

Intervju med Alison Gerber (2010)

PhD student, Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University

How would you define your research?

– I am interested in working life in society and particularly the relationship between working life, worth, and citizenship. People who have some sort of nonstandard relationship to the world of work are most interesting to me. Because of the centrality of work in a number of cultures, their position can be really problematic. For example, if you don't have a job – even if you make money, or support your household in other ways – depending on where you live you perhaps don't pay taxes, don't have a pension, don't have access to childcare or healthcare. I'm especially interested in people who aren't unemployed – they're working and economically active – but because their working lives are not standard they have some problematic and interesting relationships to the state and to the dominant culture. So far, I've worked mainly with archival material, especially first-person public statements, but in the near future I think I will be doing more interviewing.

How did your interest for this research start?

– I worked as an artist before I went to graduate school and because I moved from one context to another – from the U.S. to Sweden – I was immediately struck by how differently people thought and talked about what they did. In particular, there were huge differences cross-nationally in the demands artists made of the state. I got interested in issues around professionalization, politics, and working life in general.

What are the similarities between being an artist and a PhD-student?

– I'm sure there are similarities, but I'm not sure what they are and I have problems seeing them; I'm still pretty immersed in PhD studies. A lot of the values around freedom, autonomy, and choice are similar, but in the beginning it was a pretty big culture shock. Entering academia and the discipline of sociology involved learning new ways of speaking about and understanding the world. So I had, and still have, a lot to learn.

What's the best thing about being a PhD-student?

– The vibrant environment, intellectually and socially. It's exciting and things are happening all the time. For me it's important to talk to people; I don't love to sit and read. The community I have at Yale, in my department and at the Centers for Cultural Sociology and Comparative Research, and being able to begin to build a network of colleagues and friends outside of my home department, all of that means a lot. I am very happy to be able to be in a number of groups at once – people studying working life, studying culture, studying organizations – and I hope that my work eventually will speak to all of those communities. I feel lucky to have access to such great people.

What is your impression from visiting Linnaeus University and Sweden?

– It's been great. There has been a lot going on while I've been here – research network meetings and things like that – so I have been able to meet a lot of people and hear about their work. And of course I've gotten a very different type of feedback on my own work than I would have gotten at home. I've had a great visit.