

SYLVIA L. THRUPP:
THE CHICAGO YEARS (1946-61)

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ylvia Thrupp's years at the University of Chicago fall to me, as we have divided our exploration of her intellectual-cum-professional biography. This seems appropriate, as I was a student at Chicago in the 1950s and in those years took several seminars from her when she finally gained full status in the graduate program in History. Her fifteen years at Chicago were the years in which she went from being a player in English medieval economic and social history to the leader of a distinguished team of inter-disciplinary and comparative historians and social scientists who worked to practice as well as preach a new gospel. What we can think of as Thrupp's medievalist reach in those years would bear fruit in the compilation and editing of two innovative volumes, *Change in Medieval Society: Europe North of the Alps, 1050-1500* (1964) and *Early Medieval Society* (1967); her comparativist reach is still with

us as *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1958-). We also have *Millennial Dreams in Action: Essays in Comparative Study* (1962), a volume she edited from the papers of a 1960 conference at Chicago that she organized and over which she presided.¹

To follow and appreciate the transition that Thrupp made in her work and disciplinary focus in those Chicago years we can pick up the tale with her 1944 application for a Guggenheim Fellowship. That helped bring her east and then to Chicago, and, once there, enabled her to crystallize the ideas that would proclaim her a leader in the unconventional areas she was to stake out amidst the conservative academia of the 1950s. We have already followed the path that led to her (poorly paid) position in the Department of History at British Columbia. It takes a stretch of imagination in our world of jet travel and e-mail to appreciate how isolated the

Canadian Northwest was in the last years of WW II, even at UBC. As an ambitious historian with a research agenda that had been long on-hold, Thrupp had been sorely stretched at UBC by a heavy teaching load and the difficult access to a major library, let alone to archives. She spoke wistfully of the occasional trip to the University of Washington in Seattle where H. S. Lucas had built a good collection of medieval material.² Her feelings of isolation and stagnation were doubtlessly compounded by a heavy dose of sexism that contributed to her second-class citizenship—as marked by the pay cut she took in going from high school to university teaching. I suspect that collegial jealousy based on gender was further fueled Thrupp’s outspoken style and her fancy research credentials from London.

Thrupp’s ambitions in 1944, as spelled out in her Guggenheim application, were to flesh out the material of her London thesis for a book, and this meant coming east to do more research and to renew contacts made in the 1930s. Note the broad sweep of her Guggenheim

proposal: “To analyse the theoretical assumptions regarding social structure, and the ethical teaching associated with this theory, in the writings of Albertus Magnus, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus. The work is intended to serve as foundation for a set of comparative studies of social thought as exhibited in other selected writings of the period 1250-1350.”³ Not exactly a modest proposal. Although she never completed this project *per se*, this looks like the very early stages of her transition from an archivally-oriented medievalist to one who would focus on large patterns of social structure and change. How much she already anticipated this future is impossible to determine but, looking back, we can sense that the seeds were being planted.

In tracing Thrupp’s development and career, I do her an injustice her if I depict her in 1944 as some kind of academic rube from the wilds of the Northwest, eager to come east to sit at the feet of the sages. She had made her way to the University of London and had prospered in the competitive world of

the legendary Power-Postan seminar. She had published a major paper in their volume of collected essays and she had enlisted Eileen Power's magisterial aid in landing a commission to subsidize her time in London and that resulted in her *The Worshipful Company of Bakers* (1933). She was a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a member of the Royal Economic Society, as well as of the Medieval Academy. When assembling her Guggenheim application—replete with those typos and scribbles that mark the paperwork of an earlier world—she lined up references from such luminaries as Postan, Frank Knight of Chicago (an economist), N. S. B. Gras of Harvard, E. F. Gay of the Huntington Library, R. M. MacIver of Columbia (a political scientist), and Frederick Lane of Johns Hopkins. Though their recommendations reflected varying views about the feasibility of her project they all wrote on her behalf, impressed by her ambition and her potential for bold and wide-sweeping work.⁴

The effort paid off; she got the much-coveted Guggenheim

Fellowship and a new day was about to dawn.⁵ During the course of her fellowship year, she was offered a position as an assistant professor in the College of the University of Chicago. When she joined the Social Science Staff there in 1946 the College was an entity separate and apart from the Division of the Social Sciences, which means that she was not a member of the History Department. In fact, Thrupp did not teach a graduate history seminar until 1958, by which time the College had lost its autonomy and its faculty could teach in the divisions.⁶ But in tracing her intellectual and academic development I think that her decade-plus of exclusion from the History Department was very much to her advantage. She was doing most of her teaching in Social Science II (Soc II)—the second in a three year sequence required of all students in The College. Soc II was innovative and exciting. Instead of indicating that we would look at sociology, anthropology, and psychology, and in lieu of a textbook, we had a syllabus of primary readings focused on “personality and culture.” The complicated

ramifications of this inquiry were explored by way of Marx and Engels, Freud, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Adam Smith, Malthus, Max Weber, William Lloyd Warner, and Everett Hughes, among others. Given the direction in which Thrupp's thinking was moving by the late 1940s it is likely that this home base was more challenging and congenial than the bread-and-butter courses of the History Department, or even of the College's own Western Civ(ilization) course.

So not only did Thrupp's main assignment in The College give her a push in a direction she was happy to go—that of comparative or interdisciplinary social science—but she was learning to function as a team player in a staff-taught course. All the College courses were taught from a common syllabus by a group of men (and a few women) who met on a regular basis to debate the material being covered and the readings chosen for that year. So if Thrupp was getting a cold shoulder from the History Department she was, as a member of the Soc II staff, meeting regularly with

colleagues to assess the readings and topics. Moreover—and of considerable significance in the evolution of her thought and the subsequent course of her career—her colleagues on that staff in the late 1940s and early 1950s included Daniel Bell, Reinhard Bendix, Philip Hauser, Bert Hoselitz, C. Wright Mills, Barrington Moore, Benjamin Nelson, Ed Shils, Milton Singer, Lewis Coser, Reuel Denney, Morris Janowitz, and David Riesman—which is pretty much a who's-who of American social science. Thrupp was playing on the A Team; heady stuff after those lonely years in the Pacific Northwest.

But to set Thrupp into the lofty context of her Chicago colleagues is not to offer her up as the new kid on the block, to be seen but not heard. In 1948, her *Merchant Class of Medieval London, 1300-1500* had appeared, bringing major scholarly credentials, a boost in self-confidence, and perhaps a raise in pay. Though this was to be the only soup-to-nuts book she ever wrote, its half century-plus in print gives an idea of how it helped set the paradigm

for the study of medieval urban history. By the time her monograph came off the press Thrupp was beginning to think of turning to more synthetic and comparative work. She was certainly pleased that her London work was now in print. In fact—presumably to give closure to the topic—she had resisted solicitations to expand its scope; she had told the Guggenheim Foundation that the University of Chicago Press had suggested, “that I produce a general book on medieval social theory.” But this would have to wait, since “a good many preliminary studies are needed before a good general survey could be written. My own contribution will be limited to social thought in England in the later middle ages.”⁷

Where to turn? These were conservative times; universities were happy if they could escape the scourge of McCarthyism and his inquisitors, and the University of Chicago, after the turmoil of the Hutchins years, had neither money nor enthusiasm for many new departures. If one were an historian at Chicago in those days, with a growing interest

in cutting across sacrosanct disciplinary and departmental lines, how to go about it? Given that the social science departments at Chicago, other than History, were among the best in the nation, the logical answer was to seek like-minded colleagues already on the campus. And this is exactly what Sylvia Thrupp did as she began to focus on projects that looked to problems and social themes, rather than disciplines and their prescribed agendas. The inter-disciplinary focus that had made Soc II such a challenge was now to be replicated to yoke history to sister fields, but now for research and publication rather than undergraduate instruction.

Thrupp was an old and close friend of the distinguished Chicago sociologist Everett Hughes (who probably helped bring her to Chicago in the first place).⁸ She—or she and Hughes—found a ready and willing ally in Gustave E. von Grunebaum, Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies. He, too, was a fish out of water at Chicago and he was working with colleagues in Anthropology and area studies.⁹ Thus an

unorthodox and innovative troika was formed—one with a broad view of the horizon and ambitious plans to yoke the historical past and the global present. With Thrupp as the driving force they laid groundwork for a seminar on “The City in History.” This was to draw scholars from the U.S. and abroad—and from a wide range of disciplines—and could it be institutionalized it might become the first step toward a journal of comparative studies. Her efforts on behalf of this “great transition”—culminating in 1958 with the launching of *CSSH*—would claim most of Thrupp’s time and energy from the mid-1950s through the 1960–61 when she went to the University of Michigan as the Alice Freeman Palmer Professor of History.

Her commitment to the enterprise becomes clear from Thrupp’s *cv* for her Chicago years. Her record after *The Merchant Class* mostly testifies to her (successful) efforts to emerge as a sage, a director of the orchestra. Beyond *The Merchant Class*—published in 1948 but virtually completed when she arrived in 1946—the

record is mainly in the direction of exploratory ventures, think pieces, and advocacy, than of medieval scholarship; bridge-building between history and other social sciences, especially sociology, claimed more and more of her time. For the 1950s, we have five articles plus an edition of William Scott’s seventeenth century treatise, *An Essay of Draperys* (1953). The latter seems a by-product of her Guggenheim project, though it is a good leap from the economic views of Duns Scotus to an argument that the profit motive is morally sound. She spent much of the Guggenheim year at Harvard, which probably explains why Scott’s treatise was published by the Kress Library of the Harvard Business School. Her only other paper closely related to the Guggenheim project, “Entrepreneurial History and the Middle Ages,” appeared in the 1951 *Bulletin of the Center for Entrepreneurial History*. Otherwise—except for a paper on the alien population of fifteenth century England (*Speculum*, 1957), an issue of long term interest—she preached the gospel of inter-disciplinarity, going where she was welcome and talking to

the already-converted or the willing-to-be-converted. There are papers, probably from talks, in *Sociology and Social Research*, *The Journal of Economic History*, and *The American Journal of Sociology*.¹⁰

Thanks to the kindness and organization of the University of Chicago's Special Collections in the Regenstein Library, the papers of Thrupp's friend and co-worker, Everett C. Hughes, enable us to delineate the stages whereby she moved toward comparative history and the creation of her journal. As early as 1953 Thrupp, Hughes, and von Grunebaum were hitting on the Ford Foundation for money (\$45,000) for their seminar on urbanization. With Ford Foundation money it came to life and drew such luminaries as G. L. Haskins from Pennsylvania, Gaines Post and R. R. Reynolds from Wisconsin, and Philippe Wolff from Toulouse. Thrupp's report on the seminar spoke proudly of an effort "to promote comparative study of the growth of towns in differing historical contexts" that relied heavily on medieval data.¹¹ By 1956, Thrupp and her

associates were looking to create a journal that would embody and institutionalize the kind of work that was being done in the seminar. There was never a shortage of idea; as far back as 1954, she sent a memo to Hughes about the significance of small towns, places "that never became any great shakes," a full generation before Rodney Hilton steered us in this direction. Letters soliciting supporters and editorial board members were making the rounds: Crane Brinton, Sidney Painter, Meyer Schapiro, and Eric Wolf, to name but some of them, and in the meantime negotiations were being conducted with Mouton in the Netherlands for the publication of *CSSH*. Colleagues came aboard, sometimes with a check from their institution in hand (Joseph Strayer—whom years later Thrupp would marry—came to the editorial board with \$500 from Princeton).

The journal appeared for the first time in 1958 and three years later Thrupp left Chicago for Michigan where she would teach until her retirement. To appreciate the magnitude of what she had accomplished

we should revisit the academy of the 1950s. If I have dwelt heavily on the conservatism and sexism of her history colleagues at Chicago I suspect that they were but typical for that day and age. Few universities had much to brag about when it came to diversity of focus or of personnel. It was a very provincial world; as yet no English translation of Marc Bloch, no E. P. Thompson, no Lawrence Stone, no Braudel for our shelves or seminars. The “new social history” was as yet unborn, those exchanges between Evans-Pritchard and Keith Thomas on the interplay of history and anthropology still in the future. The Department at Chicago had but two women (counting Thrupp, who had entered by the side door), one Latin Americanist, perhaps a couple of Asianists, and only von Grunebaum for the Near East. The historian of medicine was based in the medical school and for an innovative program like “religion and history” one had to go to the Divinity School.

Suffice it to say that it was a different world in terms of the historical discipline, and Sylvia

Thrupp set out to make a change. To a remarkable degree she did, and her challenges were even more threatening given her sex, her sharp tongue, and the coterie of friends she was able to line up. If we look at the editorial board of the initial *CSSH* we have a roster that proclaims international and inter-disciplinary contacts: nine colleagues from four universities and in seven fields. For the consulting editors: 17 universities, eight countries, 12 academic disciplines. Of this group, among such great names as Raymond Firth and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Thrupp was the only woman. Moreover, she and she alone was listed as “editor.”¹²

Her Chicago days were ending and it is not my purpose to go through the early years of *CSSH*, rich though they are with Thrupp’s editorials and reviews. It all bore her stamp. From the start she had insisted that the world under examination meant every nook and cranny of the globe, not just the USA and Europe. The journal was to be as broad in geographical reach as in chronological and disciplinary ones. Days of

honor and influence lay ahead when Thrupp left Chicago for Michigan, taking her brainchild along with her. But the pioneering days were over; the revolution had been launched and was now running on the rails. Sylvia Thrupp was a prophet who worked to see that her time did come. In approach or method—I am reluctant to say in philosophy—she was a structural functionalist from her very first research, with an early and sustained concern for social history and a sociologist’s agenda (and interests she pursued while working on an SSRC grant in the mid-1930s were along the lines she could later develop in depth). From the mid-1950s, as her bibliography indicates, she was becoming more concerned to chart pathways—for herself and for others—than she necessarily was to follow them, let alone to do much “new” research. But she had a real flair for asking penetrating questions about how things worked and how we could grasp the way in which they were inter-related, and if one worked with or around her this distinctive approach always loomed large.¹³



In later years, Sylvia Thrupp was firm about proclaiming that she was not a feminist, nor had she been a victim of academic misogyny. I think she chose to underplay or deny those earlier years when she—a fellow of the Royal Historical Society—was denied access to Chicago’s graduate students. We know that in her days in British Columbia she had chafed against the confines of provincial society. She was not an easy colleague, and her outspoken style and her flair for eccentricity must have been used against her—a self-fulfilling prophecy about female colleagues. But even as a graduate student I realized that she—excluded from the old boys club—was forming her own club, and that it was a different and probably an interesting club at that. Working under her supervision was not easy. A seminar on comparative urbanization led me to read widely though to what end was never clear. Another, in which we helped transcribe the freeman entry rolls of Canterbury—which she eventually published

with the Kent Archaeological Society—would have been more rewarding had we been told at the start, rather than at the finish, the purpose of the list of names we struggled to decipher on her rickety microfilm reader (though compensation in this case came in the form of hot rum drinks in her book-lined apartment).¹⁴

So it was not all wine and roses. It would be easy to conclude by asserting that Thrupp was a scholar ahead of her time and that the History Department at Chicago done her wrong. There is much to this; sexism and personal animosity, as well as her outspoken devotion to an idiosyncratic enterprise, denied her much that should have been hers, at least for a long time. But there was also a lot of good news. At Chicago she found room in which to spread her wings and she found colleagues—if not among the historians—who were eager to help her turn her project, or her dream, into reality. She learned to become a team player, which came by art rather than nature. She was a better prophet than an expositor. She could explain matters in a wayward

fashion as though her auditor already had the benefit of a prior conversation on which to ground this one. She could be elusive and allusive when a little old fashioned explication might have settled some of the dust. Nor was she always inclined to honor the adage about honey being a better draw than vinegar.

But for all these shortcomings she was a towering figure. That my alma mater did not cosset her so she remained there to wind up her academic is hardly to their credit, though the same institution also lost Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey over the years and was not unduly concerned. On the other hand, fifteen years of teaching and scholarship at Chicago is hardly a flash in the pan. The University provided her with an intellectual community of major scholars in a wide range of fields. It assigned her to the most innovative and interdisciplinary social science course going in the land. The setting was right, the opportunity was there. She had the wisdom to recognize the setting, the drive to take advantage of the opportunity, the perseverance to

deliver the goods. Her journey was often difficult, often poorly rewarded, often questioned by those who might have known better. If so, the more power to her. She had a vision and she made it work. Not a role model, perhaps, but an inspiration.

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END NOTES

¹ The bibliography of Thrupp's publications following this article is based on that compiled and published by Raymond Grew and Nicholas G. Steneck in their edited volume, *Society and History: Essays by Sylvia L. Thrupp* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 1977), though where possible we have added the page numbers for articles, review articles, and chapters. *Society and History* is a collection of some of Thrupp's writings and also a tribute to her with introductions by colleagues (Philippe Wolff, M. M. Postan, Eric R Wolf, and Thomas C. Cochran) to cover various problems and themes that engaged her: social structure and change, demography, methodology, etc. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* is referred to as *CSSH* in the rest of this paper.

² Much of my material on "the Chicago years" is derived from the papers of Everett C. Hughes in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library (and available through the courtesy of the Library staff). I have

mostly drawn on the Hughes Papers, box 63, folder 9, box 64, folders 1-3, and box 79, folder 6. In addition, though not as pertinent to the pre-launch years of *CSSH* are the papers of Lloyd Fallers: Fallers Papers, box 15, folders 3 and 79 (and Thrupp wrote an obituary notice for Fallers, *CSSH* 17(1975), p. 509. In a letter to Hughes in 1942, Thrupp lamented the lack of intellectual life at UBC: "one might almost live in a cell." Her reference to trips to the University of Washington is in her application for a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. Her application for a Guggenheim Fellowship was made available through the courtesy of G. Thomas Tanselle, Senior Vice President of the Foundation.

³ As stated in her application to the Guggenheim Foundation. It was a simpler world; other than responses to set queries, she only had to write 1.5 pages of prose on prior work (including references to an SSRC post-doc, 1934-35), and then another 3 pages or so detailing her research plans.

⁴ By today's standards the letters were very moderate in tone, this evidently being sufficient in a smaller academic world and from men of considerable distinction. One senior figure said she was unusual in her ability to combine ideas with facts and to use the ideas as her guide for painstaking and critical historical research. Another was impressed by the way she was already showing an interest in crossing boundaries, immersing herself in "the social scene." There was approval of the range and originality of her approach, treating historical problems

as though they were topics “in contemporary sociology.”

⁵ While the Guggenheim Foundation was deliberating the fellowship, Thrupp was offered a one-year position at the University of Toronto (which she accepted for the 1944-45 academic year). She then spent 1945-46 as a Guggenheim Fellow and accepted the offer from the University of Chicago, in autumn 1946. She was one of five Canadians and the only woman of the group to receive Fellowship that year; her co-winners proposed to work on Milton, the problems of returning veterans, vertebrate embryos, and Canadian trade unionism.

⁶ Chicago was on a three-quarter academic year, and in 1958-59 she (finally) offered an autumn seminar on medieval Italy, one on 14th century England in the winter, and one on English economic and social history, 1350-1450, in the spring (hence the microfilm transcriptions). Her seminar with Hughes and von Grunebaum on Cities, drawing scholars from the U.S. and Europe on a regular basis, was not a listed graduate seminar, at least not to those of us taking History Department seminars.

⁷ Thrupp tells of this in her closing report to the Guggenheim Foundation.

⁸ Everett Hughes (1897-1983) was President of the American Sociological Association in 1962-63. He was a wide-ranging sociologist, having written many books and collected studies, including the co-authored *Where Peoples Meet: Racial and Ethnic Frontiers* with his wife, Helen MacGill Hughes (1952). In the undergraduate

Soc II course, we read sections of his *French Canada in Transition* (1st ed., 1943).

⁹ Gustav E. von Grunebaum left Chicago about when Thrupp did, going to the University of California at Los Angeles (where the UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies has been named in his honor/memory). He published widely on the history, literature, and culture of Islam in both the medieval and modern periods.

¹⁰ The bibliography that appears later in this volume shows this for the work Thrupp published between her (1951) “Entrepreneurial History and the Middle Ages” and the “Editorial” that launched the first issue of *CSSH* in 1958.

¹¹ *Speculum* 30(1955), p. 311. Thrupp thanks the Ford Foundation for funding and the French Government for aid in bringing scholars from that country.

¹² When she formed the Society for Comparative Studies in Society and History (presumably as the corporation that owned the journal), Max Rheinstein, Professor of Comparative Legal Institutions in Chicago’s Law School, was named as the president, with Thrupp as the secretary and treasurer. Another early member of Thrupp’s team was Theodore Silverstein, a medievalist in the English Department and yet another well-published scholar in a department with little interest in his field of expertise.

¹³ This was both the theme of her editorial comments in the journal and for such presentations as the one she gave at the International Congress of Historical Studies in Moscow (“The

Dynamics of Medieval Society,” listed in the bibliography for 1973).

¹⁴ Published as “The Earliest Canterbury Freeman’s Rolls, 1298-1363,” listed below for 1964. Thrupp gave co-authorship credit to Harold B. Johnson; he was a member of the seminar and he continued to work with her on the documents and then on the introduction and analysis.



“Your death troubles me so much
And shares out so much ill to me,
Lover, that my heart breaks.
But, before I die, my heart humbly begs
The True God to look upon us
With such loving countenance
That in a book we will find life.”

— from *Le lay de plour* (*The Lay of Weeping*),
in *Le Jugement dou roy de Navarre* (*The
Judgment of the King of Navarre*) by Guillaume
de Machaut (edited and translated by Barbara K.
Altman and K. Barton Palmer)

