

Somewhere in Space: The Experience of the Space Settlement Studies Project in the Sociology Department at Niagara University

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[Abstract] This report is a sociohistorical descriptive analysis of the Space Settlement Studies Project of Niagara University, an internationally-acclaimed social sciences program that flourished during the 1970s through the 1990s. Its decimation in the later 1990s and early 2000s by university administrators intent on replacing the entire sociology department of Niagara University with a Criminal Justice Program is narrated in the first person by its founder, Dr. Stewart B. Whitney, an Educator-in-Space candidate.

Keywords

Sociohistorical descriptive analysis, Space Settlement Studies Project, Space Compact, Study of Human Communities in Space

I. Introduction

THIS sociohistorical descriptive analysis of the Space Settlement Studies Project would be incomplete without due recognition of the scientific and astronautic pioneers who inspired the creation and generation of the scientific study of the social aspects of space settlement. Without their bravery and brilliance we would be unprepared for Humankind's paramount migration from Earth to the new worlds.

The following commentary follows a chronological template from 1972 to 2006. During the interim, the Project swerved through a gauntlet of skepticism and contentious opposition, not dissimilar to that which has challenged our national space program and its participants and supporters.

A. Establishment and Generation of Space Compact and the Center for the Study of Human Communities in Space

In 1972, while serving as an Associate Professor at the State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo, I founded the Niagara Research Institute, which sponsored a wildlife conservancy, a study abroad program for college students, and research grants to support environmental conservation. However, a challenge on the horizon eclipsed my earthbound mentality and energy: Human migration from Earth was the vision.

In 1975 I established Space Compact as an integral part of the Niagara Research Institute. Based on available information about space travel and development, the Compact was modeled after the Mayflower Compact and consisted of a Durkheimian design of social integration and social regulation including a valuative orientation, norms, patterns of participation and incentives for group cohesiveness. Space Compact was circulated to a select group of scientists interested in researching the physical exigencies of space development. By 1977, the Compact Design had been revised extensively. It was at that time that a very serendipitous event occurred.

On one of those unusual spring days in Western New York when the temperature exceeds 40 degrees, I entered into conversation with William McDaniel, my faculty colleague in sociology at Niagara University. Bill shared with me his interest in space development sparked by the "High Frontier" work of Gerard O'Neill at Princeton, and he suggested that an effort to research the social aspects of space development was needed.

Our conversation expanded when I shared with him my interest and the Space Compact project. Together we brainstormed and developed an idea for a center for space research at Niagara University that would consist of a resource for information and an academic program, and we decided to approach our Academic Vice President to share our ideas and request his suggestions to establish our ideas in an organizational form. Within two months, our

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formal proposal to establish the Center for the Study of Human Communities in Space (CSHCS) was approved by the administration with resource support including an office, secretary, research assistant, and leave time to develop academic courses. CSHCS was born and the excitement and activity spread through the campus, the scientific community, and the media.

The goals of CSHCS were to:

- Disseminate information to people and organizations interested in human communities in space by acting as a clearinghouse.
- Coordinate activity with other organizations focusing on space development (including the L-5 Society and Steve Cheston's new organization at Georgetown as well as the Space Initiative, Gerry O'Neill, and Henry Holm at MIT).
- Publish an international monthly newsletter (*Extraterrestrial Society*) about space activities and distribute it to over 1000 scientists and others.
- Coordinate conferences and symposia about space settlement.
- Present papers at professional and space conferences.
- Hold an annual symposium.
- Offer three courses on space settlement (SOC 190, Human Communities in Space; SOC 202, Social Organization in Space; and SOC 323, Social Change in Space).
- Raise public consciousness about the feasibility and necessity of space settlement.

The activities and work of CSHCS received critical acclaim and media attention. In 1978 and 1979 I chaired sessions on space development at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association and the Eastern Sociological Society to be followed by presentations at numerous other annual meetings. In 1980 I chaired a space settlement session at the First Global Conference on the Future in Toronto and was a featured speaker at the Millennium III Conference in Canada, and in 1983 was a distinguished presenter at the Annual Space Development Conference in Houston. Public response to these events was strongly supportive, and we participated as guests on radio and television. Newspaper and magazine articles featured our work, and Niagara University received local, national, and international publicity.

CSHCS was a highlight of our campus and Western New York. Our mailing list grew to over 2000, coordination with other scientists and organizations became extensive, and I was able to receive seven academic research grants and eight summer research grants. The number of students majoring in sociology grew from 14 to 46. CSHCS had arrived and had a place in space.

B. Transformation: Space Settlement Studies Project

In 1985, Bill McDaniel and I reformulated the goals of CSHCS to focus on human space settlement and submitted a proposal to transform the Center to the Space Settlement Studies Project (3SP). We received full approval and support from the administration and we served as co-directors until 1986, when Bill retired and I became director.

3SP was an internationally recognized project. I was able to coordinate activities with the Robert Heinlein expeditions of the League of the New Worlds, Sea Planet Odyssey, the L-5 Society and the National Space Institute (later merged as the National Space Society), and numerous other space enthusiasts and organizations. Our academic courses were popular among faculty and students, and our newsletter continued along with a journal (*Space Journal*) that I launched with the support of a foundation seed grant.

The activity of 3SP was overwhelming to our staff, especially the voluminous correspondence, voice inquiries, publicity, and conference participation. In 1992, I took sabbatical leave to network with colleagues and organizations throughout the United States and Europe, where I lectured at the University of Bern.

The Durkheimian model of social organization and cohesiveness for space habitats that I had developed and revised became a prototype for social organization among inhabitants in isolation and extreme physical environments. The model became the focus of my work and when I returned to campus in September 1993 I was resolved to have 3SP generate a template for the social aspects of space habitats. I shared and applied the model to various expeditionary ventures, including NASA, League of the New Worlds, Sea Planet Odyssey, and terrestrial expedition leaders. Having led many expeditions in arctic and tropical areas, as well as being a candidate for Educator in Space (Christa McAuliffe was selected and flew on *Challenger* mission STS-51L), enthusiasm and dedication to expand 3SP became my passion.

Irony is the shadow of passion. When one embellishes the desire, the object often becomes unreachable. Having studied Max Scheler's work since 1964 (especially his seminal work *Resentment*), one would probably doubt that I

would be either surprised or dismayed at the destruction of a dream. Upon returning from sabbatical leave, a professor's concern is that his office will no longer exist nor will his position. My office was as I had left it and 3SP was alive and well. I decided to check the offices of the Black Family Studies Center (the Center for the Study and Stabilization of the Black Family in America), which we developed in our department as the first academic minor program in Black Family Studies in America. It, too, was alive and well. All was well, so I thought, until my secretary wanted to inform me about changes taking place on campus.

The changes were significant, especially since they involved the replacement of our department's two major administrative supporters: the Academic Vice President and the Dean of our college. What would be the import of these changes for our department and our programs, which I had laboriously established while I was chairperson? Such a situation is a risk of going on sabbatical, but it was only my second leave in 31 years!

C. Transition: Administrative and Research Council Changes

It was a difficult year. Not only was there an onus to explain and justify our programs to two new administrators who had not previously shared the consciousness of space settlement, but there were major faculty replacements, especially on the Research Council and in the growing Criminal Justice Program, which was becoming a department and receiving the attention and support of the administration.

To my surprise, the president of our university resigned. He had been very interested in and supportive of our 3SP and Black Family Studies programs. There was a malaise among the faculty, an uncertainty about the future, a growing apathy and self-interest. It was the 1990s, the decade of transition that tore the fabric of education and shattered its body in a gauntlet of vision, mission, outcomes assessment, and technological demands.

The struggle to maintain 3SP was gargantuan. In the absence of interest and support from the new cadre of administrators and faculty, I energized 3SP to continue and survive. Overcoming the skepticism and antagonism of the new cadre, our department grew and 3SP survived. By involving students in the program and working with graduate students who were interested in space settlement, 3SP began to flourish, as did all programs in our department. We added two new part-time faculty, over-enrolled our courses, recruited in secondary schools, began internship programs for all our students, received numerous awards for our research academic work and community service, and maintained strong public consciousness and recognition.

The struggle took its toll on my health. My physical condition began to deteriorate. I developed atrial fibrillation and in 1999 suffered from four heart attacks. While at my weakest in an intensive care unit for nine days, I was repeatedly harassed by one of the new administrators until my mate intervened by emphatically telling her that they almost lost me and that I needed to rest. And, rest I did for three months and returned to the university strong and ready to continue the struggle until I would take another sabbatical leave in Spring 2000.

The interim was a time of concern. My strongest faculty colleague was retiring in Spring 2000, we had hired an additional faculty member who had other interests and agenda, and 3SP was being scrutinized and ridiculed by the new Criminal Justice faculty. 3SP was alive, but we realized that it would not continue to exist without me.

My 2000 leave was very productive, as I was able to energize my 3SP research projects and especially work with Marilyn Dudley-Rowley on her PhD dissertation at the University of South Carolina while I was an outside member of her dissertation committee.¹ Renewed, I anticipated strengthening 3SP upon my return to campus in August. With more vigor and resolve than ever, 3SP would survive and our work would be crucial to the issue of space settlement.

Upon return, my office existed as did the staff. But, checking out the Black Family Studies Center, I found that it no longer existed! It had been replaced with graduate education offices and all our furniture and computer equipment, which had been purchased by our government grant, had been "liberated" by others. I inquired about the change and wanted information. How appropriate it seemed that the Center was closed while I was on sabbatical and James Williams, its Director and my strong faculty colleague, had retired and moved to South Africa. My inquiries were deflected. I was assertive in my right to know and was finally informed that it was an administrative decision that did not include or involve me. After all, I was only the chairperson of the department that housed the Center.

In addition, another department hired away our Black Family Studies faculty member and we had to hire a replacement immediately. And, our files and records had been stuffed in boxes and stored in an attic that was inaccessible to me. The die was cast!

Furthermore, I learned that 3SP would no longer have administrative and staff support for our newsletter, journal, clerical work, and office space. And, it was my sole responsibility to handle the situation. The challenge to continue 3SP and the activities of our department seemed formidable. Faculty were harried and unhappy, students were concerned and openly angry with the administration, and I was upset and concerned about the very future of the sociology department.

The University replaced the Academic Vice President with a candidate who was a business research specialist. The heat increased. Our department, our programs, 3SP were scrutinized and attacked, especially since we had lost our administrative and faculty offices through replacement, retirement, relocation, and death.

D. Termination: Elimination of Projects and Programs

Recognition of our department of sociology and programs was indisputable. On a site visit, the review sociologist from the American Sociological Association cited our academic program as remarkable and in the forefront of sociology departments. Our anthropology program had some of the most popular courses on campus. Scholars nationwide lauded our Black Family Studies Program. Our internship program (Project Mentoring) had received community awards and publicity, and 3SP was internationally recognized as the locus for the study of the social aspects of space settlement. The possibility of what was to occur seemed unthinkable and impossible.

Fall 2005 was the worst of times. We were under scrutiny, harassment, disparagement, and ridicule. Our new faculty member in Black Family Studies resigned under pressure; our anthropology faculty member took a leave of absence and her replacement was very unhappy with the university; our sociology faculty member was applying for a position elsewhere; a part-time faculty member in gerontology was terminated by an administrator because “we don’t need her anymore;” and our teaching levels were difficult with four-course loads per semester and a faculty/student average ratio of 1:34 for all our courses, the largest F/S ratio on campus.

It was the worst of times for 3SP. On two occasions I was publicly reprimanded by the Dean for 1) inquiring about the cultural diversity situation on our campus given the demise of the Black Family Studies Center, and 2) questioning the Dean’s decision to delete our 3SP courses from the curriculum. And, I was informed that the hiring of an additional faculty member in sociology “will never happen.”

Our programs, the programs we labored to establish and develop as first-rate with recognition and respect, were ridiculed, sabotaged, and decaying. The administration had a plan and as winter chilled the air it became clear that we could not survive and that 3SP was targeted. The graffiti that appeared on our corridor bulletin board was symbolic of the change. Criminal Justice was the priority and we were in the way of their expansion. This became increasingly clear during the winter break.

II. Conclusion of an Era

While in Florida during the holidays, I received a call from our Dean on January 4, 2006. I was informed that I was to meet with her before the semester began and was interrogated in what I considered a punitive tone. The meeting revolved around a monstrous demand. Having been a full professor with tenure for 30 years and chairperson of a department, directing its programs, I was commanded to fulfill untoward and unprofessional requirements within 72 hours, even though I had to advise, teach my classes, begin the semester, hire three new faculty members, and place my interns. I submitted my letter of resignation for retirement effective immediately in accordance with our Collective Bargaining Agreement the next day, and only reconsidered remaining to teach my spring classes upon the heartfelt request of another administrator.

The spring semester was dreadful and filled with encroachment by Criminal Justice, from where a faculty member would assume the chairpersonship of our department. In the end, our department and 3SP had been forced to jump through too many hoops. We had been eliminated by an administrative plan. Sociology, Black Family Studies, and Space Settlement Studies were not a priority at Niagara University.

I am in the process of reactivating the Niagara Research Institute and relocating 3SP. We will have our space, and someday humans will be somewhere in space.

Acknowledgments

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References

¹Dudley-Rowley, Marilyn, “The Effects of Size and Heterogeneity of Crew and Mission Duration on the Deviant Behavior and Performance of Team Personnel in Space and Analog Polar Environments: A Pilot Study,” Ph.D Dissertation, Sociology Dept., The Univ. of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, 2000.