**Writing about writing**

Catherine Finer Jones

Some of us dream of being writers long before there is any chance – or risk – of the dream being exposed to reality. I used to battle fruitlessly with my elder sister for a share of the script-writing for our ‘plays’  (for which we charged friends & not-so-friends a grudged halfpenny per performance). So I used to insert extra words on the day instead, as we went along - much to her fury (“You’ve spoilt it *again*!”). There were only ever four parts (one each for me & my sister and our boy cousins from next door) and two dressy costumes to argue over (a sequined gown from the 1920s for the princess, as it were, and a frayed embroidered sort of jockey silk jacket & breeches for her suitor). Yet we seem in retrospect to have rung an impressive range of changes on them.   And I remained convinced I could write as well as anyone, certainly better than my sister.

Nevertheless, the first little triumph came from writing in the style of someone else. I still have fond memories of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*because (thanks to a flip suggestion from I suspect a bored teacher) it had offered such a wonderful vehicle for parodying the entire teaching staff of our then grammar school, to surreptitious acclaim – for all that my Chaucer was ruled unsuitable for the school magazine.

Part of the same proclivity must have been the habit of making up quotations, especially to ‘flesh out’ history essays. I had never thought of this as wrong, since I was not attributing them to anyone in particular. They were simply a huge and entertaining convenience: the dramatic, explosive, emollient, or utterly decisive statement, as need be, to cut through the need for further explication - provided one was sure of the judgement expected to be arrived at, which I usually was.  It was not until being *viva’*dfor an actual history degree that the questionability of making up quotations was brought home. In the words (more or less) of the formidable lady academic present at my inquisition “This is an extremely interesting quotation, offering penetrating insight into the conduct of government under Charles II.  From whence does it come?” “I can’t remember” I mumbled, embarrassed beyond belief. Since when, there have been no more made-up quotations - except when I‘m *known* to be parodying e.g. members of the great British public.

Finding my own voice meant sorting out not just how to write more effectively, but how to fix on the sorts of subject I might be best at writing about. It was to be a long do-it-yourself haul on both counts.

The stylistic challenge was obvious. I had arrived at university knowing school teachers had disagreed over whether I was a free-flowing original as against a wordy child given to over-complicated, Latinist sentences. The latter judgement proved the more spot-on. Other students seemed to spend their work time on essay *preparation*before (as I saw it) simply knocking off their essays more or less in time for delivery. Whereas I agonised over the essay *writing* for so long I used to turn up to tutorials clutching not merely the ‘core’ essay script but handfuls of insertions to be read into it as well.

All of which was in advance of the word processing revolution. As also was my PhD experience, for which the only technological innovation of use turned out to be *Tippex*.  Imagine. The only means of correcting successive carbon copies of the massive would-be final script was manually whiting-out every odd mistake (or misplaced page number) as an alternative to having the whole damned MSS typed all over again. Not that word processing, when it came, was to prove the cure-all solution. The ability to correct *ad infinitum* can after all engender its own forms of writer’s block.

The best and most influential advice came in the end from Gordon Rose, when he was Reader in Sociology in the Department of Social Administration at Manchester where I was the newest of Assistant Lecturers. “Cath” he said, apropos one of my early efforts “give the readers a chance. This looks more like the transcript for a play than a paper. Take out all the inverted commas and most of the adjectives for a start. Let them make up their own minds !” And so I did.

Meanwhile the quest for congenial subject matter continued.  I was not unusual as a history graduate in having shifted subject; but I was unusual within the field of social administration (as it then was) for not having an obvious desire to engage in campaigns for social reform (nor much trust in their chances of being effective). Meanwhile also, my brush with quantitative methods for PhD purposes had been enough to demonstrate the unsuitability, for me, of such a style of reportage.  (I had proved far better at evoking the interviewees’ environment than I was at making constructive, statistical sense of the results of my survey into West Indian Food Habits in North Kensington - an elusive topic at the best of times and not one of my own choosing.)1

Nevertheless, the pressure was on at Manchester for me to latch on to a proper (British) specialism such as Health Care or Housing or (given my pre-PhD experience of unqualified social work) the Personal Social Services. None of which appealed. Instead, it was a summer spent exploring *Assurance Maladie*and *Allocations Familiales*arrangements in the Loire Valley France of the early 1970s which proved irresistible; thanks to the disarming generosity of Manchester’s Barbara & Brian Rodgers in introducing me to this one of their favourite places and networks of contacts.  It was not just the new friends and the scenery – or for that matter the constant challenge of communicating in French. It was the revelation that neighbouring people could be tackling their comparable problems so differently and in such seeming ignorance (if not disdain) of each other’s efforts. Comparative social policy was where I wanted to be; for all that the subject, as then, did not properly exist.

After which, *Patterns of Social Policy: An Introduction to Comparative Analysis*(1985) was the one book – a so-called textbook – which I found the most absorbing to write. Of course there had by that time been various publications with ‘comparative social policy’ somewhere in their title. But my book was spelling out the scope of this new subject systematically, as I saw it, to my own satisfaction. And not just to my own satisfaction, thank goodness. “Social Administration comes of age !” was the triumphal headline of the book’s first serious review (Peter Taylor Gooby) in the then *New Society*magazine*.*

By which time I had made another key move from a writing perspective: into editing other people’s papers (*Yearbooks of Social Policy*in the early 1980s; *Social Policy & Administration*1993-2007; plus a number of edited books stretching over the same period). It was a revelation to me that someone who had found writing such a tortuous taxing business for themselves could find editing (even quite ‘hard editing’) other people’s efforts so relatively easy, congenial – *and* acceptable to the more or less grateful authors concerned. The disjunction between these two sets of abilities – writing for oneself and adjudging the writing of others - remains a mystery to me. But it also remains why I never submit anything of my own composition to any serious outlet without having first subjected it to review from an ‘influential other’.

Except in the present case.

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[Anthropology as irony and philosophy, or the knots in simple ethnographic projects](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/epdf/10.14318/hau4.3.010)

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