

## Joseph R. Gusfield, 1923–2015



The distinguished American sociologist, Joseph Robert Gusfield, died peacefully at his residence in Danville, California on 5 January 2015. He was aged 91. Joe Gusfield was well known and greatly revered for his inquiring spirit, his richly humanistic approach to sociology, his encompassing scholarship and his gentle manner. Gusfield's work explored the importance of meaning, conceptualization, symbols, social construction and dramatism in social movements, social history and science. He was particularly interested in how 'social' or (as he termed them) 'public' problems became defined as such, and changed. His work reflected the impress of numerous seminal thinkers—perhaps most notably that of Kenneth Burke. Gusfield published an edited collection of Burke's writings in 1989 [1], introduced by an appreciative biographical and interpretive essay. Gusfield was perhaps best known in the addictions field for three books: (a) *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (1963) [2], (b) his deconstructions of the drinking-and-driving public problem arena, in *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order* (1981) [3] and (c) his insightful essays and analyses in *Contested Meanings: The Construction of Alcohol Problems* (1996) [4]. His investigations always sought to enlarge

sociological understanding broadly defined, drawing upon his own deep well of learning; he eschewed the more narrowly technocratic objectives that so often characterize research projects and publications in the substance abuse field.

Joe received his bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago in 1946, where his undergraduate years were interrupted by US Army service from Spring 1943 to early 1946. After trying the University of Chicago Law School for a couple of years, he switched to sociology. His dissertation, 'Organizational Change: A Study of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union', was completed in 1954. *Symbolic Crusade*, which appeared nine years later, offered a series of analyses of telling sociological aspects of social movements, each chapter geared to a period in the temperance movement's unfolding history. The result was a masterpiece. One chapter, for example, addressing the 20th century's first 30 years, offered Gusfield's theoretically textured treatment of the sociology of moral indignation. *Symbolic Crusade's* abiding thesis was that cultural conflict not understandable or explainable in traditional class-versus-class or economic terms could nevertheless be brought into clear focus as struggles over deference and perceived social honoring. A foretaste of *Crusade's* broader analysis appeared as a chapter in *Society, Culture and Drinking Patterns*, the pioneering edited volume put out in 1962 by the Committee on Alcoholism of the Society for the Study of Social Problems [5]. Joe's membership in the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) dated from its beginnings in 1950–1951 and he served a term as its president in the late 1980s.

Joe left the Midwest and his faculty post at the University of Illinois in 1967, and embraced the challenge of creating a department of sociology at the University of California, San Diego. At a time when the arrival of powerful computers fueled an almost irresistible trend toward multivariate modes of survey analysis in academic sociology, Gusfield noted that he 'wanted a department that would break with the emphasis on quantitative work'. The 1960s was also a time of great social ferment and change, both inside and outside the academy. Theoretical sociology, however, was saddled with a largely static view of society coming out of the structural–functional perspectives of the 1950s. Gusfield addressed this weakness in an edited volume of readings on social change, *Protest, Reform, and Revolt: A Reader in Social Movements*, published in 1970 [6]. 'Change and conflict', he wrote, 'are as much facts of human society as are stability and order'. The eclecticism, inclusivity and great range of Joe's scholarship is evidenced in the wide variety of authors to whom this volume gave

voice—including, for instance, George Rudé, Alexis de Tocqueville, H. Richard Niebuhr and Vladimir Lenin. Despite Joe's passionate commitment to social justice—as suggested by his participation in the Selma civil rights march—his approach to the sociological study of social movements and change maintained a strong commitment to high-road scholarly values. 'In this period of history', he wrote in *Protest, Reform, and Revolt*, 'when students, professors, and publics are so deeply preoccupied with issues of revolt, reform, and dissent, I still hang firmly to a belief in the value of intellectual detachment and the virtues of disinterested analysis' (p. viii).

Joe's work in the drinking-and-driving arena examined the social construction and dynamics of problem definition, both in public and scientific discourses. This work was both palpably subversive with respect to conventional drunk-driving research (because it contextualized, relativized and thus also questioned the reification of problem definition that accompanies positivistic research approaches) and profoundly useful as well (because it expanded the potential discourse and thus also the potential avenues for ameliorative social responses). On a personal note, Joe maintained a strong relationship with the Alcohol Research Group in Berkeley during the years that I worked there. He particularly valued Robin Room's encyclopedic knowledge and Harry Gene Levine's reinterpretations of alcohol-related history. Indeed, a goodly portion of the epilogue Joe added to *Symbolic Crusade's* second edition [7], published in 1986, was devoted to Levine's ideas. And yet I also had the vague feeling of a 'visitor from another planet' when Joe paid a visit to ARG and its library. It was as if, for instance, a warmly welcomed and highly respected cosmologist had dropped in on the engineers in short sleeves at NASA.

Joe was pre-deceased in 2013 by his wife, Irma, of 66 years, to whom *Symbolic Crusade* was dedicated; a daughter, Julie, also pre-deceased him. He leaves behind son

Dan and daughter Chaya, both in Northern California. Joseph R. Gusfield also leaves behind mostly fallow farmland, where his symbolically orientated approach to the sociology of alcohol was once productively sowed. Fortunately, some of the fields Joe tilled have in recent years been drawing the attentions of scholars in the humanities. Yet, and truly, there will be no replacing the rich scholarship and lofty sociological vision Joe brought to our topic.

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For more on Joseph R. Gusfield, please see 'Conversation with Joseph Gusfield. *Addiction* 2006; 101: 481–490. doi: 10.1111/j.1360-0443.2006.01383.x.