
Remembering Sally Merry: Exemplary Teacher and Mentor

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I am teaching Human Rights this fall, and like every time I teach this course, I assign at least one of Sally Merry's articles. The students' response to her work is always gratifying: they are better able to understand difficult concepts, they praise the clarity of her writing, and, by their own admission, they look at human rights from entirely new angles. Merry is not only a giant in human rights scholarship, but she has reshaped many other fields as well—legal pluralism, legal consciousness, indicators, and dispute resolution. Reflections on her life will rightly focus on the impact of her scholarship in law and society, legal anthropology, human rights, and other fields.

I was privileged to know Sally not only through her scholarship, but as a teacher and a mentor. She came to New York University (NYU) when I was a PhD student in the law and society program, and I vividly remember how thrilled my fellow students and I were to learn that she would be joining the faculty. Although I took only one class with her, she had a significant impact on me as my mentor. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn ethnographic research at the feet of the expert. Sally had received a National Science Foundation grant to study human rights comparatively in collaboration with Dr. Peggy Levitt (Wellesley College). They were gathering teams of researchers on the ground to study human rights vernacularization in various locales, and Sally invited two NYU law and society students (myself and Diana Yoon) to work on human rights in New York City. I had taken methods classes, but working on an actual ethnographic project with a specialist of her distinction was an entirely different experience. We met weekly to discuss possible field sites, construct interview questions, identify directions for research, talk about methodology, and parse out challenges and writing plans.

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We conducted some of the initial interviews together, and I learned the finer points of interviewing by observing Sally in action. We continued to meet as we became more immersed in our sites and started analyzing interview data and drafting our paper. Sally was patient and intense at the same time. When I hit a wall, she would persist, probing deeper and seeing new angles or nuances that would throw a completely new light on the project.

Sally did not just listen intently and carefully to her students, but she could often see our questions from a different perspective and understand the contributions we were trying to make even when we still couldn't. As I worked on my dissertation proposal, Sally was immensely helpful with thinking through my research questions and methods. As Erin Braatz, a friend and fellow NYU law and society graduate has noted, Sally had an amazing ability to reframe her students' questions and statements and reflect, or refract, our ideas back to us in startling ways.

I trusted Sally with questions about research and writing, but she was also a deeply valued mentor when I was struggling to do field research in Romania with a newborn. It came as a revelation, as Sally shared stories of her early days as a researcher, to realize I was by no means alone. She was always supportive and her door was truly always open. She understood and had overcome challenges that I had barely started to face, including as an interdisciplinary scholar, and was more than generous with her advice and support. Sally organized professional development sessions, explained what the job really entails at various levels of academia, and mentored many of us as we were navigating the very treacherous post-recession academic waters.

I will carry the high standards of research, teaching, and mentorship I learned from Sally for the rest of my life. But this is a disorienting moment, as I know I can no longer email her with a question or difficulty and count on receiving her prompt and solid advice. Like all good mentors, she had my back. I felt stronger simply knowing she was there, even as we saw each more rarely over the years (with LSA meetings becoming treasured opportunities to reconnect). I don't know that there will ever be a time when I can say that I don't need my mentors, and I am sad to have lost an amazing one.

Mihaela Șerban is an Associate Professor of Law and Society at Ramapo College of New Jersey. Șerban's research and writing focus on law and society in Eastern Europe, human rights, and the rule of law. Her most recent publications include a special issue on Law, History, and Justice for the Journal of Romanian Studies (2020, with Monica Ciobanu), and the

monograph Subverting Communism in Romania: Law and Private Property, 1945–1965 (Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). Şerban is a co-founder of the Collaborative Research Network on Law and Society in Central and Eastern Europe, Balkans, Russia and Eurasia within the Law and Society Association, and is currently serving as a board member for the Society of Romanian Studies.