

Teaching Fieldwork in Sociology

Cases of Participant Observation in Higher Learning

The field of sociology emerged in the 19th century with no model to follow as a new discipline. It stood between the sciences and the humanities but science had become the way people determined “facts” about the natural world. Sociology then started as a descriptive, objective, historical measurable and quantitative explanation of social world in society.

Auguste Comte was the first to coin the term "sociology" as a “positive” science. Positivism was a quest for "invariant laws” of nature and now Comte claimed that the same quest for “laws” to understand society. Comte described three basic methods for discovering these invariant laws as, *observation, experimentation, and comparison*.

The formation of a subjective and qualitative side of sociology began with European scholars like Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber and Americans like Albion Small, Herbert Blumer, and Everett Hughes.¹

Weber argued that social action” required an “interpretive” method called *verstehen*. This interpretive method meant understanding the meaning people attach to their own conduct. For Weber, understanding the “subjective life of others” was critical to sociology. “Social action” referred to an internal “fact” of meaning in human experience. That is, the meaning was a fact from the viewpoint of the people being studied.²

Weber was suggesting that sociologists should “walk in the shoes” of the people being studied. Sociology should treat the actor as a subject, rather than as an object of observation. Human actors could *not* be fully understood simply by observing their behavior from the outside. People are *not* merely the product of external institutions like the military, a church or government. People create their own world by socially interacting and giving their conduct meaning.³

The method of *Verstehen* would require a systematic and rigorous form of inquiry but Weber did not describe “*the method*” in any detail. Nonetheless, his concept was close to a method in anthropology called participant observation. The aim of fieldwork was for the observer to find a close and intimate familiarity with a given group of people. It meant, “taking their roles” in the group, finding an intensive involvement with them usually over an extended period of time. The method was followed by social anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski in Britain, the students of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and also Margaret Mead in the United States.⁴

My purpose here is to illustrate how this method of fieldwork allows students to gain an interior understanding of people in society. It means living “inside” a social setting with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of what life is like there. We will also see how this fieldwork fits the purposes of a liberal arts college.

A “liberal arts college” has a mission to help students think for themselves. But fieldwork through participant observation gives them something more. Fieldwork brings students new feelings and helps them find emotional maturity. It gives them an opportunity to *feel* their way into different ways of life. It leads them from small worlds into bigger ones; it brings students away from limited, safe settings into larger, and more demanding ones. It is the *experience* that challenges their narrow outlooks and ideologies. Finally, it helps students understand personally the greater complexity of life in society.⁵

Teaching Undergraduates

Illinois College

When I was teaching sociology to undergraduates at Illinois College in the 1950s I gave a course on community organization. I asked students to conduct fieldwork in small towns around Jacksonville and take the roles of people who lived there. They attended town council meetings and took the positions as local

citizens, joined recreation clubs, sat with mayors to see what their work entailed, attended churches, worked for days in a local business, etc. They were there in these towns (e.g. Concord and Chapin) to see the round of life in different roles and settings. They came back to class to discuss how they were able to be accurate in reporting on about life in rural communities. It meant being accurate both subjectively and objectively. It was an experiment in learning what lay inside the minds of local citizens as well as to describe factually the town's history and economic organization.

That was just the beginning.

One day I was teaching a class that included the subject of race in society. All students claimed to believe in equality among people of all kinds. But among some 60 students, there was one African-American, called a Negro in those days.

I suggested that on Saturday the class all go swimming at the public pool for fun. I was curious about the lack of racism in class. We all went to Nichols Park and to the entrance of the pool. But our black student was not allowed to enter. All white students entered automatically while the black student and I stayed outside. We watched them all swim happily in the pool while we stood outside the fence. I realized how much the classroom was different from the public pool.

Later we talked about the gap between what students say in class what happens in daily life. The white students said it was just the "custom" and they had thought nothing about it.

As we talked about the event in class, the inequality and segregation hit home with students. Two white students (and I) decided to go into an ice cream parlor with our black friend. We sat down and asked the waiter for a dish of ice cream. The white students and I were served the ice cream but our black friend was refused any service. It was another learning event.

The case was then brought before a local judge. He was friendly to us and found the refusal to be unlawful discrimination. I cannot remember the "law" cited by the judge but it was a lesson for

everyone about the distance between gown and town. This was a decade before the lunch “sit-ins” and Martin Luther King.

Boston College

When I was teaching Introductory Sociology at Boston College in 1967, I suggested “participant observation” to students as a way to understand the life of people who might be different from them. They were invited to do fieldwork and write a paper on their experience.

I gave an example of how different cultures (ways of life) could be found along Washington Street in Boston. The Street stretched through the shopping district and the Combat Zone (with strip clubs) and finally out to the suburbs. One student liked that idea and took it on as his project. He made a movie of both sides of Washington Street while stopping to talk with people along the way. He wanted to know why residents and businesses were there, and how people felt about it. He had to estimate the veracity of what persons told him in his short inquiry.

He wrote a superb term paper with a discussion of reliability and validity in his work. He also showed his movie to the class. He was so excited by what he learned that every student in class got energized, personally involved, like walking the same street.

I talked in another class about how Chicago sociologists in the 1930s had published their fieldwork notes while living with the homeless, called “hoboes, tramps, and vagrants”.

One student said that he wanted to know what it was like to be “homeless”. I said: “It would be hard because you are not homeless but you could see how far you could go with it.” He went out on a street in downtown Boston and begged for money in ragged clothes. He spent a night in a homeless shelter called the Pine Street Inn. For his paper, he got an “A” based on its quality, sensitivity and accuracy. The experience changed his life.

It also changed mine.

I decided to do a “validity check” on his work. I spent a night at the Pine Street Inn. I experienced the same conditions that he wrote about. This included being frisked for weapons, undressing to go

into a shower to get clean, sleeping on a cot with a hundred other men in a large room. I heard the local “T” train charging by my window every few minutes at night, waking me up; I heard night screams (nightmares) of men who would wake up not knowing who they were. That was the beginning of further work that students and I began to do on the streets of Boston.⁶

Kasanof’s Bakery

One of my graduate students saw a notice in the Boston Globe that Kasanof’s Bakery in Roxbury was about to be shut down. The unions were on strike and the owner (living in New York) decided to sell the building. Students and I went to the Bakery and talked to the workers. We suggested that workers buy the plant itself because it was still profitable. (The owner did want to face the cost of a strike by the unions at the time.) They scoffed at the idea but agreed to meet collectively at the Arlington Street Church to talk about it. About a hundred workers showed up, all African American and poor.

Several others joined us (a graduate student at Harvard and a professional economist) to talk about the idea with these Kasanof workers at the Arlington Street Church. I obtained a grant to hire some one to provide technical assistance. We formed a committee at the American Friends Service Committee to help workers buy out companies and manage their own business.

The workers had no money; they were too poor to buy the Company. But as they talked, we realized that the owner would owe them back-vacation time pay. The money owed to the workers by the owner with his shutdown would add up collectively to a quarter of the cost of the Company, seven hundred thousand out of a sale price of about two million dollars. The owner was not aware of his legal obligation. This was a shock to him as well as to the workers.

The workers agreed to place their individual vacation payments in a bank together. (The manager of the plant was white, not black, and offered to put \$10,000 of his own money into the purchase; his daughter was taking courses at the Boston College School of

Management.) The professional economist then went to the Small Business Administration to obtain a guarantee a loan from a local bank. The guarantee was ninety percent of money to be borrowed by the workers from a local bank.

This would be enough to complete the deal. We began to negotiate with the owner.

But local banks were reluctant to loan the money to the workers – in spite of the SBA’s ninety percent guarantee. Bank officials would not say “why” but it was pretty evident that racism was involved along with the fact that bank officials had never seen anything like this before -- a workers’ purchase of their own company. Could the workers manage their own company?

The owner came up from New York to negotiate with us. The workers refused to talk with him at first, partly out of shyness and because they had never done anything like this before. They watched on the sidelines during the negotiating process in the lawyer’s office.

As we were proceeding to discuss the price, six workers (representing the unions) began to lean forward. I heard them whispering about the sale. One trucker said: “We know those [truck] routes better than management. If we were to own this Company, we could take routes that would be faster, quicker, and save money.” I heard another worker in the bakery say: “We can’t let those loaves fall off the assembly line on to the floor. If we do, we lose money.” Pretty soon, the workers were sitting up at the table with us. They began to engage in the negotiations. We began to make an agreement.

But the banks and also a state agency refused to loan the money. The whole effort failed at the last minute,

Yet it was a start for a lot more to happen. It advanced the cause for worker ownership in Boston in many ways. The story hit the newspapers for greater public awareness. A study was made on the total welfare cost to the state after the shutdown. It was found that the state of Massachusetts would lose more money paying welfare

for unemployed workers than by loaning them money to buy the plant.

The state agency on economic development learned about a new way to save jobs. After that event, we would never have difficulty getting loans from the state for worker “takeovers.”⁷

We organized a nonprofit company to help workers learn how to purchase and manage their own company. We made requests and received capital from private foundations. That nonprofit company still exists, and is financially self-sufficient. It is today helping workers purchase their own companies. One of my graduate students is on the board of directors.⁸

Puerto Rico

I was invited to teach in Rio Piedras at the University of Puerto Rico. The undergraduate students in my course wanted to study the environment. I told them about “participatory fieldwork.” They liked the idea and so we went with a chemist to document how the waste from factories were being sent out into the ocean, how the forests, vegetation, and rivers were being destroyed by pollution. Some of their findings on the destruction were brought to the Island’s office of Environmental Protection (EPA.)

The Island’s EPA director was grateful for documentation of the damage being done to the environment. The students were shocked to find that the EPA did not have enough staff and money to keep track of all the pollution. The corporations had more money, more power and more lawyers than the EPA. Students learned a lot from this experience about corporate power and politics.

I was so impressed by the student work that I decided to make some field inquiries myself. Environmental damage was a major criticism made by a political party called *Partido Independentista*. The Party aimed to gain independence from the United States.

Revolutionaries were hiding in the hills trying to stop American companies from polluting their Island. They were bombing and blowing up the sites where American copper companies were digging to find copper veins under the ground.

Students had evidence that companies were massively damaging the environment. I found a Puerto Rican in Roxbury who hated the United States as a colonial power. He took me out to where the rebels were hiding in the hills. I saw maps on the walls of their cabin where they were dynamiting the copper sites. If the rebels were found in this location, they were up for capital punishment.

I talked to them with the aid of my Puerto Rican friend who had brought me to them deep into the hills. He vouched for me as “okay.” The rebels said that they had been farmers who had been affected by the copper companies. Damages had been done to their property and people had been harmed.

I did not stay long. I realized that if I were caught with them I would go to prison.

I decided to talk to one of the farmers harmed by the companies. He was far out into the hinterland but my Puerto Rican friend found him. I asked him if he had been harmed. He said that his son had dropped a lighted match down one of the holes in the earth made by the company. The gases in the hole blew up and burned his son badly and that he almost died.

The Company told the farmer that it was not their fault that his son was seriously injured. There were warning signs by the hole. It was the boy’s fault. They would pay for his son’s hospital bills if the father would let them buy his property. There was a copper vein running beneath his land. The farmer said the Company was planning to follow a long the line of copper veins. “They would rip up” all the good land and forest. And “waste” would be sent out to sea.

The information gathered by students was distributed to the public and a great debate was held on the Island. The Governor said he wanted American copper companies, not foreign. He was in close contact with Amax and Kennecott Copper. He was making a deal with them through the Island’s Industrial Mission. I talked to one of the government’s top officers about alternative plans but I made no progress.

I wrote to a Swedish copper company to see whether they were willing to come to the Island and do the mining under special conditions. I wrote in effect: “You would train Puerto Ricans to mine copper. After you [the Swedish Copper Company] made an agreed-upon profit, your property would be sold back to Islanders. The Islanders would set up community development corporations in the towns with nearby excavations. Islanders would then oversee and co-own the property and mining with local workers. An Island wide co-operative would be set up later when more towns were involved.”

The Swedish Copper Company wrote back in agreement with my idea and said they would come to Puerto Rico to discuss it. They understood worker ownership. Their workers’ pension funds owned big corporations in Sweden.

But my sabbatical year was over and I could not meet with them. They went instead to the Island’s Industrial Mission. The government had planned to let the Americans buy properties secretly and make all the profits. They said they would “create jobs” for the island. I learned that Kennecott Copper had signed an agreement with the government before the Swedish Company could get there.

When I returned home, David Ackerman, the vice president of AMAX Copper Company came to Boston College to talk with me. He was interested in the idea and suggested that I write an article for a book that he would sponsor on this topic. But my colleagues suggested that I decline. They thought my inquiry might be misused under Company control. I then placed part of the story in the Appendix of my book on *The Social Economy*.⁹

The Overall Picture

Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead were fieldwork pioneers in the study of different cultures. They suggested that fieldworkers should look for “master themes” when they study a whole society. Their work was interdisciplinary and broke through the segregated disciplines. The flaws in their fieldwork (as great and pioneering as they might be) indicated to me that fieldwork in this mode needed

to be balanced by empirical studies. Nonetheless, without money for empirical studies, I asked myself: Was there a “master theme” in the culture of the Island?¹⁰

I began to see how “self-governance” was a constant theme of life among people on the island. So I decided to come back and study the culture myself. I kept a Journal. This research opened my eyes – not only to the master theme of self-governance -- existing in every institution – but also to the notion “societal development.” This research is posted on my webpage as *Self Governance in Puerto Rico*.

The methodology of participant observation requires training for professional skills. These skills are much more complex than can be taught to undergraduates. It requires graduate work similar to training a lawyer or a physician. The method is complicated with different levels of comprehending how to do fieldwork in the right way. It requires knowing how to establish the validity of subjective data; it requires learning how to ascertain reliability; it requires learning how to keep a proper relationship -- distance versus closeness -- to the subjects studied.¹¹

The method is closer to the humanities than the sciences. It involves special training to determine “truth” in the subjective life others. The real skill and knowledge begins in graduate school.

Graduate Students

In the 1930s, the late sociologist William Foote Whyte lived in a slum district of Boston that was inhabited by first and second-generation immigrants from Italy. The neighborhood was dangerous; crime was prevalent. Some Italians were suspected allies of Italian fascism.

Whyte lived in that district for three and a half years, including 18 months living with an Italian family. His book *Street Corner Society* became a classic. It describes the social life of the whole neighborhood.

In describing local politics, he saw the interweaving of racketeering on the one hand, and the importance of WPA jobs on

the other hand. The book uncovered facts about collusions that could be dangerous when exposed. As we shall see below, this type of participant observation research can be quite revealing about what goes on beyond public awareness. Some activities students found would be considered criminal today.

Guatemala

I was teaching a course on global corporations to graduate students at Boston College in 1970 when a Maryknoll priest came on campus talking about his experiences in Guatemala. He told horror stories about the government “dictatorship” and its ties to the United Fruit Company. I had trouble believing what he described as “facts.” So I told the class that it would be important to do some fieldwork in that country to determine the accuracy of what he said. No student volunteered. I saw how it would be costly and dangerous for them. I said that I would look into it and bring back my findings to class.

I looked in my Boston phone book and found the headquarters of the Company located in the Prudential Building. I called the Director of Public Relations and asked if I might do some fieldwork in Guatemala. He was skeptical but invited me to come to his office. After checking my credentials, he said that I might be allowed to live on a plantation for a summer – if I got clearance from the Vice President of Agriculture.

I saw the Vice President and was “cleared” to live on a plantation in Honduras. I took notes on the social structure of the plantation. Honduran workers were segregated apart from the main headquarters by a high wire fence. The housing arrangements for workers had one outdoor toilet built for eight families. Families lived in connected wood planked houses crafted so badly that you could see through open boards from one apartment to the next. I saw the neighborhood of prostitutes living next to the plantation for male workers, the spraying of dangerous pesticides, and much more that could be easily documented. I asked to enter Guatemala.

The Company refused my entry into Guatemala at first because of the danger of living there, but later the administration allowed me to go. I was placed in a fancy apartment next to the Company's airfield. It was a safe place for visitors, like American Generals, again fenced off from the workers.

I insisted on going out to view the areas where the workers were picking bananas. I wanted see how the work took place in the fields. After some reluctance, the local headquarters let me go on a train, I went on the train full of curiosity.

I sat down by chance next to a fellow who had a machine gun on his lap. I asked him what he planned to do with it. He told me that it was hazardous working in the fields because rebels would attack. I kept on talking with him and others in shacks near the fields. I found out that the Guatemala government had an army out there. It was the job of the Company to feed their army. I thought to myself: "That is a "very close" working relationship between a private business and a state.

I went back and talked with the Company's public relations officer. As I was confirming this corporate-state army relationship, we were interrupted by a phone call to him from the President of Guatemala. I heard the PR officer saying that they "do not have room to employ a hundred workers who had supported the President's candidacy for office," He was frustrated.

But the PR officer finally said on the phone that the Company would find some place to pay the President's volunteers to work. The officer then told me how much the Company is dependent upon the government to keep itself safe.

I wrote a journal of all my experiences on the plantation. I kept in mind that someone in the Company at some point would read it. So I wrote how this was "not a free market when supporting a government army." Furthermore the Company was supporting the party in power financially, basically, sustaining a dictator. I could see why rebels, seeking a democratic government,

could be fighting the Company and the government.

I noted how workers in the fields would steal Company instruments, thinking themselves justified by the fact that they were so poor and the Company so rich. I noted how the Company owned schools and a hospital in the area. I wondered how Americans might feel if a foreign government owned schools in the United States. I wrote about such “facts” in this community along with my reactions to them.

I wrote in detail about how the Company could remove itself from collusion with this dictatorship (and “non-free-market”) situation. In my journal I imagined how the company could train workers in self-management. Over time employees could be given the opportunity to buy the subsidiary and sell bananas to the Company. The Company could keep some Americans there for oversight but they would have to learn the local language. The Company would set an example for social development and make money. Indeed, it would be more profitable for the Company to follow this plan.

I detailed the alternatives in my diary, structurally and financially. The U.S. was in a Cold War with the Soviet Union. Citizens in the Soviet Union, I wrote, did not eat bananas and would not interfere with the process. Furthermore, the “public relations” of The United Fruit Company would improve in Middle America. People hated the Company and most important, the change would be more profitable than under present conditions.

How?

If the subsidiary became worker-owned, the Company would make money by *not* paying to support a dictator’s party and feed government troops. They would *not* be paying the costs of a hospital and schools in the surrounding area. The workers would *not* steal hammers and tractors from their own (worker-owned) company. I went and on and on about how United Fruit could make more money by this plan.

I sent a copy of my journal to the Department of Public Relations in Boston, and figured that action might be the end of the story. But one day when I was talking with my class about my findings, I showed videos I had taken of the banana plantations. Students saw the segregation, the barbed wire fence, the poor housing, the prostitution, etc. I wanted to check my “facts”, and be as objective as possible; and so I called the Company to come lecture to my class on their outlook on the situation.

The public relations officer told me that he had sent my journal to the President of the Company (John Fox) and he wanted to come out to my class to talk to my students. I said “Great! Send him over.”

The President came to my office with several associates carrying a tape recorder. I reached for my own tape recorder and we went to class. He opened his talk to my students by saying that he is “just a farmer”. There was nothing on the land before the Company came to create fertile land and create jobs for people. Employees were given excellent medical care, rent-free housing, and six years of free schooling for children. By clearing and draining thousands of acres of jungle that are today among the country's most productive farm lands, United Fruit converted Guatemala into a major banana producer, thereby ending the country's unhealthy dependence on its exports of coffee.

The students were ready to ask him questions. They asked the Company President how “intimate” the Company was with the U.S. State Department. They said that the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles had been on the board of directors of the Company and that his brother was head of the CIA. The Company orchestrated a media campaign against the Arbenz government. And they kept going with more strong questions.¹²

The President the Company recognized a problem existed “back then” but today it is much harder to get the State Department to do anything for them.

Students said they saw the movie that their professor had taken with the wire fence segregating the workers. Only card-carrying office workers were permitted to pass the gate and the guard. The President, in turn, said he was not aware of the segregation. This led the students to wonder whether he had ever been down there.

John Fox said to me later that the idea of worker-owned companies was interesting but he did not think that the workers could keep up the good quality of their bananas. I said that it would take maybe three years to train them but it would be worth it. They could have a contract guaranteeing to continue to sell bananas to the Company for a decade. It would take away the need for rebels to attack the plantation. It would help maintain a free market. He said he wanted to have lunch with me and talk about worker self-management.

He said he would call me to meet for lunch but as a week passed, I saw the stock rise sharply on the Company. I learned that Eli Black was secretly buying the company hoping to get his hands on its great capital reserves. Black bought 733,000 shares of United Fruit in 1968, becoming the company's largest shareholder. He put John Fox on the board of directors. I was told that Fox left later to become president of the Hood Milk Company.

In June 1970, Black merged United Fruit with his own public company (AMK) to create the *United Brands Company*. United Fruit had far less cash than Black had counted on and Black's mismanagement led to United Brands becoming crippled with debt. On February 3, 1975, Black committed suicide by jumping out of his office on the 44th floor of the Pan Am Building in New York City. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission exposed a scheme by United Brands to bribe Honduran President Oswaldo Lopez Arellano with \$1.25 million, plus the promise of another \$1.25 million upon the reduction of certain export taxes.¹³

My students learned a lot from their study of this case. The

public relations officer later wrote book on the types of exploitation and dominance that he knew about the Company from the inside.¹⁴

Nicaragua

Two of my graduate students at BC wanted to do field research on the Sandinista government. I was interested in what they might find and said: “Go for it.” One of them was already in Nicaragua and the other one (Richard) was planning to join him when I suggested we talk to the opposition.¹⁵

Their enthusiasm for the Sandinistas was overwhelming and so I said: “Let’s talk to people who were there in opposition to the Sandinista government. Richard was not happy about it but I said, “You need a rounded (objective) picture to do this research.” I added: “Give me the names of American companies who were down there when the revolution took place. We will talk to the American corporation presidents and see what happened.

He found me some company names. From my office I called the president of a company that made refrigerators and whose headquarters were in New Orleans. Richard was in my office to hear the phone conversation. I explained to the company’s president that some of us at BC were doing research on the Sandinistas. I wanted to know his experience with them. His answer was: “Those god damn bastards destroyed one of my factories. I hate them.”

I asked the owner if he was still operating any factories there after the revolution. He said, “Yes, but I am going to leave. The Sandinista government will *not* give me a fair exchange rate on refrigerator parts. They give me a bad time on everything.”

I said that he could make a lot of money if he did what I suggested. (He said: “What do you mean?”) Tell the Sandinista government that you want to sell the company to the workers. You need time to teach the workers how to manage their own company. (“Why? Ridiculous”!)) The government will love you. They will

give you the best exchange rate you could get. Tell them that it will take several years to train them. The action will open up new markets for the refrigerators. The Mexican people will buy your refrigerators. Mexicans are sympathetic with the Sandinistas and so are Cuba and other Latin American governments.

Believe me, Spanish-speaking nations will buy refrigerators made by those workers. You could be a model for creating a win-win situation for American corporations: make a lot of money. The workers would pay you for their Nicaraguan ownership over a period of years. You will make *more* money than you are making now. If you leave and give up, you will lose everything.

I told him about employee ownership (ESOPs) in the United States. “Worker co-ops are part of the free market system. You will be helping to open the door for freedom in Nicaragua.

He never had thought about solving his financial problems in this way. He would definitely look into it. He thanked me and we said goodbye. After I hung up the phone, Richard and I talked about it.

I asked Richard to set up meetings for me with key players in Nicaragua. I would talk to the President of the Chamber of Commerce in the morning and to the Vice President of the Sandinista government in the afternoon.

He made the arrangements and agreed to meet me at the airport in Managua. I took a plane and flew down and he met me at the airport.

We drove to the Chamber of Commerce in Managua and I met the President. I had learned Spanish but we talked in English. I asked him what he thought of the government. He was very unhappy. “Damn them. I hate socialism. It’s a dictatorship. There is no free market here.”

I said, “I know how you can set up a free market here.”

“What!”

“Tell government officials that you want to work with them to develop more income equality in Nicaragua. Ask them what is the best way to set up an economy that has maximum freedom and equality together. I can tell you how to do it – so you are prepared. Think about how a free market can develop side by side with socialism.

“How?”

“In the United States we have democratic corporations that are in the free market. By themselves, they look “socialist” but they are part of the competitive market.” The Chamber President was very interested to know what I was talking about. I told him about Employee Stock Ownership Plans. He was interested.¹⁶

Then I told him about community development corporations, community land trusts, community financial corporations, co-housing, and more. I said: “They are all local democratic organizations. They are nonprofit but they could be profit corporations. The point is that local people elect the board of directors. Each person has a right to vote in these private corporations.¹⁷

“At some point you can talk about the civil privatization of government agencies. State agencies can be turned into democratic corporations in the private market. In other words, nationalized corporations (government agencies) can be privatized into cooperatives of all kinds. I know of government utility agencies in the United States that became owned by its customers. Customers elect their own Board and run the company apart from the government.”

I went on, and on, about how the economy is evolving socially in the United States. I said: “We could get some charitable foundations and churches to help you and the government work together to start these corporations. He was very interested.

I said: “I bet I could arrange a meeting between you and the Vice President of Government Planning in Nicaragua to talk about

these ideas. He said: “That son of a bitch would never go for the plan.”

I replied: “This plan puts capitalism (freedom) and socialism (equality) together. It changes the market system based on competition to a system based on more cooperation. Competition remains but it is subordinate to the cooperation among corporations. You will need trade associations with standards in the public interest – to finish the job. These corporations need to work for the higher good of society. Think about it.”

Richard then took me to see the Vice President of Government Planning in the afternoon. We had to go past high wire fences and clear our way through guards to meet with him. The Vice President and I sat down to talk in Spanish but pretty soon it was evident that my Spanish-speaking was so slow that he called in his secretary to translate. She knew English and so we were able to carry on satisfactorily.

I told the Vice President the same thing I told the Chamber President. But I talked in Marxist language. I said: “Marx saw the importance of building a classless society. He wanted equality for all citizens in a new economy. He thought that a democratic (classless) society would be organized after the revolution. After the revolution, Marx said: “The government will wither away.” That is how confident Marx was that revolutionaries would take the action to develop *equality* and *freedom* together.”

Then I told him my idea for “social development.” It was basically the same as I had told the Chamber President to save free markets. But everything I said was in Marxist language.

I said that the bourgeoisie would never give up their power willingly. He just thought that a revolution was needed to bring about economic democracy. Marx was very interested in cooperatives.

“And now look at this: Cooperatives had been developing spontaneously around Latin America. There are agricultural

(farmer) co-ops, telephone co-ops, worker co-ops, consumer co-ops, etc. They need your encouragement with government planning. A capitalist government would never do that. But a socialist government is here to bring equality to everyone.”

The Vice President of Planning: “Great. But that God-damn Chamber of Commerce would get in our way. The Chamber would fight against it.”

I said that the idea was worth trying. (I did not mention my talk with the Chamber President.) “Talk to the Chamber President about bringing together equality and a freedom. He will listen, I am sure.”

I talked in more detail about “cooperation” as the essence of socialism in the 19th century. A sociologist (Emile Durkheim) studied different theories of socialism. He concluded that the common feature of all of theories was in effect, the *cooperation of corporations competing in the interest of the larger society.*”¹⁸

The problem was that corporations were based on the principle of competition, not cooperation. This market system was self-destructive. This competition in the economy was creating *anomie*. (I said to him “anarchy”.) Society needs a civil order in the economy. But how does this order develop with the right way in society?

He did not know.

I asked him: “How could *cooperation* among *democratic corporations* develop in Nicaragua?” He shook his head, not answering.

I said, “Cooperatives (all kinds) should be supported in the private sector by your government. When they are supported (with government incentives), they will need your assistance next to cooperate in the interest of the society. Worker-owned companies (by themselves) would compete in the market just like capitalist companies. They will need *trade associations* between them to set standards in the public interest.”

“Trade associations in the United States are in effect *cooperatives*. They are nonprofit corporations owned and managed by their members. Their members select their own board of directors. Many have private judicial courts to settle disputes among members. They set up standards for competition. This practice is like the U.S. government with its Federal Trade Commission, Security Exchange Commission, etc. If one of them breaks a standard on safety or health to get ahead in their competition the members have incentives to report the misconduct. Their own trade court hears the case and judges the offenders. If guilty the offender pays a penalty.”

“If trade associations fail to keep their standards as they develop, you can create a government agency to make an outside appeal. The U.S. government agencies (e.g. EPA, SEC, FTC, FCC, etc.) would not disappear immediately in socialist planning. They remain as back up enforcement for the new self-governing powers that you develop in the economy. This is not easy because trade associations can become monopolies. They can engage in price-fixing. This is why government needs to remain as an overseer.”

He said: “This is hard to follow.”

I answered: “You have to move *experimentally*. The change cannot be too forced by police. A government should provide incentives to change. When done right, capitalism could evolve (with government support) into socialism. It might take you many years but you have to start somewhere. Work carefully so you can do it right.”

“Trade associations are part of capitalist markets. They are not socialist.”

I replied, “I am talking about Durkheim’s definition of socialism. The trade associations in Nicaragua can develop their own higher associations as “watchdogs” and “enforcers” by joint contracts and agreements. Each trade association then belongs to a higher trade association with standard that can be given this task of

keeping an eye on trade monopolies. Don't worry. This has never been done before. You are building a new society."

He said: "But in the United States...."

"In the United States, trade groups belong to higher order associations like the Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers. These American associations are capitalist, not structured for a socialist purpose. You would have to help structure broad trade groups for setting social (health and safety) standards. Nicaragua could take the lead around the world in modeling socialism. You would be building a self-governing economy. What do you think?"

He held: "The Chamber of Commerce fights against bigger government. You are talking about building smaller government?"

"Yes but this happens slowly with legislation. ("What?") Few people in the United States know that governments created "free markets" in the first place -- by government legislation. It took centuries to develop the free market system from feudalism. It will take centuries to develop self-governing (civil) economies."¹⁹

He insisted: "We do not have time to wait."

I answered: "In this kind of socialism, government agencies get smaller to the degree to which managers in nonprofit associations become more skilled and accustomed to taking care of their own problems. The state does not suddenly "wither away" but reduces its surveillance and controls, slowly. The "state" is reduced to the degree that self-governing practices become the "norm" for the nation."

He responded: "Trade associations are powerful lobbyists in the United States."

"I know. But they also create social standards that are in the public interest – as well as their own interest.

("What do you mean?")

For example, trade associations in the lumber industry set

common standards for the *quality of lumber* that is sold on the market. Lumber was sold as mislabeled, poor quality, fooling people. The trade association decided they should protect the consumer in their own interest. The government did not make the standards and enforce them. The trade associations did it themselves. It is in their interest as well as the customers' interest."

Mmmm.

"Private colleges and universities organize accrediting agencies to verify that the quality of work their members do in teaching and research. Together, they want high standards set for themselves. The government does not have to do this accrediting work."

"I need to see for myself."

I suggested: "As Vice President, you could send a government representative to the U.S. State Department. Tell them that you want to create a free market system that is more self-regulating. (This will shock them.) You would like to work with the American government. You could say: "Americans have all sorts of consumer organizations and trade associations. We would like to talk with them about setting standards in the public interest."

He said: "The Americans hate us."

"No. The government hates you. Then go to some consumer organizations, like Consumer (Union) Reports. This union tests the quality of the products sold by businesses. Ask to work with them. They will help you and teach you about testing products.... Then go talk with the National Association of Consumer Advocates and the American Standards Institute.²⁰

He said that he knew nothing about these organizations. I said that I would take him personally to see these groups – if he would come to the United States.

I went on: "The United States has a Council of Economic

Advisors but you should create a “Council of Social Advisors” in Nicaragua. The “Council” would gather statistics on the social and economic development of your country. They will formulate “indexes” to measure the growth in health, safety, and fairness in competition.”

He looked interested.

“Remember, you are building a socialist economy in the private sector, a civil economy. The American Congress, with its ideology would *never* establish any “Council of Social Advisors.” You could be a model for other socialist countries.”

He checked with his secretary about her translations.

I went on: “It will take decades to do this right. It has to be a step-by-step process of experimentation to see what works best. At your call, I will fly down to Managua from Boston and work with you. We can talk on the phone.”

He swore against the Chamber of Commerce: “*Mierda.*”

“I understand how you feel. But you will be creating a democratically organized market. It will be a *self-governing economy* based on justice and fairness. If you take your time, one *tiny* step after another, you could become a model for the world.

He said that the plan was interesting but that “God-damn Chamber of Commerce would undercut him. The President would never accept worker-owned corporations, community corporations...”

I responded quickly: “We can give it a try. Talk with him about saving free markets. That will lighten him up. I am heading back to the United States to see whether we can get some cooperation from the American government.

We said “Adios” and I flew back to Boston.

I needed to find a top government official that might be sympathetic to the changes I was recommending. I found a member of the National Security Council who was in favor of

Employee Stock Ownership Plan. He would support the idea of worker owned companies in Nicaragua.

But as I looked further into the idea of supporting this Nicaraguan socialist plan I realized that President Ronald Reagan and his advisers would defeat it, no matter what. They had so much venom against the Sandinista Government that I would become a pawn in their chess game called the “Iran-Contra affair.” The U.S. government was secretly supporting rebels against the Sandinista Government.²¹

Richard and I learned a lot in this experience. After this work, Richard’s dissertation took a more sociological outlook, less ideological. The case was indeed very complex.

That’s it.

Faculty advisors can add ideas for students to broaden their scope of thought and imagination. I became unusually involved in adding ideas in Guatemala and Nicaragua but it was a learning experience for all of us.

The Guatemala case was filmed and taped for students with the visit of the United Fruit President in class. The facts are all there. The Nicaraguan case added new ideas in the context and they created a new orientation for students and the residents involved. Adding ideas and facts is true for faculty in every discipline; new thoughts, theories, and perspectives are provided for students in history, political science, chemistry, and onward. The purpose is to stimulate students to think in new ways about their subject.

There are more cases to put forth here but these instances (above) should provide insight into how fieldwork methods in sociology fit into the purposes of a liberal arts college. Social statistics, surveys and qualitative studies remain important as core courses; and term papers about ideas assessed through library research remain vital for student learning.

But these fieldwork cases in participant observation

demonstrate how this methodology opens the mind, the feeling, and heart of a student. This kind of learning is vital for students to understand other ways of life and people with different identities. It is the *human experience* that makes the difference. The practice of being a participant observer adds a special type of learning in sociology, and when done well, it becomes part of the mission and the excellence for teaching in a liberal arts college.

¹ Wilhelm Dilthey wanted to establish a methodological foundation for the "human sciences" that was different from science -- and at the same time -- "scientific." He suggested that all human experience divides naturally into two parts: the surrounding "natural world", in which "objective necessity" rules, and "inner experience," where free will rules. He rejected using a model formed exclusively from the natural sciences called in German (*Naturwissenschaften*), and instead proposed a separate model for the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). He argued that in the natural sciences we explain phenomena in terms of cause and effect, or the general and the particular condition; however, in contrast, in the human sciences, we seek to *understand* in terms of the relations of the part and the whole. His theory of understanding or comprehension (*Verstehen*) could be applied to all manner of interpretation ranging from ancient texts to art work, religious works, and even law.

² Weber's view was a virtual opposite from Comte and Emile Durkheim who wanted to follow the model of science. Durkheim refined Comte's positivism by promoting the use of a deductive model. For Durkheim, sociology was the science of institutions-- modes of behavior instituted by people as a "collectivity". The aim was to study "social facts" as "things". In his view, sociology should study phenomena attributed to society at large, rather than limited to the specific actions of individuals. The task of the sociologist was to search for correlations between social facts in order to reveal laws of society.

³ Here we see two types of sociological theory; the first is the *structural* (or objective) perspective while the other is social action (or *interpretive*) perspective. Structuralism tends to be a top-down, deterministic outlook that examines the way in which society as a whole fits together. Objective sociologists see human activity as the result of social structures. Weber advocated the combination of both structuralist and interpretative approaches but emphasized the latter.

⁴ In the 1960s, a more qualitative (interpretive) research program was introduced by myself (*The Human Perspective in Sociology: The Methodology of Participant Observation* (Prentice Hall, 1966] and Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, [*The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies*

for qualitative research. Aldine, [1967]. This methodology then began to gain currency and more thoroughness within sociology.

⁵ A liberal arts college wants students to respect facts, employ methods of research fitting to their field, and engage in problem solving. In qualitative fieldwork, students meet these objectives but also learn to look for alternatives. Students learn to welcome the facts in a wider play of thought.

Fieldwork also meets other objectives of liberal arts. This kind of learning makes them more reflective about their beliefs, and more self-aware; it makes them conscious of their presumptions as opposed to the complex motives of other people. Fieldwork in a liberal education encourages a student's ability to synthesize different perspectives into a larger picture. Real-world problems rarely have textbook solutions. This is why fieldwork experiments noted here become so important in teaching students how to adjust to settings in which they have never been before, and enriches their lives.

⁶ Students have their own stories but I can tell you how more street experience changed my life. I went out many nights to talk with homeless people. Here is one example.

I befriended a hefty man without legs, living all night in a wheelchair. He claimed that the Pine Street Inn would not let him stay overnight. I said: "No, I've been there. They told me that they take anybody off the street." I hauled his big body into my car and put his wheelchair in my trunk and took him to the Inn. They saw him and refused to let him come in. They said: "He gives us too much trouble." (I could not believe it.) I took him home, bathed him, and saw how he was infected all around his crotch. He was up every night on the street and had never been to a bathroom. I slept next to him on the floor and saw how sick he was. In the morning I called 911. They took him to the hospital where he stayed for a week to be treated. I learned that the Pine Street Inn (and other shelters) did not take everybody.

⁷ Kasanoffs closed in 1977 and was razed in 1983. The Thomas I. Atkins Apartments are located at the intersection of Blue Hill Avenue and Edgewood Street in Roxbury, MA, on the former site of the Kasanof Bakery. MassHousing Approved \$8.9 Million in Loans for Affordable Housing in Roxbury. In other words, the vacant Kasanof Bakery property was converted into 48 affordable rental units. It opened in 2010.

⁸ The *ICA Group* was founded in 1978 and is now a nonprofit organized for national consulting. Its mission is “to expand economic opportunity and self-determination by supporting initiatives that empower workers, build community assets and root capital locally. [They] provide a full range of consulting services including strategic analysis and technical assistance services that help clients create economic opportunities for disadvantaged populations and develop and sustain alternative business structures including cooperatives, social enterprises and conventionally structured businesses with an employee focus.” See <http://ica-group.org/>

⁹ Severyn Bruyn, *The Social Economy* (John Wiley and Sons (*Appendix*, 1977)). The project to mine copper in the Island ended with my return to Boston College but it remains a possibility even today. Plans for mining in Puerto Rico began at the end of the 1950s after a prospecting expedition carried out by a number of companies, including AMAX (American Metals Climax), Anaconda Mining and Kennecott Copper. Since then, 37,000 acres of land have been appropriated for strip-mining by the Puerto Rican government. To my knowledge the government is again studying a new proposal by Kennecott and AMAX regarding the copper deposits.

- ¹⁰ Ruth Benedict is one of *the* pioneers of cultural anthropology. She was one of the first to apply anthropology to the study of advanced societies. Benedict is remembered for her work on the national character of various culture groups, most famously the Japanese around World War II. Her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946) is still recommended as introductory reading for students of Japanese culture. Other significant published works include: *Patterns of Culture* (1934), *Zuni Mythology* (1935), *Race: Science and Politics* (1940).
- Margaret Mead was a highly respected (often controversial) anthropologist. Her reports about the attitudes towards sex in South Pacific and Southeast Asian traditional cultures informed the 1960s sexual revolution. She was a champion of broadened sexual mores within a context of traditional religious life. Some of her books were *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), *Growing up in New Guinea* (1930), *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe* (1932), *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935).

¹¹ Faculty at the Harvard's School of Business invited me to lunch when I first arrived in Boston. They read my book on *The Human Perspective in Sociology: The Methodology of Participant Observation*. This book on fieldwork methods fit perfectly their case studies on business. That meeting encouraged me to see more about what was happening in the field of business. I decided to look for a bridge between sociology and business on campus. I went over to the School of Management to talk with the Associate Dean (William Torbert). I suggested to him that we set up a joint-degree program between our Department of Sociology and his School. Students might do case studies. We organized a graduate program in which students could get a Ph.D. in sociology and a Masters in Business. Corporations sent their managers to take courses for credit. We had three sociologists and three management teachers in the program.

¹² Colonel Arbenz Guzman was a Guatemalan Defense Minister and President of Guatemala from 1951 to 1954. He was ousted in a coup d'etat by the United States government and the CIA. The CIA used the threat of communism and the Cold War to prepare a case in which accusations against Jacobo Arbenz's regime were made, indicating that he had alliances with communist emerging parties and even with Russian communists. According to these claims by the U.S. government, the security of the Western Hemisphere was threatened.

¹³ Hondurans commonly referred to the corporation as "the Octopus." Its control seemed to reach virtually everywhere. In the United States the company enjoyed a better image with the federal government, which found United Fruit indispensable during World War II and in later years. In 1961 United Fruit supplied the government with ships for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and the free flow of both durable and nondurable goods throughout the Caribbean. For more detailed readings, see:

- "The Banana Rebellion," *Time*, June 11, 1990, p. 49.
- Brown, Christie, "Banana Split," *Business Week*, August 12, 1996, pp. 94--95.
- "Chiquita Cites Lower Meat Margins in Results," *Feedstuffs*, December 21, 1992.
- De Cordoba, Jose, "Fruit Fight: Two Banana Empires, Latin and Caribbean, Battle Over Europe," *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 1993.
- Fox, John M., "How 'Chiquita' Helped United Fruit," *Agribusiness Worldwide*, February/March 1980.

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- Grigsby, Jefferson, "The Wonder Is That It Works at All," *Forbes*, February 18, 1980.
 - Hannon, Kerry, "Ripe Banana," *Forbes*, June 13, 1988, p. 86.
 - Jaffe, Thomas, "Don't Slip," *Forbes*, July 1, 1985.
 - Larmer, Brook, "Brawl over Bananas," *Newsweek*, April 28, 1997, pp. 43--44.
 - Lavine, Harold, "Bright New Image for the 'Octopus'," *Saturday Review World*, April 20, 1974.
 - "Lindner's Buildup at United Brands," *Business Week*, August 26, 1985.
 - Mejia, John, "Chiquita, Polly Peck Deny Reports of Del Monte Sale," *Supermarket News*, March 4, 1991.
 - Rohter, Larry, "Where Banana Is King, a Revolt over Farmlands," *New York Times*, July 22, 1996, p. A4.
 - Sanger, David E., "Trade Group Backs Effort to Ship Bananas to Europe," *New York Times*, March 20, 1997, p. B11.
 - Shapiro, Eben, "Revitalized Chiquita Seeks Growth," *New York Times*, September 11, 1990.
 - -----, "Yes, They Have Too Many Bananas," *New York Times*, July 8, 1992.
 - "Sorting Out the Wreckage," *Fortune*, June 1975.
 - Tracy, Eleanor Johnson, "United Brands' Hidden Charms for Carl Lindner," *Fortune*, March 19, 1984, p. 41.
 - "United Brands Trades More Assets for Cash," *Business Week*, January 13, 1975.
- "Who Calls the Shots at United Brands," *Business Week*, May 26, 1975.

¹⁴ A company specializing in bananas in those days was considered a capitalist giant on the level of today's firms. At its height in the first half of the last century, United Fruit owned one of the largest private navies in the world. It owned 50 percent of the private land in Honduras and 70 percent of all private land and every mile of railroad in Guatemala. Students learned a lot from this research. I published an article on my fieldwork with a journal of the *Society for the Study of Social Problems*. "The Multinational Corporation and Social Research: The Case of the United Fruit Company," in *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Fall 1971.

¹⁵ The Sandinistas took their name from Augusto Cesar Sandino (1895–

1934). He was a charismatic leader of Nicaragua's nationalist rebellion against the US occupation of the country during the early 20th century. A US-equipped National Guard in Nicaragua assassinated Sandino in 1934. To make a long story short, members of a new junta was organized with Daniel Ortega and eleven others. They pledged to organize an democratic regime, promote political pluralism and universal suffrage, and ban ideological discrimination. On July 17, Somoza resigned, handed over power to others. On July 19, the FSLN army entered Managua, culminating the first goal of the Nicaraguan revolution. The war left approximately 50,000 dead and 150,000 Nicaraguans in exile. The five-member junta entered the Nicaraguan capital the next day and assumed power, reiterating its pledge to work for political pluralism, a mixed economic system, and a nonaligned foreign policy. So the Sandinistas inherited a country in ruins with a debt and 600,000 homeless. To establish a new government, they created a Council of National Reconstruction, made up of five appointed members including Daniel Ortega.

¹⁶ Federal pension laws, called the Employee Retirement Income Security Act, or “ERISA”, govern ESOPs. ERISA ensures that there can be no ‘preferred’ classes of participants in an ESOP; all employees must be treated proportionally the same. Internal Revenue Code section 404(a)(3) provides for an annual limit on the amount of deductible contributions an employer can make to a tax-qualified stock bonus or profit-sharing plan of 25 percent of the compensation otherwise paid or accrued during the year to the employees who benefit under the plan.

The National Center for Employee Ownership estimates that there are approximately 11,300 employee stock ownership plans for over 13 million employees in the United States. U.S. employee-owned corporations include the 150,000 employee supermarket chain Publix Supermarkets, McCarthy Building Company and photography studio company called Lifetouch.

¹⁷ Community development corporations are non-profit, locally-based organizations that anchor capital through the development of residential and commercial property, ranging from affordable housing to shopping centers and businesses. They were first formed in the late 1960s and have expanded rapidly in size and numbers since. An industry survey published in 2006 found that 4,600 CDCs promote community economic stability by developing over 86,000 units of affordable housing and 8.75 million square

feet of commercial and industrial space a year.

¹⁸ Emile Durkheim said that “socialism” was not science and it was not sociology. But sociologists could study socialism as a “thing,” objectively. The research task involved looking for the common features of all ideologies that fell under the name of socialism and determine what was held in common among them all. Read Anthony Giddens (ed.) *Durkheim: On Politics and the State*. (Stanford University Press, 1973.) A major hope for Durkheim was for what he called “occupational groups” that were emerging as corporations. The state could not be expected to play the integrative role that might be needed, because it was too remote. Durkheim thought that corporations like occupational or professional groups could provide the means of integration required to perform for the good of society. In other words, these corporate groups would be formed by people in an industry, representing all the people in their sector. They would “foster the general interest of society at a level that most citizens can understand and accept.” Edward G. Grabb, *Theories of Social Inequality: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, second edition, (Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1990)

¹⁹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Beacon Press, 2001) [originally: 1944] Polanyi argued that the free market (capitalism) is the enemy of humanity. It was an alien form of social organization created in 18th-century England by state action. In other words, markets come into existence only by legislation taken by governments. Political leaders had to remove impediments to commerce, investment, and labor and then to provide some oversight of economic activity once it was freed from social norms. Free economic activity was dependent on the state. Polanyi said: “Laissez-faire was planned” by the state. Prior of the rise of “the market” as an planned principle for society, politics, religion and social norms were the forces of governance. When the Great Transformation happened, Polanyi argued, markets became seen as autonomous forces in their own right. The presumption was that “market forces” should organize all of society. The free market is inherently self-destructive, constantly requiring new government controls and regulations.

²⁰ The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) is a private non-profit organization that oversees the development of “voluntary consensus standards” for all kinds of things -- products, services, processes, and

personnel in the United States. It also coordinates American standards with international standards so that American products can be used worldwide. Standards ensure that people who own cameras can find the film they need for that camera anywhere around the globe. It verifies that the “principles of openness and due process” have been followed and that a consensus of all interested parties has been reached.

Consumer Advocates is an organization of some 1500 attorneys who have represented hundreds of thousands of consumers victimized by fraudulent, abusive, and predatory business practices. These associations are part of the market system and committed to promoting justice for consumers.

²¹ On November 25, 1986, President Ronald Reagan told a packed White House news conference that funds derived from covert arms deals with the Islamic Republic of Iran had been diverted to buy weapons for the U.S.-backed Contra rebels in Nicaragua. In the weeks leading up to this shock event, news reports had exposed the U.S. role in both the Iran deals and the secret support for the Contras. In Reagan's announcement, he named two subordinates -- National Security Advisor John M. Poindexter and NSC staffer Oliver L. North -- as the responsible parties,