

NEWSLETTER OF THE  
**Comparative & Historical SOCIOLOGY**  
SECTION OF THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

October 1991

Vol. 4: No. 1

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**GOODBYE...**

This is the last issue of the newsletter that I am editing. Thanks to all who helped out, most especially Barbara Laslett. Contributions for the January issue should be sent to the new editor, George Steinmetz, at the Department of Sociology, The University of Chicago, 1126 E. 59th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637. George's work phone is 312-702-0398.

Julia Adams

**HELLO...**

***Report of the new Section Chair, Ron Aminzade***

As incoming chair of the section, I'm pleased to report that our roundtables and our three sessions (on rational choice theory, social movements, and Charles Tilly's new book) at the Cincinnati meetings drew large audiences and stimulated lively discussion. Thanks to the efforts of Pam Walters, David Zaret, and Barbara Laslett, we had a great party, which attracted an overflow crowd of loquacious and thirsty sociologists. Our section membership is now comfortably above the 400 member level, which allows us to organize three sessions and roundtables for next year's meeting.

This year's business meeting focussed on three issues: changes in rules for the annual prize, topics for next year's sessions, and how to encourage more graduate students to join our section. Members approved a recommendation from the council to move the deadlines for submissions for the prize to January 1st and to limit submissions to published articles. Section members also decided on three topics for next year's sessions: "World Systems Analysis and Comparative/Historical Sociology" (organizers: Ron Aminzade and Philip McMichael); "Identity Formation in Comparative/Historical Perspective" (organizer: Ann Orloff); and "Empirical Explanation--People or Processes: Data, Events, and Aggregation in Historical Sociology" (organizers: Jack Goldstone and John Hall). We discussed various ways to encourage graduate student membership, including providing free issues of the newsletter to prospective members.

The altruistic behavior of our members challenged the assumptions of rational choice theory. Carole Turbin, who did an impressive job of organizing this year's roundtables, agreed to once again take on this task. Harland Prechel agreed to chair the Nominations Committee, which includes Said Arjomand, Kathleen Blee, Larry Griffin, and Craig Jenkins. Kim Voss will

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chair the Prize Committee, which includes William Sewell, Jr., Carol Connell and two additional members to be recruited.

This is Julia Adams' last issue as newsletter editor and we owe her our collective thanks for a fine job. It's a hard act to follow, but our new editor George Steinmetz (University of Chicago) is eager to keep the pages of the newsletter filled with up-to-date research reports, controversial insights, and news of what our members are doing. Please send him your suggestions and contributions. If you are unable to make the annual meetings, take advantage of the pages of the newsletter to express your opinion and contribute to our dialogue. Articles which deal with issues relevant to next year's sessions are especially welcome. We look forward to hearing from you.

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### **MORE ON COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY PROGRAMS ...**

The last newsletter carried an article based on responses to Rachel Parker and William Roy's survey of comparative-historical sociology programs. Since then, three more programs have responded.

Professor Edward A. Tiryakian, of the **Duke University** sociology department, is the convener of the department's formal graduate program in comparative-historical sociology. The program, which has been in existence for 15 years, includes 8 faculty and 20 graduate students. The department offers a course in comparative-historical methods on an annual basis; the course generally attracts about 15 students. Faculty research interests focus on Europe, Canada, East Asia and Latin America, while doctoral dissertations in progress deal with such topics as a comparative study of the women's movement in Canada and the United States, organizational strategies of the German and American machine tool industry, export strategies of Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the changing role of religious volunteer organizations in Central America.

Although the department does not have a formal program yet, writes Professor Juan Diez Medrano of the **University of California-San Diego**, department members are heavily involved in comparative historical research. About 9 faculty members are currently engaged in this type of work, and at least 6 more do contemporary comparative sociology. Every year the department offers a required 7-week course on Comparative Historical Sociological Methods; an optional 10-week course on more advanced methodological topics is also offered annually, designed for students who want to use it to fulfill one of their methods requirements. The department may institutionalize a formal program in the future.

**The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor** sociology department has had a long comparative-historical tradition. At present, 11 faculty members are engaged in comparative-historical research; approximately 50 graduate students are working in conjunction with these faculty. The department's course in Comparative-Historical Methods is bi-annual, alternating with a course in qualitative field methods. Some faculty and graduate students also participate in the interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Social Transformation (CSST), which provides a number of different forums for faculty and graduate students to engage each other's work, as well as bringing in visiting scholars with comparative-historical concerns.

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*Did we miss your program?*

*If so, write a letter about it to the Newsletter...*

*The information will appear in the January issue*



## **THE WEBSTER DECISION: AN HISTORIAN'S EXPERIENCE**

*Linda Gordon, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

In the most recent major Supreme Court decision about abortion, the Webster case, I was one of a group of historians who wrote an historians' amicus brief in defense of abortion rights. It was in many ways an impressive and gratifying effort, for in the end 427 historians signed the brief, including many who had not participated in writing it and who thus had to endorse something to which they no doubt had minor objections that could not be accommodated. We have no way of measuring the brief's influence; perhaps someday the private papers of today's Supreme Court Justices will be examined by historians, but certainly few of us would seriously imagine the Justices to be immune to pressure from various lobbying groups. I would certainly do such a brief again if asked. Nevertheless, the process and the product raised some questions for me about the relation between scholarly and legal argumentation.

The brief made two main arguments. The first, developed (or at least presented to me) by Sylvia Law, seems brilliant to my most nonlegal mind: abortion was first prohibited in the US, and in most of the world, in the middle and late 19th century, having previously been legally and customarily accepted. The goal of this prohibition was largely the legal defense of a Victorian notion of woman's proper place, and it was stimulated by the fears and anxieties caused by the women's rights movement as well as by non-organized women's claims of greater freedom. It was easy for the historians writing the brief to supply evidence that this purpose underlay the state laws against abortion. Nineteenth-century abortion opponents spoke of selfish women, rejecting their destined maternal role, subverting thereby the normative family. And most abortion opponents condemned abortion and contraception equally; many did not even distinguish between them, and some used the term "foeticide" to apply to both.

But despite the occasional appearance of this phrase, the 19th-century opponents of abortion were not much concerned with fetuses of "unborn children". They did not much use the rhetorical fetal "rights" -- although certainly rights discourse was well known to them. They were clear and unembarrassed about their aim: they wanted to impose mandatory motherhood on married women. This purpose, the Webster brief argued, is no longer constitutional. Courts have ruled repeatedly that it is not proper to use the state to enforce a particular conception of the sexual division of labor, the family, or sex "roles". Thus to prohibit one of women's most basic reproductive choices is also unconstitutional.

I explain the contemporary importance of attributing rights to a fetus in a parallel way: it is no longer acceptable -- or at least not yet, not in secular circles -- to speak publicly of women's duty to serve in a particular social condition. In fact the rhetoric of the New Right is saturated with anxiety about the subversion of society and family by women's nondomestic aspirations, but in legal and official discourse this remains a subordinated or veiled argument. The usefulness of the "right-to-life" position is that it is apparently gender neutral. Of course it is not, any more than prohibiting begging or denying that tenants have rights affects rich and poor alike. But as the brief says, "we must therefore question whether protection of unborn life has become a surrogate for other social objectives that are no longer tolerated."

The brief's second argument was one that I myself had often used, because it corrects the widespread myth that a prohibition on abortion was somehow "traditional". In fact, abortion was legal through most of the "western" -- i.e. Christian -- world until the mid-19th century. Its prohibition then (as a backlash against a developing women's rights movement) began first in the secular and Protestant countries, followed by the Catholic. The Webster brief presented various authorities demonstrating that abortion was not

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only widespread, not only commonplace, but also unstigmatized in the 17th- and 18th-century US. Cut from the final version of the brief was one of my favorite of our assertions, an attack on strict constructionists: that the writers of the US Constitution had almost certainly all known a woman who had had an abortion; if they had wanted to prohibit it, they would have done so.

There was a growing discomfort with this argument -- not enough that anyone argued entirely against using it in the brief, but it was clear that the more we thought, the less we liked it. The objections should be obvious: slavery, wife-beating and coverture also prevailed "traditionally" in the US. How can we avoid what appears to be opportunism in choices of argument and evidence, depending on whether we prefer change or continuity, and depending on which of several traditions -- in this case we liked the 18th century better than the 19th -- is in our interest? Maybe there are legal theorists who have tried to answer this concern. Had we had the time and money to hold the Webster brief-writing group together for longer or periodic meetings, we might have made some progress in thinking this through. (It would be a wonderful topic for a small working conference.)

The issue is important because it isn't an ultimate, irreducible, ethical question of which traditions we want to keep and which to change. It is a question that has been addressed with much greater sophistication with respect to other issues by historians who have shown that practices and laws that may appear similar across different eras may have extremely different meanings. This is by now fairly well understood, among good women's historians anyway, about the argument between protective legislation and the ERA. In 1910 the arguments for giving protective legislation for women a try were, on balance, stronger than the arguments for the ERA. At some point between, say, 1940 and 1950 it became clear that the balance had shifted. What shifted it was administrative and legal experience, and substantial change in a variety of economic and demographic factors. An understanding of such change would be it seems to me

vital in the Johnson Controls case. We need such a discussion about, for example, why feminists opposed abortion (and contraception, let me remind you) in the 19th century and what changed their minds; or why women we might call embryonic feminists in an earlier period seem to have taken abortion for granted as a reasonable choice for women. We need to be able to explain clearly and simply to a "public" why such a transformation made sense.

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## ***MORE SECTION NEWS***

### ***CALL FOR PAPERS FOR SECTION PRIZE***

The section on Comparative Historical Sociology will award a prize for the best article in historical and/or comparative historical sociology published in the last two years (since January 1, 1990). Papers may be submitted by the authors or by others. Five copies of papers submitted should be sent to Kim Voss, Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, to arrive no later than 1 January 1992.

### ***WHO'S WHO :***

#### ***SECTION NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE***

The Nominations Committee of the Comparative Historical section now consists of: Harland Prechel (chair), Texas A&M University; Said Arjomand, SUNY-Stony Brook; Kathleen Blee, University of Kentucky; Larry Griffin, Vanderbilt University; Craig Jenkins, Ohio State University.

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**The Library of Sociology Series** (Garland, New York) is planning to publish monographs and edited volumes on issues related to aging, women, poverty/homelessness, AIDS, Vietnam veterans, race and ethnicity, family, law, economy, education, health, and other issues of contemporary interest. Proposals should be submitted to the series editor: Dan A. Chekki, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Winnipeg; Winnipeg, Manitoba; R3B 2E9 Canada.

The founder of the **Journal of the History of Sociology**, Jack Nusan Porter, would like to convince the ASA to adopt the journal and make it an official journal of the association. If you want to register your opinion, contact a member of the ASA Publications Committee. For more information, write Jack Nusan Porter; The Spencer Group; 8 Burnside Road; Newton, Massachusetts 02161.

**The ASA and the Society for Applied Sociology** have made available the 1991 directory of "Graduate Programs in Applied Sociology and Sociological Practice" (2nd edition). This 48-page directory lists the details of 118 graduate programs that offer applied or practice components. Copies are available for \$5.00 from: ASA Teaching Services Program; 1722 N Street NW; Washington, DC 20036.

In addition to the Comparative-Historical section's formal activities, several **ASA Open Submission Topic sessions** for next year's annual meetings that are not organized by the section may be of interest to members:

"Historical Sociology". Organizer: Sonya O. Rose, Sociology Department, Colby College; Waterville, Maine 04901; tel. 207-872-3207; [SOROSE@COLBY.EDU](mailto:SOROSE@COLBY.EDU)

"Historical Methodology". Organizer: Fatma Muge Goccek, Sociology Department, The University of Michigan; 3012 LS&A Building; Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109; tel. 313-747-4228; Bitnet: [USERGEV2@UMICHUM](mailto:USERGEV2@UMICHUM); Internet: [MUGEGOCEK@UM.CC.UMICH.EDU](mailto:MUGEGOCEK@UM.CC.UMICH.EDU)

"Marxist Sociology". Organizer: Julia Adams, Sociology Department, The University of Michigan; 3012 LS&A Building; Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109; tel. 313-936-0785; Bitnet: [USERGFKP@UMICHUM](mailto:USERGFKP@UMICHUM); Internet: [JULIAADAMS@UM.CC.UMICH.EDU](mailto:JULIAADAMS@UM.CC.UMICH.EDU)