



## ***Sociology of Self-Knowledge at Macalester College***

**Khaldoun Samman**

*Macalester College*

-----  
*"I see each of my classes as a makeshift, semester-long, 'research working group' involvement, during which students are treated as more or less young research scholars engaged in a most important research undertaking: understanding (and perhaps changing) their selves within a micro/macro sociological framework. The classroom is thereby transformed into a research collective of scholars whose central goal in the semester is to critically develop new knowledges about (and perhaps realities in) their globally constituted selves."*

—M. H. (Behrooz) Tamdgidi

After having known Behrooz Tamdgidi as a good friend and colleague since the early 1990s, his concept of the sociology of self-knowledge became meaningful to me in my experience of teaching over the past few years. Having become more familiar with his work over those many years, it became apparent to me he was onto something quite profound. After offering a large number of courses on such themes as Global Racial Formations, macro level analysis of race, class, and gender inequalities, Social Problems, and a course on Islam and the West, Tamdgidi's concept of the sociol-

ogy of self-knowledge made me realize that I had missed the most important theme of C. Wright Mills' discussion of the relationship between private troubles and public issues. It was the *interaction* between biography and social structure, private troubles and public issues, and the self and society that completed the quest for knowledge creation. It was this relationship between self and society that Tamdgidi's work made me become aware of my teaching bias towards the macro-level.

At this point in my life I also began to recognize that my research, although largely about world-historical formations—Orientalism, the Capitalist Modern World-System, nationalism, state formation, modernity, and Zionism—were deeply informed by my life experiences as a young child born in Jordan and then moving to the United States. If my research is itself a product of my life-experience, why should that be different for my sociology students? It was about a year ago, as I was preparing for a senior seminar course, that I finally decided to offer a course in which students were provided full opportunity to explore their lives from a personal and creative, yet sociological, perspective. I titled the seminar, in honor of Tamdgidi's contribution, the "sociology of self-knowledge" and created the following course description:

Students come to Macalester with a number of experiences that are crying out for sociological analysis. Many have attended proms, participated in adolescent subcultures, and so on. Reading sociological studies in a number of sites students are familiar with—including their family, their high school, their network of friendships, and even their automobile—this course will allow them to reflect upon their past by asking fundamental sociological questions.

Shortly after Behrooz Tamdgidi began publishing his journal *Human Architecture* in 2002, he kindly invited me to be an advising editor to the journal, which I gladly accepted. Now that I was offering a course on this theme, Tamdgidi and I thought it may be time to have my students submit their papers to his journal. His description of the journal, which I had read a year or two before conceptualizing the course I was to shortly offer at Macalester College, went well with the description of the course I was offering:

[*Human Architecture*] seeks to creatively institutionalize new conceptual and curricular structures of knowledge whereby critical study of one's selves within an increasingly world-historical framework is given educational and pedagogical legitimacy. The journal is a public forum for those who seek to radically understand and, if need be, change their world-historically constructed selves.

I was fortunate enough to have a small seminar with four gifted sociology seniors: Ellen Corrigan, Jeremy Cover, Jesse Mortenson, and Jessica Sawyer. Throughout the semester we read a number of sociologically informed books and biographies in areas of life that are directly related to their own. For each week they were expected to reflect about their own lives through their assigned readings in weekly journals. At the end of the semester they collected their journals and each put together a publishable sociologically informed autobiography.

I'll let the writers tell their stories themselves, but here I'd like to make a few comments on their fine work. All of the papers discuss, in one way or another, their individual attempt to come to terms with the constraints of powerful social institutions, the production of self-knowledge in diffi-

cult, sometimes hostile, institutional environments, and their search for the liberation of the self and the courage to find spaces of autonomy in all of these constraining circumstances.

Jessica Sawyer, in her paper "Confessions of a Maine-iac: The Family, Academia, and Modernity," has asked us to consider a very difficult question: "What is it about academia and the 'liberal arts' experience that makes it so hard to go 'home'? How does this revolve around the professional middle class ideology of what a family is and what functions a family serves...?" She provides a compelling criticism of the notion of progress, as it relates to the issue of family (especially in Modernization theory and some currents in Feminist theories). The intersection of her relationship with her family and the struggle she experienced living out this professional middle class ideology provides a powerful insight into how personal troubles are in constant interaction with public issues.

Jesse Mortenson, in his "Identity, Resistance, and Market-based Political Culture at a Small Liberal Arts School," offers us a political analysis of his high school and college experience as a young white working class gay man developing a unique political consciousness, especially as it relates to his "encounter as a student with the dominant political culture at Macalester College." The location of his class, race, and sexual orientation provided him a powerful sociological lens to uncover the institutional biases of schools and colleges:

This combination of racial/class dynamics—the privilege to access resources necessary for class-advancement, yet a white working class cultural background and lower-than-average household income to peers—positioned me as likely to develop institutional agency but an ambiguous relationship to institutions. This is, perhaps, the most

obvious formula for the sort of political identity I wish to encourage, which might be summarized as the sense of desire and ability to change the institutions that order life through collective, organized action.

Jeremy Cover explains the liberating effect of moving from a small town to an urban-based college, where he finally is able, as Emile Durkheim predicted, to perform a self that feels more individual and authentic. While Durkheim offers the theoretical tool Jeremy appropriates to uncover this self-discovery, he offers a subtle criticism of Ervin Goffman: “Here is where I begin to have problems with Goffman’s conception of personal agency. While recognizing the importance of situational factors, I can also remember the purposeful construction and maintenance of various identities that I imagine most people engage in during adolescence.”

Ellen Corrigan, in her fine essay, “The ‘Out’ Crowd: Resisting the Stereotypes of High School and Teen Culture,” writes on how she and her group continuously found autonomist spaces to perform group solidarities that were outside of institutionally approved roles. She provides a detailed analysis of how we may award “agency to subordinate groups,” especially the manner by which some high school students, in very difficult circumstances, engage in a number of group rituals “such as gossip, put downs, and exclusivity,” as an alternative to the accepted discourse of “cool” and other mainstream constructs of “youth culture.” Her discussion of her “crowd” provides a wonderful example of this “rebellion”: “This solidarity is what allowed us to engage in our activities of rebellion, such as having piggyback races or cartwheeling down the hall, dressing in costume, or pushing each other’s chairs into the middle of the classroom during lecture, in the first place.”

This seminar was a great delight, both in terms of the food we consumed and the sweet discussions that we engaged in weekly. All of these essays are a testament to the validity of the sociology of self-knowledge, which I’d like to thank Behrooz Tamdgidi for planting in my mind.