

July 4, 2007

To: SSSP Board of Directors

From: Héctor L. Delgado, Ph.D.  
Chair, 2006 C. Wright Mills Award Committee

Re: Committee Report

First, thank you for allowing me to chair this committee and for the opportunity to work with such a distinguished and committed group of individuals.

**Committee Members:**

Hector L. Delgado, Chair, University of La Verne  
Kathleen Lowney, Chair-Elect, Valdosta State University  
Tracy Dietz, University of Central Florida  
Marlese Durr, Wright State University  
Luis Fernandez, Northern Arizona University  
Gary Alan Fine, Northwestern University  
Valerie Gunter, University of New Orleans  
Arlene Stein, Rutgers University

It truly was an honor and a pleasure to work with them. This has to be one of the most labor-intensive committees in the discipline, yet it was one of the most enjoyable experiences I've had as a member of the SSSP and ASA.

The C. Wright Mills Award, established in 1964 and awarded annually, carries with it a stipend of \$500 for the author(s) of the winning book(s). The 2006 award will be presented at the 57th Annual Meeting in New York, NY, August 10-12, 2007.

Some ninety-five books were nominated for the award, although roughly ten were ineligible because they were either edited volumes, were not first editions, or did not have a copyright of 2006. The following criteria were used to select finalists and the eventual winner.

- 1) critically addresses an issue of contemporary public importance,
- 2) brings to the topic a fresh, imaginative perspective,
- 3) advances social scientific understanding of the topic,

- 4) displays a theoretically informed view and empirical orientation,
- 5) evinces quality in style of writing,
- 6) explicitly or implicitly contains implications for courses of action.

Base on these criteria, the committee selected the following eight books as finalists.

**Finalists:**

Lawrence D. Bobo and Mia Tuan, *Prejudice in Politics: Group Position, Public Opinion, and the Wisconsin Treaty Rights Dispute*, Harvard University Press

Kieran Healy, *Last Best Gifts: Altruism and the Market for Human Blood and Organs*, University of Chicago Press

Rosanna Hertz, *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood without Marriage and Creating the New American Family*, Oxford University Press

Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen, *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy*, Oxford University Press

Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement*, Russell Sage Foundation

Kathleen M. Shaw, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Christopher Mazzeo, and Jerry Jacobs, *Putting Poor People to Work: How the Work-First Idea Eroded College Access for the Poor*, Russell Sage Foundation

Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*, Harvard University Press

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, Yale University Press

I wrote to each of these authors to congratulate them and to urge them to attend the banquet whether they were or were not the recipient of the award, in order to allow the SSSP to acknowledge publicly their exemplary work.

Every member of the committee read these books and **selected Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh's *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* (Harvard University Press) as the winner of the 2006 C. Wright Mills Award.**

We made every effort to avoid co-winners; something we urge future committees to do. Part of what made it possible was a discussion via e-mail of the finalists and especially the top three. We took a vote, but did not rely solely on the vote count. We gave committee members the opportunity to make a case for books. Despite the extraordinary quality of the final group of books, it became clear very quickly that *Off the Books* was the one.

I wrote to Dr. Venkatesh to inform him that he was the recipient of the award and he was, as expected, extremely happy and honored to receive the award. I contacted the others to let them know they did not win, but did not tell them who did win; and, again, urged them to attend the award ceremony. I reminded them what an honor it was just to be nominated from a field of eighty-five books. I believe most, if not all, of them agreed, although their disappointment was understandable.

At this juncture in the report, I have a couple of comments and suggestions for the SSSP Board and future committees.

- We received numerous books that were “technically” eligible for the award, i.e., they were first editions published in 2006 and were not edited volumes, but they were not *appropriate* for the award. My impression is that publishers simply send books without paying sufficient attention to whether books are in the C. Wright Mills tradition. At least one member of the committee questioned whether publishers should be allowed to nominate books. This is a very good question and one the Board may want to consider.
- A related issue was whether committee members should be permitted to nominate books. We decided against it because most of the committee members and I believed it constituted a conflict of interest or even the appearance of a conflict, and it is essential that the process not only be fair, but also appear fair.
- The books were slow to arrive in at the beginning. I think this is par for the course. As we approached the deadline, we got flooded with books. I recommend that the committee begin reading submissions even when the flow is only a trickle in the beginning. Next year’s committee need not panic, as we almost did, when the number of books is low in the beginning.
- I had the task of assigning books. I assigned two readers to each book and asked readers to rate the books independently, using the criteria listed above. I asked committee members to give me a list of their

interests/specialties and I tried to assign books accordingly. It is impossible to make everyone happy, but to the degree that you succeed in assigning books on the basis of people's interests and areas of expertise, the process is fairer and more pleasant. I recommend to the next chair, Kathleen Lowney, that she try to match up members to books on this basis as much as she can. It's more work in the short run, but the long-term benefits are worth the effort.

- Individuals tried to nominate books after the deadline, but we held firmly to the deadline. I recommend to next year's committee to do the same. However, we may want to re-examine where and how we advertise the award, to make sure everyone knows about the award, what the award is for, and when the deadline is. We may want to underscore what books are eligible and to let people know that if a book is ineligible, for whatever reason, the book will not be returned to them.
- Finally, we had a discussion on how and when to notify recipients and non-recipients of the award. I was uncomfortable not telling individuals who did not win that they had not won. I did not like the idea of seven individuals showing up at the award ceremony with the expectation that they might have won, while we (and the recipient of the award) knew they had not. I discussed this with committee members, most of whom felt equally uncomfortable, and with Tom and Valerie. We agreed to let them know they did not win, but to urge them nonetheless to attend the ceremony in NYC to be acknowledged publicly. We asked the recipient of the award and the publisher not to advertise that he had won. Both agreed graciously to keep it under wraps until after the ceremony.

In closing, let say that Michele Koontz's assistance was invaluable. She truly is amazing, and I hope the SSSP appreciates, as much we did, what she does for the organization. It is rare that she does not know the answer to a question. If she does not have a ready answer, she gets it – and quickly! And if her competence were not enough, she has to be one of the most pleasant and calmest persons to work with. I'd like to thank Valerie and Tom as well. On a couple of occasions I had to consult with them, and they were very helpful – and without interfering in the committee's work. Thank you so much.

Finally, I want to wish next year's chair, Kathleen Lowney, well. If she does her job as chair half as well as she did her job as a committee member this past year, she will be a wonderful chair. You could not have picked a better person to serve as chair.