

When a Dissertation Chooses You

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When I first told the professor whose work made me want to study sociology at Berkeley that I planned to write a dissertation about a massively lethal heat wave that had just happened in Chicago, he immediately advised me that it was a terrible idea.

He had a point.

Élite sociology departments, as I'd later learn, have little interest in the environment and even less in disasters. Intellectually ambitious work in our field is about everyday social processes, not extreme events. We analyze social facts, not ecological or meteorological conditions. And, student beware, when we study current events and crises we can easily get distracted by political rather than scientific concerns. The heat wave, my professor explained, should be an object of criticism, and those responsible for the unnecessary suffering it induced should be denounced. But a dissertation in sociology needs an object of *analysis*. He kindly, perhaps wisely, encouraged me to leave his office and find one.

The trouble, one I likely share with other contributors to this volume, is that the problem of the heat wave had already chosen me. Part of this stemmed from biography. I grew up in Chicago and had long been fascinated by its neighborhoods, its political culture, its durable racial segregation, its ruthless violence, and, most intriguingly, its collective pride in being a "city that works". I was also interested in political ecology and had worked for an environmental group while I was an undergraduate. When I began graduate school in the fall of 1995, I was trying to understand how emerging concerns about global warming being issued by climate scientists might be relevant for sociology. Although I had just moved to California, I felt compelled to return to my native city and investigate what happened.

I was lucky, because the heat wave turned out to be far more interesting than my professor (and I) had imagined, and there were all kinds of genuine scientific puzzles to explore. For instance, the mortality rate during the event far exceeded what the best health and climate models predicted, leaving epidemiologists to speculate about why it was so deadly. Sociology offered tools for replacing their guesses with concrete evidence. That was just the beginning. Predictably, the city's poor neighborhoods were disproportionately affected by the heat wave. But there was surprising variation among them, with several areas showing surprising resilience. Again, sociological research methods could help explain why.

The more closely I examined the heat wave, the more vexing sociological questions I identified: Why did so many people die alone? Why were men, who were so much less likely than women to age alone, so much more likely to die during the disaster? Why did city leaders decide not to issue a heat emergency and ignore the plan they had prepared for this very situation? Why did the government provide public services to people who didn't need really need them, while neglecting the people and places that were most at risk? Why did the editors of the city's largest journalistic organization assign a large team of reporters to uncover the reasons that so many people died, and then bury the story after deciding it wasn't worthy of sustained attention? Why did the catastrophe, one of the worst in modern American history, prove so easy to deny, ignore, and forget?

Each of these questions became a peg for my dissertation chapters, and intellectually, I was hooked. My professor got it, too, albeit only after I did a lot of writing to flesh out the problems I would tackle. I decided that he wouldn't be the right person to chair the committee, but his skepticism helped motivate me, and his critical voice, which of course I'd internalized, forced me to dig deeper and think more sociologically. It still does.

In my final months of graduate school, I became close with an eminent professor in a different field whose work blended social science, political history, and psychoanalysis. When he advised me, he rarely asked questions about research methods or inferences or theory building. Others would cover that. Instead, he probed for the underlying reasons that I was so interested in questions about isolation, ecological collapse, racial inequality, the soft violence of an unnatural disaster, and the collective "will not to know" about rampant social suffering in the city I still called home.

One day, at his favorite lunch spot, the outdoor restaurant at the campus art museum, I asked him how he chose topics for the essays he'd been writing. "At this point," he said, "I prefer to have someone else choose projects for me. It's actually one guy, an editor (at a prestigious review of books). He gets me. He sees things I'd be interested in, things that I probably wouldn't see myself. He's been giving me assignments for a few years now, and he's had some great ideas. I trust him. And each time he puts me onto something I wind up learning a lot more than I would if I chose something on my own."

Fifteen years later, a book editor I'd worked with called me and asked if I could come to his office and meet a comedian.

Chosen, again.