Katherine Kocisky
Scholar Profile
Interview with Dr. Margo Anderson

Dr. Margo Anderson is Distinguished Professor Emerita of History & Urban Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Interview conducted and transcribed by Kat Kocisky, UWM Urban Studies PhD Student

This is a scholar profile of Dr. Margo Anderson who specializes in American social, urban and women's history and has research interests in both urban history and the history of the social sciences and the development of statistical data systems, particularly the census. Her publications include the second edition of *The American Census: A Social History* (Yale University Press, 2015); *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Census: From the Constitution to the American Community Survey (ACS)*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011), coedited with Constance F. Citro and Joseph J. Salvo; and a coedited volume with Victor Greene, *Perspectives on Milwaukee's Past* (University of Illinois Press, 2009). With UWM Professor Amanda Seligman, she is Lead Editor of the Encyclopedia of Milwaukee. In 2006 she served as the President of the Social Science History Association. She received her PhD in History from Rutgers University.

Katherine Kocisky
Scholar Profile
Interview with Dr. Margo Anderson

Kat Kocisky (KK): I'd like to start this interview by asking how you first became interested in history as a discipline and what motivated you to pursue graduate studies?

Margo Anderson (MA): I started as a math [undergraduate] major which is where some of [my] quantitative interests come from. But "girls" didn't do science in those days, which I discovered when I got to a physics classes of three hundred students, and realized I was one of two women in the class. I switched to a history major. After graduating, I went into the Peace Corps in India, worked for a couple years, and went to graduate school at Rutgers University in New Jersey. This was in the heyday of what was called the "new social history," "history from the bottom up," or the history of ordinary people instead of simply the history of elites and powerful people. I specialized in urban, women's and gender studies. At the time, even then, the job market in the humanities was not good, so you had to find some sort of hook to make yourself a little more attractive on the job market. My hook was to do quantitative work which was also a hot new thing. So, I became the "girl who could count," and I did a quantitative dissertation using aggregate census data on occupational change in major cities from New York to Philadelphia from 1870 to 1940. I had to understand what the census officials thought about the data they were collecting. I discovered that the questions and classifications kept changing. Because I had to reconcile and harmonize it all to produce a time series analysis, I realized that there were some very interesting issues there which I developed in later work. I finished my dissertation while I taught at Vassar for a year, then came to UWM in the late 1970s. Originally, I was a joint

appointment in History and the old department of Urban Affairs. The doctoral program in what was then called Urban Social Institutions (USI) had just started, so there were several new hires, and I was part of that.

KK: So, you've been involved with Urban Studies and History from the very beginning?

MA: Right, that's what I was trying to do. Until that point I had spent most of my time with other historians. But because the department of Urban Affairs was an interdisciplinary program and there was a lot of team teaching going on, I got to know my colleagues in the other social sciences very well. At that time, the old department of Urban Affairs had political scientists, economists, geographers, urban planners, sociologists, and historians, even faculty from Extension.

KK: That's a unique position to be in, starting your interdisciplinary career at UWM. Can you talk more about the significance of being part of both Urban Studies and History departments?

MA: I was already an urban historian, but it meant that I had to learn the lingo and the way that other social sciences approached questions. I always thought that the team teaching was as useful to the faculty who did it as it was to the students in classes. I hope, anyway. I was around during the period when the programs were being implemented and created, so there was a lot of curricular planning to do. Through the late 1970s and early 1980s, the [Urban Affairs] master's

program was large because UWM hadn't yet built out a course array for related degrees. Urban planning was a pretty small program; the Non-profit Management or Public Administration programs came later. So, Urban Affairs was a vehicle to do a semi-professional master's program. There was also a big demand for the PhD program, for those interested in urban public policy. At that point sociology and history did not have their own free-standing PhD programs either. Students who were interested in those kinds of programs from an urban perspective found a home in Urban Affairs or USI.

KK: How did being integrated with different disciplines affect your research interests?

MA: I hadn't been trained in what we call classical public policy, which the disciplines of economics, political science and sociology do more systematically. My research on the census very quickly got tangled up in public policy issues in the early 1980s, so I realized that the two things were coming together. Over the next five to ten years, I began to work much more closely with statisticians, sociologists, demographers – in other words, people who were much more directly involved in public policy issues. My later publications are almost all co-authored with others. In that sense, Urban Studies was a nice home to be able to do that from.

KK: You have several publications that explore the history and politics of the American Census including the book *Who Counts? The Politics of Census-Taking in Contemporary America* published in 2001 and *The American Census: A Social History* (2nd edition) published in 2015. Why should people be paying attention to the 2020 Census, especially

under the Trump administration? What are the implications of its proposal to add a citizenship question?

MA: First of all, a short primer from my stock analysis of the American census. The census is what I call a rare, repeated and unobtrusive event. It's a central piece of the constitutional structure of the American state created in 1787. The U.S. has taken a decennial census every ten years since 1790. The 2020 census will be the 24th. Because the census has a ten-year time frame, most people forget about it for about seven or eight years and then all of sudden we realize it's back again!

The census matters not only for research, social science and, local government but also because it was originally designed to reapportion seats in the House of Representatives and the Electoral College. Unlike in most nation states, it's directly tied to the political system and shifts power to the areas of the country where population is growing. The U.S. population is one of the most dynamic and diverse in the history of the world. And the framers of the Constitution knew this in the 18th century. The first census had 3.9 million people. That's about two thirds of the current population of the state of Wisconsin. Now it's almost 330 million people. The census is the mechanism that integrates all those new people into the political system. Every ten years, the U.S. shifts seats in Congress and the electoral college based on where growing populations are. Therefore, the outcome of the census is a real political win or loss for certain places. Wisconsin has roughly been on the losing side for the last twenty to thirty years, losing a congressional seat

after the 2000 census, not because the population isn't growing, but because the population isn't growing as fast as other parts of the country.

Whenever you take the census, therefore, whatever happens to be the hot-button issue of the time will get tangled up in the technical issues of the count, which is supposed to be a "fair" to everyone, scientific enterprise. Now we're debating immigration and the question of who the "people" are and who a "citizen" is. What about an immigrant who is "undocumented," i.e., came to the US without a visa, or overstayed a visa. Should such "people" count for apportionment? The Trump administration wants to put the citizenship question back on what is called the "short form" "complete count" census where it hasn't been since 1950, and anti-immigration advocates want to debit a state's noncitizen population for apportionment calculations.

The Census Bureau does collect information about the citizenship status of Americans. The question was on the sample long form census from 1970 to 2000, and now on the annual the American Community Survey. In the mid twentieth century census, social science perfected the methodology of probability sampling for most survey research, so the citizenship question, as well as dozens of other questions about the educational, occupational, economic situation of Americans was shifted to the sample. It was cheaper, more efficient, and actually produced better and more frequent data because complete count data collections like the decennial census can't afford the trained interviewers used for sample surveys.

Critics of the Trump administration proposal, including me, argue that the anti-immigrant policies of the administration will deter people from responding voluntarily by mail or internet to the census. The question hasn't been tested to see if people will answer promptly. If the response rate goes down, it costs a lot to send enumerators to addresses to collect the data. If it's suspected that the count wasn't "complete," it would affect political apportionment and redistricting.

Overall, it's a very complicated issue right now and a number of states and civil rights organizations have filed suit to block the inclusion of the citizenship question on the 2020 census form. We're in the early stages of litigation, but it is expected to come to a head in the next three to four months simply because the [census] forms, advertising materials, and computer processing software have to be finalized. The scientific officials at the Census Bureau, including former Census Directors from both Democratic and Republican administrations have opposed the inclusion of the question. They tried to convince Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to pursue a different solution to collecting citizenship data. He did not support his scientific staff.

When reporters ask me whether this controversy has historical parallels, I say that, yes, there are. In 1930, for example, the hot issue was whether someone was unemployed. There was then no standard for measuring unemployment, and it took until the 1940s to create a consensus on its measurement. That issue created similar fuss and bother because the world was sliding into the Great Depression. So, the question of what's controversial in population counting is very much

specific to the country and the time. In China, stating that you have more than one child can have implications. Ultimately, the census gets tangled in what else is going on politically.

KK: Let's talk about the Encyclopedia of Milwaukee, a project started in 2008. You are the lead editor with History and Urban Studies faculty Dr. Amanda Seligman. What motivated you to pursue this project?

MA: Urban encyclopedias are a genre of what some people would call, in history, tertiary sources. Primary sources are the original documents; secondary sources are interpretations or traditional scholarly work; and tertiary sources are synthetic treatments of the other two. The urban encyclopedia as a genre was started by scholars at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s who created the Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, https://case.edu/ech/ and were followed by scholars who did the same thing for Chicago, http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/, New York, https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300114652/encyclopedia-new-york-city , Indianapolis, http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/product_info.php?products_id=182016, , Philadelphia, https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/ and other state-based projects. These are very large-scale but accessible compilations of scholarly knowledge about a place. It has to be grant-funded because it's too big for one person to do. Amanda Seligman had worked as a graduate student on the encyclopedia of Chicago project. I had done an encyclopedia of the census with a couple other people. We both had experience doing encyclopedias and both saw Milwaukee as a very interesting city deserving of a lot more study. The National Endowment of Humanities funds

such projects, but these days, primarily as public websites, not solely as a book. So, we applied and received seed funding from UWM's Research Growth Initiative (RGI) program to plan and organize the project, in anticipation of applying for federal funding. We had to find web developers on campus and figure out how much it would all cost. There was a fair amount of enthusiasm and support not only from UWM, but from other scholars in the area, particularly the Marquette History Department -- a stalwart and partner all along. Before really starting work on it, Amanda went on a diplomatic mission to check with other local agencies that might want to take the lead on the project, including the Marquette History Department, the Milwaukee County Historical Society, the Milwaukee Public Library, the UWM library. They all said: "Great idea! Go ahead. We'll help, but you take the lead." We received funding from NEH from 2013-16; as well as funding from private foundations and individuals. Altogether, we commissioned over 700 entries, contracted with contributing authors, and supervised graduate students to write the text content. We worked with web developers in Creative Services to design the website and backend system to manage all the content. See https://emke.uwm.edu. The site went live around 2014 and 2015 and we started posting content: first text, and more recently pictures and some maps, and hopefully even more videos, audio, maps in the future. Now we have a robust platform and can use it to do more. We could have podcasts and tour itineraries, for example. There have always been feedback features to the digital site, a Facebook page, Twitter link. People can comment on entries. We recently reapplied for and received more RGI seed funding, to help us finish all the original text entries, attach at least one picture to every entry, start beefing up mapping and apply for the second round of grants. When I retired in May 2018, the university began funding an academic staff position to continue the work for three years, so there's been a staff transition.

KK: As an urban historian, what do you see as some of the most pressing issues facing cities like Milwaukee today?

MA: I think I'm still where I was when I co-edited *Perspectives on Milwaukee's Past* with Victor Greene. We asked the question: "How does a city that was built on one set of economic institutions transition when the economy changes?" Milwaukee was first built as a trading center, then as a heavy manufacturing center, but the heavy manufacturing sector is no longer sufficient to provide either jobs or good living standard for the majority of the population. You need to bring in new industry and make economic changes, and you've got to figure out how you're going to do that. I grew up in the New York metro area. New York, and to a certain extent, other cities in the Northeast faced this same problem in the 1960s and 70s. As New York's economy faltered in the 1960s, the quality of life deteriorated, and New York City itself went bankrupt in 1975.

KK: From deindustrialization?

MA: Deindustrialization, yes. When the economy falters and people get poorer, there's a lot of blame on whose fault it is. When New York City went bankrupt, it dramatically impoverished the public service sector. The City University of New York (CUNY) which charged no (!) tuition at the time, reeled from the collapse of tax support. Local universities stopped hiring. CUNY laid off faculty, including prominent tenured faculty, temporarily, who swamped the regional job

market. Someone like me coming out of graduate school was not about to get a job within 500 miles. That's one of the reasons why my husband, Steve Meyer and I ended up in the Midwest, because the economy was better in the Midwest, and universities were still hiring. The East Coast economic collapse bottomed out in the 1980s. The city began to come back in the 1990s and of course New York is now again a hot place. Places in Brooklyn that were like war zones when I was growing up are now places where reinvestment has taken place and people want to live. In some ways, that's what happened to the industrial Midwest later. It's not just Milwaukee, it's the whole industrial Midwest, and each city has tried various things to fix it. One of the arguments I've made is that Milwaukee, even in its heavy manufacturing and socialist heyday, was always a very conservative place. It was much slower growing than Detroit, Cleveland or Chicago. The result is that the boom/bust cycle was less severe in Milwaukee. Detroit went from two million people in 1950 down to about 700,000 recently. Milwaukee's peak population was 740,000 in 1960, and now it's about 600,000, the same size it was in 1940. Milwaukee has taken a much slower form of transformation led by simultaneous but competing visions. One vision was John Norquist's [Milwaukee mayor from 1988-2004] New Urbanism. It was a kind of liberal notion – let's make this environmentally interesting place, tear down the freeways, make the rivers clean again, build clean industry. That was one side. Tommy Thompson's [Milwaukee governor from 1987-2001] vision was the other side. His included building a stadium for the Brewer's on the public dime, welfare reform to cut public benefits and force people into the labor force, and tax breaks for industry. And those two visions are still competing in the city today.

The Milwaukee area has also always been ethnically and racially enclaved. It was enclaved in the 19th century and still is. Lots of cities are enclaved but Milwaukee's pattern is particularly severe. People need to be able to move freely for jobs and opportunity, and if the housing market is segregated, and the transportation system doesn't support good regional transit, people, particularly poor people, are stuck, and can't get to where the jobs are. The punitive notion of forcing people into jobs, any jobs, neglects consideration of the barriers that created the segregated enclaves in the first place.

KK: Any projects that you're working on now that you'd like to share?

MA: I have a book manuscript that's pretty close to being finished. It's the story of the role of the Census Bureau in rounding up Japanese Americans on the West Coast [of the U.S.] who were put in concentration camps during World War II. It's a story of how they did it, why, and why they shouldn't have done it in the first place.

KK: Do you have a title for it yet?

MA: The working title is *After Pearl Harbor: The Proper Use of Population Data in Time of War*. It's a complicated story involving the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt administration, and the enduring patterns of racism in American society.

KK: What advice would you give to current students like me?

MA: You're [Urban Studies] such a diverse group. What Urban Studies has always done, particularly at the master's level, has been to connect people who were already in the trenches [working] with the literatures, scholars and compatriots involved to better understand their work. Urban Studies is the liberal arts – the read, write, think, talk, and research skills. I think that how you make a living off of that is very specific to the time and the person. When I started out I knew I was going to teach quantitative methods, because that was my meal ticket. In history right now, it's digital history. Don't underestimate the skills you do have. And take advantage of the resources available to you.