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Beating the system

Sociologist Gary Genosko investigates
technology's subversive subcultures

Déjouer le système

Le sociologue Gary Genosko tente de
comprendre les sous-cultures subversives
de la technologie



Phreaks, renegades, subversives – all are fodder for sociology professor Gary Genosko as he makes his peripatetic way through our technoculture



EXPLORING THE GLITCHES IN THE SYSTEM

by Mark Cardwell **Photo** by Jesse Senko

GARY GENOSKO DOESN'T COLLECT VINYL RECORDS, eight-track tapes and reel-to-reel music because he's an audiophile obsessed with the sound quality of decades-old classics. No, he does it because he loves listening to the background noises in recordings made by those outmoded technologies. "You can hear a wide range of clicks and squeals and other mechanical sounds that are all on their own and are not part of the artistic product," he says. "I find it all very fascinating."

Small wonder, then, why Dr. Genosko is having the time of his life as holder of the Canada Research Chair in Technoculture. In addition to his duties as an innovative professor in the sociology department at Lakehead University, the 51-year-old has spent much of the past decade studying – and trying to interpret – the creative but subversive actions that individuals and small groups sometimes take in an effort to frustrate or usurp mainstream information systems and infrastructures.

EXIT



For example, some of the 100-plus articles Dr. Genosko has written on an impressively broad range of topics are devoted to counterculture outlaws like Michael “Mafiaboy” Calce, the Montreal teenager who hacked the websites of several global companies (including Internet giant Yahoo) from the basement of his family’s middle-class home in 2000.

He is editor of *The Semiotic Review of Books* and is also working on a new book of his own – his 18th, “with a couple more in the bag,” he says. This latest will consider the actions of such disparate groups as phone phreaks (including Apple founder Steve Jobs) who hacked telephone systems in the 1960s and ’70s and modern-day “urban explorers” who enter and investigate off-beat, sometimes off-limit, areas of cities, like sewers and subway systems.

“These people and their activities are like those glitches you hear in old recordings,” Dr. Genosko observes over lunch in downtown Toronto. “What I like, and try to know, is how they evade or thwart or hack systems. That’s where you find real signs of creativity and innovation.”

Besides being fascinated with the artistic flair of these geeky renegades, Dr. Genosko believes their actions hold intrinsic value for society. Notably, he says, they make the rest of us stop and think about the uses and abuses that can and do occur through the use of information and surveillance technologies that support, but also increasingly control, many aspects of our daily lives.

That concept, which Dr. Genosko calls “the informatics of subjugation,” is at the heart of *Punched Drunk: Alcohol, Surveillance, and the LCBO, 1927-1975*, a book he co-authored with Scott Thompson, one of his graduate students, in 2009. The work examines efforts to monitor and control alcohol consumption through an elaborate surveillance bureaucracy that gathered and shared personal data on thousands of individuals.

For decades, the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (which was set up to regulate the sale of alcohol when prohibition ended in 1927) kept detailed records of who purchased alcohol and where they lived. Unbeknownst to customers, that information was accessed and used, not just by liquor inspectors but by officials in several other government agencies as well. The data formed the basis for disturbing practices like geo-racial profiling, which restricted sales to entire groups or classes of people – everyone from aboriginals and northerners to single mothers and bush workers.

For Dr. Genosko, those discriminatory policies can serve both as a lesson and a warning in contemporary public debates about such issues as the possible legalization or decriminalization of marijuana. “The fear and danger today is that the fragments of our personal data will somehow be used in a diabolical way,” he says. “The important lesson is not to repeat that strategy and to allow people to participate in the construction of

their informatics identities.”

Another interesting finding that emerged from the research was the discovery that many LCBO employees risked their jobs by falsifying the sales data that was crucial to the agency’s rudimentary, punch card-based surveillance system – hence the title of the book.

“They did it for a number of reasons,” says Dr. Genosko. Some employees acted out of sympathy to help individuals who risked being cut off simply because of who they were or because they were deemed to be buying too much alcohol. Other employees wrecked the paper trail to defy a “snitch” culture that even monitored their activities.

Dr. Genosko likens those “acts of sabotage” to today’s WikiLeaks phenomenon and what he calls “the crumbling of the distinction between classified and declassified information.” They also tell us something “about how people react to technological innovation [and] how they transit to becoming part of the system. To me that is interesting and highly relevant today because information technology is ubiquitous and is changing fundamentally the way we live.”

After lunch, Dr. Genosko takes the short walk to a small room in the University of Toronto’s faculty of information iSchool, where he’s a visiting professor this year. Settling in, he talks at length about the personal and academic journeys that have made him a leading abstract thinker in Canada on how and why technology, information and culture collide.

Born and raised in suburban Thornhill just north of Toronto, Dr. Genosko was a self-described “average kid” who did “just okay” in school. He loved baseball, swimming and hockey but developed a passion for more worldly hobbies an early age. A notable one was painting, which he picked up from his maternal grandfather, a professional picture framer and painter who gave art classes and organized an annual art show at his home in nearby Willowdale. Dr. Genosko sold his first piece – a drip painting in the style of American abstract artist Jackson Pollock – at one of those shows when he was 10. “I think I got 12 bucks,” he recalls, smiling. “[The buyers] could have been humouring me, but I think they really liked it.”

Accepted to U of T in 1978 (“thanks to Ontario’s lenient admission standards,” he says), Dr. Genosko had no idea what he wanted to do. “I took philosophy because I liked the abstract and theoretical dimension.” It wasn’t until his third year as an undergraduate that a defining moment – or rather two – pointed him down a path to a career.

One was a course on surrealism, the highlight of which was a “Surrealist Day” that involved the three U of T academics he most admired: Marshall McLuhan, Paul Bouissac and Derrick de Kerckhove. Around the same time, Dr. Genosko reviewed an art show put on by surrealist painter Ludwig Zeller. By happenstance, the Chilean cubist’s daughter was a fellow student in one of Dr. Genosko’s classes, and she told him

“The fear and danger today is that the fragments of our personal data will somehow be used in a diabolical way. The important lesson is not to repeat that strategy [of surveillance] and to allow people to participate in the construction of their informatics identities.”

how impressed her father had been with the article.

“Those two events were really a turning point for me as a writer and an academic,” recalls Dr. Genosko. “I was suddenly filled with ideas and inspired by the prospect of publishing – and it’s never stopped.”

He went on to complete a master’s degree in environmental studies and a PhD in social and political thought at York University, and an MA in philosophy at the University of Alberta in between. During that time, he met his future wife, Rachel Ariss, a law student at York, who later completed a Doctor of Juridical Science degree at U of T.

Shortly after the birth of their first of two daughters, they moved to England, where Dr. Genosko did a postdoctoral fellowship in sociology at the University of London. Despite it being a hectic period in the family’s life, the move helped to launch his publishing career. Dr. Genosko published his first book, *Baudrillard and Signs: Signification Ablaze*, for Routledge in 1994.

Since then he has edited and written the introductions to several books, volumes and collections of essays that the storied British publishing house has produced on several abstract philosophers. Among those works were the first three volumes of *Marshall McLuhan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory* (2005). “I did mostly portrait paintings about people and their process of thought,” explains Dr. Genosko. “I try to write in a way that makes a readable, useable contribution to potential readers in multi disciplines.”

Back in Toronto, Dr. Genosko also began writing articles for art and cultural magazines like *Fuse* and *Border Crossings* that mixed together and explored various disparate themes. In addition to honing his writing and thinking skills, the articles reflected his interest in – and ability to write about – a wide range of subjects. “Writing in just one area of expertise brands you and sticks with you,” says Dr. Genosko. “I didn’t want to get pigeon-holed. I’m not a silo or discipline thinker.”

After a move to Winnipeg, Dr. Genosko founded a professional writing and editing company he named Public Writer. Then, at age 40, he decided to apply for – and got – a teaching position at Thunder Bay’s Lakehead University. “I wanted to try out an academic job while I still had some shelf life,” he quips. Though he found it hard adapting to the ways of what he calls “a very conservative institution,” Dr. Genosko says he learned to relish the opportunities that a sociology department in a smallish, relatively remote university offers for the teaching of non-mainstream ideas.

Among his accomplishments, he has created courses that feature such community-service learning initiatives as graveyard visits (to help students understand the evolution of the cultural portrayal of death) and food and cultural seminars with local aboriginal groups. “Gary is a very entrepreneurial type who is not afraid to just go and do things,” says Scott

Pound, an English professor at Lakehead and a close friend of Dr. Genosko.

According to Dr. Pound, Dr. Genosko is “a strange bird in terms of academia. People tend to be telescoped on their field of expertise. Not Gary. He has an incredibly broad and diverse knowledge base and he is able to take many points of view and synthesize knowledge. He’s a bona fide star researcher – but he’s not a too-cool-for-school type. He makes himself very available to students.”

Dr. Genosko’s co-author on *Punched Drunk* agrees. “From a grad student perspective, [Dr. Genosko] was unusually supportive and fostered an open environment that allowed the project to evolve in its own direction,” says Mr. Thompson, now a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Victoria. He says that his former teacher, who insisted that Thompson’s name be first on their book, “brings a lot of publishing experience to the table [and] an intense curiosity for subjects and how they interact in real life.”

All those things – plus a timely series of major grants and awards – helped land Dr. Genosko the Canada Research Chair in Technoculture in 2002. He credits the 10-year, \$1-million appointment with helping to “free me from heavy teaching and administration to focus on research.” He has still found time, however, for “the not very glamorous stuff of academia,” such as adjudicating doctoral dissertations and sitting on a grant review committee of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

For longtime friend and fellow academic Samir Gandesha, Dr. Genosko’s work – notably his theoretical musings on new media and its connection to social and political life – is helping society get a better understanding of the still-nebulous contours on a new global economy based on information and knowledge. “I think what he’s doing is extremely relevant in today’s world,” says Dr. Gandesha, a political theorist who did graduate studies with Dr. Genosko at York and is now director of the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University. “Just consider the growth in value of new media and its use in social organization.” He adds that Dr. Genosko “is likely the leading scholar in North America” in his interdisciplinary field.

After a decade in Thunder Bay, where the family owns a home and a cottage on a small lake, the Genoskos are currently living in downtown Toronto. His wife, who previously taught in Lakehead’s sociology department, is now an assistant professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology.

Dr. Ariss says that despite the changes in their lives, her husband remains the easygoing and fun person she’s always known. “Gary is a very complex and creative person who thinks in a very sophisticated and mature way,” she says. “But unlike many adults, he’s never lost his capacity to play, or his curiosity.” **UA**

Pirates, renégats et éléments subversifs constituent le terrain d'étude du sociologue

GARY GENOSKO, SPÉCIALISTE EN TECHNOCULTURE

par Mark Cardwell



TITULAIRE DE LA CHAIRE DE RECHERCHE du Canada en technoculture, Gary Genosko s'en donne à cœur joie. En plus d'accomplir ses tâches de professeur innovateur au département de sociologie de l'Université Lakehead, cet homme de 51 ans a passé une bonne partie des 10 dernières années à étudier – et à tenter d'interpréter – les activités créatives, néanmoins subversives, de personnes et de petits groupes qui cherchent à entraver ou à usurper les systèmes d'information modernes.

Certains des quelque 100 articles qu'il a écrits sur une variété de sujets traitent des hors-la-loi de la contre-culture comme Michael « Mafiaboy » Calce, l'adolescent montréalais de classe moyenne qui, du sous-sol familial, a piraté le site Web de plusieurs multinationales en 2000. Rédacteur en chef de la publication *The Semiotic Review of Books*, il travaille actuellement à son 18^e livre, dans lequel il aborde les activités de groupes hétérogènes comme les pirates du téléphone qui s'attaquaient aux systèmes téléphoniques dans les années 1960 et 1970 et des « explorateurs urbains » modernes qui s'infiltrèrent dans des zones inusitées et interdites des villes, comme les égouts et les tunnels de transport en commun.

« J'essaie de savoir comment ils envahissent, entravent ou piratent les systèmes, explique M. Genosko. On saisit ainsi la mesure véritable de la créativité et de l'innovation. » Selon lui, les activités de ces groupes ont une valeur intrinsèque pour la société puisqu'elles nous forcent à réfléchir aux abus que peut entraîner l'utilisation des technologies de l'information et de la surveillance qui appuient mais aussi contrôlent de plus en plus d'aspects de nos vies quotidiennes.

Ce concept est au cœur de *Punched Drunk: Alcohol, Surveillance, and the LCBO, 1927-1975*, un livre qu'il a publié en 2009 avec Scott Thompson, un de ses étudiants aux cycles supérieurs. L'ouvrage aborde les efforts consacrés à la surveillance et au contrôle de la consommation d'alcool par l'entremise d'une bureaucratie élaborée qui recueillait et partageait les renseignements personnels de milliers de personnes. Pendant des décennies, la Régie des alcools de l'Ontario (LCBO) a conservé des dossiers précis sur les acheteurs et leur domicile. En plus des inspecteurs des alcools, les fonctionnaires de plusieurs agences gouvernementales accédaient à ces renseignements et les

utilisaient à l'insu des consommateurs. Ces données servaient de point de départ à des pratiques troublantes comme le profilage géoracial afin de limiter les ventes à des classes ou groupes entiers de gens, des Autochtones aux mères célibataires. Pour M. Genosko, de telles politiques discriminatoires peuvent servir tant de leçons que d'avertissements dans le cadre des débats publics actuels sur des enjeux comme la décriminalisation du cannabis.

On a également découvert, ajoute-t-il, que de nombreux employés de la LCBO mettaient leur emploi en jeu en falsifiant les données de vente essentielles au système de surveillance rudimentaire de cartes à perforer de la régie, d'où le titre du livre. Certains employés agissaient par sympathie pour ceux qui risquaient de se faire refuser de l'alcool ou pour défier la culture de délation visant à surveiller les activités des citoyens. L'auteur compare ces « actes de sabotage » au phénomène WikiLeaks actuel et ce qu'il définit comme « l'effondrement de la distinction entre les renseignements classifiés et non classifiés ».

La carrière universitaire de M. Genosko résulte d'un parcours sinueux. Après avoir démontré un vif intérêt pour l'art contemporain, il a cumulé des diplômes en sciences de l'environnement, en philosophie et en pensée politique des universités York, de Toronto et de l'Alberta. En 1994, pendant un stage postdoctoral en sociologie à l'Université de London, il a publié son premier ouvrage. Il a ensuite fondé une entreprise de rédaction et de révision à Winnipeg et obtenu, avant d'avoir 40 ans, son premier poste de professeur à l'Université Lakehead. « Je ne voulais pas qu'on m'étiquette, explique-t-il. Je ne suis pas adepte de la pensée cloisonnée. » Cette année, il est professeur invité à la faculté de l'information iSchool de l'Université de Toronto.

Son collègue Samir Gandesha affirme que le travail de M. Genosko, et tout particulièrement ses théories sur les nouveaux médias et la façon dont elles sont reliées à la vie sociale et politique, améliore notre compréhension de la nouvelle économie mondiale fondée sur l'information et les connaissances. « Je crois que ses travaux sont des plus pertinents dans le monde actuel », déclare M. Gandesha, directeur de l'Institut des sciences humaines de l'Université Simon Fraser. AU