

The Origins of *Sociological Forum*: An Ode to Robin M. Williams
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Sociological Forum is entering its 22nd year of publication as the official journal of the Eastern Sociological Society. The journal has published articles and review essays by sociological luminaries and has also been the venue for many first time authors who went on to become prominent sociologists. The current editor, Karen Cerulo of Rutgers, follows in the distinguished footsteps of prior editors including Robert Max Jackson, Richard Hall, and Stephen Cole. In this essay, I recall the origins of *Sociological Forum* and its founding editor, Robin M. Williams, Jr., who edited the first 7 volumes from 1986 to 1992. The death of Robin Williams in 2006 at age 91 marks the passing of one of the sociological giants of the 20th century whose vision shaped the origins and the evolution of *Sociological Forum*.

The story begins in the early 1980s when I joined the faculty of Cornell University. At the time, my image of Cornell sociology was Robin Williams. His work on race and ethnic relations had influenced my research and teaching, and I was looking forward to meeting him. He was out of town at the time of my job interview, but even in his absence, Robin Williams was the most talked-about person in the department. He had passed the traditional retirement age of 65, but he was still teaching more courses than anyone else. When Cornell had reduced the faculty teaching load some years earlier, he saw no reason to cut back. Moreover, as one Cornell faculty member told me, Robin Williams continued to advise more graduate students and publish more than anyone else in the department. I wasn't sure if these comments were ones of praise or envy, but there was a general feeling that Williams was a rate-buster, and his colleagues would breathe a bit easier when he faced the then mandatory retirement age of 70.

My initial contacts with Robin Williams were pleasant and friendly, but in a formal sort of way. His office was down the hall from mine, and he was there everyday from morning to late afternoon. His office door was always open, and there was a steady parade of students to his door. A couple of junior colleagues mentioned that I might wish to drop by at one of the Robin Williams' lunches at the faculty club. Robin Williams was a regular at a lunch table that anyone could join, but there was always a core group of senior faculty drawn from across campus. They didn't talk about research or politics, but told stories about the past, poked fun at each other, and laughed a lot. In those days, I thought that serious faculty members should talk about serious matters and I didn't see the point of extended lunchtime conversations on such inconsequential topics. I attended only one lunch and never returned.

In my second year at Cornell, I was acting departmental chair for a semester. This gave me an opportunity to try out some ideas for my self-assigned task of making everyone more serious.

After observing that departmental discussions about job candidates were superficial and often uninformed by a thorough reading of the files, I recommended that each faculty member write a memo on the pros and cons of each candidate prior to the meeting at which job candidates would be discussed. My proposal met with complete silence. Finally, Robin Williams explained that my proposal would add to everyone's workload and would not serve any useful purpose. Clearly, I had not impressed my senior colleagues, especially Professor Williams.

My missionary zeal for departmental upliftment was slowed down only temporarily. Pretty soon, I had another idea. Why not start a new sociological journal. Chicago had AJS, and UNC had Social Forces, so perhaps Cornell Sociology might move upward with an innovative journal with a distinctive voice. The Eastern Sociological Society was the only major regional association without a journal, so there seemed to be an empty niche that we might fill.

I had engaged a couple of accomplices among my colleagues, but we had neither the credentials nor credibility to convince the high muckety-mucks of the ESS Executive Committee. We did have one good idea, however, namely to enlist Robin Williams to serve as the designated editor. Several senior colleagues politely advised against even asking Robin Williams. He had just turned 70 and was about to retire; why would he want to edit a new journal.

Nonetheless, I sent Robin Williams a draft copy of our proposal and requested an appointment. After hearing me out, Robin gave me one of his stern looks and asked me if we were just trying to use the "Robin Williams" name to make the proposal look good. I stuttered and stammered, and insisted that he was clearly the best person to serve as editor, but I acknowledged that having the Robin Williams name would be helpful. Robin laughed and said that he often used the Robin Williams name whenever it might be useful. He said that we could use his name on our proposal, but was doubtful that the ESS would go for it.

We submitted the proposal to the ESS and were invited to meet with the Executive Committee at the next ESS meetings. Robin and Marguerite were off to Europe, so it was left to my accomplices and me to make the case. Our initial reception was not positive. In response to our argument that having a journal would benefit the Society, some executive committee members responded that the absence of a journal was not an oversight, but a conscious decision to focus ESS energies on intellectual discussions at the meetings rather than editing a pedestrian journal. Others thought that there was no need for a new sociological journal and the ESS would be embarrassed if a second rate publication would result. However, these words were countered with the reassurance that a journal edited by Robin Williams would certainly be first rate. We also scored points when mentioning that ESS presidential addresses were not routinely published, and that many of the fine papers presented at the ESS annual meetings would be first priority for inclusion in an official journal of the Society. The ESS Executive Committee were also concerned with our business plan, but we had done considerable homework and had the figures showing that an ESS journal was viable with a modest increase in dues and a few hundred library subscriptions. Some months later, after an exchange of letters between the ESS leadership and Robin Williams to confirm his commitment, the ESS gave its blessing.

For reasons that were not immediately obvious to me, Robin Williams was energized with the prospect of launching a new sociological journal and assumed full leadership of the planning

process. He told me that he had been disappointed earlier in his career when he was asked to edit ASR and there was insufficient collegial support to do so. This time Robin had support from across the Cornell campus, including Rural Sociology and sociologists in the Schools of Industrial and Labor Relations and Human Ecology

Robin assembled a first rate editorial board of Cornell sociologists and other distinguished sociologists from around the country, including Ruth Coser, Paul DiMaggio, Mel Kohn, Cora Marrett, Terry Sullivan, Glen Elder, William Foote Whyte, Morris Rosenberg, Doris Wilkinson, and many more. He worked the Deans across the Cornell campus as well as the Provost for interim subsidies and hired a first rate managing editor. In one of his most brilliant moves, he recruited Chuck Tilly to serve as the first book review editor. Tilly established a style of long review essays with editorial introductions that became a permanent feature of *Sociological Forum*.

With Robin in charge, I felt that my job in starting a new journal was done, and looked for new opportunities for my mission to make Cornell Sociology more serious. You may not be surprised to know that very few of my ideas met with any success.

I went on sabbatical the following year and wasn't thinking about the new journal. One day, when reading a Cornell newsletter, I came across a brief item that mentioned the new ESS sociological journal to be edited by Robin Williams. I sent a congratulatory note to Robin on the success of our fledging journal. By return post, I received the one and only angry letter that I ever received from Robin Williams. It seems that everything that could go wrong had gone wrong. The promised support from ESS had all but evaporated and a lot of other people who made promises of support were nowhere to be seen. He was losing sleep, and at his age, he did not need all the problems that I had foisted on him. And exactly what was I doing on sabbatical in Australia? Hadn't I promised him that I would support this new journal? I wrote back with all the apology that I could muster and said that I would return to Ithaca as soon as possible.

When I appeared in Robin's office a couple months later, some of the impending financial clouds had disappeared, but he was still upset with me for leaving town when I was needed to help run the journal. He told me that I had gotten him into this mess, and I had better enlist for the duration. He didn't ask me, but told me that I would be his deputy editor.

For the next two years, Robin worked pretty much full time on *Sociological Forum*, and I probably worked half time.¹ I tried to compartmentalize my role, since I was teaching full time and trying to hold together an ambitious research agenda. But as Robin Williams' deputy editor, I was obligated to (try to) keep pace with his expectations for a good editorial team. My idea of running a journal would have been to send promising submissions out for review and then wait for the reviews to arrive back at the editorial office. If the reviews were positive, then and only then would the editors have to read the papers.

¹ It only seemed that Robin was working full time on the journal. He was also chairing the National Research Council Committee on the Status of Black Americans (which published *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society*) and also continued to teach part-time.

This was not Robin Williams' style. He read every submission upon arrival. If the external reviews were not up to snuff, he would write his own detailed reviews (anonymously labeled as reviewer C). Even if the decision was to reject, he offered detailed comments on how the paper might be revised. If a paper were provisionally accepted, he offered specific instructions on organization as well as substance. After final acceptance, each paper was given the full editorial treatment. Of course, we had a managing editor to copy-edit accepted papers, but Robin believed that the editors should also edit every paper to eliminate redundancy, to organize the logical flow of ideas and analysis, and to enhance clarity of expression. Once I spent the better part of a day editing an accepted paper of an eminent sociologist. The author wrote a note to the managing editor thanking her for the exceptional copy-editing by *Sociological Forum*.

One day, Robin Williams explained that editors should never expect gratitude for a job well done. Authors of rejected papers were understandingly angry with the editors. The authors of accepted papers felt that the editors had only done their job. Even if we had substantially rewritten most of the published papers, our responsibility was to give full credit to our authors and to remain invisible.

There were quarterly meetings with the local editorial board and weekly meetings of the editors (Robin, the managing editor, and me) to review the status of each submission under consideration. I was expected to comment on the merits of every paper under review as well as the qualifications of reviewers. In addition, Robin would come to my office once or twice a week to drop off a manuscript on which he wanted my opinion. He expected my response the following day. He did not simply want to know whether I liked or disliked the paper, but if the methods were appropriate, the theory was clear, and if there was a significant empirical contribution. It was impossible to keep up with Robin's pace of work, and it was all that I could do to just keep up the pretence that I was his deputy editor.

Starting a new journal is quite different than running an established one. Papers that came in over the transom were very uneven, and we were constantly scouting for new and innovative research at ASA and ESS meetings. We also ran our own business office. All ESS members were automatic subscribers, but we wanted to establish a national readership, and most of all, to have a solid base of library subscriptions that would guarantee financial solvency. My father had been a small businessman and wrote advertising copy, and so I drew upon my heritage in writing solicitation letters, brochures, and subscription forms to increase individual and library subscribers. Although I was loathe to admit it, I greatly enjoyed both the editorial and business aspects of running *Sociological Forum*.

Sociological Forum was an immediate critical success. The first issue had Rose Coser's ESS presidential address and additional articles by Cynthia Epstein, Michael Hannan, Mel Kohn, Guy Swanson, and Harrison White. A special section called "Notes and Insights" had provocative essays by Charles Page and Charles Perrow. The new reviews essays editor, Chuck Tilly wrote a marvelous reflective piece on differences in the disciplines of sociology, history, and social history. In his statement on editorial policy, Robin called for articles that focused on social change and articles that linked together subfields of the discipline.

The problems, especially financial, of producing *Sociological Forum* did not disappear, and this wore heavily on Robin's shoulders. The ESS had made a financial commitment to *Sociological Forum* that the organization had great difficulties in fulfilling. Robin was obliged to raise funds and he called in almost all of his chits from Cornell deans and successive Provosts, to cover the costs of *Sociological Forum*. After several years, the ESS leadership decided that a commercial publisher had to be found to lower ESS financial commitments. This was a step backward – the costs of subscribing to non ESS members and to libraries jumped rapidly and we lost readers if not revenues. For several years, I followed the publisher's success in adding library subscriptions. The numbers of library subscriptions were only slightly above those of the first few years when *Sociological Forum* was run as an in-house enterprise.

In retrospect, working with Robin Williams on *Sociological Forum* was perhaps the single most rewarding experience of my career. I have never felt so closely involved in so many different branches of the discipline. I learned editorial skills that have been important throughout my career. Most of all, I enjoyed working with Robin. I have never known anyone with as much theoretical breadth and with such an uncanny ability to recognize the germ of a good idea. He was able to spot weaknesses in argument (or evidence) that were clear once he pointed them out, but not before. Most of all, I enjoyed listening to Robin's stories about his life, sociological ideas and research, and much more. We also laughed a lot. Perhaps, I was too quick to judge the content and the participants of the lunch table that Robin attended. Although I did not join his lunch table, I did learn that the goal of producing a more serious sociology had to be leavened with an appreciation for collegiality and laughter.