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978-0-521-40922-3 - The United States as a Developing Country: Studies in U.S. History in the Progressive Era and the 1920s

Martin J. Sklar

Excerpt

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I

*Periodization and
historiography: The United
States considered as a
developing country*

Society . . . is the ultimate thing disclosed by an analysis of human relations.

Henry Carter Adams (1887)

I

It is by now a familiar mark of sophistication to acknowledge that there can be no purely “objective” study of history, in the sense of its being entirely value-free: Objectivity is best served when the historian explicitly discloses the interpretive framework and underlying assumptions guiding the research and its outcome. Taken no further, however, this axiom can become a justification of subjective license, if not incoherence. The question remains whether, above and beyond rules of evidence and technical competence, there is a common standard of objectivity, which may be adopted by historians in forming comprehensive conceptions of an historical period and in guiding specialized inquiry as well, but which nevertheless leaves them free, even while maintaining the most rigorous criteria of logic and empirical method, to differ not only on normative matters, but also on the particular interpretations and conclusions they may draw from inquiry based on that common standard.

This essay, completed in January 1991, is published here for the first time, except that Section 1 appears also as part of Section 1 of the essay, “Periodization and Historiography: Studying American Political Development in the Progressive Era, 1890s–1916,” *Studies in American Political Development*, Fall 1991. It originated in a presentation prepared, on invitation, for the panel on periodization of the Conference on American Politics in Historical Perspective, held at the University of California, Los Angeles, 12–13 May 1990, convened by Karen Orren of the Department of Political Science and Joyce Appleby of the Department of History, of UCLA. The panel consisted of Walter Dean Burnham (Chair) of the University of Texas, Austin, Eldon Eisenach of the University of Tulsa, Stephen Skowronek of Yale University, and myself. The conference brought together historians and political scientists for an interdisciplinarian exchange of views.

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The principle of periodization itself offers a common standard satisfying these conditions. What general and special theories are to the meaning and indeed the very designation of facts in the physical sciences, so periodization may be to their meaning and designation in history. As referred to in this way, periodization means not the familiar device usefully invoked for narrative or connotative convenience, such as the Age of Jackson, the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, Prosperity Decade, the New Deal, and the like. It means, rather, a constructive or a postulated definition of the society-type in question, the system of its social relations, with its historically evolving requirements, capacities, patterns of authority, and structures or relations of power, in its general historical formation and in its more historically specific circumstances and stage of evolution.

The requirements and capacities of a society include not only their manifestations in geophysical, technoeconomic, and other “material” conditions, but also their manifestations in social consciousness, both secular and religious, including theories, ideologies, and outlooks or world-views, of those who exercise authority or power, whether governmental or nongovernmental, as well as of those in subordinate positions in society. As this implies, there is some causal connection between a society’s requirements and capacities as a social system, and its pattern of authority and structure or relations of power.

As theory that postulates society-type and its state of evolution in this way, periodization establishes not only the ground of permissible deductive reasoning about a society’s prevalent modes of behavior and thought and how they interrelate, but also the essential foundation for fashioning the inductive framework of inquiry into them and their interrelations, into their genesis, their development, and their transformations. Periodization also thereby informs the range and limits of reflective generalization respecting the society’s actualities and potentialities in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. As a method of study, or theory of history (and all theories, in whatever field, are at bottom methods of study), periodization imposes a discipline upon inquiry that acts as a control against the presuppositions, the fashionable interpretations, as well as the appealingly irreverent ones, the personal intuitions, the current political persuasions, or the professional infighting, of the inquirers and their critical audience.

Understood in this way, periodization fosters vigilance against the arbitrary adoption of a tight interpretive grid, on the one hand, or the loose invocation of dissociated concepts, principles, sentiments, or axioms, on the other, not well founded in evidence, context, logic, or reason. Made explicit, periodization invites constant testing of interpretation, by both deductive and inductive reasoning, against rules of co-

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herence and empirical inquiry. Periodization also subjects to such critical assessment the range and limits of its own efforts at reflective generalization. Periodization, or theory, in this sense, yields historical knowledge whose meaning is subject to objective verification, or more precisely to falsification, and establishes at the same time the ground of its own validation, alteration, or discard. As and when its set of premises, or its range, falls short of comprehending pertinent materials in a manner consistent with its discipline, it signals the limits beyond which it is unable to proceed, and therefore its impending modification or demise and displacement by a theory, or periodization, more sufficient. In this sense, periodization, or theory, in history is no different in general principle from theory in the physical sciences.¹

Without the discipline of periodization, history tends to be written and perceived on the run, skimming surface appearances without reference to their essential sources in the matrix of social relations. On the

1. The difference lies in the forms of reasoning and the character of empirical evidence, not in the role of theory and its relation to the discovery and definition of empirical evidence (or facts). On theory and scientific method in the social realm, analogous to that in the physical realm, see, e.g., Arnold Brecht, *Political Theory: The Foundations of Twentieth Century Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959; Third Princeton Paperback Printing, 1970), chs. I and II, pp. 27–72 and 73–116. Cf. Charles S. Peirce: “Induction consists in starting from a theory, deducing from it predictions of phenomena in order to see how nearly they agree with the theory. . . . by steadily pursuing that method [i.e., experiential theory subjected to testing over time] we must in the long run find out how the matter really stands. . . . Thus the validity of induction depends upon the necessary relation between the general and the singular. It is precisely this which is the support of Pragmatism.” In this connection, Peirce designated laws as essential to reasoning in both the physical and social sciences, precisely because the sciences of either type have as their fields of inquiry matters that are not predetermined and are in principle open-ended: “The principle of the demonstration is that whatever has no end can have no mode of being other than that of a law, and therefore whatever general character it may have must be describable, but the only way of describing an endless series is by stating explicitly or implicitly the law of succession of one term upon another. . . .” Peirce, 1903 *Lectures on Pragmatism*, quoted and discussed by Manley Thompson, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of C. S. Peirce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 174–175. Peirce’s view stands in partial contrast to that of Karl R. Popper, who in positing the necessity of theory in the study of history no less than in the physical sciences, drew conclusions warranting a large degree of discretionary license: “For undoubtedly there can be no history without a point of view; like the natural sciences, history must be selective unless it is to be choked by a flood of poor and unrelated material. . . . The only way out of this difficulty is . . . consciously to introduce a *preconceived selective point of view* into one’s history; that is, to write *that history which interests us*. This does not mean that we may twist the facts . . . , or that we may neglect the facts that do not fit. . . . But it means that we need not worry about all those facts and aspects which have no bearing upon our point of view and which therefore do not interest us.” Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 150 (Popper’s italics). For a critical discussion of Popper’s *fallibilist* view of science, and its contrast with Peirce’s “contrite fallibilism,” see Ernest Nagel, *Teleology Revisited and Other Essays in the Philosophy and History of Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 64–77. Nagel (p. 76) nevertheless considers Popper “correct . . . in pointing out the indispensable role of theories in the conduct of research and the growth of science.”

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surface, when “facts speak for themselves,” they may preempt meaning other than that to which the historian or audience may be predisposed. A particular fact can not yield a verifiable meaning apart from the context within which it belongs to, and derives from, a larger whole. It is the interrelations among those items or events designated as facts, the relation of each to the others and to the whole, and the way that each fact represents a particular manifestation of the whole, that imposes a cognitive discipline upon historian and audience. A fact speaking for itself, in short, is no fact at all, if a fact signifies information having an objectively verifiable, or more precisely, falsifiable, meaning. By itself, it becomes a plaything of convention or indulgence, or a manipulative ploy upon the undiscerning. Put another way, the meaning of a fact, indeed its very discovery, lies in its context, and historical context is in essence established by periodization.²

2. On context as essentially constitutive of meaning, and on the corollary role of theory, or the hypothetico-deductive method, in science, rooted in constructive postulation subject to falsification, see Heinz R. Pagels, *The Dreams of Reason: The Computer and the Rise of the Sciences of Complexity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), pp. 94–95, 126–127, 241–269. Pagels notes that meaning is necessarily context-dependent (in his words), and I would add that in history, periodization critically defines context. See also, A. Brecht, *Political Theory*, pp. 28–34, on the role of ideas, “creative imagination,” genius, selective relevance, and hypotheses, in the construction of theory and its relation to the very designation and discovery of facts, and note Brecht’s statement (p. 34): “Strictly speaking, there is no scientific observation, however direct, that does not contain . . . some sort of hypothesis.” For similar perspectives on meaning, see also, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), especially chs. III–V, pp. 50–115, and ch. IX, pp. 193–218. While warning against a priori static, absolute laws as the basis for historical interpretation, especially those of a statistical or quantitative kind from the field of economics, Frederick Jackson Turner nevertheless also had this to say about a Rankean faith in facts: “Those who insist that history is simply the effort to tell the thing exactly as it was, to state the facts, are confronted with the difficulty that the fact which they would represent is not planted on the solid ground of fixed conditions; it is in the midst and is itself a part of the changing currents, the complex and interacting influences of the time, deriving its significance as a fact from its relations to the deeper-seated movements of the age. . . .” Turner, “Social Forces in American History,” *American Historical Review*, XVI (January 1911), pp. 217–233, in *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner*, ed. Ray Allen Billington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 179. To similar effect, see Alfred Marshall, “The Old Generation of Economists and the New,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XI (January 1897), p. 119: “As the nineteenth century has worn on, there has been a growing readiness among economists, as among students of physical sciences, to recognize that . . . every inference from one set of facts to another . . . involves a passage upwards from particulars to general propositions and ideas; and a passage downwards from them to other particulars. We can seldom infer particulars from other particulars without passing through generals, however simple be the subject-matter of our study; and we can never do so in the complex problems of social life.” The essay (pp. 115–135) originated as an address to the Cambridge Economic Club’s first meeting, delivered at Cambridge, England, 29 October 1896. In the same vein, cf. Gunnar Myrdal, *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955),

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The need for periodization as the ground of coherence and objective inquiry may not be universally accepted, but it is not necessary for the present purposes to assume that it is especially controversial. The earnest controversy begins beyond this point, with the criteria and substance of periodization. The increasing and currently well-praised resort by historians to social-science disciplines testifies to their acknowledgment that facts neither speak for nor define themselves, and that adequate periodizations, or interpretive frameworks (or theories), beyond the implementation of innovative research technique narrowly taken, are necessary to historical inquiry.³

It may be that historians have made greater strides toward recognizing the importance of theory than social scientists have made toward understanding the nature of, and in practice engaging in, historical research in primary sources. It may be, too, that the evergrowing vogue of interdisciplinary study among historians represents further testimony in this direction. But in the absence of making the theoretical dimension integral to historical study, and to the training of historians, this “external” resort to the social sciences by historians lends credibility to a view of the historical discipline as being inferior to the social sciences for inquiry into and grasping social reality. The engagement in the quantitative rigors of

“Preface to the English Edition,” p. vii: “Facts do not organize themselves into concepts and theories just by being looked at; indeed, except within the framework of concepts and theories, there are no scientific facts but only chaos. There is an inescapable *a priori* element in all scientific work. Questions must be asked before answers can be given. The questions are an expression of our interest in the world; they are at bottom valuations. Valuations are thus necessarily involved already at the stage when we observe facts and carry on theoretical analysis. . . .” In this sense, Myrdal rejected as “naive empiricism” the idea that value-free facts speak for themselves.

3. Research technique is undoubtedly a basic matter of concern as integral to theory in historical inquiry, but that is different from acquiescing in a tendency to reduce the question of theory to that of information-gathering technique, which properly takes its direction from the broader conceptual framework. See, e.g., Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1964), pp. 24–27, where in discussing “The Myth of Methodology,” Kaplan referred to the strongly entrenched belief among American intellectuals that equated scientific method with technique. Insofar as a resort to quantitative technique implies an effort at making history more an “exact science,” like the physical sciences, by the discovery of indissoluble facts (data), from which incontestable theory may be derived, it misconceives both the nature of the physical sciences and the relation between fact and theory (notes 1 and 2, and related text, above). Sigmund Freud’s characterization of scientific method is relevant here: “It is a mistake to believe that a science consists in nothing but conclusively proved propositions, and it is unjust to demand that it should. It is a demand only made by those who feel a craving for authority in some form and a need to replace the religious catechism by something else, even if it be a scientific one. Science in its catechism has but few apodictic percepts; it consists mainly of statements which it has developed to varying degrees of probability. The capacity to be content with these approximations to certainty and the ability to carry on constructive work despite the lack of final confirmation are actually a mark of the scientific habit of mind.” Freud, *A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis*, tr. Joan Riviere (New York: Liveright, 1935), p. 47.

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cliometrics by many historians has been to some extent a response to this view. In any case, the external resort has far from constructively overcome the division between social theory and historical study that set in and has developed since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the rise of academic specialization in the historical and social science disciplines.

The division may be observed in the tendency of social scientists, in constructing their theories, seldom to engage in sustained and systematic historical research in primary sources, and too often to regard quantitative data as coterminous with primary sources, while historians, in pursuing primary research, seldom seek or find training, as historians, in social theory. Historians and social scientists (including social theorists) tend, accordingly, to borrow across disciplines from one another in naive or “user-friendly” ways that mutually reinforce each others’ predispositions, if not their weaknesses, more than their scientific objectivity or their investigatory strengths. In general, the resort to other disciplines by historians for an interpretive framework, or in terms used here, for guidance in periodization, suggests an implied criticism not only of the current shape of academic specialization, but of the deficiencies of current prevalent historiographical method and training.

2

The concept, periodization, presupposes an assumption of change. As related to society or social relations, it designates a subject characterized by its being historical, that is, a subject the essence of which is change, whether cyclical or cumulative, or a blend of the two, although at times decumulative. Like other subjects in the natural universe, it is a subject that in the long run, at least, and taking humanity as a whole in its many societies, preserves itself, or realizes its potentialities, through change – a kind of change that is evolutionary from relatively more simple to relatively more complex modes of being: a kind of change that, however cyclical in many respects, or however slow the pace, is cumulative in significant characteristics, involving an evolution of social formation and mind interacting with the rest of nature, and yielding a growing and deepening knowledge and willful use, modification, or reshaping, of both the physical and social orders.

The subject, human society – society, or sociality, being essential to human being as we commonly use the latter term – therefore exhibits characteristics that are both transhistorical and historical. The transhistorical refers to those characteristics that are preservative, generative or potential, cyclical or relatively persistent, variously rooted in or involving geophysics, biology, thought, culture, art, habit, custom; the his-

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torical refers to those in flux through time, a flux that however random or subject to contingency, also exhibits systemically causal characteristics, whereby what happens in the present has its causes in what happened in the past and serves as causes of what will happen in the future, although these causal relations may be neither precisely predetermined nor predictable – something like the weather as it stands to the climate. The transhistorical includes transepochal and transsocietal characteristics, as well as shorter-term characteristics of eras or stages within epochs or within specific societies or society-types.⁴

Periods, or efforts at periodization, track change on a field of permanence – the historical on the field of the transhistorical – as well as the transhistorical proceeding through the historical. If this sounds Hegelian, well Hegel knew a thing or two. If nothing else, he contributed greatly to our understanding of evolutionary process, particularly to our ability to think complexly in evolutionary terms.

The subject, being human, in sum, involves social relations *and* consciousness, matter *and* mind, institutions *and* ideas, custom *and* reason, fact *and* value, intersecting with, or manifested in, regularity *and* contingency, permanence *and* variability, necessity *and* freedom, all sharing in both transhistorical and historical dimensions. Whatever else it is, the subject, human society, is complex, and therefore so is periodization.

In this respect, the theoretical situation corresponds with that in the physical sciences; that is, the relations of the transhistorical and the historical may be considered analogous to (but not identical with) those of general relativity and quantum physics. General relativity, in applying to the macrouniverse, views nature as a deterministic, predictable continuum: given a set of conditions, for a particular physical situation, it yields precise predictions about the outcome. By analogy, the transhistorical, while it does not apply only to macrohistory, views human history as a long-term continuum involving a significant degree of determined and predictable development in the relations of mind, social organization, and physical nature. Quantum physics, in applying to the microuniverse, views nature as composed of discrete particles (quanta), involving an inherent element of chance, and makes its predictions in terms of probabilities. By analogy, the historical, while not applying only to microhistory, deals with specific societies at specific times and with their specific characteristics, and views human history as composed of

4. Examples of transepochal and transsocietal characteristics are philosophical and theological ideas, some scientific and mathematical thought, tools and production methods, foods, motherhood, fatherhood, monarchy, aristocracy, tyranny, conscience, sexual relations, music, architecture, literature, other works of art; examples of shorter-term transhistorical characteristics include those just listed and also: aspects of the U.S. Constitution, racism, sectionalism, class formations, political principles, morals and manners.

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diverse components involving inherent elements of chance, unpredictability, and probability.

Just as in the physical sciences, general relativity and quantum physics may be considered to contradict each other philosophically, so with determinism and contingency in the transhistorical and the historical; and just as a unified theory in the physical sciences would reconcile general relativity and quantum physics, so a unified periodization theory would integrate the transhistorical and the historical in some rigorous set of conceptions. Similarly, just as the continuing absence of a unified theory in the physical sciences neither invalidates general relativity or quantum physics separately, nor suspends research and thought in either field and thinking about their interrelation, so the absence of a unified periodization theory, and even the absence of the broad agreement on macro- and micro- theory that exists among physical scientists, need not invalidate the transhistorical-historical method. Rather, the analogy suggests that history involves the play of chance on the field of necessity, or the interrelation of freedom and determinism, characterized by complexity, or, the complex interrelations of relatively more simple components (individuals, families, groups, interests, classes, ideas, values). Following Heinz R. Pagels's formulation, as he derived it from his own and others' work, we may take complexity to denote conditions characterized as somewhere between a completely ordered and a completely random system: a self-organizing system, in the sense of not having been pre-designed or at least not having a pre-design that can be known; a system involving a hierarchy of interacting, operating constituent systems, and networks among them or their components, and more, involving a diversity or variability in interactions among the components and systems, some of which may be predictable and some unpredictable. This diversity or variability of interaction constitutes the essential feature of complex behavior characteristic of systems composed nevertheless of elementary parts. As with the physical sciences so with history, or the study of humanity, what is involved is the study of intermixing systems demanding sciences of complexity based as much upon the principle of uncertainty as upon that of certainty.⁵

3

In the task of formulating a constructive or postulated hypothesis as the ground of inquiry, the following may be considered as ranking among the essential questions of periodization:

5. Pagels, *Dreams of Reason*, pp. 64–67, et passim.

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- What general type of society is it? What criteria are best suited to determining or defining the society-type?
- If an observably evolving society, what kind of evolution characterizes it, and in what historically specific phase of its evolution is it?
- What are the currently prevalent, declining, and emergent social relations and modes of consciousness, their requirements, capacities, patterns of authority, and structure or relations of power?
- What are the prevalent, or critical, causes and agencies, ranges and limits, of change, or failures to change, or obstructions to change?
- Which aspects of the society are transhistorical, and which historically transient or specific to current or very recent periods, and how do they interact?
- How are transhistorical aspects modified, if at all, over time, in adaptation to, or in shaping, historically transient or more specific aspects?
- Which historically more specific aspects are changing or evolving at more rapid, or less rapid, rates than others? What are the causes and consequences of such differential rates of change and their interaction?
- To what extent are such differentials in rates of change critical to the ways in which a society changes, or evolves, or fails to?

There are many other questions, of course, as these few suggest. These are sufficient for indicating the framework of inquiry, from which we may turn to American society in particular and pose a postulated hypothesis with respect to type of society, and draw out some of its implications.

Suppose we begin by saying that through all or most of its history, from colonial times forward, the society we associate with the United States of America has been a political society (or group of political societies). This assumes a society in which politics is critically important to, perhaps constitutive of, the society in its essence. In the case of the United States, it is observable that continuing change, or history, characterizes this politics, and that indeed politics is the activity or system through which people have engaged in formulating, promoting, and managing (or resisting) change – that is, history.⁶

As a political society in this sense, it has been one in which people have been engaged in consciously, or intentionally, seeking to shape or make change, that is, their history, – or, in words of human drama, define or

6. Among the major strategies of managing history seized upon by Americans, a prominent one is the idea – some would say, the conceit – of having “escaped from history” (from the Old World) and therefore being “born free” to shape their own fate: the self-made people.

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embrace and fulfill what they conceive to be their society's "destiny" – or future, as well as their own as individuals. Periodization itself, then, concerned as it is with defining the course of change, with its unavoidable implications for the present and the future, becomes infused with intentionality and therefore with controversy. In sum, the society that we are assuming is in some critical sense a political society undergoing continuous change, and in the case of the United States, open to a range of dialogue, conflict, consensus, and division concerning the character and rate of change. Our efforts at periodization, and the circumstance that they can not escape differences of opinion and controversy (in a way not common among physical scientists), may be taken to signify that we are indeed members of a political society, and a political society undergoing continuous change, or evolution, or *history*. The "end of history" is not yet upon us; no such relief is in sight – or if it is, then it would signify that the United States was no longer, or was becoming something other than, a political society.⁷

In some greater detail, by political society I mean one in which associative activity, centered upon defining issues and formulating and implementing measures or programs through public discourse, lawmaking, election of governmental officeholders, electioneering and campaigning, litigation and judicial process, involving in all of these spheres large numbers of the people, and in general becoming more inclusive of people and issues as time goes on, rather than being confined to religious institutions and leaders, prescriptive elites, or dynastic or closed or closely restricted circles, becomes increasingly, as the society evolves, essentially constitutive of authority and power in the society, and of the society's pattern and pace of change or evolution. It follows from this that a political society is one whose pattern and pace of change or evolution is inexplicable apart from its politics in this sense. It also follows that the evolution of United States society, in particular, can not be studied or taught without reference to the centrality of its *political* history. Here is an example, to begin with, of the way periodization designates the facts to be discovered, analyzed, studied, and reasoned with.

Not all societies are political in this sense. Most societies in world history have not been. But the United States is, and has been, as also has been the case, more or less, with those societies of the Western world identified with the passage from a *Gemeinschaft* (communality) to a *Gesellschaft* (association) type in the modern epoch since about the six-

7. To set political scientists at ease, let me say that I would agree that all societies are political in some important, even constitutive, sense. Here, *political society* is a term meant to convey a more particular meaning.