

SOCIOLOGY ON THE ROCK

Sociology Department Newsletter

Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador



Editor and Founder: Stephen Harold Riggins

This issue

Adrian Tanner: Remembering Social Anthropologist Robert Paine, *pp. 2 – 6*

Stephen Harold Riggins: Which Memorial University Sociologist will be read in a Hundred Years?, *pp. 6 - 10*

Chris William Martin: Fatherhood is an Act of Letting Go, *pp. 10 - 12*

Shayan Morshedi: Why do some Violent Events stick in our Collective Memory while others Fade Away?, *pp. 12 - 14*

“Humans weren’t created from scratch, and anyone who is seriously interested in how our minds work simply must have some appreciation for both the logic of evolutionary theory and the rich body of data on the mental lives of other animals” – **Paul Bloom.**



Memorial University graduate students who participated in the 2023 annual meeting of the Canadian Sociological Association at York University. From left to right: Forough Mohammadi, Adela Kabiri, Heather Dicks, Atinuke Tiamiyu, Hannah Marie-Laure McLean, and behind them are Shayan Morshedi and Pouya Morshedi.

Remembering Social Anthropologist Robert Paine

By **Adrian Tanner**

Crossing Boundaries

When social anthropologist Robert Paine came to Memorial in the mid-1960s and headed the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, he faced significant barriers to building a strong academic unit. As the only university in the province, and a relatively small one, the administration had to try its best to cover all the bases in undergraduate course offerings. The salaries Memorial offered were generally below those of mainland universities. In the social sciences and humanities, scholars generally select their own research, often as individuals, and bring to it and to their teaching, their own interests, experiences and conceptual approaches. Moving a department in a particular direction is like herding cats. Robert brought in a very diverse group of scholars, and never tried to create anything like a school of the followers of his own ideas.

Robert brought in as ISER Fellows many anthropologically trained scholars to conduct the kind of research that elsewhere in North America is known as “rural sociology.” To recruit new scholars he tended to use his existing personal networks. However, I wonder if it is the case, as has been suggested, that he actively discouraged sociology. The sociologist, Nels Anderson, who was a member of the Sociology and Anthropology Department between 1964 and 1966, is quoted as saying of Robert, “He knows nothing about sociology so he puts anthropology up and sociology down, so the best for me is to stay at the typewriter, see and hear but say nothing” (Riggins 2017:104).

It is true that Paine was skeptical of how statistics can be misused, such as in his comments on those Norwegian scholars who had cited figures on the size of Sami caribou herds, but without considering the herd’s age profile, which fundamentally misrepresented the situation (Paine 1986). Nels Anderson had no previous experience as a full-time faculty member in a university, and thus had little familiarity with the way academic departments operate. Robert also knew as little about archaeology as he did about sociology, and yet this specialization was able to get established under his headship. Robert would have had a hand in recruiting Jim Tuck; and after his arrival, Tuck was able to bring in other archaeologists, and develop a very successful unit

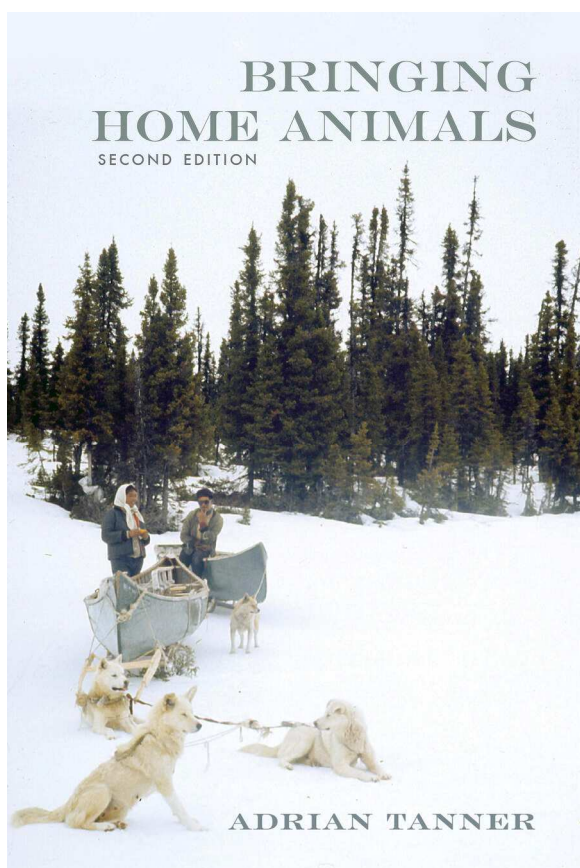
within the department. Was it indeed the case that Robert prevented the same kind of development from taking place among the sociologists within the department?

While visiting Toronto in 1972, Robert Paine, about whose academic work I was only vaguely aware, invited me to apply to Memorial. My first impression of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology was of a small but interesting and diverse group of scholars, Robert Paine’s influence was evident, although mainly indirectly, from his role as director of ISER and ISER Books, and from the various scholars, many from Scandinavia, who he had invited to conduct research in this province. He was no longer the department head, and did not come to department meetings. He was rumoured to have good relations with Memorial’s senior administrators, particularly with President Moses Morgan; and the Dean of Arts and later Vice-President (Academic) Leslie Harris. It was relatively simple in those days for department members to get funds from ISER for small projects.

I was pleased to find how well department members generally got along together, as I had previously encountered some vicious internal factional conflicts among faculty members in the Anthology Departments at both McGill and the University of Toronto. We also felt privileged having the benefit of Robert’s influence with the administration, and our preferential connection to ISER, even if this was only of direct relevance to those doing research in the province. However, Robert’s influence with the administration had not extended to one of the most persistent issues faced by all university departments – space. The department seemed to be treated as somewhat peripheral within the Arts Faculty, compared, for example, to better established departments, like English or History, in that our offices were relegated to a temporary building until we moved to Queen’s College. Moreover, in the decades since then Memorial has never managed to house all the social sciences in the same building.

The split with sociology, a year after I arrived, was, as far as I was made aware at the time, imposed by the university administration. I was told the reason was that there was a problem among the sociologists, and that they needed to be isolated as a group in order for the issue to be fixed. Academically the sociologists formed a separate group within the department, as

did the archaeologists, and it was not clear to me why this arrangement seemed to be working for the one but not for the other. At the time, I assumed this “problem” was that the sociologists lacked a senior sociologist with leadership skills. I have recently learned that, while the initiative for the split came from the Dean of Arts a couple of years before my arrival, the matter had been debated within the department, with a division of opinion on the issue among department members, including some anthropologists arguing in favour of the split.



Knowing none of this, on arrival I felt comfortable to be in a joint Sociology-Anthropology Department, even if it was more common for universities to have separate departments. While anthropologists had once focused exclusively on tribal societies, with sociology studying “modern” industrial ones, a shift was well under way by the 1970s. Anthropologists had begun focusing on “communities” in general, in both industrial and tribal contexts, often using participant observation, while sociologists remained mainly concerned with mass society, often using surveys and statistical methods. My first academic friendships, initially within the department, were with people like Jean Briggs, Ron Schwartz, Judy Adler, Volker Meja, Barbara Neis and Doug House. While all but Jean were sociologists, I did not feel any disciplinary boundary between us in our academic work or our intellectual ideas. For example, I found that Meja’s work on the sociology of knowledge was in principle applicable to

the kinds of small-scale societies that I studied. For me, the two disciplines are complementary approaches. My general attitude is that, while disciplines may be an organizational necessity for a university, and for those professions that make practical use of university research, the disciplinary silos that academic departments sometimes create can be a barrier to good scientific thinking, and to new discoveries. I believe in a holistic, unified social science.

Friend and Scholar

After the split, the Anthropology Department began to assert itself with what seemed to me a new emphasis stemming from the department’s autonomy, that is, a general unwillingness to go along meekly with whatever dictates or suggestions might come down from the university administration. However, given that Gordon Inglis, John Kennedy and I were the last new anthropology hires for a few years, there was little opportunity to change the department’s direction after the split. Beginning in 1971, John Kennedy had been an ISER Fellow, specializing in coastal Labrador communities, and was appointed to the department in 1973. Gordon Inglis was hired in the department in 1972 to head a new community development program. Robert must have been aware of the new management style that Anthropology adopted, but I do not know what he thought about it.

Although in later years, Robert and I became friends, in those early days I did not see a whole lot of him. I was closer with Jean Briggs, who like me had conducted long-term participant observation research with hunters, in her case with Inuit, and in mine with Cree. Jean also had an on-and-off friendship with Robert. Jean had been involved in Robert’s Killam team project, “Identity and Modernity in the East Arctic,” which was winding up when I arrived, although *The White Arctic* (Paine 1977), a major collection of articles from the project, was published a few years later. I became aware of the innovative direction this project had taken from some of the ISER fellows who were, or had been, members of the project team, like John Kennedy, Ditte Koster and Hugh Brody. John Kennedy had contributed a chapter in *The White Arctic* on ethnic division in one northern Labrador community. Ditte Koster had written a chapter on gossip among non-Inuit in an arctic community. By the 1970s, when I knew her, she was working as a Memorial University librarian, and writing her doctoral thesis on the federal Department of Indian Affairs, which took her into the literature on bureaucracy, very much a part of sociology. She died

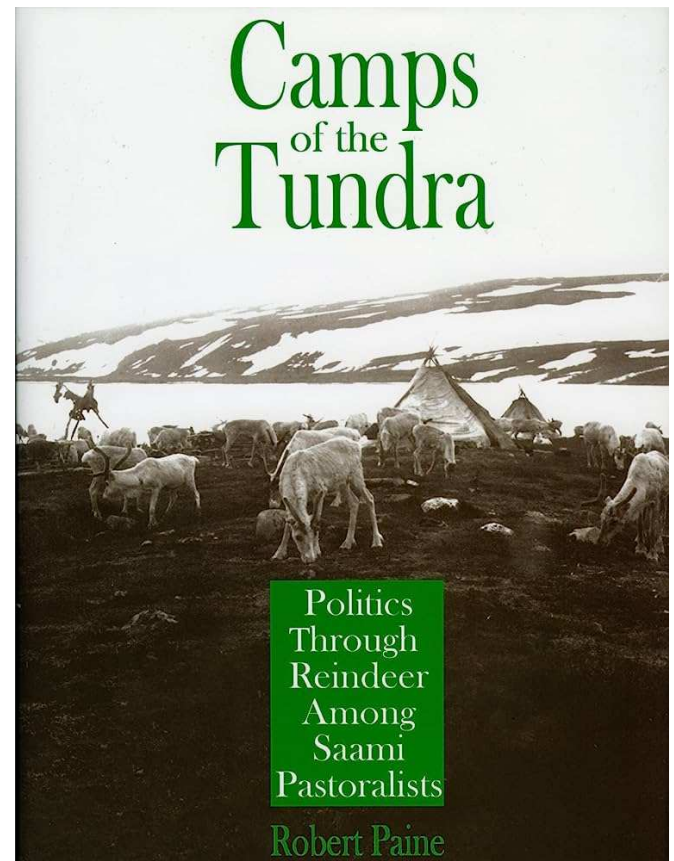
from cancer in 1981, before that work could be completed. Hugh Brody is now a famous writer and film maker. He studied anthropology at Oxford, and had conducted research in Ireland, after which he lived in a number of Canadian arctic communities, on the basis of which he published *The People's Land* (Brody 1975), as well as a chapter in *The White Arctic*.

Paine's project was remarkable in two ways. It was the first team research project to focus on the role that non-Inuit were playing in the lives of the Inuit, something I was already personally aware of from my own experience living for three years in the arctic, before becoming an anthropologist. Secondly, in the publications that came from the project Robert introduced to a North American context several of the theoretical concepts developed earlier by the Norwegian scholar Frederick Barth.

Barth had studied at Oxford, and Robert had known him personally when Barth was heading the Anthropology Department at the University of Bergen in Norway. I was already aware of Barth from his often-cited research *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). In terms of his general theoretical approach, with which Robert identified, Barth is known as a "transactionalist." Barth described this as follows: "Most of our basic relationships, all of our basic relationships, are social relations that are built around mutual transactions" built upon the "biological constraints of ecology" (Anderson 2007, p. xii). Like most of the concepts used by Robert Paine in his work, such as brokers and patrons, gossip, and political rhetoric, these ideas are as relevant to sociology as they are to anthropology.

Robert did contact me from time to time in those early years, and showed interest in my work with the Cree, particularly on the impact of the James Bay hydro-electric project, as well as on the land claim of the Labrador Innu. After only two years at Memorial I asked for, and was given, a semester off, so I could temporarily move to Montreal to set up a negotiating team for the Naskapi of Quebec in land claims negotiations. This particular First Nation had, up to then, been left out of the James Bay Agreement negotiations, even though under the agreement they were about to lose aboriginal title to their traditional lands. It was therefore urgent that they immediately got involved in the negotiations. Robert came to visit me in Montreal while I was working for the Naskapi, and showed a lot of interest in the issues I was facing. This was some years before Paine himself took on an advocacy role alongside the Sami, in their opposition to the Kautokeino hydro scheme in northern Norway (Paine 1982).

After coming to Memorial, I paid a bit more attention to Robert's research, particularly on the Sami, noting similarities, despite the forager/herder divide, between the Cree hunters I worked with and Robert's reindeer herders. Both were nomads in similar subarctic environments, with similar material cultures, but with quite different idea systems. However, over the next forty-plus years Robert and I never did formally collaborate on research, although we regularly swapped ideas, news, and stories about our mutual field work experiences. We also kept a close interest in each other's research projects.



I noticed how Robert turned on the charm with most people he dealt with, including strangers. However, some women, in particular, found him patronizing or condescending, if their work was not of interest to him. In time, Robert and I began to have lunch together on a regular basis. We ate at restaurants, and he always chatted up the server, and usually managed to get the person to talk about themselves. I could see that he was a natural as an ethnographic field worker.

Over time, Robert and I occasionally exchanged drafts of papers for comments. Some people thought that Robert sometimes used other people, but I felt I got as much from my relationship with him as I gave. Robert always came to department seminars, and tended to ask questions that often took the discussion in a new direction. I confess that I sometimes had

difficulty following some of these “off-the-cuff” ideas, and, apart from concepts like “welfare colonialism” a phrase he coined to describe government relations with the Inuit, I cannot say that his ideas had a significant influence on my own writing or intellectual development, at least not consciously. Robert also gave seminars, and this kind of forum seemed to be one he enjoyed.

Moreover, Robert and I got along well despite, and not because of, our similar social backgrounds and the circumstances of our UK origins. For instance, both of our fathers had officer-level military backgrounds. I had come to Canada in part as a rejection of the British class system that I had grown up in, and my parents’ views on social class and politics. It seemed to me that Robert, while not a snob, embraced, rather than rejected, his British class status. One factor behind this, apart from his years at Oxford, could have been that while I had come to Canada as a teenager, Robert moved here in his late 30s.

My wife, Marguerite MacKenzie, and I were invited to Robert’s house from time to time, as well as having him to our place. I got to know all of his various wives, except for his first, Norwegian one, although he would often talk about their son, Michael. When I first knew Robert, he was living in a house in the woods on Old Broad Cove Road, on the outskirts of Portugal Cove, with his second wife, Sonja. Among her other talents, Sonja was a flamenco dancer, and gave occasional public performances in St. John’s.

Sonja was also employed as a text editor for ISER Books, and in my dealings with her I found that she held very strong opinions. I felt that, as the wife of the Institute director, she put some authors whose work she edited in an awkward position. This issue once gave me difficulties, when I edited an ISER book *The Politics of Indianness* (Tanner 1983). Robert had come to me with three studies that had been submitted to ISER Books, none of them enough to make a book on its own. I took the editing task as a challenge, despite initial misgivings, and in the end I was pleased that I had been able to set down in print some of my own ideas about Indigenous politics in Canada in my introduction. However, I lost at least one battle with Sonja over the text, and later became aware that one of the authors in my collection was very unhappy with a change she had made.

Robert also moved house quite often – after Portugal Cove he had a house on Bond Street, in the old part of the city, and later another in an upscale area off Kings Bridge Road. For a while he lived in Ottawa. His last house was at the East end of Empire Avenue, with a

garden that stretched down to Rennie’s River. This last house was close to Quidi Vidi Lake, where Robert would often walk. He was something of an expert on sea birds, at least from my perspective, knowing nothing on that subject. Robert told me he had been brought up in Exeter, in Devon, and as a youth had spent time on the large estuary of the River Ex, where he became familiar with its bird life. I have since got to know this area myself, after one of my brothers retired to the same general area.

Given that when he came to Memorial, the Department of Sociology and Anthropology was a small unit in a small university in an out-of-the-way place, it is remarkable that Robert Paine managed to create a department that punched above its weight, and made a distinctive contribution to the development of the social sciences in Canada. He and I remained friends to the end, with me visiting him on his death bed. Today, he is one of those deceased acquaintances who I can truly say I miss.

Adrian Tanner is Professor Emeritus in the MUN Department of Anthropology. His publications include Bringing Home Animals and The Politics of Indianness: Case Studies of Native Ethnopolitics in Canada.



Robert Paine photographed by Moyra Buchan

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Which Memorial University Sociologist will be read in a Hundred Years?

By **Stephen Harold Riggins**

If I were to name a Memorial University sociologist who might be read in a hundred years, Victor Zaslavsky (1937-2009) would certainly be at the top of the list. Zaslavsky is important despite – perhaps because – his initial training was not in the social sciences. He was a mining engineer who became an art historian, a critic of organized brutality, and an author of autobiographical short stories.

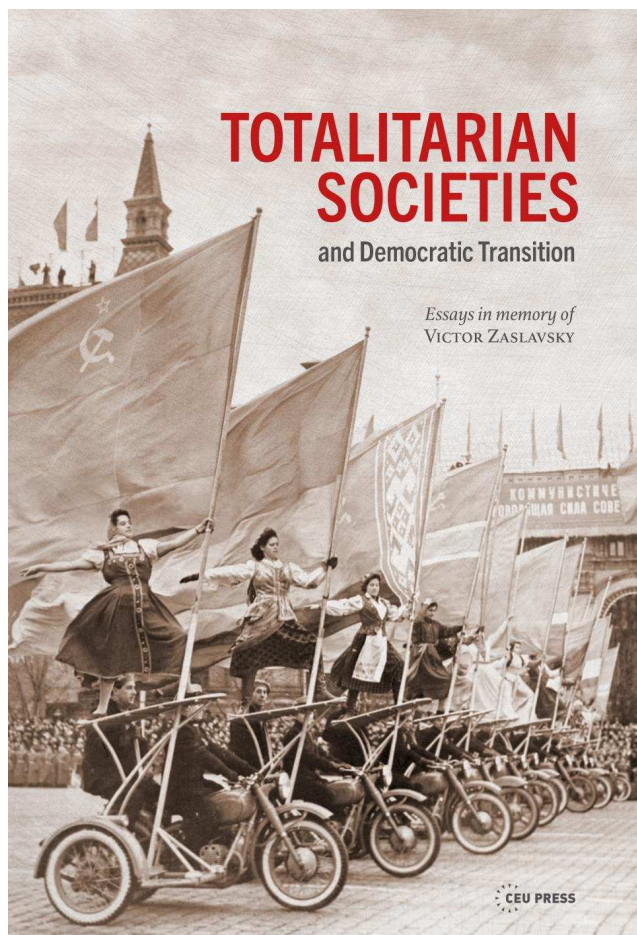
Zaslavsky's parents were "Old Bolsheviks," supporters of communism before the Russian Revolution, who survived Stalin's purges by abandoning politics. Victor helped his father, a metallurgist and chemist, burn letters from Trotsky in a fireplace. His mother, a physician, was director of a hospital during the 900-day Nazi blockade of Leningrad. Like many children, Victor had been evacuated from Leningrad with his aunt to the distant Urals, while his mother stayed behind. The experience is described in his autobiographical story "Nadezhda." An English translation was published by Judith Adler in 2022 in the journal *Society*.

As a young man, he was interested in history, although the discipline was too political, and he was rejected by Leningrad State University because of anti-Semitism and nationality quotas. It was difficult for Jews, even assimilated agnostics, to win acceptance to the most popular Russian universities. They solved the problem, like Zaslavsky, by majoring in a subject most young people did not want to study. Consequently, Zaslavsky was educated at the Leningrad Mining Institute, the oldest mining school in Russia. From 1959 to 1968, he was employed as a mining engineer, working in distant

regions before gaining permission to attend evening courses in art history and aesthetics at the Krupskaya Institute of Cultural Studies. He spent several years at the Krupskaya Institute, becoming a lecturer in 1972 and was allowed to travel to East Germany to complete his research for a dissertation titled *The Problem of the Aesthetic Relation in Soviet Aesthetics (1954-1974)* that he would never get to defend. He started at the Krupskaya Institute in 1969 and would have defended his dissertation in 1974, had his nephew not emigrated in 1973. He also did lectures on art history as an adjunct, including at the ballet school, to make some money on the side.

Outside the classroom, Zaslavsky seems to have been reticent about recounting his personal experiences in the Soviet Union. Perhaps he was tired of the topic or thought Canadians would not understand. He was less reticent among Russian immigrants. I quote Vladislav Zubok, whose recollections appeared in a book of eulogies for Zaslavsky. As a young geologist, Zaslavsky crisscrossed the Soviet Union. One of his instructors was a Chechen veteran of World War II, an expert in explosions. The story is that the instructor was punished for refusing to blow up a famous Leningrad cathedral. "Zaslavsky said to me once," Vladislav Zubok wrote, "pointing to a building across the street, 'I could blow up that building over there so that all window-panes on this side of the street would remain intact.' I thought he was joking, but understood that he knew indeed how to do it" (Zubok, in Orlandi, 2010: 163). This is also described in his autobiographical story "The Professor of Explosion," published in German translation.

It was not Zaslavsky's intention to leave the Soviet Union (Riggins interview 2007). He said on several occasions that the Soviet system was not as rigid as it looked. His family was ostracized when a nephew, his sister's son, immigrated to Canada in 1973. His sister, her husband, and Zaslavsky himself were blacklisted for "political unreliability." He had participated in activities, which were "unofficial" although not subversive. The final straw was that he was told his son Alexander, age 10, would never be allowed to attend university. Zaslavsky reluctantly joined the exodus of 250,000 Jews who left the Soviet Union in the mid-1970s. In 1973, when nephew Serge emigrated, the numbers were small and receiving permission was far from guaranteed, hence the old joke that you would be going "either West or East" (meaning Siberia); by 1974 and 1975 the floodgates opened, only to be shut again in 1980.



Victor received permission to emigrate as soon as he applied – the authorities had the forms ready, he assumed. Then stateless, he traveled to Vienna on a Nansen passport, an internationally recognized identity card, and then to Rome to await a visa to one of the handful of countries accepting Soviet Jewish emigrants. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society gave Soviet Jews small amounts of money for the several months they spent during visa processing in Rome.

Since the nephew and his parents had by then settled in Toronto, Zaslavsky's immigration might be classified as a family reunion. He arrived with his first wife and son in Toronto in October 1975. "Émigrés do not have a choice," he said. "They go with the flow."

Trying to find a teaching position in Canada, Zaslavsky first consulted Marshall McLuhan because he was one of the few Toronto professors whose work he had heard of. At their meeting, Zaslavsky realized it was the "sunset of McLuhan" and that he was no longer a useful contact. He then turned to the Jewish-American sociologist Lewis Feuer, also at the University of Toronto, whose book *The Conflict of Generations: The Character and Significance of Student Movements* Zaslavsky had read in a samizdat copy. In the autumn of 1975 Feuer gave a lecture at Memorial University on sociological theories about the decline of Rome and their relevance for understanding the contemporary decline of the United States. On this occasion, he mentioned that an exceptionally interesting, unemployed Russian sociologist had recently moved to Toronto.

Feuer apparently appreciated the MUN sociologists he met in St. John's, although he thought they were a little naïve politically. The impact of the New Left was waning among MUN sociologists but some still identified with the movement. Feuer had been a leftist in his younger years. He pitched the idea of inviting Zaslavsky as a kind of dare. I quote a MUN colleague: "You hotshot leftists, here is a worthy refugee who will enlighten you. Let's see if you are courageous enough to invite him." The MUN department was seeking a specialist in socio-economic development. Zaslavsky claimed his specialties were the sociology of art and Soviet society. The department already had one specialist in the sociology of culture. There was little need for a second. Few sociology majors would be expected to enroll in a course on the Soviet Union.

The MUN Department of Sociology could then offer limited-term appointments for Visiting Professors. Thus, allowing visitors to see how they felt about living in St. John's and allowing the tenured sociologists to decide if the candidate was compatible with the department. Unfortunately, we have lost this option, which gave the department an aura among professional sociologists throughout Canada. Zaslavsky's lecture led to a limited-term appointment followed by a tenure-stream position. The department tended to choose the most interesting candidates rather than the one most qualified for the position

given the job advertisement.

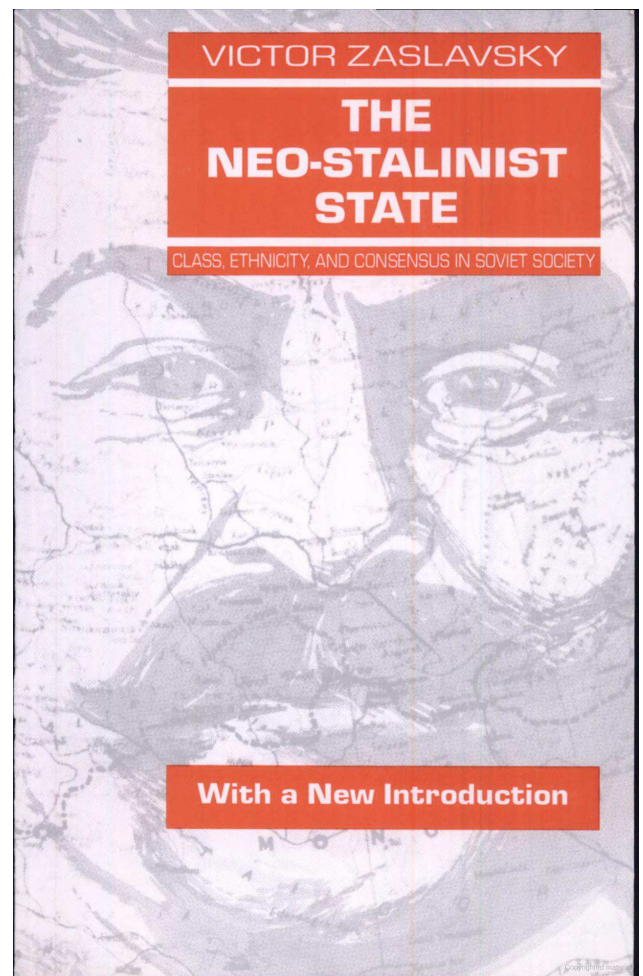
In the early years in St. John's, Zaslavsky lived in rooms rented from Geoff and Kathy Stiles and, subsequently from Ron Schwartz. Zaslavsky concentrated on establishing a publishing record in English by his early forties, with his first book, *The Neo-Stalinist State: Class, Ethnicity, and Consensus in Soviet Society*, coming out in 1982. He redefined himself as a specialist on Soviet politics. In Ron Schwartz's words, he "wrote his way out of a bed sitting room." (Later, he lived for fifteen years in the home of Volker Meja, 166 Gower Street.) Zaslavsky was not afraid of being more conservative than his MUN colleagues. He admired Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and other politicians who had no illusions about the Soviet Union. His political positions were usually more conservative than the opinions of his best friends at Memorial, who often discussed international politics at length at their dinners. According to Victor's son Alexander, his father was certainly conservative politically, but today this has social policy connotations that his father did not subscribe to.

Zaslavsky was affiliated with Memorial University from 1976 to 1996, and at the same time taught as a visiting scholar elsewhere, notably at the Stanford-Berkeley Program in Soviet Studies. Then, benefitting from an offer MUN administrators used to entice professors into early retirement, he moved to Italy where his second wife lived. In the last dozen years of his life, he became one of the most respected Russian public intellectuals in Italy. He taught there at the Free International University of Social Studies (LUISS), an independent university with strong links to Italian industry.

Zaslavsky's book *The Neo-Stalinist State: Class, Ethnicity, and Consensus in Soviet Society* documents the contradictions and social inequality of Soviet society, circa 1980, by a knowledgeable insider who could provide detailed accounts of how Soviet institutions functioned behind the scenes. Western opinion about the Soviet Union tended to explain stability as a result of violence and fear. On the other hand, Soviet writers glossed over the repressive nature of the regime.

"Organized consensus" (or "dictatorship of spin" in the recent terminology of Guriev and Treisman) consists of mostly hidden tactics authoritarian leaders use to guarantee social passivity and political conformism. Zaslavsky wrote that foreign observers of the Soviet Union failed to appreciate fully the impact of

organized consensus because it was conducted in secret. A partial list of these mechanisms includes control over voluntary associations, the overproduction of occupational specialties dependent on the state for employment, encouraging anti-Semitism and the consumption of alcohol, fostering feelings of social superiority among a select few through fringe benefits and higher wages, and restricting the population's geographical movement. These practices worked as long as the Communist Party was able gradually to increase the prosperity of the general population. Although Marxist ideology idealized social equality, the operating ideology of the Soviet Union tended, intentionally and unintentionally, to promote nationalism, antidemocracy, and social inequality. Zaslavsky (1994: 77) argued that social inequality increased in the Soviet Union in the 1970s.



If you are interested in reading Zaslavsky, *Class Cleansing: The Massacre at Katyn* is perhaps the best introduction. Class cleansing is the "calculated and systematic annihilation" of an entire social class. The book is important both for its documentation of the 1940 massacre of 25,000 Poles by the Russians but also for publicizing the cover-up by the Soviet government and leftists in the west. The book was

awarded the 2008 Hannah Arendt Award for Political Thought by the Heinrich Böll Foundation. There is a certain irony in this award because Zaslavsky and Arendt disagreed on the essential characteristics of totalitarianism. (See Peter Baehr [2017] for a detailed discussion of this topic.)

Given Zaslavsky's long publication record, a short story would normally be overlooked, but "Mystery in a Soviet Library," reprinted in *The Best American Essays 1989*, is an exception. The unnamed main character in the story was given access to a restricted reading room that housed anti-Soviet, pre-Revolutionary, and Western books. The mystery was the identity of the man with whom "I" shared a desk. The reader seemed oblivious to the impression management required of readers in a library stocked with books most Soviet citizens were forbidden to read. Other readers prayed for "invisibility, wished to be forgotten, so that nothing threatened our fragile right to read forbidden literature.... An ordinary reader always remembered he was not alone and hence kept up an expression of distaste or boredom no matter how gripping the book – as if he were being forced to read or to chew on a lemon. It was our disagreeable profession, after all, that compelled us to read Western propaganda" (Zaslavsky 1989: 283).

Zaslavsky married his second wife, the historian Elena Aga-Rossi on the lawn of Bonnie and Elliott Leyton's home in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland, a home overlooking the ocean, "the air saturated with chamber music and the scent of lilac trees and fresh roses" (Leyton, in Orlandi, 2010, p. 110). After retirement from Memorial University, he returned almost every autumn to St. John's to pick mushrooms and for medical appointments. He claimed the Canadian medical system was superior to the one in Italy. Actually, the biggest draw was his dentist – Victor was scarred by memories of Soviet dental practices and, once he found a dentist he was not afraid of, he would certainly return rather than look for another in Rome. His last visit to Newfoundland, which he thought resembled the landscape north of St. Petersburg, was in the autumn of 2009. He brought back to Rome, Newfoundland mushrooms, smoked salmon, and partridgeberry jam.

I would like to thank Alexander Zaslavsky and Volker Meja for their assistance in writing this article.

Stephen Harold Riggins taught sociology at Memorial University for 25 years. His most recent publications include Canadian Sociologists in the First Person (co-

edited with Neil McLaughlin) and Creating a University: The Newfoundland Experience (co-edited with Roberta Buchanan).



Victor Zaslavsky

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Viaggiatore Attraverso il Secolo. Levico Terme: Centro Studi sulla Storia dell'Europa Orientale. The book includes contributions by the following MUN colleagues, Visiting Professors, and St. John's residents: Judy Adler, Peter Baehr, Cecilia Benoit, Elena Popova and Luben Boykov, Juan E. Corradi, Doug House, Rick Johnstone, Bonnie and Elliott Leyton, Volker Meja, Barbara Neis, and Gianfranco Poggi.

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Fatherhood is an Act of Letting Go

By Chris William Martin

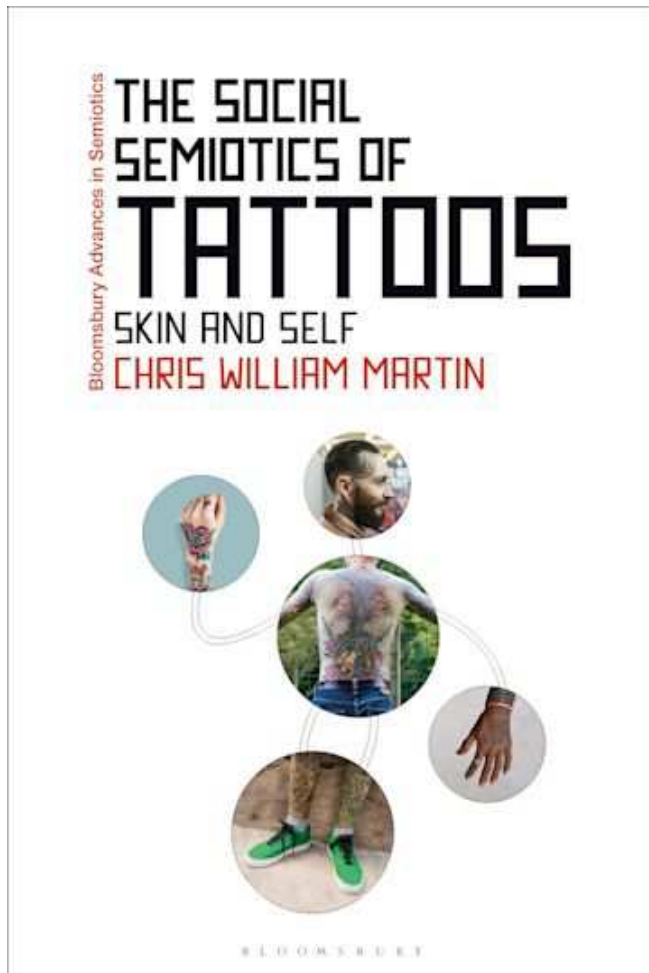
What familial title holds such weight that it commands a spot above that of President of the United States? Barack Obama's biography on his social media accounts reads "Dad, husband, President, citizen." These words, like tattoos or keychain mementos, serve as little identity signifiers. It is best to put the title of husband before one's job. Anyone in a long-term relationship knows that. However, dad is number one. The order of the words is indeed significant. My personal bio riffs on Obama's: "Dad, husband, sociologist, professor, musician, writer." The appellative noun dad can become so significant personally that it makes you let go of other titles, which once held the top spot in your string of identity markers. It seems inconceivable until it happens.

Life before fatherhood is about holding on, upgrading, replacing, and building anew. Life is an act of what the humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow described as building up elements of esteem, proving oneself to the world and to others by grasping for titles, awards, status, and accomplishments. The tasks guarantee the stability of life choices through contracts for full-time employment, marriage licenses, and plaques on the wall. And then being willing to replace these accomplishments with upgrades as soon as the next one comes along. Zygmunt Bauman writes in *The Art of Life* about this sort of thing. He describes identity –

particularly in the fleeting and ephemeral "liquid" modern era – as a constant project whereby we seek ready-made identities and work as artists on life-projects propelled forward by a consumer mindset and always a little hesitant about fully committing to anything for very long. Our life-project is a self-serving mindset, whereby we understand that happiness can mean owning or obtaining the next great thing whether title or consumer product. "In a society of shoppers and a life of shopping, we are happy as long as we haven't lost the hope of becoming happy," Bauman writes.

There is a scene in the 2014 science-fiction movie *Interstellar*, which has stuck with me. The protagonist of the film, Cooper, says the following to his child before leaving on a space mission: "After you kids came along, your mom said something to me I never quite understood. She said, 'Now, we're just here to be memories for our kids.' I think now I understand what she meant. Once you're a parent, you're the ghost of your children's future."

Trying to understand why this quote remains so memorable to me, I started to imagine that I did not mind being replaced by my children. I want them to be better than me. It also implies that, as I become a ghost in their past lives, the memories my wife April and I make now will influence their future perspectives.



I distinctly remember sitting with my oldest child Daisy when she was perhaps only 4 or 5 months old. I was tasked with trying to get her to fall asleep. As I sat in a rocking chair while she fought sleep, which she surely needed, I remember wishing I could go and live my own life. I was just beginning my teaching career at Algonquin College in Ottawa. I should be writing lectures, reading more, publishing more, I thought. I was spending all this time in quiet frustration with a crying baby in my arms. She was holding me back from enjoying life. Then it occurred to me. *This* is my life. I need to let go of what I had expected to do and enjoy this moment because it is what I have. The experience was akin to a Zen moment when I realized that I had to learn to engage fully with the present. For the first time, I realized what “involved fatherhood” meant.

When Daisy shouted her first word (she did not mutter!) and then proceeded to repeat it over and over, I continued to understand letting go. “DaDa, DaDa, DaDa.” I can still hear it. How could a title like Dad or Daddy replace one’s given name so easily? After all, the title seems so anonymous given that it is not at all unique to me. When she says it today, I realize I have already let go of an old self. My personal

name and all that it stood for back then just does not matter as I once thought it did.

In one of the poignant moments of *The Art of Life*, Bauman (p. 8) recalls Abraham Maslow’s story about self-sacrifice. Father and little son shared a love of strawberries. “Their wife and mother indulged them with strawberries for breakfast; ‘my son,’ Maslow told me, ‘was, as most children are, impatient, impetuous, unable to slowly savour his delights and stretch his joy for longer; he emptied his plate in no time, and then looked wistfully at mine, still almost full. Each time it happened, I passed my strawberries to him. ‘And you know,’ so Maslow concluded the story, ‘I remember those strawberries tasting better in his mouth than in mine.’”

Yet, it must be said that writing about letting go of a past conception of self in order to become a more involved father comes with a range of personal and cultural complications. Writing for *Gender and Society*, Wall and Arnold (2007) describe emerging trends since the 1980s of a new style of fatherhood, which is more involved, present, and taking up the slack as mothers enter the workforce in increasing numbers.

Wall and Arnold debate, though, whether this new style is a reality or just a recurring narrative. In the debate on behavior or narrative, the authors point to several studies that show fathers lagging behind mothers in sharing parental responsibilities in the household. More sociologically compelling, however, is Wall and Arnold’s conclusion gathered through an analysis of *Globe and Mail* parenting columns, which shows that fatherhood in many ways has still not shifted as much as some reports suggest. Indeed, mothers continue to be overrepresented as the primary caregiver while fathers play secondary, superficial, or more supporting roles.

In the article “Involved Fatherhood and the Workplace Context: A New Theoretical Approach,” Jamie Atkinson (2021) explores the involved father role alongside longstanding norms of the ideal worker, traditional masculinity in household income expectations, and government policies around caregiving. Atkinson points to examples of dilemmas fathers face between maintaining the norm of the ideal worker while pivoting to being a more involved parent who shares parity with mothers for child responsibilities. Ultimately, the author contends that “most working fathers, with varying degrees of reluctance, continue to choose the former.”

Studies then point to the practice of involved fatherhood as something, which contends with structural constraints around work, income, cultural norms, and policy decisions. Diana Lengensdorf and Michael Meuser (2016) use data gathered from studies in Germany to contextualize advances in involved fatherhood in the Global North. They write that “in Germany, there are various political initiatives that offer incentives for men to engage themselves in the family, like the so-called father months (‘Vätermonate’).”

The German example is also found in the concluding remarks of “The Effects of Involved Fatherhood on Families, and How Fathers can be Supported both at the Workplace and in the Home” by Behson and Robbins (2016). The article is an examination of policy and cultural advances, which have had measurable and tangible impacts on increased and enlightened father involvement in parenting. In the same article, which was written to be presented to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the authors provide compelling evidence of the socio-psychological benefits of increased father involvement on child rearing for children, women, and for fathers themselves.

Therefore, making the process of self-sacrifice for one’s children look easy, or equal along the gender lines, would be to lie to myself and to downplay socio-historical factors. Being a father of two little girls now, Daisy (born 2016) and Molly (born 2022) is an ongoing process to rectify who I am and want to be while still letting go of titles, names, and identity when need be. It is a life-project and I am ready to keep working on it. When Molly was born, I continued the journey.

I am currently more at peace with it than I have ever been.

One other thing I share with Barrack Obama is the hope for a better tomorrow for younger generations. In his memoir *A Promised Land*, Obama wrote the following. “If I remain hopeful, it’s because I’ve learned to place my faith in my fellow citizens, especially those of the next generation, whose conviction in the equal worth of all people seems to come as second nature, and who insist on making real those principles that their parents and teachers told them were true but perhaps never fully believed themselves.”



Daisy, April and Chris Martin.

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Why do some Violent Events stick in our Collective Memory while others Fade Away?

By **Shayan Morshedi**

Memory shapes the identity of individuals and plays a crucial role in how people think, decide, judge, and act. It is the ability to remember the past and to imagine a future that shapes our understanding of the world around us. Without memory, civilization and progress are not possible. However, memory is not limited to individuals. Groups, too, have a memory, a “collective” memory.

Collective memory studies can provide an insightful understanding of how social worlds work. Power,

identity, and agency are aspects of communities devoted to remembering. While all of the social sciences study collective memory, they have different approaches to defining and researching this phenomenon. Some scholars, such as Barry Schwartz, writing about the American commemoration of Abraham Lincoln, define collective memory as the “representation of the past embodied in both historical evidence and commemorative symbolism.” This approach tends to conceptualize collective

memory by emphasizing the rather obvious meanings of artifacts and physical memorials.

Others point to active minds that create subjective meanings and memories in ongoing interaction. For example, Lisa-Jo van den Scott defines collective memory as a “living concept linked to the behaviours and responses of social actors who *generate* meaning.” In this perspective, meaning appears to be more fragile and unstable. Remembering – a vital part of collective memory – is intrinsically social. It is more than just the activities of an individual’s mind. It is a skilled, learned, and shared activity, which occurs through human interaction. Thus, “collective” memory is not the same as “collected” memory, a simple aggregation of individual minds.

Collective memory as a social act is not only the ideas we remember. It is also information that we forget. According to cognitive load theory and our inability to remember every detail of everything, when we remember something we are forgetting something else. Each moment of remembering entails some degree of oblivion.

In researching the collective memory of any group, we need to consider silence and denial. There is a noteworthy difference between the two concepts. Silence is more passive than denial. The latter is an intentional act to erase a memory. Consciously or unconsciously, it may lead to remembrance at an individual level. Since we have to recall something to deny it, denial ironically functions as remembrance. We cannot easily erase memories. Even if we forget something, it does not mean that it has been totally deleted from our minds. It is perhaps only momentarily inaccessible. The question then arises: Do silence and denial in collective memory function as they do in an individual’s memory?

Some cognitive activities through which we process, understand, and recall our interactions with other people can be referred to as “social cognition.” The basic idea of social cognitive theory is that all cognitions are social and people’s cognition does not work just individually. People learn by observing how other people make decisions, and the consequences they experience. Social cognitive theory and the version of sociology called symbolic interactionism emphasize that humans are self-reflective, active decision-makers rather than passively shaped by social forces. This includes the active, conscious processes of observation, interpreting the meanings of verbal and non-verbal communication, and developing an understanding of group dynamics. Social cognition includes ideas about how we form

representations of “us and them” as well as the intermediate categories of “not quite us” and “not quite them.” Group representations shape perceptions, judgments, and actions. There is a circular cause and effect relationship between memory and social cognition. Memory plays a vital role in social cognition when we categorize, automatize, emotionalize, and compare events by remembering and learning from the past. On the other hand, social cognitions, such as emotions, biases, facial expressions, heuristics, and symbolic gestures play an essential role in shaping, faking, and maintaining our memories.



Opening of the Newfoundland Memorial Park,
Beaumont-Hamel, France, 1925.

A social cognitive perspective can bridge the cognitive sciences and sociology. Seeing the world through the lens of social cognitive theory is consistent with the way the subtleties of interacting people are recorded by symbolic interactionists. Concepts from social cognition perspectives can be an enlightening tool for the way collective memory is shaped, used, and changed. Although the relationship between memory and cognition at an individual level has been studied, the relationship between social cognition and collective memory is relatively ignored.

My research concentrates on three social cognitive processes: perspective-taking, empathy, and ingroup/outgroup biases. Perspective-taking refers to the recognition of another person’s point of view. Cognitive perspective-taking means inferring others’ thoughts, while affective perspective-taking is inferring others’ emotions. Perspective-taking acts like a movie director shaping our memory of an incident. Perspective-taking is closely linked to empathy because the absence of perspective-taking inhibits empathy.

There is an interwoven relationship between empathy, ingroup/outgroup biases, and perspective-taking. Not paying sufficient attention to all of these processes can lead to misunderstandings of the other processes. It is the role of these processes in the perception of violence, communication with others, and the formation of ingroup/outgroup biases that I study.

Some scholars highlight the association between a lack of empathy and encouraging violent acts. However, this idea is inconsistent with surprising evidence that more empathic people can sometimes be more violent. The relationship between empathy and violence can be explained by ingroup/outgroup biases and the concept of counter-empathy.

Daniel Goleman and Paul Ekman define empathy as including cognition, emotions, and compassion. The emotional and cognitive aspects align with perspective-taking, feeling and understanding others' emotions, while the third aspect is about taking perceived appropriate action. The lack of empathic concern turns empathy into counter-empathy, such as "schadenfreude" (pleasure at others' misfortune) or "gluckschmerz" (pain at others' good fortune). Ingroup/outgroup biases explain the presence or absence of empathic concern about others.

Ingroup bias can transform empathy into counter-empathy and dehumanization, completely altering the story of an incident. When one category of people dehumanizes another category, we do not expect similar emotions or stories about a common event. In this condition, dehumanized people are just numbers or tools that can be used, consumed, or killed for the better good of "us." For instance, the Pew Research Center claims that in 2015, 56% of Americans considered the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (approximately 150,000 civilians killed) to have been the right military decision, while only 14% of Japanese approved this idea.

The relation between collective memory and ingroup/outgroup bias is not limited to memorizing. Listening to ingroup members selectively retrieve previously encoded information leads to the concurrent retrieval of memories while listening to outgroup members does not. In a 2014 study by

Coman et al. in *Psychological Science*, a different recall based on whether the speaker is a member of an ingroup or outgroup supports a motivated retrieval mechanism for how people remember group-relevant memories.

Of course, history does not consist only of violent events, but violence is often among the most salient events that stick in collective memory. The history of humankind is like an artistic drawing that has been colored by violence. War, terrorism, and genocide are horror-filled parts of collective memories that play vital roles in group identities, social movements, and social conflicts. One question underlying my own research is why some violent acts are remembered vividly, while others do not stay within the collective memory. For instance, 9/11 was one of the most deadly terroristic attacks of the 20th century (nearly 3,000 victims). However, at least 4,130 Indigenous children died at Canadian residential schools. Some authorities estimate that the number may be as high as 15,000 deaths. Do Canadians remember both painful incidents with the same intensity and level of detail? Probably not. My question is then: What social processes make an incident more sustainable in a group's collective memory? What social processes make it forgettable?

My focus is on the way these issues in social cognitive theory are voiced by Canadians in their social media messages about acts of violence and terrorism. I have narrowed my research to the residents of two provinces (one being Newfoundland). I am now using qualitative methods, including content analysis and in-depth interviews to analyze narratives of collective memory about the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the shooting down of Ukraine International Airlines 752 by the Iranian military, and the residential schools tragedy in Canada, including silence and denial narratives. There is a political dimension to my research, which supports voiceless and forgotten people.

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