

What Happens Next – Sunday April 25, 2021

Reinventing Business, Liberty and Rights, Sex and Drugs in NYC, Xerox PARC and Bell Labs Terry Williams QA

Larry Bernstein:

Terry, I don't even know where to start with this one. Let's go back to the Boogie Woogie, where everyone is intimately connected in breaking the law. How do they think about that? How has their behavior changed from being outside the Boogie Woogie to being inside the Boogie Woogie? Is there a huge sense of relief that they get to do what they want to do without having to worry about the law? Are they worried about blackmail? Are some of the people there trying to have a dual life, to look clean to the outside world, but be dirty inside where others don't face that shame? How do they think about life inside and outside the Boogie Woogie?

Terry Williams: Well, I mean, that's a good question, but keep in mind that I'm really trying to provide a portrait of the after-hours life at a particular historic moment. What's important, I felt, is to capture disappearing social worlds in the city, because I think through this work, I was searching for a lot of patterns that could bring about a measure of social justice in a way. These patterns need to be made rather explicit, and I was trying to do that in these two clubs. There was also a great deal of self-reflection, so I'm not sure that question is answered here, but that's what I was trying to do.

Larry Bernstein:

Howard Becker has his book, *The Outsider*, where he looks at the marijuana smoker, he looks at homosexual clubs, and he argues that the people who were, the marijuana smoker or the homosexual, felt very comfortable in their own shoes, they just felt uncomfortable in mainstream society. Is that cocaine club some combination of those two examples that they did not feel comfortable outside the club and had to go to this special place to do what they wanted to do? And in that club, in the Boogie Woogie, they felt very comfortable fulfilling their desires. It was like a place of freedom.

Terry Williams:

It certainly was a place of freedom for a lot of folk. It was also a place that people felt that they could come back. But this kind of gets to this whole question about my role as observer and/or participant. I guess I want to mention that as a way to, I don't want to sound too didactic, but I want to talk a little bit about this question about inside or outside it.

Because in many ways what you're asking is a question that relates to this issue of being an observer or being a participant. Because the ethnographer isn't an observer, just like all other social scientists. But the ethnographic immersion also implies participation. That's like the

second pole to this dialectical method of participant observation, and probably, I think, it's one of the most discussed questions and issues that we hear in this dimension of ethnographic research. Because by asserting the need to participate in this after-hours club scene, to participate in the field, the ethnographer, and what I'm doing is I make a series of important claims. Let me just mention a few of those.

The first claim is that observation is not enough for yielding knowledge. Second, it cannot be, I think, entirely objective; but rather, it sort of depends on the context. The third point, I think, is that the observer gains knowledge by embracing his or her active presence in the field. As an ethnographer, what do I do? I make claims. I make claims against empirical science. In other words, that the control of the environment in which it takes place only yields partial knowledge. Remember, the reason for setting up tightly-controlled experiments, it primarily has to do with the need to repeat the experiment several times to validate a hypothesis. This repetition in a similar environment, what does it do? It allows for the observation of constant behavior while the introduction of variation in the environment allows for the observation of a change in behavior and thereby for identifying its cause.

I'm not trying to control what goes on in that club, but rather I'm trying to understand the situation as it unfolds. I'm trying to understand what all these folk are doing at the same time. It's not easy to do that because not just that it would in most situation be impossible to set up a situation where you could control what everybody is doing, but this is not a good business. It is tricky.

It also asserts something else. That is, when you're faced with this complex situation of social persons in this turbulence of actions taking place, of forces taking place, of processes taking place, of interactions taking place that exists well beyond the individual, observation as a standalone method can only allow for a particular glimpse, a partial glimpse of that social world, and that's all I could do. That's where participation comes in because by participating what I am able to, I'm able to reach a deeper understanding of the social world. I'm able to act and look at different modalities that in this particular participation take place; from conversation to actual work, of training side by side with my accomplices.

I have to keep in mind that I live in that world. We, the ethnographers, we live in the world. The world that we are conducting as a matter of daily life. What are we doing? We're investigating and investing our time, and participating through our actions, through our thoughts, through our emotions, in the very situation that I'm observing. That means that this observation implies an active presence. My physical and mental presence can't really remain distinct from this interaction which I'm participating, and of course, influencing as well.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to ask about changing social mores. In 1962, Howard Becker writes his book, *The Outsider*, and chapter one is *The Marijuana Smoker*. The marijuana smoker in that chapter is perceived to be a degenerate by the public, and the marijuana smoker recognizes that. But actually he doesn't really find much wrong what he's doing. But 60 years later, the marijuana smoker is no longer viewed as a degenerate at all, but has become much more mainstream. In your analysis of the cocaine smoker, my understanding is that you did this original research maybe 15 to 20 years ago. Do you think that there's been significant changes in social mores as it relates to the cocaine use or other drug use? Has it gone more mainstream? Are the social mores different now? Does that club still need to be underground that operates in the middle of the night in a neighborhood that is unaware of what is going on at the Boogie Woogie?

Terry Williams:

Well, I think the mores have changed a bit, but they've changed for different reasons and for different folk. I think if you look at the way black folk are treated in their use of these chemicals, it's very different than the way whites are treated, for example, or others are treated. There has been obviously an attempt to make those changes, but it really hasn't happened completely. The after-hours still club is still and there are still after-hours club around, those clubs are, for the most part, still hidden, they're still underground, and you can still find some of these locations that are available for, I guess, the wealthy; but you don't see as much of that world as you used to.

Larry Bernstein:

Who was the clientele in the Boogie Woogie? How did it differ by race, by income, by social class? Did they congregate in the club by race, social class, and interest, or otherwise? How did it work?

Terry Williams:

Well, first of all, you had different kinds of categories of folk there. The after-hours club world was a hustler world, which means that you had most people there who controlled the clubs were people who had enough money to pay hundreds of dollars every night to be part of it. You had the hustle class was the main class of folk who you saw there. But then you had a little bit of everybody who would come. People from the local communities would come and hang out. You had visitors. Once in a while. You even see tourists in the after-hours clubs. There was a variable mixture of different folk who made the after-hours club their home.

Larry Bernstein:

You did an ethnographic analysis of a crack house that I found to be extremely shocking and more disturbing than I expected. But with the Boogie Woogie, you seem to be much more open-minded and, and not horrified or shocked by what you saw. You admit that you sort of thought it was fine. How do you distinguish these two environments?

Terry Williams:

Well, I think what happened after crack cocaine is that it was a change in the way in which people identified with the drug, with the cocaine use. There was a kind of etiquette that existed. People would share. There was an attempt to, there was also sexuality there, but in the crack house, there was no sharing. There was often a lot of bickering that went on. You didn't see the kind of conviviality that you see in the cocaine clubs. It was a different kind of environment that found yourself in when you were watching what was happening in crack houses, as opposed to what was going on in the cocaine world.

Larry Bernstein:

You also explained in the crack house that none of the characters in that environment ever seem to get out and rejoin the real world, in any meaningful way. They always slip back into the crack community. What was the relationship like for the Boogie Woogie cocaine users? Were they able to engage and participate fully in the more normal world or did the fallback into the pure cocaine world?

Terry Williams:

I think it has to do with pharmacology. What happens when one engages with crack cocaine is almost an immediate obsession. The cocaine users didn't have that monkey on their back. They had an opportunity to simply just move from one place to another. They could use the drug at the party level with was what the after-hour club was. Then, but the crack user did not seem to be able to control, having any control, over what the chemical did to them. As a result, this kind of addiction, really was rather profound for people who chose to smoke the drug, as opposed to snorting it. That inhalation, the difference between snorting and smoking was really a rather profound change, hinged the mind of the person who happened to be indulgent. It was a very different world if you add it to the smoke.

Larry Bernstein:

You did work on crack. You did work on cocaine. Now, you've moved into ethnographic analysis of sex in public places. How would you contrast that movement of your work? What are the key things to learn in your new work on sex?

Terry Williams:

Well, what I've been doing today, follow the same kind of pattern. That's to say, I am out in the field and I observe and hear and see what goes on, and then I try and record that behavior, or try and find a link to someone who can assist me in learning about that behavior. Basically, I see this as being curious about the world that I happened to be involved in. Every location that I've gone to, from teenage life to housing to crack cocaine, well, this always had an element of sex

involved. I thought if I could start to recall, and I took notes, of course, I have lots of field notes and I have journals, and I noticed that this pattern was consistent in all the work that I was doing. That there was an element of sex.

As a result of that, I put those notes together, and this was now over a four decades, and I decided to put it together as a volume. Columbia was interested in it. I started to collect notes from everyone who was involved in some way or another, and that became the Soft City. It's about public sex, of course, but it covers that 40 year period.

Larry Bernstein:

Terry, thank you so much. I have a feeling that once your book comes out, I'm going to have you back on the show to discuss more about it. In the meantime, we're going to segue to something completely different, which is the industrial lab. I'm going to start with my Mike Hiltzik who'll speak for six minutes, and then to be