

1. Sociology's Historical Imagination

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Every social science—or better, every well considered social study—requires an historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials.

C. Wright Mills¹

In a basic sense, sociology has always been a historically grounded and oriented enterprise. As wise commentators have pointed out again and again, all of the modern social sciences, and especially sociology, were originally efforts to come to grips with the roots and unprecedented effects of capitalist commercialization and industrialization in Europe. What accounted for the special dynamism of Europe compared to other civilizations, of some parts of Europe compared to others? How were social inequalities, political conflicts, moral values, and human lives affected by the unprecedented changes in economic life? Would industrializing capitalist societies break asunder or generate new forms of solidarity and satisfaction for their members? How would changes proceed in the rest of the world under the impact of European expansion? The major works of those who would come to be seen as the founders of modern sociology, especially the works of Karl Marx, Alexis de Tocqueville, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, all grappled with such questions.² To varying degrees, all offered concepts and explanations meant to be used in truly historical analyses of social structures and social change.

Truly historical sociological studies have some or all of the following characteristics. Most basically, they ask questions about social structures or processes understood to be concretely situated in time and space. Second, they address processes over time, and take temporal sequences seriously in accounting for outcomes. Third, most historical analyses attend to the interplay of meaningful actions and structural contexts, in order to make sense of the unfolding of unintended as well as intended outcomes in individual lives and social transformations. Finally, historical sociological studies highlight the *particular* and *varying* features of specific kinds of social structures and patterns of change. Along with temporal processes and contexts, social and cultural differences are intrinsically of interest to historically oriented sociologists. For them, the world's past is not seen as a unified devel-

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opmental story or as a set of standardized sequences. Instead, it is understood that groups or organizations have chosen, or stumbled into, varying paths in the past. Earlier “choices,” in turn, both limit and open up alternative possibilities for further change, leading toward no predetermined end.

To be sure, some of sociology’s founders focused more closely than others on explaining particular sequences of historical events. And some founders, or their followers, turned more readily than others to the fashioning of transhistorical generalizations and teleological schemas. Thus, strictly speaking, Tocqueville and Weber – and Marx in his essays on current events – were more “historical” in the senses I have listed than Durkheim, or Marx in his more philosophical writings. Yet each of the founders was so committed to making sense of the key changes and contrasts of his own epoch that he was a historically oriented social analyst according to at least some of the basic criteria just mentioned.³ None of the founders ever got entirely carried away by a philosophy of universal evolution, by formal conceptualization, or by theoretical abstraction for its own sake. Each devoted himself again and again to situating and explaining modern European social structures and processes of change.

The Partial Eclipse of Historical Sociology

Despite its roots in the works of the founders, by the time sociology became fully institutionalized as an academic discipline in the United States after World War II, its historical orientation and sensibilities were partially eclipsed. Important scholars such as Robert Bellah, Reinhard Bendix, and Seymour Martin Lipset continued to do historical work in the direct tradition of the founders,⁴ but the most prestigious theoretical and empirical paradigms broke with the tradition. The anti-historicism of “grand theory” and “abstracted empiricism” was lamented by C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*, his passionate dissent from establishment trends in American sociology of the 1950s.⁵ Although Mills pointed out that qualitative investigations of social problems could exhibit equal disregard for temporal and structural contexts, empiricist antihistoricism was chiefly exemplified in Mills’s account by quantitative studies of specific social patterns, in which U.S. realities of the moment were naively treated out of context as proxies for all of human social life. At the opposite, though complementary, extreme of the sociological practice of his day, the antihistoricism of grand theory was for Mills supremely epitomized in Talcott Parsons’s

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The Social System, published in 1951.⁶ That prestigious work set forth a grid of abstract categories through which all aspects of social life, regardless of times and places, could be classified and supposedly explained in the same, universal theoretical terms.

The Social System elaborated a theoretical edifice overwhelmingly devoted to accounting for societal equilibria, with only passing nods to phenomena of social change. Yet Parsons himself was too great a theorist, and structural functionalism too ambitious as a world view and a scholarly approach, not to take on more directly issues of societal transformation. Evolutionist theories of "development" or "modernization" proliferated in the later 1950s and in the 1960s, all of them treating "societal differentiation" as the master key to classifying and ordering all types of societies and accounting for transformations from traditional to modern social orders.⁷ Given the hegemony of the United States in the international order it shaped after World War II, and given the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was perhaps not surprising that these theories of societal change as modernization mapped standardized lines of change along which all normally developing nations would sooner or later move. In due course, they would supposedly come to resemble what the United States was happily conceptualized to be in the 1950s and early 1960s: economically expanding and innovative, highly educated and achievement-oriented, politically pluralistic, and pragmatically nonideological.

Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, Stalinist readings of Marxist grand theory had already established a twisted mirror image of this evolutionist scheme. In the Soviet version of modernization, economic progress inevitably drove all nations through fixed stages.⁸ Each stage was a mode of production with its own characteristic technological level and associated patterns of class domination and class conflict. Nations would move through successive stages toward a classless "socialist" order and would ultimately arrive at a conflict-free "Communist" utopia.

This is not the place to discuss in detail how and why. Yet between the 1950s and the 1980s, the implicit world views embodied in both static and developmentalist versions of structural functionalism were rendered less meaningful by the reverberations of political conflicts inside the United States and across the globe. Economic-determinist and linear evolutionist readings of Marxism also lost any appeal they once held for most Western intellectuals. Meanwhile, however, different versions of Marxist ideas, stressing class consciousness, historical process, and the roles of varying cultural and political structures, became attractive to

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younger scholars looking for ways to criticize social scientific orthodoxies. Not only did the historically oriented Western Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci gain enormously in visibility and popularity, Marx's own writings were also selectively reexamined to plumb their resources for handling issues of consciousness and political struggle.⁹

During this same period, the ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville and (especially) Max Weber have also sparked renewed interest for students of social change and comparative social structures. Simply put, people have turned to the particular works or readings of classical sociologists that could best help them reintroduce concerns for socio-cultural variety, temporal process, concrete events, and the dialectic of meaningful actions and structural determinants into macrosociological explanations and research. For these purposes, the methodological ideas and historical works of Max Weber are especially relevant, so it is hardly surprising that the small coterie of sociologists who, in 1982 and 1983, launched a new section of the American Sociological Association dedicated to fostering Comparative and Historical Sociology devoted their early efforts to reconsiderations of themes from Weber's scholarly corpus.

Are Revivals of the Classics the Essence?

If reconsiderations of Weber were the essence of the increasing interest in historically oriented theorizing and research in contemporary sociology, this interest could be treated simply as an intellectual revival. The renewed interest in Weber's historical writings could be seen as accompanied by, and furthering, a de-Parsonizing of our understanding of Weber's ideas, essentially the kind of project to which Anthony Giddens and Randall Collins have devoted significant efforts.¹⁰ We could speak of an era of Weberian historical interpretation taking over the baton of macrosociological explanation from Durkheim and Parsons, on the one hand, and snatching it from the waiting arms of various neo-Marxists, on the other. And that would be that.

There are able commentators who advocate this way of understanding what the spreading interest in historical work in sociology is all about.¹¹ Others would respond to this identification of historical sociology with Weber's legacy by constructing Durkheimian or Marxian historical sociologies as alternatives or supplements.¹² In my view historical sociology is better understood as a continuing, ever-renewed tradition of research devoted to understanding the nature and effects of large-scale structures and fundamental processes of change. Compelling desires to answer

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historically grounded questions, not classical theoretical paradigms, are the driving force. To be sure, there have always been, and always will be, sociologists who do not ask or seek to answer historically grounded, macroscopic questions. Although none can afford to ignore structural and historical contexts, all sociologists need not investigate directly matters such as the origins and development of capitalism and nation-states; the spread of ideologies and religions; the causes and consequences of revolutions; and the relationship of ongoing economic and geopolitical transformations to the fates of communities, groups, and types of organizations. Moreover, there certainly have been moments when many scholars interested in macroscopic questions attempted antihistorical modes of addressing them. The brief credibility of Parsonian structural functionalism as an all-encompassing theory of society was one such moment.

But the realities of modern social life are so fundamentally rooted in ongoing conflicts and changes in communities, regions, nations, and the world as a whole, that sociologists have never stopped—and will never want to stop—fashioning fresh theories and interpretations that highlight the variety of social structures, the epochal constraints and alternative possibilities for change, the intersections of structural contexts and group experiences, and the unfolding of events and actions over time. Indeed, historically oriented analyses in sociology are bound to be especially attractive in periods such as our own, when for the world as a whole—for the leaders and victors in earlier phases of economic development and geopolitical conflict, as well as for the peripheral and newly industrializing nations—there are such obvious uncertainties about the continuation of existing trends and relationships into the future. Broadly conceived historical analyses promise possibilities for understanding how past patterns and alternative trajectories might be relevant, or irrelevant, for present choices. Thus excellent historical sociology can actually speak more meaningfully to real-life concerns than narrowly focused empiricist studies that pride themselves on their “policy relevance.”¹³

Research Agendas in Historical Sociology

The classical questions and answers of Weber, Marx, Tocqueville, Durkheim, and others naturally live on in the ongoing enterprise of historical sociology. This happens partly because the founders' answers to the important questions they asked about their own and earlier times were not always correct or complete. Even more it happens

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because the ideas of the founders rightly continue to serve as fruitful benchmarks for much sociological theorizing. Yet it is a sign of the continuing vitality of historical sociology in the twentieth century, right down to the present, that new questions and ideas, beyond the letter if not the spirit of the founders, are always being addressed by sociologists with comparable vision and will to understand social structures and transformations from the vantage points of their own times and places.

The nine scholars whose working lives and major projects constitute the focus of the chapters in this book all operate on terrain shared with the founders. Most of the major works of the scholars discussed here, from Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* and *French Rural History* to Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, and from Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* to Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System*, continue to explore the antecedents, nature, and consequences of the original capitalist and democratic revolutions of Europe.¹⁴ The specific problems addressed, however, are often distinct from those of the founders, and fresh answers are certainly offered.

English industrialization, the French Revolution, and German bureaucratization were, one might say, the events and processes that preoccupied the founders. Their basic shared concern was to conceptualize the distinctiveness and dynamics of capitalist industrialism and democracy in contrast to other orders of social life. Among the scholars surveyed here, Reinhard Bendix, Perry Anderson, E. P. Thompson, and Charles Tilly draw both their questions and their answers almost entirely from this classical agenda. Bendix and Anderson build on Weber's arguments about bureaucratization and transformations of political regimes. Thompson reworks the quintessential Marxian ideas about industrialization and the formation of the working class in England. Tilly probes the tensions between the explanations offered by Durkheim and Marx for the changing forms of group conflict that accompanied European revolutions, statemaking, and capitalistic development. Even so, each of these contemporary historical sociologists offers new blends of, or counterpoints to, the classical arguments. And each deploys his own distinctive methods for mediating between theories and historical facts.

Beyond these four, the twentieth-century scholars break new ground in their questions as well as arguments and ways of arriving at them. Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* deals not only with the establishment of capitalist market society in England but also with the national and international crises of the market order from the early to

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middle twentieth century. Marc Bloch's historical agenda focuses mainly on European and French feudal patterns as worthy of explanation in their own right. In three very different ways, S. N. Eisenstadt, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Barrington Moore, Jr., seek to encompass and explain in the same conceptual terms broad swatches of non-Western along with Western history. Eisenstadt's most important book, *The Political Systems of Empires*, analyzes the emergence and long-term fates of historical bureaucratic empires throughout world history. Wallerstein explores the origins, structure, history, and projected future demise of the capitalist world economy. Moore probes the patterns and moral significance of the alternative paths that agrarian states have traversed into the modern world. These grand subject matters have pushed Eisenstadt, Wallerstein, and Moore well beyond Marx's and (even) Weber's strategies of using the non-West mainly to validate by contrast arguments about the special dynamism of the West.

The chapters to come take very seriously the particular problems explored by the nine scholars, for their arguments and methods certainly cannot be understood apart from the questions they address and their individual reasons for caring to ask those questions. So the authors probe their subjects in different ways, not only because authors write from their own individual points of view, but more fundamentally because each major historical sociologist is (or was) concerned with a distinctive set of problems, forming his own special lifelong research agenda. Still, some important common themes emerge, telling us about the special qualities shared by these scholars and the similar theoretical and methodological challenges all of them have faced in their research and writing.

Vantage Points for Thinking Big

In the twentieth century, the Western social sciences have been centered in universities and professional associations. Both research and teaching have been, as they say, institutionalized in an array of specialized disciplines, and often in very narrowly or technically focused compartments within those academic disciplines. Even so, major unspecialized works by every single one of the nine men examined here have been celebrated in the institutional worlds of academic social science. Professional associations have awarded their highest prizes to books by Bendix, Eisenstadt, Anderson, Wallerstein, and Moore, and both graduate and undergraduate reading lists have, again and again, given pride of place to Bloch's *Feudal Society*, Polanyi's *The Great Trans-*

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formation, Eisenstadt's *The Political Systems of Empires*, Bendix's *Work and Authority in Industry*, Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, Tilly's *The Vendée* and many theoretical or quantitative articles, Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System*, and Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

What is more, many of these scholars have sought and attained great institutional influence within academia: Bloch helped to found the internationally prestigious French *Annales* school and attained the most coveted prize in French academic life, a professorial chair in Paris. Eisenstadt holds Germanic sway at the Hebrew University, has been visiting professor at the Western world's most prestigious universities, and participates in every important international conference conceivably related to his breathtakingly broad interests. Bendix, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, is honored by established sociologists, political scientists, and historians alike, and gained sufficient professional visibility to be elected president of the American Sociological Association. Tilly has attracted large amounts of research funding over the years, built a major research center at the University of Michigan, and serves as a professional gatekeeper in three or four disciplines. Wallerstein enjoys broad international prestige comparable to Eisenstadt's, and has managed to embody his world-system perspective in a research center and journal at the State University of New York at Binghamton, in yearly conferences at revolving university locations around the United States, and in a section of the American Sociological Association that controls several sessions for every year's annual meeting.

Despite these evidences of mainstream academic and professional attainments, every one of our nine scholars has been in some sense marginal or opposed to orthodox academic ways of doing things. Their marginality or opposition has been intimately related, as both cause and effect, to their ability to ask bigger questions than most social scientists ever dream of posing. In turn, asking big questions has led them toward the various blends of general theorizing, totalizing or comparative historical analysis, and sensitivity to contextual details and temporal processes that make their scholarly achievements so compelling.

The connection between genuinely oppositional marginality to mainstream academia and asking big questions and devising unorthodox ways to pursue the answers is most obvious—and certainly most clearly highlighted in the subsequent chapters—for those scholars who have also been politically engaged leftists. Karl Polanyi was and Perry Anderson, E. P. Thompson, and Immanuel Wallerstein all are committed socialists of one variety or another, although, significantly, none of

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these four has been permanently associated with any established Communist or Socialist party. Polanyi, according to Block and Somers, wrote *The Great Transformation*, "the book that brought together all of the themes of a lifetime" for this humanist socialist, as a "conscious political intervention . . . to influence the shape of the post-World War II world."¹⁵ And Polanyi completed this masterwork *before* he moved into a more specialized academic niche in economic anthropology.

Anderson has not pursued a regular academic career in any sense. As Fulbrook and I stress, he has formulated his "totalizing" questions and answers in historical sociology in close conjunction with his effort to reorient revolutionary socialist intellectual life in Britain through the *New Left Review*. Similarly, as Kay Timberger elaborates, E. P. Thompson did not become a historian through graduate work at a university. He has conceived all of his major scholarly projects not in the course of a regular professorial career but through involvements in adult worker education and the Communist Historians' Group of 1946–56, followed by participation in the British New Left after his break with the Communist Party, and culminating, now, in his plunge back into the crusade for nuclear disarmament. In general, this trajectory has left Thompson free to pursue intensely felt, politically relevant subjects with polemic gusto and insouciance, defying narrow academic conventions. *The Making of the English Working Class* reflects this freedom in both its grand design and its detailed arguments.

Unlike Polanyi, Anderson, and Thompson, Immanuel Wallerstein *has* pursued an academic career; thus his situation is perhaps the most revealing tale of marginality among the leftists. Wallerstein's intention in conceptualizing and studying the modern world system of capitalism has been, Ragin and Chirot maintain, fundamentally political. They tell the fascinating story of Wallerstein's step-by-step movement away from modernization theory and empiricism, toward the more holistic and historical approach embodied in the world-system perspective. For his Ph.D. and his first books, Wallerstein studied the early hopes and later travails of decolonized African nations; thereafter he experienced some of the most intense battles of the American student rebellion of the 1960s. Simultaneously, he moved from the role of loyal Columbia graduate student into the uncomfortable position of a young associate professor who (from the point of view of the Columbia establishment) sympathized too much with student New Leftists. Thus, at the very intellectual juncture when he arrived at his vision of the world system, launched his own major historical projects, and "set himself the task of becoming the academic spokesman and promoter of the

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vision of world history that lay behind the Third World's revolutionary ideologies," Wallerstein's collegial life at Columbia became "increasingly unpleasant" and he relinquished his tenure there. Since 1975, the perhaps inevitable relationship between Wallerstein's politically leftist big thinking and his marginality to the most orthodox centers of academic and professional life has been aptly expressed by his semiperipheral empire building through the Braudel Center at Binghamton and through the Political Economy of the World System Section of the American Sociological Association.

In some ways, the issue of how distance is gained from academic orthodoxies becomes even more interesting when we turn from those scholars who have explicitly combined scholarship and leftist politics to those whose extraacademic involvements, while often important (think of Bloch's work in the Resistance), have come in forms more acceptable to their respective national academic establishments. Participating in government service or military activities during legitimate national emergencies, or engaging in intellectual journalism and the giving of speeches on issues of current interest to educated publics are, after all, entirely respectable forms of academic political involvement. No doubt they are conducive to a certain breadth of scholarly vision, but they hardly give us a sufficient view of the special critical vantage points attained by Bloch, Eisenstadt, Bendix, Tilly, and Moore. Varying factors, it seems to me, came into play for each of these scholars.

The careers of Marc Bloch and Charles Tilly reveal the special concomitants of unusual thinking for two scholars who eventually became very successful shapers of collective research agendas at the centers of established academia. Bloch finally "arrived" at a professorship in Paris, where he had originally received his graduate education. But his highly unorthodox ideas about methods of historiography, and his unusually cosmopolitan and transnational sense of the scope appropriate to the study of medieval Europe, germinated while this man from a Jewish family with roots in Alsace was a professor at the University of Strasbourg, an Alsatian university considered quite peripheral in the French system, as it had been earlier in the German system. Bloch, moreover, drew (selectively and cautiously, as Chirot shows) on sociological ideas to broaden his agenda of historical questions and explanations.

Decades later in the United States, as Lynn Hunt skillfully argues, Charles Tilly would fashion an unusually broad and temporally deep agenda for his historical sociology by simultaneously using archival methods to do French history and quantitative statistical techniques to test sociological hypotheses and develop an innovative theory of collec-