

Application for editorship of *Contemporary Sociology*

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Submitted version: October, 2007; revised, January, 2008

Vision for the journal:

A. General View of CS's Role in Sociology

Contemporary Sociology constitutes a unique self-portrait of how book-oriented sociologists have occupied themselves over the last generation. It became a bellwether for the discipline shortly after its appearance in 1972 (just as I began graduate school). As an historian of the field, I often re-read back issues of *CS* to learn what most captivated our peers during the last 35 years. Changes have been revealed in disputes aired in letters between wounded authors and their critics, harsh or generous review-essays and symposia, lists of books received, changes in review categories and the make-up of editorial boards, and so on. *CS* has therefore long been my favorite ASA reading, as I think it has been for many of our colleagues. Ida Harper Simpson wisely observed when she was editor, "*CS* is the journal of the whole" (20:6). It has become essential to the task of broadening sociological literacy in ways that the specialty journals cannot--which means that the editor must exercise extraordinary care in managing the journal's content.

The most pertinent part of the *CS* legacy to my current task are the editors' statements, both their inaugural promises as well as their concluding observations (when they chose to leave them). *CS* has had 12 editorial transitions, including 9 solo editors (Dennis Wrong [vols. 1-3], Bennett Berger [4-6], Norval Glenn [7-10:1], William D'Antonio [10:2-11:4], Jerold Heiss [11:5-13:1], Barbara Laslett [13:2-15], Ida Harper Simpson [16-20], Woody Powell [21-23], and Dan Clawson [24-26]) and three teams (Barbara Risman and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey [27-29], JoAnn Miller and Robert Ferrucci [30-34], and the current set, Valerie Jenness, David A. Smith, and Judith Stepan-Norris [35-37]). Each had interesting things to say about what they hoped to do with their editorial responsibilities, and how they intended to improve the journal in small ways.

Certain patterns reveal themselves. A common theme held that each new editor, coming to an already successful journal, would not initiate drastic reforms, which I think is wise. As the first editor, Dennis Wrong, wryly remarked in January, 1972, "of the making of books and of the assigning and writing of reviews there is no end." He planned "the abandonment of any effort to review all books published in the English language which are unmistakably written by and largely for sociologists," thereby initiating a tradition of complaint from *CS* editors that reflects the journal's troubling dual mission. Even though the journal needs to "cover" the sociological terrain, most readers agree that review-essays and symposia are the journal's most compelling and

instructive features. And because they are more satisfying to write, they often entice the guild's senior scholars who might otherwise be unwilling to work for CS. (Ending his tenure as editor, Woody Powell noted, "I have been puzzled by how very difficult it is to get some of the most celebrated people in our field to write for CS" [23:6], a viewpoint recently developed at length by Gail Pool in *Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America*.) Yet if excessive pages are consumed by essays and symposia treating the favored few, too many other books authored by sociologists will not be reviewed at all, and careers may be upended.

This is particularly critical for authors at smaller institutions with fewer research resources, for whom publishing a monograph may be a rare event with dire professional consequences if it is ignored. And the possibility of intellectual loss to the discipline and beyond is ever-present if too few titles receive public attention. In the perennial tug-of-war between space allocated to review-essays versus regular reviews, I slightly favor the latter. This preference was well expressed long ago by Joan Huber in debate with Paul Elliot Starr, when she wrote "Before CS broadens its function to meet a larger need, it should fulfill its basic purpose: the review of all books by and for sociologists" (in Bennett Berger's inaugural issue, January, 1975). It is no longer possible to review "all" deserving books, but a genuine effort at broad inclusiveness is essential. *The New York Review of Books*, my bedside reading for 30 years, owes its deserved fame to depth, not breadth, but the contrasting role of CS must tilt it in the opposite direction. It is the sole "journal of record" for what sociologists create in book form. The "Take Note" section is a good way to alleviate some of the strain, and I would surely continue that, perhaps even enlarge it.

Editorial boards have incrementally grown in size and diversity, from the five white male Associate Editors whom Wrong employed in 1972 to the 36 currently serving. Some editors have refrained from using any of their friends or colleagues (Norval Glenn made a point of this), whereas others, like Dan Clawson, heavily relied on proximate faculty (making possible a fruitful monthly editorial board dinner). The most recent editors decided to diversify with rigor, formulating their board according to factors of geography, size of school, race, gender, and seniority. I sympathize with their motives and would try my best to imitate them.

The "ideal" board member, of course, is one who knows a lot of capable reviewers, is expert in their area, and works hard for the journal. These characteristics must be balanced, though, with available personnel who represent the various demographics which editors of CS are now expected to honor. I learned how trying a matter this can be while editing *Sociological Theory*. Too often the "ideal" reader of a given manuscript was either too busy, too famous to bother, on sabbatical, or too close to the author. In short, I value board diversity as much as would any prospective editor, but I also know that associate editors of real merit sometimes fail to fall conveniently into all the right demographic boxes. One must find a happy balance, remembering that the primary

duty of a good editor is to make sure the journal is produced at the highest professional and intellectual level, whatever and whoever that requires.

Another constant theme among editors has been the need to expand coverage of foreign works and to involve more non-U.S. reviewers and board members. Once again, this is easier wished for than realized. I pushed hard while editing *Sociological Theory* to involve scholars who did not reside in North America, and had some success. Since much of my own research has dealt with European theorists, I have contacts abroad which I could draw upon when searching for foreign books and finding suitable reviewers for them. My contacts in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are less well developed, but it would be a pleasant challenge to find common ground with our colleagues abroad and involve them in CS whenever possible. It is worth noting in this regard that one of the best recent monographs on Weber is by a Korean (which I reviewed for CS), and which could well signal the future of the field.

Dan Clawson introduced "Journals in Review," which is a good idea, space permitting, and Howie Becker persuaded Barbara Laslett to review "visual sociology" in terms of films and computer software. If computers are to be the future site of knowledge, as books become "old technology," it might be wise to reserve whatever space is available in CS exclusively for books and let films and computer applications be treated in other outlets. An occasional essay about these concerns would be welcome.

Also beginning with Clawson's editorship and continuing hence, editors have often grouped books into symposia treating large themes, particularly regarding the discipline's changing identity in the new century. These have been worthwhile ventures, too, yet I feel that it's essential to review books with great care for their actual identity as individual products, and not to force them into unlikely partnership with other titles in order to please one's own desires for thematic unity. If several important titles happen to appear simultaneously, it would make sense to treat them collectively and at length. Similarly, if trade books make important contributions to sociological discourse, they should be reviewed as well. For me, then, the ultimate determinant of CS's content is not shaped by the editor's interests--as would, at least in part, indeed be the case with a specialty journal--but by what publishers offer in a given season, and who is available to write reviews. In short, I do not have an editorial or political agenda extrinsic to the books themselves. If they can be grouped in unforced fashion and under meaningful rubrics (public policy, the future of the discipline, the globalization of sociology, et cetera), no-one would be happier than I, yet I cannot in good faith begin with hopes that they will.

The current editors innovatively suggested that sending copies of CS symposia to policy makers and others outside the sociological community proper would help put our ideas to use. I like this idea very much and would continue the practice.

B. Pragmatic Considerations in Running the Journal:

I have not contacted the current editors or staff of CS for help with this application because I thought it would be unfair, even pretentious, to do so. (Were I selected as the new editor, I would of course draw on all their accumulated wisdom and advice during the transition period.) But my previous experience on editorial boards (including *ASR*) has given me a clear notion of how things could be run ideally.

Ever-helpful Karen Edwards sent me the current CS editorial board list with outgoing dates of each member, which indicates that as of 1/1/09, when I would officially take over, I would have to replace the entire board, with only three exceptions (out of 28 for 2008, 37 during 2007). This contradicts what I'd understood to be standard ASA journal practice these days, with staggered retirement dates for board members, so that roughly one third of each board leaves annually. For some reason it seems this path was not taken with the current CS board. Since it seems that ASA policy for board members revolves in part around proportional membership representation, I would do my best to include minority (and international) scholars in percentages which mimic the current board (e.g., 32% minority, 35% female), along with a reasonable distribution by rank. Having board members from institutions of varying sizes and with sound geographic distribution is also essential. Energetic junior scholars are particularly desirable since they are closer to the latest research trends, even though their networks may be smaller and their time more preciously geared toward achieving tenure. One could even argue that because ASA is now 50.55% female, the current editorial board of CS under-represents them. Naturally, the editor must balance the needs for scholarly coverage with fair demographic representation, and I would endeavor to handle both in a way that would be viewed by Council as reasonable.

As to Deputy Editors, I will invite several senior members of the Penn State sociology faculty to assume that role, especially those who are more inclined toward book production than to article writing. Because having important journals in the department is a high priority within the sociology faculty itself, as well as at higher administrative levels, I suspect that they will be pleased to serve. I would additionally invite several other senior scholars to assume Deputy Editor positions who are at distant institutions, with particular attention to those who command discipline-wide respect for their books, and who are expert in areas about which I know little. I have not canvassed any candidates yet because I did not want to give the impression that I was already selected as the incoming editor. But I surely have in mind a number of scholars who I have good reason to believe would be amenable to such a request, based on my past professional contacts with them.

Though I would want to know how the Irvine group has handled its editorial tasks on a day-to-day basis before deciding on my own S.O.P, I would imagine that having

regular meetings of Deputy Editors at Penn State, while involving distant D.E.'s by conference call, would be required, particularly in terms of generating ideas for good symposia and the larger projects which exceed single-book reviews in scope. My editorial office would be sending out monthly requests for potential reviewers to area-specialists on the board, which, given the new computer program in use at CS, should not be too difficult.

In sum: I would hope to put together two teams, a smaller one of Deputy Editors who would work with me directly and regularly on fulfilling the journal's mission, as well as a larger and more diverse board that would look not unlike the make-up of the current one.

As to guidelines for reviewers: I would probably send them a copy, with permission, of John Updike's "code of book reviewing" (*Picked-Up Pieces*, 1975: xvi), modified to suit the social sciences. It has worked well for him!

Qualifications of prospective editor:

My association with *Contemporary Sociology* began in 1980 when its incoming editor, Bill D'Antonio (later executive officer of ASA), asked me to serve on its editorial board. Every 6 weeks for several years he would send a list of books that required reviewers, and I would go to the library and search for scholars with the required expertise. Before computerization this was all done manually, by studying journals and flipping through the university library's "card catalogue." I learned just how difficult and time-consuming it is to match the right reader with the right book. As an untenured assistant professor, I at first hesitated to join the CS board, but after serving for a while I discovered what most junior scholars have since learned: there is no better way to educate oneself in the broader sociological realm than to read CS regularly. It is more valuable than any of the specialty journals or even *ASR* in helping the nascent scholar and teacher explore in outline the larger expanses of sociological territory. It remains my favorite ASA journal—even more generally useful than *Sociological Theory*, which I edited for five years in the early 90s.

While a visiting professor at the University of Chicago in 1984-85, I served on the editorial collective (3 faculty, 2 grad students) which met weekly and ran *AJS*. This was a demanding and thoroughly enlightening part of my training concerning journal production. Also, from 1983 through 1987, I edited and published *History of Sociology*, a journal ahead of its time and in a difficult economic period. Despite strenuous amateur efforts at publicizing the journal, I was unable to find enough institutional subscribers to support its continuation. My university at the time could not afford to underwrite the journal in any way, so my wife and I ran it from our home. This was long prior to desktop publishing, so I drove each issue 100 miles to the cheapest competent printer I

could find, and thereby learned about the "business end" of journal publishing.

Between 1980 and 2005, *Contemporary Sociology* published 6 review-essays, 14 book reviews, and 2 comments that I wrote. I was asked not long ago to do another review for *CS*, but refused owing to a conflict of interest. (I have also published 19 additional review-essays and 37 reviews elsewhere, often in *AJS* and *Social Forces*, and am currently preparing a review-essay for Gary Fine at *SPQ*, plus a review for *The American Historical Review*.) In sum, writing reviews and review-essays has always been an important part of my scholarly work, and I know the genre well.

I am currently working on my 11th and 12th books (both edited works), and have contracted to write still others. Monographs and edited volumes have been more important to me than articles owing to my specializations, in social theory and the history of the social sciences, which are traditionally more aligned with book production than are many subdisciplines within sociology. And having reviewed book manuscripts for all the major university publishers and many others, in Britain and the U.S., I understand book production from the ground up. I confess that books have always interested me more than shorter works, and I do not mind the appellation "bookish," which I regard as a compliment.

Institutional Support:

Penn State is home not only to the official ASA Archive (which I set up after a long decade of negotiations), but also to many scholarly journals. In sociology alone we have hosted *Demography*, *Sociological Theory*, *Sociological Methodology*, and, most recently, *ASR* under Glenn Firebaugh. The central administration understands the importance of journals to the life of the university, and has offered maximum support so that each succeeds while on campus. After checking with Karen Edwards, I learned that *CS* requires two contiguous rooms for its exclusive use (a smaller one for the Managing Editor, the other housing two half-time graduate student assistants who process incoming books); its own phone and fax lines; the usual office equipment and furnishings, including computers and a copier; a half-time teaching reduction for the editor; and whatever else is required by ASA to assure the smooth functioning of the journal. The Dean of the Liberal Arts as well as the chair of sociology have both enthusiastically agreed to these requirements. (This is the same Dean, a political scientist, who helped bring *ASR* to Penn State, and whose husband edited *Journal of Marriage and the Family*.) Penn State is willing and able to make available to *CS* whatever is necessary so that its time on campus will be well regarded by readers and reviewers alike. It is worth noting that John McCarthy, chair of sociology, first suggested I apply for the editorship and has been entirely supportive ever since.