

What I Do, and How I Got Where I Am

Remarks upon Receiving the Virginia Social Science Association 2018 Scholar Award

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This is an intimidating and sort of a scary task. I had to ask myself “how honest do I want to be and how far back do I need to go?”

OK. I’ll start in high school where I was not, if I am honest, the best of students.

My interests were sports, girls and cars—not necessarily in that order. I actually thought I would be Phil Rizzuto or James Dean! I did not do very well in my history classes and actually found it all rather boring. Also, I did not like most of my teachers. Where did that leave me?

I could not find a college to accept my mediocre academic record. Somehow, I ended up at Concord University where I did turn into a somewhat better student but maintained my original (non-academic) interests until I found out I could not hit a curve ball!! By then I found some teachers (a political scientist, a sociologist, a historian and an English Professor) who showed me that there were some interesting things beyond my limited worldview.

Originally wanted to be an engineer but I could not comprehend math. Then I decided I would go to law school and actually was admitted into one before I decided, with apologies to any lawyers, that I have never really met a lawyer I actually LIKED! At the last minute I changed my mind and decided that graduate school was the place for me because, you see, my personality is completely unfit to wearing a suit, going to a 9-to-5 job or really ever strictly obeying authority. Also, to my everlasting shame I made a “C” in my Political Parties class!!

This decision turned into a few weeks of panic! Once again, I could not find a school that could see my “great” potential. Finally, Villanova University, (current NCAA basketball champs) offered me a Teaching Assistantship after someone else turned it down at the last minute. Suddenly, I was transformed into a budding intellectual. No, really the program was heavy on political theory and history and had not yet embraced, what was at the time, the “new” behavioral revolution. We actually read stuff that I continue to refer to today but much of this content has gone out of style...sort of like bell bottoms?

It was really a great time and place to be. I was leaning im-

portant and cool stuff and meeting interesting people and, then, one day, November 22, 1963 to be exact, I was sitting in a lounge with another grad student and we were debating some undergraduate students as to whether the US should be in Vietnam, when Walter Cronkite came on the TV and said John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. I changed my interest to the study and explanation of political violence.

Now newly interested in the psychology and politics of violence I read an article by Fred Greenstein, “The benevolent Leader” in the *American Political Science Review* and I thought; “this is biased,” since it interviewed middle class students near Yale in Connecticut. I decided I would look for a place to test cultural biases and applied to the PhD program in Political Science at the University of Kentucky. At the time it had a great department and, this time, they deliberately offered me money to study for a PhD. I was also lucky because LBJ had started the OEO and I applied for a grant from the Center for Developmental Change to study the impact of the Community Action Program and to try to replicate Greenstein’s study...without the obvious bias.

I drove all around Appalachia interviewing various folks and then I wrote an article called “The Malevolent Leader” published in the *APSR* which pointed out the importance of culture.

In 1968 I campaigned for Gene McCarthy, got my PhD, and then a job at the University of Texas at Austin. I set off in 1968, missing the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, for my first real teaching job. My very first class was a course in legislative politics and I was so nervous my knees were shaking but I managed to stay one class ahead of the students. I did learn an interesting lesson in one of my first classes—one never knows who will be in your class. I was lecturing on Executive-Legislative relations when I pointed out that the then sitting governor of Texas, Allen Shivers, was not very good at working with the legislature. At the end of class, a young, blonde woman with a Texas accent approached and said: “Dr. Hirsch, my name is Sis-sy Shivers and...” My first thought was, “OH shit, there goes my first job.” But she proceeded to say “I think you are absolutely correct.” OK, I survived...!

In my first five years I wrote a book, *Poverty and Politicization*, and edited another *Comparative Legislative Systems*, I had an-

other article in the APSR and four others in other journals and I got tenured. I also began to realize what was wrong with my first book—it lacked two important things, context and narrative. I did not elaborate the culture and history of Appalachia and I did not tell stories to humanize the interviews. I mean, I was good at methodology, before we had the modern facility I had to do it all on punch cards and coding.

In the meantime, I had some fun in the late 1960's and early 1970s in Austin. I attended Janis Joplin's birthday party, also Willie Nelson's! I helped organize a student-faculty strike after Kent State, etc. etc. And as I was teaching a graduate seminar in political socialization and political psychology I found myself doing more research on political violence.

I wrote a book on *Violence as Politics* and started teaching a course on The Holocaust and in November 1978 Jim Jones took his group to Jonestown, Guyana and convinced about 900 people, including 300 children, to commit mass suicide by drinking Kool Aid laced with poison. Thought to myself: if you can convince 900 people to commit mass suicide and kill their own children, how difficult is it to convince them to kill others?? And thus, began my current journey to becoming a scholar of genocide and human rights.

I admit I liked Austin but hated, (I REALLY hated) Texas. It is a very different place. Politicians intruded into the academic freedom of the university. The department of over fifty political scientists was divided by various factions who, and this is a huge understatement, did NOT like each other.

We were divided by politics, anti-war vs. pro-war, notions of what is and is not "objective," methodological conflicts, the old behavioral versus phenomenological, etc. From these arguments, I decided we cannot do one without the other (method/science without history and culture) and that is, in fact, still one of the problems with modern political science, because for the most part it ignores history and narrative.

I was moving along and saw a job ad for Department Chair in Political Science at VCU. Wanting to get **out** of Texas, and given that I like big trees and beaches and mountains, as well as generally being on the East Coast, I came out for an interview and was hired here in 1981.

When I was hired I was promised that VCU would provide the funds to, "build a first-rate political science department." When I arrived, the state of Virginia experienced another of its periodic budget crises and suddenly there was no money. I did find that generally people were nicer to each other than in Texas but Richmond, at the time, was a provincial southern city which was described to me as "having the worst combination of southern politics and northern weather."

VCU was not the University of Texas and Richmond was not Austin and after a bit of culture shock I realized that this was "really" the South! I had never lived in a place so mired in the past. One drove down an avenue devoted to generals who lost a war. My kids went to schools where American history classes spent *weeks* on "the War between the States," and the kids had

to visit battlefields dedicated to preserving that war. If they ever reached the era of Vietnam or even after they did so at the very end of the term. Restaurants consisted of a very narrow selection and Richmond, at the time, had one of the highest homicide rates in the US. I must confess that or the first three years I seriously looked for other jobs but every time I went for an interview I found that EVERY place had problems—some *far* more serious than VCU.

But Richmond and VCU both improved and new colleagues appeared and through it all I very much liked our students. They were primarily first generation students and the best of them were at least as good, if not superior, to anyone I ever taught at UT.

So, and in spite of now hating every single minute I had to deal with university bureaucracy and administration, I managed to write two books: *Genocide and the Politics of Memory* and *Anti-Genocide* and was one of the founding editors of one of the first international journals devoted to studying genocide: *Genocide Studies International*.

And now, here I am today and I truly appreciate this honor but I must tell you that I am experiencing a frightening sense of Déjà vu. I never expected, after Vietnam and the 1960s and Nixon and George W. Bush to see an even worse crisis in American democracy. And, yet, here we are part of a growing international trend where liberal democracy is under attack. It is our obligation as teachers of political science and social science to counter those threats and to continue to educate our students with a critical intelligence.

I'll end with this: If one were teaching political science in Nazi Germany, would one not have a moral obligation to stand up and point to what was happening? We have that same obligation today.

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