

On (From) Lafayette: A Journey Through Life from the Bronx to Cyberspace

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Note: This memoir was written (September 5, 2003) for Aristeia, a Lafayette College undergraduate magazine, after our College Bowl team returned Spring 2003 for a reunion and to play College Bowl against current undergraduate. (We won.) It was published in a truncated one-page form (without my in put) as "Through Life from the Bronx to Cyberspace" in the Fall 2005 issue.

Lafayette Sets My Path: Most of us have a few defining "A Ha!" moments when the true nature of our universe becomes clear. The most important one came in 1962 while walking with Jack Marchalonis ('62) back from class in Pardee to the McKelvy Honors House. I was a junior then, having oscillated between being pre-law (not enough social skills), pre-med (klutz in the laboratory) and pre grad history (fun, but no future).

"What am I going to do with my (work) life?" I asked Jack. As is often the case, others can tell us how to run our lives better than we can because they are not distorted by our own hangups and histories. "Barry, you always use history to talk about what's happening in the world now. Why not become a sociologist."

My internal light bulb flashed. "You're right!" I exclaimed. "I'm going to become a sociologist, whatever that is." And so I did. And I have lived happily ever after.

Of course, it wasn't as simple as that. Lafayette had no sociology department then. Fortunately, I was at Lafayette where classes were small and faculty were accessible, supportive, and knew their students. To be sure, some of my mentors were skeptical of my career choice: "Are you going to study a bunch of pigeons pecking?" asked history professor Albert Gendebien, confusing sociology with then-voguish Skinnerian psychology. But the Dean and the faculty quickly arranged for the lone anthropologist, Luther P. Gerlach (who moved to the University of Minnesota soon afterwards), to give me a crash independent study course in sociology during my senior year. Armed with that, my history major, obsessive reading of the *New York Times*, and bull sessions at McKelvy, I got into Harvard. Although I was terrified when I arrived at Harvard, I found that the Lafayette experience had stood me well. I was used to talking in small seminars, to professors taking me seriously, and to writing many papers.

Lafayette also taught me the value of diversity -- by negative example. It was a homogenous place then: All "men," almost entirely white, and predominantly Christians from Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Many of its suburban and small town student body had never met a Jew before. My first roommate even asked me if it were true that Jews had horns. He was a sweet guy and blushed at the request, so I let him feel my head. I felt socially excluded, especially when fraternity rules barred me from entry. It took me an unhappy while, but I eventually realized that it was the insular majority that were the real sufferers. I've often wondered how they coped with

the diversity of the U.S. and the world in the tumultuous 1960s and later.

From the Bronx to Lafayette: My Lafayette realization of my vocation wasn't my first "A Ha!" moment! That came in the late 1950s when I was a teenager in the Bronx, New York City. Although my relatives lived elsewhere, I never was lonely. I mostly hung out on neighborhood street corners with my friends. We all lived in multiple worlds. Although we had an active neighborhood life, we scattered on weekends. We used the subway to go downtown to Manhattan, or we drove with our parents to visit relatives who lived elsewhere in New York.

The Bronx led me to realize that people live simultaneously in multiple, permeable social worlds. People are always coming and going. Very few belong to only one community or see themselves as fully committed to one group. It is as futile to draw a map cleanly delineating each group's turf as it is to draw precise ethnic boundaries in eastern Europe or the Middle East.

Using the Bronx and Lafayette at Harvard

Given these experiences, when I began studying sociology in 1963 as a Harvard graduate student, I was shocked to find urban sociology filled with despair about the supposed loss of community in contemporary Western societies. Urban scholars implicitly took the preindustrial village as their ideal of a good community, a place like the bar in the television show *Cheers* "where everybody knows your name". They were continually searching for the simulacrum of these villages in the streets of urban neighbourhoods but finding that most people did not know most others. Not finding it, urbanists had mostly preached for over a century that the large-scale social changes accompanying the Industrial Revolution had led people to be isolated and miserable in the city. They used the same rhetoric that politicians and pundits continue to sell, although now cyberspace has joined inner-city slums as the alleged destroyer of community.

The folks who wrote this stuff had never been to the Bronx! I knew that my fellow New Yorkers were heavily -- and usually happily -- involved with friends, neighbours, relatives, coworkers, and fellow members of churches, unions, and voluntary organizations. And if New York -- often feared as a hellish city -- was a happy, communal place, certainly other cities were too.

Fortunately, Lafayette had taught me how to profit from my Harvard mentors, Harrison White, Chuck Tilly, and Chad Gordon. They, too, took their students seriously. Bull sessions with Harvard graduate students were a continuation of McKelvy House sessions. Lafayette helped my research too. Sociology then was heavily quantitative and present-oriented. But I had labored for years in the historical bowels of Skillman library. I learned a lot of statistics at Harvard, but I always tried to interpret them in historical context. This has been especially useful in my analyses of the Internet when I have demonstrated the continuity of past practices to breathless pundits who believe the world was born anew when the Internet blossomed.

Getting Structured, Globalized, and Re-Urbanized and More Networked

Moving to the University of Toronto in 1967 to be a sociology professor was an immense education. On its surface, Toronto looked and sounded much like American cities, but it was profoundly unAmerican. Among other things, Canadian cities were not seen as teeming with evil. With low personal and property crime and without the race wars of the U.S., Canadian middle and working classes continued to thrive in the hearts of cities. Pro-urban policies encouraged people to continue to move about the city without fear and to positively enjoy its varied urbane delights. Unlike the fearfully-defended neighborhoods of many American cities, Toronto has continued to be an open city where ethnic concentration in neighborhoods was more charming than a forbidden fortress.

My Lafayette studies of world history and world literature also helped me to appreciate the Canadian perspective on things. Canadians see things in more global, less egocentric, terms than do national-centric Americans. Being the neighbor of the world's strongest economy and military, they have learned how to view things in terms of relations of power and to value countervailing multilateral institutions. No Canadian would see the world in bipolar terms: "If you are not for us, you are against us." Thus, I was at the right place to continue seeing urban communities as positive, fuzzy sets.

From Old Pardee to Cyberspace

Together, the Bronx, Lafayette and Harvard helped me to set my lifetime research journey. My research and writing have focused on demonstrating that the world is composed of permeable, sparsely-knit networks and not tightly-bounded, densely-knit groups. I've helped to develop the field of "social network analysis" in order to understand how the kinds of networks people are in connect them to each other and the larger world, and channel resources to and from them

My work started with showing how communities still exist in cities, but that it no longer has been bound up in neighbourhoods. Our NetLab research team has shown that only a small minority of people's active ties are with neighbors. Nevertheless, people are usually able to lead active, sociable lives, finding social capital in their far-flung social networks.

Lafayette also gave me the necessary cultural background for my research work during the past fourteen years of studying computer networks as social networks. In 1990, after twenty-five years as a scholar, I had the implicit choice: Keep doing what I had been with increasing staleness; stop doing research and become a semi-retired pundit, an administrator; or switch fields. Rather than coast or administer, I switched.

The Internet was becoming popular, and I had been playing with its forebearers since 1976. The Internet was made for my social network approach, for when computer networks connect people or organizations, they are social networks. Indeed, the Internet is the world's largest social network. Much of this work involved collaboration with computer scientists at universities, corporations and the governments. My Lafayette experience, was a great help here, because I had

already spent much time with scientists and engineers and knew how to talk with them. Indeed, I got to be one of the few sociologists who designs new stuff rather than just analyzing what already exists. This has led me to do a daring, politically incorrect, thing for a sociologist: focusing on social opportunities and not just on abuses. Recently the NetLab I direct has been studying:

1) How organizations function as loosely-coupled organizations rather than as strict hierarchies of little boxes. We're especially interested in how people access and manage knowledge in such organizations. 2) Learning if using the Internet increases, decreases or supplements social capital? The answer is "Yes" to all of these. Our survey research with the National Geographic Society shows that frequent emailing supplements face-to-face and telephone meetings so that frequent Internet users have very high levels of communication.

3) Getting a window into the future by studying the online and offline lives of the residents of "Netville": a leading-edge wired suburb of Toronto that had access to very high-speed Internet service. We've discovered the "glocalization" (globalization + localization) that comes with wired living. Many emails are local. The Internet supports the local as well as the global village.

Of course, I'm glocalized too. Just think of that walk across the quad with Jack Marchalonis -- a highly local experience. Now we keep in touch by the Internet, as he makes his immunological, cancer-related discoveries at the University of Arizona. It's been On (from) Lafayette all the way.

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