

## **SOCIOLOGY AS A WAY OF LIFE: WARSAW AND HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ENGAGE MICHAEL D. KENNEDY**

**Szymon Chlebowicz:** Michael, when I first saw the keywords of your autobiographical piece (Kennedy 2023), I immediately thought: this could be a description of an excellent old American action movie. We start with Solidarity and Martial Arts, go through Contemplation, Justice, and Transformation, and finish with Articulation and Love!

**Filip Dankiewicz:** In my view, your testimony is about sociology as a spiritual exercise. You practise sociology how the ancients practised philosophy: not as an abstract theory but a way of life. Pierre Hadot (1995) argues that ancient philosophy was about self-transformation, ascetic practices, ethical living, wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, and presence. It is the perfect description of the project of your sociology, isn't it?

**Anna-Larisa Hoffmann:** Indeed, I love the part about your spiritual transformation, Michael. I also love that you reflect on contemplative practices critically and still decide to engage in them. You are not saying: "I'm so self-reflective that I'm stepping back." No, you recognise that these contemplative practices really mean something to you. Also, your text really spoke to me because you normalised violence. Usually, contemplative studies focus on calmness, kindness, love, and peace; somehow neglecting ubiquitous inequality and violence.

**Marcin Mochocki:** For me the theme of solidarity is vital, the phenomenon of "we" that doesn't necessarily require "them," which is far from obvious. In the context of militarised animosity in Ukraine and Gaza – and soon elsewhere in the world – what are the practical steps that you deem important to build long-term peace?

**Michael D. Kennedy:** My deepest response to your first reactions is the feeling that I have right now. And that is profound gratitude. This strikes me when thinking about sociology because we never talk about gratitude for our practice. Whereas gratitude is profoundly implicated in all sorts of contemplative practices.

**Jakub Szydelski:** Gratitude seems to be a bridge between sociology and so many different fields like peace-making and dialogue. And it connects with humility. To be grateful one cannot look down on the other person. In your take on sociology of martial arts I find this mutual respect, curiosity, and recognition of self-biases.

**ALH:** I would be happy to know more about how martial arts change a lot about one's way of life. I find it interesting as it personally resonated with me when I read your text. I felt like I'm going through similar processes, although it is hard to say for me whether they form a spiritual journey. Whenever I try to engage with contemplative practices like yoga I immediately feel they are inauthentic. That I am just following the masses on some fashionable trend. And I think it is worth striking the balance here between enjoying yourself and being critical. Recognising your own position within the broader social structures. And also dimensions that are different to all of us, such as race or gender. For me the recognition poses a question: how come yoga became so fashionable and cool now? Why is it so expensive and accessible mostly to the privileged? Why are other practices not hyped even though they are really beneficial? That makes me wonder if I should even practise contemplative arts at all. But I also realise Seligman et al. (2023) suggest there are some contemplative practices that are not body related ones, but mind-oriented. Sometimes at night I go to sleep and just think about beautiful scenarios of the future. In fact, that's already a mindfulness I recognise now, thanks to you.

**MDK:** One of my former students wrote this article on yoga sociology and its relationship to neoliberalism (Erkmen 2021). She wrote yoga practice is the ultimate neoliberal expression, because we are supposed to figure out ways to contort our bodies so that we become accustomed to living with discomfort. That's just like neoliberalism and how it asks us to adapt to its structures, alongside the promise that there's something better coming down the road. At the same time, yoga can help us recognise the distinction between our everyday lives and the lives we might wish to live intentionally. When I'm on the yoga mat, I'm complaining about my body, but I'm also escaping from those everyday stresses. And when I leave the yoga studio or the martial arts studio, I approach everything with more

calm, peace, and clarity. And this is actually a central theme in contemplative practice. Neuroscientists today seek how different parts of the brain light up when you are praying, appealing to something external to you, and recognising the commonality of all existence (Chang & Chakrabarti 2024). That was a wonderful insight, Anna, thank you. I'll be interested to hear how everyone builds on it.

**JSz:** I don't practise yoga or martial arts, but I enjoy playing squash. And when I am fully engaged in the match, I achieve this zen state, the feeling of flow. I just focus on the game, and my body intuitively does the rest. It also lets me detach myself from daily struggles. As for the contemplative part, praying gives me this opportunity to step back from the daily rush, rethink the day, and to be grateful.

**FD:** I was wondering whether we should distinguish some contemplative practices from others. I think that prayer and mindfulness are great examples because prayer engages with a higher deity, and mindfulness doesn't. Focusing on the breath or some physical activities through which we can sharpen our attention is one thing. But there is also the content or the object of attention, and our relationship with this object, which is of the utmost importance. So, there is the act of practice and the object of practice. I wondered whether we could swap this object or deity and have a sociological prayer. Replace deity with something else, society, state, or even sociological theories. I'm asking myself: How would that differ from a Christian prayer?

**MM:** Jakub mentioned the state of flow in squash. It resonates with me. I often do not succeed in organising myself in a way that both the bodily and the intellectual parts of me work together, but when I practise sport, they come together after all. There is also another part, the spiritual part. Maybe in contemplation I can access it, but I'm not sure. Spirituality is the area that I know the least. Contemplating anything sounds quite weird to be honest because we're not used to it anymore. You mentioned that it's hard to be grateful nowadays. We are taught by our culture that we should be occupied and "hungry" all the time. That's probably also why it's hard to be grateful because why would you be grateful if you can have more?

**JSz:** I find it weird to treat sports and martial arts as a sociological field. Because to me they are so personal. I would treat martial arts sociology in the same way as visual sociology. Rather as a method than a subject. Example of that would be Palestinian Freedom Theater that was set up by both Israelis and Palestinians. They channel their trauma, violence into drama, role-playing, dance... Playing out the trauma on stage helps both

the amateur actors and the audience to cope with extreme emotions, to let them out and process them. And for me, this is what the sociology of martial arts could be. This could be a method of engaging people from very different backgrounds to meet at a safe, neutral place and engage with one another. In the case of visual sociology, it was a scene, but here it could be an arena or dojo. A place where you can meet and let out the anger, pain, hurt in a regulated, humane way. Martial arts is not about killing the opponent, it's not about crushing them. Actually, as they throw each other across the room, as they practise together the opponents may become colleagues. In this way, martial arts sociology could be the study of how to get people together, how to engage them and how in time create this mutual understanding, respect even.

**FD:** What you say strictly relates to other topics, mainly personal transformation and spiritual practice. This is simply a great question, which we may add to this conversation: what is the right way to transform the world? Is it through theatre, like in the example of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and those actors you mentioned? In other words, is it through our own personal change or is it through systemic, top-down, political solutions? Maybe it's a false opposition? What would the change including both systemic and personal actions look like?

**SzCh:** I see peace-building as both engaging public debate and taking actions. We must find a balance so as not to fall into a trap of just talking about problems, on the one hand, or blindly acting without any theorisation on the other hand. Participation in public debate is a crucial factor for achieving real actions in society. And discussing problems is certainly a way of affecting this sphere.

**MDK:** One of the things I want to do is to think about how different institutions and organisational practices can be infused with some kind of spirit of loving kindness. This shapes my contemplative disposition, which has always stemmed from my Catholic roots and from me listening to music – I always had it, but I never named it as such. We might ask how naming contemplative practice helps us to recognise and appreciate it. By the way, none of you mentioned music as a contemplative practice, which surprises me in the land of Chopin; music is one of the most profound contemplative practices. Performing it, listening to it, enables you to escape from the tyranny of the cognitive, the tyranny of words. Visual sociology is a step in a good direction, but music sociology is deeper. It fosters solidarity without language, like martial arts, which are grounded strongly in our body. And I think it's really important to be able to name it so that we can

escape the domination of our everyday professional secular lives in order to be able to imagine those questions that our everyday professional lives ought to ask but don't because of our frenetic everyday lives.

**ALH:** You reminded me about the peacebuilders' life stories (Gopin 2023; Lederach 2005). Most of them actually came to the point that they became great at their vocation by improving their relationship with themselves. That's why this scaling up from personal change to the community, even world change, is more tangible for me. As for me, I am in a state of personal change right now, yet unrelated to an academic field. In the case of peacebuilding researchers – you or Marc Gopin – I wonder if your transformative experience was intentionally academic from the start or rather well-being practices followed your research. Experience suggests that both individual and community levels are important in peacemaking, so the question remains: how can academia, community, and peacemakers change the world for the better?

**MM:** I was wondering about the artists in Gaza, Jakub. People had an opportunity to let their emotions out in a safe space, whatever that means, and what's next? That's what I'm interested in. Is it a promise of peace that is possible to fulfil? Or is it merely an exercise that we carry out and then go on to continue participating in violent contests.

**JSz:** It is way easier to talk about peace or conflict resolution from the standpoint of countries that are relatively peaceful.

**MM:** If Ukraine loses, then Mr. Putin the strongman will certainly sooner or later come for us. We are not so safe in Poland. What should we do if the strongmen don't want to play by the peaceful rules? Probably also martial arts can teach us that in some cases there is no escape from violence.

**MDK:** Martial arts recognise the existential quality of violence. It is always present, it is always potential, and it is always potentially greater. So how do you deal with that? Not through simple slogans like peace through strength but through awareness of how to contain and transform violence. Albeit intrinsic to human experience, violence can be mitigated through sociological, theological, and public work. Think about experts on nuclear war who are stuck in a mindset saying we must do everything we can to prevent it. Putin as a judo master knows how to use this escalation debate to his advantage. He is juxtaposing the nuclear holocaust as an alternative to Russian fascism's victory against Ukraine, making the latter somehow acceptable, better than nuclear war. Meanwhile those who have experienced Putin's rule know that passivity will only extend the aggressiveness of Putin and the kind of destruction that he will bring in the future. Only

armed opposition of Western democracies and public mobilisation of Russians can stop Putin. The same goes for the Israel–Palestine war. Only grassroots Jewish and Palestinian political action against the atrocity of war can prevent the destruction of Gaza and the loss of all these innocent lives. Paradoxically, the greatest threat to Israel nowadays may come not from Hamas itself but rather from the loss of Israel’s legitimacy and global solidarity, alongside the possible convictions of its leaders for human rights violations and war crimes.

**MM:** Violence can be always justified because – if it’s in my interest – I can present my violence as more “moral” than yours. My violence is going to “end” the conflict and bring “peace and order.”

**FD:** You view solidarity as based on opposition to the other, be it Putin or strongmen. But violence creates violence. The conflict will never be resolved. If we want to think about conflict resolution, we should reflect on the positive solidarity that needs no opponents. The Solidarity movement is a great example.

**MM:** I don’t think Solidarity was purely a positive movement, but you are right nonetheless about the vicious circle of violence: violence creates violence. It’s very hard for me to even think about positive solidarity. I’m just so embedded in the culture of violence when choosing my country, Central Eastern Europe, and Europe over Russia. I doubt whether your kind of solidarity is even possible. Even if it’s possible, I’m just afraid of advocating for it from a position of inferiority. That’s probably one of the many reasons why I call for solidarity with Ukraine. It’s probably not because I love them, but because I know it’s in our best political interest.

**FD:** I think that practical and idealistic approaches don’t necessarily have to stand in opposition to one another. Last year, I had an opportunity to engage with the thoughts of Ukrainian theologians (see Dymyd 2023) reflecting on the war in Ukraine (Dankiewicz 2023). And I believe their message is the following. Yes, we protect our land. Yes, we engage in this antagonistic relationship. But we also see pathology. We see that what differentiates us from them is that they are embedded in this antagonistic logic, even if Russians obscure it in the name of peace. For Russians, the state is the demigod (or a mortal god in Hobbesian terminology). Every death of a Russian soldier is a sacrifice on the altar of the empire or *russkij mir*. Whereas Ukrainians refuse such logic, or at least some of them do. They intentionally dissociate themselves by rewriting Ukrainian history in a semi-mythical way, highlighting the role of positive solidarity and Christian ideals in Cossack communities. Practical action demands, the survival

of the nation demands, these ideals, just like firing bullets. Nevertheless, they keep in mind this fundamental distinction.

**MM:** Is their position something along the following lines? “We engage in this practical firing of bullets to the enemy while being aware of the fact that this is wrong, and we therefore do not fully engage in the act of violence.”

**FD:** They find deeper meaning in martyrdom and in Christian values. The way Ukrainian theologians phrase their metaphysics of death may be informative. They are not sacrificing themselves for the sake of the nation’s greatness. On the contrary, the act of sacrifice in itself is something they value because of its connection to the pre-political Christian community, which thrives in the midst of war. But maybe they are also wrong, it may be just another justification of Ukrainian nationalism...

**JSz:** Solidarity is usually based on scapegoating (Girard 1986). We create an ingroup by selecting an outgroup: somebody against whom we act. In Poland, the Solidarity movement connected people against the communist elites. Maybe in the same vein we can imagine solidarity of Ukrainians (and some Russians) who are against Putin. I don’t expect people to share one object of love during times of crisis. Instead, I would settle for them sharing the same hatred for someone. And maybe from this hatred might emerge some kind of understanding and communication. If the hate is already there, we should capitalise on it instead of forcing a very generous, selfless, intricate feeling of love.

**MM:** So, can solidarity emerge without a scapegoat? I doubt it...

**FD:** Pawel Rojek (2009) researched the semantics of both the discourse of Polish Solidarity and the Polish United Workers’ Party. He concludes that the discourse of Solidarity wasn’t only a reversed version of the communist discourse. They were not just taking the rhetoric of the communist party and merely reversing it. He argues that they created some positive, creative input. Maybe this is what you’re talking about, this movement arising from the opposition to the communist party, but then transforming maybe into something more promising than just an element of political, antagonistic relation. But we must also keep in mind that the broad programme of Solidarity collapsed after 1989. Maybe this impact arising from positive solidarity wasn’t enough to keep the movement going. While accepting this fact, it doesn’t necessarily imply that the impact of positive solidarity sometime in the future won’t be able to sustain itself. I don’t believe such kind of solidarity is impossible or that we have to exclude it from our sociological imagination.

**AH:** For me as a German it is really striking how the Solidarity movement as well as the solidarity concept are evergreen themes in Poland. I am sure each country has its own agenda, and this is also why some prioritise social, economic, or historical forms of solidarity. I have the intuition that – in martial arts – solidarity is built around “strength,” while in sociology, around “understanding.” In martial arts you can become in solidarity with a group or a person by preparing your body through enhanced strength and common body practice, while in sociology – by listening and understanding.

**JSz:** So, we’ve started with the ideological and the political to finally arrive at the sociological aspects of solidarity.

**FD:** Sociology as a social science is predominantly a critical endeavour, in a loosely Kantian sense. Sociologists should examine activists who want to engage in solidarity with the Ukrainians, or university students who participate in protests and demonstrations in defence of Palestine. We should shed light on the hidden social motives of their actions, which might push them to engage in solidarity, not for “true” solidarity’s sake. To give a historical example, Max Weber writes extensively on mystics in different religions and Christian denominations. He argues that their goal wasn’t exactly to become one with God but to stay in this mystical stage because mystical habitus in itself was something they valued (Weber 2019). Being a mystic was attractive in itself. The situation of protest or a huge rush of emotional energy, following the same principle, might be attractive in itself. What is more, the situation might make it hard to access real solidarity, which was supposed to be the goal of those protesting in a given situation. So, I would add to our list the important role of a sociologist performing a critical evaluation. Only after such an evaluation can we hold a serious conversation.

**MDK:** I have always defined myself as a critical sociologist. I’m profoundly unsatisfied with most politicians’ approach to social change, because they often don’t recognise sociological realities. They don’t recognise social structures; they don’t recognise how institutions work. They don’t recognise the contradictions of existence, because they believe they can supersede them through their own interventions. This is where I show the limits of my loving kindness. I can’t stand it when we distinguish between the abstract and the empirical. The ideal and the real. I can’t stand it when we use these categorical distinctions, because such terminology is a way of positioning our discussions in a fashion that limits the creativity of our engagement. Instead, some key concepts that I’ve come to embrace are “epistemic justice” or “epistemic injustice” (Fricker 2009). I think we need



to create that space to be able to ask challenging questions and find solutions that are based on community action and try to transform violence. We as sociologists need to think about what are the social forces that enable a deeper reflexivity, a deeper awareness and possibilities for a transformational solidarity (Kennedy & Tadesse 2019).

**SzCh:** Recently, Ruth Wodak (2021) explored this deeper reflexivity in her critical analysis of the strategies used by European governments to legitimise their restrictive measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. She identifies four frames – religious, dialogic, trust-invoking, and warlike – employed to build national solidarity in the face of the threat of death. However, according to her, the constructed solidarities were based more on fear than on hope, focusing on conserving rather than transforming societies.

**MDK:** One of the things I love about our sociological discipline is that it's constantly emergent. It's not about the state, it's not about the economy. It is about how we live together and how we destroy each other. And so, if we can't constantly use the context of our learning in everyday life to pose new questions and imagine anew then we're killing sociology. One wisdom I have gained as I have aged is that developing science is not about how many people I can find to replicate me, but rather how many people I can support in superseding what I've come to know. And so that quality of emergence is something we need to think about: how to cultivate and practise it? This is where your discussion of sociology and its plurality helps, beginning with the distinctions among professional sociology, policy sociology, critical sociology, and public sociology (Burawoy 2021). In fact, critical sociology has this emergent spirit at its foundation. Always looking at the unacknowledged assumptions that are suffocating classical sociology, and at the unintended consequences that public sociology sometimes doesn't want to consider.

**MM:** This is the question of academic leadership. I think that we can feel a great lack of it at our universities. We are led by managers, not leaders. Don't get me wrong, I probably wouldn't want to be a leader. It's so hard to be courageous and reflective. It's hard to start a conversation, for example, with the pro-Palestinian protesters right now at our campuses. Those in the positions of authority often seem to fail in taking the responsibility and courageous action. One of the most important questions of our time remains: why is that happening?

**JSz:** I guess it's really hard. There's a problem with leadership, probably because we talk so much about it. Everybody wants to be a leader. There are only leaders...

**MM:** But somebody has to be a follower.

**JSz:** Exactly! Our times encourage people to write their own story as a hero of their own life. And it's rarely the story of a follower.

**MM:** Everybody's a leader. Yet somehow, we have a crisis of leadership.

**MDK:** The question of leadership adequacy oftentimes becomes the substitute for engaging what the problem really is. And that is the structure of communication in which the leader is implicated. Speaking from experience of leadership in academic administration, I think my best moments were when I listened to people offering novel approaches. Those critics were helping us to see the challenges and to address them by mobilising our institutions to find better pathways. And so, leadership is not about finding the person most suited to lead, but rather leadership is about designing more robust, resilient forms of communication. This practice allows those formally charged with leadership to have a wider optic, to anticipate, plan, and address not only today's problems but also those months and years ahead. Strongmen, for example, never think beyond the present. They imply their resilience when they single-handedly solve the present problem. This is the key difference between a strongman and a good leader. The first one is focused only on himself and his proposition for solving current problems. A really good leader would also want other people to join in the problem solving, in trajectory-setting, involving those who will be affected by leadership's decisions. Strongmen don't amplify other voices. Whereas good leaders always amplify other voices because by recognising others they increase solidarity.

**JSz:** The key is responsibility and humility, being eager to exchange places and to serve others.

**MDK:** There is a sequence of leadership styles that creates a continuum: order, rule, hegemony, legitimacy, trust, peace, and love. All of them imply a coordinated life, but "order" doesn't tell you how it's realised. "Rule" implies a strongman dictating order. "Hegemony" clarifies the coercive mechanisms that enforce the status quo of power. "Legitimacy" suggests consensus but often masks the difference between voluntary and coerced acceptance. "Trust" implies an idealistic state of consensus without the use of power. "Peace" never exists. But we *can* talk about degrees of peacefulness and love. "Love" is often seen as whimsical, but it evokes a sense of vulnerability, gratitude, and spirit of collaboration. And this is why I want to just conclude that little sequence there with love. Because when we talk about love here, almost inevitably we'll chuckle, we'll laugh. Love is playful and beautiful. And that's why love is a good subject because

you can't be loving without having playfulness inside of you. This is where I end. The idea of loving kindness in sociology makes me smile. And we're all smiling a little right now.

### **/// Postscript by Michael D. Kennedy**

I am so grateful for this transcript. But I must say that I feared reading it; I worried that it would not stand up to my memory. The live conversation with the students was definitely among the best conversations with students I have had in my life. That is all the more remarkable given that I had never worked with any of them before. However, this transcript does that conversation justice. More, it allows for us to read, pause, and reflect on some profound issues to emerge from the engagement.

Of course, I was honoured to have these students read my work so closely. But the ways in which they engaged it offers lessons to all sociologists. Here are just a few things I would mark as significant and worthy of further reflection.

First, what is the relationship between our everyday lives and our scholarly practice? We often bracket them, but we know – sociologically yet intuitively – that they shape one another. In my essay moving their questions, I am explicit about this, especially with the martial arts preceding its sociology, which in turn allows me to engage contemplative studies with a rather novel frame. We each might do more of that kind of rearticulation, whether through sports, music, or other immersions in the present, or with more deliberate concentrated work, as in prayer or meditation. Sociology has much to gain from that address; and contemplative studies has much to gain from its sociology. That became most evident when we began to compare contemplative practices in sociological terms.

Second, we encountered more familiar sociological subjects, but I found our conversation to be quite innovative. In particular, we need to develop a sociology that takes more seriously the cultural construction of “idealist” and “practical” distinctions so as to rearticulate them into more sociological questions. For example, under what conditions does idealism prove transformational in real terms? To what extent does that distinction elevate a certain category of policy-minded intellectual over intellectuals who can see the bigger picture in which these policies function? Considering “positive solidarity” is a good example of both.

Finally, this conversation has led me to think anew about qualities of leadership, and even teaching. So many professors want to be sure that their

students follow their example in a kind of “homosocial” reproduction. So many leaders want to assure that their followers support the leader’s ideas, and then they engineer practices with carrots and sticks to maximise an outcome that looks like good management. But is good management, good leadership, based on assuring a smooth organisation? Or is it one that is disruptive of convention, and rather looks in our routines and our imaginations for the things we cannot see, for the practices that make some invisible and unworthy of engagement? If our organisations are dedicated to anticipating the future, and recognising the excluded, we cannot be so ignorant.

Listening to these students certainly demonstrated to me just how important it is to have communication structures and practices that allow for voices with less institutional or credentialed authority to be heard. And maybe in the dialogue, new ideas can be found, new expressions articulated, new modes of understanding realised. This conversation certainly reaffirmed my faith in just that.

In the end, these wonderful students were struck with my emphasis on gratitude at the start of our conversation. We all find gratitude too uncommon in our professional practice. To my mind, that is enough to mark this conversation as genuinely transformational. I am grateful to Jakub, Anna, Filip, Marcin, and Szymon for their time and thoughtfulness.

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