

PROPOSAL TO EDIT *CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY*

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Vision for the Journal

For me, as I would imagine for many others, *Contemporary Sociology* has always been the most enjoyable to read of all the sociology journals. Since my first days of graduate school, I have relished leafing through its pages, reading about books by acquaintances and colleagues, familiarizing myself with new research in other areas, reconsidering held opinions based on the critical reviews of others, and—best of all—stumbling across interesting books and arguments that I would not have heard about otherwise. Between the standard reviews and the longer review essays and symposia, it has always been easy to lose several hours or an entire afternoon to this bi-monthly monument to the breadth and depth of our field.

Implicit in this personal account is my view of *Contemporary Sociology's* role in our field, a view that does not dramatically depart from that of past editors. First and foremost, I believe the journal should aim at extensive coverage of books written about and pertaining to sociology. Ideally, this would mean gaining access to and then reviewing every qualified book—clearly, an impossible task. *Contemporary Sociology* does, however, have the capacity, both in terms of page allocation and access to a field of experts, to produce reviews for a great many of these books. In a recent “Editor’s Remarks,” Alan Sica estimates that *Contemporary Sociology* currently reviews about 500 of the 1300-1400 volumes received each year.¹ As editor, I would aim to achieve similar results, dedicating significant space to the “standard” (approximately 1000 word) reviews and continuing the current editorship’s practice of also publishing a handful shorter reviews (250-500 words) in the “Briefly Noted” section of each issue.

But the goal is not only to review as many books as possible, but also to make an honest effort at reviewing books that represent the widely varied interests of ASA’s constituent members. In an editorial introduction written 35 years ago, Norval Glenn wrote, “Perhaps more than any other sociological journal, *CS* has come to reflect the pluralism—diversity of theoretical perspectives, methodologies, specialties, and conceptions of purposes and goals—that characterizes American sociology,”² and I think this statement holds true today (although with less emphasis on the “American” qualifier). As such, I would work to ensure that *Contemporary Sociology*, as much as it is able, serves as a reflection of the diversity that characterizes our discipline. Through the composition of the editorial board, the page space allocated to specialty areas, and a commitment to finding books and

¹ Sica, Alan. 2013. “Mixing Past and Future.” *Contemporary Sociology* 42:653-657.

² Glenn, Norval. 1978. “Statement of the New Editor.” *Contemporary Sociology* 7:5-6.

reviewers from all corners of sociology, I would make this commitment to extensive and representative coverage the first priority of the journal.

The second priority of the journal—one, however, that does not lag far behind the first—should be to provide a venue for longer reviews and interchanges about books or bodies of work. The balance between standard reviews and longer treatments has been an important issue for editors over the forty odd years of the journal's history. Editorships have varied both in terms of their page allocations for and the content of these non-standard reviews. Early issues of the journal (i.e., those edited by Dennis Wrong, Bennett Berger, Norval Glenn, and Barbara Laslett) tended to dedicate a fair amount of space to review symposia, review essays, and survey essays (essays in which many books in one area were reviewed together to provide a sense of the current state of a topic area or subfield); editorial comments during this period also explicitly argue for the importance of including longer reviews and criticism in *Contemporary Sociology*.

During the middle period of the journal's existence (here, defined loosely as 1987 to 2005), there were pockets of resistance to this approach. A few editorships—most noticeably those of Ida Harper Simpson (1987-1991) and JoAnn Miller and Robert Perrucci (2001-2005)—placed much less emphasis on these forms, dedicating more page space to standard reviews. Others tended to replicate the balance between standard and non-standard reviews of the early issues, although review essays during this period were far more common than any other form of non-standard review. The most recent editorships have maintained the original dedication to non-standard reviews, but they have also rotated in other formats along with the more traditional review essay and symposia. Valerie Jenness, David A. Smith, and Judith Stepan-Norris, for example, offered “paired essays” in which two commentators would write a review essay of the same book, and these reviews would then be published together. Alan Sica, departing a bit more from established formats, introduced “critical retrospective” essays in which established scholars discuss a number of recent books that have shaped a particular specialty area, line of research, or theoretical framework (an idea I will return to below).

In light of this brief consideration of the history of the journal and considering the arguments made in past editorial statements, I find myself in the majority camp: these non-standard formats deserve a central role in the journal because they differentiate *Contemporary Sociology* from other publications, because they offer a distinctive outlet for critical argument, and because—at least when they are successful—they provide a singular resource for the sociological community. More practically, I would guess that these essays help *Contemporary Sociology* to attract readers and account for most of the citations that the journal receives.

For these reasons, I would mirror the current editor's apportioning of space to standard and non-standard reviews. However, I would also like to follow the current editor in considering new ways to critically reflect on relevant material. In this vein, I would continue the “critical retrospective” essays. I have found these

essays to be very enlightening and enjoyable to read; they offer an efficient means by which one can catch up on debates, trends, or fields of study that are outside of one's own areas of expertise. They also represent a type of published writing—rather short and focused thought pieces—that is difficult to find in other publications. The potential of these essays to spark interest and debate is demonstrated by the online reaction to one recent example: Phillip S. Gorski's "What is Critical Realism? And Why Should You Care?"³ The publication of this piece was the subject of a series of posts on a popular sociology blog, orgtheory.net. These posts generated nearly 200 responses, many of which were essay-length statements by some of the leading advocates and critics of this perspective. Although at times heated, this debate about the merits and limitations of critical realism was ultimately informative and productive. Spurring discussions of this type exemplifies the potential of these essays to contribute to the intellectual community of sociology, and, in my view, there are no other prominent sociology journals so well suited to foster these types of provocative essays.

I am enthusiastic about the opportunity to continue these essays as well as to think creatively about how to expand their scope in hopes of maintaining the established momentum and possibly drawing new readers. One idea is to ask sociologists who work on the boundaries between sociology and adjacent disciplines (I'm thinking of not only the usual suspects—anthropology, economics, philosophy, political science, and psychology—but also of fields that are becoming increasingly relevant to our own, such as geography, neuroscience, and genetics) to write essays about recent books in these external fields that are relevant to sociologists. Given the increasing demand for interdisciplinary fluency and scholarship, essays of this type would be of general value and interest. Expanding the current essays in this way, I believe, would remain true to the existing framework of *Contemporary Sociology* and, once again, offer an outlet for scholarship that does not fit well in other prominent venues.

Another possibility would be to solicit new reviews of older books. Candidates for reconsideration would include books that have grown in influence over time, books that have come to be interpreted in new ways, or books that have been "forgotten" or underappreciated. If appropriate, these new reviews could be published along with the original reviews from *Contemporary Sociology* or *American Sociological Review*. The value of these "re-reviews" would lay in their ability to shed light on how knowledge accumulates, how perspectives change over time, and how well foundational pieces hold up to new generations of scholars. This idea was in part inspired by the reviews currently being published in the *American Journal of Sociology* under the name of Barbara Celarent, and the similarity may be a reason not to pursue it. For *Contemporary Sociology*, however, I envision focusing on more recent books—say, from the latter half of the twentieth century—and books that are less esoteric.

³ Phillip S. Gorski. 2013. "What is Critical Realism? And Why Should You Care?" *Contemporary Sociology* 42:658-669.

I offer these ideas for the long review format not to suggest major changes to the journal—I like what the journal does now and I would not try to implement these new ideas before getting my feet under me or without consulting others—but instead to signal that I am serious about the role that these non-standard reviews play in the identity and value of *Contemporary Sociology*. No matter the form, I think it is very important to maintain the journal's commitment to this type of material, and to maintain the vitality of these longer reviews—through the inclusion of compelling topics, the participation of leading scholars, and the alternation of appropriate formats—as much as possible. I foresee following the example of the recent editorial regimes both in the proportion of pages dedicated to this format and the use of different forms.

In summary, I would like to reiterate that I like what the journal does now. In my view, it succeeds in balancing the need to be extensive and inclusive in its coverage with the desire to print longer, more personalized and dialogue-producing essays. Although I will likely implement minor changes to maintain the vitality of the journal, I propose a continuation of the current editorship, and, for that matter, the long tradition of editors at *Contemporary Sociology*, rather than a dramatic reimagining of the journal.

Qualifications of Prospective Editor

At the beginning of this application, I noted how enjoyable it is to read *Contemporary Sociology*. Having served on the journal's editorial board for the last three years, however, I have gotten a glimpse of the work necessary to produce this pleasurable reading experience. Through my own 18-issue cycle on the editorial board, the board's annual breakfast meetings at ASA, Alan Sica's editorial essays, and the writing I have done for the journal, I believe I have a general idea of the major steps involved in producing the five hundred or so book reviews that the journal publishes each year: prompting publishers to submit recent releases, deciding which books are candidates for review, compiling lists of qualified reviewers with the help of the editorial board and student assistants, cajoling colleagues into making the time and effort to write reviews, and compiling these reviews and other longer essays into a coherent and well-edited volume. This list, of course, elides all of the essential clerical and administrative tasks that are also necessary for the production of each issue.

Although I have not edited a journal before, I do have experience with the editorial process and some insight into the importance of journals to professional associations. Aside from my three-year term on the board of *Contemporary Sociology*, I have also served on the editorial boards of the *American Journal of Sociology* and *Sociological Quarterly*. These three very different journals have provided valuable insights into the backstage workings of the production of sociological knowledge. I also served a three-year term on the publications

committee of the Midwest Sociological Society, including one year as chair of this committee. This experience, which included a search for new editors of *Sociological Quarterly*, helped me develop a better understanding of the business aspects of journal production and the increasingly important role that journals play in the finances and identity of their home associations.

I believe that my experiences at many different types of institutions and my wide-ranging interests would be an asset to my editorship. During my graduate training and professional career, I have spent significant time at four institutions with very different specializations and approaches to sociology: I received my MA at Penn State University and my PhD at Northwestern University, I have served on the faculty at University of Iowa, and I spent two years at Harvard and MIT as part of a mid-career fellowship. Moreover, I am not a specialist. Much of my work sits at the boundaries of organizations, culture, theory, and qualitative methodology, but I have also published work in sociology of law, sociology of education, social psychology, and the sociology of health. My exposure to a wide variety of sociological departments, cultures, and subfields has fostered a broad understanding of the field that should be useful for an editor of a journal that aims to represent the entire spectrum of sociological knowledge.

Finally, I believe that I possess the personal attributes that will help me to be an effective editor. I am good at meeting deadlines, and I work well with others. I do not hesitate to consult with colleagues when faced with difficult decisions, and I am willing to draw on the expertise of the editorial board, the publications committee, the ASA, or past editors about the difficult decisions or unforeseen problems that will inevitably arise during a sustained editorship. Last, but certainly not least, I love books. I am genuinely excited by the idea of dedicating a significant portion of my work life to managing books and their critical reception.

Pragmatic Considerations in Running the Journal

While I believe I have an approximate understanding of the day-to-day operations of *Contemporary Sociology* from my time on the journal's editorial board, if I were appointed editor, I would plan to spend several days in State College consulting with the current editor and his team about what has and has not worked in terms of processing books, file management, communications, and the production process. Given that the current system appears to function very efficiently and turns out high quality material, I would attempt to import as much of the current structure and system as I can.

My approach to the editorial board would prioritize broad representation on many dimensions. My understanding is that the board is structured so that approximately one third of its members rotate off each year. When it comes time to replace retiring members, I will solicit names from current board members and draw on my own networks to attempt to compose a board that reasonably reflects ASA

membership in terms of gender, race, specialization, geography (both across the U.S. and internationally), institutional type, and career stage. I also propose to add a few Deputy Editors to the journal. For these positions, I would invite senior scholars who are experienced in book publishing, specialize in areas with which I am less well versed, and have extensive networks. Above and beyond helping to locate reviewers for books, I would ask the Deputy Editors to help generate ideas for the longer-format articles and consult with them about problems that may arise.

Institutional Support

Both the department of Sociology and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Iowa understand the value of professional journals to the academic enterprise and have expressed enthusiastic support for bringing the editorship of *Contemporary Sociology* to Iowa. The college and my chair have indicated that they will happily provide the office space, equipment, and computer support necessary to the maintenance of the journal. They have also agreed to grant a half-time teaching reduction if I were to become editor and work with the ASA to ensure that there is support graduate students to assist with the production of the journal. In addition to these financial resources, the sociology department at the University of Iowa also offers important intellectual resources that will be an asset to the journal. My colleagues represent a broad array of sociological specialty areas, including social psychology, criminology, stratification, organizations, and networks, and—living up to their name—they are collegial. The department would not only recognize the value of having the *Contemporary Sociology* editorship at Iowa, but would also provide professional resources on which I would be able to freely draw.