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Abstract

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Reference


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WATERING SURROUNDING DESERTS: A LIFETIME OF SPREADING FEMINIST INSIGHTS. AN INTERVIEW WITH BARRIE THORNE, UC BERKELEY.

Laurence Bachmann

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Barrie Thorne – who was until recently Professor and Acting Chair of Gender & Women's Studies and Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley – has been active in the collective effort to bring feminism into the US academic world. She has fought relentlessly for over 40 years to promote women and gender studies in higher education. This creative sociologist is also a much appreciated teacher and mentor. I interviewed her on campus in February 2012, a few months before she retired.

Your friends and colleagues within academia appreciate your friendliness, engagement, broad knowledge and intense interest in people. Describing you as a kind and principled person, they emphasize most of all your unmatched generosity. To begin this interview, I’d like to ask you if you have some sociological thoughts on the origin of these attributes.

I’m honored by all this praise! I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s in a Mormon family and community in northern Utah. My ancestors were Mormon pioneers and hard working people. I now regard the Mormon or LDS church as patriarchal, right-wing and kind of foolish, and I am happily and proudly excommunicated, a move initiated by the church “elders” in 1980 because of my feminist views; I had been inactive for decades before then. But I have also come to appreciate the many things I received from growing up in a sharing and family-oriented Mormon community. I grew up in a large family with five children. Our mother was very principled with a steady sense of social justice both within and outside the family. Balancing individual needs with principles of fairness, she nurtured reciprocal relations among her children. Her children, now in their 60s and 70s, continue to stay in close contact and to take care of one another; we have a lifelong base of support. When you’re supported generously by others, it's easier to give to other people.

Being an older sister with responsibilities also influenced my development; I learned organizational skills and ways of helping others grow, and I also acquired a streak of bossiness, as my younger sisters and brothers will tell you! (laughs) I like creating and being in groups, and my passion for equity is partly rooted in a fear of being left out. If there’s a principle of sharing and mutual gift giving, then I feel a sense of belonging and also feel assured that others won’t take advantage. I like and thus work to create contexts of mutual care, sharing, and equity; to me, that’s the best way of running things. Those values animate my deep distaste for capitalism.


2 These attributes are described in correspondence with Arlie R. Hochschild (University of California, Berkeley), Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen (University of Oslo) and Raewyn Connell (University of Sydney).
Could you talk about your experiences breaking with Mormonism? Is there a relationship between this early rebellion and your subsequent commitments to feminism?

Although my parents were critical of many features of the Mormon Church, it was the community in which they each grew up and in which we lived. They were intellectuals, trying to create a critical tier of Mormonism like liberation theology within the Catholic Church. But they couldn’t succeed, because Mormonism (which doesn’t allow varied levels of involvement) is more like a sect than a church. It thrives on obedience and is threatened by organized critique. The church marginalizes and sometimes expels those who actively dissent. My siblings and I grew up with a kind of intellectual dissonance: we’d hear one thing at church and then our parents would question it at home. This encouraged us to think for ourselves. I’m glad that I know how it feels to have religious faith and to live in a totalizing world view (at least from a child’s perspective). But I also know how empowering it feels to break with and get distance on a closed, self-referential system of belief.

Feminism brought me, and many others, a new experience of breaking with and questioning received patterns of thought and practice. We began to see, make visible, and question hidden patriarchal assumptions within varied bodies of knowledge. Bettina Aptheker, a friend of mine who grew up in the inner circles of the U.S. Communist party and resigned when she became a feminist, once said to me: “You and I have a lot in common: we both got away from patriarchy.” Indeed, we both broke with patriarchal systems and found a lot more freedom on the other side.

You entered the field of sociology in the mid 1960’s and got involved in the women’s liberation movement of the 1970’s. How did it influence your sociological thinking?

In so many ways! I went through this trajectory with other women in the sociology graduate program at Brandeis University. We converged with many other women then going to school or working in the Boston area in consciousness-raising groups and the emergent women’s liberation movement. This was part of a nation-wide mobilization, as the women’s movement spread to different regions and ties began to develop across the country (my mother, living in Logan, Utah, became an active feminist in tandem with my own move into the women’s movement). The late 1960s and 1970s was an extremely generative time.

In an essay published in 1997, I wrote about the fruitful confluence between the women’s liberation movement and the intellectual contours of the Brandeis sociology department in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Brandeis University was created by the American Jewish community after World War II. The university welcomed many Jewish refugee intellectuals such as Lewis Coser, Herbert Marcuse, and Kurt Wolff, who had fled the Nazis in Germany and France. The sociology department also welcomed intellectual refugees, like my mentor, Everett C. Hughes, who fled forced retirement at the University of Chicago and Maurice Stein and Phil Slater who broke with conventional sociology at Columbia and Harvard. Our teachers were extremely critical of structural functionalism and positivism, the mainstream U.S. sociological frameworks at that time. They were influenced by Marx, Weber, Simmel, Freud, and the Frankfurt school of sociology. Everett Hughes and others brought in ethnographic and other interpretive methods. “Brandeis sociology” was a mix of European critical theory and historical and ethnographic approaches to empirical work.

The Brandeis approach resonated with the intellectual and emotional projects of women’s liberation, which also encouraged critical thinking. The feminist credo, “the personal is political,” fit beautifully with ethnographic practices, which offer tools for excavating everyday worlds of meaning and social practice and can be connected to larger structural and historical forces. In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, about half of the graduate students in the Brandeis sociology department were women – a much higher proportion than in other graduate programs in the field, and the women formed feminist bonds of mutual support. In the late 1960’s and through the 1970’s Brandeis produced more feminist sociologists per capita of graduate students than any other sociology graduate program in the country (Thorne, 1997). The department was alive with generative ideas, many developed among groups of students with support from our teachers, whom we also challenged.

In 1967 I joined with many other Brandeis students and faculty in actively protesting the U.S. war in Vietnam. I became active in the Boston area draft resistance movement which organized demonstrations and urged young men to resist military conscription. I decided to write my Ph.D. dissertation on the draft resistance movement, blending continued activism with sociological fieldwork. This was an unorthodox research stance which my adviser, Everett Hughes, encouraged, as long as I was reflexive about my activist stance. It was through draft resistance and the anti war movement that I came into contact with the ideas of women’s liberation and helped form a consciousness raising group that eventually became part of Bread and Roses, a Boston-area socialist-feminist organization active between 1969 and 1972. Many political and educational projects were generated through Bread and Roses, including the Boston Women’s Health Collective, which created Our Bodies, Ourselves, a practical and critical guide to women’s health.

Small consciousness-raising groups of many kinds proliferated in those years. In 1970 I became part of a mothers-daughters group in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which grew out of recognition that the sociological and psychological literature on family relations emphasized fathers and sons (the stuff of patriarchal transitions) and the oedipal dyads (mothers-sons, fathers-daughters), but paid little attention to mothers and daughters. We delved into our own experiences to generate shared insight. Our discussions launched Nancy Chodorow’s research on the reproduction of mothering; a published short story and a film project also came out of our weekly meetings.

What do you consider to be your main contribution to sociology of gender?

Besides teaching many students, I think that my book, Gender Play (1993), has been my most creative and influential contribution. Having children of my own alerted me to the adult-centered assumptions of the social sciences and opened my eyes to the ways in which children exert agency and develop their own perspectives and worlds of meaning. I came to see that children, like women, have been excluded from
traditional ideas about who exerts agency and whose standpoints inform conventional knowledge. In 1976 I started doing fieldwork in a public elementary school as a way of getting access to children and their practices. With gender issues on my mind, I explored the worlds children created on the playground and in subterranean moments and areas of classrooms, hallways, and the school cafeteria. It took me a while to step on out and assert that children actively participate not only in reproducing gender structures and meanings but also in processes of change. That led me into the “new” sociology of childhood, an approach that began to flourish in Europe in the 1980s, and I began to connect with childhood scholars in Scandinavia and the U.K.

The 1985 article I published with Judith Stacey on “The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology” and later updates (Stacey and Thorne, 1986; Thorne, 2006) have also been influential contributions. Judy and I began to notice and talk about the relative success of feminist rethinking in different academic disciplines. By the mid-1980s feminist scholars had upturned traditional assumptions in anthropology, literary criticism, and history, but feminist economists, who also developed critiques that unsettled disciplinary paradigms, made little headway in changing mainstream frameworks. Judy and I examined various ways in which the field of sociology coopted feminist ideas, e.g. by snapping up gender as a variable but not using it as a lens of theorizing and by containing rather than attending to the critical insights of Marxist-feminist theories. Continuing the chutzpah of “grading” entire disciplines, by 1996 I saw more progress of feminist insights and gender theories within U.S. sociology. We also began to emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary spaces – like gender and women’s studies, ethnic studies, and cultural studies – as sites of intellectual ferment and critique (Thorne 2006).

In Gender Play, you describe gender as “fluid”; could you explain what this means?

“Fluid” means that rather than being understood as a fixed binary, gender fluctuates in organization, salience, and meaning. This approach is associated with poststructuralism, but I first came to it through empirical research using ethnographic and interpretive methods. As I observed in the two schools that anchored my study, I noticed that children’s daily practices and meanings not only reproduced but also unsettled fixed and categorical understandings of gender. Postmodern critiques of essentialist way of thinking about gender later validated and buttressed my ethnographic insights and helped me move forward in writing the book.

How did you come up with the concept of “borderwork”?

As I worked on Gender Play, I began to look for a concept to articulate my observation that when girls and boys sometimes interacted in ways that strengthened rather than weakened gender boundaries. Working with field notes I had taken on school playgrounds, I mapped what Goffman called the “with and apart” of gender separation. Girls and boys often played in separate groups (“apart”), and sometimes they mixed in relaxed ways that eased divisions between them (“with”). But on some occasions boys and girls interacted in ways that firmed up rather than lessened gender boundaries, as when they played mixed-gender chasing games laced with cross-gender teasing and the use of language (“that girl’s chasin’ me!”) that conveyed a sense of being on opposite sides. Reading anthropologist Frederick Barth’s writing on ethnic boundaries helped me come up with the term “borderwork.”

In your latest research in an elementary school in Oakland, you widened your angle of vision to study not only gender but also other power relations such as race and class among children. What caused this change and what are your findings?

In this project I wanted to explore how gender, social class, racial-ethnicity, and age articulate with one another in the daily lives of children growing up in urban California. In the late 1980s I read in the Los Angeles Times that a total of 88 different languages were spoken by students attending Los Angeles public schools. This fact intrigued me. How did these children and young people make sense of so many cultural and linguistic differences? I later ran across the concept of “contact zones,” used by Mary Louise Pratt to describe colonial situations where people from varied historical trajectories and cultural backgrounds converge in situations where they are pressed to interact and make sense of one another. I began to frame an ethnographic study situated in the larger, dramatically changing political economy of urban California childhoods, characterized by widening social class divides and extensive cultural and language diversity related to high rates of immigration. In 1995 I gained research access to an elementary school in Oakland, California that had students from 11 different language groups and that was somewhat mixed by social class. As we did fieldwork and interviewing, my co-researchers and I tried to attend to converging and cross-cutting lines of difference related to social class, immigration, constructions of racial-ethnicity, gender, and age – with children’s experiences at the center. This was much more challenging than the singular focus on gender and age, with class and racial ethnicity at the edges, as I did in my earlier school-based fieldwork. One paradox I discovered and tried to illuminate was the fact that although social class divides are enormously consequential for the material conditions of children’s lives in the present and future, racial-ethnic, gender, and age distinctions were much more sharply coded and speakable in their day-to-day lives. This was partly because of the shame and “shamework” (anticipatory interventions to stave off or handle shame) associated with social class; it was also because the landscape of childhoods – patterns of residence, schooling, and everyday association – was deeply divided (Thorne 2008).

Over the course of your career you have been engaged in many efforts to bring feminist thought into mainstream sociology. In 2002, you received the American Sociological Association Jessie Bernard Award, given annually in recognition of scholarly work that has enlarged the horizons of sociology to more fully encompass the role of women in society. Could you describe some of the different strategies you have used to accomplish this important work?

“We” is a more appropriate pronoun than “you” since bringing feminist insights and practices into sociology has always been and continues to be a collective project. Over the last four decades feminist sociologists have sought to change mainstream sociology through critiques of the limitations and distortions of traditional frameworks and through the creation of new forms of knowledge. Feminist sociologists have always drawn on and dialogue with other forms of sociological theory and empirical

7

8
work; our perspectives are distinctive in keeping women’s varied lives and experiences in view, and in using gender and gender relations as tools of analysis.

Various branches of the women’s movement have provided insights for sociological theorizing and research. The Marxist roots of socialist-feminism made these political and intellectual tools especially useful for sociological projects. But we are also indebted to insights from radical feminism, starting with Shulamith Firestone and through the later work of theorists like Adrienne Rich, Andrea Dworkin, and Catharine MacKinnon. To my knowledge, radical feminism – highlighting male dominance as a unique form of oppression and emphasizing men’s violence against women, and their control of women’s bodies – is the only branch of feminist thought that emerged, initially, in the U.S. I believe this is because, due to a long history of anti-communism and ideas about American exceptionalism, the U.S. never developed a strong labor party and Marxist intellectual tradition, unlike most European countries and Australia. While labor traditions and Marxist theorizing enhanced class-progressive politics in other countries (much to the detriment of class struggle in the U.S.), they also tended to co-opt and defuse an emphasis on male dominance. It’s easy to criticize radical feminism as ahistorical and even simplistic, but the articulation of this perspective helped solidify feminism (including in “socialist-feminism”) and to bring issues like rape, sexual harassment, and woman battering into full view. Sociologists of gender have done valuable work in illuminating these issues, along with the gendering of labor, medicine, education, the state, and many other sites of social living.

U.S. feminist scholars in sociology have developed an infrastructure for mutual support and political mobilization, both within and beyond the discipline, by creating organizations like the Sex and Gender Section of the American Sociological Association and Sociologists for Women in Society (www.socwomen.org), an autonomous feminist organization that encourages activism of many kinds. These, and many less formal groups and networks, provide contexts for feminist scholars to try out ideas, air issues, and get help in maneuvering institutions and careers. We have our own specialized journals in feminist sociology, notably Gender & Society, sponsored by SWS; feminist sociologists also publish articles in interdisciplinary journals like Signs and Feminist Studies; providing much material for scholarship and teaching. In the early 1970s it was possible to be on top of most feminist sociological work, as well as feminist writing in other areas. Now, the amount of feminist writing is far beyond one reader’s capacity, especially if one tries to read more globally and across disciplines.

Feminist institution building has also taken place at the local level, with the creation of gender and women’s studies departments, programs, and research institutes in colleges and universities across the U.S. (sociologists of gender often link their departments to interdisciplinary spaces; some have joint appointments, as I do). To use a metaphor I have long used and enjoyed, these feminist academic spaces are oases from which we water surrounding deserts, create tools for survival, and nurture a next generation of scholars and teachers.

The symposium on Dorothy Smith that you co-organized with Barbara Laslett and published in Sociological Theory in 1992 also jostled mainstream sociology, didn’t it?

Back in the zestful times of early second-wave feminism, we organised what we called “zap actions.” For example, in 1970 the Brattle Theatre, an art cinema in Harvard Square in Cambridge, showed pornography with a pretentious explanation that the series was designed to explore the aesthetic forms of a specific genre of film. The women in our Bread and Roses CR group saw it as an occasion for horny Harvard boys to see porn with an intellectual excuse. We found a queue of young men waiting to get in and, deciding to do a zap action, we walked along the line, asking, “Does your mother know you’re here?” and “How do you think pornography treats women?” (laugh). We also had stickers that said “This insults women!” which we put on sexist ads in public spaces, and we once spray painted the car of a well-known sexual harasser (laugh)!

The symposium on Dorothy Smith’s theoretical contributions was an intellectual zap action. A group of feminist sociologists had tried, for a number of years, to get the American Sociological Association (ASA) Theory Section and journal to include more acknowledgement of and dialogue with feminist theory. Some of us joined and became active in the Theory Section with that goal in mind. Barbara Laslett and I decided that Dorothy Smith – a contemporary feminist sociological and feminist theorist in generative dialogue with Marxism, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology – was an ideal scholar to promote as we sought to water this arid domain. We persuaded the chair of the Theory Section to sponsor an ASA session focused on Smith’s theoretical work (the contributions were later published in Sociological Theory (Laslett and Thorne, 1992). The session followed another very dull, theory session, with mostly men speaking and attending; many of them walked out rather than staying on for our session. The contrast in spirit was phenomenal; the first one droned on in a boring way; ours was full of high spirits and laughter. Passionate engagement speaks for itself.

You also advocated that the book Our Bodies, Ourselves be nominated as one of the most influential books in sociology.

That was a 1995 zap action, which I undertook with a feminist social historian, Linda Gordon, whom I knew from Bread and Roses days in Boston. In the mid 1990s Linda and I were both on the editorial board of Contemporary Sociology, the ASA journal of reviews. As a way of honoring the 25th anniversary of the journal, the editor, Dan Clawson, organized a forum of essays about the ten most influential books in the social sciences in the previous 25 years (the project assumed, as does most U.S. academic life, a skew to U.S.-based knowledge). All 28 members of the journal’s board nominated books, and Dan compiled the results. The books most frequently nominated included only two by women (Nancy Chodorow; Theda Skocpol). The only feminist book was Chodorow’s, The Reproduction of Mothering. The top nominees (e.g., by Braverman, Geertz, Bourdieu, Said, and Foucault) were mostly in the vein of social theory. And yet, as Dan Clawson observed in introducing the forum, between 1971 and 1996, feminism led to more changes in the social sciences than any other social factor. Linda Gordon and I felt that the many intellectual shifts opened by feminism should be more fully acknowledged, and we proposed including...
Our Bodies, Ourselves by the Boston Women’s Health Collective among the top ten. Dan made an executive decision to do so, which was quite controversial. In our essay (Gordon and Thorne, 1996), Linda and I argued that Our Bodies, Ourselves exemplifies the transformative influence of feminism on both popular and academic knowledge. It opened insight into the political construction of bodies, long before Foucault, and it exemplifies the collective generation of new knowledge, in the context of radical movements, as opposed to the masculinized canon by individual “theory stars” in the academy.

Looking back over the last four decades of all your critical work, what are your reflections on these struggles?

All in all it’s been quite satisfying. There are still many problems in the world of women (and men), especially those related to global capitalism, militarism, and the deteriorating environment. But we have made headway in bringing marginalized people and their standpoints and problems into greater visibility. Relationships between feminist intellectual and activist work need closer attention, and academic work in the U.S. including feminist work, is far too insular; we need to knit stronger transnational ties.

From a personal perspective, I’ve been personally blessed in having held a sequence of tenure-track jobs, including joint positions in sociology and gender and women’s studies. Taking stock of the local intellectual landscape, I’m troubled by an increase in disciplinary policing; for example, the UC Berkeley sociology department, long known for being intellectually eclectic and encouraging public sociology, is becoming more professionalized. When I joined the faculty in 1995, six of the 28 tenure-track faculty specialized in gender; due to retirements and one unjust tenure denial, we’re now down to three, two of us half-time in the department, and I’m soon retiring. Some of the faculty in sociology are overtly hostile to feminist sociology and have blocked our efforts to replace the sociologists of gender who have left. From a global and national vantage point, feminist social science continues to grow and to change along with new political and intellectual developments. But there are also points of backlash.

I would also note that the UCB Gender and Women’s Studies Department is flourishing. When I arrived 17 years ago, the department had fewer faculty, all but one with joint appointments. When I became department chair, I became convinced that women’s and gender studies programs need a core of full time faculty who have a deep stake in interdisciplinary work. We persuaded the university administration of the need for full-time positions, and we now have six full-time faculty plus three with joint appointments. The next generation of gender and women’s studies faculty are engaged in exciting interdisciplinary work, and we have close political, intellectual, and organizational ties with LGBT Studies, African American Studies, and Ethnic Studies, which furthers our shared goal of understanding gender as it articulates with other relations of power. The UCB Department of Gender and Women’s Studies has special strengths in queer theory and in transnational feminism. As an older second wave feminist, I’ve learned a lot from participating in the struggles and creative energy bound up in generational transitions infused with a spirit of goodwill.

Creativity is indeed a preoccupation that infuses your work and your teaching. Could you tell us more about the way you think about its role in interdisciplinary spaces, such as departments of gender studies?

Returning to my earlier metaphor, I see interdisciplinary spaces, such as gender studies departments, as oases from which to water various deserts. That’s an autobiographical image since my pioneer ancestors used irrigation to make the desert of Utah a habitable place, and my father, a farm boy, became an expert on irrigation. The image of watering and nurturing also describes what happens in teaching feminist ideas. To shift metaphors, when they are exposed to feminist perspectives, students often catch on fire, developing intellectual and a personal engagement with ideas. It’s partly because feminist topics and insights reach into their experiences, but also because the insights stretch in new directions. Social movements that break with old ideas often generate creativity.

Creativity and engagement can also be unleashed when one falls in love with a discipline. That’s what happened to me when I first encountered anthropological and sociological frameworks; they opened my eyes and I could see new things. But, having been in academia for over four decades, I have also seen how disciplines can become like a series of crossword puzzles – each self-contained, with intellectual work as a kind of shuffling of pieces already in place. Disciplines – and academic culture in general – are also places of status marking: build your CV, get your publications, look at the citation count, and worry, worry, about your ranking. These practices smash creativity!

I often think about an observation once made by my late husband, Peter Lyman, that people ask about the conditions that might nurture creativity. We should give more individual and collective thought to that question. Teaching can open spaces of creativity, inviting a playful approach to ideas. I wish departments were more that way.

I think the way you teach is very inspiring; you really empower the students to think critically and speak up. This could be considered as another form of feminism in action. You have received five awards for mentoring and teaching from different universities and professional associations and contributed to the literature on feminist pedagogy. Could you share some of your reflections about teaching? How did you come up with your teaching methods?

When I started teaching, I gave a lot of thought to my own past experiences with teachers and with classrooms I experienced as empowering, playful, and engaging, compared with those that felt boring, disturbing and/or authoritarian. Soon after I started my first faculty job, at Michigan State University, a feminist colleague in another department suggested that we sit in on lectures given by others and see how they taught. I realized then that my model of a good lecturer was a highly performative and authoritative man, who took up a lot of space as he talked. Women, my friend and I observed in this tour of big lecture halls, more often stayed silent, almost hiding behind the podium.
During my initial years of university teaching, I collaborated with Nancy Henley, a feminist psychologist, in research on gender-inflected patterns in verbal and nonverbal communication (Thorne and Henley, 1975). This work attuned me to the gendered dynamics of classrooms, including spatial and seating arrangements, patterns of speech and silence, and varied mixes of lecturing and discussion. I reflected on my own experiences of feeling silenced and scared to talk when I was in college and my amazement when I realized that others — nearly always men — felt entitled to say whatever came into their heads, even if they hadn’t done the reading. I vowed I wouldn’t be the kind of teacher who lets that happen in my classrooms (this is easier said than done).

In my undergraduate classes, I have sometimes opened discussions of speech and silence. Occasionally students volunteer slices of autobiography, describing their own trajectories of classroom seating (in front; on the side; in the back) and of participation. I tell my classes that I want to encourage silent students to come to voice (“Let’s hear from students who haven’t yet spoken”). If it’s possible, I try to rearrange chairs into a circle, and if it’s a smaller class seated at a rectangular table, I sometimes sit on the side rather than the end so that participants are more likely to disperse their eye contact. It’s been found in empirical studies of large classrooms that after asking a question, the teacher often looks at those who have talked before, in effect cueing them to talk yet again. If you try to look at another part of the classroom and catch someone who seems to have words in their throat ready to come out, you can sometimes help words to pour out. But it’s important not to humiliate students or put them on the spot. If I’m teaching a class with fifty students or less, I ask them to introduce themselves. Sometimes I ask them to make or wear nametags. In large classes, I ask students say their names before they speak. These are efforts to make present and acknowledged. In lectures and discussions I often share details and stories from my personal life; I run the risk of over-sharing, and my children haven’t always appreciated it (laughs)! I figure if I make myself vulnerable, then maybe other people will do the same. My main goal is to make classrooms more personal and accessible.

What about your use of humour? I’ve never laughed so much in a class.

That’s not deliberate. I’m happy when people say that I’m funny, because I don’t think of myself as a humorist (laughs)! But I do have a sense of irony about a lot of things that happen in life and especially in academia. I think that’s a good sensibility to cultivate because our days are often so unnecessarily serious and laced with anxiety. Humor (when it’s not the aggressive kind) makes for conviviality. I like to have a good time when I teach.

You’re retiring next summer. What will that be like?

I have some ambivalence about retiring, but it’s definitely time — I’ll turn 70 this May. I’m trying to adjust to the idea of retirement before the moment arrives. It’s time for a next generation to move fully into place, and, given the increasingly scarce resources in U.S. higher education, I think it’s unethical to draw a salary beyond this point.

After I retire, I will continue to do some academic writing and will step up my involvement in organized efforts to stave off the privatization of public education. In 2009, when the current budget crisis heated up, I helped form a UC Berkeley faculty group called SAVE. We wrote position papers and tried to reach the media with critiques of the privatization of public education; we also worked with students and unions to organize demonstrations protesting cutbacks and the sharp increase in student tuition and fees. We’ve had several big fights in the Academic Senate about the university’s collaboration with corporations like Novartis and British Petroleum, which restricts academic freedom and promotes the growing corporatization of public universities. In the University of California Office of the President, which oversees the ten-campus university system, there are only four employees with academic backgrounds. Instead, there are lawyers and lots of business and managerial types, and academic values are rapidly eroding. These are some of the issues our political group is trying to enjoin. We are working with students and staff (many of whom are unionized) on our campus, and we are developing stronger ties with activists at other UC campuses, community colleges, the California State University system, and teachers in primary and secondary public schools. We also hope to reach out to parents. This is a vision for the kind of organizing we want to do, and we have far to go to save and rejuvenate institutions committed to the public good rather than to private gain.

My fieldwork in public schools in California made me aware of their deteriorating conditions, widening social class divides, and the unmet needs of immigrant and low-income children and young people. I value public education and after I retire, I’ll have more time to devote to these political struggles. After I retire, I also hope to have a less pressed life and to grow in new directions. I’ll spend more time with my son and daughter and their families, including three grandchildren. I’m blessed with lots of friends and I’m blessed with family, which brings me back to the opening theme in our conversation.

References


