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Conrad Maynadier Arensberg (1910-1997)

by Joel Halpern ('56)

Conrad Maynadier Arensberg died on February 10, 1997. Connie, as he was known to his legions of students, colleagues and friends, was 86. Connie's work was key to the development of anthropology as a natural science in a hierarchy with the other natural sciences, each with its own specific unit of observation—that of anthropology being human interaction. He developed and demonstrated interactionist theory in his research, most famously in his influential and widely-read works *The Irish Countryman* (Macmillan, 1937) and *Family and Community in Ireland* (with Solon Kimball, Harvard, 1940). Connie pioneered the study of complex societies through use of conceptual frameworks of interpersonal action based on verifiable *in vivo* observations.

Since Connie was born in 1910, his long life spanned most of this century. A full appreciation of his life and career is not possible without attention to experiences which helped to shape his outlook. A significant experience for him was moving from the subculture of a tough neighborhood public elementary school where disputes were settled with one's fists in the schoolyard, to that of a private academy modeled after the British public schools, with their explicit hierarchy. He then attended Harvard where he received his BA summa cum laude in 1931 and PhD in 1934.

Connie's research career began as one of a number of promising undergraduate field-worker analysts who worked with Lloyd Warner in his long-term Yankee City studies, in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Lloyd Warner brought the ideas of British social anthropology as developed by Radcliffe-Brown to Harvard, and the focus of concerns of this group at Harvard can be contrasted with the then-Boasian emphasis on race and culture, as well as with Benedict's and Mead's subsequent concerns with psychology and the individual in culture. Warner proved to be a seminal influence on Connie's career. Connie was assigned to researching ethnic groups in the Yankee City project. Then, as a graduate student, Warner successively sent Connie and Kimball to Ireland to study the Old World background of the most numerous of these groups, the Irish. The two became lifelong friends and colleagues, and Kimball became Connie's most important collaborator. Each wrote many articles on anthropological methods for studying complex societies, including works on contemporary U.S. culture. Some of the most important of these articles were collected and reprinted in their *Culture and Community* (Harcourt, Brace 1965). Another important Newburyport researcher whom Connie first met on this project was Elliott Chapple with whom Connie worked on

developing inductive operational methods, which resulted in their work *Measuring Human Relations* (Genetic Psychology Monographs, 1942).

Perhaps the most significant experience that affected Connie's intellectual development was his post-doctoral participation in the Society of Fellows at Harvard (1934-38). Here, Connie formed his commitment to the development of anthropology as a natural science. The biochemist L. J. Henderson, one of the founders of the Harvard Society of Fellows, was an intellectual role model and mentor for the Junior Fellows, Connie among them. Henderson is particularly noted for his development of the biologically-derived concept of system among social sciences. His eschewal of grand theory in favor of focusing on the observable, as Bernard Barber notes in discussing the Society of Fellows members (*L.J. Henderson on the Social System*, Chicago, 1970), finds its echoes in Connie's approach which found wide expression in the works of his students, yet was never identified as a "school."

*"Connie always
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picture."*

Connie was thus part of a group of emerging young professionals who were to make their mark in the integrated development of the then-nascent social sciences. Perhaps the most important peer relationship that Connie developed during this period was with William F. Whyte, also a Harvard Junior Fellow. Whyte attributes some of his organizing ideas and field work methods for his *Street Corner Society* (Chicago, 1943) to their discussions. Importantly Whyte refers to Connie's generosity of spirit and to his helpfulness to others which has been a hallmark observation of those who knew them. Although their approach was later to diverge, Connie also influenced George Homans's work, particularly his *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Harvard, 1941). Yet it was Connie's consistent focus on the observable interactive group which provided the methodology that was crucial in unifying members of this groups' focus, despite their spread into diverse disciplines and interest in diverse world regions. The pragmatic focus of research on human interactions also provided the basis for the subsequent development of applied anthropology and employment opportunities for generations of practicing anthropologists.

A new phase in Connie's life began in 1937 when he went off to teach at MIT in its department of Social Sciences and Economics, a newly constituted experiment in integrated social science research. This provided opportunities to extend the possibilities for social science research, such as in his 1939 publication "The Mechanics of Human

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Organization" (in *Mechanical Engineering*). A year later, Connie joined anthropological colleagues in founding the Society for Applied Anthropology. He was one of its first presidents and the first editor of its journal *Human Organization*, in addition to serving a second term as the Society's president, some twenty years.

Connie served with distinction in World War II in Army intelligence. He was on the team that, once the Japanese codes had been cracked, analyzed intercepted messages and figured out the Japanese plan of attack's main sites (the Japanese Order of Battle). Right after the war Connie participated in the Strategic Bombing Survey, the important study that demonstrated that U.S. bombing of sites, both in Germany and in Japan, had little strategic value. Just prior to the war, Connie had taught at Brooklyn College and immediately after the war he took a job at Barnard College, moving to the Graduate Faculties at Columbia in 1952. It was during this period that he trained a very large number of doctoral students. In addition to those for whom he was the main advisor, Connie also served on the doctoral committees of many other candidates in the Department of Anthropology and from any other departments and schools of the university. Connie was generous with his time and enjoyed helping others.

As Principal Investigator, Connie initiated and directed a number of research grants during these years. This continued his interdisciplinary endeavors, in particular the Columbia University Inter-Disciplinary Project on Growth of Economic Institutions (1953-57), which he co-directed with Karl Polanyi, culminating in their co-edited volume (with Harry W. Pearson) *Trade and Markets in the Early Empires* (Chicago, 1957). Connie's interest lay in developing the analyzing comparative frameworks to be utilized in these works. Other research undertakings were on Cantometrics with Alan Lomax, and the Indian Community Studies Project, which sent students and scholars to diverse sites in India. Connie was the editor of the *Point IV Manual of the American Anthropological Association* (1952), which subsequently evolved into *Introducing Social Change: A Manual for Americans Overseas* (1964), written with Arthur Niehoff. In line with these works, Connie also was organizer and chair of a significant number of the University Seminars at Columbia, including the one he conducted with Karl Polanyi.

Connie's last active professional years in the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the appearance of a number of publications that developed further his theoretical concepts. Thus his view that culture emerges from the regularities in human interaction, "minimal sequence process modeling," was spelled out in detail in his "Culture as Behavior, Structure and Emergence," (*Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1972), and "Cultural Holism Through Interactional Systems," his AAA Presidential Address (*American Anthropologist*, 1981). His essay "Generalizing Anthropology: The Recovery of Holism" (in E. Adamson Hoebel, ed., *Crisis in Anthropology: the View From Spring Hill*, Garland 1982) reveals his continuing desire to grapple with perennial issues of coherence in

a field of study which today remains fragmented.

Friends often complained of Connie that he did not press himself forward sufficiently. Connie's gentlemanly manner and unfailing courtesy were a byword in the profession. His was a full professional life both consistent and imaginative and one which serves as a model for others. His scholarly legacy remains pervasive as many of the readers of *AnthroWatch* will surely agree.

Grace Goodell's memorial remarks perhaps summarizes this unique individual: "Connie always reached out to assemble the big picture: all sciences in one framework, all Indo-European cultures in a common stream; each complex society connected to its civilizational core, its archaeological and historical past. The powerful synthesizing drive behind such an intellect, we saw in his personal relations as well: building bridges, introducing scholars of like mind but very diverse fields to one another, bringing out the strong points in a student's or opponent's position.

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Dr. Vivian Garrison in providing access to materials used in the preparation of this article.

A memorial service for Conrad M. Arensberg was held May 7, 1997, in St. Paul's Chapel, Columbia University, sponsored by the combined departments of anthropology at Barnard College, Columbia University, and Teachers College. Speakers included: Myron L. Cohen, Lambros Comitas, Grace E. Goodell, Owen Lynch, Alexander G. Moore and Harry Soodak, Daniel P. Sciarra and Elliott Skinner.

AnthroWatch: Special Issue in Honor of Conrad M. Arensberg

In October, 1994 *AnthroWatch* published a special issue devoted to Conrad Arensberg (Vol. 2, No. 2), and edited by Carol Henderson with contributions from co-workers, colleagues, and students. Joel Halpern contributed "A Scholar for All Seasons," an overview of Connie's works and life. Shorter contributions were written especially for the issue by: Elliott P. Skinner, Lucy Wood Saunders, Helen I. Safa, Alexander Moore, Arthur H. Niehoff, Morton Klass, Lambros Comitas, Alan Lomax, Anne Chapman, Ralph L. Holloway, Grace Goodell, Henry G. Burger, Geraldine Gamburd, Walter Zenner, Peggy Barlett, Barbara K. Larson, Howard M. Hecker, Maria Lagos, and William Foote Whyte. A biographical sketch was prepared by Carol Henderson and Sally Wrigley, along with a brief bibliography. CGAAA still has copies available of the CMA issue, still \$5.00. Contact us CGAAA, P.O. Box 459, Cathedral Station, New York, NY 10025.