

Reflections on Joseph R. Gusfield

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Joe Gusfield, a sociologist of great reknown, died in January 2015 at the age of 91. In this piece I'm going to reflect briefly on Joe's life and work and rely on others to fill in more details.

First, how do I know Joe? If I had to name half a dozen sociologists who shaped how I look at sociology, Joe would be among them. But at first I only knew Joe through his writings, especially on alcoholism and social problems. When Joseph Schneider and I finished *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness* (1980) as two unknown assistant professors at a midwestern university we asked Joe (who was not unknown and no longer midwestern) if he would write a Forward to the book. He generously agreed and the book, still in print, undoubtedly benefited from his contextualizing our work and adding his imprimatur. My other major encounter with Joe was when Deborah Stone and I invited Joe for a 3 day visit to Brandeis. Joe was erudite and kind in sharing his intellect and experience with graduate students in Sociology and the Heller School.

For this reflection I have relied on some published autobiographical and interview materials as well as a couple of recent obituaries, along with as my own experience and impressions. Any errors in fact or interpretation reside with me.

Joe was born 1923 in Chicago to a Jewish lower middle class family. He lived much of his youth in the depression. He went to public schools and was a good student, perhaps somewhat bookish. He was the first in his extended family to attend a 4 year college. He went to the University of Chicago as an undergraduate and was enraptured by the social sciences in the interdisciplinary undergraduate curriculum. At first he was not particularly drawn to sociology, but more to economic and social theory that included Durkheim, Marx and Weber. He loved these broad thinkers and the intellectual

This article was prepared as a reflection on Joesph Gusfield and his work for a memorial session for Joe at the meetings of the Society of Social Problems in August 2015. Since this is an appreciation rather than a scholarly paper I did not include specific references for most points. However, I made one exception: several of the longer quotes are from a chapter Joe wrote about his life. See Joseph R. Gusfield, "My Life and Soft Times," Pp. 104–129 in Bennett Berger (ed.), *Authors of their Own Lives*, University of California Press, 1990.

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discussions he and his fellow students would engage in. Yet by his own admission, he also harbored a distaste for abstract theories. While not using these phrases at the time, Joe recognized early that theories needed to be grounded. Joe served in the Army from 1943 to 1946 and then returned to graduate from college and continue his education on the G.I. Bill. He had put himself through school by working 20 h a week at a local super market. Much to my surprise, after undergraduate graduation Joe went for a year to U of C Law School (who knew? He even made law review). At the same time he was working as a teaching assistant in Social Science 2 seminar at the College. His fellow TAs included the likes of Lewis and Rose Coser, Daniel Bell, C. Wright Mills, David Reisman, Murray and Rosalie Wax, Philip Rieff, among others. Discussions with the likes of these intellects made law school seem “confining.” As he notes, “Weber’s cultural analysis of the rise of capitalism was the most captivating book in social science that I had ever encountered and it changed the way I viewed history and society.” (113) After weighing intellectual and practical life options Joe left the law school and entered the graduate program in the Department of Sociology.

At first he was a bit disappointed because the department was very empiricist, even “a bit dull and narrow” and he missed the encounters with the big thinkers so vehemently discussed in Social Science 2 in the College. Only later while writing his dissertation did he begin to recognize the importance “of the tension between” “necessity and joy of narrowness’ and the theoretical values of the craft.

Joe entered the Sociology Department in 1947 and received his Ph.D. in 1954. Joe was part of the incredible post war U of C Sociology cohort that included Howard S. Becker, Erving Goffman, Eliot Freidson, Anslem Strauss, Fred Davis, and dozens of others who shaped the discipline, especially in terms of qualitative research and different versions of symbolic interaction (including what is now called social constructionism). Everett Hughes and Herbert Blumer were important faculty mentors, along with W. Lloyd Warner and George Herbert Mead. Joe finished his course work but left U of C, without a viable dissertation topic, to take a faculty post at Hobart and William Smith College in upper New York state.

Joe and his wife Irma moved Geneva, NY. Reading Joe’s account of his years at Hobart and William Smith (1950–55) there were at least three notable impacts of those years. First Joe was the only sociologist at the college, so he taught a whole range of sociology courses and by his own admission “learned about sociology” by teaching courses “from methods to marriage and the family to public opinion.” Second, Hobart and the Geneva NY area were quite different than urban Jewish enclaves where Joe had lived most of his life. As he notes, “I grew up at Hobart and William Smith. It was my first encounter a world of manners and tradition...” as an Episcopalian based college, his first immersion in a largely “gentile” environment, where character training was as important as intellect. (117). Third, Joe encountered what would become his dissertation topic through encounters in upstate New York and its culture and history.

Joe began his interest in social movements, the temperance movement in particular, and specifically the WCTU, during his Hobart years. As he writes, he “fell in love with the topic.” He finished his dissertation in 1954, entitled “The Women’s Christian Temperance Union: Change and Continuity in an Organized Interest Group.” The book based on this research was published in 1963 as *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement*. The book has become a classic in sociology. Gusfield asked the question why were the rural members of the WCTU so vehement about their anti-saloon,

anti-alcohol cause and getting a prohibition law passed when their own rural, Protestant communities were largely dry and teetotaling and where alcohol wasn't a problem? What Gusfield proposes was that one needed to look at the larger context. Where was alcohol use most common at the time? It was among the urban, mostly Catholic, immigrants. He argues that the rural, Protestant Americans felt they were losing their status, their values and cultural dominance of their America to the waves of immigrants arriving in urban areas, who arrived with their own cultural traits, especially the use of alcohol. The temperance movement was then largely a cultural movement, pitting the old American culture against the threatening new one. The alcohol was symbolic of a way of life that was threatening the old way of life; Joe called it "status politics", then a new and provocative insight for social movements and social change as well as the usage of law for cultural dominance. This also partly explained why the temperance movement was unflagging about their insistence that it be complete prohibition. Yet after the law was passed, much of the temperance movement had little interest in its enforcement, because they (and others) knew that the law upheld one set of cultural values over another. All could know whose law it was.

In 1955 Joe moved from Hobart to the University of Illinois where he was a faculty member until 1969. These were Joe's first years at a major university with a graduate program. It was the time that universities were in an unprecedented expansion mode. It was also a time of extant social movements and social change. These were also the years Joe went to India on a Fulbright for the first of 6 stays during the rest of his career. He became interested in development and modernization, as well the impact of cultural differences. This was also the time Joe was committed to civil rights, including participating in the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965.

In 1965 Joe was offered the opportunity to begin a new sociology department at UCSD in California. He first turned it down but when it was offered again in 1967, he accepted. In his own words:

It would be a department that broke with the conventional quantitative bent of modern sociology and emphasized the central importance of observation and data collection. But the offer also held out the opportunity to begin a new intellectual life. (123)

Joe arrived in 1969 and began the department that would reflect what he had absorbed at Chicago from Blumer, Hughes and Warner, plus new, seemingly compatible directions of strains like ethnomethodology. It was a noble experiment and continues as a department that has Gusfieldian roots. Chandra Mukerji, a long time UCSD faculty member and an equally long Gusfield friend, reflects on the UCSD years in a companion article.

Joe was involved in a number of areas of research at UCSD. I will only focus on one here, the work of which he is proudest, *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking, Driving and the Public Order* (1981). This is ostensibly a study of drinking, driving and policy, but it is sociologically much more than that. It is a major contribution to the sociology of social problems and an important way of potentially rethinking the problem of drunk driving. One major question Joe asks is who owns the problem of drinking and driving, how does that shape the way the problem is conceived, what kind of data are collected about the problem, and ultimately what kind of policies are promulgated to manage the problem. The book was awarded the 1983 Charles Horton

Cooley Award from the SSSI. Joel Best's other companion article will have more to add about Joe's contributions to the Sociology of Social Problems.

Given that that these reflections were prepared for an SSSP sponsored session, I should mention that Joe was President of the SSSP in 1988–89 and delivered a incisive presidential Address, "Constructing the Ownership of Social Problems: Fun and Profit in the Welfare State." (1989)

Joe retired from UCSD in 1991 and kept active as a sociologist and his other beloved avocation, painting. But that is another story. In his rich and productive career Joe contributed to an unusual number of subareas: alcohol studies, social movements, sociology of social problems, sociology of culture, historical sociology, policy analysis, to name only the most obvious. He also contributed concepts to the sociological toolbox that continue to enlighten scholars' work: status politics, symbolic crusades, moral passage, who owns social problems. Sociology was enriched to have Joe Gusfield; he is appreciated and will be missed.