Future History

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Future history

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Past sociology[1]

Sociology began its separate existence as historical speculation. Auguste Comte, coiner of the name for the enterprise that finally stuck, had no mean plans for his cherished sociology. He considered its future construction as the crowning achievement of scientific enlightenment. Just as astronomy displaced astrology and chemistry displaced alchemy, sociology would displace theological speculation about human affairs. Comte spoke of:

> the invariant hierarchy, at once historical, dogmatic, scientific, and logical, of the six fundamental sciences, mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and sociology, of which the first constitutes the sole point of departure and the last the sole essential goal of all positive philosophy.[2]

Dealing with the most complex subject matter and building on all the other sciences, according to Comte, sociology would take its place at the head of the scientific hierarchy, immediately above biology. Thus sociology had two equally gratifying roles to play, as analyst of the process by which humanity progressed from Theological to Metaphysical to Positive forms of thought, and as the very culmination of that process.

Comte's speculation about the stages of human understanding counts as metahistory, the effort to discern a temporal pattern in all human experience. We can usefully distinguish metahistory from history, which examines variation in human action as a function of time and place, and which normally deals with much less than the totality of human action. As history approaches universality, indeed, it becomes metahistory. On the whole professional historians shun metahistory, or

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treat it as a taste one ought to indulge outside of regular working hours. Metahistory enjoys some of the same disrepute among historians that the search for a single prototype of all human languages receives among linguists. In both cases, workaday practitioners do not so much doubt the possibility of such a discovery in principle as sense its vulnerability to quackery, self-deception, and wasted effort in practice.

If few of Comte's successors publicly proclaimed sociology to be queen of the sciences, many of them continued to practice it chiefly as historical speculation of one variety or another. Herbert Spencer, Oswald Spengler, Pitirim Sorokin, and many lesser souls erected metahistories as the frames for their sociologies.[3] Another brand of historical inquiry, furthermore, appeared at the edge of sociology, among the followers of Karl Marx and Max Weber; both schools pursued ambitious inquiries into the actual unfolding of social processes in time and space, making arguments and achieving results that professional historians would recognize, however grudgingly, as impinging on their own enterprise.

Nevertheless, from the time of Durkheim onward, the main body of professional sociologists turned away from grand historical schemes, and from history itself. Sociology — especially American sociology — became the systematic study of the present. Sociologists became specialists in structures and processes, rather than times and places, on the presumption that currently observable uniformities in structures and processes transcend the limits of time and place.

Less so than economists but more so than political scientists, anthropologists, or geographers, sociologists built a discipline in which time and place served merely as convenient markers, not as systematic objects of analysis or ever-present bases of variation. By the time of a semi-official American review of the field in 1959, the editors could describe historical sociology as an "important subject," but omit it from their survey "because of limitations of space."[4] They reached their decision despite the fact that one of the editors, Robert Merton, was making distinguished contributions to the historical study of science. The authors of articles on sociological subjects that aforesaid limitations of space did allow into the volume, furthermore, rarely mentioned historical problems and material, doing so for the most part when sketching the intellectual background to the present-day, presumably more scientific, enterprise. From the 1959 publication, one could reasonably have concluded that, with the exception of an occasional oddi-

ty such as Merton's work, sociology and history had almost nothing to do with each other.

The history and sociology of that time did, in fact, dally now and then. In the 1950s, not only Merton, but also such scholars as Reinhard Bendix, George Homans and Barrington Moore, Jr., were pursuing historical research.[5] Within his metahistorical frame, Pitirim Sorokin was continuing his more specific historical inquiries into altruism.[6] Scholars who maintained self-conscious contact with European social thought commonly wrote in a historical idiom. Nevertheless, these historically oriented sociologists constituted a small remnant in a largely present-oriented discipline.

What is more, twentieth-century sociologists commonly adopted a dismissive definition of their relationship to historians. As Charles Ellwood described the division of labor in a widely read text first published in 1910:

> History is a concrete, descriptive science of society which attempts to construct a picture of the social past. Sociology, however, is an abstract, theoretical science of society concerned with the laws and principles which govern social organization and social change. In one sense, sociology is narrower than history inasmuch as it is an abstract science, and in another sense it is wider than history because it concerns itself not only with the social past but also with the social present. The facts of contemporary social life are indeed even more important to the sociologist than the facts of history, although it is impossible to construct a theory of social evolution without taking into full account all the facts available in human history, and for this reason we must consider history one of the very important methods of sociology. Upon its evolutionary or dynamic side sociology may be considered a sort of philosophy of history; at least it attempts to give a scientific theory which will explain the social changes which history describes concretely.[7]

Answering in 1964 the question "What is Sociology?", Alex Inkeles offered a similar contrast: "The historian prides himself on the explicitness, the concreteness of detail which characterizes his discipline. The sociologist is more likely to abstract from concrete reality, to categorize and generalize, to be interested in what is true not only of a particular people's history but of the histories of many different peoples."[8] For some reason sociologists did not recognize the condescension in that distinction between those who gather the facts and those who explain them, those who describe and those who analyze, those who grub and those who pluck, those who scrub and those who polish.

History redivivus

In any case, the years since Inkeles's summary have seen a great revival of historical thinking and historical research in sociology. Perhaps "revival" is the wrong word, for two reasons: First, the sort of historical work sociologists have undertaken over the past quarter-century has few precedents in the speculative schemata of the nineteenth century. Second, the properly historical writing of founding fathers Marx and Weber had few repercussions inside academic sociology, especially its American variant, until the 1960s. Within standard sociology, there was little history to revive. To a large degree, the expansion of historical work among sociologists marked a new departure.

Why did the new growth occur? I have no intention of tracing the intellectual history of a strongly historical sociology, or even of proposing an explanation of its expansion. As an active participant in that expansion, I hope someone else will do both. Here, in any case, is the most salient fact: Out of a sustained critique of the ideas of "development" and "modernization" that dominated sociological analyses of large-scale social change for two decades after World War II grew an effort to historicize such analyses — to extend backward the period over which one analyzed great transformations, to seek past analogs of present changes, to try out general ideas concerning the consequences of sweeping processes on well-documented historical experiences of similar processes. At the same time a minority of historians, likewise critical of the models of large-scale change that prevailed in their own discipline, were turning to the social sciences, including sociology, for alternative ways of analyzing the past.[9]

The turn to history could have proceeded at any of four levels, metahistorical, world-systemic, macrohistorical, or microhistorical:

> *metahistorical*: attempting to identify temporal patterns in all human experience
> *world-systemic*: tracing the succession of world-systems, the largest connected sets of human interaction
> *macrohistorical*: examining large-scale structures and processes within world-systems
> *microhistorical*: studying the experiences of individuals and well-defined groups within the limits set by large-scale structures and processes

Some of sociology's historical revival has taken place at each of the levels. Anthony Giddens and Michael Mann have, for example, started

to fashion new metahistories of power and social change.[10] Although most of their analyses have focused on change and variation within what they conceive of as the contemporary capitalist world-system, Immanuel Wallerstein and his collaborators have at least occasionally tried to chart the movement from one world-system to another. Numerous students of family structure, communities, inequality, and population processes have pursued microhistory. Yet the bulk of sociology's new historical effort has gone into macrohistory, the examination of large-scale structures and processes within world-systems. Thus we have sustained sociological treatments of farmers' movements in the United States, of the European fertility decline, of the emergence of different forms of the welfare state.

Comparisons among populations identified by national states have occupied a large (to my mind, disproportionate) share of sociologists' historical energy; analyses of the so-called transition from feudalism to capitalism have, for example, repeatedly compared entities labeled France, England, Prussia, and so on. National states have had a large weight in western history; they occupy an important place in my own historical work. But exclusive concentration on national states fosters a series of illusions: that behind the state stands a coherent society; that a single unit such as Prussia had an integrity making it possible to assign the unit a continuous history over many centuries, using schemes involving origins, stages, or developmental paths; that the important states, and therefore the ones worthy of sustained sociological analysis, were those that survived into the twentieth century; that comparison of the experiences of the survivor states will yield or test comprehensive explanations of the capitalism's development. As soon as historical analysts start taking economic regions, cities, mercantile networks, churches, linguistic blocs, and other crucial social groupings into serious account, the illusions begin to fade, and the possibility of relating the histories of national states to these other histories begins to open up.

Whether conducted at the national scale or not, most of this work partakes of historicism, asserting that how things happen depends strongly on when and where they happen. Historicism permits analysts to claim that late industrializers followed different paths than early industrializers, that the presence of great landlords in a region at one point in time affected the subsequent possibility of democratic politics in that region, that the state of the economy during a given birth cohort's childhood shapes its members' orientations toward childbearing, and so on.

Historicism counters the old sociological faith in the generality of relationships inferred from the proper systematic analysis of contemporary social life. The various intellectual enterprises that observers group together as "historical sociology" lean implicitly toward historicism.

Not that they have great intellectual unity. The trouble with "historical sociology" as the name of a specialty is that it groups inquiries by their methods and materials rather than by the ideas and phenomena with which they deal. The term parallels such labels as "survey sociology" and "qualitative sociology" — perhaps realities as coalitions vis à vis the rest of the field, but treacherous bases for common intellectual endeavors. Historical sociology, as actually practiced, includes a variety of investigations at different edges of sociology: investigations of political processes, family structure, community organization, inequality, ideological orientations, scientific activity, economic transformation, and much more. On the whole, the ideas guiding such investigations bind the investigators to others who are studying similar phenomena much more strongly than to fellow sociologists who likewise work chiefly on the past rather than the present. Nevertheless, the disparate enterprises called historical sociology have greatly gained in popularity over the last two decades, especially in the United States.

In 1959, cutting through a great deal of criticism and counter-criticism, Kingsley Davis declared that all sociologists were really functionalists of one sort or another; "In a way it is appropriate to speak of functional analysis as something *within* anthropology," he wrote, "because there are branches of that field that have totally different subject-matters. A similar statement with respect to *social* anthropology or sociology, however, is tautological, for the reason that structural-functional analysis *is* sociological analysis."[11]

What should a thirtieth-anniversary version of Davis's presidential address say? Are we all now really historicists? Do we all now claim that where and when social changes occur strongly influence how they occur? No: In fact, plenty of sociology is still unclear about its time and place references, and unprepared to take time and place seriously. Although I have no survey to prove it, I would say that most sociologists in the United States and elsewhere still cling to the pursuit of generalities that transcend time and space, even large blocks of time and space such as world-systems. Historical sociology still represents a minority mood among sociologists.

Fears and hopes

What future has historical work in sociology? Let me distinguish between my fearful predictions and my cherished hopes. Fearfully, I predict the institutionalization of historical sociology: fixing of a labeled specialty in sections of learned societies, journals, courses, a share of the job market. I fear these likely outcomes for two reasons: first, because the "field" lacks intellectual unity and, by its very nature, will forever lack it; second, because institutionalization may well impede the spread of historical thinking to other parts of sociology. The other parts need that thinking badly.

My cherished hopes run in a different direction. In the short run, I would be delighted if more historical sociologists would broaden their scope from national comparisons to 1) other macrohistorical investigations, taking regions, markets, modes of production, connections among capitalists, and other large structures as their units of analysis, 2) world-systemic analyses, including new attempts to examine the actual historical circumstances under which European capitalism came to dominate most of the world's economies, and 3) microhistorical studies of structures and processes that sociologists now examine chiefly in the contemporary world.

In the long run, I hope for a miracle elixir, one that will dissolve the specialty of historical sociology, and let its premises — especially its historicism — permeate all of sociology. Thus not only students of capitalism and of family change, but also demographers and survey analysts, would find themselves examining how the relation among their favored variables altered as a function of region and historical era. The result would be a historically grounded sociology of far greater intellectual power than its current incarnation.

A greatly broadened historical sociology can make two major contributions to the discipline. First, it can historicize sociological analyses: anchor them in time and place. If we now have established any important nontautological generalizations that hold across all historical eras, they have not come to my attention. I do not deny in principle that any such generalizations can exist, but insist that we are better off for the time being trying to ground all generalizations historically: specifying their time and place limits, and attaching them to other empirical generalizations that reliably characterize social life within those time and place limits.

Second, a greatly broadened historical sociology can also draw in important problems that are prominent in historical analysis and in lived history, but somehow remain neglected in sociology. Most notably, it can force sociologists to examine how the residues of action at a given time constrain subsequent action. Arthur Stinchcombe provided an important example of that sort of historicizing analysis in his discussion of the way that craft organizations persisted in some industries into the era of mass production.[12] Allan Pred, a sociologically inclined geographer, has similarly shown how the existing connections among cities in eighteenth-century North America constrained the subsequent growth of the North American urban system.[13] In a phrase faintly echoing Karl Marx, Pred has recently preached that "People do not produce history and places under conditions of their own choosing, but in the context of already existing, directly encountered social and spatial structures."[14]

The linking idea is simple and powerful: past social relations and their residues — material, ideological, and otherwise — constrain present social relations, and consequently their residues as well. Once an employer has established ties with a particular source of labor, those ties affect his subsequent recruitment of labor, and may well reproduce themselves. Once developers have laid down a certain urban structure, that structure defines the opportunities for further development. Once people adopt a certain national language, that language circumscribes the other people with whom they can easily communicate. Such processes produce connectedness within time and space that goes beyond simple temporal and spatial autocorrelation; every existing structure stands in the place of many theoretically possible alternative structures, and its very existence affects the probabilities that the alternatives will ever come into being. In short, social processes are path-dependent. That is why history matters.

Consider some examples. The social organization of migration affects the subsequent welfare of migrants and their descendants, among other reasons because some forms of migration build means of capital accumulation within families and ethnic groups, while others individualize whatever accumulation occurs. The proletarianization of one generation of workers strongly affects the opportunities of the next generation of workers to become capitalists, artisans, or peasants. The efforts of great powers to build up the military capacities of friendly Third World states shape the likelihoods that the national armed forces will take over those states. The creation of collective-action repertoires through

struggles between powerholders and their challengers limits the possibilities of action for all parties in the next round of struggle. Intergroup conflicts over jobs, land, or political power create new social actors, whose presence then alters the character and outcome of conflict. In all these processes, time and place matter fundamentally; when and where they occur affects how they occur. They therefore fall into the domain of history.

Of course, some sociologists are addressing these topics, and others like them; the historical revival has made a healthy difference. But we need more, more, more — enough more to refashion sociology as a whole so that it automatically takes time and place seriously, and seriously engages the challenge of placing its regularities firmly within historical eras. If these things happen, sociology will have realized its potential as history of the present.

At that point, as Philip Abrams long since prescribed, the distinction between history and sociology will have disappeared. "Historical sociology is not," wrote Abrams,

> a matter of imposing grand schemes of evolutionary development on the relationship of the past to the present. Nor is it merely a matter of recognising the historical background to the present. It is the attempt to understand the relationship of personal activity and experience on the one hand and social organisation on the other as something that is continuously constructed in time.[15]

Abrams barred the road back to Comte, and opened it to Marx and Weber. Ultimately, however, the road back to anywhere concerned him less than the road forward: Where should the historical enterprise within sociology go? It should go on to become the foundation of all sociology.

Notes

1. This article has its origin in notes for an informal talk at the annual meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society in New York City, April 1986. I am grateful to Kai Erikson and Charles Perrow for comments on that talk, and to Charles Lemert for encouragement to distill the notes into a short essay. Because I mean the article to state opinions and provoke discussion rather than prove points, I have omitted the bulky documentation many of its assertions would require.
2. Auguste Comte, *Discours sur l'esprit positif* (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1963), 133.

3. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology* (Londen: Appleton, 1897; 2 vols.); Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Knopf, 1926—28; 2 vols.); Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (New York: Bedminster, 1962; 4 vols.)
4. Robert K. Merton, Leonard Broom, and Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., editors, *Sociology Today: Problems and Prospects* (New York: Basic, 1959), vi.
5. Reinhard Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry* (New York: Wiley, 1956); George C. Homans, *Sentiments and Activities* (New York: Free Press, 1962); Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 1966).
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7. Charles A. Ellwood, *Social Problems and Sociology* (New York: American Book Company, 1935), 18.
8. Alex Inkeles, *What Is Sociology?* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 21.
9. Olivier Zunz, editor, *Reliving the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
10. Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power I. A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
11. Kingsley Davis, "The Myth of Functional Analysis in Sociology and Anthropology," *American Sociological Review* 24 (1959), 771.
12. Arthur L. Stinchcombe, "Social Structure and Organizations," in James G. March, editor, *Handbook of Organizations* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965).
13. Allan Pred, *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information: The United States System of Cities, 1790—1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).
14. Allan Pred, "Interpenetrating Processes: Human Agency and the Becoming of Regional Spatial and Social Structures," *Papers of the Regional Science Association* 57 (1985), 7—17. (Pred 1985: 8).
15. Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

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Notes

[11] **The Myth of Functional Analysis as a Special Method in Sociology and Anthropology**
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