

To: SSSP Board of Directors

From: Debra Street, Chair, 2009 C. Wright Mills Award, University at Buffalo, SUNY

RE: Committee Report

Date: July 26, 2010

The C. Wright Mills Award was established in 1964 and is awarded annually for the book that best reflects scholarship meeting the criteria SSSP stipulates for the award. The author(s) receives a stipend of \$500 and two complementary tickets to the award banquet where the 2009 C. Wright Mills Award will be presented at the 60th Annual Meeting in Atlanta on August 14 to Mario Luis Small for his book *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life*, Oxford University Press.

This is my third time serving on this committee: I was a member of the C. Wright Mills Award committee twice (once as a student member in the 1990s and last year [2008 award]) and I chaired the committee this year. Prior experience on the committee and trying to fill the shoes of last year's wonderful chair (Heather Dalmage) helped in terms of thinking through the best way to honor the scholarship of all of the nominees and generate a winner in a transparent and rigorous way. Despite the considerable time commitment (whether as a committee member or chair) the rewards outweigh the work—I've read many books I might otherwise not "have time" to read because of the committee charge to review nominated works carefully. I'm sure my committee colleagues feel as gratified as I do and I know this year's committee members devoted hundreds of people hours to the gratifying (and sometimes rather agonizing) responsibility of designating a winner.

The 2009 C. Wright Mills award committee consisted of me and seven diligent members who worked very hard and carefully over several months to determine the winner from a strong pool of nominees. The committee was:

Elizabeth A. Armstrong, University of Michigan
Stephanie Woodham Burge, University of Oklahoma
Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo
Leslie Hinkson, Georgetown University
Margaret Hunter, Mills College
Brian C. Kelly, Purdue University
Gale E. Miller, Marquette University
Debra Street, University at Buffalo, SUNY

Ninety-two books were nominated for the award. Several were ineligible because they were either edited volumes, did not have a 2009 copyright, or clearly did not fit the criteria for the award (i.e., were journalism).

The criteria that the award committee was charged to take into consideration of their review of the eighty-five eligible books were derived from the SSSP statement of award criteria. They require that the winning book conform to 6 criteria:

- critically addresses an issue of contemporary public importance
- brings to the topic a fresh, imaginative perspective
- advances social scientific understanding of the topic
- displays a theoretically informed view and empirical orientation
- evinces quality in style of writing
- explicitly or implicitly contains implications for courses of action.

FINALISTS for the 2009 C. WRIGHT MILLS AWARD (*in alphabetical order*)

Jennifer Jihye Chun, *Organizing at the Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States*, Cornell University Press.

Robert P. Fairbanks II, *How It Works: Recovering Citizens in Post-Welfare Philadelphia*, The University of Chicago Press.

Allison J. Pugh, *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer*, University of California Press.

Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India*, Stanford University Press.

Leland T. Saito, *The Politics of Exclusion: The Failure of Race-Neutral Policies In Urban America*, Stanford University Press.

Mario Luis Small, *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life*, Oxford University Press.

Celeste Watkins-Hayes, *The New Welfare Bureaucrats: Entanglements of Race, Class, and Policy Reform*, University of Chicago Press.

Committee Process:

The committee began receiving books near the end of 2009. Over a period of 6 weeks, the committee coordinated evolving lists of nominee books, first to identify “missing” books (books that were nominated but had not reached individual committee members, or in some cases, books that had been nominated but not yet sent by publishers to any on the committee). Michele Koontz and Sharon Shumaker quickly and diligently followed up on each of the missing books.

Adapting practices implemented by previous committees (based on prior experience on the committee, and advice both from current and previous committee members and chairs) I followed the round one tradition of each nominated book being reviewed by at least two members. Before I assigned reviewers, I first provided the entire nominee list to all committee members asking each to indicate any books that they were particularly interested in reviewing (this was based on advice from a previous chair). At that time I reminded committee members that they should identify any potential conflicts of interest that might compromise a review, and to keep committee deliberations confidential. My goal was to honor the traditional review processes associated with this committee, to balance the chance to read books in a scholar’s substantive area (where each would have the expertise to assess the import of work against other

in the field) and the need to read outside “familiar zones” by also assigning some of the non-requested book from a very diverse pool. In the end, each committee member ended up reading 23-24 books in round one (just under half of the books were from each committee member’s request list, the balance assigned to provide a range of subject matter to each reviewer and to avoid potential “review pair” effects that might happen if the books read by any two reviewers overlapped too much). The aim was at the end of round one to generate a much shorter semifinalist list for each member of the committee then to read and rank.

Following practices I experienced the previous year, I provided each committee member a standardized form to use in their assessment of books. The form laid out all of the award criteria and provided a mechanism for each reviewer to generate an internally consistent way to score and eventually rank books they had reviewed.

Committee members were asked to use a form as they read and evaluated each book:

Please rate this book on how well it meets the following criteria on a five point scale (1= minimally; 3= moderately; 5= to an outstanding degree)

- 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 _____
- Total points _____

Given this particular ranking system, 30 would be the highest possible number of points.

Because last year’s experience demonstrated that it is impossible to establish inter-rater reliability across the committee using this form (some members are “stingy” reviewers with few books scoring in the 25+ range (that would be me), some are “generous” reviewer who score several books in the 28-30 range) its most appropriate use is as a standardized way for each committee member to use to generate their own internally consistent rankings for books. Because this list reminds reviewers of ALL of the C. Wright Mills criteria, using the form prevents the tendency to “love” a book and rank it very highly, even though it might entirely miss one or several of the award criteria.

Once each member had read all of the books assigned for round one, I then asked each committee member to generate a ranked list of books according the award criteria. This surmounts the problem of inter-rater reliability—since no matter whether a reviewer is stingy or generous, each reviewer can use scores from the form to generate a ranked list of which books most closely met C. Wright Mills award criteria among the round one books they read. At a committee member’s suggestion, I asked each member to provide me with a list of their top

ranked books by a deadline. From the ranked lists I received from all seven committee members (and mine) I compiled a draft list of nine semi-finalist books. The draft list of nine semi-finalist books were those that were among the top five ranked books by at two committee members (and every committee member had at books represented in the draft list), Before we proceeded to another round of reviews, I then circulated that draft list of nine semi-finalists to the entire committee, in an effort to ensure that every single book that any reviewer felt strongly must remain in the semi-finalist pool as a contender for the 2009 award was included in the next round of reviews. I specifically asked if anyone wanted to add one or several of their individual “top” picks (that had been among their individual top choices but which had not garnered such a high ranking from the other committee member who read it) to the list of consensus leaders. At that point one reviewer did designate two additional books as highly worthy further consideration. No other reviewers advocated inclusion of any more books. Those two additional books were included, which yielded a final list of eleven semi-finalist books.

We tackled the semi-finalist list of eleven books for round two. Each committee member read, evaluated (again, using the form provided as a heuristic device) and ranked all eleven semi-final books. I created a spreadsheet, with rankings anonymized (to minimize risk that any particular reviewer’s opinion might sway any other reviewer) and calculated the rankings generated in round two in several different ways, to see how sensitive the finalist list was to different modes of calculating scores. I circulated that spread sheet to the entire committee so that the rankings from each method and using the different techniques used to rank the eleven semi-finalist books were transparent to all committee members. Using five different techniques (raw scores, mean scores, number of #1 rankings, number of top 3 rankings, number of top 5 rankings), the top three books were robustly ranked 1 (Small), 2 (Fairbanks), 3 (Watkins-Hayes), and the Small book was the clear frontrunner (by a sizeable margin), with each semi-finalist (and by extension, finalist) book having been read and reviewed by each committee member using the six C. Wright Mills award criteria. Beyond the top three books, the rankings were not stable (i.e. different techniques generated different rankings for books 4 through 7 or 8).

At that point, and before I contacted SSSP administrative office to provide the finalist list, I asked the committee via email for guidance on how to proceed. I asked the committee whether they wanted to send three finalists (those robustly ranked as 1, 2, 3) AND designate the winner (recognizing the sizeable gap in all techniques between Small’s book and the other two in the top three) at that point. It seemed to be both efficient and empirically appropriate since the results were the same using scores generated using several different techniques from data derived from all committee members having reviewed all eleven semi-finalist books. At the same time, I also asked the committee to consider other alternatives to that suggestion, including whether the finalist list should include more books, and whether the committee should have another round of review of whatever finalist list we finally decided upon. Brian Kelly used a somewhat different empirical technique to suggest going deeper into the list of finalists than just three, to include seven books in the finalist list as a way of honoring the breadth of scholarship we reviewed. I and a majority of committee members thought that his was a better suggestion than a shorter (3 book) finalist list. Once we decided on a seven finalist list, I again asked the committee whether they wanted to proceed with seven finalists and deliberate further, or whether they wanted to proceed with seven finalists and designate Small the winner. Every committee member who responded to the email (seven out of eight committee members, although all eight of us read and ranked the books) agreed that seven finalists was appropriate, that a clear winner had already emerged in the full committee review of the semi-finalist books, and that there was no need for

additional deliberation. I notified the SSSP administrative office that we had generated both a list of finalists and designated the 2009 C. Wright Mills winner on May 7, 2010.

Two letters went out to the finalists: the first notified them that they were finalists for the C. Wright Mills award, the second letter (after some time had elapsed) notified them that another work had been selected for the award. The winner received the first finalist letter and in late June, I called the winner, and the SSSP administrative office followed up with an official letter, notifying Mario Small that he won the 2009 C. Wright Mills award. Professor Small informed me that he plans to attend the banquet to receive the award.

I want to thank the 2009 Mills committee. Despite committee members' international travel, health issues and regular (often overwhelming) demands of work schedules (and the leisure and family time I know they sacrificed, too), the committee devoted considerable time and energy to the committee work, and agonized over the professional judgments they invoked to determine the winner in a very strong pool of nominees. I appreciate the professionalism with which each person read, ranked and commented on books, and the advice and experience that provided the foundation for a fair and efficient process to determine the winning book. It was a pleasure to chair this committee.

Heather Dalmage, past-2008 Chair, and her regular and transparent communication last year provided a wonderful template and streamlined process for this year's work. I particularly benefited from a discussion about deriving a fair way to surmount differences in assessments based on the award criteria (generating form scores) and ranking books in ways that took different "grading" styles into account. I certainly benefited from advice—which I nearly always followed—from previous and current committee members whose overriding concern has always been to provide a fair and meaningful review of many fine scholars' work for consideration of one of the most prestigious awards in our discipline. Any flaws in the process are a result of my mistakes, not the committee members' work.

Michele Koontz is an awesome "silent" partner in the C. Wright Mills committee processes and I have her to thank for avoiding some obvious mistakes I might otherwise have made. She and Sharon Shumaker provided outstanding administrative for the committee, and Hector Delgado provided several helpful suggestions. I am sure I speak for all members of the 2009 C. Wright Mills committee when I say that serving on this committee is a gratifying way to honor the spirit of the award and the important work of SSSP.

Respectfully submitted,

Debi Street
Chair, 2009 C. Wright Mills Award Committee