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Film Review: Sociological Images: Inspiring Sociological Imaginations Everywhere

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able to capitalize on federal “cold war” funding for area studies. But when President Kennedy considered him to head the Bureau of African Affairs, Herskovits failed to obtain a security clearance, apparently because of his strong support for decolonization as well as his membership in so-called communist front organizations as defined by the House Un-American Activities Committee.

After his death, the Black Panther Party and other black nationalist groups used Herskovits’s (1941) book *The Myth of the Negro Past* to challenge white-dominated institutions. Most ironically, this included the African Studies Association, which Herskovits helped create. In 1969 at a conference in Montreal, black activists demanded greater representation on the African Studies Association governing board. They believed, according to Vincent Brown, that “if knowledge is power, then knowledge about black people ought to contribute to the making of black power.”

Although the film is directed at a broadly educated audience (PBS aired it in February 2010), it might work best with upper level undergraduates in courses in race relations and the sociology of knowledge. It is an excellent vehicle for documenting the work of a central figure in African American studies and for illustrating that knowledge is a social construct, shaped by the values and power of those who produce it. The film asks difficult, complex questions for which there are no simple answers; a few of these could be the basis for stimulating discussion. How is an individual’s ethnic or cultural identity determined? Who controls the production of knowledge regarding cultural identity, with what consequences? What happens when the people being studied are excluded from the study of themselves? What is objective scholarship and when does it become politicized? To what extent is scholarship a matter of fitting together pieces of evidence to tell the story that the scholar wants to tell?

REFERENCE

Herskovits Melville J. 1941. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Lisa Wade and Gwen Sharp *Sociological Images: Inspiring Sociological Imaginations Everywhere*. 2009. Washington, DC: Contexts.org. Retrieved December 1, 2009 (<http://thesocietypages.org/socimages>).

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Like so many facets of society, information technology’s ongoing development has changed educational systems, including the ways information is conveyed by instructors and consumed by students. Increasingly, university instructors are communicating with students via electronic methods, not only through e-mail but also through robust systems that allow courses to be taught in varying degrees online. Given the ubiquitous nature of information technology in the academy, it is appropriate and important that sociology educators turn to quality Web sites created by social scientists when expanding their course curricula.

To this end, Lisa Wade (Occidental College) and Gwen Sharp (Nevada State College) created and maintain the sociology-based Web site *Sociological Images: Inspiring Sociological Imaginations Everywhere*. According to the authors, the site was “designed to encourage all kinds of people to exercise and develop their sociological imagination by presenting brief sociological discussions of compelling and timely imagery that spans the breadth of sociological inquiry” (<http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/about/>). Wade and Sharp have constructed an insightful, thought-provoking site that can be used by sociology instructors and students in a number of key areas.

To begin with, the Web site offers roughly two to four new entries daily. Each entry provides at least one visual, typically a picture or short video, although charts and tables are occasionally presented as well. The visual (or visuals) in each entry is accompanied by brief commentary from Wade, Sharp, or a guest contributor, focusing on how the image speaks to different sociological concepts. Material for daily entries is generally drawn from mainstream Web sites, other social science Web sites, and readers who submit pictures for analysis.

Sociological Images is especially strong in its analysis of images in American popular culture that perpetuate gender inequities. As an example, images of advertisements may be shown that cater to women or girls, emphasizing their femininity and valuing them as beauty objects. Attendant commentary from the authors will then detail

how these images perpetuate deleterious gender norms, while also providing numerous links to prior entries on the Web site, thereby illustrating how these particular images contribute to dominant patterns in society.

Entries in Sociological Images are also useful in that they allow for readers to comment on each entry (anyone with Internet access may view the Web site; those who leave comments must provide a screen name, which may be anonymous). Consequently, readers' commentaries offer additional insights and resemble a class discussion when commentators respond to one another. Notably, the discussions that emerge between those making comments on this Web site tend to be intelligent, respectful, and constructive, which differs from many mainstream news Web sites that allow for readers to make comments.

In addition to having a strong focus on gender, Sociological Images offers numerous examples of racist imagery in American popular culture, again drawing much of its content from advertisements, television shows, magazines, and mainstream Web site stories. An analysis of gendered and racialized imagery appears to be the Web site's central focus. However, it is not uncommon that other statuses are weaved into analyses, such as age, nationality, class, and sexuality. A final strength is the authors' ability to show how discriminatory imagery evolves over time, preserving dominant narratives in society, but manifesting in different ways depending on the social context. For instance, a contemporary advertisement may be shown via a YouTube.com video of a woman doing numerous household chores, coupled with commentary on the social construction of the family and pictures of advertisements from the 1970s that exemplify the same gender dynamic. Thus, readers can concretely see how minor aspects of gender role expectations shift over time, though the dominant narratives for gender roles in the family remain the same.

With regard to teaching sociology, the entries themselves are extremely useful for instructors who wish to keep pace with the abundant ways that popular culture reifies discrimination. Instructors can use the examples independently in their classes to provoke discussions on race, gender, class, sexuality, and the ways that these social statuses are stratified in society. Additionally, Sociological Images offers sample assignments written by Wade, Sharp, and/or their colleagues. These

assignments are said to encourage "students to continue to think sociologically outside of the classroom" (<http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/tag/sample-assignments/>). The sample assignments are also accompanied by descriptions of their purpose, suggested instructions, and a target audience (e.g., lower-division or upper-division students).

I personally have used two entries ("Standing Up Against Racism: An Experiment" from November 4, 2009, and "Morgan Harrington's Disappearance Sexualized by Nancy Grace" from November 5, 2009) from Sociological Images in my Introduction to Sociology and Cross-Cultural Relations courses to stimulate discussion. Both examples proved to be extremely successful in getting students to express their thoughts on racial profiling, gender norms, and ethics in the mass media. Although I have not yet directed undergraduate students to the Sociological Images Web site, its layout and content are well organized and would be useful for upper-division undergraduates who are interested in social inequalities. Likewise, graduate students interested in popular culture would benefit from participating in this Web site by submitting pictures to the authors, commenting on entries, and engaging in discussions with other readers.

As noted previously, the strength of Sociological Images lies in its analysis of American popular culture as it relates to gender and race. On rarer occasions, entries are provided that address discriminatory images from countries outside of the United States. To be fair, a broader analysis of international images does not appear to be one of the site's central goals. In addition, Sociological Images tends not to provide deeper theoretical rhetoric in its entries, which may be a strategic choice by the authors given that they hope readers will come from multiple social circles, presumably within and beyond academia.

Consequently, Sociological Images can best be utilized by sociology instructors who teach Introduction to Sociology as well as classes in popular culture, media studies, gender, race, the family, and perhaps sexuality. Specific entries from the site can be found that would be useful in criminology, global studies, deviance, and theory courses. However, the site as a whole does not lend itself to those particular areas of study.

On the whole, however, Sociological Images is a highly recommended Web site for sociology

instructors. Considering university students' increasing use of the Internet to communicate through electronic social networking and draw entertainment from video-sharing Web sites, such as YouTube.com, it would behoove instructors to familiarize themselves with the those quality social science Web sites emerging across the Internet. Undoubtedly, Sociological Images is one of these quality sites through which both students and instructors can learn a great deal.

A Village Called Versailles. 67 minutes. 2009. S. Leo Chiang, producer/director. New Day Films. 190 Route 17M, P.O. Box 1084, Harriman, NY 10926. (888) 367-9154. Purchase \$275.00; rental \$85.00.

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A Village Called Versailles brings together discussions of natural disasters, environmental justice, immigrant communities, and community organizing to tell the tale of a Vietnamese community in New Orleans East before and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The film begins by surveying the history of this community, one of the largest Vietnamese communities outside of Vietnam itself. This community has its roots in two Catholic towns in North Vietnam; the residents of both towns were displaced as refugees first to South Vietnam, then to boats and refugee camps, before finally being resettled in New Orleans by Catholic relief workers. The community struggled to build a life for itself in New Orleans despite interethnic conflicts with both whites and Blacks, but eventually developed a stable set of institutions including fishing and agricultural production and a well-attended Catholic parish centered in an apartment development called Versailles.

Three decades after resettlement, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. Most of us remember the images of flooded neighborhoods, people stranded on roofs, crowds seeking shelter, and of the shelters themselves. It was clear to many that the hardest hit neighborhoods—like the Ninth Ward—were disproportionately Black and poor. But from the perspective of the Vietnamese population of New Orleans East, at least the Ninth Ward story was being told. Their community

had been devastated as well, and yet no one was talking about it. Furthermore, many of the Vietnamese New Orleanians had now been displaced from their homes, and had now lost everything, for the third time in their lives. Furthermore, many of the elderly Vietnamese community members still had limited English proficiency, and few Vietnamese translators were available in the FEMA reception sites outside of New Orleans.

The story of Versailles after Katrina takes up the bulk of the film, and there are two main threads to this story. First there is the role that religion plays in the community. The Catholic Church was and is a mainstay of the community, holding mass in Vietnamese and led by two dynamic Vietnamese pastors. They began rebuilding the community church as soon as they could after the floodwaters receded, long before electricity or other basic services were available in the neighborhood. Within five weeks after the hurricane, they had resumed holding mass every Sunday. These actions helped make Versailles a place residents felt willing and able to return to, and soon many residents were working on rebuilding their homes.

Second, there is the story of political voice. Before Hurricane Katrina, Versailles residents (as many refugees) were politically uninvolved. However, the rebuilding process caused them to find their political voice. As the Bring New Orleans Back Commission developed its master plan for the city, New Orleans East found that it was erased from the map. Officials ignored its higher rebuilding rates than some other areas in the city and instead slated it to become green space. Four hundred people came out to demonstrate for the survival of the community. This new political voice would become even more important when the city opened a landfill a mile away from Versailles for the debris from rebuilding. This landfill did not use a liner, meaning that toxins in the waste could leak into the watershed used by the community. The Vietnamese community, and their New Orleans East neighbors, engaged in a coordinated campaign to shut down the landfill. The film shows a demonstration at city hall that won brief concessions from the mayor, testimony at city council meetings, and eventually an act of civil disobedience that brought young and old together to block trucks from dumping at the landfill. At the same time, legal challenges wove their way