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# How Is Sociology Informed by History?\*

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## *Abstract*

*Often mischaracterized as merely the application of social theory to past events and happenings, historical sociology is actually a distinct way of approaching, explaining, and interpreting general sociological problems. By situating social action and social structures in their historical contexts and by examining their historical unfoldings, historical sociologists exploit the temporality of social life to ask and answer questions of perennial importance to social theory. I draw on recent research and literature both in sociology and in history to argue that we should and can continue to deepen the discipline's "historical turn" by more thoroughly historicizing how we conduct research, understand and use basic analytic concepts, and develop and test general social theories.*

Since the beginning of our discipline, sociologists have been deeply divided over the question of whether history is to be understood as a "storehouse of samples" (Moore 1958:131) to be used as a testing ground for the development of sociological theory, or, alternatively, as something of importance to be comprehended in its own right (Erikson 1970; Skocpol 1984; Sztompka 1986; Tilly 1981). The implications of this debate for sociological practice are, as we will see later, quite profound.

While the dispute still rages, it is clear that an important segment of the discipline now places real importance on the power of history to elucidate the sociological enterprise. Evidence for this is seen (1) in the increasing number of genuinely historical sociology articles appearing in our more important general journals, (2) in the growth in the number and visibility of journals explicitly designed to integrate history and social science (e.g., *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, the *Journal of Historical Sociology*, and *Social Science History*), (3) in the recent methodological appropriation of analytic tools such as narrative, event, and biography which were once thought reserved almost exclusively for historians and other humanists (Abrams 1982; Isaac, Street & Knapp 1994; Sewell N.d.), and (4) in the large number of fine, even award-winning, books effectively integrating history and sociology in intellectually informative and exciting ways (Goldstone 1991; Skocpol 1979; Quadagno 1994).

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How contemporary sociologists actually use history in their research is the most telling evidence of the interpenetration of history and sociology. Below I discuss three books whose objectives, methods, and theories are sufficiently diverse that, when viewed as a set, they suggest much of the range of historical sociology today: Barry Schwartz's (1987) *George Washington: The Making of An American Symbol*, Theda Skocpol's (1992) *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, and Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck's (1995) *Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*.

Each of these authors pose and answer questions that are intrinsically historical in nature; that is, they characterize the historical experiences of concrete people and of social creations that were themselves historically motivated, encapsulated, and meaningful. In Skocpol's case, she wanted to understand, among other things, both how Civil War pensions were transmuted into a uniquely "American" form of social insurance and what prevented this system from becoming a more inclusive social security program for workers and the elderly. Tolnay and Beck wanted to understand why Southern whites lynched Southern African Americans and to grasp at least some of the consequences — migration patterns, for example — of this pervasive Southern horror. Schwartz, finally, wanted to understand how a mortal, George Washington, was transformed into a much venerated living monument and then to discern the significance of the Washington cult for the meaning of America.

By emphasizing the "historical" nature of these three studies, I am not implying that they are in any sense atheoretical. All three books bear directly on enduring questions of social organization, social control, and social change, and the authors of all three plainly raise issues that are as distinctly theoretical as they are historical. Each devotes considerable attention to the theoretical genesis and implications of her or his research, and each uses history to advance theory. Skocpol, for example, developed a nuanced and historically rich "polity centered" theory of state and politics. Tolnay and Beck embraced some theoretical explanations for Southern lynching — those pointing to economic motives and requirements, for example — and discounted others, such as a weak criminal justice system. And Schwartz deepened our general appreciation of what holds a diverse people together, the social functions of tradition, ritual and ceremony, and the interpenetration of political and religious life.

But none of these authors understood or reproduced history as mere "background" for what was "really important": that is, sociological theory and inference (see Skocpol 1992:x). Schwartz exploited history to do what his interpretive project demanded: the recreation of the collective mentalities of early Americans, elite and rabble alike, who were anxiously trying to live their understanding of republicanism. Tolnay and Beck historically contextualized the meaning and operation of the theories they examined, historicized their statistical analysis, and then used history to make sense of their complex statistical findings. Skocpol, finally, acknowledged both how the history of women and of gender relations in America shaped her theoretical understanding of policy formation and that aspects of that history — conceptualized as identity politics and the "gendering" of social policy — became for her an important explanatory device.

Each of them, then, centrally incorporated history into his or her analysis and fashioned historically informed and historically grounded sociological explanations and interpretations. Skocpol, Schwartz, and Tolnay and Beck do not give us history reduced to the status of a storehouse of samples, a lifeless, mechanistic history evoked only to be cranked through some prefigured theory. Nor do we get a sense that social theory is somehow above, outside or otherwise independent of history. Rather, history and theory were merged in these studies in a voyage of discovery in which answers to pressing sociological questions were not known before the historical research and analysis were completed. These studies, as does much contemporary historical sociology, kindle appreciation of why history's complexities, contingencies, exceptions, and ironies must be preserved and recaptured not only to "get the history right" but also, and more important for us, to "get the sociology right." And I think this is true whether the analytic intent is to explain what happened in history and why it happened as it did, or to view history as an interpretive lens through which we may perceive cultural meaning, the creation of cultural icons and myths, and the institutionalization and expression of collective memory.

These three books are but the tip of an iceberg of looming weight. So intimate now is the relationship between history and sociology in some arenas, and so important are those arenas to the institutional and intellectual make-up of our discipline (Abbott 1991), that I believe it accurate to speak of an accomplished "modern" historical revolution in sociology: sociological theory, methodology, and research arguably are more self-consciously informed by historical questions and perspectives than at any time in the life of the discipline in this country.

### Examining History Sociologically

All this is true, and, yet, none of it is, in my opinion, quite enough. Sociologists, even those of us who are drawn to history, have yet to realize fully the richness and eloquence of history as multivoiced witness to the dialogue between human possibility and social constraint. Simply put, to fulfill the promise of a historically infused *sociology*, we should take history even more seriously than we do now.

Such a claim should immediately call forth at least two questions: why *should* sociologists take history more seriously? And how can we take history more seriously and do so *sociologically*? My answers admittedly are both tentative and limited by my personal research interests, theoretical alliances, and value judgements — judgements most centrally about sociology and its mission and practices. But I hope my intent to open up debate and inquiry, not close them off, is clear.

Let me answer my first question by simply stating that by taking history more seriously, we also take "time" more seriously. Time defines the very idea of history, and, conversely, history conveys time, whether we think of history as having the quality of "pastness," or as part of the social context in which things happen, or as processual unfolding (Aminzade 1992; Griffin 1992; Sewell N.d.).

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A skeptic may question why time is important to sociological analysis and explanation. My response here is that if sociology can be defined by its questions and obsessions, then I submit, as have many others (Abrams 1982; Giddens 1979; Sewell 1992), that our discipline has as its defining problematic the mutually constitutive interplay of culture, social structure, and social action. We see this in everything from Marx's *Capital* and Weber's *Protestant Ethic* to each of the books I referenced or discussed earlier.

Culture, structure, and action contribute to the "making" of each other. The challenge for us is to discern and explain how the creations of past human action — that is, social structures and cultural arrangements — become human prisons or, less frequently, a source of human liberation. But we should recognize that culture and social structure constrain or empower social action at any one point *in time*, and cultural understandings and social institutions are continually made and remade by social action occurring *through time*. To underscore the active and continually temporal character of this reciprocal dynamic, Philip Abrams (1982) has labeled the entire process "structuring."

Time is an inescapable part of the structural and cultural context in which people exist, think, and act. It is part of the context in which societal arrangements have personal and collective meaning and causal efficacy, and it is the medium through which action occurs, social relations institutionalized, and cultural definitions developed. As analysts of social patterns, finally we ourselves forge ways to study all of this that is historically conditioned and historically limited. People do things — kill each other, get jobs, raise families, build and then tear down walls, metaphorical and literal — in sequences of actions that necessarily take place in, and have cumulative consequences through, time. In both of these ways — time as context and time as processual unfolding — is social life inescapably temporal and thus historical in character.

Given that an atemporal social existence for either individuals or societies is truly a sociological impossibility, we must therefore deal seriously with time. The tools needed to conceptualize and analyze historical context and historical sequence thus should become as familiar as social theory or conventional research designs. All are necessary to comprehend and explain the most fundamental and general of all sociological processes, the structuring of social action.

Now let me turn to the second, and in some ways more difficult, question: how can we take history more seriously and do so *sociologically*? Here I have two thoughts. The first is that we should more thoroughly historicize how we use some of our basic categories of analysis, perhaps especially what has been called sociology's "holy trinity" of class, gender, and race. The second way is that we should more fully exploit the explanatory and interpretive potential inherent in the most widely used, and probably least reflected-upon, device in the historian's tool chest, narrative.

## Historians and Sociologists: A Comparison

### CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS

We sociologists tend to view the content of our analytical categories as (1) independent of other concepts and categories, (2) fixed in meaning, and (3) positionally defined and thus directly mapped onto, or directly extracted from, social structure. There are decided advantages to these assumptions, not least of which are that quantification is often permitted and replication eased. But there are losses as well. In particular, our ability to discern the temporal fluidity and mutability of analytical categories, their contested and negotiated nature, and possibly even their interdependence is seriously jeopardized. And I believe it reasonable also to ask if what is lost is sometimes excessive.

Consider class by way of illustration. Sociologists have spilled a good bit of ink in attempting to determine (1) what class is, (2) which criteria define class boundaries, (3) who is a member of which class, (4) class interests, and (5) why some classes have generally behaved as unruly school children, ignoring the historic obligations imposed on them by their theoretical tutors. Compare this treatment of class to that of the historian E.P. Thompson (1963), who argues that class is a historical process and product and, as such, is necessarily also the outcome of lived experiences, the creation of agency as well as of external structures, and a matter of consciousness, identity, and language as well as positional relations (Sewell 1990).

Now let me now turn for a moment to gender and race. In most sociological research, both are generally conceptualized and understood as ascribed statuses attached to individuals and/or as vast structures of oppression. Each is also usually deployed in analysis as independent or mediating variables. Race and gender can be fruitfully specified in these ways, but historians such as Joan Scott (1986), Evelyn Higginbotham (1992), and Kathleen Canning (1992) suggest that both, like class, are also historical products and processes. They are elastic, "shifting" and "unstable" in content and definition (Higginbotham 1992:274) because their meanings are fought over, embraced, shunned, and transformed through struggle.

Though historians are often accused by social scientists of fetishizing facts to the detriment of theory, I believe that some of them may have thus far surpassed us here. To the extent that I correctly understand the theories that some historians now use, gender, class, and race can be conceptualized as articulations of power and cultural difference that are (1) historicized as materially and symbolically inscribed sets of cultural impositions and social and linguistic practices, (2) simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by personal and group identity, social relations and institutional arrangements, and (3) subject to contestation, definition, and redefinition. So much for the claim, now clearly archaic, that historians are not interested in, or cannot deal with, theory.

Much of this talk about historically "decentered" categories is, I think, generally known in the sociological community. But with a few exceptions, such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (1988) fine book on racial formation and William Sewell's (1980) work on the "language of labor," sociologists have been

hesitant to incorporate such conceptualizations into their work. Our caution here is rooted in more than blind positivism or intellectual cowardice for, taken to extreme, this approach may be, as Charles Tilly (1992) warns, nihilistic. Even if we do not push these conceptualizations to the limit, and there is nothing that says we must and good sense to say we should not, historicizing concepts in this fashion is both exceedingly messy and frankly inconsistent with some cherished methodological conventions and analytic goals. Were Thompson's (1963) view of class adopted, for example, it is not at all clear that class could be measured precisely, or that the class locations of individuals could be precisely determined even at any one moment in time, or that serious statistical analysis of class conflict is anything but the first step toward understanding the meaning and experience of class. To say that this goes against the grain of how sociology is now practiced is an understatement.

The challenge goes still deeper, however. In particular historical contexts or happenings, gender, class and race may have become so interpenetrated in appreciation, meaning, and signification — so fused, in a word — that attempts to disentangle them may be impossible. In using a chemical metaphor to describe how this process might happen, the historian Nancy Hewitt (1992) equates the three elemental categories to a compound in which each element is bonded to the others and thus is so transformed that the original components are no longer analytically recoverable. This goes beyond what we often confront as multicollinearity: it is just not that race, gender, and class are correlated, it is rather that the presence of one or more categories, say gender or race, actually changes the content and meaning of the remaining category, say class (see Griffin & Korstad 1995).

Two examples taken from the research of historians and modified to some extent will, I hope, clarify both the challenge and the promise posed by questioning both the fixity of meaning and the conceptual independence of some of our elemental categories. The first illustration comes from Marxist historian Barbara Fields (1982), no particular friend of deconstruction. Africans, she argues, were enslaved for reasons of class exploitation, not race. But the ideology of race became the explanation for slavery in an egalitarian, republican culture: race was the medium through which, now in Fields's own words, "basic questions of power and domination, sovereignty and citizenship, justice and right" were constructed and understood (162). Class, even the idea of republicanism itself — that is, the equality and rights of free white men — thereby became racial in meaning and, though Fields does not say so, gendered as well.

The second example refashions labor historian David Montgomery's (1979) justly famous class analysis of late nineteenth century craft workers. Rather than being "only" class actors stripped of broader cultural constructions, Montgomery's workers actually articulated and defended their class position, work ethic, and job privileges with explicitly gendered language, as evidence of their "manliness" (14). Gender, more specifically masculinity, thus was one way in which class was conceived and played out by these craftsmen and by those who interacted with them. Class was also more subtly racialized. Montgomery's craft workers were white, an identity and relationship that they (and he) apparently took for granted. But African Americans were unlikely to be craft workers with

the power to subcontract and hire and fire white subordinates, and black males could be “manly” in nineteenth century America — that is, in Montgomery’s words, to act with “dignity, respectability, defiant egalitarianism” (13) — only by contesting at great risk the meaning of race. Even in the physical absence of either African Americans or of overt racial conflict, race, along with gender, thus structured and signified the class of these white craftsmen.

Two methodological implications of this and similar views are, I think, startlingly transparent. The first is that no one category — race, gender, or class — should be so privileged in its use that it obscures the significance of the others: all categories, at least ideally, must be evoked to understand any one of them or to explain a particular event, institutional arrangement or general process. The second implication goes back to the difficulty of disentangling the discrete effects of historically fused categories. Fields (1990), for example, posits that race and class cannot compete for relative importance in accounting for social inequality because their “joint indispensability” (100) — that is, the historical meaning of class *as* race — renders attempts to discern the relative weight of one or the other category, in her words, as “meaningless” as trying to decide the relative importance of the numerator and the denominator to a fraction. This view need only be compared to William Wilson’s (1978) strategy of juxtaposing race and class to see how truly different it is from much sociological practice.

Does all this pose a real challenge to sociology? Yes, incontrovertibly. A mortal blow? Certainly not. One understanding of aspects of Skocpol’s (1992) quite clearly *causal* analysis, in fact, is generally consistent with the thrust of the two examples I discussed above. Gender and gender identities represent more than just social forces pushing for or against the adoption of particular policies. Indeed, whatever the direct influence of gender, this reading suggests that the social policies studied by Skocpol were inescapably gendered, as were the political processes underpinning the adoption of these policies, because both were defined and expressed in gendered terms. Jill Quadagno’s (1994) notion of the “color of welfare” also suggests a similar historical logic at work, one now framed by race. And both books, I think, are better for having historicized key concepts and categories in this manner.

#### NARRATIVE EXPLANATION

To discuss the second theme — the narrative representation and explanation of social phenomena — I must first return for a moment to the notion of structuring, which, again, is the temporal process whereby structurally and culturally encapsulated social action continuously through time makes and remakes the very circumstances under which action occurs. Each element in this understanding, and certainly their combined force, imposes fairly stringent and interdependent methodological requirements on research, requirements not easily satisfied by most research designs (Erikson 1970), even those that knowledgeably incorporate historical context and exploit time-series data.

First, the data to be used in an analysis of structuring should consist of, and closely track, social actions through time because structuring results from the clash of social structure and social action. These data, second, should be



intrinsically sequential in their very definition and construction because social action is itself temporally sequential and ordered in its execution. Most of the kinds of data we normally analyze, including data that are chronological, such as time series, are not well suited to the analysis of structuring because they do not generally consist of sequences of actions. Therefore we should consider weaning ourselves from our near exclusive addiction to variables and factors and system states that measure social conditions and constraints, institutional relations and roles, subjective experiences and individual traits. I am not suggesting that any of the things that most of us analyze, and on which we cut our sociological eyeteeth, are irrelevant. Rather, what I am saying is that we should begin to think about them differently — no longer just as variables, but also as actions, or as the motives for action, or as the consequences of sequences of actions. And, third, I am also suggesting that we need to rethink the potential utility of information that almost intrinsically conveys and carries action — stories, narratives, biographies — and that we have too infrequently analyzed, or have raided for discrete, isolated facts, or have ignored altogether.

Finally, to the issue of the most appropriate way to think of explanation. Most sociological explanations do not build time into the *logic* of explanation, but, instead, rely on logical comparisons across a few cases, analysis of statistical relationships across many cases, or subsumption of particular cases under theoretical generalizations and categories (Griffin 1992). However, if our objective is to explain the structuring of social action through time, and if to do this we analyze temporal sequences of actions, we should also think about exploiting an explanatory mode that is intrinsically, if not exclusively, temporal in its very logic (Abbott 1992). And it is at this point that we must lean especially hard on the intellectual traditions of the discipline of history because it has been most concerned with narrating how events, actions, and processes unfold in and through time.

We need to better understand how narratives display, and can be used to interpret and explain, what happens in stories, and then we need to bend whatever it is about the logical construction of narratives — the sequential connectedness and unfolding of action organized around and by a central theme or “plot,” perhaps (Abbott 1992; Griffin 1993) — to distinctly sociological purposes. Sociologists more than historians, I am pleased to say, generally have taken the lead here. Philip Abrams (1982), a central figure in the reinvigoration of a temporal sociology, argues that the sociological appropriation of narrative and event entails distilling the logical from the chronological and discerning the theoretically general in the historically particular. We see much of this in Skocpol’s (1992) analysis. And if the very different explorations in “narrative positivism” (Abbott 1992), “eventmental” sociology (Sewell N.d.), event-structure analysis (Griffin 1993; Isaac, Street & Knapp 1994), and other perspectives continue to bear weight, we will likely see much more empirical sociology stamped with the methodological character of narrative.

## Conclusion

To take history seriously is to take time seriously: time as context and time as narrative. Context and narrative are everywhere present in the continual making

and remaking of individuals, of cultural meanings and social structures, of societies. Contexts encapsulate narratives, and some narratives encapsulate other narratives. A single lynching studied by Tolnay and Beck, for example, is both a narrative in its own right and a moment in a much broader and sweeping historical narrative, the entire 100-plus year history of the making and partial unmaking of Jim Crow in the U.S. South. Indeed, I know of no dimension of social life that could not be usefully represented and analyzed as the conjuncture of context and narrative. The construction of Barry Schwartz's (1987) national identity, the passage of Theda Skocpol's (1992) protective legislation, the formation and use of Barbara Field's (1990) racialist ideology — a strike, a funeral, the history of a labor union, a war, and the expansion of the capitalist world economy over the last four hundred years, all are narratives that are captured by, and simultaneously remake, contexts. And each — macroscopic or microscopic in historical breadth, those taking only hours to unfold and those taking centuries — equally provide access to structuring.

Each of the studies I have discussed here — whether authored by a sociologist or an historian — is simultaneously sociological and historical. This should not be surprising for, at bottom, history and sociology are united by a common purpose (Abrams 1982). Both take real people with unclear and conflicted interpretations of, and aspirations for, themselves and their world, real people with widely varying personal resources and institutional opportunities, and each — sociology and history — tries to understand and explain how these people acted in contested, challenging or hostile environments and, in so doing, changed or reproduced the social structures, cultural categories and political practices in which they were enmeshed. To understand social life *historically* in the broadest sense of the term therefore is to also understand it sociologically (Stinchcombe 1978:1).

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