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# Documentary Film, Teaching, and the Accumulation of Sociological Insight: The Work of Richard Broadman

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*Children of Labor: A Finnish-American History.* 55 minutes. 1977. Richard Broadman, producer/director. Documentary Educational Resources. 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02472. 800.569.6621. [docued@der.org](mailto:docued@der.org). Institutional purchase: \$145; rent: \$79.95. (The distributor and contact information are relevant for all the reviewed films below.)

*Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston.* 60 minutes. 1978. Richard Broadman, director; produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, John Pennington, and Roy Rosenzweig. Institutional purchase: \$145; rent: \$79.95.

*Down the Project: The Crisis of Public Housing.* 60 minutes. 1982. Richard Broadman, director; produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, John Gillis, Byron Rushing, and John Pennington. Institutional purchase: \$145; rent: \$79.95.

*Water and the Dream of the Engineers.* 80 minutes. 1983. Richard Broadman, director; produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, Samm Bass Warner, Roy Rosenzweig, John Angel Grant, Larry Johnson, and John Pennington. Institutional purchase: \$195; rent: \$89.95.

*The Collective: Fifteen Years Later.* 60 minutes. 1985. Richard Broadman, director; produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, Fred Simon, Daniel Hartnett, Stephen Olech, and Anne Robinson. Institutional purchase: \$145; rent: \$79.95.

*Love Stories: Women, Men, & Romance.* 85 minutes. 1987. Richard Broadman, director; produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, John Bishop, Judith Smith, Kersti Yllo, Stephen Olech, Susan Steimer,

Kate Davis, and Barbara Ehrenreich. Institutional purchase: \$195; rent: \$79.95.

*Brownsville Black and White.* 83 minutes. 2002. Richard Broadman and Laurann Black, producers/directors. Institutional purchase: \$195; rent: \$89.95.

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The documentary filmmaker Richard Broadman, who died at age 53 in 2000, left a superb body of work. Along with Frederick Wiseman, Barbara Koppel, and groups such as Kartemquin Films, based in Chicago, Broadman for many years navigated the vagaries of funding and distribution that challenge even the most devoted and talented filmmakers. Through the 1970s and 1980s, Broadman produced a series of rich ethnographic films that delve into deeply rooted sociological concerns, including the nature of urban communities, public housing, labor and labor movements, race and ethnic relations, and even romance and intimate relationships.

The films' combination of historical context and narrative richness place Broadman in the first rank of documentary filmmakers. Though not himself a sociologist, Broadman collaborated closely with one—John Grady—in the research and production of many of his films, and this contributes to an especially coherent blending of narrative and analytical elements. Thanks to Documentary Educational Resources, a distinguished archive and distributor of nonfiction films, Broadman's work is enjoying renewed availability and attention. (All films reviewed in this essay are available at [www.der.org](http://www.der.org).)

A detailed overview of Broadman's oeuvre (consisting of eight films, one completed after his passing) can be found in Crockett's (2012) recent essay. My goal here is to identify important aspects

of Broadman's work for teachers of sociology and other social sciences. I argue that deriving the powerful insights and benefits of the best documentary films requires teachers, as well as students, to sharpen and enlarge their interpretive resources. Such films invite teachers to reconsider the role(s) of film in the classroom—to frame them not merely as visual illustrations of social processes and problems but also as data that students can use to historicize social life and grapple with micro-macro linkages and human agency, central to developing the sociological imagination that Mills (1959) urges us to cultivate.

This teaching task is made harder because of the expectations regarding film that students bring into the classroom. As Grady (2001:89) notes,

one of the legacies of the audio/visual tradition of illustration is that students come into our classes expecting either to be amused or to be edified by the images we display. Their experience is that viewing is a break in the action that enlivens the pace of normal instruction. So as soon as the projector and screen are set up ... students know that it will be time either to relax or to view something so serious that its interpretation of events and society will be beyond question.

Neither stance is conducive to the kind of active, critical interpretation that Broadman's films invite.

That relatively few teachers have developed a nuanced approach to integrating film is not, therefore, a sign of indifference or lack of creativity. Instead, as Beck (1986:212) notes, "there is no generally accepted system of standards for certifying the scholarly acceptability of films, and there are no routine channels in which films can be circulated and used as scholarly contributions." Thus, while in principle films can, as Becker (1986:126–31) argues, be assessed in terms of processes of selection and editing generic to any/all ways of "telling about society," doing so demands that teachers attend not only to the surface but also to the implicit structure and choices through which arguments are advanced via film. At least this is true of so careful a documentarian as Richard Broadman. When we share this interpretive task

with students, in the light of relevant concepts, arguments, and empirical cases in class, the films reveal new dimensions that transcend the specific times and settings of their making.

## THE GRAMMAR AND GOALS OF BROADMAN'S FILMS

The style and objectives of Broadman's films are informed by what Barnouw (1983:231–53) terms an *observer* stance, facilitated through light, portable cameras, and enhanced ways of synchronizing sound to images. This approach to documentary film grammar came of age in the 1950s and finds exceptional fluency in Broadman, in whose films oral history, still images, and naturalistic location shooting are seamlessly interwoven. For all the skill, there's a plainness and economy to the films, most of which are shot in black and white: The viewer is thrust into the story, without credits or mood-setting music, guided by the commentary of informants shown in informal settings (usually their homes). It is their perspectives—drawn out with evident warmth and rapport from unseen interviewers—that carry the stories along. There is little voice-over narration and few on-screen captions, a style that sustains ethnographic intimacy and also reveals the particularity and humility of informants' narratives. Said differently, Broadman's goal is not to advance an overarching argument but rather in an inductive spirit to reveal cultural perspectives and human agency—with all their ambiguities, inertia, regrets, and contradictions. Curry (1984:44), discussing Broadman's *Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston*, declares that "this is not a neat package of predigested social commentary." And as John Grady, Broadman's collaborator, told an interviewer from the *Boston Globe*, "the problems are so deep, so rooted in the political, geographic, racial and economic history of the city that any simple solutions would be ludicrous. ... We have a point of view, but not an ideology" (quoted in Curry 1984:44). This sets Broadman's films apart from, say, those of Ken Burns—"TV's designated historian" according to a recent review by Nancy Franklin (2007) in *The New Yorker*—in which overarching themes lend the films a strongly didactic quality. Broadman's goal, in contrast, is to interrogate and challenge ostensibly settled

accounts of such social processes and policies as ethnic assimilation, subsidized housing, counter-culture movements, and racial tension. In doing so, he compels viewers to grapple with how cities work (or don't), with the unintended consequences of social policies and with the insights of participants who are regarded as invaluable theorists of their own social worlds.

### Film Synopses

So to the films: Most take place in Boston or New England, the series distributed by Documentary Educational Resources was released between 1977 and 2002, and each film touches on a topic that has contemporary relevance. *Children of Labor: A Finnish-American History* (1977) traces the experiences of three generations of Finnish immigrants, and their efforts in the industrial United States of the early to mid twentieth century, to establish their own cultural continuity and institutions. Among the surprising connections are alliances that emerged between the Finns, the Temperance Movement, and Socialist labor coalitions such as the Industrial Workers of the World, respectively. Later, those ties with organized labor led to fear and oppression within the community during the McCarthy era and to the exodus of some to the Soviet Union, only to become disillusioned with life there. The ethos of a later generation of Finns, involved in cooperative housing, is understandable as a legacy of this tradition of progressivism. The visual texture of the film is detailed and observant, a collage of photographs, reminiscences, and found footage from local TV news reports; it's a rich portrait of an ethnic, working-class community against the backdrop of the twentieth century. It also calls to mind parallels to current processes and discourses of immigration and to the ethnic niches that abound in urban America.

Released only a year later (1978), *Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston* and the next film, *Down the Project: The Crisis of Public Housing* (1982), are substantively related and together represent an ambitious and penetrating visual account and analysis of what was euphemistically termed "urban renewal" in Boston and other cities. As Gans ([1962] 1982:368) concluded in *Urban Villagers*, his landmark ethnographic study of the process in Boston,

[urban] redevelopment proceeded from beginning to end on the assumption that the needs of the site residents were of far less importance than the clearing and rebuilding of the site itself. Great pains were taken with the planning for buildings, but planning for the West Enders was done on an *ad hoc* basis, almost as an afterthought.

Broadman's films illustrate and elaborate on Gans's discovery of the importance of peer groups—a dense set of social ties that are especially salient in life transitions, such as from adolescence to adulthood—and of the damage to such communities from housing policy imposed by those operating either with indifference or condescending assumptions about residents' needs and lives. The prior life of the community is captured through warm, animated conversations between people who have maintained their friendships despite the razing of their neighborhood. Not merely a rejoinder to views that such housing projects were a "failure," the films portray community strengths that can and should inform contemporary public housing policy (Crockett 2012:106). The films overturn stereotypes about the causes of blight in so many housing projects (centering on residents' supposed cultural and behavioral shortcomings). Further, they reveal how inadequate maintenance, tax policy, gentrification, and negligence in developing low- to moderate-income housing conspired, along with factors such as deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, to produce the homelessness that became so visible nationally in the 1980s and thereafter. More broadly, the films document how social change occurs through a conjuncture of actions and events, often unintended or heedless, which combine in consequential ways. Without this nuanced, contextual understanding, students have, at best, a simplistic grasp of sociological analysis (see Becker 1992).

*Water and the Dream of the Engineers* (1983) anticipated sociological concern with the environment and sustainability. Broadman's first color film, *Water* develops case studies of how civil engineers and access to abundant water were as essential to the urban development of New York City and New Orleans as to the settlement and cultivation of the agricultural valley of northern California. It also shows how prosperity in some areas—especially in

southern California—was achieved through expansionist ambitions and political machinations that produced distress elsewhere. Diversion of water from the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the sprawling counties around Los Angeles has been destructive both for human and other habitats in the central Delta, and the century-old “Water Wars” continue to rage in California. And as Crockett (2012:106) argues, viewers come to appreciate three limitations: “the limitations of growth in a capitalist economic model; the limitations of engineers ... to subdue the natural environment; and the rational limitations of everyday actors unwilling to comprehend how their way of life threatens their own existence.”

Released in 1985, but filmed early in the first Reagan administration, *The Collective: Fifteen Years Later* has special poignance—and renewed relevance today, with the Occupy Movement—as a portrayal of unabashed political activism. Born in the antiwar movement of the 1960s, *The Collective* was not campus-based and so rescues the topic from clichéd representations that too often exclude working-class and older activists who, after all, often had the most to lose from alienating family or from arrest. Here, the ethnographic skill and narrative depth of Broadman’s project come fully into flower. Reflecting on both the excitement and the disappointment of their political engagement, informants are, by turns, candid, rueful, and idealistic; they’re unsparing in acknowledging their own mistakes both in analyzing and in organizing against a structure of oppression centering on, but extending beyond, militarism and neocolonialism. Seven informants with a shared history are interviewed, often in an informal focus group, an approach that stimulates and reveals the collective memory of the 1960s political counterculture.

*Love Stories: Women, Men, & Romance* (1987) might at first appear incongruous because of Broadman’s typical focus on public/community life and conflict. However, it reflects his underlying concern with the interlacing of historical change with cultural traditions and the trajectories of lives. He captures the fallout from a then-recent rise in divorce rates and the increasing unease of men grappling with how to respond to women’s greater social and economic independence. Teachers

of courses on family, gender, or interpersonal relationships would profit from a film that was produced when these questions had special urgency. In turn, *Brownsville Black and White* (2002) traces the context and experience of racial tension, from the 1940s through 1980s, in a diverse neighborhood of Brooklyn. Prior to World War II, Brownsville was a dense, ethnic/geographic patchwork of black, Italian, and Jewish communities, held together through labor unions and civic/voluntary associations such as the Boys Club, which fostered interracial athletic teams. One needn’t romanticize this period to see how, despite widespread poverty, there was less inequality and more trust between these communities by far than there is today. (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010:49–62 demonstrate the linkage between inequality and trust in community life.) The film reconstructs the texture of those relationships through reminiscence and documentary footage. We see this tenuous detente strained first by public housing policies that sharpened ethnic and class segregation and later by a bitter “school war” that pitted the (mostly white) teachers’ union against the increasingly black community of residents seeking local control of schooling. That local control may be only a symbolic victory, given that urban schools are often starved of resources, doesn’t lessen the force of conflict (see Lewis and Nakagawa 1995).

This review seeks to show that there are three ways in which Richard Broadman’s films can enhance the teaching of sociology. First, there are substantive themes and analyses that are fundamental to courses offered on urban community, race/ethnic relations, and inequality. Second, the films provide models of holistic interpretation, allowing teachers and students to apply more abstract theoretical concepts and models (e.g., of ethnic succession and conflict, collective action, and policy implementation). Finally, the films showcase both the method and fruits of narrative interviewing and interpretation. Viewers see how well-prepared and sensitive interviewers collaborate with informants to conjure new insights from the welter of experience. Such skill and commitment to inquiry, equally essential to oral history and journalism, are too often hidden from students to the detriment of teaching and of sociological understanding.

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