

## The Geneva Gig – Barry Wellman, July, 1997

### A Fantasy Fulfilled

There Bev and I were, teaching network analysis in Switzerland. We were having problems getting UCINET to work. "I wish Steve Borgatti were here," I said to my students. "**He'd** get it to work."

A bearded man leaped into the computer lab. "I'm here, Barry," said Steve Borgatti in the flesh. "How can I help you?"

The students were amazed, for I had been referring to Borgatti's development of UCINET for the past few days.

My dream of two decades had been fulfilled. Remember that wondrous moment in *Annie Hall* when Annie (Diane Keaton) and Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) are waiting in line to see *The Sorrow and the Pity*. A pompous Columbia professor who is also in line tries to impress his girl friend by pontificating about Marshall McLuhan. Woody says, as I think we all would in that situation, "Gosh, I wish I had Marshall McLuhan here to set this twit straight." (I paraphrase here).

At that moment, Marshall McLuhan himself steps out from behind a life-sized advertising placard of himself and says to the professor, "You're wrong. My fallacy is nothing like your hypothesis."

In this case, things were a bit more planned. I had run into Steve Borgatti earlier that day. He (and Russ Bernard) were in Geneva to teach courses about qualitative analysis just as Bev and I were teaching an intensive one-week intro. to network analysis the previous week.

### Swiss Social Science – Today and Tomorrow

It was all part of *Suisse La Demain*, an ambitious 3-year program to move Swiss social sciences forward. (Because Switzerland is not part of the European Union, they have been feeling left out of European collaborative social science development. However, the Swiss social science that I saw seemed quite good.) As part of this collaborative program, the Swiss were holding a series of one week, ICPSR-ish, workshops in social scientific methodology. These were open only to selected doctoral students. In Switzerland, like most places in Europe, doctoral students write theses only. They don't take courses. Leading Swiss social scientists were concerned that students were not getting methodological training. (Judging by their enthusiastic and frequent participation, the 80+ doctoral students who gave up two weeks of summer also felt this way.) These one-week intensives were designed to fill the gap.

It is probably not coincidental that the summer school was organized by two American-trained social scientists: HansPeter Kriesi, the head of the whole program (Soc, U Chicago); Klaus Scherer, the organizer of the first summer school (Psych-SocRel, Harvard). Network perspectives were well represented. In addition to Steve Borgatti, Russ Bernard, Bev and myself, Dave Kenny (Psych, U Connecticut) was teaching a psychology-focused course on studying dependent observations, and Ralf Langeheime (Soc, Kiel U) was teaching latent classification analysis. Other participants included Bayesian statistician Don Rubin, the Bayesian head of Harvard's department, and Harvard Psych's Bob Rosenthal, known to us 30 years ago for "Pygmalion in the Classroom" but now specializing in statistical methods for meta-analysis.

### **Tying Swiss Bonds**

How did things go? Fantastically, I – and I think our 18 students – thought at the end, although in the early going, none of us were sure. “We need more theory,” one student said on the second day, politely but firmly. Fortunately, 5 minutes later, another student said, equally as politely and firmly, “We need more methods.”

In developing our course, Bev and I built in part on our own strengths in research design, participatory education, and ego-centered network analysis. We also spent two days on whole network analysis. (I’d love to get feedback from other network analysts about how they would approach this course.) We guaranteed (with fingers crossed) to the students that they each would have a thesis design by the end of the week. We also wanted to give them both theoretical knowledge (being lectured at) and actual workshop experience doing network analysis. Indeed, the latter had been specifically requested by the summer school organizers.

Our first day of teaching was an expanded version of the 3-hour Introductory workshop that I teach annually at the Sunbelt Social Network conference. I mostly lectured about ego-centered networks the second day: personal community, social support and all that. To help the students think about their own research designs, I focused on the choices and mistakes I had made with the two East York studies. Drawing upon Bev’s teaching skills, we divided the students into four thematic groups in different corners of the room to get them developing approaches to studying their own research problems. The students took turns discussing their project with their group.

The third day was devoted to ego-centered network analysis using SPSS (hardly anyone knew SAS) to analyze data. We used Bev’s tie-level data on the relationships of users of alternative health-care and aggregated up to the network-level. It was then we had a shock. The students had all assured us that they had had at least a year of statistics, but it turned out that this was statistical theory, taught by econometricians or statisticians. Hardly anyone knew how to do basic SPSS procedures, such as recoding, or running and reading freqs, crosstabs or regressions. So we slowed down and did the first days of Stats100. But because these students were smart, hardworking and motivated, they picked everything up quickly and were soon interpreting Bev’s data for her. (She’s given them the datasets to take home and play with some more.)

All of the fourth day and some of the fifth day were devoted to whole network analysis: theory, substantive findings, and practice using the sample datasets available with UCINet and Krackplot. (Each student received a new copy of these programs, complete with manuals.) Everyone had great fun wiping out the Medici and seeing what happened to the Florentine elite network.

We finished the course by honoring our promise to foster basic thesis designs by the end of the week. It was wonderful to see 18 students, from 4 languages and 4 disciplines presenting and critiquing. I was fascinated by how almost all of the projects were macro and whole network – a quite different mix from the high percentage of social-support projects I usually hear about at my Sunbelt workshops. Many students wanted to study policy networks, building on Laumann, Knoke and Pappi. Several students wanted to study diffusion of innovation and were delighted to hear about Tom Valente’s new book. One wanted to study how TV studios put together production deals; two social psychologists were planning to study how

small-group structure affected emotions. The closest to my current work was a proposed study of online communities while another student shared Bev's interest in networks of support for low-back pain.

Despite their not having prior hands-on statistical training, we were most impressed with the students. They were smart, motivated, hard-working, and caught on quickly. Rumor has it that a Swiss cluster of network analysts is forming now; look for them at the Barcelona Sunbelt conference.

If you've been marveling at our ability to teach in French or Swiss German, marvel no more. We taught in English. The organizers had stipulated this at the beginning, and they knew their country(wo)men. Many (most?) of the French Swiss ( about 18% of the pop.) could not easily understand Swiss German (70% of the pop.) and vice-versa. Only those born Italian-speaking could handle Swiss Italian (10% of the pop.) But just about everyone could speak and write English - at a high level of quality. Coming from the intense linguistic-cultural-political battles of Canada, we were surprised at how no one sweated linguistic differences. "You speak your canton's (province's) language," a political scientist explained. One Genevois professor, originally German speaking, told me he always spoke French at all-Swiss conferences because he represented a French-speaking university.

### **Hanging Out in Geneva**

The pleasure of the course was further enhanced by its Geneva venue. If your expenses are paid, Geneva is a wonderful city in the summer. The city was filled with beautiful sports cars, women and men. Bev and I came to believe that there were look-alike contests underway for Catherine Deneuve and Alain Delon. I couldn't hold out and bought a BMW sports car in silver: a lovely 1' model of a Z3.

The city was great for people-watching - most restaurants had moved their tables outside onto the sidewalk (and street sometimes) - so much so that I began to doubt whether my privatization of community thesis held for the Genevois. The food was great too, as long as you were reconciled with spending C\$40-\$60 for dinner or, in a pinch, \$18 for pizza and mineral water. (The city of Evian, France, was just across the lake, but as it is right on the lake, I hope that the mineral water itself does not come from its namesake but from the Alps behind it.)

We also luxuriated in the politeness of the people we dealt with, strangers as well as university folks. Whenever we went into a store or a restaurant, we were greeted by "Bon Jour", with the speaker clearly available to be at our service. Similarly, folks always said goodbye to us when we left, even if we had only been "just looking" in a store or drinking only a mineral water.

The contrast with Toronto is immense, where store keepers and waiters rarely look up when you enter or leave. After the courtesy of the Genevois, Toronto's rudeness came as a re-entry shock. The day after I came back, I was chatting with a Sociology Dept. administrator. Three colleagues came in successively. Each never bothered to say hello to me or to the administrator. Instead, they barked brusque requests to the administrator and walked out with harried frowns. Geneva reminded us that life is to be enjoyed as well as to be trudged through.

Our hotel was right where beautiful Lake Lemman meets the Rhone River. All along the shore were the HQs and display windows of every Swiss watch

you've ever heard of – we saw over a thousand different models from a score of manufacturers. If you, too, were required to read Lillian Hellman in high school, you will realize why I called them "The Watches on the Rhone." I tried on a \$57,000 Rolex for fun, but found that even the cheaper \$5,000 model was too rich (and heavy) for my blood. Looking in the display windows was like being in a somewhat archaic museum, for almost all of the watches were mechanical marvels. Let the Japanese do quartz, the Swiss persevere in automatic, self-winding mechanisms, filled with dials and precision gears (except for less-expensive \$100 Swatch, \$500 Tissot and \$1500 Omega). The mechanical watches were big, heavy and beautiful – but not quite as robust as my \$30 Timex Ironman. On the other hand, they are some of the only socially-acceptable expensive jewelry that most straight Western men would wear.

I'm sure the watches work well because the streetcars do. We commuted everyday from the centre of Geneva to the suburban Carouge home of the University of Geneva psychology department. Each tram stop had a coin-operated ticket machine. Each stop also had a schedule, and the trams always came within 30 seconds of their posted time. Peter Ustinov once quipped that Toronto was "New York run by the Swiss". Unfortunately, the Swiss do not run the Toronto transit system.

#### **Peak Experiences – Even in the Depths**

A high point of our trip was a visit to a friend of a friend's bomb shelter. We were told that all Swiss residences and workplaces had to have them, part of the "hedgehog" theory of defensive neutrality. In this case, we took an elevator down to the sub-basement of the apartment building and just after the laundry room, we encountered the first of three bank vault doors, several feet thick and with bank-vault locks. After passing through the third vault door, we came to the shelter itself. It had its own air filtration system (for gas attacks), food supply and water pipes. In these peaceful times, the shelter itself was divided into storage roomettes for the building's residents. There were many skiis and wine-racks, but there were also many submachine guns. As in Israel, each Swiss man goes into the army and then is a militia member for much of his adult life. He, too, is part of the Swiss hedgehog.

We holidayed in the mountains before and after our work week. The day after we arrived, we took a steam train up above the tree line to where the Rochers de Naye are part of the Continental Divide between the Rhine and the Rhone river basins. At the end of the trip, I had a dream come true when we took three "telepheriques" (gondola cars) in sequence from Chaminox to nearly the summit of Mont Blanc: the Aiguille de Midi at 12,600 feet. We loved the beauty even as we swayed dizzily from altitude sickness. We climbed above the tree line and then the snow line. We were at a glacier, looking across at gorgeous mountains, with snowcaps surmounting deep green forests. Below us were hikers crossing the glacier, perhaps to Italy; above us were climbers. It's no sport for amateurs: a score of people have died in the Alps this summer from exposure, falls or avalanches.

The other high point of the trip came at the beginning – in the depths of the Montreux jazz festival. We'd known about Montreux for many years and were thrilled to find it located at the other end of Lake Lemane (aka Lake Geneva). Getting advance tickets from Toronto was a breeze. We just searched Alta Vista for the festival web site, called up the schedule on the web site, and found an online order form built in. Just input charge

number and click. The next day we had email confirmation; a week later, postal confirmation. Our tickets were waiting for us at the box office.

The evening was magic. We had gone to hear Ahmad Jamal (who did a lovely set) and Kenny Garrett (Miles Davis' last sax player, who alienated me by playing with his back to the audience a la Miles). But we were amazed and enthralled by the opening act, what we had thought was just a politic sop to local talent: Pascal Auberson with the "Big Band of Lausanne" (Lausanne is also on Lake Lemman.) What we got from Auberson, et al. was two hours of beautifully-spoken poetry (combining Rilke, Tom Waites, Hatikvah and lounge crooning); atonal original big band interactions, brilliantly arranged; and even some modern dance. Difficult to describe; only a high-quality, multi-screen video would do it justice. The only analogues we could think of were some things we saw in Berkeley a decade ago: George Coates' "See Hear" and a Frank Zappa [RIP] orchestra/dance/vocal piece.

As stodgy North Americans, we naturally thought that the Montreux festival evening would end like Toronto festival nights do, at about 10:30. Therefore we had bought a round-trip train ticket to Montreux, figuring we'd catch the last train back at 11:10. Foolish us. Pascal Auberson, only the first act, took two hours and finished at 10:30. We were despondent, because we were having a magical time and there were two more sets to go. Bev said in the festival spirit, "Let's stay overnight in the (luxury) hotel across the street sans toothbrush". It would be our instant jazz holiday within our working holiday. However, I found a cheaper, but less romantic, solution: a special "pyjama jazz" bus that left Montreux for Geneva at 2 AM - just after the last act let out. We saved hundreds of dollars, but Bev may never forgive me.