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## **My Non-linear Academic Trajectory**

Trajectories are imagined as well as performed. Imagined, in the sense that they conjure a desirable future; performed when life moves us forward on a path that most likely differs from what we imagined. In retrospect, we can account for many of the unplanned incidents, personal encounters, and factors that may have influenced the traceable path that has emerged. Maybe this is what Kierkegaard meant when he wrote that we live forwards, but we try to understand life backwards. In academia, institutions converge to design the trajectories to be taken. They pride themselves that their assessment is based on rigorous, quantitative measurements, and peer-review. Selective screening and evaluation are in line with past outcomes and preset entry bars for the next round, yet the power of selection remains in the hands of those who select.

Also, in academia a career trajectory is a course in time and unfolds over time and thus follows the time regimes that have been inscribed in it (Felt 2021). This includes formal and informal deadlines and cut-off

points in terms of the lifetime of individual researchers. Prescriptive timelines, formal and informal norms privilege some and exclude others. In academic life, the ultimate goal for many remains a tenured professorship which comes with the status of being an established scientist. The entrepreneurial world had coined the term “valley of death” that awaits the numerous start-ups. Something similar exists in academia, as every postdoc knows and only few make it to the other side.

My academic trajectory started at a time when universities in Europe still followed the largely inward-looking and slow pace of elite institutions whose place in society was assured. The logic of efficiency, manifest in university rankings and in the pressure to accelerate the production by publishing in highly ranked journals, was unknown in the “World of Yesterday” so vividly captured by the great Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (Zweig 1942). For the most part, universities were in the hands of a small, conservative group of old men who acted as gatekeepers to admit into their ranks only those who they deemed worthy, meaning those resembling them. The observation that a university professor’s goal in life was to “reproduce” himself in his students and assistants can already be found in Max Weber’s last lecture which he delivered in 1919 at the University of Vienna (Weber 1919).

## **My Years at the University of Vienna**

My academic career was definitely non-linear. It had its unexpected swerves, was highly uneven and certainly not planned this way. Being a good student and always having received much support from my parents, there was never a doubt that I would go to university. The choice of study was more difficult. Some of my friends were already at university, so I asked them to take me with them to “sample” courses in medicine, chemistry, biology, and sociology. The chosen method

turned out to be a heuristic of elimination, and in the end I settled for law as leaving many options open for the future. At the time, its comprehensive curriculum included economics, statistics and what later became political science. I finished my doctorate in jurisprudence in record time and shortly afterwards applied for a vacant position as assistant professor in criminal law and criminology. The circumstances are worth being retold. In those days, the recruitment decision was taken by *Herr Professor* alone. As I had attended his seminars, he knew me and told me right away that it was not his intention to hire a woman. I was somewhat taken aback and asked for the reason, and he explained that his investment in me would eventually be lost, as I would get married and leave. It would have been ludicrous to insist that I would not get married, but I challenged him on grounds of merits. If he would find a man more qualified than me, he should hire him. It honors him that he accepted, and this is how I got my first job at the University of Vienna.

During the three years I spent at the Institute of Criminology I learned a lot. Foremost, about the inner workings of the judiciary system, its contradictions and the gaps between the formal norms upheld by the law and the actual practice by the different actors involved. My professor was internationally well known and highly esteemed. In many ways, he was at the forefront of the forensic and empirical side of criminology. He used methods from the natural sciences to investigate suspected crimes like insurance fraud, but we also conducted an empirical study on differences in sentencing for the same offenses in the various courts of the country. In identifying the judges who were most harsh or lenient I could put to good use what I had learned in statistics during my study.

My professor was also innovative in his teaching. Each semester he planned an excursion with his students to a penitentiary, interviewing

one or two selected inmates with their back to the students, so that they could follow live. It was my task to prepare these visits by closely reading every single document that had been written about the inmate, beginning with the police records, the various stages leading up to the trial and sentence, recourse and, very important, the assessments produced by psychiatric and other experts. At times, I felt reading a novel by Dostoevsky, piecing together the socio- and psychogram of a convicted murderer, trying to understand what made the person commit the crime. I was appalled by what I called the “irresponsible cold gaze” of the psychiatric experts whose assessments were often decisive for the sentence, as judges tended to rely on them. The authority they assumed was clad in the aura of “scientific objectivity,” but it was obvious to me that they mainly followed their superficial, formulaic, and openly displayed prejudices. Much later I learned that one prominent and frequently called upon expert had been intricately involved in some of the horrific euthanasia experiments conducted under the Nazi regime. He had succeeded to be reinstated as a professor and psychiatric expert.

I also learned how to keep to the prescribed time when lecturing. Whenever my professor was on an official mission, he asked me to step in and deliver the lecture in his place. I did not need much preparation content-wise and he handed me the box of slides containing the photographed paragraphs of the criminal code he had prepared for each lecture. All I had to do was to insert them into the projector and explain what students could see on a big screen, just like a power point presentation today. The lecture was held in the large auditorium of the University of Vienna. I was barely twenty-two years young and had to speak in front of more than 200, overwhelmingly male and older students, making them listen to me attentively. I succeeded, but at least in the beginning, I was terrified to keep exactly the forty-five minutes

to go through all the slides. If I went too fast, how would I fill the time after the last slide? If I was too slow, I would have to admit that I had not succeeded to cover all the slides I was supposed to present. It taught me how to keep time whenever speaking in front of an audience, but I also discovered how rare this is.

## **My Years at Columbia University, New York**

In the end, my professor had been correct with his prediction when he recruited me, in line with what economists had claimed all along. I got married and moved with my husband to New York. My professor's investment was a loss for him, but a gain for me and, I hope, for whatever I was able to give back later. In New York, it became clear that I could not pursue my career in criminology and penal law. The next institute comparable to the one in Vienna was in Philadelphia. Overnight, I decided to enroll in a Ph.D. program in sociology at Columbia University and the next day I went to see Paul F. Lazarsfeld, a born Viennese who had left Austria before the Nazi takeover. I was eager to learn the latest methodology in sociology and he was the world-renowned founder of empirical social science research. Generously, he accepted me on a fast track, as I already had some publications to show, even though I considered myself a beginner.

During my years at Columbia University, I got an optimal introduction to sociology. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton were considered the “twin stars,” representing the best of empirical methods and theory in sociology at the time. I was impressed how each of them included their students into their work and thinking, sharing the questions that preoccupied them and leading by example in moving beyond disciplinary boundaries by challenging established dogmas. Once Paul invited a guest speaker for a seminar on the work

of Ervin Goffman and ethno-methodology. Paul was the uncontested leader in survey research, yet he wanted us to familiarize ourselves with what some considered a rival research program. I remember how surprised we were when he concluded by saying that he foresaw that the “soft” qualitative approach of ethnomethodology could outlive the kind of survey research that he had championed.

Robert K. Merton’s lectures were an intellectual treat, presented in an optimal and carefully orchestrated way. In one of his courses, he introduced us to “Karl Marx, the sociologist,” showing us the strengths and weaknesses of Marx’ work. He alerted us very early to a recently published book on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn and why it was important to know about paradigm changes. Merton kindled my first interest in the sociology of science, but I was still too much rooted in my legal past to consider switching. I was fascinated by reading Max Weber anew in English—I had read some of his work in German as part of my studies in law—only to find out how much the translation differed from what he had written in German. Translations are treacherous, as is well known. Especially in science, the translated version can easily be absorbed into the dominant way of thinking or, speaking with Kuhn, into the dominant paradigm.

The years at Columbia University were also the years of the anti-Vietnam protest movement which swept across campus. The *Zeitgeist* might have contributed to me seeing the limitations of survey research as the most adequate tool to understand what happens in society and to diagnose impending changes. In an article I published in the *Graduate Student Journal*, I compared the writings of Karl Marx and Lorenz von Stein, who both happened to be in Paris in the early 1840s and witnessed the same events. For young Marx the focus was on class struggle and the role of the bourgeoisie, while von Stein, who later became a professor of political economy at the University of Vienna, viewed them as the formation of social movements and the forging

of political links between proletariat and the State. As a Hegelian, the State was above society. I was fascinated by the divergence in the interpretations of the Paris uprisings as seen by these two men. The result that empirical evidence can be used and interpreted in completely different ways, depending on theoretical assumptions, the selection of different units of analysis and what counts as evidence, became the empirical material for my Ph.D. thesis, which dealt with societal changes at the macrolevel. It marked a switch from the microlevel of survey research towards larger units of analysis and their dynamics. At the time, I was only dimly aware that one of the most glaring problems for the social sciences is the gap in the analysis and methodological tools between the microlevel and the macrolevel. It remains unresolved until this day.

In the early 1970s I returned to Vienna, together with my husband and our daughter. I took up a position as Head of Department of Sociology in the Institute for Advanced Study, founded by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Oskar Morgenstern five years earlier. The Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna (IHS) was intended to challenge Austrian universities, offering an innovative curriculum in advanced quantitative methods in economics, sociology, political science, and informatics as well as immersion in empirical projects. It hosted an illustrious group of international visiting professors, mostly from prestigious US universities, among them Nobel laureates in economics. After the period of initial funding by the Ford Foundation, it was expected that Austrian funding should take over (Huber and König 2023).

In those days, Austrian politics was dominated by *Proporz*.<sup>1</sup> Practically all public funding and most public positions were divided

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1 Editor's note: *Proporz* is an abbreviation for "proportionality," a practice in Austria in which positions in government are distributed between political parties in a manner proportional to their electoral or public support.

between the two major political parties, who formed a series of coalition governments. This applied also to obtain funding for research projects from ministries which followed the same logic, and which partly fell upon me. When a new cohort of fellows (“Scholaren”) entered the IHS, they were eager to follow the revolutionary fervor which had reached the University of Vienna with some delay. As Head of Department, I felt increasingly squeezed between the demands of the fellows to change not only the curriculum but the world, and the directorate, which was also composed in *Proporz*-like way. The days, and parts of the night, were filled with endless meetings with little or no time left for research, let alone for my private life. I needed a break and applied at the British Council for a sabbatical in Cambridge, which I obtained.

### **King’s College, Cambridge: Half a Year of Wild Thinking**

Sabbaticals are a time-honored ritual in academic life, perceived as an entitlement to break the routines of teaching and administration, with the sole purpose to devote oneself to research. Cambridge seemed to me an ideal location, given the intensity of intellectual life at its colleges. King’s College granted me the status of a visiting scholar. I had access to the library and a select number of events at King’s, but no other obligation. These minimal conditions fulfilled the promise of a sabbatical: having time to read and think. It became an extremely fertile period of my life, with lasting effect.

Anthony Giddens, who was not yet the well-known sociologist and prolific author he later became, was already at King’s and asked me whether I would accept to be a tutor. He needed someone for a course on “The Sociology of Science, Knowledge and Belief” and as there was nobody around with a Ph.D. in sociology, I was the ideal person.