

History of and in Sociology

**Introduction to the Didactic Seminar on Methodologies of
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During the heyday of Social Relations at Harvard, our convener Ed Tiryakian and I met as graduate students there. Although the program's ambitious scope exposed us to personality psychology, social psychology, and social anthropology as well as sociology, its vigorous vision of the social scientific future did not include history as a discipline. Nevertheless, the faculty offered at least three contrasting models of working relations between sociology and history. My initial mentor Pitirim Sorokin constructed grand historical schemes in which historical research served mainly as raw material for the detection of successive socio-cultural stages. George Homans, in contrast, alternated between observations of contemporary social interaction and skilled historical analyses of such topics as Medieval village life and migration of cultural traits from Frisia to East Anglia. Barrington Moore Jr. took a different tack from Sorokin and Homans, plunging into comparative history to answer questions concerning political processes including, of course, the social origins of dictatorship and democracy. Fatefully for my own subsequent work, Homans and Moore ended up co-directing my doctoral dissertation on the French Revolution.

We might call the Sorokin, Homans, and Moore versions of history-sociology relations Epochal Synthesis, Retrospective Ethnography, and Critical Comparison. In epochal syntheses from Gianbattista Vico onward, great phases and types of human experience serve both as the object of analysis and the settings within which to place smaller-scale phenomena that require explanation. In retrospective ethnography from Montesquieu onward, empathetic reconstruction of alien times and peoples uses current understandings of social processes to show how those instances fit into a known range of variation. In critical comparison from Alexis de Tocqueville onward, a salient question concerning origins and causes guides the logical confrontation of differing historical experiences. Epochal syntheses have lost most of the favor they once enjoyed in sociology, but retrospective ethnography and critical comparison remain as two competing visions.

Epochal syntheses do not require empathy with historical actors or even closely reasoned comparisons, but they do depend on strong theories of what drives human change and variation. Although they fall far from my own historical practice and even frighten me because of their easy misuse, I predict a revival of epochal syntheses in sociology as biology's evolutionary models and findings become increasingly dominant in public discourse; why should sociologists let the world's Jared Diamonds monopolize the discussion? In any case, retrospective ethnography and critical comparison continue to struggle for the souls of historically oriented sociologists.

To an important degree, the struggle pits dispositions against processes. If you believe that individual and collective dispositions constitute the fundamental causes of social behavior, you will be trying to explain historical events by reconstructing their participants' motives, emotions, and states of consciousness. Retrospective ethnography lends itself to that reconstruction. If, in contrast, you believe that cognitive mechanisms only take their places as social causes among a wider range of

environmental and relational mechanisms, you will more likely move to process accounts of historical events. Critical comparison lends itself to the identification of mechanisms and processes that make a difference.

In the seminar we are conducting here, history means mainly intellectual history. But the same choices apply. Analysts of intellectual situations, change, and variation can adopt epochal syntheses, retrospective ethnography, or critical comparisons. Not having yet heard the papers, I can only guess at their distribution among the three endeavors. Let me guess that we will hear little of epochal synthesis, but witness an interesting confrontation between retrospective ethnography and critical comparison. An intellectual biography of Pitirim Sorokin or Talcott Parsons easily draws on retrospective ethnography, but histories of American sociology, women sociologists, and the Southern Sociological Society – not to mention general discussions of research issues in comparative histories – makes primary concentration on the reconstruction of motives, emotions, and states of consciousness an awkward base for explanation. To be sure, I also guess that some of our contributors will attempt some of each: placing empathetic reconstructions of thinkers' situations within critical comparisons. But that hybrid effort will turn out to produce its own perplexities when it comes to tracing causal chains. Let's see if it works out that way.

No intellectual historian myself but an enthusiast for comparative-historical analysis in sociology and elsewhere, let me shift the ground to an area where retrospective ethnography and critical comparison clearly do compete with each other. Looking at the field they define broadly as historical sociology, Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, Ann Shola Orloff, and a host of contributors have recently produced an impressive volume of critical and synthetic essays. They call their book *Remaking Modernity*. The hefty book undertakes two related tasks: to interpret changes in the practice of historical sociology, broadly defined, since World War II; and to make the case for culturally situated interpretation as a superior alternative to the deterministic, externalist accounts of social processes most of the book's authors see as having prevailed during the later twentieth century. As method, interpretation clings to retrospective ethnography, just as much of the previous work Adams et al. criticize clung to critical comparison.

According to the editors, the volume's contributors belong mainly to a third wave of postwar historical sociology. The small first wave, including such scholars as Barrington Moore Jr. and Reinhard Bendix, rejected the presentism and modernism of sociological contemporaries, notably including Talcott Parsons. A substantially larger second wave surged during the 1970s, organizing around questions (although not necessarily answers) posed by historical materialism. While displaying considerable respect for first wave pioneers, Adams, Clemens, and Orloff treat the second wave as hegemony to be toppled. The second wavers, they claim, still cling to the illusion of settled modernity. What is more, they defend their obsolete conceptions by means of intellectual power plays:

Historical sociologists, like other academics and intellectuals, have unconsciously depended on this sense of settlement, of achieved modernity, and are disoriented by its loss. So it is natural when they react with nostalgia for old totalities, a past of imagined theoretical stability, or with a sense of perceived threat – by policing the boundaries of intellectual inquiry to try to forcibly settle things anew or by simply refusing to debate or consider new ways of thinking.

As a named member of the first and second waves, I winced to read about our alleged misconceptions and misdeeds. My mission here, however, is not to defend myself and my second wave companions, but to portray the vision of relations between history and sociology implied by the Adams-Clemens-Orloff analysis.

The third wave of the 1990s and thereafter, according to this chronology, rejected Marxist problematics in favor of an emphasis on culture, consciousness, and interpretation. Accordingly, “both actors and the relationships among them are understood as profoundly constituted by culture and historical conjuncture, rather than as reflections of some underlying system of economic relations.” In Richard Biernacki’s version, for example, the shift from second wave to third involved moving from means-end reasoning to the reconstruction of situations within which social actors act. Action becomes not the pursuit of well-defined ends by instrumental means, but a “problem-solving contrivance.”

Since, as Biernacki points out, Max Weber organized much of his analysis around means-end schemata, a surprise awaits the reader of *Remaking Modernity*. For the book’s most widely discussed and cited author is none other than . . . Max Weber! In this book, Weber thrives, Marx dies, while Foucault and (more surprisingly) Emile Durkheim survive as sources of inspiration.

Weber attracts these theorists for two separate reasons: because he stands as the quintessential historically informed sociologist, and because his version of means-end analysis places the conscious actor at center stage. Foucault occupies such a large place, according to the editors, because he “captures the historical emergence of normalizing discourses and ‘technologies of the self’ and traces the processes by which they are embedded in and help create a range of disciplinary complexes.” Thus Foucault, for third wavers, provides a connection between ambient culture and situated social action.

Durkheim likewise provides retroactive ratification for a third wave position. Durkheim, “abominated” by the second wave according to the editors, returns as the patron saint of social determination for cognitive categories. The book’s retrospective ethnography centers on the image of conscious human actors who actively organize their worlds using materials supplied to them by the ambient culture. To that extent, they remain prisoners of available language and (to use a term the book draws repeatedly from Pierre Bourdieu) doxa. We begin to see why the authors devote so much energy to

bashing the interest-based analyses of second-wave Marxism. Interests derived from locations within social structures contradict culturally embedded phenomenology as the fundamental explanation of social action.

By a circuitous route, comparative-historical sociology thus returns us to intellectual history, and more specifically the intellectual history of sociology. In both fields, the debate between retrospective ethnography and critical comparison continues.