

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MEMOIR BOOM FOR TEACHING SOCIOLOGY

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Abstract

The paper examines how the recent deluge of narratives about the remembrance of personal pasts has significance for teaching sociology. The paper looks at evidence of the memoir boom and examines its applications and relevance for teaching sociology and supplementing sociology courses. Many of the issues that the current crop of memoirs deal with are the very issues of sociology courses, the testimony of lives framed by sociological experience; family experiences and dysfunctions, racial and ethnic experiences, and sexual identities. The paper explores how and why memoirs can be useful tools in approaching the task of examining sociological existence.

Keywords: narrative, identity, social relationship, teaching sociology

Mary Gordon wrote in her memoir of her father that "I am primarily a writer of fiction, but I knew I couldn't present him as a fictional character because the details of his life, presented as fiction, would be too bizarre to be believed" (p. xiv). Whereas years ago, people who thought they had a story to tell sat down to write a novel. Today they sit down to write a memoir, a tale told directly from life, rather than one fashioned by the imagination out of life. Contemporary times it has been noted (Atlas 1996; Blais 1997; Gornick 1996) are characterized by a deluge of memoirs. Today numerous women and men are telling their stories out of the belief that one's own life signifies.

Saint Augustine's *Confessions* established a literary tradition of intimate disclosure that addressed a mass but unseen public in intimate terms in which private thoughts were expressed publically. Centuries after Augustine, Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* shocked 18th century France with its author's admissions of sexual masochism and other private deviancies. Since the publication of Augustine's and Rousseau's confessions, the memoir has been a staple of a written form that involves the writer as self publicist, discloser, and author of personal history as against public history. Since the invention of the printing press (Postman 1982, p.26) as an instrument of publicity that greatly stimulated and facilitated confessional writing the memoir has become a

form of address in which an individual can with assurance and directness address the unseen living as well as posterity.

The literary genre of the memoir has become a particularly robust trend in recent years. Although the moment of the inception of the memoir boom cannot be pin pointed (Gornick 1996; Conway 1990), its arrival and proliferation on the shelves of bookstores and in our collective consciousness has been noted by numerous cultural observers. Blais (Fall 1997) notes that "You would have to be living in a cultural vacuum not to have noticed that memoir as a genre is hot" (p. 80). James Atlas observed (1996) that "the triumph of memoir is now established fact" (p. 125). The memoir, Patricia Hampl asserts (1997), "has become the signature genre of the age."

"Alice B. Toklas did hers and now everybody will do theirs" Gertrude Stein observed in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1973) referring to her companion, whom she impersonated in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Subjectivity is now everybody's subject. Memoir seems to be the fin de-siecle literary form. Literary historians of the future may well look back on the 1990's as the decade of the memoir—a period that saw a prodigious flowering of narratives about the remembrance of personal pasts.

It is a truism," Madeleine Blais observed, "that generals write autobiographies: public accounts of public valor in

public places. Foot soldiers write memoirs" (1997, p.80)¹. Literary memoirs were once written by eminences basking in the forgiving twilight of their fame. In the past memoirs were the preserve of ex-presidents, public officials, and celebrities with reputations to save or time on their hands. All that has now changed. Everywhere today it seems ordinary women and men are rising up to tell their story of how an individual life signifies. The current age is characterized by a need to testify. A growing number of authors have a story to tell, a catastrophe to relate, a lesson to teach, a memoir to write. For many writers today memoir is the format of first, not last resort. Scarcely has one passed through childhood and adolescence that some memorists (Grealy 1994; Wurtzel 1994; Hornbacher 1997) are wondering from the vantage point of only a few years' distance what it all means.

What is the significance of the memoir boom for teaching sociology? The issues that the current crop of memoirs deal with are very much the issues of undergraduate sociology courses. The new trend in confessional writing, the licence to tell all has produced a virtual library of sociological revelation. The politics and social movements of the last thirty years have given voice to once marginalized and silenced groups. Following in the wake of political interpretations and explications of "personal politics" has come the testimony of lives framed by pedestrian chaos: memorists witness their traumatic illnesses (Handler 1998; Wexler 1995) alcoholism (Knapp 1996; McGovern 1996), racial experiences (Gates 1994; McBride 1996) ethnic experiences (McCourt 1996; Mura 1991), sexual identities (Monette 1992; Bepko 1997) and family dysfunction (Karr 1995; Lyden 1997).

The memoir has opened up a new kind of narrative authority for the young, for ethnic subcultures, for different sexual persuasions, for the handicapped, for victims of abuse—in short for anyone whose questions about life fall outside the central narrative of worldly success, or of moral and

spiritual growth, or of power and its exercise—once the main theme for American autobiographical writing. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, there has been an outpouring of autobiographical writing by women and men focused not on reflections about the unfolding of a long and successful life, but on the urgent questions of identity and relationships to family and society.

Since postmodern literary theory has deconstructed narrative by pointing out the ways narrative structure expresses power, relationships within a society, one does not have to have climbed to some position of power, eminence, or authority in society to claim that one's experience is exemplary—anyone's story is as good as the telling. A postmodern author can begin and end a story however she or he likes. Thus, voices once silent, are describing the relationship between a life and history.

Memoir shares with sociological writing the project of lifting from sociological existence a narrative that will shape experience, transform event, and deliver wisdom. However, the memoir differs from sociological writing in the way it approaches the task. A relevant distinction between traditional sociological writing and memoir is illuminated in Walter Benjamin's contrast between storytelling and information. Information, in Benjamin's analysis, is a mode of communication linked to the development of the printing press and of capitalism; it represents itself as verifiable, it is "shot through with explanation" (1973, p.89). Storytelling on the other hand, is "always the art of repeating stories," without explanation, combining the extraordinary and the ordinary. Most important, it is grounded in a community of listeners and readers on whom the story makes a claim to be remembered by virtue of its "chaste compactness." The storyteller takes what he/she tells from experience and makes it the experience of those who listen or read the tale. It is the "art of storytelling to keep the story free from explanation as one reproduces it." It is left up to the listener/reader "to interpret things

the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks" (1973, p.89). What happened to the memoirist is not what matters, what matters is what the memoirist makes of what happened. The situation may be revealing, but it is the writing, that provides revelation and revelation comes with a story well told.

In this perspective the memoir accomplishes what C. W. Mills (1959) held to be the goal of sociology. Mills argued (as almost every introductory sociology text notes) that the "sociological imagination" helps to make an illuminating connection between "personal troubles" and "public issues." "The sociological imagination," Mills wrote, "enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (p.6). Mills' "sociological imagination" in the tradition of Marx and Mannheim was a debunking project. It enabled "its possessor" to "take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions" (p.5) Mills' everyman is silent; "They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of men and society; of biography and history, of self and the world" (p.4). The individual could understand his/her own experience only by becoming aware of a "quality of mind"—"the sociological imagination."

For Mills the key to bringing about clear understanding and change was learning to understand the social forces that have shaped individual lives. And the avenue to understanding required a voice speaking from out there to explain the relation between social forces and individual lives. Memoir writing shares with Mill's "sociological imagination" the obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will enhance understanding. But the voice of memoir is not the voice of expert authority out there. Memoirs are sociological and historical accounts that can bear witness to some universal experience experienced on a personal level. Such personal

narratives provide a unique perspective on the interaction of the individual, the collectivity, the cultural, and the social.

As the century has worn on, the sound of the voice out there has grown less compelling, its insights repetitive, its wisdom sometimes wearisome. And the voice of the silent everyman, once without agency, has grown louder. One of the virtues of a memoir is that it highlights through personal example themes that sociologists and historians have articulated, but not made vivid. Many memoirs grasp the relation between history and biography. The search for consciousness in the memoir is profoundly linked to cultural meanings and to the historical moment in which the author (and we) live. The link between an individual life story and the collective story which gives context to that life is a defining formal and thematic aspect of the memoir.

Memoirs can show the "examined life" in a compelling fashion. For example in *Angela's Ashes* Frank McCourt (1996) vividly discusses issues of Irish poverty, the dysfunctional family, and historical events:

When I look back on my childhood, I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare to the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless, loquacious alcoholic father: the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English, and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (p. 11)

The story is one of unrelieved poverty, the exploitation of children, the degradation of women, and the effects of alcoholism on a family, and yet because of McCourt's narrative talent it becomes a three dimensional, richly detailed portrayal of a society and of McCourt's coming of age.

A dramatic story can be told, but there is room for reflection. One of the attrac-

tions of contemporary memoirs, is that they not only "show" and "tell" but they reflect on the very process of telling itself. In many of contemporary memoirs the author successfully combines the techniques of fiction with essay writing, the personal with public dimensions of experience, and the documentary account with poetic and evocative recreations of experience.

The memoir is an additional tool to access the resistant reader in the classroom. Unlike much qualitative sociology, with its case studies and composite characters who often perfectly reflect the author's theories, memoirs start with the material of a life and refuse to glide over the messy contradictions that accompany being human. The memoir is a tale told directly from life, rather than one fashioned by the interpretation of lives. Understanding in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of facts or a didactic explanation; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage, and illuminate with the experience at hand.

There is a tendency for academics to look down on memoirs as inferior to academic non fiction, as relatively naive, as simple transcriptions of life. However students who balk and recoil at traditional academic texts, who liken the experience of reading such texts as wadding through wet sand often find the memoir a more congenial text. The challenge is to write so that the reader cares, and many memoirs succeed at this task (whereas textbooks and traditional texts do not). Personal accounts which bear witness to poverty, racial and ethnic experiences, emigration, abuse, infertility, adoption, AIDS, addiction and recovery can engage the resistant post literate student in a way that traditional non fiction texts often do not.

The memoir can help mediate students' hesitation or aversion at the frontiers of their knowledge. This resistance can be addressed through the "border pedagogy" conceptualized by Aronowitz and Girouz

(1991). "Border pedagogy" sees cultural differences as enhancing public life and encourages students "to engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages including their own" (pp. 118-119). Students become border crossers as they learn to analyze cultural codes and negotiate these cultural differences. Students who read McCourt (1996) are border crossers into the world of white Irish poverty, those who read Paul Monette (1992) are border crossers into Monette's claustrophobic world of a closeted gay childhood, those who read Rhoades (1990), Bolton (1994) and Karr (1995) are border crossers into the world of abused childhoods and dysfunctional families.

The memoir can also lead to what the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (1989) called "imaginative identification." "Imaginative identification," Achebe holds, "is the opposite of indifference...It is humane connectiveness at its most intimate...it begins as an adventure of self-discovery and ends in wisdom and humane conscience" (p. 159). Memoir affords the reader access to the education and self discovery of another. Memoirs are often narratives of self discovery, stories of change, and education. Thus, they are an excellent vehicle for connecting readers to lives and experience of others.

The recent deluge of memoirs has produced a library of sociological revelation and commentary. Many of the current crop of memoirs offer options for exposing students to fine writing, readable texts that often can be linked to sociological concepts, theories and texts, excellent illuminations of social behavior and society, and texts that lend themselves to both conventional analytical writing assignments, and as models for personal writing assignments. Like film and novels, memoirs can be a valuable supplement to sociology courses.

ENDNOTES

¹As literary genre the autobiography and the memoir are not different versions of the same thing, though in some cases the line between autobiography and memoir might be an exceedingly fine line. Tobias Wolf (1997) distinguishes between autobiographies and memoir in terms of documentation. Autobiographies he holds use supporting documents. "A memoir," he contends, "is literally the story your memory tells you. Your not going back to source documents in your memory. The memoir tries to preserve that story" (p. 26). In *Palimpsest*, Gore Vidal (1996) noted "A memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double checked. I've taken the memoir route on the ground that even an idling memory is apt to get right what matters most" (p.5). Truth in memoir is not achieved through a recital of actual and verifiable events, it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard and honestly to engage with the experience at hand.

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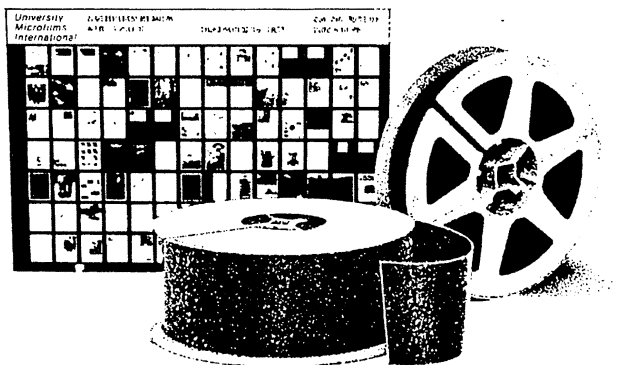
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