

# INTERVIEW WITH EVAN CURLEY



Evan Curley is a Canadian sociologist based in rural Nova Scotia whose research spans art, craft, cultural organization, rurality, and identity. With a strong foundation in social theory, he integrates sociological and philosophical perspectives in his work. Currently a PhD candidate at Dalhousie University, Evan studies coastal resource use and management, fisheries conflicts, and the sociological aspects of boatbuilding in Nova Scotia. He also lectures at both Dalhousie and St. Francis Xavier Universities and actively contributes to academic communities, including the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation.

## Can you tell me about your time at StFX and how it influenced your decision to pursue a career in sociology?

I'm from Pictou County, New Glasgow, so there's a pipeline down the highway to Antigonish, and I was one of those people. I originally applied to start in the engineering program. Uncoincidentally, now I'm studying people who make and build things as a big part of my research. However, by the time I got to StFX, I decided to switch into a math degree. I was fully committed to that for two years, but I needed an arts pair to fulfill the degree, so I took a sociology class knowing absolutely nothing about the subject. It was with Dr. David Lynes. The class was a huge shift from the math classes I loved, but sociology felt much more tangible. It made me think about the world in immediate ways and how it changes your perception. Understanding the people and communities around you, and what contributes to the makeup of their lives, was intriguing. At the end of that class, Dr. Lynes asked if I had ever thought about doing honours in sociology, and that question really got me thinking. That was when I shifted gears. For the next two years, I moved math to my minor and pursued sociology, completing my honours in the field. It was a great experience, and I think it's important for students to realize you don't have to finish your degree the way you started, it's okay to be exploratory.

## Can you tell me about your time at StFX and how it influenced your decision to pursue a career in sociology?

All the professors I worked with were great. Dr. David Lynes was the first to push me into the discipline, which was a good start. Later, I connected with Dr. Lynda Harling Stalker, who supervised my honours thesis. She was a big influence on my interest in rural sociology and the study of craftspeople, artists, and people who make things, which is also her area of expertise. Another key aspect of sociology that pushed me toward the field is the freedom it offers in terms of what you can study and how you approach it. The freedom it offers in terms of what you can study and how you approach it. You can approach any subject through a sociological lens, which makes the discipline incredibly versatile.

## What first sparked your interest in rural communities and cultural practices like boatbuilding? Was there a moment or experience that led you down that path?

I don't think there was one specific moment, but rather a culmination of experiences. Growing up in rural Nova Scotia, I didn't initially see myself as a "rural person." My family didn't identify that way—we were just from there. That's the interesting part of sociology, looking back with a different perspective allows you to see where you fit in the world. Sociology helped me understand how my community was connected to, or sometimes on the margins of, the larger social world. A big reason I got into rural sociology was because of StFX faculties focus on studying local communities and social change movements, especially those happening in Antigonish and across Nova Scotia. That really resonated with me.

## What has it been like returning to StFX as a lecturer, teaching at the same university where you once studied?

It's been a great privilege and a wonderful experience. The faculty at StFX really championed me as a scholar, always supporting me throughout my studies. After I left StFX, we kept in touch, and they were always checking in on how things were going for me. Once I reached the point where I was able to teach, they connected me back to StFX, and I even got to teach a couple of classes before I started my PhD. It's been fantastic. Many of the students I teach are from rural areas, and I get to tell them I come from the same community as them. For many students, universities can feel like prestigious institutions, and they tend to assume professors come from big cities. So, it's been great to connect with students from my own hometown and explore ideas about the places we come from. It also gives me a common perspective with the students, which I think is really helpful in building connections.

## What advice would you give to current StFX students who are interested in sociology, especially those looking to explore, research, or work in rural communities?

If you're interested in sociology, just go for it, whatever program you're in, sociology will welcome you. For students interested in studying rural communities, my advice is to always trust what people have to say and show respect for the communities you're researching. Build collaborative relationships and keep yourself grounded in the real-life perspectives of the people you work with. Take what they have to say seriously. And, of course, have fun with it! Sociology allows you to explore any topic you're passionate about, and when you follow your interests, it makes the research much more rewarding.

## If you could go back and give your undergraduate-self one piece of advice, what would it be?

A lot of students come to university and feel intimidated by the institution. They focus on getting the best grades or pursuing a degree they think will guarantee a good job. While that's important, for me, making the switch to sociology was about following my own interests, and it worked out really well. I think it would benefit a lot of people to do the same. University is a time for exploration, and we sometimes forget that it's a privilege to have this time to think, take courses, and enjoy the learning process. My advice would be to embrace that opportunity to explore and enjoy your time here without rushing ahead.