History and Theory 46 (May 2007), 299-307 ISSN: 0018-2656

THREE VISIONS OF HISTORY AND THEORY

HISTORY AND SOCIAL THEORY, 2d ed. By Peter Burke. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. Pp. xii, 224.

REMAKING MODERNITY: POLITICS, HISTORY, AND SOCIOLOGY. Edited by Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. Pp. 612.

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF CONTEXTUAL POLITICAL ANALYSIS. Edited by Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 888.

How can we develop a viable vision of relations between history and social theory? A comparison of three recent books clarifies the stakes and possibilities of the question. Peter Burke's *History and Social Theory* looks out at social and cultural theory from the viewpoint of historical practice, sorting theoretical resources chiefly by their contribution to that practice. Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, Ann Shola Orloff, and their contributors focus on historical sociology, but range widely in their search for valid uses of theory. Robert Goodin, Charles Tilly, and their collaborators seek to move beyond the confrontation of modernism and postmodernism by taking seriously how the contexts of political processes affect those processes and scholars' understanding of them. We might call the three visions of relations between history and social theory as practical sense, cultural phenomenology, and systematic constructivism.

Although Burke labels his book a second edition, it actually comes third in a line descending from his compact 1980 essay on sociology and history. That first book appeared in an Open University series called Controversies in Sociology, edited by T. B. Bottomore and M. J. Mulkay.[1] *Sociology and History* called for an end of the "dialogue of the deaf" between historians, on one side, and sociologists and social anthropologists, on the other. It did so chiefly by enumerating a number of sociological and anthropological topics—the comparative method, models, structure and function, social roles, and so on—of relevance to historical analysis. But it also offered brief explications of Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Fernand Braudel, William H. McNeill, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and Nathan Wachtel, asking whether the four historians were pointing toward models of social change "which would take more account of diversity and of long-term trends than previous models have done, and specify the alternative paths and the constraints more clearly than before."[2]

1. Peter Burke, *Sociology and History* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980).
2. *Ibid.,* 105.

Burke's *Sociology and History* haunts the second edition of his *History and Social Theory* like the ghost of a previous occupant. Both books begin with the "dialogue of the deaf," although now the "differentiation of history and sociology" becomes the "differentiation of history and theory," just as the "convergence of sociology and history" becomes the "convergence of theory and history." The new book devotes a full chapter to models and methods, expands the roster of themes from social science that could inform historical analysis, deals more deliberately with problems of knowledge, adds a chapter on postmodernity and postmodernism, but still centers its discussion of social change on Spencer, Marx, and alternatives to them.

Twice the original's size, *History and Social Theory* gives much more attention to philosophy, literary analysis, and general theory than did its predecessor. Such figures as Ernst Gombrich, Mikhail Bakhtin, Thomas Kuhn, and Michel Foucault (all but Foucault quite absent from the first volume, and Foucault appearing there as an interesting historian of insanity rather than as a subversive social philosopher) now figure importantly as theorists to reckon with. Yet both books concentrate on what lessons historians and social analysts can learn from each other as they pursue their own work. *History and Social Theory* exudes practical sense. We see Burke in the emporium of social theory, picking up interesting items, inspecting them curiously to see whether they might serve some useful purpose in his own workshop.

Burke's practical sense circumscribes the part that theory can and should play in historians' work. Burke holds out no hope of constructing a synthetic world history, testing epochal theories by means of historical evidence, or even identifying systematic variation among places and times by means of disciplined comparisons. Instead, he assumes that historians are trying to make sense of particular times, places, phenomena, and transformations for which theorists may supply effective tools of description and explanation. Sociologist Erving Goffman appears, for example, as a source of insight into how courtiers and portraitists of the Italian Renaissance sought to represent themselves and each other rather than, say, as an inspiration for thinking about how Norbert Elias's "civilizing process" actually produced its effects on individual comportment. Similarly, Burke uses Thorstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu not to open up a discussion of variations in systems of inequality but to highlight the frequency with which historical elites advertise their positions by engaging in conspicuous consumption. We watch a perceptive social and cultural historian scanning social theorists for means of doing his local work—and, by extension, other historians' local work—more effectively.

At his book's very end, Burke reinforces that impression by observing:

> It will be clear by now, if it was not obvious from the start, that empiricists and theorists are not two close-knit groups, but two ends of a spectrum. Conceptual borrowing tends to take place from neighbouring disciplines on the theoretical side. Thus historians borrow from anthropologists, who borrow from linguists, who borrow from mathematicians.
>
> In return, historians, like ethnographers, offer reminders of the complexity and variety of human experience and institutions which theories inevitably simplify. This variety does not imply that theorists are wrong to simplify. As I tried to argue above . . . simplification is their function, their contribution to the division of labour between approaches and

disciplines. What this variety does suggest, however, is that theory can never be simply "applied" to the past.[3]

We begin to glimpse a vivid vision of history as the repository of humanity's richness, theory as a set of tools and compartments for arraying those riches.

Partly by necessity and partly by choice, Burke's vision of relations between history and theory excludes substantial bodies of theory that other historians consider relevant, or even essential, to their enterprise. By necessity, Burke's program excludes serious consideration of ontology and epistemology. Even the discussion of postmodernity and postmodernism concentrates on social construction, decentering, anti-Eurocentrism, and globalization rather than problems of historical existence and knowledge as such. Burke reports rightly that "deconstruction, poststructuralism, and related developments," if defined precisely, have made little headway in mainstream history.[4] With his practical sense of the historical craft, Burke joins the consensus, remaining coolly skeptical about radical innovations, either philosophical or methodological.

Of available theoretical resources in the social sciences, linguistics, geography, and social psychology almost disappear from Burke's accounting. Another near-absence deserves special attention: formal economic theory. Among economists, only A. V. Chayanov, John D. Hicks, Albert Hirschman, Charles Kindleberger, Witold Kula, David Landes, Karl Polanyi, W. W. Rostow, Thorstein Veblen, and Amartya Sen—the latter inevitably for his famous critique of rational-choice models, "Rational Fools"—make appearances in the text. They appear as quasi-historians, not as producers of formal economic theory. Except for a passing mention of cliometrics, not even econometric economic history enters Burke's discussion of history and theory.

Most likely that neglect reflects Burke's own discomfort with formal and quantitative analysis; in two adjacent sentences, for example, he interprets Fernand Braudel as estimating that the Mediterranean's gross product per capita during the later sixteenth century as twenty ducats, then deduces wrongly that the poor, defined as earning less than twenty ducats per year, constituted twenty–twenty-five percent of the whole population.[5] In any case, Burke also ignores the powerful, and largely non-quantitative, influence of economic institutional analysis, as represented by Douglass North, on the last two decades of economic history.[6] Implicitly but understandably, he takes as his point of reference for history–theory dialogues the interpretive social and cultural history of which he is a master.

3. Burke, *History and Social Theory,* 188.

4. *Ibid.,* 176.

5. *Ibid.,* 36. Burke is conflating Braudel's figures for the active population and the population as a whole: Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), I, 458, 460. Given the disproportionate contribution of very high incomes to total and therefore per capita income, the proportion of the active population earning twenty ducats per year or less must have reached at least sixty percent, the proportion of all persons living below that threshold far higher than that.

6. See, for example, Douglass C. North, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

More surprisingly, Burke neglects two "turns" one might have expected him to emphasize: the cultural turn in history, and the historical turn in social science.[7] In history, postwar enthusiasm for social science lasted about three decades, but during the 1970s broke the discipline into two unequal parts: a minority that specialized in such synthetic and eminently social-scientific fields as econometric history, demographic history, and quantitative urban history; a majority that turned away from economics, demography, and sociology toward cultural anthropology as its principal source of social-scientific inspiration. In the social sciences at about the same time, historical-comparative analysis regained some of the prestige and energy it had lost during decades of abstracted empiricism.

Perhaps these two turns began too early to shape Burke's treatment of history and social theory. But their absence permits Burke to speak as though since 1950 or so rapprochement between history and social science has increased more or less continuously instead of taking repeated zigzags. Their absence also lends a timeless quality to Burke's analysis, and thereby understates the extent to which the issues on which he offers wise reflection have been matters of bitter struggle in history and the social sciences.

For a strong sense of struggle, read Adams, Clemens, Orloff, and contributors, *Remaking Modernity.* Their 600-plus page 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 what we might call cultural phenomenology 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. In fact, Burke nicely anticipates the attitude toward previous work we find in Adams, Clemens, and Orloff:

> Today, however, both structuralism and Marxism are frequently rejected as determinist, and the emphasis falls on collective creativity. What used to be assumed to be objective, hard social facts, like gender or class or community, are now assumed to be culturally "constructed" or "constituted." In contrast to the structuralists, poststructuralists emphasize human agency and also change, not so much construction as reconstruction, a process of continuous creation. For this reason "essentialism" is one of the greatest insults in their vocabulary.[8]

But Adams and company take up poststructuralism with a difference, with a program of recasting the premises of historical sociology. Ontologically, their book forwards a view of individual human consciousness as the principal site and spring of social processes. Epistemologically, it emphasizes the interpretation of consciousness—hence, the treatment of texts documenting that consciousness—as the means to knowledge of historical social processes. Methodologically, it implies a hermeneutic approach, without using the term. In her concluding essay,

7. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1994); *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terence J. McDonald (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); *Engaging the Past: The Uses of History across the Social Sciences*, ed. Eric H. Monkkonen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); William H. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative," *Past and Present* 85 (1979), 1-24.

8. Burke, *History and Social Theory,* 175.

Elisabeth Clemens presents what she sees as the program's crucial research questions:

> How does the available repertoire of practices or schemas shape the space of possible actions? How are distinctive cultural schemas combined? How are existing schemas linked to new projects or available categories embedded in systems of social relations and practice? What unifies these questions is an imagery of history as constructed but not as an endlessly malleable work in progress; moments of reconfiguration are less than routine yet enduringly significant.[9]

Pursuing that agenda, the editors and their authors have produced an expansive survey of recent work in historical-comparative analysis. The editors' introduction and conclusion occupy about a fifth of the book's main text. That leaves plenty of room for searching essays by Richard Biernacki, Zine Magubane, George Steinmetz, Philip Gorski, Ann Orloff, Edgar Kiser and Justin Baer, Meyer Kestnbaum, Roger Gould, Nader Sohrabi, Bruce Carruthers, Rebecca Emigh, Ming-Cheng Lo, Lyn Spillman and Russell Faeges, Margaret Somers, and Rogers Brubaker—sociologists all, but drawn from the most historically-oriented wing of contemporary American sociology.

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 hegemons 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.[10]

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 examine the vision of relations between history and social science 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."[11] In Richard Biernacki's version, for example, the shift from second wave to third

9. Adams *et al*., eds., *Remaking Modernity*, 505.
10. *Ibid*., 68.
11. *Ibid*., 69.

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."[12]

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:

> Foucault's own unclassifiable work—which if not that of a standard sociologue, certainly flirts with historical sociology and is taught in many of our graduate theory courses—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, including the prison, the clinic, the confessional, and state apparatuses. These discourses contribute to creating the very individuals that they describe and regulate. These arguments have been an impetus for exciting sociological work detecting the fingerprints of power on shifting historical categories.[13]

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.[14] The book's cultural phenomenology 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.

In an essay on religion in historical analysis he titles provocatively "The Return of the Repressed," Philip Gorski points out that early sociologists such as Weber and Durkheim assigned capital importance to religion. Even some first-wave analysts, including Shmuel Eisenstadt and Robert Bellah, gave religion central attention. But, Gorski rightly observes, the second wave generally ignored religious factors in historical change.[15] Gorski proposes four explanations for that willful

12. *Ibid.,* 76-82.

13. *Ibid.,* 41.

14. *Ibid.,* 40.

15. I must, however, defend my own credentials as an analyst of religion. My first published article and my first book analyzed an ostensibly religious rebellion, my books on the evolution of contention in France and Britain repeatedly dealt with religious mobilizations and conflicts, and my analyses of Irish politics in recent books inevitably featured religious divisions. See, for example, Charles Tilly, "Civil Constitution and Counter-Revolution in Southern Anjou," *French Historical Studies* 1 (1959), 172-199; *The Vendée* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834*

ignorance. First, second-wave analysts reacted fiercely against sociology's derivation of social processes from ideas and values—Parsons again!—and bent over backwards to avoid arguments smacking of what they saw as idealism. Second, within Marxism they drew especially on the *Communist Manifesto* version, with its insistence on the derivation of ideologies such as religion from the solid base of material relations. Third, the Marxist-inspired work of Theda Skocpol, Immanuel Wallerstein, and other prominent second-wave analysts set the agenda for other practitioners of historical sociology, whether or not they subscribed to Marxist tenets. Finally, as committed modernists, members of the second wave inherited the Enlightenment view of religion as the foe of modernity, and as a force that modernization was eradicating. In Gorski's analysis, like those of his collaborators, the revival of Weber and the downgrading of Marx form essential parts of cultural phenomenology's program.

Let me not, however, give the impression that all nineteen authors in this big book, cadences counted by their editors, march in perfect step. George Steinmetz, for example, offers a competing account of historical sociology's transformation based on the US movement from Fordism to post-Fordism. Rebecca Emigh revisits transitions to capitalisms in a valuable survey of alternative descriptions and explanations. But she reduces the third wave's distinctiveness to a turn away from Eurocentrism, a re-introduction of cultural factors, a recognition of gradualism, and an enumeration of multiple paths: Emigh insists on the multiplicity of both transitions and of capitalisms. In a third display of independence, Rogers Brubaker argues against the representation of ethnicity as a characteristic of durably constituted groups and for a view of ethnicity as a contingent, constructed form of political interaction. The array of individual contributions in *Remaking Modernity* undermines the impression of conformity to the editors' daring ontological and epistemological positions, but offers greater hope that historical sociologists will continue to serve as important pivots between history and theory.

In fact, Brubaker's essay could easily have appeared in the third book under discussion here: the *Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*.[16] Robert Goodin and I assembled the book as a constructive reply to polar challenges within political science: on one side, the claim to establish timeless, spaceless general laws of political behavior by means of such approaches as rational-choice analysis; on the other, the postmodern claim that since all political realities rest on social construction, analysts can do little more than interpret those realities in pursuit of their preferred political outcomes. To the first claim, the book replies that the contexts in which political processes occur affect how they occur. To the second, it replies, "Yes, social construction matters, but we must face the challenge of explaining how it actually works and produces its effects." We can therefore reasonably call the book's overall approach systematic constructivism.

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); *Trust and Rule* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

16. Although *History and Theory* readers may accuse me of pride for discussing this book, they can hardly accuse me of greed; with a list price of $150, sales of the book to individual readers are unlikely to bring me any editor's royalties.

Dwarfing even the Adams-Clemens-Orloff collection, the Handbook runs 888 pages—a fat fistful of a book. After an editor's introduction, it breaks into ten sections, each taking up a different aspect of context. In nine of them, a long general essay on that sort of context precedes three or four shorter, more specialized essays. The headliners include:

- Why and How Philosophy Matters (Philip Petit)
- Why and How Psychology Matters (Kathleen M. McGraw)
- Why and How Ideas Matter (Dietrich Rueschemeyer)
- Why and How Culture Matters (Michael Thompson, Marco Verweij, and Richard J. Ellis)
- Why and How History Matters (Charles Tilly)
- Why and How Place Matters (Göran Therborn)
- Why and How Population Matters (David Levine)
- Why and How Technology Matters (Wiebe E. Beijker)

The book closes with reflective essays from two veterans of political science's paradigm wars: David E. Apter and Lucian Pye.

With fifty-one authors and co-authors, the *Handbook* speaks in many voices. Yet cumulatively it makes the case for systematic constructivism: for the dual view that all political processes vary in actual operation as a function of context, but that the effects of context are themselves amenable to systematic analysis. More precisely, its essays demonstrate contextual effects on a) analysts' understanding of political processes, b) the evidence available for empirical examination of political processes, and c) the processes themselves. As a consequence, it devotes significant effort to sorting out interactions among a, b, and c—how, for example, available evidence and analysts' understandings affect each other.

Take the section titled "Culture Matters." In their introductory essay, Michael Thompson, Marco Verweij, and Richard J. Ellis argue for "constrained relativism" as a way of thinking about the interplay of culture and politics, clarify the extent to which institutional approaches to politics involve just such constrained relativism, then illustrate their argument by applying it to current political discussions of climate change. In a chapter called "How to Detect Culture and its Effects," Pamela Ballinger reviews competing anthropological conceptions of culture before looking hard at how sensitive field-workers actually acquire knowledge of the shared understandings and their representations in symbols and practices—the cultures—that prevail in their field settings.

Under the heading "Race, Ethnicity, Religion," Courtney Jung, in parallel with Brubaker, argues negatively that "Constructivism sets forth the proposition that race, ethnicity, and religion (and also class, gender, and sexuality) do not have any essential core that determines their fundamental character."[17] Positively, she calls attention to the processes by which people and groups become subjects and/or agents publicly identified by race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, or sexuality. Susan Gal next takes up "Language, its Stakes, and its Effects." She centers her analysis on how people come to communicate in certain languages

17. Goodin and Tilly, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, 366.

and not others, a question that inevitably involves the exercise of power. But she also inverts the question by asking how the availability of a given language shapes political relations. In a final essay on "The Idea of Political Culture," Paul Lichterman and Daniel Cefai analyze how political culture "structures the way actors create their strategies, perceive their field of action, define their identities and solidarities."[18] In this light, they compare alternative (but mostly complementary) analyses of political culture as shared representations, performance, and everyday communication and action. Throughout the *Handbook*'s section on "Culture Matters," then, analysts are building toward an understanding of culture as continuously constructed, as politically consequential, and as amenable to systematic analysis.

To be sure, editors Goodin and I recruited contributors to this and other sections with some such conception in mind. But the volume as a whole makes my point: as compared with Burke's practical sense and the Adams-Clemens-Orloff cultural phenomenology, the *Handbook*'s contributors converge on a different vision of the relation between history and theory. To name that vision "systematic constructivism" draws attention away from consciousness and toward social interaction. It focuses attention on the continuous reconstruction of persons, groups, and social processes through negotiated transactions among social sites. It draws on the analogy of conversation as a process that incessantly transforms its participants and produces continuous social action. It calls up an image of history as a huge series of consequential conversations.

Visions of relations between history and social theory as practical sense, cultural phenomenology, and systematic constructivism contradict one another along two divides. The first divide separates the Burkian vision as self-contained practice in possible need of occasional assistance from the two more ambitious efforts to synthesize history and theory in a single enterprise. But the two synthesizing visions differ fundamentally from each other with regard to ontology, epistemology, and historical method. For advocates of cultural phenomenology, culturally-drenched consciousness lies at the center of social existence, knowledge depends on analysts' ability to penetrate that consciousness, and hermeneutic methods provide the means of acquiring that knowledge. For followers of systematic constructivism, social analysis centers on transactions among persons, groups, and other social sites, knowledge accumulates from systematic observation of those transactions, and a wide variety of methods from network analysis to ethnography all make contributions to systematic knowledge. I have obviously already placed my bets on the third approach. At least this comparison of three recent books should demonstrate that the stakes are high.

CHARLES TILLY

Columbia University

18. *Ibid*., 393.