

Reflections For eSymposium

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Prelude

In 2000, I took part in an interim conference of the ISA Research Council in Montreal, organized by the then VP for Research, Arnaud Sales. During these sessions, there were many interesting papers. The session I remember most vividly was the business meeting chaired by the organizer in which there was a talk about the upcoming congress by the then VP for the Congress Program, Piotr Sztompka. Both Sales and Sztompka had the responsibility of promoting the forthcoming congress and had important information to impart in a limited time; they tried to advance the big issues – the issues that concerned the ISA as a whole. But the representatives of the RCs/WGs/TGs were palpably ‘wired’ and wanted to talk about their particular interests. Looking at the topics being discussed as ‘players’ with the points of view of their own groups, the representatives complained about the ISA handling the finances of all the research groups: they wanted more support from the association for running interim conferences; they expressed dissatisfaction with the requirement that all the members of the research groups had to pay separately for membership in the ISA; and they each demanded more consideration in the form of an allocation of a larger number of sessions at congresses. The core issue as they saw it was that people who had a specific research interest were happy to be part of a research group; and they wanted proof that the ISA was really contributing something to the game.

At that meeting, both the division of labor and content highlighted the split between the interests of

the association and those of the research groups. The research groups insisted that when all was said and done, they were the reason for the existence of the association. Then serving my second term as President of RC36 (Study of Alienation Theory and Research), I shared the feelings of many of the others who attended that meeting. It all connected with the theme of my RC’s research, didn’t it? I was acutely conscious of the possibility that even in an association with the benign professional intentions of the ISA, the clash of interests indicated that alienation might be inherent in the structure.

While at that meeting, many of the groups expressed their claims with some bitterness, I discovered later that the officers had taken the statements seriously and that the Executive Committee (EC) had subsequently made changes. The handling of RC dues and the financial support for research groups were liberalized; and the rules for allocating congress sessions were diversified. Research groups could earn more sessions by combining forces and by organizing extraordinary sessions. From informal discussions with RC officers in Gothenburg, I learned that while those problems have indeed been resolved, there are still issues between the constituent groups and the central organization. The challenges of maintaining a healthy diversity of membership in research groups and sustaining professional support for sociological research around the globe apparently require that structures likely to be alienating constantly be revised.

I am writing this after learning how to see the is-

sues from the standpoint of an RC representative to the EC and of an officer of the association. Two years after the stormy meeting in Montreal, I was elected to the EC and four years after that became VP for Publications. Now, having completed my term as VP, I know how consistently the ISA functions in attempts to shape an organizational policy that furthers the interests of the research groups. But, I also know that thanks to the keen insights of the representatives of the research groups and of the national associations, inappropriate projects, or even missteps of the EC can be caught and corrected – and that is for the best of all those involved in the ISA.

Getting to the Congress in Durban

My election as ISA VP for Publications was strange. It began when a friend insisted that I could ‘do it.’ I had no idea if she was right, if only because I had no more than a fleeting idea of what ‘it’ was. But becoming a candidate was a relatively easy process, and of course I could rely on those voting to decide whether or not there was a chance that I would be suitable. Elections were to take place at the Durban congress. When the summer of 2006 arrived, my head and heart were not really open to the attractions of the position, or, as a matter of fact, to the attractions of the congress.

The war between Israel and Lebanon (the Second Lebanese War) started almost two weeks before the congress. The outbreak of war, which seemed to be explained by decisions in ‘high places’ and undoubtedly was designed there, was first of all a painful jolt to everyday life. That evening, I was at a concert. The hall was full and the Israel Philharmonic, as usual, was in good form. The normalcy of a night out was belied when, after the intermission, there were rumors that some rockets had fallen on the hill leading to Stella Maris, an abbey overlooking the Haifa bay. I called home to make sure that my daughter and granddaughter were all right and when the concert was over, the whole audience left the hall unusually quietly. We all knew what this meant.

Haifa, with a population of about 300,000, is a tidy city built on a hill. One side faces a bay and the

other side faces the Mediterranean. After that evening, toward the middle of July, the city was shelled almost every day. Frequent sirens sent us squirreling into our Protected Space within 2 minutes, as advised; there we could hear the booms (How far from us?) while listening to reports on the radio about where the rockets had fallen and whether there was any damage, or, any ‘people hurt.’ We always knew, of course, that if there were no reports of specific ‘injuries’, ‘hurt’ meant that somebody had been killed. And people from different places in the city – Mt. Carmel (a middle to high class area), Wadi Nisnass (a relatively poor neighborhood downtown with a majority of Arab residents), the industrial area (people who simply had come to work on time) - were indeed ‘hurt’. We realized that the rockets were probably aimed at the industrial area just outside the city; but in practice, there was, we soon discovered, no particular order to the hits and no logic that could help people figure out where to be in order to avoid trouble. Workplaces had no rational excuse to shut down. Going shopping was an activity that could mean extreme danger because a rocket might land on the mall or on the supermarket. Visiting friends or family in the evening was a risk the seriousness of which could not be calculated. But staying home could also bring disaster, as residential quarters were shelled freely. We learned that in the north of the country, there was even more shelling and people were pent up in public refuges.

Obviously we were not the only civilians in the region who were too nervous, frightened and anxious to make plans. Our fears and our shame were augmented by reports of what was happening in the villages in the south of Lebanon and in the much-bombed city of Beirut. Gone were the apparent rationalities of diplomatic maneuvering, buried under barrages of explosions. For non-combatants, war overtakes common sense and logic.

Yet, there was nothing to do but attempt to go on with what we thought our lives were about. In my own life, whether or not I should travel to the congress became a topic for family consultations. In the back of our heads was a kind of rule of thumb that had emerged from far too much experience. Wars in our area of the Middle East are usually fought in the

summer when there is no rain; and maybe because it is very hot, they are not interminable. The family consensus was that I should go – after all, the congress was only to last for a week — and the day before the date of my trip was magically one when no rockets fell on the city. There was room for the hope that the war was indeed winding down after two and a half weeks as had happened in the past.

Still, I left home worried and beset by guilty feelings about leaving loved ones in the danger zone. The fact is that hostilities flared up again while I was away, and the fighting went on with no signs of easing off. In Durban, my primary sources of information were CNN reports and personal phone calls. I was immersed in fear for people in Lebanon and in Israel, and in anger at the generals who seemed to have no qualms about going on with the relentless killing. I had no way of knowing how long the conflict would last while I was at the congress, but our guesses were all wrong. The fighting was destined to continue for more than a month after I returned.

With the deformations and dangers of war uppermost in my mind, the matter of elections naturally had only a secondary place in my attention. But I did take part in the election that evening, and it was gratifying to be chosen.

The Four-Year Term

At the outset of my term of office, I had only a vague idea that, as VP, I would have to make sure that the needs of the ISA as an organization and the needs of individual members would be served to the best of our capacities. On the personal level, frankly, all I had in mind at the start was how to get through the meeting with the new Publications Committee (PC) safely. Luckily, the meeting immediately after the elections was short and was no more than a chance to become acquainted. So I was not required to be very competent. It was reassuring to know that the meeting thereafter was still about a year away when the EC as a whole would have its annual meeting. I was beset with worries about how others would see ‘me’ in the role.

In 2007, the meeting was in Recife, Brazil, and there I discovered that thanks to the PC assistant

(Sylvia Trnka), I as VP just had to be open to fitting into the rhythm of the committee’s history. A more or less fixed agenda had room for me to open the meeting, to thank the editors for their dedication, the secretariat, the publisher, and Sylvia. By this time, I had some idea of how important publications were not only to individual researchers but also to the ISA as an organization.

The minutes of that meeting quote me as explaining that I see my job “as collecting ideas and doing [my] best to facilitate their implementation.” We talked about the fact that the task of the PC was to make sure that the work of ISA sociologists was given a stage that not only earned them their due, but also inspired further research. Just to underline our goals, we looked at the PC mandate as laid down in the ISA statutes, namely “to oversee the running of the ISA’s publications, and to propose policies in the area of publications”.

The meeting was filled with reports from the editors, from Sage, and from *Sociological Abstracts*. There were also initial discussions about new proposals. It turned out that there were many details that had to be clarified in relation to each of them. At that meeting we discussed a new project - following up on the speeches of ISA Presidents in order to discern some trends in sociology over the past fifty years. The PC approved, and luckily Jennifer Platt agreed to take on the responsibility of carrying out the task (which indeed was completed and uploaded for the Congress in Gothenburg). The Committee also approved a budget for supporting a publication emerging out of the first conference of the National Associations organized by then VP for National Associations, Sujata Patel.

Marcel Fournier, as the head of a Task Force for exploring the ‘State of the Art’, was a guest at one meeting and made several suggestions which were discussed with interest and pertinent questions about implementation were cited. The Recife meeting was a watershed. I had learned something about the rules of play in the committee and now had an inkling of how my role fit in with the ISA.

The first meeting set the pattern for later ones. In some, we discovered that proposals that seemed at-

tractive opportunities for publications could not ultimately be approved. One such idea was the proposal to publish RC/WG/TG working papers on the ISA Website. Although the idea was met with a great deal of enthusiasm, after discussion, the committee came to the conclusion that it was impracticable. Putting unfinished papers on the ISA site was seen as possibly endangering authors' chances to publish the completed papers in recognized journals.

At the Recife meeting and at subsequent meetings, the matters raised had to be discussed further, while new issues also concerned the committee. These included:

- Discounts on *Sage* publications for ISA members (a tentative promise of 45%-50%, which was eventually confirmed);
- The possibility of promoting ISA publications in languages other than English and to this end, seeking connections with publishers in the Spanish-speaking world (to date - difficult to negotiate);
- The possibility of compiling textbooks that would be appropriate for Introductory courses on the 'global South' to replace the current reliance on translations of Western texts (a firm decision has yet to be made);
- Publications of RCs that might want to have additional publications of their own (possible but without the ISA logo);
- Translations
- Of articles submitted in languages other than the official languages of the ISA,
- Of canonical books written in languages other than English and which would bring fresh material to the reader of English;
- The possibility of expanding the flagship journals
- Choosing new editors.

The issues that emerged from these discussions provided a framework for the tasks of the VP. Almost every topic that came up at a meeting required clarification with people who were not part of the committee's discussions. Because the EC and the PC meet only once a year, there would be elements of the proposals to discuss via e-mail. Some of the details of the

discussion required attention over more than a single year.

As VP, I made two important discoveries. For one thing, I discovered the power of history. First and foremost, I learned what it meant to be carrying on from the point to which my predecessor (Susan McDaniel) had brought publications. For another, I discovered what it means to grow into a job. After the meeting at Recife, I no longer had to guess at what there was to do, that elusive 'it'. Getting ideas for initiatives was a sign of catching on to the game. But it was more important to collect reactions and to revise ideas to include a variety of approaches. People from different parts of the globe who are involved in publications bring diverse approaches with them to organizational matters. And the magic of diversity is part of the added value of an international association. In part, the way members of the committee took sides for or against proposals were a test of how important the ideas were. Sometimes, paradoxically, I discovered that when there were splits in opinion, the opposition could be seen as a signal that we were discussing something really novel and of significance.

The central task of the VP turned out to be, as I had understood at the outset, ensuring that what was useful to members of the ISA would indeed be implemented. There were, however, different ways of finding out how to do things. This meant getting the hang of each of the issues and knowing whom to talk to, and whom to ask for help. Between the annual meetings there had to be correspondences to prepare the issues to be discussed, and after meetings there had to be correspondences to disseminate the outcomes of the discussions and to ensure that decisions would indeed be taken into account.

The items mentioned above seemed to become more complex as time went on. From year to year, the list of things to be done and things that could be done in connection with each item grew longer. This was an experience that I had no way of presaging. With an increased understanding of how complicated the tasks were, there was a growth of confidence — not in the sense of personal confidence — but in the sense of gaining a perspective on what was involved in the field of ISA publications and how this branch of the

association could be of use to members worldwide.

When somebody recently asked me what being VP for publications entailed, I found it fairly easy to enumerate the kinds of responsibilities the role imposes: leading the publications committee in overseeing the journals, initiating projects, finding solutions for ad hoc problems, locating publishing opportunities, as well as chairing meetings of the committee appointed by the EC and the Editors, plus meetings related to collaborations / discussions with editors, writers, publisher. Oh yes, and collecting complaints and ideas from the RCs and from the National Associations affiliated with the ISA.

But the list gives only the barest of outlines. I discovered that over the four year term one becomes socialized. The VP first imitates the imagined role, gathers experience, becomes accustomed to the routines, learns as many rules of the game as she can and gains a feeling for what kinds of novelties can or should be introduced and ultimately feels, after all, on top of things! Although the formal job description did not change, the content did become more detailed, and the modes of implementation became increasingly more interesting.

From a personal point of view, the four years were endlessly enriching. Through the publication needs expressed by members of the ISA, I was able to become acquainted with, and, at times, become closely associated with more and more people in the ISA. The verve of the research groups: committees, thematic groups, and working groups; the astonishing energy potential in the national associations affiliated with the ISA, all had some expression regarding publications and even if the VP was not doing 'it', the VP became the channel through which things got done. That meant that as VP, one's connection with the ISA deepens and broadens.

And then — it was over. There is a unique satis-

faction in having been an officer of the ISA. The fact that the constitution provides for no more than one term makes it easy to leave.

I think it is exactly right that a VP should not be allowed to hold the same position for more than four years. There is no question in my mind that it is good to have a new VP for Publications after each congress. There are two advantages. The usual argument is that a new person in the position means fresh ideas and fresh approaches. That is undoubtedly true. But for the history of the association there is something that is, I believe, even more important. In the swing of initiating projects and thinking up 'things to do', it is possible that any person in a position of responsibility may be instituting activities that are basically inappropriate for the association. A new administration necessarily has to make decisions on what to continue and how. Thus, the new PC with the new VP at the head will make obvious what ideas were indeed useful and can be integrated into the workings of the ISA and what ideas were perhaps out of place, premature, or even inept.

When, after the Gothenburg elections, I handed over the job of VP to the superbly competent hands of Jennifer Platt, I was, however, keenly aware of ambiguous feelings. Having learned what 'it' was in my own way, and having had to put a stop to 'doing it' by constitutional fiat, I now must cope with a residue of inadequacy. For one thing: knowing what I know now could I have done more? For another: was I able to carry out association policy in a way that contributed to the interests of the research groups — in a way that moderated what as RC36 representative I had read as structural alienation? And most of all: given that the ISA has the right to be growing in its own way, did my term of office help it along? Only future developments in the organization will tell.

Devorah Kalekin-Fishman, founding editor of the International Sociology Review of Books was ISA Vice-President for publications, 2006-2010. Among her recent publications: *The ISA Handbook in Contemporary Sociology* (ed., 2009, with Ann Denis, Sage), *Everyday Life in Asia: Perspectives from the Senses* (ed., 2010, with Kelvin Low, Ashgate), *The Shape of a Sociology for the 21st Century: Tradition and Renewal* (ed. In press, with Ann Denis, Sage). On completing her term of office as Vice-President (VP) for Publications, Devorah would like to summarize some of the lessons she has learnt: the intertwining of personal and public lives, the experience of Meadian socialization into an official position, and something about the force of organizational culture.
