

## Finding a Mentor and Being a Mentor

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### Abstract

Becoming a professional social scientist, getting inside, finding your way in a complex field, and improving your position requires lots of diverse skills and helpful ties that one cannot get at most universities. In this short piece I first describe how I could find a mentor for myself in communist Hungary, and how he, and later also a second mentor, have helped me to position myself in a transnational scholarly field. I also discuss how I have used the lessons I have learnt from them in my role as supervisor to over thirty doctoral dissertations.

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## 1 Finding a Mentor

Becoming a professional social scientist, getting inside and finding your way in a complex field, and improving your position within that field, requires lots of diverse skills and helpful ties. Even the best universities can provide only a part of those skills and ties. Besides *bona fortuna* one also needs the friendly guiding help that only mentors can provide. These are more experienced people with the capacity and readiness to guide beginners' steps to becoming a successful player in the field. A good mentor is hard to find; this has always been so. One must invest in finding a mentor, and as one progresses in the field, sometimes a second or even a third one. Below I discuss my experiences with finding and having a mentor followed by a brief discussion of what it takes to be one.

I decided to become a sociologist sometime during the mid 1970s, in Budapest. I graduated in business administration at the age of 21 and, after having worked few weeks at a state socialist factory, I felt myself in the middle of an organized chaos, and I wanted to understand it. I felt that this was a subject for sociologists. At that time, sociologists were an unwanted species in Hungary. Sociology was seen as a discipline hostile to the regime and some of the best sociologists were expelled from Hungary. The teaching of sociology was strictly limited to evening courses for a select few. I needed help to become a sociologist — I needed a mentor. Someone who understood that I knew precious little about what the profession is, let alone about the requirements and rules of becoming a sociologist, about ways to develop my skills as a sociologist, about the ways and tricks of positioning and developing myself within the field.

With the help of friends, I found few real-life sociologists who gave me advice about minor but relevant starting information: "Read this or that from Marx," one of them said; "Read the *Organized Disorganization* from Zoltan Zsille" (Zsille, 1988), advised another. A more practical suggestion was given by one of them: "If you would like to start studying sociology at the sociology department, you have to be inside it," he said. That was the best advice I got. I did some mapping exercises and found a few research assistants of my age working there. I met with them and they helped me to get involved in one of the research projects led by the head of the department and to get a contract for writing a case-study about my factory.

By the next fall I was a sociology student. During my studies at the university, I met with some inspiring teachers, but none of them were interested in mentoring me. I was already in the second year of my studies and I still did not know what the next steps would be — how I could find a position within the only sociological research institute in the country, the Institute of Sociology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Equally as important was how I would enter the profession after having received a bachelor's degree. Graduate schools did not exist in Hungary at that time, which meant that I got my Ph.D. at the age of 40 after having taught at several universities in the United States, and years after having been invited to stable teaching positions first to Rutgers and then to CEU.

I had to find a mentor. It again started with a mapping exercise that helped me find Elemer Hankiss. My B.A. thesis at the university was linked to organizational sociology, but I was interested basically in everything. I needed a Renaissance man and Elemer — yes, that he was. He studied literary theory, wrote books about the structuralist analysis of literature, wrote about the many readings of Hamlet, advised makers of cartoon movies, and led a workshop on the sociology of values at the Institute of Sociology, comparing the value systems of Hungary and United States. So, I got an appointment with him and told him that I would like to join his workshop. We had a long conversation that ended with Elemer offering me a research assistant position for six months. I worked with him for eight years, receiving my first one-year long

contract from him after the fifth year.

On my first day at the Workshop on Value Sociology, Elemer sat down with me and introduced me to his rules of mentorship. “This profession is based on self-exploitation,” he started. “You do whatever you want. I am not going to nudge you. This is about your ambitions. I will read and comment on whatever you write, and you can come to my office to ask questions whenever you want.”

Whenever I finished a draft of unreadable “whatever”, full of my half-cooked ideas, Elemer gave it back to me within a few days with comments and critical notes in the margins. He was able to find one or two good ideas even in my foggiest pieces. He also suggested that I “re-learn Hungarian” by reading Hungarian writers from the 1930s. “They still knew how to put ideas on paper in a simple and sharp way. Perhaps at one point you will also be able to write in Hungarian,” he said, with the usual friendly and warm smile on his face.

Elemer’s research unit functioned like a genuine Renaissance *studio* in 15–16<sup>th</sup> century Florence. Young aspiring economists, sociologists, method geeks, and political economists were employed there. There were weekly seminars where issues of theory and method were discussed based on draft papers. Invited guest speakers included economists, historians, and anthropologists. Just as importantly, his workshop was known among sociologists in Western Europe and in the United States, so whenever a good sociologist came to Hungary from these countries, s/he would make sure to spend time there, to present a paper and to mingle with the young researchers of the workshop. I shared an office for half a year with Michael Burawoy. Ivan Szeleenyi, after he was allowed to return to Hungary for the first time since his expulsion, gave his lectures to his former students in my office, and it was there where I first met David Stark, my long-time friend and co-author.

In 1983, Elemer told me to pass a state exam in English within eight months, after which he would help me get a four-month fellowship at Columbia University. The businessman George Soros had made a deal with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and he was allowed to open his first fellowship program in communist Eastern and Central Europe. This made it possible for Hungarians to study abroad, as at that time traveling was still heavily restricted. I had only been to the “West” once before — to Vienna — and going to Columbia University straight from the Great Hungarian Plain seemed like a dream. I passed the language exam, and with the help of Elemer I wrote my first ever C.V. and job application in English. I think it was the 16<sup>th</sup> rewrite of these materials that Elemer finally approved to be sent to the committee that decided on the distribution of the fellowships at Columbia. I got one of them.

It was in the U.S. that I met my second mentor, Philippe Schmitter. At that time, I was writing on the politics of interest associations and an exciting new field in political science on the borderlines of comparative politics and political economy, that ran under the label of “neocorporatism”. It was a sub-discipline that challenged key tenets of the then-dominant pluralist paradigm. Philippe was unquestionably the leader of this new approach. He was the one who had provided the broad historical and theoretical framework to research in the field. I had extensively used his writings in my works, and he was one of the scholars who I most wanted to meet while in the United States. We met at an American Political Science Association (APSA) conference where he gave one of the keynotes. After he finished his speech, a line formed of all the people who wanted to talk to him, which was almost as long as the one at the Lenin Mausoleum in Moscow. I waited until he was finally liberated and introduced myself. At that time, there were not too many people at APSA conferences from my part of the world, so he might have liked my interest in communist business associations. He invited me for lunch and we talked about his ancestors, about the Polish and Romanian roots of state-corporatism in

Latin America, about the party secretary of the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce, and about Elemer when it turned out that Philippe also knew him.

Philippe became my long-distance mentor. He sent me readings, and advised me about workshops and conferences. He invited me to Florence, once he started teaching at the European University Institute there, to participate in his research project with Wolfgang Streeck on the politics of business associations. In 1987, it was with his help that I got a one-year Jean Monnet fellowship at the EUI. I think I was the first to receive that fellowship from Eastern Europe. Besides writing, my principal task during the fellowship was to remind my colleagues that the lands to the east of Vienna are also parts of Europe.

Later, it was Philippe who brought to my attention an opening at the EUI for a teaching position, which I successfully applied for. It was his last year at the EUI when I started teaching there. We taught his last course together and I was invited to sit in on several of the dissertation defenses of his students. I could see up close his style of mentoring doctoral students. He was a giving mentor, deeply understanding the key points that the students wanted to make. In a warm and open friendly style, he reformulated their ideas, putting them in a broader framework and inducing the ambition to be bold in formulating ideas. He would spend hours with them, going through each detail in their dissertation. And yes, he could also be rude with the ones who were unambitious. But that was the exception; he could see promising things even in students who I thought were long lost “in the deep dark forest”.

I also once saw a Philippe who could frighten. That was during a mock interview he organized to help one of his doctoral students who was preparing for his first ever job application committee. Philippe played the role of the “bad cop”. He asked rude questions, he continuously interrupted them with nasty interjections, and even loudly laughed at one of the poor guy’s answers. It was unbearable, and at one point I wanted to leave the room. I asked Philippe whether this was necessary. “Yes, it is”, he answered. “If he wants to survive in this profession, he has to also be prepared for the worst.” Now, I know — he was right.

The other person whom I wanted to meet while I was in New York was Theda Skocpol. I was impressed by her *States and Social Revolutions* (Skocpol, 1979) that was published at around that time. She was on a fellowship in New York in 1984. I got her phone number and called her. I introduced myself and told her that I am from Hungary, that I read her book, and that I would like to meet with her. There was silence on her side, and after a while she said to me: “We can meet, but you should know that I am not a Marxist.” My answer was ready-made: “Sure, but I am also neo-Weberian.” We met for a beer or two and after that meeting I knew that I would love to be her doctoral student. Three years later, at the age of 34, I applied for the Ph.D. program at Harvard Sociology. I was interviewed by her, and I was offered to start my doctoral studies at Harvard in the Fall of 1988. But that turned out to be a road not taken. By the time I was supposed to go to the U.S., regime change had started in Hungary. I was busy with organizing unions and a campaign against a planned restrictive strike law. I wrote a long letter to my mentor-to-be explaining to her my new situation and my desire to stay in Hungary. I got a wonderful, approving letter from her. I know that there I lost a mentor who could have put my career as a sociologist on a very different pathway. I know this from my friends who had the good fortune of being her supervisees.

## 2 Being a Mentor

At the age of 18 I hadn’t the faintest idea of what I would like to do as an adult. The only thing I knew, based on my experiences with my father, who was a teacher, was that I never wanted to

teach. I started to teach after my return from my one-year fellowship in Florence. In Florence, I had taken a class with Steven Lukes on theories of power, and I loved the style of teaching that he used. He never wanted to tell you in any way how you must think about a specific thing, how to conceptualize it, or how to establish relations among different phenomena. Instead, he tried to encourage you to think about these issues yourself — and to think harder. His seminars were only led by his students, and he most often intervened with the questions “Are you sure about this?” and “Does anyone have a different idea?”.

I took my teaching style from Steven; my mentoring strategies, from Elemer and Philippe. From Steven I have learned that the most important goal in teaching graduate seminars is to help doctoral students to learn how to participate in disciplined scholarly debate, to prepare them for the critical reading of the literature, to use those readings in formulating positions in debates, and to learn how to use debates to refine your thinking about the issues at hand — to prepare them for a profession that is based on never-ending debates.

Mentoring is a much more complex thing. Besides the learning of scholarly skills, it includes helping a young aspirant to acquire the ambitions, the behavioral skills, the emotional regulation, the right use of “professional” body language, to make “playing the game” a second nature — knowing how to position themselves in the field, how to enter into alliances, and how to choose opponents (and to reject those who do not deserve to be opponents). It also includes helping them in their professional path to overcome constraints, and to detect and use opportunities. It might even include helping them at key junctures of their personal life. Mentoring includes “midwifery”: helping to find a viable path for a young scholar-in-the-making; once this is achieved, it also includes nurturing them, sometimes nudging them to improve their position, or to find pathways better suited to them.

Mentoring might start as a more hierarchical and authoritarian relationship and evolve slowly towards a more lateral one, towards a role resembling that of an older sibling and eventually towards a status not unlike the closest friendships.

I have served as a supervisor for over 30 doctoral students. Not all of them have received the same level of attention from me and I have given up on some of them after having realized that they were in the wrong place. Academia is not for them and if I would like to help them, the best thing I could do is to help them realize that their future is somewhere else. With the other doctoral students, I used the lessons I learned from Elemer and from Philippe, and I always tried to tailor these lessons to their very diverse and specific needs, many times learning the solutions to this problem from the students themselves.

Many times, mentoring had to go far beyond transferring the narrow skillset of a professional academic to include the professional management of emotions and body language. Several of my students had low tolerance for conflict and lacked elementary skills for managing unprofessional personal attacks. Academia is not a country for the faint-hearted. One must learn the capacity to withstand and manage strong criticism that is sometimes peppered with personal attacks bordering on character assassination.

Several of my mentored students had to learn that the clash of perspectives is the most elementary part of the profession. Being contradicted, or even being cornered, is a normal part of the game. Professionalism starts with acquiring the skills for managing such situations. Seeing your students answering even the strongest criticism in a self-assured calm way is one of the most rewarding experiences of mentorship. Even more rewarding is to see, in the works of your students, the increased preparedness for potential critical comments.

One of my first success stories came when preparing one of my doctoral students for her defense. In her committee, there was one colleague who strongly disliked her dissertation and

had expressed his opinion in a report that was full of personal attacks. Close to nervous breakdown, my student did not want to go to the defense. I sat down with her, going through one by one all the points of criticism made by the hostile committee member. I demonstrated to her that his points were either weak, could be easily refuted, or were not relevant, as they did not relate to the key points of the dissertation. They could be easily corrected once the dissertation became a book. After that, we rehearsed a way of taking and replying to these criticisms during the defense. Visibly relaxed and attentive, showing no emotion on her face, she started her answer by giving thanks for such great questions and comments, then calmly discussed their weaknesses one by one, point by point. She passed the defense with distinction.

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