

interview met alan blum

Paul ten Have

Enige gegevens over Alan F. Blum.

Bij Blum's bijdrage aan de bundel van McKinney en Tiryakian staat onder andere vermeld:

"Alan F. Blum was born in 1935 and received his Ph.D. in 1964 from the University of Chicago. Mr Blum spent the next two years as a U.S. Public Health post doctoral fellow in the department of psychiatry at Harvard University".

Hierna volgen zijn docentschappen aan de Columbia University en New York University en een gepland boek over socialisatie, dat nooit verschenen is.

Achterop zijn boek *Theorizing* lezen we:

"Alan Blum completed his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1963. He was a Post-Doctoral Fellow at Harvard University before holding Assistant Professorships at Columbia and then at New York University. He is now an Associate Professor at York University, Toronto. In 1972 he was a visiting scholar at King's College, Cambridge".

Het volgende interview geeft aan hoe deze gegevens in zijn intellectuele ontwikkeling passen. Ook Peter McHugh, waarvan hij herhaaldelijk zegt dat hun samenwerking zo belangrijk is voor zijn werk, is als Associate professor aan York University verbonden. Ze hadden beide de benoeming van de ander als voorwaarde voor hun eigen in dienst treden gesteld.

Als karakteristiek voor zijn werk is de volgende passage achterop *Theorizing* het beste wat ik zou kunnen parafraseren:

"A sociologist here for the first time attempts to say what is fundamental to "theorizing" as an activity. He writes in terms of what are often thought to be two traditions, the Platonic enterprise of metaphysics in its development down to Heidegger; and the grand sociological tradition of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. The author develops a notion of inquiry that is grounded in a critical image of the relationship of man to language, an image responsive

to the dialogic inwardness of theoretic writing rather than to a standard of inter-personal organization.

This book is a unique attempt to revive classic discourse as the only rational alternative to the speechlessness of modern speech and as the foundation of genuine theorizing".

Dat is toch weer mooi gezegd. Wil men eens wat van hem lezen, dan lijken *Positive thinking* en *On the beginning* me het beste als start.

Publikaties van Alan Blum:

- "The Corpus of knowledge as a Normative Order: intellectual critiques of the social order of knowledge and the common sense features of bodies of knowledge", in *Theoretical sociology; perspectives and developments*. J.C. McKinney & E.A. Tiryakian eds. New York : Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970, p.319-336.
- "The Sociology of mental illness", in *Deviance and respectability: the social construction of moral meanings*. J.D. Douglas ed. New York: Basic books, 1970, p.31-60.
- "Theorizing", in *Understanding Everyday Life*. J.D. Douglas ed. Chicago: Aldine, 1970; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 301-319.
- "Methods for recognizing, formulating and describing social problems" in *Handbook on the study of social problems*. E.D. Smigel ed. Rand McNally, 1971.
- "Reading Marx", in *Sociological Inquiry*. vol. 43 (1973) p. 23-34.
- *Theorizing*, London: Heinemann, 1974.
- "Positive Thinking", in *Theory and Society*. Vol. I (1974), p. 245-269.
- en een produkt van samenwerking: *On the beginning of social inquiry*. P. Mc Hugh, S. Raffel, D.C. Foss, A.F. Blum, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974.

Here follow parts of a talk with Blum in Café Reynders, Leidseplein, Amsterdam, on Saturday, April 19th 1975, on the occasion of Blum's appearance at the Amsterdam Festival of the Social Sciences. My own talking is summarized, Blum's remarks are given in as complete a way as possible, although they have been slightly polished: ah's, uh's, kind of's etc. are omitted.

(After being shown a bibliography of his works):

"When I said that some of those papers I'd like to forget, I don't mean that I don't want to accept responsibility for the work. It is like growing up. You learn about your commitment through writing, through practice. In the real sense of theory and praxis, you have to write and formulate problems to find out what you mean. So, in a way, it's almost as if you have the notion, but you can never see it and develop it, until you write it. You have to learn after the fact, it's a funny kind

of relation. So a lot of those papers, I had a notion, I did not know what I meant. And also, the younger you are, the more desperate you become, in terms of publishing, etc. Especially in North America, there are a lot of pressures on the young man to write quickly. And fast writing is really dangerous. So, in a way, I regard the early stuff as practice rehearsal for later material.

There is another point that doesn't come out in the list, and this is really important to understand my work, it's that our work is purely collective. So, o.k., I've been invited here but it's really impossible for me to separate my contribution from Peter McHugh's. My friends differentiate me, because I write more, but almost everything I write is generated communally with McHugh, in talks, just continuous talks, coffee, and also with students. So, our enterprise could never be understood if its collective character is repressed. *On the beginning of social inquiry* shows that. *Theorizing* doesn't, concretely, because I wrote it, and yet it's a collective book. I say that in the preface, that there are really crucial students, who helped me. And the same is true today: McHugh and the relationship with students is fuel for the work. So I am like a spokesman, sometimes they agree, sometimes they say, "go on" etc. That has to be grasped. I don't think any people in the academic world really understand that character of our work adequately; they think there is one star, another star, etc. That's just not true, and that's why graduate training is very important to us: if our student population is impoverished, we don't have material. For example if I come here, I get a feeling it's a kind of atomistic university situation: people have friends, but writing and conversation doesn't occur collaboratively.. All that is a very Protestant notion as compared to the Greek notion, where you go to the Agora, the marketplace, and do it together. So to me that's the most important concrete character of our work, that it's public, collective, communal, it cannot occur impersonally with anyone. That's why public talks are terribly dangerous. It requires a commitment to friendship, to community before it begins, a kind of commitment to "well, let's listen to each other talk, let's be playful and exploratory, let's not be sophistic and just raise objections, let's generate something and let's see where it leads us". You need friends for that, you can't have distrust and people who are anxious to make objections and points, so given all that, the work can flourish.

- Tell me about your intellectual career

I studied at Chicago, in a very conventional and empirical department, the kind of department we all know. The people there were Peter Blau, and Peter Rossi, and Strodbeck. I worked in something called the Social Psychology Laboratory and I did research on families, experimental studies, stuff I don't do now. I don't look back at that with any anger. I was really trained as an empiricist. So I kind of know that life and I

accepted. I was influenced by people like Skinner and Donald Campbell. Strodbeck is a very good methodologist. So you could see a good methodologist working. But I was always kind of alienated, and in those days, like most students, I attributed the alienation to....I formulated it as my problem, because empiricism was so self-evidently powerful, rational etc. But I learned it wasn't my problem. I learned that through contact with the material. I learned there was something inauthentic about that relationship to materials. And then, at that time, Goffman's first book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, came out. It was kind of interesting, it showed there was a possibility for another kind of thinking. But the few friends I had, who thought this way, couldn't grasp a viable alternative. It seemed, if you didn't accept the empirical commitment, you have to be a poet. There was no reasonable, rational way to develop a relation to materials other than the two options of Poetry, what they called "subjectivism", or Science. So, Goffman didn't help that much, he showed people could work, but nothing really happened.

I took a post-doctorate at Harvard. I worked with a very competent empirical guy, on schizophrenogenic families, his name was Elliot Mishler. I came in contact with a lot of psychiatrists. I did a paper, a really old paper, a kind of symbolic interactionist treatment of the training of therapists. Mishler was an old friend of Garfinkel. He didn't do the kind of work, but he appreciated him, and he had a file-cabinet full of Garfinkel's stuff. I was pretty isolated at Harvard. I was around clinical psychologists and Parsonians, a kind of uninteresting intellectual environment. And so I started reading Garfinkel's unpublished work. There were just tons of papers, and they really intrigued me. He was most influential at that time. So then I started changing. What they called "ethnomethodology" looked interesting, but I could see problems. Then, going to Columbia, my first real job, exposed me to Schegloff and McHugh. I shared an office with Schegloff and McHugh in the department. And that was very good, because Schegloff represented the logical climax of ethnomethodology as conversational analysis. He used to argue and talk about Sacks' work, at the time. This was young work. Through that contact McHugh and I generated the idea of the impasse produced by that kind of approach, unless you conceived of the relation to materials in radically different ways. Ethnomethodology is, after all, a descriptivism, in its most self-conscious perhaps rational form, but it still leads to tremendous problems. So Peter and I began reading Wittgenstein and other materials, formed a good relation. We talked a lot and that's the period I was doing *Mental Illness*. You can see in the *Mental Illness* paper I didn't know what to do: I said mental illness isn't "out there", but I didn't want to say it's just a product of labeling. I was still in the grip of this dumb version of language, which reading Wittgenstein was pulling me out of.

I went to New York University. I generated a lively group of students and our reading was changed. I got much more philosophical. We went through Heidegger: he explicated in various ways things that Wittgenstein left unsaid; they formed a nice package. And then I went back to Plato, accidentally and under the pressure of a couple of students, and that was interesting. I found I could read Plato, without doing crazy things at all. I could read Plato as providing the kind of solution I wanted, that language is "resonant", there is a notion of an absolute, of what is necessary, and it's necessary because we can't do without it, because of the Good (people laughed at it, the Good...). The very notion of this absolute makes it resistant to our conventional ways of speaking. So Plato helped. Now I can read Plato in such a way as to generate all the possibilities for relating to materials, for thinking, for theorizing. Now I am much more comfortable: we really don't have problems in our work. We think we have generated the only adequate way of understanding the relationship between language and life, the relationship to our speech. We know that certain things can't be said, they can only be shown. We assume that the difference between the theorist and the multitude is that the theorist, as compared to the multitude, knows that he can only *show*, and he has to make reference to his showing. We have a sense of how that is done in work, and we can see it, (not) objectively, I mean we can't provide indicators, but we know, for example, when our students' work improves. If someone came around one of the sceptics, they could sit in their classes over the year, and we'd show them and we tell them, why the work is improved. We know how to talk about our own work, when we talk to each other, and when here I say, well, we have to do more here, do more there. So we have a sense of evaluation of our material, when it gets better, when it's not enough. And we also have a strong sense of respecting the only rational version of language. So, we're comfortable. We know there are other problems, we do have problems we would like to handle, because they pose interesting challenges to us, we could imagine giving us trouble. But, we know we can handle any problem, because -this would sound crazy to an empiricist- our version of life and language requires us to transform anything in our terms. An empiricist would say: that's just narcissism. We are working right now: Peter and I are doing a book on Comedy. We think it's the most important work so far, because we are trying to formulate the theorist, his relation to the materials, in terms of the Socratic notion of irony, comedy. We are examining the conventional notion of comedy as laughing and the conventional notion of the tragedy as higher form. And we try to show how that conventional version of the nobility of tragedy is really a mathematical way of speaking. In a way, tragedy shows a very concrete notion of language. A theorist, a real theorist in our terms, could never be the topic of a tragedy, because the tragic figures..(onverstaanbaar), the incompleteness of his language isn't a continuous feature of his life, so he is always shocked when he finds out his mother is

his wife. Oedipous is only shocked because he's a mathematical guy, and he's not thinking all the time. He needs a prophet or someone to come around and tell him. He is like the paradigma of the theorist who is afraid, more than anything, of being a topic for tragedy. So, consequently, he theorizes in such a way as to try to close off every possibility, to anticipate every contingency. That is like Kant, or anyone with "a system" or anyone who says they have "a theory", who wants to make a complete speech. We say "that's just a phantasy, a dream" The resonance and open character of speech must be lived with, not as a problem, but ironically and strongly: it's not like a burden to bear; it's what man is. Man is not a god; only gods have complete speech. And man is not a beast, he is kind of in the middle, as the Greeks would say. And being in the middle means: he always has questions, and the questions never end. The most dangerous kind of speech is the speech which gives you answers, which conceives of answers as termination the questions, which for me is what tragedy, or positivism, and all these forms do. So a lot of people who we like, a lot of people who's work is often classified with ours, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, Levi-Strauss, when you examine the work you see they are interested in describing, in answering questions in a concrete way and we're not. What has to be kept in mind is that we are also not Andy Warhol, just interested in surrealistic displays, so it's a thin line... of theorizing.

- Many people feel your way comes down to the creation of a small circle of friends. If you don't speak the language your way, you are out. So they see it as a closed universe, while you speak of openness...

That's interesting; the idea of insulating ourselves. That's funny because, I mean the Greeks had this notion of Greeks and Barbarians. Now, Barbarian isn't a short term for Pig; Barbarians are non-Greek. And a non-Greek is a one with a different way. He speaks different ba-ba; the different tongues. To try to speak to the Empire. Like the Romans would speak; they try to conquer the world. The theorist knows he can't conquer the world. As soon as he tries to conquer the world; to the extent where he is just talking: chatter. So what has to be resisted first is the impulse to simplify in order to cater to the demand for clarity and adequate communication, i.e. the demand for Empire. Now that can be interpreted as "wilful obscurity". That's what a reviewer said. A reviewer treated my book in the TLS as if it was impenetrable as a methodological principle. What it shows is it's tough to say the kinds of things we want to say. If we wanted to talk about what they talk about we could communicate, but still haven't adressed them.

- I talked with someone who said he felt inspired by Goffman. Goffman gave him a vision, new possibilities of looking at things. But when he heard you, he felt he had to choose, to join you by learning to speak your language, or remaining

outside of your circle, if he didn't want to be converted.

That's interesting! I want to make something good of that, to reformulate that. I like that comment, because what that tells me is that Goffman entertains him, that's what I take "a vision" -even though we Modern Liberals see that as the highest form of theorizing- Goffman entertains him, but in a way -and this will sound pompous, but it's the same thing that occurs with students: we look like a cult or an ideology. Now, we're not a cult or an ideology, in the way some Marxist groups or ethno-methodology, or some different intellectual groups are. But we appear to be a cult in the sense that the commitment we talked about in the beginning is required. And this our students recognize. Whether they agree with us or not, at some point they realize that they either have to work with us or go somewhere else. In other words: the topic of their training becomes commitments. There is a lot of frustration and concern. Many students say: "I just can't do this kind of work, I can't live with this, it makes me uncomfortable" etc. Then you say: "Well, o.k., so then why are you worried, just go, like to the supermarket and do another kind of work". But they say: "I know the other kind of work isn't good". I say "Aha! You've been forced to make a move, wherever you go, you will be going to be thinking about: why you speak, why you write, what the origin is, where it comes from". So, in a way, it's our severity, a kind of austerity that frightens some people; we are not entertainers. People expect us to be entertainers. They come to us for erotic reasons: we reject Positivism, we use Wittgenstein and Heidegger, so we sound kind of sexy, you know, funny topics, hip. And then they come and find: oh no, man, you have to undergo training and formulating, and writing and working and theorizing, which is a discipline relation. You have to resist at every instance the pressure of the multitude to simplify your speech and become descriptive. It's true: we talk to friends. We are not an egalitarian movement, and yet: everyone is eligible. Everyman can become a Greek, very few will. Let them keep their different ways.

Yet, I don't want to give the impression that we are a little enclave. Our version of theorizing requires us to co-exist with the multitude. So we don't do the version of protestant rebellion where you say: "well, I'm going to my study and hell with all these dummies". We need what I call "multitudinous talk", common sense, because we are members. We are not deities, we are part of the life, the culture. We approach a notion like Jesus, or Bias, or Motives. We start with our multitudinous understanding, our common sense understanding, so we need that. It's what we do to that beginning that differentiates us from the others who are always controlled by the security of the notion.

The guy who made the comment, I can appreciate what he's saying, but we might have forced him, maybe he doesn't know it yet, to examine the notion of what he thinks he wants or needs. O.k.,

if Goffman entertains him, why does he find Goffman providing a vision. What is it about Goffman's work that provides a vision? Maybe, it's just the fact that it doesn't make demands in conversation, maybe, in a way, it's like "clever talk". And I'm not trying to demean Goffman's work. I think it's lovely work. It's just like a real smart member of the multitude making observations. And that's good, you like such a person around. I think Mary Douglas' work is like that, too. They are smart members, and you like to have them around to talk to you, to do violence on what they start with, because they tend to forget that they are doing the talking, in our terms, that's the way they live. So this guy... I can understand it. What else do you hear?

- *Many people ask: "What is the purpose, what does it accomplish, what is the use?"*

You hear that in a lot of ways. Let's try to formulate again what they mean when they ask "what's the purpose". The (ideal type) of the multitudinous objection would ask: "What is its use". So, "it is going to change the political structure", that kind of talk. I don't figure we have to respect that talk. You can think of usefulness in various ways. In my talk I try to make reference to the strongest and most powerful necessities, that you use your material to affirm the strongest and most powerful necessities which are left unsaid. That to me is useful speech, but certainly that is not what the critic means. Most of the critics who raise that objection on the most primitive level have a notion of necessities like distributing bread, stopping war. Necessities which to us are inessential, which isn't to demean them, but is to say that they are really topics or occasions for formulation. This sounds awful, but what's interesting about war is the idea, the life, the necessities that sustain it. And before you talk about stopping war, a theorist is interested in re-formulating the notion of life that creates war as a rational, intelligible option. So, we handle any topic and conceive of the activity of formulating as useful to us communally, interactionally... Let's think of what work is. The work, I try to say, is conversation, conversation means continuously re-collecting, in the Greek sense, or re-centering notions. The origins of the notions, the resonances, have become segregated from their use. Wittgenstein says: "Language goes on holiday". Lazy, we take things for granted. Yet you don't re-center by providing a definition, some hypothesis or description, because that terminates the very life of the species. So the life of the species is to continuously renew our notions. Not because we are interested in "motive" per se. That kind of renewal is a renewal of what life is, that what life means to us.

So, I would conceive of a student relating to his environment, his material, his people, as when he is continuously open to the possibility of re-formulating. Now, that doesn't mean he necessarily writes papers. It's not that he's saying: "what do

you mean by that?". There is the attention, the continuous attention to the origin of the talk... The tradition, to us, is to keep this idea of Otherness, of the absolute necessities of life. The necessities are such that they can never be raised in one hand or appropriated. Their very nature means: they need our talk. Imagine you're talking about Being; well, Being needs us to revive. That's what words are speaking for; that's our solution to the problem of theory and practice. That's a strong solution. It says: theory is connected to life; you keep it open...It's hard to communicate this by differentiation it from pure capriciousness and narcissism, so I can understand the objections there. But all I could say then was: well, such objections would be tamed if the people were really serious. If they're really serious, they would come and look around and work with us. Then, after a while, they no longer raise the questions of narcissism, of subjectivity, those things. They'd raise other objections and they'd either leave or stay, but they'd formulated and participated. Right now, the objections are abstract. "What use?" is a funny question, if one asks it as a spectator. Like "What's the goal?", and you say "come, join us and see our goal; you have to see it in the work, in the talk; you want to submit to that?", and they say "no, you have to show it first", and we say "we cannot show it first".

- *But many people still feel the work is impenetrable and obscure.*

The worst enemy of Analysis is the one who uses obscurity, the idea that the work is obscure as a self-evident notion and then leaves it. The authors who I found most obscure at various points in my life: Garfinkel, Wittgenstein, Heidegger at various points, Jacques Derrida. I always treated it as my problem, assuming their rationality. And I still get papers from students that I find very obscure, and I assume it is my problem. So the charge of obscurity is to me a pure cop-out. I know the work is obscure, but that should be an occasion to work with the work. I have constructed an image of a "good reader" as one who can treat the obscurity not as if it's willful secrecy or subterfuge, but as a way of saying: "what I have to speak is difficult; help me, do some formulating, I know what I mean, I cannot quite get it, etc..." and not: "I can't understand, goodbye". So I would tell readers that they have to work with it. If you can't understand it, you keep the book around and put it away and you go to other stuff, you're not supposed to understand it in two days. You'll have to have a little faith in words you know. It takes a little faith...".