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New Methods for Social History

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International Review of Social History 43 (1998), Supplement, pp. 3–8

Introduction

Our intent in publishing this collection of essays is to introduce historians to a set of quantitative and qualitative social science methods that have genuine, and as yet un- or under-explored, utility for historical inquiry. Believing that the potency of any methodology is best displayed through the analysis of actual historical cases, we called for our contributors to demonstrate their chosen method's logic and applicability by grounding their exposition in concrete historical happenings. Though we also asked them to use as expository vehicles historical cases that are significant on their own terms and of clear relevance to social historians, the essays' actual substantive pay-off is apt to be less important than their ability to display in an accessible fashion when, why and how the application of various formal methods may generate deeper, more satisfying explanations and interpretations of historical happenings.

Admittedly, a call to contemporary historians to reconsider the possible value to them of formal social science methodologies comes at a peculiar time in our intellectual life. Analytical formalism in history seems on the wane, and, at best, social science and history have shared a checkered and uneasy relationship over the last century and a half. Early sociology, for example, borrowed from, leaned on, or in other ways was in conversation with history, even if some of the discipline's founders paradoxically used history in an ahistorical manner; that is, as a "storehouse of samples" in Barrington Moore's apt phrase, a mere testing ground for grand sociological theory rather than something to be comprehended in its own right.[1] Except

1. See, for instance, the following English language publications: Barrington Moore, "Strategy in Social Research", in B. Moore, *Political Power and Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1958), p. 131. Published discussions of the history-social science dialogue/dilemma are extensive. Notable contributions include H. Stuart Hughes, "The Historian and the Social Scientist", in Alexander V. Riasanovsky and Barnes Riznik (eds), *Generalizations in Historical Writing* (Philadelphia, 1963), pp. 18–59; Warren Cahnman and Alvin Boskoff, "Sociology and History: Reunion and Rapprochement" (pp. 1–18) and "Sociology and History: Review and Outlook" (pp. 560–580) in their edited volume *Sociology and History* (New York, 1964); Robert Berkhofer, *A Behavioral Approach to Historical* Analysis (New York, 1969); Samuel Beer, "Political Science and History", in Melvin Richter (ed.), *Essays in Theory and History: An Approach to the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 41–73; Kai Erikson, "Sociology and the Historical Perspective", *American Sociologist*, 15 (1970), pp. 331–338; J.H. Hexter, "History and the Social Sciences", in idem, *Doing History* (Bloomington, IN, 1972), pp. 107–134; Lawrence Stone, "History and Social Sciences in the Twentieth Century", in Charles F. Delzell (ed.), *The Future of History* (Nashville, TN, 1977), pp. 3–42; Theda Skocpol, "Sociology's Historical Imagination" (pp. 1–21) and "Emerging Agendas and Recurrent Strategies in Historical Sociology" (pp. 356–391), in idem (ed.), *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (New York, 1984); Piotr Sztompka, "The Renaissance of Historical Orientation in Sociology", *International Sociology*, 1 (1986), pp. 321–337; Andrew Abbott, "History and Sociology: The Lost Synthesis", *Social Science History*, 15 (1991), pp. 201–238; and Jill Quadagno and Stan Knapp, "Have Historical Sociologists Forsaken Theory? Thoughts on the History/Theory Relationship", *Sociological Research and Methods*, 20 (1992), pp. 481–507.

for economic historians and the occasional institutional or Marxist maverick, economists, of course, long ago embraced marginalism and thereby jettisoned serious historical inquiry. But since the 1960s there has been a certain rapprochement between historians and social scientists, a development which has become visible in "Social Sciences History Conferences" in Europe and the US, in the blossoming of scholarship in historical sociology, in new interdisciplinary journals explicitly merging social science and history, and in the application of sociological methods by social historians.[2]

To date, however, this convergence has remained quite limited. Misunderstandings between social scientists and historians about how each actually conducts their research are part of the problem. The late historical sociologist Philip Abrams, for example, has compellingly argued that sociologists and historians share a common, if often unstated, goal, that of understanding the mutually constitutive interplay of social structure and social action, a process he has labelled "structuring" to connote its intrinsically temporal – that is to say, historical – quality.[3] But differences in the internal organization, socialization practices, overt disciplinary objectives, and so on of history and the social sciences also contribute to their intellectual separation, and to this extent complete rapprochement will never come about. What can at least be partially eliminated, though, is the isolation fed by misguided a priori dismissals of historical approaches by social scientists or of social science theories and methods by historians. This lamentable practice is all too common today.

On the one hand, many influential social scientists, such as John Gold-

2. This rapprochement, and, indeed, historical sociology's current visibility and prestige, has roots now more than a generation old: Robert Bellah, Reinhard Bendix, S.N. Eisenstadt, Norbert Elias, Seymour M. Lipset and Barrington Moore, and others, continued to infuse their sociology with history in fruitful and exciting ways throughout the 1950s and 1960s and into the 1970s. Coupled with the fact that accepted (and largely ahistorical) sociological theories and approaches were unable to anticipate or satisfactorily account for the social conflict and transformations of the 1960s, the example and influence of these scholars are likely responsible for what became a striking, perhaps even profound and possibly irreversible, turn to history in the 1970s and 1980s among sociologists. Here we should particularly acknowledge the herculean efforts of Charles Tilly – efforts seen both in his own research going back to the 1960s and his more recent programmatic statements such as *As Sociology Meets History* (New York, 1981) and *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York, 1984). If Tilly deserves special mention, he was clearly aided in his "subversive" quest by a whole host of others, perhaps most importantly by Theda Skocpol, again both in her own research on *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge, 1979) and in her influential edited volume, *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*; by Immanuel Wallerstein in his conceptualization and analysis of *The Modern World System* (New York, 1974), and, again, by Barrington Moore, whose *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston, 1966) continues to excite and stimulate more than thirty years after it first appeared. Powerful and effective defenses of a historically oriented social science were also published by Arthur Stinchcombe, *Theoretical Methods of Social History* (New York, 1978) and Philips Abrams, "History, Sociology, Historical Sociology", *Past and Present*, 87 (1980), pp. 3–16, and *Historical Sociology* (Ithaca, NY, 1982).
3. Abrams, "History, Sociology, Historical Sociology", and *Historical Sociology*.

thorpe, argue that "history" will always remain only a "necessary residual category".[4] This view is, as we noted above, as old as academic social science itself and is especially widespread among social scientists committed to a relatively narrow "scientific" understanding of their disciplines' purposes – for example, the testing and refinement of highly abstract general theory, the empirical identification of "social laws" or law-like regularities thought operative across time and space,[5] and an unyielding commitment to quantification as the best way to summarize and analyze information.

For decades, social science research has been dominated by multivariate statistical techniques.[6] Such procedures generally require large data sets and permit the user to proceed to analysis with little, if any, in-depth knowledge of the distinct cases subject to analysis. Most sociologists using such methods, moreover, generally do not intend to limit their inferences to the specific cases they analyze. Indeed, they typically work hard to escape the spatial and temporal constraints of their studies by showing that their samples are representative of more inclusive populations, and/or that they are studying an instance or example of a theoretically general process even if the inquiry is of phenomena occurring at only one time point and/or in one place. By definition and intent, then, most sociologists do not seriously ground either the theories they use or the analyses they perform in the historical (temporal and spatial) contexts housing the sample, population, example, or instance of interest. To do so, in fact, would compromise the "timeless" and "placeless" generality of their theories, findings and inferences.[7] The effective consequence of these presuppositions and practices too often is an excessively mechanistic and ahistorical social science.[8]

On the other hand, the much-heralded quantitative revolution in history of the 1960s and 1970s, associated with such historians as Robert Fogel,

4. John H. Goldthorpe, "Current Issues in Comparative Macrosociology: A Debate on Methodological Issues", *Comparative Social Research*, 16 (1997), p. 17. Earlier, Goldthorpe made similar assertions that elicited strong commentary from historical sociologists. See Goldthorpe, "The Uses of History in Sociology: Reflections on Some Recent Tendencies", *British Journal of Sociology*, 42 (1991), pp. 211–230. Subsequent comments by Joseph Bryant (pp. 3–19), Nicky Hart (pp. 21–30), Nicos Mouzelis (pp. 31–36), and Michael Mann (pp. 37–54), and Goldthorpe's response (pp. 55–77) are found in *British Journal of Sociology*, 45 (1994).

5. See, for example, Edgar Kiser and Michael Hechter, "The Role of General Theory in Comparative-Historical Sociology", *American Journal of Sociology*, 97 (1991), pp. 1–30.

6. See, for example, Christopher Bernert, "The Career of Causal Analysis in American Sociology", *British Journal of Sociology*, 34 (1983), pp. 230–254.

7. This argument is taken from, and elaborated in, Larry J. Griffin, "Temporality, Events, and Explanation in Historical Sociology: An Introduction", *Sociological Methods and Research*, 20 (1992), pp. 403–427.

8. David Zaret, "Sociological Theory and Historical Scholarship", *American Sociologist*, 13 (1978), pp. 114–121; Larry W. Isaac and Larry J. Griffin, "Ahistoricism in Time-Series Analyses of Historical Process: Critique, Redirections, and Illustrations from U.S. Labor History", *American Sociological Review*, 54 (1989), pp. 873–890; and Norbert Elias, "The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4 (1987), pp. 223–247.

Stanley Engerman, J. Morton Kousser and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, simply failed to materialize.[9] In fact, a majority of all historians, including social historians, now appears largely indifferent to most of the conventions of formal social science, particularly those calling for the development and application of codified theory stated so as to be empirically disconfirmed and the use of formal inferential techniques and methodologies.[10] Seemingly in reaction to the grandiose explanatory claims of some behaviorists and positivists, moreover, many historians increasingly turned first to Geertzian-style symbolic and interpretative anthropology for inspiration[11] and, more recently, to postmodern and linguistic constructions of history's project. In the process, cultural interpretation often has been cleaved from causal explanation, and indifference to formal social science has, in many important historical circles at least, given way to profound skepticism about its power to elucidate: when such elementary notions as "cause" and "consequence" are thought to be arbitrary, of doubtful utility, or mere intellectual fictions, historians are unlikely to concern themselves with methodological advances in the social sciences and with how those innovations can be fruitfully applied in historical research.[12]

Except for certain fields of historical research, such as historical demography and studies of social mobility, the historical utility of traditional multivariate sociological techniques undoubtedly is limited. At the risk of overgeneralizing, let us assume that most historians

(a) usually deal with a singular historical event or just a small number of cases, not dozens or hundreds of them;

9. For a relatively balanced and nuanced defense of the efficacy of a formal social science history, see Robert Fogel, "'Scientific History' and Traditional History", in R. Fogel and G.R. Elton, *Which Road to the Past?* (New Haven, 1983), pp. 5–70.

10. See, for example, the discussions of these and similar issues in Roderick Floud, "Quantitative History and People's History: Two Methods in Conflict", *Social Science History*, 8 (1984), pp. 151–168; Jürgen Kocka, "Theories and Quantification in History", *Social Science History*, 8 (1984), pp. 169–178; and Tony Judt, "A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians", *History Workshop*, 7 (1979), pp. 66–94.

11. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1971); Ronald G. Walters, "Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and Historians", *Social Research*, XLVII (1980), pp. 537–556; Bernard S. Cohen, "Anthropology and History in the 1980s", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12 (1981), pp. 227–252.

12. See, among many others, Nancy Fitch, "Statistical Fantasies and Historical Facts: History in Crisis and Its Methodological Implication", *Historical Methods*, 17 (1984), pp. 239–254; Joan W. Scott, "History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story", *American Historical Review*, 94 (1989), pp. 680–692; F.R. Ankersmit, "History and Postmoderism", *History and Theory*, 28 (1989), pp. 137–153; Patrick Joyce, "The End of Social History?", *Social History*, 20 (1995), pp. 73–91; and Robert Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, 1995). Lawrence Stone initiated a sharp debate about history's postmodern turn in the journal *Past and Present*. See Stone, "History and Post–Modernism" (No. 131, 1991, pp. 217–218; No. 135, 1992, pp. 189–194) and the comments by Patrick Joyce (No. 133, 1991, pp. 204–209), Catriona Kelly (No. 133, 1991, pp. 209–213) and Gabrielle M. Spiegel (No. 135, 1992, pp. 194–208).

(b) often piece together their cases even as they analyze them rather than reach for predefined analytical units established for reasons other than historical research (e.g. census tracts, political parties);
(c) struggle with a rich variety of information that is nonetheless often too incomplete to permit statistical analysis, that cannot be easily ordered by strict criteria externally dictated by statistical rules (the so-called "crisp data partition"), that cannot be assumed to be fixed or stable in meaning through time or from one historical actor to another, and that moves across levels of analysis in a complex, apparently bewildering, fashion (from person to collectivity to institution to period);
(d) rely on and prefer explanations and interpretations that are context-dependent and causally contingent, not invariant across time and space and deterministic.

Woven throughout all of the above, of course, is the basic historical premise that "time matters" and that understanding and explaining past actions and events in time and through time is the goal of historical inquiry. "In truth", states Fernand Braudel, "the historian can never get away from the question of time in history; time sticks to his [sic] thinking like soil to a gardner's spade."[13] Given the practices and objectives of historians, given also the ahistoricism of much social science research, and given, finally, how that ahistoricism is aided and abetted by the somewhat unreflective use of multivariate statistical procedures, it is therefore easy to understand why practising historians typically ignore formal social science methods or decry their application to real historical problems.

By virtue of the existence of this special issue, however, we clearly do not believe that this state of affairs is inevitable. During the last ten to fifteen years, social scientists themselves have discerned many of the limitations to statistical analysis and successfully historicized the application of multivariate procedures or provided analytical alternatives that permit, occasionally even coerce, greater attention to historical particularity, contingency, context and flow. Often these innovations – such as those explored in the essays to follow by Larry Isaac and his co-authors, Holly McCammon, and Glenn Deane and his co-authors – remain essentially true to the logic and

13. Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago, 1980), p. 47. The problem is not merely that sociologists generally ignore time; it is also, and as profoundly, that the statistical analysis of time-ordered data (e.g. via time-series regression) may itself remain ahistorical. Time, that is, is not historicized; it is not transmuted in most sociological analyses of time-order data into what Braudel (*ibid.*, p. 49) calls "historical time". See the arguments and documentation put forward by Isaac and Griffin, "Ahistoricism in Time-Series Analyses of Historical Process", and Larry J. Griffin and Larry W. Isaac, "Recursive Regression and the Historical Use of 'Time' in Time-Series Analysis of Historical Process", *Historical Methods*, 25 (1992), pp. 166–179. What matters to the historical grounding of an analysis is not simply the use of over-time data, but, rather, the historical meaning those series convey and the historical purpose they can be put in the course of analysis and interpretation.

application of conventional statistical analysis, but are put to decidedly historical uses or are modified so that the inherent historicity of the data subject to analysis is magnified and exploited. Other methodological advances also illuminating historical processes – those discussed, for example, by Roberto Franzosi, Charles Ragin and Charles Wetherell in this collection – are more distant from many of the conventions of statistical analysis but are nonetheless analytically formal in that they mandate systematic and replicable routines, require strict coding rules and have an internal logic or algorithm that produces descriptive or inferential results. Finally, some formal techniques – such as that demonstrated by Larry Griffin and Robert Korstad, below – entirely leave the realm of multivariate statistics and actually merge with the type of interpretative and explanatory reasoning used by narrative historians.

Social science methodology, therefore, need not be ahistorical, whatever its track record thus far, and, as our contributors demonstrate, historically-oriented social scientists who use such methods both appreciate and advance the importance of "history" in their use of these techniques and in their interpretation of their findings. The time seems ripe, then, for social historians to examine – critically, to be sure, but with an open mind – the utility to them and to future historical inquiry of recent innovations in formal social science methodology.

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International Review of Social History 43 (1998), Supplement, pp. 9–32

Temporally Recursive Regression and Social Historical Inquiry: An Example of Cross-Movement Militancy Spillover*

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Our focus here is on time-series regression as a formal analytic tool in social historical inquiry. We have three interrelated purposes. First, we argue that conventional time-series regression is typically ill-suited for social historical inquiry because ahistorical assumptions and conventions regarding time undermine the historical character of social "process-as-analyzed". Second, we present a modified time-series approach – temporally recursive regression – that takes time seriously and provides a more adequate analytic vehicle for social historical inquiry. Finally, we illustrate the promise of temporally recursive regression by using it to analyze how workplace militancy in post-war America was fueled by massive insurgency waves during successive phases of the civil rights movement.

AHISTORICAL CHARACTER OF CONVENTIONAL TIME-SERIES REGRESSION[1]

Conventional time-series regression contains a conception of time that is *ahistorical* in character.[2] It is fairly termed ahistorical, we believe, because time enters the analysis solely as a means of analysis, an instrumental marker for purposes of ordering the time unit observations (e.g. years). Treating time, and therefore history, as simply *means* rather than also *object* of analysis shapes the practice of conventional time-series regression in such a way that unduly masks significant historical context, meaning and nuance in social process. Simply put, ahistorical time severely limits what conventional

* We thank Larry Griffin and Marcel van der Linden for comments on prior versions of the paper. Isaac's co-authors are listed in alphabetical order.

1. This section draws on: Larry Isaac and Larry Griffin, "Ahistoricism in Time-Series Analyses of Historical Process: Critique, Redirection, and Illustrations from U.S. Labor History", *American Sociological Review*, 54 (1989), pp. 873–890; Larry Griffin and Larry Isaac, "Recursive Regression and the Historical Use of 'Time' in Time-Series Analysis of Historical Process", *Historical Methods*, 25 (1992), pp. 166–179; Larry Isaac and Kevin Leicht, "Regimes of Power and the Power of Analytic Regimes: Explaining U.S. Military Procurement Keynesianism as Historical Process", *Historical Methods*, 30 (1997), pp. 28–45.

2. On forms of temporality in social historical inquiry, see William Sewell, "Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology", in Terrence McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996), pp. 245–280.

time-series regression can contribute to social historical inquiry, both in terms of mapping past historical processes and what it can offer for theoretical development.

The acceptance of ahistorical time leads to two interrelated practices that produce much of the damage. One rests on the analytical use of a single, *fixed time frame*. Data representing the process of interest are organized into and analyzed over a fixed time period without regard to historical aspects of starting, ending or intervening time points. Opening and ending dates are arbitrarily selected, then the model is estimated on a single time frame. The potential value to historical inquiry of varying the start/end points is not anticipated (usually the question is not even raised) and is, therefore, not explored.

A related convention – known as the *homogeneity assumption* – assumes that the regression coefficients linking a dependent variable to a set of independent variables are identical for each and every time point contained within the fixed time frame. Several significant ahistorical implications stem from this assumption. First, transhistorically general parameter estimates are produced as single numerical representations of causal impact over quite lengthy periods of history. Consequently historical documentation and extant analysis of how social contexts and events might condition or alter the causal processes of interest are simply ruled out by methodological fiat. The only source of social change posited within such a model occurs as quantitative variation in the dependent variable. Other, perhaps deeper, forms of social change that might register in the process structure (structural form of the model) or parameter structure (coefficients linking independent to dependent variables) are treated as historical constants.[3]

Second, the homogeneity assumption masks the existence of unusual time periods, especially active moments that form historical turning points in a particular process. "Exceptional" (or "deviant") cases are routinely treated as obstacles rather than as important theoretical-historical anomalies to be explained. As such, they are often ignored or eliminated. An image of seamless historical continuity is created, again by methodological fiat, rather than empirically detected and explained. Consequently, theories that posit important historical discontinuities and/or feature the transformative potential of events and human agency are unlikely to find inspiration or support from conventional time-series analyses. Moreover, when historical contexts and events do, in fact, affect the causal relationships between independent and dependent variables, the opposite a priori assumption is likely to generate seriously misguided inferences.

3. For more detail on sources of constancy and change within time-series models, see Thomas Janoski and Larry Isaac, "Introduction to Time-Series Analysis", in Thomas Janoski and Alexander Hicks (eds), *The Comparative Political Economy of the Welfare State* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 31–53, Table 1.