

An Interview with Dr. Anne Bonds
Assistant Professor Geography, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Dr. Bonds Talks about Research, Teaching and Writing

Interviewed by Melissa Mann, Master's Student in Urban Studies,
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Melissa Mann (Q):

What first interested you in Urban Studies?

Anne Bonds (A):

As a geographer, in my largest research project I have looked at rural areas, but the way I think about space and place is that you can't think about urban issues and rural issues as being separate from one another. In fact, I'd rather think about these places on a continuum and importantly connected through processes. Here I am teaching the Urban Studies graduate seminar 945 class, affiliated with Urban Studies, with the bulk of my research has focused on rural places; but I still study urban issues and still consider myself, you know; interested in urban geography, urban studies more broadly. So I guess that's the first thing. It's important to think across places and that's the standpoint I'm trying to bring to my research. And while I'm interviewing here, it's important to point out when individuals ask how this relates to urban issues. When you think about, for instance, I don't know if I'm jumping the gun here; when you think about prisons being built as a strategy for economic development in rural places, that couldn't happen without urban issues facilitating and driving that trend. To conceptualize that as being completely distinct and cut off from urban dynamics would be a big mistake. And

that's often, unfortunately the way the scholars have conceived prison sites and things like that, as separate and distinct. So the way that I try to envision my research is pushing an analysis that thinks about processes as interconnected and not separate. That doesn't really get into the urban issues but maybe that will come up more.

Melissa Mann (Q):

That's a great start. This is more about urban studies in general. In your opinion, how can different fields like sociology, political science, geography, and history find common grounds or work together to improve knowledge about the urban environment?

Anne Bonds (A):

Well I think one of the things that's really interesting about all of us in our different kind of camps and what an interdisciplinary program Urban Studies brings out is how much what we're doing is similar. We're all doing similar work, and in many ways we often have different, you know, different phrases, different ways of describing it; and we all bring in specific, you know analytic, with engaging the urban problems or urban issues so that we're all trained in our different fields but we're looking at similar phenomena. In many ways, we have similar methods, etc, but we're not often talking to one another. So I think that one of the things that came out of 945 this spring was that because we did look at urban studies but it was also a look at urban geography; the themes of the course were urban geography. One of the things that came out a lot was that students said, "I've been studying this but I haven't looked at it from a geographic perspective." And so, it's the same kind of issues but a very different lens, you know privileging; for instance place, and how place plays a significant role in shaping social outcomes, political outcomes, economic outcomes, etc. So, I think we can learn from

one another when we get at the table and start talking about what we're doing, just like the Urban Studies Forum; and all of the events Urban Studies puts together kind of shows the significant overlap. We're interested in the same things but we're often studying in similar ways, obtain similar conclusions; but we might use a different language and a different analytic. But we can learn from one another.

Melissa Mann (Q):

I agree completely. How do you balance geography and urban studies?

Anne Bonds (A):

Well I think it's been really exciting for me, especially as a scholar to begin ... I keep bringing up 945, it's still fresh, I'm fresh off of teaching it. It has pushed me a lot to do, to think about the other perspectives, sociology, history, political science. How my work can be informed by the work that's being done in those fields. The way that I kind of try to bring those together is to think about doing research for writing a paper; I don't want to just look at what geographers are doing. While, of course, I'm publishing in geography journals for the most part, pretty much exclusively right now. So it's important for me to be engaged in what's happening in geography. It would be short sighted for me to not consider how others outside of geography are doing research on prisons, expansion of prisons, and racial poverty. So, I think one of the best ways that I can learn from urban studies and learn from other scholars doing urban studies research is to see what they're doing and to not have my blinders on and just be focused on geography. Actually it really enriches my research and pushes it in such a way that lets me know what other people are doing.

Melissa Mann (Q):

OK, I'm going to combine two questions. What are your main research and teaching interests? Can you please explain some of the research you're currently working on and how does this research relate to urban studies?

Anne Bonds (A):

You might need to remind me of some of the points here. So the first one, just to be clear, is what are my research and teaching interests? OK; well I'm really interested in poverty, geography of poverty, geographies of racialized inequality and geography of difference; and so that's really the primary areas where I do research. I'm really interested in neo-liberal, political economic restructuring; and how that transforms places; the way that social policy is generated, the devolution of welfare reform. It really has re-entrenched poverty and had a terrible impact on the most vulnerable, the poor, women, people of color. So that's a real interest of mine. Basically racialized poverty and how poverty intersects with race, class, and gender.

And I'm also really interested in the dynamics of mass incarceration and how that's a form of, as I've mentioned earlier rural development strategies. It all comes together then, looking at how places that have been really disenfranchised by processes of neo-liberal restructuring. What kind of economic development policies are they grasping for? And that's how the prison theme kind of emerged, and I really become interested in learning more about it. Like I said, I think it's really interesting to look at similarities between places; how similar processes are both possessed and urban and rural areas, and it kind of connects them in very unusual ways.

And so right now I have been working on looking at prison fighting in persistently poor communities. Communities that have experienced very deep poverty, they have

lost primary industry, such that there is not many jobs, or not much of an economic base; and coupling that with the entrenchment of welfare reform, so that communities are responsible for funding and providing services to the most needy. They kind of come together and that there's a need for communities to go out find their own economic development strategies and they are kind of grasping for anything they can find; at the same time that welfare reform has dispossessed poor people in urban areas and contributed to the incarceration of numbers that are historically unprecedented, so there's been such a huge growth. And then suddenly, prisons emerge as an economic development growth industry; and rural areas say "hey, this is recession proof, we can just get a prison here, it can create jobs..." and ultimately, it has a terrible impact on communities; they expect it to create growth, provide jobs, but it doesn't, over the long haul.

And so, my studies look at the recruitment process. How prisons are identified as the solution to poverty and unemployment and why prisons have been growing so much; both contributing to the micro level, in-state, and then also looking at the national level. Longitudinal studies and also time studies by other scholars have pointed to the fact that actually prisons don't help a community but in a long run hurt communities because other industries are much less interested in locating in communities where there is a prison. And also, people end up commuting from other places and you have to have certifications to work in prisons so, the people that need jobs are readily qualified to work in prisons; and what often happens is people commute in from other cities and work in the prisons and then commuting back. So it's not really bringing the growth that it is anticipated to bring. So that's been my focus, I had case studies in the

America Northwest; the state of Washington, Oregon, Montana and Idaho. Now I'm looking to develop that research here in Wisconsin so that I can have a comparative analysis across regions.

Melissa Mann (Q):

I have a question I was just thinking about: Does the development of prisons drive how many people are sent to prison?

Anne Bonds (A):

Well, this is the talk. You have to start by asking questions like that when it has become such a huge industry. It's an industry like other industries that it requires human capital, it requires humans and that means the strategies to build prisons necessitates the incarceration of people. Prisons are predominately filled by people of color, basically young black men that have been incarcerated because of drug busts, and also the poor. Increasingly private firms are engaged. These are private companies that are operating prisons for a profit.

So your question is not off base. I think that the policy-makers who are coming up with correction policy...see it as locking up people that are committing crimes. But when you stand back and look at it as a whole, the fact that private companies are...

Melissa Mann (Q):

Are driving the rate of incarceration?

Anne Bonds (A):

I don't know. You can't say "yes" entirely but you can't say "no." You certainly can't rule it out. There are many people that use the term prison industrial complex. You have probably heard of that before. It refers to the whole host of invested interests

that are involved. It's both political and economic. There is an economic incentive to all of this.

Melissa Mann (Q):

Is it only recently, that there are these private prisons?

Anne Bonds (A):

They are huge companies.

Melissa Mann (Q):

I've never heard of this.

Anne Bonds (A):

There's a sense, and this kind of fits in with neo-liberalization and a broader trend toward privatization; that private companies, because once you start providing a service on the open market, there's an ideology that says private firms are doing it and competing with one another, it means it will be done more efficiently. But it raises a lot of questions. Once again there are human lives involved. And when you're driving down the cost and you're making profits, your company is making profits off the incarceration of people. It is relatively new, within the past 20 years that you have started to see more and more private companies getting involved. Some states have come out against private companies. In fact, Wisconsin is a state that although there was a private prison built there they are less favorable. In some places, like where I did my research in Montana, there are private firms.

Melissa Mann (Q):

So there's an emerging private market.

Anne Bonds (A):

And they have to contract with the state. So the state has to say, “OK, we have prison overcrowding and we need to build a new prison. Well, we could build this ourselves and manage it ourselves or we can contract with this company and they do it all. We don’t have to do it.” So what has been documented across the board is that the workers in private prisons are paid less, which isn’t surprising. So they are paid less and often the most violent riots that happen in prisons happen in private prison because oftentimes workers have less training than they do if they are governmental and working for the Department of Corrections ... here’s a whole host of reasons to question whether or not private prisons are the best way to go.

Melissa Mann (Q):

Is there something that you research explicitly also?

Anne Bonds (A):

Yes, it’s part of it. I keep coming up with this, I’m saying the buzzword “neo-liberalization.” But I’m interested in you know basically how that’s changing governance. So, how communities support their population, how it’s changing policies, such that privatization and the market becomes the solution. You might have studied this elsewhere: the rollback of the federal government, letting the market roll, the market can decide. It all has been changes that have arguably intensified since the 1980s onward, where private companies becomes more important, reduced government involvement and so that has affected the way that services are offered, poverty and welfare reform and all of those things. It affects economic development and the way that I kind of bridge all of this together is by looking at prisons as an example of that. You can see it in the privatization of services. There is a direct correlation between an increased

number of people in urban poverty and an increased number of people in prison. These are the things my research questions.

Melissa Mann (Q):

You have a diverse educational background. Has this affected your research?

Anne Bonds (A):

That's a good question. You can see that I am very interdisciplinary. You might look at my CV or resume and say "How did she end up in Geography and then Urban Studies?" Urban Studies in and of itself is interdisciplinary, so it's perfect. I've always been interested in political economy, and economics was where I started. But I wanted something more. I guess when I studied economics, I felt like humans and people in general were missing, and I wanted to get out into the field, and doing work with people was something that I craved. I was also really interested in how women's experiences in the labor market were much different than men's. My research and interests have always been from a feminist's perspective.

So when I went into women's studies I was really interested in bringing together political economy and feminism to think about feminist political economy. That is still a key focus of my research -- how poverty and these things are particularly shaped by gender dynamics, race dynamics, and class.

I ended up working with a geographer when I was doing my master's work. It was just by chance. I worked for this organization called the Southwest Institute for Research and Women, and she's actually a quite well known geographer, a feminist geographer, Jan Monk is her name. She really mentored me and I came to see geography was the place for me to bring together these interests that I had because it

was in geography that I became introduced to geographic perspectives. I saw that I could use the tools and other types of things. The issues that I wanted to study I could use the geographer's tools to look at. And so I was a convert. I fell in love with geography and went on to do my Ph.D. at the University of Washington, where there is a large concentration on the feminist perspective and social theory, but also political economy. So the University of Washington was a perfect fit for me. That's how I ended up in geography, and urban issues are huge in geography. The largest specialty group in the geography department is urban geographers; geography has always had a close connection with cities. Cities are central places for all of the dynamics we are interested in; political issues, social issues, economic issues. Cities are the perfect place to examine what is happening in society.

Melissa Mann (Q):

What is your most memorable research moment?

Anne Bonds (A):

Doing research, you never know what to expect. And so if you can go into the field with that in mind, no matter how much planning ... One of the most interesting research moments I had was in the field in rural Oregon at a huge prison that was in the process of being built. I was interviewing the mayor of that city who was a real character. He had no interest in allowing me to ask questions; immediately he took over the interview. It was clear to me that I was not going to be able to ask questions, it was more going to be his show. He basically hijacked the interview process and then took me on a two-hour personal tour of the town in his giant truck. He was also a professional bass fisherman so he took me all around his economic development

project that had nothing to do with what I was trying to learn from him. At first I tried to regain control and then realized I was not going to have it in that situation. The experience in and of itself I can learn from it and also take things away and understand more how policies are created in that particular community.

One of the other experiences that I learned in that particular community was that my most valuable informants were not scheduled interviews. They were not people that I had planned to talk to. When I stayed in this community, I stayed at the same hotel. I got to know the hotel owners, the hotel staff and their family. They told me stuff I never would have known had I not made a point of going down to talk to them at breakfast. I was a returning visitor and they asked me "What are you doing here? Why do you keep coming back? What are you researching?" I learned so much from them.

So expect the unexpected. Don't try to hold onto the control in your interviews. Sometimes it's not going to happen. And also, you can learn from people you may not expect to learn from so you always have to keep your eyes and your ears open because you never know who you are going to meet and what they are going to tell you.

Melissa Mann (Q):

How do you balance researching, writing and teaching? Which of the three do you prefer if any?

Anne Bonds (A):

Wow. Well you know as a first year faculty member I think it's safe to say I am still learning to negotiate the importance balance It is a constant struggle. Particularly when you start a faculty position you suddenly have more expectations in terms of teaching load. I am used to teaching, but not two courses per semester. So it is a lot of

juggling. But the important thing is that you have to make time for research. You have to schedule it and schedule writing time ... I think learning to value your research even though sometimes sitting in front of a computer and writing does not feel as important. It is as important and you have to schedule it in and get it done. I am still learning.

As to which I like, to be honest for a long time I thought I just wanted to be a researcher. I love doing research. I love writing, it's so much fun. I love writing, even though it can be annoying and burdensome at times. Although after teaching my first class with the graduate students I realize the power of teaching. Teaching is a wonderful experience. It can be completely demoralizing; I'm not speaking about the wonderful graduate seminars, those are fantastic. But you know it is hard to teach a large group of students and it's hard when students are taking your class because of the requirement and they are not there because they are necessarily there to learn ... to transform a person's perspective and challenge them to think differently, I can't really think of a more gratifying experience. I don't know that I can say I prefer one or the other. They are just very different. One takes one part of your brain and one takes another part. The best that can happen is when you can bridge the two together and teach about your research and you can learn from students. That is my goal as an academic: To get to the point where I can have my teaching inform my research and my research inform my teaching. It won't always be an exact fit; it depends on what projects you are working on. As long as they are related, it can be very powerful.

Melissa Mann (Q):

Do you have different approaches with undergraduate and graduate students?

Anne Bonds (A):

Yes. My philosophy on teaching is discovery-based learning. First of all, I want to teach critical thinking; which I think all of us do in the Academy. But I think students sadly enough, have a hard time when they are asked to think differently about things. I think critical thinking is essential in any class; math, science, urban studies, social sciences. My goal is to have students not to think about things as the way it is, but ask why it is that way. Nothing can be taken for granted, and that is my goal with teaching in general. But I also want to be discovery based, I don't want to just regurgitate what is being said. It's hard because you have to convey a certain amount of information in a short amount of time and the test is a few weeks away. You need to get them to think about it first. What I strive to do is to get students engaged and to actively learn to draw their own conclusions. That's what informs my teaching. I also teach for social justice. Social justice is a core component of my research and teaching in general. I teach against racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. So my goal is getting students to think critically about issues and to challenge taking for granted ideas.

Melissa Mann (Q):

What is your most memorable teaching moment?

Anne Bonds (A):

I had a wonderful experience with my 945 class this spring. It was a larger class which I ran as a seminar. We were a good group and we learned well together; I will always have good memories of the group because it was my first time teaching the class. They were kind of my guinea pig group. I will be teaching again next year. I learned from them and hopefully they learned something from me. I can't pick one

particular experience but it always feels wonderful to have a person say, “I never thought about that in that way before, thank you for sharing with me.”

Melissa Mann (Q):

One more question: Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Anne Bonds (A):

Wow. You know, here in Milwaukee, doing research, I plan to be here thinking about urban issues. I’m sure I will still have a passionate interest in poverty and equality and researching urban problems. That’s about as much as I can say. I plan to be here doing much of the same; hopefully tenured and still teaching and doing research.

Melissa Mann (Q):

Thank you for this interview.

Anne Bonds (A):

You’re welcome. No problem.