Christian Fleck

talks about the talking class

Sociologist **Christian Fleck** was born in Graz, educated in Graz, and teaches at the University of Graz. But he's also been a Schumpeter Fellow at Harvard, a Fellow of the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, and, in spring 2008, a Fulbright Visiting Professor at the University of Minnesota. While here, he gave a lecture entitled "Towards a Theory of the Talking Class." A few days later, this bona fide member of the talking class talked, and *ASN* listened.

Interview and photo by Daniel Pinkerton

ASN: *What got you interested in sociology?*
CF: I started to become interested in politics during my high school years (the early 1970s). At this time it was clear that there was one big thing—sociology—that could explain everything, so I went into it. Then I started learning sociology and realized that it couldn't actually explain everything. (*laughs*) But I liked it anyway.

ASN: *Is there anybody who was a particular mentor to you?*
CF: Some faculty members of the University of Graz impressed me more than others, but I cannot say that I'm a disciple of someone, or someone took the position of being my mentor. I got much more from reading, I would say, than from personal influences. I don't want to blame any of my teachers, but when I studied, we learned the most from discussion groups with arguments.

ASN: *The discipline was in its infancy, at least at Graz.*
CF: Yes. It was a very very small department with just a few students. There wasn't even an official program in sociology. My PhD is actually in philosophy, but on a more or less sociological topic. So, it wasn't a kind of serious education we got there.

ASN: *You say you were interested in politics, but your sociology has a historical dimension to it, and you're frequently working in collaboration with historians.*
CF: I cannot explain it from a biographical perspective, but it's clear that whatever you take as an object of social science research has a history. During the last few decades, sociologists forgot this and thought, "Oh, what happened yesterday is ancient history." (*laughs*) But if you're living and working in Austria, you cannot escape the historicity of your own existence. I did a time-consuming research project on the history of the social sciences in Austria, the scientists who emigrated when the Nazis took power, and those who stayed and helped the Nazis exercise power in the universities. It became immediately clear that this isn't ancient history. This has very much to do with the present, because universities are, not only in Europe but nearly worldwide, relatively slow-moving institutions. The life course of a university teacher in Austria is usually thirty years, so the teachers of your teachers could have been part of the Nazi regime. So I'm personally interested in history.

ASN: *But not every sociologist is.*
CF: True. Only a minority of sociologists has a historical orientation. But things are moving a little bit—partly because of the famous Minnesota Population Center, which offers data sets that go back 40, 50, 60 years or more. They are a big influence because they offer more data. In the 1960s it wasn't easy to do sociological research with a historical dimension on a scientific basis. At that time, they used punch cards and huge computers with very little memory.

ASN: *Yes, thanks to rich databases and more robust technology, it has become much easier to measure change over time using scientific and mathematical sorts of methodologies.*
CF: Just like this instrument. (*points to the digital recorder*) In my first oral history sociology project, we used big tape recorders, and lost a lot of tape, because it didn't work well. Technology has an influence on the development of all scholarly work.

ASN: *Absolutely. Turning to the lecture you gave, can you compare Thostein Veblen's leisure class with your talking class?*
CF: Back in 1899, Veblen, a then relatively young and unknown man, came up with the idea of the "leisure class" and wrote about what their place might be in society. But it's been more than 100 years since then. What happened to this particular group? Has it changed or grown? Imagine you put Thorstein Veblen into the year 2008. What would he see nowadays? It's great fun to think about the ridiculous things rich people do to impress themselves and a larger audience. Back in the late 19th century, there were incredible parallels to our time. (*laughs*) There is still a group around that wants to impress others by "conspicuous consumption"—a term Veblen invented. This was how the leisure class demonstrated its values, wealth, and status. On the other hand, something more fundamental has changed over time. Just to give two examples, Veblen wrote this book before the assembly line started, and before mass production started. A whole epoch really happened in between Veblen and today. We're really a postindustrial society. Veblen was referring to the era of the machine. But today, according

to many, we have a knowledge-based economy. The European Union has proposed a big plan for a knowledge-based economy that will be globally competitive. There is a lot of rhetoric about knowledge, but not all people contribute knowledge. Some contribute just by *talking* about the knowledge of others. Therefore, I am trying to find a way to identify those people who are, as I call them, members of the talking class, and who function as disseminators. These people are in between producers and consumers, or between producers and the larger audience. We don't have a good title for them. Sometimes they are teachers, or journalists, or commentators, or artists. I propose calling them the talking class in reference to the leisure class of Veblen.

ASN: *Give us an example of the talking class at work.*
CF: How about news media? There is some event actually occurring—let's say the primary elections in the US. People go out on a Tuesday and vote for someone. If you distribute this voting over months, the members of the talking class have many chances to influence people by talking about it. For every ninety-minute debate between the Democratic candidates, for example, hours have been devoted to analysis of them by thousands of reporters and columnists. This is just one example that illustrates the increase in people who are active in disseminating messages.

ASN: *There's great variety in the talking class—it can include anything from the nonprofit* Consumer Reports *who might tell you what car is more reliable to somebody like Rush Limbaugh, who might tell you nothing particularly useful.*
CF: I don't want to give the impression that the talking class is just ridiculous. What some of them do is necessary. It's nearly the same with information technology. If your computer breaks down, you need someone to help you, and in this knowledge-based economy, a person who knows more than you, rather than a producer of original research, can be extremely valuable. I would propose that it is an increasing phenomenon, and an expanding part of our culture is doing this.

ASN: *Why do you think it's expanding?*
CF: Partly as a byproduct. If you create a new cable TV channel, then you have to fill it with programs. And if it's a news channel, you need to have news, and people to help explain to viewers what this news means. Many people have a problem finding their way through the more elaborate knowledge that exists about everything. Nowadays you should have at least some knowledge about the stock exchange and DNA. A hundred years ago no one had any idea what DNA was, and very few cared about the stock exchange. Therefore, if you include in this talking class all knowledge transfer from one generation to the next one, including the education system, then it is clear that the talking class performs a valuable function.

ASN: *Do you think the talking class has expanded because of technology? Now we have the internet, where bloggers can write to their hearts' content, but we didn't 25 years ago.*
CF: Definitely. Over the three times I've stayed in this country I can compare it. In the mid-1990s, the fax machine was the leading technology to get in touch with people. You could not get a TV program from Europe in this country. Newspapers would be several days old by the time they got here. When I was in New York in 1999-2000, I could read nearly all of the European papers on the web and I could communicate by instant messaging. Now I can use Skype and talk with someone in Austria right now, although it would be midnight there. The technology produces a lot of additional sources of information. Therefore, we need people who are collecting them, browsing through, channeling it to us, because no one is able to read everything. So we do have a kind of hierarchy to trickle-down information and at every step someone collects contents and hands it over to the next.

ASN: *This isn't a new process. How does technology change it?*
CF: It has become much less professionalized. A press agency, for example, works the same way, but with much less chance for ordinary people to enter the talking class. It's different with blogs. Everyone, wherever or whoever she or he is, can participate. If some of these blogs are interesting, they will become recognized and read by many others—so this new technology allows the talking class to become more democratic and egalitarian.

ASN: *On the whole that's a good thing, although my Twin Cities newspaper carries a column in which someone collects excerpts from bloggers, who are themselves writing about press coverage of the event. This is three degrees of separation from the actual event! Do you see any disadvantage to having a more populist talking class?*
CF: Not really. What I like is that nowadays, a skeptic can Google any news story and find every source immediately. That makes it more difficult to "spin" news or outright lie. Not because people are now more educated, or more clever, but because more people have a chance to check out who said what, when, and where.

ASN: *So it's a good thing on the whole…*
CF: This was true for the leisure class too; it was good to have leisure! (*laughs*)

ASN: *It was better than working in a coal mine six days a week.*
CF: Veblen's book makes many jokes about rich people. But it had a serious point, because he realized something had changed in his society, and some of them made a full time job out of doing nothing, which is fun, too.

ASN: *I thought a full time job doing nothing was traditional among British nobility. A gentleman might be a naturalist or something like that, if he is so inclined, but he never dirties his hands making money. All his money is inherited and he receives an annual income.*
CF: There is some truth to that, and not just in Britain. There is a story, probably apocryphal, about a Chinese princess who saw a tennis match between two gentlemen she was acquainted with, and said, "Why didn't they send the servants to do this for them?" (*laughs*) She had a point. Gentlemen in the 19th century might play some sports or go out hunting, but they didn't go to a gym to improve their muscles, because servants, not gentlemen, had muscles.

ASN: *I know people who spend an hour on their e-mail, maybe an hour surfing the net, and read several newspapers or blogs. Is this leisure? And how does spending that much non-work time connecting to the talking class instead of spending "face time" with real people affect us in terms of socialization?*
CF: The pessimistic view of culture would say all this new information technology changes everything. Life becomes easier, but there is no real-life conversation of three-dimensional people sitting around and talking to each other and exchanging arguments. There is some truth in this view. Virtual reality isn't real. On the other hand, if you compare surfing the web with turn-of-the-century coal miners, whom you mentioned earlier, it's much more comfortable to sit in front of a screen and use the keyboard than it is to work in a mine. It's pretty close to leisure, especially if people *enjoy* blogging or surfing the web. And instant messaging is pretty immediate, even if it is no substitute for what you call "face time."

ASN: *If the talking class informs us for good or ill, how much power do the disseminators of knowledge or opinion actually have?*
CF: They do have power, and they don't have power. Most of the actors in the media world are just employees of the big corporations. Therefore, their power is limited as individuals. As a group, as a class, however, they are incredibly powerful. And individual members of the talking class do sometimes greatly affect our culture. One of my favorite examples is Alfred Kinsey, who founded the Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction in 1947. He was an ordinary professor at Indiana University who

continued on page **8**

In Memoriam: Stephen Feinstein 1943-2008

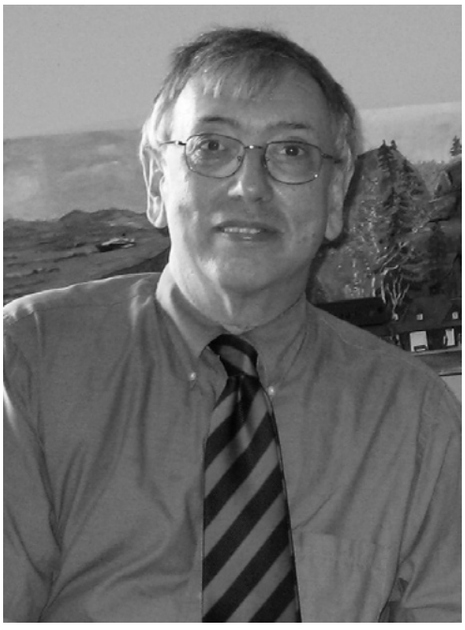
Stephen Feinstein died very suddenly and unexpectedly on March 4, 2008. True to form, he was out in the community, giving a lecture at the Jewish Film Festival in Minneapolis when he suffered an aortic anyeurism.

Steve came to the University of Minnesota in 1997 as the founding director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies (CHGS) and Adjunct Professor of History. He brought an outsized energy level to everything he undertook, whether his legendary train set that took up a good part of the basement in the Feinsteins' Minneapolis home, his somewhat manic pace of lectures and museum consultations, his exuberant teaching, or his passionate directorship of CHGS.

Steve brought a fine and multi-disciplinary educational background to all of this. He studied economics as an undergraduate at Villanova University and went on to receive his Ph.D. in Russian history from New York University, where he also completed a minor field in art history. For thirty years he taught a wide variety of courses at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls where, in the 1980s, he introduced a Holocaust history course. Steve was already heavily involved in all sorts of human rights activities, notably the anti-apartheid movement and the campaign in support of Soviet Jews.

In the Twin Cities he became a leader in mobilizations around these issues, and was recognized by the regional Jewish Community Relations Council for his efforts on behalf of Soviet Jews. It was not only a public campaign that Steve spearheaded: the Feinstein home became a virtual hostel for new immigrants from Russia, the Feinstein station wagon the local moving service when the new arrivals got settled in their own apartments.

It was through Steve's knowledge and love of art that he came to know a most generous donor in the Jewish community of the Twin Cities, who was also an avid art collector. Out of a series of consultations and conversations came, in 1997, the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota with Steve as the founding director. (He retired officially from the University of Wisconsin in 1999.) In the ten years he headed CHGS, Steve built it into an internationally



Stephen Feinstein

renowned center. Always, Steve was committed to education, research, and public outreach on the Holocaust, and also on other genocides around the globe, various other forms of crimes against humanity, and human rights norms.

The programming Steve developed at the University of Minnesota was enormously creative. He developed projects with the Law School, the School of Public Health, the Medical School, and various human rights programs. All his Holocaust history courses were cross-listed with Jewish studies. With the Zoryan Institute of Toronto he co-sponsored a highly successful summer course on genocide and human rights. In spring 2008 Steve was teaching for a second time "The Holocaust and the Law" with Michael Bazyler of Whittier Law School. Organized by the University of Minnesota's Center for German and European Studies, the graduate-level class "met" over interactive television. The class was a great success, not least because it brought together students in law, history, political science, and other disciplines.

Steve also brought together the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Science Museum of Minnesota, and the University of Minnesota to mount "Deadly Medicine," the exhibit on Nazi eugenics developed by the USHMM. The exhibit was on display in spring 2008 at the Science Museum, and got an overwhelming response from the public. Along with faculty in Public Health and Medicine and other units, Steve organized an associated course and lecture series. Both the "Holocaust and the Law" course and the museum exhibit were typical Steve operations: they brought together around an issue of grave importance all sorts of people who rarely, if ever, had talked to one another. In the collaborations, everyone's knowledge was enhanced, often in the most unexpected ways.

Steve also brought major international conferences and workshops to Minnesota: the International Association of Genocide Scholars, Lessons and Legacies Holocaust Conference, and the Workshop on Armenian-Turkish Scholarship (WATS). The latter event is particularly noteworthy. From its very beginnings, Steve ensured that the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies devoted serious attention to the Armenian genocide. CHGS conducted workshops for teachers on the Armenian tragedy and, alongside WATS, helped bring major scholars—Taner Akçam, Peter Balakian, Vahakn Dadrian, Richard Hovannisian, Ron Suny—to Minnesota.

Steve and the CHGS frequently collaborated with the Center for Austrian Studies. He readily agreed to cosponsor many lectures and conferences, such as "Creating the Other" (1999) and the CGES/CAS "Borderlands" research project (2003-07). Most recently, he helped Linda Andrean to organize the Center's hugely successful 2008 workshop for educators, "The Ethics of Medicine" (see p. 9), which was inspired by the "Deadly Medicine" exhibit.

He leaves behind his wife Susan, son Jeremy, daughter Rebecca, and her husband Avi and their two children. For his family and the many people in Europe, Israel, Armenia, North America, and many other places who counted him as a colleague and friend, his unexpected and early death has been a very sad experience, salved only by the knowledge of how much he accomplished and how deep was his commitment to human dignity and human rights.

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Christian Fleck *from page 7*

became interested in sexuality and started his own research. When he published his first volume, on the sexual behavior of males, it was a bestseller. He became an immediate star, and millions read his books.

ASN: *But many people who are out there blogging are neither industry people nor experts like Kinsey. They're just posting their own opinions. Will they achieve any kind of power or cultural permanency?*

CF: They might. They might not. Right now, there is a lot of tension and struggle surrounding the new talking class, and sometimes it's funny just to sit back and observe how people are acting. As Veblen did. ❖