

# The First 50 Years

## Following Sol Tax

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It began with a mysterious phone call from Lita Osmundsen. “Would you mind coming to New York? Sol Tax is stepping down as Editor of *CA* and we would like your advice.” Of course I agreed, although I did not quite know how my advice would help.

At the Wenner-Gren offices, as I recall it, there was a meeting of the Board of the Foundation. They asked me to come in, and we talked a bit about the unique qualities of the journal. As always with the Board at that time, one had to defend the Foundation’s involvement.

Afterwards Lita invited me to become the new Editor. I had recently stepped down as Head of the University of British Columbia department, so I said that the timing was right and that it would be an unexpected privilege.

The next step was to visit Sol. He had a tiny office at the University of Chicago in which his small intense frame seemed to be covered with a confusion of files and loose papers. He told me about the way the system worked and stressed the extraordinary contribution made by Barbara Metzger in keeping up the quality of *CA* writing. He arranged to send me the large and invaluable card index of scholars that contained information about their specialties, so that they could be tapped as referees and commentators.

The head of the Journals Division at the University of Chicago Press, Jean Sacks, was welcoming, showing an intrigued interest in this strange addition to its stable. We talked, among other things, about raising advertising revenue, something that did not come about during my watch although we made several attempts, and I still feel there is a role for publicizing not only books but equipment of interest to fieldworkers.

Back in Vancouver, it was time to appoint at least one helper. The arrangement was that the Foundation would deposit an imprest account with the University which I would spend in accordance with university rules. Good fortune amazingly favored me. Along came (the late) Penny Gorham from England, who was the Dean’s secretary. She became a fiercely devoted and punctiliously efficient core of the enterprise. We established procedures that enabled her to keep in touch with me during my extensive traveling and essentially keep the show going without delays or hitches. Then within

a couple of days, who should arrive but (now) Jacqueline Geerbrandt, a French woman who had worked with anthropologists and was escaping with her child from a dire life in an Arctic tent where her partner was doing fieldwork. Jacqueline became a top translator in the international world. While she was building her career, she sorted the referees and commentators part-time, sticking with the journal even when it was a nuisance to her schedule and she didn’t need the small income. And a month or two later, a New Zealander, Anne Watters, became our part-time typist. Our United Nations-style office, appropriate for an international journal, was complete and stayed that way until I left, through thick and thin. Their effectiveness made it possible for me to continue to edit even when I was incarcerated and my mailing privileges were subject to censorship.

During his tenure as editor Sol Tax had his international interests front and center, a theme that fitted well with my own interests. This projected him into the leadership of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. It was a natural fit, and by happenstance I followed in his footsteps. Indeed, at one time there was discussion of the possibility that *CA* might be adopted by the Union as its official journal. *CA* reported on some of the Union’s activities. Sol had traveled widely to consult with colleagues about the form of *CA*, discussions that were the source of the journal’s (at the time) unique procedures. The editor had at his disposal a travel grant that enabled me to follow suit. Hence, with the additional generous assistance from Canadian sources, I was able to merge elements of the two organizations.

*CA*’s refereeing, discussion, and subscription systems were being noticed in other disciplines. There was an Association of Scientific Editors’ Associations. I received an invitation to join and was immediately bumped into the position of Vice President, learning a great deal from the meetings and becoming something of an object of curiosity. How did *CA* work? was a continual subject of interest. When the group published a huge volume, worthy of Sol Tax himself, of editorial practices, I had a few paragraphs. Now some of the *CA* procedures have been adopted in other subjects from medicine to sociology, the processes now immensely enhanced by e-mail and the Internet.

The task of persuading colleagues in other countries that their submissions were welcome was a tough one. From Scandinavia to Africa I found people working, often under difficult conditions, on unusual projects. Often these were addressed to data from within the country itself. The authors thought the articles were not of international but of local interest and published highly significant material in national papers that only regional specialists in other countries knew about. Yet the methods and theoretical themes were often innovative and of more general international application. I also felt the need for cross-regional communication on issues of common interest to different continents. I assured colleagues that they could submit in their own languages, which would be pub-

lished as such with English translation carried out in Vancouver. In Africa the situation of anthropologists was dire for many reasons. Among these was a lack of relevant literature and a lack of typing assistance. The first was a major deterrent because articles had to be located in the broader literature. For the second, though, we assured colleagues that they could submit in pencil if that helped. Indeed, there were a couple of submissions in that format.

There was some francophone response to this policy, but the main interest came from the Soviet Union. There was a fascinating meeting with colleagues in Moscow during which, by implication, anthropologists barraged me with questions to ensure themselves that I had editorial independence and that the Foundation was not some sort of front for the CIA. There were several papers submitted in Russian, and the Russians insisted on having the translations done in Moscow. When the papers were published in both languages, despite Barbara Metzger's valiant efforts, the English versions were wooden.

After I stepped down, I tried in a very small way to address the issue. With the help of several foundations I organized a small workshop in Nairobi on writing for international journals for a few social scientists from eastern and southern Africa. Barbara Metzger was part of the team, along with John Ogbu from the University of California and A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo from Kenya. The participants generously accepted the

ways in which we picked apart their essays and reshaped them, moving them in principle from articles suitable for a local journal into ones that could be presented to a wider field. Although we felt it very much worthwhile, the experiment was not repeated.

In the 20 years since then, conditions of African academe have changed almost beyond recognition. In particular, libraries, book publishing, scholarly organizations, digital publication, and Internet access have improved radically in many countries. One wonders if Sol Tax's dream for *Current Anthropology* will become even more real.

Some years after I handed over responsibility for *CA*, I decided to apply the lessons I had learned to a Web journal called the *AnthroGlobe Journal*, now run by the Centre for Computing and Anthropology at the University of Kent. This offers an opportunity to publish multimedia articles of varying length without deadlines and depending on communication rather than referees for the ultimate judgment of worth. In the meantime, *CA* has itself embraced the Internet. The broad principles of scholarly publishing are slowly shifting like a quiet tectonic plate. It will be fascinating to see the ultimate results of the movements in scholarly communication. In my own consideration of this I owe an enormous amount to Sol Tax's pioneering vision, to *Current Anthropology*, and to its contributors.