

Sociology department confronts misinformation

By GARY T. MARX

*In a room
where people unanimously
maintain
a conspiracy of silence,
one word of truth
sounds like a pistol shot.*

Czeslaw Milosz

Milosz's words are particularly appropriate at this time, when extensive misinformation about the University of Colorado department of sociology has been met with such deafening silence. In light of the media attention recently devoted to the department, the following points may be of interest to readers of the Daily Camera.

1) In 1994 as part of the university's policy of reviewing departments every five years, sociology underwent careful scrutiny from four separate committees. The Program Review Panel reports were all favorable. In none of these was there even a hint of any racial concerns. Accusations regarding the department's racial climate appeared only after the department took action according to its professional standards in a personnel case. The department's procedures were unanimously supported by higher level university review committees appointed by the Dean and the Vice Chancellor.

2) Those publicly making charges about racism in the department never filed formal complaints in the many places available for doing this. Nor did they ever discuss their concerns with the department's leadership. It is far easier and politically strategic to make sensationalist undocumented charges to the media than to report them through formal channels. In the latter case individuals can be held accountable for their claims.

3) A review of the Department of Sociology now going on was

requested by the department to clear its name. It is indeed ironic that before the results of that review are in, the regents have taken action that presumes guilt.

4) The conflicts in the department (and on the campus) have been overtly and covertly encouraged by the president to serve her own ends. She has sought to demonstrate that there are problems on the Boulder campus which she is needed to deal with. The situation is exactly the opposite; her negative leadership has helped to create the problems. For sociology this began with a student protest in which the president, according to media accounts, agreed to investigate the sociology department. This led some of my colleagues to suggest that perhaps if they went on a hunger strike someone would call for an investigation of the president.

5) Of the many departments on the campus, sociology both locally and nationally, is among those most concerned and sensitive to issues of race, ethnicity and gender. This is demonstrated by the topics we study, our actions in social movements and the diverse composition of our many students.

I have spent three decades as a scholar and citizen concerned with questions of civil rights and civil liberties. From the White House to black churches I have worked as a policy adviser on issues of race and ethnicity. I was active in CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality). I served on the staff of the Kerner Commission (the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders) and helped write its report. I served on the Rosovsky Committee at Harvard which was responsible for creating one of the first Afro-American Studies Departments. I am a founding member of the American Sociological Association's Section on Race and Eth-

nicity. I have mentored minority students who are now in positions of leadership in universities throughout the country. Many legitimate criticisms can be directed against academic sociology, but a hostile racial and gender climate is not one of them.

6) The Department of Sociology is democratically run and not the creature of some all-powerful chair or dean. The changes it has undergone in recent years have been arrived at through democratic and open decision-making (including defining areas of specialization; hiring world-class faculty; establishing explicit criteria for rewarding research and teaching excellence; and extensive revisions of the undergraduate and graduate curriculum). These actions are strongly supported by most faculty. Yet change generates resistance. Much of the controversy around sociology involves an effort to create a first-rate department where the quality of scholarship and teaching, not a person's politics, race or gender is determinative of recognition.

7) In our effort to create a first rate department, much in the sociology department has been under careful review in recent years. As part of this ongoing review and improvement (which I as an outside chair was specifically recruited to carry out), a problem was discovered with the behavior of the person who had clerical responsibility for independent studies. This was immediately reported to the dean and led to an audit. The department welcomed the audit, cooperated fully with it and has made the changes it recommended. Many of the recommendations of the audit report applied to other university departments. While independent studies constitute a tiny fraction of the department's activities, such abuse cannot be

tolerated and administrators must accept general responsibility for the actions of those in their units.

Actions have been taken to minimize the likelihood of such problems ever happening again. Yet it is important to note that to a significant extent in its daily operations a university runs on trust. Ideally employees must be respected, challenged by their work and encouraged to use their creativity. An important research finding is that if you want people to behave responsibly, treat them as if they were responsible. A university needs careful selection of its members, clear policies and procedures, and appropriate oversight mechanisms. But given its fundamental ethos and modest resources, a university cannot and should not be run like a police state nor a militaristic organization.

We recently unanimously adopted a positive diversity statement. The department is strongly committed to understanding and helping to change problems of race and racism in American society — as befits a public research university and a department that defines itself as a theoretically-driven, generalizing and comparative scholarly discipline.

I chose to come to Colorado several years ago because I believed in our potential to create a distinguished sociology department and a leading national university. That belief has been severely shaken, but not yet fully shattered. For it to be realized there must be leadership that has integrity and does not bend to the will of self-interest or political expediency. Above all it must strive for excellence, and respect the most fundamental value of a university — the pursuit of truth in an environment of civility.

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