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A New-Sociologist “Makes Peace with” One of his Former Subconscious Role Models

Sinan Caya ^{a*}

^aDr., Marmara University, Faculty of Engineering, Instructor of Social Electives

Abstract

This presentation contains extracts from the correspondence between a former-engineer Turkish sociologist and a foreign sociology instructor, with whom he had befriended years ago. At the time, the Turkish sociologist was an engineering student and as such, he used to underestimate sociology. Moreover; he did not even refrain from expressing this openly in his conversations. Years later, though, he wants to find the address of that instructor (now an emeritus professor) and in a sense submit his apology; because, now, let alone appreciating sociology, he himself has obtained a Ph.D. degree in sociology; in the mean time. The need to establish such a dialogue is a compulsory task of reliving his conscience as it would come equal to a professional debt and an ethical self-acquittal.

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1. Brief Introduction

The body of this article comprises of true letters and messages between an emeritus professor of sociology living in the United States and a Turkish scholar, who, years after graduation from an engineering department of a distinguished university in Turkey resorted to studying sociology until obtaining a Ph.D. degree from a university in Ankara.

* Sinan Caya. Tel.: 0216 348 0292.

E-mail address: sinan.caya@gmail.com

2. An Extract from a Letter Addressed to the Sociology Department of an American University

I own a Ph.D. in Sociology from (a Turkish University, since 1998. I would like to get in touch with Professor Emeritus (R) through your assistance, if possible. (He had taught Sociology in Istanbul in early 1970s). As a matter of fact, I would appreciate it a lot if you could please somehow forward the enclosed letter of mine to Prof. (R).

The letter, being of no confidential nature, is not even put in a further smaller envelope. You might as well go ahead and do read it. I have a feeling that it is worthwhile to read such a letter for the sake of sociology itself, anyhow!

I would hereby like to express my gratitude in advance of your hoped-for-help.

Respectfully yours,

p.s. Attached is the above mentioned letter (Very many thanks once again!)

3. An Extract From an e-Mail Message

Dear Sir; hello from Istanbul! Many thanks for your e-mail message. A friend of mine read it aloud to me through the phone.

The reason is simple: I had used his e-mail for communication. I personally do not have an e-mail in my work place, unfortunately. People with e-mail addresses in my proximity do not know English, either. Moreover, I do not have a computer at home either (*).

Being an emeritus professor since ten years *is* a blessing. I am happy for you.

I had written a “*repentance letter*” addressed to you and sent it to (C) University, Sociology Department. They must have forwarded the letter to you by now.

Right now I am resending the letter itself directly to you, anyhow.

I send my respects and greetings. Yours faithfully,

4. The Above-Mentioned Letter Itself

Dear Sir; I would like to start my letter by refreshing your memory: In September 1971 you arrived on the campus of (D) *University*. Initially you had your lodging at the guest house of the university, where I was also staying (a privilege granted to me by the administration then, since I had found a summer job in Istanbul).

At the time I was a scholarship student at the Faculty of Engineering.

On one occasion I tried to tease you and said: “*In my opinion social sciences, including sociology, are unnecessary things for humanity*”. You gave a calm, reserved reply: “Well, I *used to* think that way, too”

* I think I am somewhat *old fashioned* when it comes to deal with highest technology of any sort. In this respect I resemble a novel character, Mr. *Walnikoff*, from *The Black Marble* by *Joseph Wambaugh*. *Walnikoff* is a detective in California. The time is mid 1970s. He is a descendant of the *White Russians*, who had escaped from *Russia* by ship (from the port of *Vladivostok*), after the *October Revolution*. Having grown up with old legends of the lost land; he turned out as a romantic, nostalgic adult, who clings to the past values stubbornly. He even drives his official police car very slowly and if possible avoids the rush hours in traffic. He is fond of classical music, especially works of his compatriot *Tschaikowski*. He likes the company of old people and enjoys Russian food. s.c.

On another occasion you must have smelled some smoke in the guest house (which later proved to be false) and said: “If the house catches fire, be ready to save yourself!” My reaction was the following: “we should try and save the building first!” whereupon you justly retorted: “People are more important than property!” (To emphasize the message you pronounced this sentence twice. Indeed they are, I strongly agree, now).

Well, here I am, a sociologist! (I received my MBA in 1992, that is, years after my B.S. from *Bosphorous University* and my Ph.D. in Sociology from *Hacettepe University* in 1998).

On one hand this is an irony of fate; but on the other hand this is a revenge of Sociology. In fact it is the very *victory of sociology*, that glorious social science!

Naturally, I sometimes remembered you along the course of my dissertation work. I guess all those memories do constitute an interesting case study, maybe even an interesting example to tell other sociology scholars.

Let me say that I have intrinsically always appreciated social sciences. Nevertheless, when I was on the verge of my freshman year at the university; at the time; natural sciences, medicine and engineering used to enjoy the best prestige almost in all social stratifications.

Those professions were considered worth of aspiration maybe basically because they were much more difficult to attain. Even the grocer, greengrocer, the milkman and the butcher were urging nice, well-liked high school students of the neighborhood towards those goals. “So you are a studious student? Which kind of engineering will you choose to study?” they would ask; taking it for granted that engineering was the best way to take up.

Sir; I would like to hear from you. Right now, I am not working as a sociologist. But, I hope to get a part-time job from a private university. Once I retire from my present government job, I may enter the teaching staff of a state university. Who knows?

Respectfully yours,

Enclosed is a somewhat younger photograph of mine to further refresh your visual memory.

5. Another Letter Addressed to the Professor

Dear Professor:

I appreciate your letter dated April 25. Thanks for taking the time to reply. Let me point out that your little granddaughter in the picture is a lovely child. (We had no children despite long gynecological treatments of my wife. *C'est la vie / this is life*. We Turks strongly believe in destiny, anyhow).

I will take your advice and obtain an e-mail address, the sooner the better. A humorous friend of mine, an official in Ankara, recently “gave me an order” to get e-mail address, too. He said he himself had been flying *postal pigeons* for communication until a few years ago; but once the pigeons died, he was obliged to buy a computer for his home.

So, your stay in *Turkey* was only for one year. Still, your experiences (*Erlebnisse*) must have greatly contributed to your case histories in your classroom, especially at points regarding cultural issues, contrasts etc. Just like the *dolmush / collective-taxis*, which you remember after so many years. By the way, today the *dolmush* practice is still going on; but they replaced the *collective-taxis* with *collective-minibuses* long ago.

I had stayed away from Istanbul for long periods, working for state-owned factories.

I have some interesting homework papers from my PhD study, all hand-written. I am considering to get to work, develop them and transform them into publishable articles: One is about *feud in rural Turkey*, another is about *racial relations in the U.S.* (as an outsider “third world” scholar, perceives it), still another about *youth movements*.

I remember: While we were at the guesthouse, on one occasion I mentioned the contemporary philosopher *Eric Hoffer* (not as famous as his namesake *Eric Fromm*) in an attempt to come closest to *sociology*. (I knew about him through the praising of my high school *English* teacher, an eager reader of his works).

I stressed that he worked for the docks in *New York* harbor! Another new-comer, a somewhat elderly *American* instructor, made a grimace and gave a sigh. He complained that his belongings (books and clothes) still had not arrived because of the strikes on the docks. This was an implication that characters like *Hoffer* were the instigators of such strikes.

I realized that, let alone being an admirable figure, this dock-laborer-philosopher was a menace for this instructor’s vested interests, at least as far as his feelings at the moment were concerned. But, sir, you did not react to *Hoffer* in this manner; though you were also awaiting your delayed shipments. There it is: the empathy of a sociologist!

You being the first career-sociologist I encountered, your memory later took on an important vividness in my recalling as I took up Sociology myself.

Again in the guesthouse, before the commencement of classes, you once expressed your worries about a would-be language barrier between you and your new students here (Indeed in social sciences language is a marked concern with respect to natural sciences, where numbers and formulas also come into play to help with communication). You said approximately the following: “When I say ‘individual’ the American student will notice that it is not the same thing as ‘person’; but I wonder if they will distinguish such shadings of differences here”.

Well, sir, it was a pleasure for me to type that letter. I wish you happiness all the time.

Yours faithfully,



Fig. 1. Following some years of engineering tasks, upon discovery of his deep interest in Behavioral Sciences, the author first had a short hesitation between Sociology and Psychology, regarding further study. Sociology prevailed. (illustration by the author himself — S.C.).

6. An e-Message Addressed to the Professor

Dear Sir,

I have just obtained an e-mail address. I began to employ it through the computer at my workplace. (No computer at home, isn't it funny?). We just returned from a nine-day-long holiday (sandwiched between two weekends), a religious festivity: the sacrifice holiday.

Once I read a French forensic article implicitly demeaning this holiday. It was written in 1950's in Algeria and referred to Moslems' so called propensity to “handhaben”/ “manier” knives with agility, arising from “surtout religieux” habitudes. However, the main aim of this holiday is for the poor to eat meat. Therefore, only the exclusively vegetarians might have a say against it, to be fair.

I am glad that you are visiting Costa Rica. I have just located Costa Rica on the map between Nicaragua and Panama. I think all Latin American countries resemble Turkey in many social aspects, one dominant characteristic

being a high opinion of martial values. Until recent times many Latin American countries had been shaking with coup d'états and as you point out CR is an exception.

I vaguely remembered a passage about CR, which I had found interesting and took notes about a few years ago. It was an extract from a passage given in an English exam by a friend. I later went back to check those notes. Let me just paraphrase it: CR is the Switzerland of Latin America. The army got abolished in late 1940's. Almost the entire state incomes are allocated for health and education. The average education level is accordingly high.

Enjoy your winter vacation in that marvelous country!

Yours truly,

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