INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR SHELTON STROMQUIST

Derek Ahrens and Sylvia Bochner
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Key
DA: Derek Ahrens
SB: Sylvia Bochner
SS: Shelton Stromquist

DA: My name is Derek Ahrens, I’m a student at the University of Iowa.

SB: My name is Sylvia Bochner, I’m also a student at the University of Iowa.

DA: The date is March 6th, 2013. We’re here at Schaeffer Hall at the University of Iowa to interview Professor Shelton Stromquist. Professor Stromquist, would you start by introducing yourself?

SS: Yes. As you have said, my name is Shelton Stromquist, I’m now an emeritus professor of history at the University of Iowa. I just retired on January 1st, 2014 and I’ve been at the university for 31 years.

DA: Could you start off by talking a bit about your childhood and early life? Like where you were born, where you grew up?

SS: I was born in Elmhurst, IL, and lived there for a couple of years and then in Champaign-Urbana. At the end of World War II, my father was unemployed and we went to live with my mother’s parents and then eventually toward the end of the forties, I was born in 1943, we moved to a new post-war suburb called Park Forest that was on the far south side of the Chicago area. And that’s basically where from the age of seven until I finished high school where I lived and went to school, most of my schooling. My mother was a homemaker but then became a schoolteacher and was quite active in the teacher’s union. My father never finished high school but he was a kind of self-taught draftsman during World War II and then learned some kind of rudimentary mechanical engineering skills and eventually worked in the machine tool industry for most of his life. I finished high school in 1961 and went off to Yale University as an undergraduate and was at Yale, well I was part of the class of ’65, but after two years, as a kid coming out of public school systems and thrown in with a bunch of preppies, although I liked the school a lot academically, I decided to drop out for a year, to kind of spread my wings, see the world, do some other stuff. So I did, much to the chagrin of Yale. People aren’t supposed to drop out of Yale. And I went off to India for the summer with a program called the Experiment in International Living and then came back to Europe, lived in Germany, for really all of, I spent a brief time in France and the Netherlands, but for the most part I was in Germany. I had had German in school and also in college so I was pretty comfortable with the language. I was a
special student at Heidelberg, then worked in a factory in Berlin for about three months in the spring, and then not having any money to get back or a plane ticket, went to Rotterdam in the Netherlands, a port, and went around the docks to see if I could get a job on a freighter coming back to the United States. And so I did, miraculously. They didn’t pay me, but they gave me free passage, and we ended up coming to Baton Rouge, LA. We came up through the Gulf and up the Mississippi to Baton Rouge, where I got off and then I hitchhiked to Chicago through the Deep South, through Mississippi, and that’s significant in terms of my personal biography, because I knew at that point that I was going to be coming back to Mississippi that summer as part of Freedom Summer to work with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee with whom I had been in touch. And I had had some peripheral involvement in civil rights my first two years at Yale, but this was going to be a much more serious involvement. So I hitchhiked back to Chicago, got a taste of what Mississippi might be like, and then reunited with my parents. They had no idea where I was or that I was even in the country, so it was quite a surprise when I walked in on them. But in any case, I joined Freedom Summer, was in Vicksburg, MI, for the summer, went back to Yale. They did admit me back in, and I spent my last two years at Yale. I continued to be involved in civil rights through the rest of my undergraduate years. I went back to Vicksburg in the summer of 1965. I went to Selma in the spring of 1965 and then in the summer of 1966, the year just right after graduation, I joined the James Meredith march, that was where he was walking solo through Mississippi to bring attention again to the state, and someone shot him. It didn’t kill him, but many people then converged again on Mississippi, and took up the march, and so a friend of mine from Yale and I did that. But I was already committed to going to Africa for two years. I had applied to graduate school and thought, you know what, maybe I will go to graduate school, or maybe I won’t go to graduate school.

DA: Can I interrupt?

SS: Sure, sure, sure, I’m going on too long.

DA: No, that’s alright, that’s exactly what we want. But at Yale, what was the focus of your studies?

SS: I started out as a philosophy major and liked it a lot, but for whatever combination of reasons began gravitating toward history. Although I think by the time I dropped out, I was still officially a philosophy major. And when I came back, I declared a history major, and so I was doing American history, but I was also doing Asian history, so I had courses in Chinese and Japanese history and in South East Asian history. There was a very wonderful professor at Yale who had a lot of influence on me, Harry Benda, who taught South East Asian history, and Staughton Lynd, who was a young professor, but also a political activist and himself involved in civil rights, and later in Anti-Vietnam War movement, was a big influence on me as well. So, I graduated as a history major. And I did apply to graduate schools, some. I don’t know if I remember how many. I got into the University of Chicago, and had a fellowship, but decided, nah, wasn’t really ready to do that. So that’s when I went off to Africa, to work for the American Friends Service Committee for two years in Tanzania. Initially, I thought I was going to work with people from
the liberation movements, and refugees from South Africa and southern Africa—Zimbabwe, and Mozambique—but it turned out that was sort of politically complicated and I eventually ended up doing rural development work in what were called Ujamaa villages, communitarian villages where farmers would come together and pool their land and work together. So I did that for two years.

DA: What was the nature of your work there?

SS: Well, I was theoretically an agriculture expert. I had spent a few summers on my mother’s family’s farm in central Illinois, so I’d been on a farm, but I didn’t really know much about farming, frankly. But I thought of myself as a quick learner and I was working with farmers in these villages who, the adults were pretty much illiterate, not all of them, but virtually all, and they were farming by very traditional methods and yet they wanted to adopt new methods of farming. And so we were kind of experimenting. I’d go off and learn some stuff from agricultural experts and bring it back and make suggestions and we worked together in the fields. They were clearing a large field, because traditionally they never cleared the land, they did what was called slash and burn agriculture. You may be familiar with it, just kind of working around existing stumps, but if you’re going to use a tractor, if you’re going to try to farm in a quote “modern” way, then you have to do something about the stumps. So we spent a lot of time, a lot of sweat, digging stumps out of this big field. It was like a thirty-acre field. It doesn’t sound that big in Iowa, but in Tanzania, this was a big field. So, a lot of physical labor, but also some attempt to help them figure out how to farm in a more modern way. But of course, they had no capital to work with. And so basically, it was trying to adapt modern technologies to the resources they had, which didn’t even include wheeled transportation. I mean, basically, if you wanted to carry fertilizer to the field (they had lots of cow dung, because they had animals), you had to carry it on your head in a big container. There were no wagons. They had cattle, but the cattle didn’t pull transportation. So it was a very basic kind of agriculture. I became part of the community and helped out in other ways, but that was sort of how I spent two years. Except that, after a year and a half, my wife and I got married. She was also a volunteer in this program and we had decided (she was working in a totally different part of the country), but we’d had enough of being apart and we wanted to be married and so we got married there, and had a Quaker wedding and a tribal wedding in the village where she worked, which was kind of exciting. Then I came back, worked for three years on and off doing anti-war work and community organizing in Milwaukee, began to take a night course here and there at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, in labor history because I was also at times working in a factory and I was interested in unions and how unions got organized and so forth. And so, at some point, decided you know, after five years now, maybe I’m ready to start thinking about going to graduate school. And so, you know, there was a lot else that went on, but I eventually applied to work with a person that I’d heard so much about in the field who was at the University of Pittsburg, David Montgomery. And I was accepted, got a fellowship in the summer of 1971, we went off to Pittsburg to work, for me to do graduate work and for Ann to teach, and we were there for four years until 1975, we moved to a farm in a rural area of Wisconsin, where some other people we knew were kind of establishing themselves. It was a kind of back to the land movement and we lived there for four years, had
two kids, actually a third kid in Madison, moved to Madison, worked for the State Historical Society Wisconsin for about four years, doing outreach work with local historical societies, got my dissertation done, and applied to the University of Iowa, and was somehow miraculously hired. And that’s more than you probably wanted to know.

**DA:** No, that’s exactly the nature of information we’re looking for. So what year did you actually come to the University of Iowa?

**SS:** It was, well we moved in the Summer of 1982, so my first semester teaching was the fall semester of 1982.

**DA:** Ok. Can you talk a bit about the atmosphere at the University of Iowa upon your arrival? Within the History department? Or just in general on campus?

**SS:** Well, first of all, I had been working in Madison, doing history as an employee of the State Historical Society, and so in that context had had quite a lot of contact with the history department folks, the faculty, some graduate students, at the University Wisconsin Madison. And of course, I’d also been at Pittsburg, and I’d been at Yale, and I had some sense of how history departments worked or didn’t work. And there are plenty of stories of dysfunctional history departments. But I guess, my first impressions here, and they really began when I did my interview, which was in the spring of 1982, my on-campus interview, and there were just several striking things about it. One was the feeling that these people actually enjoyed being together. They seemed to get along, at least as far as one could tell from the outside. The second thing was that every last one of them had read my dissertation, and I was sort of bowled over. And third, they didn’t ask me to do a job talk, which is kind of the standard fare in interviews, you know you come and give a talk about your work to the assembled faculty and graduate students. Iowa didn’t do that.

**DA:** So was this a council of history professors interviewing you?

**SS:** It was everybody in the department. But the way we did it, the way we still do it, which was very striking, was that I had this schedule for two days of individual appointments, with literally everybody in the department who was here (people who were on leave and off doing research obviously weren’t included).

**DA:** So kind of like your own personal conference?

**SS:** Yeah. But you had these one-on-one conversations with people. They were about half an hour each, it was exhausting as you can imagine, you know, a whole day of one-on-one conversations, but the other striking thing was, no matter what people’s field was, whether it was Russian history or Chinese history or medieval Europe, they’d read my dissertation. They had interesting questions to ask about it, things that I hadn’t thought of because I’d been talking to Americanists this whole time, right, and suddenly I was getting feedback and questions from
people across a wide range of fields and subfields across history. And it was really exhilarating, I mean, I guess they had maybe clued me in what the interview process was going to be like ahead of time, but if they did, it didn’t really sink in until I was in the middle of the interview that I thought, “wow, this is quite extraordinary.” I’ve never heard of a department conducting interviews this way, so I was quite exhilarated by the experience, exhausted and exhilarated, and I left, and you know, you never know how you do in an interview, you focus on the kind of stupid things you said, right, or the questions that you can’t even begin to answer. I remember at lunch, one of the faculty members, I think it was Sid James, sitting around the table with 6 or 8 people, and he looks across the table at me and he says, “What is culture?” And where do I begin? But it was that sense that people were intellectually engaged with what you were doing and they thought it was interesting and they wanted to ask you about it, even if some of the questions were hard to get your mind around. So that was, I would have to say that was my first introduction to the department, the interview process. Then, when the fall came, I attended my first department meeting, which was a unique and interesting experience. I taught my first courses, I began to get acquainted with people on a somewhat deeper level than one can in an interview, but I was struck, I guess I have to say, not only was this a unique department in the way it conducted itself and its business and the kind of intellectual climate of the department, but I could not discern any significant acrimony or you know, bad blood or conflict, that sort of just below the surface. And you know, I’d been in Madison, I’d been in Wisconsin. I was not a member of the history department, but I’d observed it from afar, and that was a department that was deeply factionalized. I mean there were people there who hadn’t spoken to each other, deliberately for years.

DA: Within the same department?

SS: In the same department. And who by all accounts, would seem to have a deep dislike for each other. Not everybody, obviously, but people were lined up in factions and it was not good. So this was kind of a breath of fresh air. I didn’t really know until I came to the interview what to expect, and really didn’t know what to expect until I’d actually begun to work here and get acquainted with people on a deeper level.

DA: Ok. So backing up a little bit, the focus of your graduate studies was American Labor History?

SS: Pretty much. In graduate school, once you’re beyond the initial couple years of course work, you begin to prepare for something called comprehensive exams. And so these are specific areas that you read very intensively in, anywhere from 60-100 books in each of the areas. And I did four areas. One of those areas was general American history, one area was American Labor History, one area was comparative labor history, and one area was British Labour History. So it was a lot of labor history, in addition to the general American history. But there was, early on, some exposure to non-US labor history, and that actually, late in my career, where my current work and work really significantly for the last decade of so has been more internationally
focused, that early work in graduate school of comparative labor history has really been an asset. That along with the fact that I knew German pretty well, which I didn’t use for 40 years, but came back to, and now discover that, you know, I’m a little shy about speaking it, but I can read it reasonably well. So, primarily US, but some comparative labor history.

DA: What was the nature of the classes you were teaching at Iowa when you first arrived?

SS: Well, I mean I was hired to teach, officially I was hired to teach Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The person I was replacing who had left a couple of years before, had taught in that field. He wasn’t a labor historian, but those were the areas he taught in. So, what were my first two courses? I think I taught the first semester two undergraduate courses, one on the Gilded Age and one on the Progressive Era. But very quickly I had the opportunity to, so those were courses that were already on the books when I was hired, so I had to teach them, right, but that was fine, I’d never constructed a course on the Progressive Era or the Gilded Age before, and it was a challenge, and I was up early in the morning, four o’clock in the morning, working on lectures for that day, but soon I was then able to gravitate to also teach a two semester sequence in US labor history. And then also graduate courses in labor history and social history, and the eventually undergraduate courses in immigration, what else have I taught, colloquia on various subjects, rural social history, on immigration, on for many years I taught a colloquium on American Radicalism. So you know, then initial menu of courses was Gilded age, Progressive Era, and then some graduate courses in social history.

DA: So I was also wondering how you felt about the University and the History Department support of academic research conducted by professors.

SS: Well, it was pretty clear to me from the outset, and again this goes back to the interview, that this was a department and a university, but especially a department, where the research component of what faculty members do was very important. And it became clear to me, that a lot of the hiring decision was going to be based on my scholarship, my research, whether they liked my dissertation or not. In addition to that, I was proud that I had defended my dissertation, it was something I wanted to talk about, but they also wanted to talk about, well what’s your next project going to be, what are you going to work on next. So it was clear that this was going to be a department in which research was expected, and publication, but it was also valued. And everybody was doing it. As I got acquainted with the individual faculty members, I think everybody was working on a book on one thing or another, and consequential books, it became clear to me. Sometime in the first or second year that I was here, I went to the chair of the department, I think it was still John Henneman at that point, and I said I’m trying to make some choices about where my scholarship is going to go, and I could write a number of articles about this and that and the other thing, or I could undertake a longer term project I’m really interested in on working-class political culture, that’s going to take awhile. It’s a big project. It’s going to be a big book. What advice does the department have about this? And without missing a beat, he said go for the big project. Don’t waste your time—not waste your time, but you know—do what you want to do and do something that’s consequential and ambitious and not just cranking out
articles. That’s not the point. And that was earlier advice, and I think it’s advice we’ve continued to give to new faculty members who’ve joined the department. Work on what’s important to you, but also what’s consequential.

DA: So it sounds like there’s a lot of support for research. Did that change during your career at Iowa?

SS: Well, it didn’t change from the perspective of the department. I mean, we were always a department in which the number of people who were getting outside grants to support their research was very high for a humanities department. I have to qualify that, of course, because for scientists, even social scientists, it’s more routine. But in the humanities, it’s harder. There’s not as much money, there’s not as much support generally, so to have a department in which a very high proportion of the faculty members are getting outside grants to support their work is really pretty impressive. So that’s been a constant in the department. I think the climate and support of research has been there from the beginning and it’s there now. What’s changed, from the perspective of a number of us in the department, is the degree to which the university commitment—the university, not the department—commitment to support research has been eroded. And that would be an argument that some university administrators would dispute. But I think the facts are that in a lot of ways, some of them just incremental ways, that level of support has been eroded, and so it’s harder for new faculty member who are joining the department to expect the same kind of funding from within the university that enables them to pursue their research in quite the same way. Just one example, and you know, you probably hear this from other people, we had a program called the Faculty Scholar Program and the Global Scholar Program. It was competitive university wide, and what it did was, if you got it, enable you to have two or three semesters off from teaching to do research over the course of two or three years. And for people in a book discipline—we write books, that’s the main thing we do—that’s really critical. And if you’re going to write books that are substantial, that are really ambitious, you’re going to need that time in the archives. You can’t just bop in for a couple weeks in the summer and bop out and expect to get it done. The university eliminated those programs, the Global Scholar and the Faculty Scholar. A disproportionate number of people in our department had benefitted from those programs—almost everybody, at one point or another. And now, junior faculty members in the department don’t have that opportunity.

DA: When was that eliminated?

SS: Not that long ago, really. It’s been five or six years.

DA: Because I’d seen that you had been awarded a Global Scholar, 2002-4, does that sound right?

SS: Correct.
DA: So along those lines, you mentioned it in passing earlier, how your current research focuses more on an international scope of labor. How did the Global Scholar Award factor into that?

SS: I mean, it was absolutely essential. I chaired the department from 1996-2000, and at the end of my chairing, and one of the other things about the department, with one or two exceptions, the norm is for someone to chair the department for three years. I did it for four because we ran into a situation where the person we thought was going to chair it couldn’t do it, but the idea is that you don’t want to leave your research to do department administration for too long. Because it’s really hard to sustain that research while you’re running the department, well not running the department, but making things work in the department, and so typically it’s three years. So at the end of my four years, I had begun to redefine and rethink the project I’d been working on the back burner. I did some other books along the way that were on the front burner, but this one was always there, it was on working-class political culture that I mentioned before, but I’d never really made it a front burner project. But now I wanted to make it a front burner project, but the field of labor history was becoming more global and international over those years. And I had actually participated in a couple of really interesting projects in the Netherlands, at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam that had connected me to scholars in a variety of other countries. So my world of labor history was changing. And so I began to think, you know, maybe I should start to think about this evolution of working-class political culture in a more global setting and I’d always been interested in cities and city politics, city development, so I began to conceptualize a project that would involve work in a number of countries, comparing it to the US. Because too often, in my judgment, we think of the US as a kind of exception, and my reading of the field was suggesting, maybe in some respects, we weren’t so much the exception, but were closer to the experience of working class movements and political movements in other countries. So I finished chairing in the fall of 2000, I had a semester off from teaching and I cobbled together some research funds, and I went off to Amsterdam to work in their archives because they had truly international archives. And I spent about six weeks there, came back, planned a subsequent trip to Amsterdam, and then in the Spring, at the end of the spring semester, planned a trip to Australia and New Zealand, because they were countries where a labor party had developed at an early stage and where I thought the comparison I wanted to do would be feasible. So these were probes into the archive to see what was possible and then on the basis of that, I began to apply for grants and among them I applied for the Global Scholar, and eventually got it. And that enabled me to go back to Australia and New Zealand and enabled me to go to Britain, enabled me to go to Sweden, where I already had pretty good contacts, to Germany and lay the foundation in terms of serious research for this project. So the Global Scholar, I mean, I could not have begun to do this project without the Global Scholar Award at that critical point. Because it not only gave me some time off from teaching, it also gave me some research funds. Not much, I mean I stayed in pretty cheap hotels, but it just made it possible. And one of the other benefits of that for me, but I think also for the university in the long run, was that it connected me to scholars in all these countries who were interested in what I was doing, I was interested in what they were doing, some of them had never heard of the University of Iowa, and some of them later came to give talks here, and I gave talks there and it was that kind of network that began to grow around my research and the contacts I was making.
through that research, which is exactly the idea that the Global Scholar program was designed to promote. So it was crucial. I’m still working on that book, by the way, but it’s about 80%, but not quite.

**DA:** Alright. I look forward to it.

**SS:** Yeah, I hope so.

**DA:** Ok, switching gears a little bit: Could you talk about your impressions of the students at the University of Iowa? Any overarching generalizations you could make?

**SS:** Undergraduates or graduates?

**DA:** Both.

**SS:** You know I might have been to Iowa one time before I had my interview—No, that’s not true because I did make a research trip to Des Moines while I was working on my dissertation. It was my first time to Iowa City—Let’s put it that way. So I didn’t really know what to expect, in terms of the students and in terms of what kind of expectations were reasonable. I guess on the whole, I was, and am, pleasantly surprised by the quality of undergraduates on the whole. You know, obviously, in any course you’re going to have people who work harder and people who don’t work so hard; people who immediately gravitate to the subject and are excited about it and people who are sort of, “who cares?” I mean, you’re always going to have that whether you’re at Yale, or Princeton, or the University of Chicago, or the University of Iowa. There’s going to be some kind of range like that. But, on the whole, I would have to say that I was struck by how good the students were—not always the writing so good – but I saw myself as a member of the faculty trying to work with students to improve their writing. But in terms of their grasp of the material, their interest level in the material, I was pretty generally surprised. You know, it varies from one class to another, one year to another. You teach the same class three or four years consecutively—which I rarely, if ever have done—and have a totally different experience, just because the chemistry of the class is different. The students, the mix of students is different. But on the whole—really quite pleased. And I’ve done a lot of graduate teaching in my years here. I’ve directed about 30 Ph.D. dissertations over the years—which involves very intensive work on an individual level with somebody, who is writing this kind of book-length study on a subject. And so, the kind of sense of collaboration between a faculty member and a student is pretty strong and pretty intense. And you have something like that when undergraduates do an honor’s thesis—it’s a shorter work, shorter period of time that they’re involved in it—but there’s some of that sense of collaboration We sit down periodically and we talk about it—they throw out their ideas and I react to their ideas. There’s a kind of amalgam that works in pretty creative ways. And I certainly learn a lot from that kind of one-on-one intensive involvement with undergraduate and graduate students. The colloquium, which you’re a part of right now, I think we were doing colloquia when I came to Iowa but I think it was more of an undergraduate
seminar intended for students who were finishing the degree. Now it’s a little more for students who are beginning the degree.

**DA:** They actually changed the name to “Introduction to the History Major.”

**SS:** But you’ve had some history courses—and there’s always going to be a mix—but I think at some point we decided, “Let’s make it a kind of an introductory course; rather than an exit course.” But in any case, that’s a course where the expectation is that the students will do some original work—original research—you’re going into the archives for your project—and that they’ll produce a major paper at the end. And so—even though it involves working with a group of students—there’s some of that sense of collaboration that I think is really integral to the education process and really important to preserve. And so, we fought really hard to keep the colloquium. The University in some ways would like us to be teaching larger numbers of students in larger classes. At the same time, they love to brag about how the student to teacher ratio is low because competitively—with other public universities they want to have it both ways, in a way. But anyways, we fought to keep the colloquium and I think it’s an important—maybe not absolutely unique—part of our curriculum, compared to other universities. But it’s a pretty special course.

**DA:** You talked earlier about your involvement in the civil rights movement in the United States and coming from a working class background—I was wondering how your own personal politics evolved and affected your work?

**SS:** That’s a good question. For a long time in the discipline of history—as in other academic disciplines—the notion of objectivity was something that was heralded and cherished and promoted; and was the norm. Whether or not it in fact was practiced is another question. Sometime—this is really hard to date exactly—certainly by the 1960s—there was a growing acceptance of the notion that we bring to History a worldview; a way of looking at the world that is a byproduct of who we are—of our experience, learning, training, and of our values. And rather than that being a liability—somehow making us less objective—many of us have come to believe that it has real value. It enables us to have interpretive insights into the history that we wouldn’t have if we were just assembling a bunch of facts and putting them out there in a descriptive way. We have to try to make sense of the past. We have to try to understand cause and effect and why things unfold in the way they do—and what multiple factors are involved. And it’s certainly wrong to simplify it down to a kind of formula and to simply take that formula or theory and mindlessly apply it to whatever period, subject, or community one might be studying. On the other hand, there are certain kinds of dynamics in historical experience that are a byproduct of particular sorts of agency and influence. And, for a long time working people were not part of the story. Women were clearly not part of the story. African Americans were not part of the story. And as we began to kind of break down some of those barriers and ask the question, “What were women doing? What was their role in public life, even if they didn’t have the vote?” Or, “How did the kind of actions and organization that working people undertook shape public policy in ways that we can only understand if we understand their activism as part of that
process?” So, if we’re only looking at it from a top-down perspective—if we’re only looking at the outcomes of policies—we’re not really understanding the dynamic that gives rise to those policies or to those politics. And so, I would have to say that certainly my own background, my own experience, my own values have pretty profoundly shaped what I’ve chosen to study and my understanding of what I’ve chosen to study. I think that I have approached it with an open mind - that I am prepared to be surprised and to take account of factors that I might not have initially thought were part of the story. But by the same token, I think my sense of the importance of what working people have done and of their agency, their way of seeing the world, has enabled me to see that history in ways I would not have otherwise. Just one example; I did a book on progressivism a few years back called Reinventing the People—If you ask me to give you the subtitle I probably can’t do it; it’s way too long of a subtitle. But the point of the book was to try to ask the question, “Why and how did Progressives come to adopt the sort of programs to try to reconcile employers and employees in the way that they did to solve the labor problem, as they saw it?” I realized from my earlier studies on the 19th century that the period of mass strikes from the Great Railroad strikes of 1877 through the Pullman Boycott, at least, were occurring during the formative years that these later Progressive reformers were growing up. Jane Addams is typical. She writes quite openly about it in her biography—being aware of the presence of poverty even though it wasn’t part of her own family’s experience. Of being aware of the deep conflict that the Pullman strikes in Chicago represented in 1894. And coming to the belief that she and her generation had to do something to try to reconcile these divisions. So, the more I read about Progressive reform the more I realized this isn’t the only the subject they are talking about but this is a central subject that they are talking about and it really is animating a very large part of their reform efforts; “How do we solve the labor problem?” And if I hadn’t taken as much account of the public impact of those big strikes of the 19th century and the violence and conflict and not realized how influential they were in shaping the outlook of these reformers I would have written a very different book. And it seems to me, modestly speaking; it does make an original contribution to the discussion of Progressivism which has been one of the hallowed subjects in American historiography. Every generation has its own take on Progressivism; this was mine. In a way, I could have only done it as someone who was trained in labor history, as someone who—to a certain extent—who came from a working class background, who saw the world in a way that gave importance to those kinds of developments. So, that’s just one example.

DA: Ok, that’s good. Along the same lines you talked about in the 1960s it was acknowledged that people would bring their own personal viewpoints into their research; that was something at the beginning of your academic career that you started with. Have your thoughts or opinions changed on how to approach objectivity?

SS: Not really, no. I would have to say that’s a fairly consistent view I continue to hold. As I go back and read some of the great historians of the previous generation—people, for instance, like

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C. Vann Woodward who wrote the most influential book on post-Civil War, post-Reconstruction South called *Origins of the New South* and *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. You look at his development as a historian – he was a byproduct of the 1930s. He grew up in Arkansas in the Upper South and had a real understanding of the South but also a real congenital hatred for the plantation class. You can feel it in his rhetoric and in his bones. There was an insight into the attempt of the plantation class to re-establish themselves as a class after Reconstruction that infuses his writing. I don’t think he would have had that perspective had he not grown up in the milieu he grew up in the 1930s but also in that part of the South. And I don’t think this is an unusual view these days. Most historians would say, “Yeah, it’s really about interpretation.” We need to be open about what we’re bringing to the interpretation; what our assumptions or predispositions are. And we need to be open to new evidence that contradicts that. On the other hand, we can’t pretend that we are somehow participating in an objective science; this is not experimental science. This is trying to piece together from fragmentary evidence some sense of the past that is coherent, that makes sense, that helps to explain how societies change and develop in the way that they do. What we bring to the interpretation is important.

**DA:** Absolutely. Taking a look back at your career at the University of Iowa, are there any particular accomplishments or moments that you are proud of that you’d like to talk about? Anything that sticks out?

**SS:** This is not a real specific incident—but something that is probably composed of specific incidents—it’s a general sense that for the period that I was chair, and before that for a few years where I was assistant chair, and as others have assumed that responsibility, that we have done what we thought we could do to sustain and nurture this department as the kind of humane intellectually-engaging department that we inherited. As I described in my experience with the interview and then beginning as a faculty member in the department I was in awe of what my predecessors had built in terms of a department culture. It really is a department culture. It is a really democratic department. One of the things we laugh about and in a certain sense make fun of, but at the same time many of us revere is the fact that we are very deliberative in our decision making; so, we have these very long department meetings which can go on for three or four hours. Everybody gets heard, at least, in principle. You can see opinions swing from one pole to another as the discussion unfolds and as more people make good arguments for one or another position. And what that reflects is the fact that, to a large extent in my view; we are listening to each other. We are paying attention to what each other are saying and the arguments that are being made. If we’re persuaded by somebody’s argument, we’re prepared to sort of say, “Ok, maybe you’re right about that.” Rather than digging in our heels and saying, “Well, this is what I believe and I think it’s right and don’t care what you believe.” That doesn’t happen, for the most part. We listen to each other. We strive to reach a consensus. It’s pretty rare—we take votes on occasion—but it’s pretty rare that there’s any decision we make in which there’s a sharply divided opinion. By the time we’ve talked about it as much as we have, we’ve sort of arrived at what is often a compromise but a place where we can all say, “I can live with that. I can agree with that.” Some of the department would say that’s not really consensus—and it really isn’t consensus in the Quaker sense of the term. But there’s a way in which it is a process that tries to
strive for that consensus ideal and strives not to be coercive in terms of forcing a consensus where one doesn’t really exist. We have often talked about how there is a sort of Quaker quality to the way the department conducts itself and to the department culture. That’s sort of figurative for the most part except that it’s also literal in a certain sense; Bill Aydelotte one of that founding cohort of the modern history department, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was himself a Quaker. His father was the president of Swarthmore College. I think there’s good evidence that he brought—he was chair of the department for many years—he brought some of those Quaker values of consensus to the department’s culture and to its decision making. People bought into that. I feel like the highpoint in many ways, in terms of the department for me, was those four years that I was Chair of the department. I felt like we, for the most part, navigated those years pretty well. We made a lot of good hires. We managed to move back into Schaeffer Hall and to shape the remodeled Schaeffer Hall—which is what you know—in a way that would be a working environment that we would all be happy with. To a remarkable degree—people can always find things to complain about—but to a remarkable degree the remodeled Schaeffer Hall has been something that we’ve all deeply appreciated. We fought to have chalk boards not whatever those—

DA: Dry erase boards.

SS: Yeah, dry erase boards. We fought for those. We fought for bookshelves. The architects initially didn’t want to have many bookshelves. “Why do you need a lot of bookshelves in your offices?” We had to convince them, “We have a lot of books. That’s what we do.” So, they gave us bookshelves. If you’ve been in some of our offices, you know, some of us have floor to ceiling bookshelves. We won that battle. So, I think everybody who has been chair would say, or would hope, and has in fact contributed to sustaining this unique department culture that continues to thrive and makes it a very humane place to work. To be able to work in a place where there’s not a lot of conflict and a lot of stress, where you basically like the people that you’re working with or at least get along; that has a lot of value. It’s one reason that a lot of us stayed at Iowa rather than looking off to the next job someplace else. Some people have left, and left with good reasons; some of them personal, some of them professional. But a lot of people have stayed and a lot of the reason they’ve stayed is that they value the department and the kind of working environment that it has fostered.

DA: Continuing with that idea, what do you hope for the future of the History Department at Iowa?

SS: Well, we always hope we’re going to grow. We are the smallest department in the Big 10 and the expanded Big 10, by a considerable margin, actually. Places like Purdue, which doesn’t define itself primarily as a liberal arts institution, has a bigger history department than we do. Every chair has fought this battle with the dean; we need to hire more faculty. I think incrementally over the years we’ve grown, but only incrementally. And sometimes we’ve gone backwards. I guess for the future I would hope that my colleagues would see value in maintaining the essential elements of this culture, that we would become a more diverse
department. When I joined the department, there were two women on the faculty. Now, women are a majority of the faculty. We’ve had a hard time building a faculty that is more racially diverse. We have hired a lot of international faculty members whose education or training has been to some degree outside the US. Partly because it’s Iowa, partly because of the nature of the fields of African American history, Latino history, where it’s extremely competitive for the best candidates it’s been hard to recruit and hold on to faculty members of color. So, that’s an area where we clearly need to do more. Periodically, we have attempted to persuade the college to give us another line in—and we’re doing that right now—in African American history, but either at times because the university hasn’t provided the resources or because the field is so competitive, that we haven’t been able to hold on to people that we’ve recruited. It’s been more of a struggle. That’s clearly an area that we, as a department, need to continue to work on. But it’s certainly more a diverse department in terms of gender, ethnicity, and race than it was when I joined the department.

DA: In regards to the profession of being a historian, what kind of opportunities do you feel are available currently, in the modern world?

SS: It’s really tough. I see this through graduate students whose work I’ve been involved with. For a long time we kept saying, “That job market has got to get better,” and we believed that it would. Part of the problem for a while was that people like me didn’t retire at 65. So, there were jobs that were occupied by senior citizens. Part of it was that people from various institutions - graduate students who finish are hired at an entry-level university, a second-tier university, and are immediately on the job market again looking for another job that is better; either in another region or at a better institution. That continues to fill the job market—I mean the candidate pool in ways that make it harder for people just entering the job market. The third thing is – the reason that it’s pretty grim out there in terms of job opportunities—is that more and more universities have gone to hiring adjunct or temporary faculty, who are not tenure-track faculty; so, there’s no permanent job there. They’re hiring them at lower pay. There’s a lot of turn-over in those jobs but the teaching load is heavier. If you’re in one of those positions, it’s harder to maintain your research. If you don’t maintain your research then you’re not competitive for jobs at better institutions or on the tenure-track. It’s a vicious kind of cycle. As a department—and to some degree as a university—but more so as a department; we’ve really held the line on hiring adjunct or temporary faculty. A lot of places haven’t done that. So, a larger proportion of faculty members these days at many institutions are temporary, even though they’re permanent; they’re hired on year to year contracts. It’s made it increasingly hard for new graduate students who are going on the job market to find those tenure-track opportunities that used to be the norm but are not anymore. There’s a lot of exciting things going on intellectually in the discipline of history. Among them is the globalization and internationalization of the field and the fact that people are doing more comparative work. I’ve been part of that in my latest work. But in terms of finding teaching opportunities of the sort that I was a beneficiary of, it’s gotten a lot harder. It’s hard to be as optimistic going forward that people going into graduate training are going to come out of it with the same range of opportunities that many of us had when we were in that position.
DA: Do you have any specific advice you’d like to share with history majors?

SS: Well, it’s kind of the advice we’ve given all along, I suppose. The number of people who major in history who go on to become professional historians is always fairly modest, partly because the job opportunities aren’t there. It’s been our mantra, and I really do believe it, that history provides a kind of training for life, but also for vocations, that is really quite valuable; the analytical skills, the verbal and writing skills that are cultivated in the history major, the ability to understand the world. Just as the field of history has become more global, so has the world in general. One of the things we’ve been adamant about maintaining is the requirement in the major that students do a significant amount of work outside of US history and that they get to know the world, historically, in a way that will give them a level of understanding of what’s going on that they would not otherwise have or that would have been much more superficial otherwise. Some of that training can lead to very interesting employment opportunities or further educational opportunities down the road. Some of it is just becoming – and it sounds hackneyed —becoming a better citizen; someone who has a fair amount of understanding of what’s going on in a situation, for instance, like the Ukraine. What are the historical roots of that? How does that kind of conflict come about? And what are the ingredients of it historically that have laid the groundwork for that? And the other thing, I suppose, is even if you don’t know from your course work what the answers to those questions might be, you’ll know where to go to find them. It’s the kind of research skills that you begin to cultivate. The awareness that for any given problem or situation there are multiple interpretations that people understand to be valid and that are in conflict. You have to figure out, “How do I sort this out? How do I weigh one understanding of this situation versus another? What evidence do I need to be able to make those kinds of judgments?” Those are the kinds of skills that we hope people begin to develop in the course of studying history. We’re always excited if people say at the end of this process, “I want to go off and do graduate work in history because I’m really excited about this subject.” But we’re also excited if somebody says, “I’m going to be reading history for my entire life because I just find it fascinating and relevant to my understanding of the world.” That’s also valuable. I would say to undergraduates; take your courses seriously, get as much as you can out of them. Work on your writing; your writing says so much about you. If you can develop a capacity to write clearly and persuasively, if you can use evidence in a convincing way to make an argument or to offer an interpretation that’s going to be a skill that’s going to get you a long way in whatever job market you find yourself in. That’s the coin of the realm in a lot of fields; unfortunately, I think that’s not widely enough recognized. People are very eager to go into business or into other fields and specialize early on and don’t lay the foundation in that kind of skill-building that is ultimately so crucial. They get out into the world and write a business letter that is incoherent, that just doesn’t make any sense, or is flawed and has all kinds of grammatical errors in it, or is just not well-done. We would hope that people coming out of the history major don’t do that.

DA: That’s great advice and great insight. In closing, are there any final thoughts you’d like to share?
SS: What you’re doing as undergraduates, in terms of acquainting yourselves with the department whose major you’re pursuing is, I think, really important. Because very often, and certainly in my own impression in years of teaching, that undergraduate and even graduate students don’t have a real clear sense of, “What is this department? What is its history? What is its culture? Why are things done the way they’re done? Why do professors do what they do? What are they doing when they’re not in their offices and they’re not in the class rooms? Why does it make sense for a university to be organized by departments?” There’s a lot of talk these days about interdisciplinary—that these old departments like History and English are kind of archaic and that they’re artifacts of an earlier intellectual and institutional era. But, important as working across disciplinary boundaries may be, there is something to be said for the disciplines in their traditional sense. Also, understanding where those disciplines come from, what their history is and why they are institutionalized within the university in the way they are. I think, frankly, that history majors at Iowa are lucky to be connected to a department that has some of the qualities that this department does. If you can become more aware of that, of what those qualities are—some of them you may think, “Well, maybe they’re not that great. Maybe these people just think too highly of themselves and their own history.” But I think to be more self-conscious about the milieu in which you are learning this discipline and the people you’re learning it from is all to the good. I think it enriches your major and your education in a way that not having that understanding would not. It gives you an opportunity, in a way, to engage with the faculty at a level of understanding that most undergraduates in the past and many undergraduates today just don’t have; they kind of pass through the portals of a department without ever really knowing what it’s about or why it functions in the way it does, or why the discipline defines itself in the ways it does. The questions you’ve been asking, for instance about —or that I’ve been answering—in terms of objectivity and interpretation and all of that—I think a lot of undergraduates go all the way to the end of the major without ever really becoming very self-conscious about those characteristics of how the discipline is practiced and the way people do history. It’s been our hope that the colloquium would provide an opportunity to do that. This colloquium in particular, by focusing on the department and the discipline, is an interesting opportunity for you to develop a better understanding of it.

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