

The First 50 Years

An Editor's Tale

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Nearly a quarter of a century ago—and roughly halfway to CA's fiftieth birthday—I took over as editor of CA, in succession to Sol Tax and Cyril Belshaw. The appointment process was very informal. I was invited to submit a brief application. A few months later, having almost forgotten all about it, I was offered the job. I had never met either of the previous editors, and I knew nothing about Lita Osmundsen, the director of the Wenner-Gren Foundation. We met only several months later. She was warm and charming (Douglas 1986), but rather vague about the terms and conditions of the editorship, although she was very insistent that I should enjoy it. In practice she gave me *carte blanche*.

When Sydel Silverman took over at the Wenner-Gren, a new decisiveness soon became apparent. However, I was in London, far from New York. Sydel made a brisk visit to the office but then left me to my own devices. The office was generously funded. I was encouraged to travel to local conferences all over the world. In many ways it was an ideal arrangement.

The one obvious drawback was that I felt poorly equipped to edit a four-fields journal. My training was in social anthropology. I had no background in human biology or prehistory. However, I was not on my own. Barbara Metzger was my constant and most dependable ally. She had been copy editor of the journal almost from the first. Acute, exact, informed, tactful, wonderfully literate, she was happy to edit creatively, rewriting as much as was needed in order to make contributions clear and reliable. (Virtually all contributors were delighted with the results, although one senior scholar was so upset when a precious phrase was cut that he vowed never to write for the journal again.) Then there were the advisory editors. Instead of the traditional board of worthy names, I introduced a rotating panel of three or four experts (international, and always including an archaeologist and a biological anthropologist). They were consulted on the choice of reviewers and were expected to steer contributors our way. Finally, there were the associates of CA. An invention of Sol Tax, this network of volunteers, drawn from our individual subscribers, felt a personal commitment to the aims of the journal. They were my primary sources of reviewers and commentators.

I could not depend entirely on my backup, of course. I had to learn—and there was a great deal to be learned. Everything was in flux. Some very old questions seemed to be on the point of finding answers at last—about the Neanderthals, and hunter-gatherers, and language origins. While I had some grasp of developments in sociocultural anthropology, I had to get a grip on models of primate behavior, find out about the schools of cognitive and ecological archaeology, learn about techniques of dating and DNA analysis.

What was at least equally challenging, though in a different way, was the discovery that as editor of CA, I had to come to terms with a great divide that was opening up in American anthropology. The old standoff between the Boasians and the evolutionists had been revived but translated into a new idiom. On the one side were the sociobiologists, provocative and ambitious, even imperialist. On the other, a postmodernist cultural anthropology had suddenly appeared, attractive to many students, unwelcome to the generally positivist readership of *Current Anthropology*. Derek Freeman's assault on Margaret Mead became a touchstone for the zealots of the two opposed parties, the relativists (Who knows who is right, after all?) and the Popperians, for whom Freeman became a rather erratic spokesman. Inclined to paranoia, Freeman communicated his dark suspicions of relativist and antiscientific hanky-panky in a stream of handwritten letters. As editor I received abusive and threatening missives from him. His supporters joined in with accusations of censorship and antiscientific attitudes when I published criticisms of his arguments or did not give him the space to reply to a reply to one of his polemics. This was rather unsettling, but more usually, debates were conducted courteously enough. CA simply held the ring while protagonists squared up to one another and onlookers weighed in with their views.

If American anthropology was divided, perhaps breaking up, there was nevertheless an international constituency for CA. Its readers had a passionate interest in human evolution, a great curiosity about long-term histories, and a common sense that although people might be much the same everywhere, they made their lives in very different circumstances and thought about the world in unpredictable yet comprehensible ways. I tried to find articles that ranged across two or more of the subdisciplines. This sometimes led me to turn down perfectly good archaeological reports or ethnographic essays if they did not address the central themes that engaged the readership. In order to sustain the central thrust of the journal, it was also necessary to commission material. The commentaries were the most important, of course, but I also invited essays on particular national traditions (and published a special issue on Japan by Japanese anthropologists), commissioned reports of conferences and exhibitions, introduced a series of interviews of leading scholars, and developed a small book review section. (Because CA was effectively interdisciplinary, reviewers were advised that the model should

be the *New York Review of Books* rather than *American Anthropologist*.)

This was a large enough agenda, but *CA* was more than just another anthropology journal. The Wenner-Gren Foundation was determined to sustain an international constituency. *CA* advertised itself as a world journal. It was launched as the Cold War began to divide Soviet and Western scholars, and Sol Tax did his best to ensure that *CA* was read by—and written for—both sides of the Iron Curtain. (His great innovation, the instant commentaries, allowed him to commission responses from scholars who might not have risked sending independent contributions.) Subscriptions were highly subsidized outside western Europe and North America. *CA* was often the one foreign journal that scholars could afford. In some of the Communist countries it was the only one that they were permitted to read. Tax's successor, Cyril Belshaw, carried on this international program. Backed by the Wenner-Gren, both men also provided leadership in the International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, then the only anthropological association that brought together Eastern Bloc and Western scholars (and, perhaps, a few spies).

When I became editor, perestroika was in the air. In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell. New initiatives were in order. There had been talk of an association to serve all European social anthropologists, and I was approached to set it up. Sydel Silverman agreed that it was very much in the tradition of what a *CA* editor should do, and she provided some seed money. Founded in December 1988, the European Association of Social Anthropologists was soon flourishing, and it is now, under a Polish president, celebrating its twentieth anniversary.

Editing *CA*, a resolutely international journal, with its tradition of commentaries, was like orchestrating a worldwide virtual seminar. As I edited, I learned. In fact, I learned more from editing *CA* than from any part of my formal training. In the end I wrote a book—*The Chosen Primate*—that was, in effect, my passing-out dissertation. *CA* made me into a real anthropologist.

Reference Cited

- Douglas, Mary. 1986. Lita Osmundsen and the Wenner-Gren Foundation: an appreciation. *Current Anthropology* 27(5): 521–525.