

Egon Bittner: Humanist and See(e)r

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I was a graduate student in the sociology department at Brandeis University in the early 1970s, and it was as improbable a gathering of intellectual dissidents as one could imagine. Amidst the loosely constructed community of Marxists, community organisers, amateur therapists and field work mavens was Egon Bittner, who did not fit into any category but who was, in many ways, the most authentic sociological voice in the department.

There were two themes in Bittner's work that I took from the experience of being his student that I shall briefly reflect on. One was his concern with the tacit rules of conduct that oversaw the accomplishment of life – i.e., ethnomethodology – and the other was his imagination of impending dehumanisation at the hand of technological advance; what he called 'technique'. Bittner's vision was the extreme extension of Max Weber's rationalisation; the domination of human autonomy by forces we had ourselves created.

Bittner's ideas about rationalisation are summarised in his 1983 essay on 'technique and the conduct of life' where he wrote that in the human urge to master nature we created the machine, and at first 'the builders of machines thought ... of the victory of the machine as their own victory, and that they further assumed that every such victory wrested one more bit of human life away from the rule of the forces of nature' (Bittner 1983: 251). As 'technique' – the capacity of the machine to 'accomplish anything by anyone, for any reason, and for any purpose' (Bittner 1983: 253) – advanced, Bittner argued that we would create machines that would advance beyond their creators. They would, Bittner warned, soon converse only with each other and in a manner that would be beyond our understanding, creating a world suited for the needs of machines rather than humans. At that moment, Bittner (1983: 260) suggests, 'We will have to reconsider our place in the order of creation'.

We all knew that Professor Bittner was a Holocaust camp survivor; the tattooed numbers on his wrist were there for anyone to see. He had experienced the extremes of human brutality, yet it was the loss of human autonomy to technique (the machine; the computer) that was his greatest fear.

There was also a mischievousness spirit in his otherwise somber melancholy. Yes, humans created these diabolical wonders of technique, but perhaps we were capable of outwitting them. This was the quiet subtext and he often seemed bemused by the ironies that only humans could create. I carried both Bittner's fears and his tentative hopefulness when a decade later I set upon a study of a bricoleur-fixer, Willie, who was an auto mechanic in northern New York (Harper 1987).

Bittner (1983: 253) had written that 'practical labor is always controlled by full regard for the timely and local features of the environment within which it takes place', and indeed this was the world of work I set out to understand. Willie's work was wedded to an environment but generalisable to larger issues. I studied Willie's mastery of the machines that we depended upon in a poor and frigid community, and of the social worlds in which the work was negotiated and accomplished. I was a college professor and thus not technically poor, but the machines my family and I depended upon (including such things as a homemade heating system for a solar greenhouse that kept plants alive at -20°F) were just as finicky, mysterious, frustrating and absolutely necessary as were the machines the marginal farmers used to grow their crops and milk their cows. Our family cars, ten-year old Saabs, were also Willie's speciality in the improbable world he occupied, and their repair and maintenance were as unstandard as were the cars themselves.

Willie's world spoke of triumph over technique; human autonomy fully realised, and his mastery of machines led him to mastery in other parts of his life. In the book I spoke of the 'moral universe of work' in which the shop existed; Willie was at the centre of a web of social relations that he managed with the same skill that he commanded when he fixed a decrepit manure spreader with his welding torch.

Bittner had written that there had never before been a time with a greater discrepancy between what an individual person knew and what is known in society; that technical advance would, as a result, make us relatively less capable. But Willie disproved such a notion. A broken machine in his shop was an interesting mystery, and more often than not he re-engineered the machines he fixed so they would not break again. The more complex the repair, the more empowered he became. He often distinguished 'parts-changers,' who Bittner would identify as people whose actions were directed by computer-generated instructions, from 'mechanics' – those who repaired. But it was not just machines that he approached in his bricolage of crafts; it was the management of his actions. He worked for some people but not others, and his decisions were not based on profit. He worked on what interested him on a given day, sometimes for those who were most in need of help, but more often those who had paid their dues in

the trades, barter and favours that were the real currency of the shop. The money charged for work was based in part on what resources people had, what a machine he had fixed was 'worth,' and sometimes it was influenced by how much he needed at that moment.

Willie was also a futurist in his own way. He respected the engine management computers that were then becoming common because they made cars work more efficiently. But the computers didn't always work correctly and he was always one step ahead of them. In other words, Willie's was the 'live intelligence, fallibly attuned to actual circumstance', that Bittner (1983: 253) had imagined giving way to the dominance of machine-driven technique.

I did not see in Willie a repudiation of Egon's spectre of dehumanisation; it was more a reminder that humans always seem to rise above the difficulties we create for ourselves, and this was also Bittner's message.

The other theme – Bittner's attention to the tacit rules of social life – encouraged an aspect of my sociological toolkit in a way that perhaps he would have found surprising. My initial inspiration was his study of the police on skid row, where Bittner (1967) described two distinctive aspects of police work, 'law enforcement,' and a more embedded and tacit activity he called 'keeping the peace.' Peace keeping was a craft, involving, in Bittner's view, three types of action. The patrolmen on skid row¹ accumulated particularised knowledge of people and institutions and how they solved the problems of their daily lives from their long assignments in the same environment. On skid row, Bittner discovered, determining guilt was generally less important than solving immediate problems. Right and wrong were often very muddy concepts but order needed to be preserved. Third, solving the mundane, 'practical' problems of the outsiders, vagabonds, alcoholics and others who lived on skid row was the central work of the cop on the beat. Bittner wrote that 'patrolmen do not really enforce the law, even when they do invoke it, but merely use it as a resource to solve certain pressing practical problems in keeping the peace' (1967: 710).

I took from this brilliant study a focus on discovering the hidden aspects of social life. For me that seemed suited to my interest in photography, used in two quite different ways.

The method I developed to study Willie's shop world is called photo elicitation, a process where the researcher and the subject discuss and analyse photos related in some way to the subject's world. The photos can be taken by the researcher or by the subject, or drawn from an archive, but the key to any version of the method is the awareness that meanings of things and events are slippery, created in circumstances, and often misunderstood. I don't think it would be presumptuous to imagine that Bittner would have found this approach consistent with the intensive looking and listening that was at the basis of his research. For

the study of the police on skid row, for example, he did fieldwork for a year and completed more than a hundred interviews. Using images to bridge the cultures of the researcher and those he or she studied seems, in retrospect, like a very Bittneresque approach; at least that is how I viewed it.

The other photographic approach that I trace to Bittner involves making photos to understand the tacit rules of everyday life. Bittner's ethnomethodology was a 'practical' method – a guide to a different kind of awareness – rather than focused on the reduction of actions into smaller and smaller parcels of meaning, and for this approach photography seems ideally suited.

When I received the invitation to write this small essay I was teaching a course on urban sociology at the University of Bologna. I began to think about how visual methods and ethnomethodology were related in practical ways; how photography can be used to reveal the tacit rules and expectations in a social universe. I designed an exercise, part as a homage to Bittner, and as a demonstration for my students, to explore this connection.

My goal was to identify norms that guide routine interaction that make collective social life possible. An aspect of this was to identify norm violations and to determine how they are integrated into settings or threaten the fleeting social order of public life. My topic would be the most mundane of activities: my normally thirty-five minute walk to and from my apartment across the centre city of Bologna to the university where I worked. At intervals of every ten steps² I would frame my view forward through a camera with a 28mm lens, about the perspective of normal sight. I framed each image to recreate the view forward in about the same way and adjusted aperture, ISO settings and focus to best approximate human visual perception. These were sometimes complicated decisions; for example, on my walk home the light was falling and the insides of the covered sidewalks (porticos) were becoming more and more dim. I was forced to open the lens aperture, which decreased depth of field more than the human eye does (we see deep depth of field – point of focus – even in dim light). Eventually I needed to use slower and slower shutter speeds, which also changed the way the reality of the street appeared on photos (people were sometimes blurred) in comparison to how the eye saw it. In the end I regarded the exercise as a trial that needed further development.

Nevertheless there were several insights gained from the study of the five hundred and fifty photos made during the exercise.

The first was that my normal vision was highly edited. I thought of my walk as a passage through a gorgeous urban environment of porticos and archways, past inviting cafes and bars, cast in the typical gold and sienna hues of Bologna. Of course I often make photos that confirmed that vision. When I analysed the photos made every ten steps, however, I saw the banality of the physical environ-

ment: trash bins, construction tape, graffiti and shuttered shops. The ‘beautiful moments’ in the ten-step project were accidental; a human shape flowing by in a particular way; an angle under the arches where the pattern of sunlight was exquisite. In this way the photos became a way to study the normal activity of ‘seeing’ as I forced a different framework on the activity.

I found evidence in the photo sequence of a great deal of norm negotiation and violation. In a certain intersection there was a double light; you passed to an island in the middle of a busy street commanded by one traffic light and to the other side commanded by another. What I noticed in the images was that people appeared to be taking cues from each other and making collective decisions on when and how to violate the traffic light, or not to.

The photo series alerted me to ‘normal acts’ (cleaning the sidewalk, commanding a part of the sidewalk in front of one’s shop; pausing to visit with a friend in the middle of pedestrian traffic) and ‘dramas’ such as getting a truck through a narrow street, with barely inches to spare. I noted various styles of negotiating ‘dangerous places,’ in particular pedestrian passages across streets marked by white lines that Italian drivers reduce to a game of chicken. Studying the photos let me to understand the path as a trip through several zones that reminded me of a Chicago school study in miniature. In other words, the photos made in a systematic way opened the door to an understanding of the organisation of routine life in an Italian urban public space. My twenty students from seven countries in Europe pledged to repeat the exercise in their home cities and if they do we shall have the beginning of a comparative study of rules and routines of urban public life in Europe.

It is an honour to reflect on how a great teacher creates a path you follow for your whole career. I hope Professor Bittner realised how profound his impact on his students really was but probably we never told him enough. I know I did not, and thus the happy experience of writing this essay is also tinged with regret.

NOTES

1. ‘Skid row’ is a term that has fallen into disuse. It came into being in the early 20th Century as a description of the ‘skid roads’ of western timber towns where logs were cut into lumber. It came to describe city centres across America where homeless men and other outsiders congregated and lived. It was a social ecology that included particular institutions, such as cheap hotels, pawn shops, and places to buy alcohol, as well as social workers, police and others who serviced the needs of the largely homeless and disconnected populations who lived there.

2. I actually made photos every twenty steps on the way to work, and every ten steps on the way back to see which worked most effectively. Sometimes these photos occurred in the

middle of a busy street and had to be framed quickly. I also made several photos as I completed the several ninety degree turns that my walk involved, so the photos would show the point of view pivoting to a new direction.

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