

Being a ‘thermostat’ sociologist

For Raheem and Isaac: “when one teaches, two learn”

Written on the edges of newspaper and toilet paper, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, penned the renowned “Letter from Birmingham Jail” after his arrest in Birmingham, Alabama on Good Friday. King’s arrest was pivotal in the movement because in Birmingham, King decided to actively aggravate the status quo using nonviolence, rather than just responding to crisis in racial tensions as was previous strategy. It is also true that young folks played a vital role during the Birmingham campaign in what is known as the Children’s crusade. This essay discusses some of my experiences teaching race and ethnicity sociology undergraduate classes at CWRU and how I endeavor to be a thermostat sociologist rather than a thermometer sociologist in the eyes of these college students.

In 1963, Birmingham represented the crucible of Jim Crow segregation and violence; it was referred to as “bomb-ingham” because there were sixty bombings and other untold violent crimes against the Black community that were unsolved at the time. Indeed, the protest actions that were the forerunner for the Birmingham campaign were begun in 1962 by local college students. These staggered economic boycotts yielded a forty percent decline downtown businesses. Over the next year, momentum built under SCLC leadership—sit-ins, kneel-ins in churches, pickets, and marches in Birmingham led to en masse arrests in a strategic effort to overwhelm Birmingham jail’s capacity. Yet, numbers of adult jail volunteers had dwindled, and King was reluctant to call on the pool of high school students with whom SCLC leaders had been holding meetings. King’s advisors prevailed and hundreds of high school students marched on the downtown business district. In response, Birmingham’s Public Safety Commissioner and arch-segregationist, Bull Connor, ordered fire hoses and police dogs in to disburse the nonviolent marchers. The chilling photographs of police brutality towards these students went viral around the world and the pendulum of society swung away from the segregated status quo in the direction of social change and integration.

Social order, social conflict, social status and social group membership, segregation and integration, domination and subordination—these social forces are all interwoven between these historic events in Birmingham. They are also what preoccupy sociologists. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to learn that King was a student of sociology and graduated with a degree in sociology from Morehouse College. Where was his thermostat among these classes, I wonder? Both then and now, I think the answer to this question is rooted in the application of knowledge and analysis to real life experiences--the analytical tools which help students make sense of the powerful social forces related to race in their social world. Here, the words of Beverly Daniel Tatum come to mind. “There is nothing so practical as a good theory,” Tatum reminds us at the beginning of her masterful explanation of the social and psychological forces behind student’s self-segregation patterns in school cafeterias.

First, being a thermostat sociologist means illustrating how the nature of race and racism in society has changed since the days of King's Letter from Birmingham Jail. Now, we distinguish between de jure and de facto discrimination when we speak of segregation. Schools are no longer segregated by law; instead, we need this distinction in order to recognize economic or social forces that drive school districts' lack of integration. All too often, though, students continue to understand present day race relations through the lens of overt racists as Bull Connor and overlook the covert manifestations of race such as institutional racism. As such, racism persists despite the absence of overt racists in society. This point was driven home to me this past semester when a student emailed me to suggest we view the film, *Crash*. Pleased that this young man was thinking about these issues outside of the classroom, I pursued his question. I discovered that sociologists critique the Oscar-winning film for restricting the audience's perceived level of racism to the personal, or between individuals level, while ignoring structural and institutional sources of racism which are far more consequential in our lives. With the student's permission, I use his inquiry and the process of discovery it elicited to introduce and underscore the changing nature of race over time.

Second, and most importantly, being a thermostat sociologist means grappling deeply with the concept and reality of white privilege. This is THE day—when the rubber meets the road. By accepting white privilege, students come to see that racism isn't just random acts of meanness by a few individuals, but a system of unearned dominance that confers merit upon members of the dominant group from birth. Consequently, it debunks the myth that society is a meritocracy and, for many students, letting go of this myth is extremely hard. The young Asian man in my class asks a provocative question out-loud: "given this situation, why would the dominant group WANT to dismantle a societal system that is weighted in their favor?" He has hit the nail on the head! This is why, I explain, white privilege is such a controversial topic and frequently provokes defensiveness, and ultimately, denial. It is often the first time members of the dominant racial group feel what it is like to be defined by their group membership and not their individual merits. White privilege implies one has not totally earned one's position. My most vocal, African American, male student erupts in anger and frustration towards the end of class as we are considering ways to address white privilege. "When I walk in this class, I don't know where to sit because, look around, all the black kids sit on the left side and the white kids sit on the right side of the classroom. F---, Tatum and her ideas about 'being the change you wish to see in the world'—that won't work for half of my friends who are in jail".

"I know, I know", I repeat, while I'm thinking there is NO WAY that I [white, middle-class, female] can claim to KNOW his experience as a young, black man growing up in society today. It is the most fiery exchange I have ever had with a student—this is the moment I either keep or lose this class. Raising my voice to match his, I insist he re-examine Tatum's solutions and I unpack the end of her book in greater detail for him. He softens. I decide it is actually a really good class because Isaac made keen observations about the power of race in our classroom seating and in his own life. It is far better for the class to witness Isaac and I work through our heated discussion than to sit through the usual silence that descends on a classroom when white privilege is discussed. I tell him

the same thing I told the frustrated young white male a few weeks earlier: “don’t hang up the phone”. In other words, keep coming to class, keep listening and engaging.

I believe it is through very REAL conversations like these that being a thermostat sociologist can change the racial weather. Even though the challenges are many, so too are the rewards, as I hope this essay describes.

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