

Diane Peters (*University Affairs*) interviews Professor Michael E. Gardiner (University of Western Ontario) (27-09-16)

DP: When did you first start looking into boredom. I understand you were doing work in everyday studies?

MG: The domain of ‘everyday life’ is something I’ve been researching since the 1990s, which includes inquiries into mundane experiences of embodiment, emotionality, affect, and so forth. So it might seem that my interest in boredom was a natural outgrowth of this scholarly focus, and to some extent it was. But, more accurately, it came more out of the realm of personal experience – to wit, I was often bored, in both work and life generally, and this was not merely ‘situational’ boredom (in relation to boring meetings or specific routines or whatever), but a much deeper, if seemingly formless and ineffable malaise. Doubtless like many academicians, I sought to explore these experiences in intellectual terms so as to provide an explanatory sociocultural framework through which they could be better understood, and, if not ‘cured’ outright (because there is no such thing), at least be able to locate certain resources in order to work through such recurrent afflictions productively. So the study of boredom for me has evinced a certain therapeutic function. (Later, I found that this is not an uncommon ‘origin story’ – Lars Svendsen’s wonderful book *A Philosophy of Boredom* chronicles a very similar process.) I was surprised to discover, around the mid-2000s, that there was a vibrant recent literature on the topic, mostly notably the translation of Svendsen’s book into English from Norwegian in 2005, and Liz Goodstein’s magisterial study *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* published in the same year.

DP: When did you first start offering your boredom course?

MG: I distinctly remembering talking to a colleague about my growing interest in boredom around this time (the mid-2000s), and she said to me, ‘I don’t think I’ve ever been bored’, or words to that effect, which really piqued my interest, insofar as I assumed boredom was both a commonplace and universal phenomenon. Why are some subject to intense and sustained periods of boredom, and others apparently blithely unaffected? What are the sociohistorical roots of this experience, especially its relation to capitalist modernity? Does boredom offer certain latent transformative possibilities, or is it a purely negative phenomenon, to be avoided at all costs? What is the relation between time and boredom, and, similarly, are there ‘spaces’ of boredom? Is there really a difference between ‘situational’ and ‘experiential’ (or ‘profound’) boredom?

I’ve had a long affiliation with the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism in my home institution, the University of Western Ontario. Insofar as ‘boredom’ seemed to be tailor-made for inquiry from a variety of intellectual domains (history, philosophy, sociology and anthropology, literary studies, technology and media studies, etc.), the CSTC seemed to be the ideal venture to explore this topic in concert with graduate students. The first time it was offered as a graduate course was in 2007, and then again last year. I will say this much: ironically, boredom is a topic that appears to be a source of endless fascination for students, both undergraduate and graduate, and my sense is that both CSTC offerings were very successful in engaging students with this area of inquiry and throwing up many novel insights in our many fruitful discussions. And of course teaching is an ideal way for a professor to really engage with a new domain of study,

especially in dialogue with graduate students as excellent as the CSTC ones generally are. It also fortuitously led to my publishing a number of essays on boredom, and, with Julian Jason Haladyn, the edited volume *Boredom Studies Reader*, published by Routledge in October 2016.

DP: What's the sociology framework for boredom studies. This work is so interdisciplinary, I'd love to better understand what aspects this discipline highlights.

MG: I'm employed in a sociology dept., but in my work has always been interdisciplinary – or, better, post- or even anti-disciplinary, ranging across cultural studies, social theory, and social philosophy, to name the most salient areas. As such, I don't have a lot of time for conventional disciplinary restraints, and to my mind the most exciting and challenging intellectual work inside the academy (and, increasingly, outside of it) shares this relaxed attitude with regard to the usual disciplinary constraints, venues, and idioms. There is a certain amount of mainstream sociological work on boredom, but most of it is simplistic and reductive and quite, well, boring, ignoring both the subjective resonance of boredom and the rich philosophical and literary traditions that have reflected on it for the past couple of hundred years. For example, organizational sociology will look at boredom as a 'social problem' or workplace issue that hinders 'productivity', something to be 'solved' by institutional tweaks, rather than seeing it as a much more complex, ambivalent, and deeply-rooted phenomenon.

DP: Was this work considered a bit odd or niche when you first began? Have views changed?

MG: Generally-speaking, social science regards things like mood, affect, the imaginary, bodily states, and so on as inconsequential and entirely individual 'subjective' phenomena that are irrelevant to explicating social forces or identifying patterns of social behaviour, not least because it cannot be easily 'measured' according to discrete categories. (There have been attempts to 'measure' boredom in, say, cognitive psychology, but they have been dismal failures, for many reasons.) So, yes, the study of 'boredom' per se in the social sciences has long been regarded with considerable skepticism – the humanities are a different kettle of clams, needless to say. (Of course, something like 'boredom' is both 'objective' and 'subjective', as Martin Heidegger told us around 1930, if we have to cling to these desperately outmoded terms.) What is happening in social science now is curiously bifurcated – some audiences are much more receptive to developments in other intellectual domains, so that the idea of something like 'boredom studies' is not automatically laughed off – but there is also a doubling-down of positivist orthodoxy in the centres of disciplinary power, a symptom of tremendous anxiety about the alleged 'scientificity' of their pursuits and their ongoing relevance in a rapidly-changing world. The recent turn to neuroscience can be seen as part and parcel of this anxiety and the scientific retrenchment that has followed in its wake.

DP: Why do you think work on boredom in various academic fields is intensifying right now?

MG: That is a very good question. The stubborn question of why we continue to be bored in the face of endless sources of entertainment and technosocial distractions 'on demand', in a society that valorizes unstinting dedication to work as an intrinsic value (and where most people are working harder than ever), amidst relative affluence and security for many in the Global North (if certainly not for everyone, I hasten to add, and under increasingly precarious and exploitative

conditions) – this is a paradox that many of us grapple with. Boredom is, as it were, bigger than Jesus. Of course, academic fashion being what it is, the more attention is paid to something like ‘boredom’, the more expansive and self-sustaining it is, with regard to accelerating levels of scholarly production. Unlike many other transient intellectual fashions, though, this one shows no sign of slowing down, perhaps because it transcends purely academic concerns, and is one that affects everyone in their daily lives – apart from my aforementioned colleague, or so it would seem!