of Yale Students. *The New York Times*. Late ed.