“Almosting It” for Fun and Profit

A review of a book by Lisa Randall (wonderfully titled, “Knocking on Heaven’s Door: How Physics and Scientific Thinking Illuminate the Universe”) says that Randall, a professor of physics at Harvard, does a great job of explaining difficult issues in contemporary physics in ways that allow regular people to feel they get the gist of it. The reviewer calls this a sense of “almosting it” after Stephen Dedalus’ use of the term in describing a dream state in Ulysses. I often feel that I am almosting it—that I have a vague but rich and satisfying sense of a deeper level of understanding—when I read poetry, for example, or late 20th century French philosophy. Friends tell me that meditation (particularly when coupled with a vegan diet) can also bring on such sensibilities and I have no reason to doubt them.

Now it may be that in dreams or love or enlightenment (or in the comprehension of Derrida), all most of us ever get is a sense of being close, of what that mysterious essence is or must be like. An asymptotic or approximate approach to X—a feeling of being in the gravity field of a black hole as it were, but with no real sense, of course, of whether we are close at all or what it would be like to live within a black hole—an impossibility as far as anyone can tell, by the way.

The role that Randall performs here—giving the uninitiated a sense of the secrets of the universe—is an ancient and honorable trade the successful practitioners of which are well rewarded—high priests, Harvard physics professors...the layperson after all can never really see the divine in its own terms but only through hints and intimations...

I worry that we—maybe me in particular in forums like this—both practice and encourage a lot of this kind of almosting it. The key signs this is happening are unfortunately also the signs of humanistic writing—rhetorical flourish and a strong reliance on analogy. Analogy is really the key—teaching and learning are generally based on understanding something (sort of) new in terms of something old and already (sort of) understood. The necessity of this approach should not blind us to the danger that the superficial similarity gives rise to a sense of insight to the new which is not, on closer scrutiny, deep, sustainable or what amounts to the same thing—useful. Sartre famously said that his novels and plays were meant to be suggestive while his formally philosophical writing was intended to convey as clearly as was possible, precisely what he meant. Hegel infamously (and perhaps apocryphally) said that only one man ever understood him, and he misunderstood him. G.E. Moore reportedly terrorized degree candidates by interrupting and intently asking them, “Precisely, what do you mean by that?”

Aphoristic quotations, such as these, model the strengths and weaknesses of almosting it but also offer some concrete lessons. First, it is darn difficult to figure out what people mean (what they intend) when they act and talk. Following Dilthey and Weber (and Husserl and Schutz) we sociologists have particular responsibilities in this realm. So second, when we profess (our job title, we like to point out) on one topic or another, we are obligated to make ourselves plain so that we may be judged. When we do so, we are far less likely to exceed our competence even if we are also less likely to inspire. To be blunt, inspiration is not our primary responsibility. Like its close cousin cynicism, it is too close to the surface, too readily available to the young. As Weber warned, there is a place for prophets—even a need—but it

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Faculty Presentations and Publications

Our faculty continue to uphold their reputation for outstanding and numerous publications and presentations.

Angie Moe


Susan Carlson

- Susan was re-elected for a third term as treasurer of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, a national professional organization of scholar activists. http://www.sssp1.org


Yuan-Kang Wang


Zoann Snyder


Continued on page 3
Chien-Ju Gu

- Chien-Juh Gu presented a paper titled "Structurative Approach to Mental Distress," at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Las Vegas in August.
- In May she was invited to serve as a discussant for the session "Negotiating Female Embodiment/Empowerment" at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian American Studies in New Orleans in May.

Slava Karpov

Slava Karpov has been working on the project "Secularism and its Adversaries," sponsored by The Bradley Foundation and carried out by an international team of researchers with Peter Berger as principal investigator (Boston University). Participants also include James Davison Hunter, Ilan Troen, and other well-known religion specialists. The project comparatively explores counter-secularizing forces and trends in the United States, India, Turkey, Russia, Israel and Western Europe. In this project, Slava is responsible for theoretical and conceptual framework. Expected outcomes include a book tentatively titled "Secularism and its Adversaries." The project's first working meeting took place in Boston in September, 2011, and the next one will be in March, 2012.

The collaboration with Peter Berger has developed since October 2010, when Karpov presented his theoretical work on desecularization (published in 2010 in The Journal of Church and State) at a presidential panel of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (Baltimore) with Dr. Berger serving as a discussant. Dr. Elena Lisovskaya, WMU professor of sociology, also presented her work on Russia's desecularization at this venue. Moreover, four of our graduate students, including Jake Armstrong, David Barry, Zhenia Leont'yeva, and Cindy Visscher, also presented at this conference and had an exciting informal, hour-long discussion with Peter Berger.

Ron Kramer


- In early September Ron attended the 39th Annual Conference of the European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control at the Université de Savoie in Chambéry, France. At the conference Ron presented a paper titled “Global Warming and Climate Change as State-Corporate Crime.” While in Europe, Ron was able to visit Baden Baden, Germany where his grandfather John Kramer was born.

Continued on page 4
Elena Gapova

- Invited lecturer for “(Re)vision of Social Policy in Post-Soviet Space: ideologies, actors and cultures,” International Summer Institute, organized by Higher School for Economics, St. Petersburg, Russia, July 2011.

- Invited presentations: “National Academia and International Recognition: On the Politics of Knowledge Production.” Institute for International Relations and Political Science, Vylius University, Lithuania. The talk was filmed and is now on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQwbvS0ptX0

Conferences:


Publications:


- “What the Foucault: Body as the Site of Power.” Neprikosnoveni Zapas, No. 76 (2011: 2). In Russian. (Intellectual journal similar to the New York Book Review). The article deals with the “semi-nude” calendar presented (by female journalists) to the Russian president Vladimir Putin for his birthday last fall.

Graduate Student News

Jessica Edel, Ph.D. candidate, was hired as the executive director for SIREN/Eaton Shelter. SIREN is the only agency in Eaton County that offers emergency shelter, transitional housing, counseling, referral and education, and a 24 hour crisis line to families affected by domestic violence or homelessness (SIREN serves both populations).
The Group for the Study of Religion, Humanity and Social Change

"The Group for the Study of Religion, Humanity, and Social Change is based in the Department of Sociology of Western Michigan University, involving both faculty and graduate students, and works in close collaboration with scholars in the U.S. and abroad. The group's research focuses on the relationships of religiosity and spirituality with altruism, open-mindedness, and interfaith and interethnic tolerance and peace in the context of societal and global change. We comparatively assess these relationships across nations, cultures and traditions."

Faculty members (alphabetical)
David Hartmann
Vyacheslav Karpov
Elena Lisovskaya
Yuan-Kang Wang

Graduate student members (alphabetical)
Jake Armstrong
David Barry
Tim Bauer
John Chew
Jessica Edel
Zhenia Leont’yeva
Melinda McCormick
Rachel Schroeder
Jessica Sullivan
Jon VanWieren
Lori Jo Verspoor
Cindy Visscher

In October 2011 Lori Verspoor and Rachel Shroeder presented their work at the conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Milwaukee.
Dear Friends:

I would like to thank you for the Marvin Olson Memorial Award. I would like to receive this award, recognition and honor not only in my own name, but also in the name of my family, my friends, colleagues and students, who for five decades have cooperated with me in developing the critical theory of society and religion, here in Michigan, in the United States and globally—including particularly my longtime friend, professor Michael Ott, the center of our movement who presented me with this handsome plaque, and his family, and my student and friend Nicholas Budimir, who sits behind me. Nick always reminded me of the beautiful times I spent in Belgrade. He also made me forget that the Serbs shot at me in Dubrovnik during what the Serbs call the civil war, and what the Croats call simply the war. I had to use all the tricks I learned in World War II to escape. We octogenarians have many very strange and contradictory historical experiences.

I would like to express my admiration for the Department of Sociology of Western Michigan University, which has allowed me to teach sociology courses for over four decades, and particularly the Michigan Sociological Association for their openness, tolerance and academic freedom in relation to contributions, which are not precisely mainstream, but which are called sometimes an alternative form of sociology and social science. I hope we shall be able to continue to cultivate this freedom into the future.

Thank you so very much.

R.J. Siebert

Please take a moment and look at my new Manifesto of the Critical Theory of Society and Religion:

The Wholly Other, Liberation, Happiness, and the Rescue of the Hopeless

WMU Represented at American Criminological Society Association Meeting

**Elizabeth Bradshaw**
Panel Co-Chair, “Bridging the Gap: The Greening of State Corporate Crime.”
Co-Author, “Representing the United States Border Patrol.”
Roundtable Discussant, “Annual Workshop on State Crime.”
Co-Author, “Bridging the Gap: The Greening of State Corporate Crime.”

**Carrie Buist**
Author, “In Session Submission: Theorizing and Employing Qualitative Methods in Law Enforcement Research.”
Co-Author, “Sex Preference, Race and Class and Sexual Assault.”
Co-Author, “On-Going Research on Rape and Sexual Assault.”

**Susan Caringella**
Author, “The Top Ten Tips for Tenure Candidates.”
Author, “Crime, Justice, and Gender: Media Constructions.”

**Kelly Faust**
Session, “State Crime, Genocide, and Disaster.”
Co-Author, “Historical Contingency in State Crime: Sorting Out Expectations of the State.”
Author, “Comparative and Historical Perspectives/Historical Comparisons.”

**Whitney D. Gunter**
Co-Author, “Traditional Bullying and Cyberbullying: Two Sides to the Same Coin?”
Author, “Tests of Self-Control Theory III.”

**Susan M. Carlson**
Co-Author, “Historical Contingency in State Crime: Sorting Out Expectations of the State.”
Co-Author, “State Crime, Genocide, and Disaster.”
Roundtable Chair, “Bridging the Gap: The Greening of State Corporate Crime.”

**Jackie Doyon**
Panel Co-Chair, “Bridging the Gap: The Greening of State Corporate Crime.”

**Gregory J. Howard**
Co-Author, “Representing the United States Border Patrol.”
Author, “Presentations of Law Enforcement in Various Media Outlets.”

**Karolina Jedzejczak**
Roundtable, “On-Going Research on Rape and Sexual Assault.”
Author, “Hook-Up Culture Norms and Rape Myths on Campus.”

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“Almosting it…” continued from page 1

is not at the lectern. Rather better for my students to precisely get what I am driving at, limited and mundane as it almost certainly is, than to feel they are almosting the truth that only I can reveal and only they can receive.

There is a positive message behind and pushing forward this overtly negative analysis—that we, personally and as a discipline, have indeed much to say, offer, claim. We should not be afraid to think we know something even as we work very hard to second-guess and critique—to strictly limit—what we think we know. There are no shortcuts to knowledge and the only certainty about a scientific claim is that it will someday be rejected. There is comfort in ambiguity and in the preemptive rhetorical strike but precious little nourishment for either the curiosity or the material and ethical needs that justify our inquiry.
Our newest Ph.D. graduate
Dr. Carrie Buist

2007—M.A.—Criminology
Criminal Justice, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Mich.

2011—Ph.D.—Criminology, Sociology, Gender and Feminism,
Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Mich.

2011-Present—Associate Professor, University of North Carolina
at Wilmington, Wilmington, N.C.

Alumni Spotlight:

Kimberly (Frankel) Levin (1980):
Criminal Justice major, Biomedical Sciences minor
Married (Kenneth), two children (Emily 13 and Daniel 11)
Live in West Bloomfield, Mich.
levink2@yahoo.com
Worked as an inhouse consultant and project manager for a medical
claims processing software vendor; current profession: homemaker.

Heather Krestick (2011):
Criminal Justice major
Graduate school at Bowling Green University, Bowling Green, Ohio, Criminal
Justice.

Rebecca Mancilla (2011):
Social Psychology major
Graduate school at University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, studying sociology and
social psychology.
Married to Dan Mancilla who is a graduate student in the Department of English
at Western Michigan University.

For more alumni news, see the WMU College of Arts and Sciences alumni newsletter here:
www.wmich.edu/cas/alumni/newsletter/
Alumni Information Update
We want to hear from you!

Our strong suit is our alumni. In each issue, we will focus on YOU, so PLEASE consider yourself selected for upcoming issues. We enjoy receiving your announcements: marriages, job changes, presentations, promotions, advanced degrees, etc. All you need to do is fill out any portion of the form below (with a picture, if possible) and send to ann.browning@wmich.edu, or mail to Newsletter Editor, Department of Sociology, 2406 Sangren Hall, 1903 West Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5257.

Name _______________________________ Email _______________________________

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Employer ____________________________ Job title _______________________________

If alumni, degree and year: ________________________________________________________

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Or complete your update on the website at:
Official WMU Alumni Update here: www.wmich.edu/friends/
Yes, I want to support the WMU Department of Sociology!

I wish to contribute to the further success of Western Michigan University’s Department of Sociology.

Your gift is important to our campus community.

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