

Vision and Method in Historical Sociology

Some of the most important questions of the social sciences in the twentieth century have been posed by scholars pursuing investigations at the intersections of social theory and history viewed on a grand scale. What research agendas have these investigators followed? How have their basic assumptions about society, history, and the purposes of scholarship informed the questions they have asked, and the kinds of answers they have offered? How have they used various sources of evidence about the past to pursue case studies or comparisons among groups, periods, nations, or civilizations? These are some of the issues addressed by the essays collected in *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*.

The nine core essays of the book focus on the careers and contributions on nine major scholars: Marc Bloch, Karl Polanyi, S. N. Eisenstadt, Reinhard Bendix, Perry Anderson, E. P. Thompson, Charles Tilly, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Barrington Moore, Jr. These essays, written by younger scholars who are themselves involved in historical sociology or social history, convey a vivid sense of the vision and values each major scholar brings (or brought) to his work. In addition, the essays analyze and evaluate the research designs and methods used in the most important works of each scholar.

The 1970s and 1980s are proving to be a period of rapid growth and renewal for historical sociology. The introduction and conclusion to this volume discuss the long-running tradition of historically grounded research in sociology, while the conclusion also provides a detailed discussion and comparison of three recurrent strategies for bringing historical evidence and theoretical ideas to bear upon one another. Finally, an annotated bibliography on methods of comparative and historical sociology is also offered as an aid to ongoing research and teaching.

Informative, thought-provoking, and unusually practical, *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* offers fascinating and relevant reading to sociologists, social historians, historically oriented political economists and anthropologists – and, indeed, to anyone who wants to learn more about the ideas and methods of some of the best-known scholars in the modern social sciences.

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*Edited by Theda Skocpol
Harvard University*



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FOR OUR TEACHERS, INCLUDING OUR STUDENTS

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Preface

On a gorgeously colorful October weekend in 1979, about a dozen historical sociologists, along with a couple of sociologically acclimated social historians, gathered in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We assembled for three intensive days of discussion about the ideas and methods embodied in the work of major historical sociologists, including several—Reinhard Bendix, Barrington Moore, Jr., Charles Tilly, and Immanuel Wallerstein—who had been the teachers of conference participants. Everyone, including myself as the organizer of this Conference on Methods of Historical Social Analysis, approached the event with considerable skepticism about its likelihood of success.

Papers had been prepared and circulated in advance. Each author had been asked to probe the major works of a single senior scholar, considering the nature of the questions posed; the ways in which theoretical ideas and historical evidence were brought to bear upon one another in answering those questions; the use of comparisons across historical cases; and, more generally, the strategies each scholar had devised to design historical investigations and communicate them to relevant audiences. Although the papers were to focus on sets of works by individuals, they were also supposed to avoid overpersonalizing the issues. Neither biography nor sheer intellectual history was the aim, for I had commissioned these essays to further methodological reflection among a growing network of young historical sociologists. The idea was to examine closely—and compare—the methodologies used in excellent, substantive examples of research and writing by important scholars not already so remote or canonized as Max Weber, Alexis de Tocqueville, or Karl Marx. The payoff, I hoped, would come not only in the edited collection of essays to follow the conference but also in the greater self-consciousness we participants would bring to our own ongoing scholarship—and, perhaps even more important, to our teaching of the growing

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numbers of still younger sociologists who now undertake research in historical sociology.

But would it work? On the eve of the conference, it was not at all clear. The draft essays were the usual mixed bag of conference papers: some very strong; others weak or not to the point; and one (a crucial paper) canceled at the last minute and therefore missing altogether. More worrisome still were other dangers. It looked as if conference participants might fall to quarreling on behalf of their respective teachers. We all wondered whether each session might not revolve simply around assessments of the individual scholars' substantive arguments. Indeed, from the moment of his arrival, one especially articulate participant repeatedly proclaimed that "historical sociology has no methods!"

In the event, all of the possible troubles happened to some degree, yet on the whole the conference was an exhilarating and intense intellectual experience—so agreed even the most skeptical participants in its aftermath. Discussants in each session did a beautiful job of criticizing each paper and of using its materials to bring out larger points about the purposes, the successes, and the limitations of the work of the major scholar. Telling comparisons were made of each scholar's approach to that of others. Methodologies were indeed clarified—with "methodology" understood not as a set of neutral techniques, but as the interrelations of substantive problems, sources of evidence, and larger assumptions about society, history, and the purposes of scholarship. Session discussions ranged widely and built on one another. After the conference, I was able to provide detailed advice on revisions to the authors, and many of them worked quickly to prepare qualitatively better essays out of the insights generated in the collective discussions.

During the last few years, in the span between the 1979 conference and the completion of this book, several sophisticated commentaries on methods of historical sociology have appeared. Arthur Stinchcombe's *Theoretical Methods in Social History*, Charles Tilly's *As Sociology Meets History*, and Philip Abrams's posthumously published *Historical Sociology* all help to define what is distinctive about historically oriented sociological research and open for debate a whole range of issues about the uses of theory, evidence, and analytic devices, including comparisons. What is more, they do this by focusing to significant degrees on current research practice, rather than dwelling solely on nineteenth-century classical authors. Had these fine books already been available at the time I conceived the plan for this volume I might not have seen a need for it. By now, however, I am glad this book has happened, for

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its chapters add new perspectives to the still nascent reflective literature about the ways in which historical sociology has been – and could be – practiced in our time.

Because this collection is organized around the work of individuals, a sense comes through of the vision and values each scholar personally brings, or brought, to his work. Surely, I now realize, this is all to the good. It conveys what a serious business this kind of scholarship can be – compelling enough to claim whole lifetimes of effort from people who really want to understand the shaping of significant aspects of the modern world and its antecedents. Besides, methodological discussions all too often portray research in an antiseptic, depersonalized manner, belying the obvious and consequential truth that scholarship is always done by real people with axes to grind and projects to pursue.

The volume also has a personal flavor to it in a second sense: Each chapter reveals one or two younger scholars characterizing and evaluating the work of an older scholar. (The age differences are, of course, average and relative. A bit plaintively, Charles Tilly queried, “How did Dietrich sneak into the youngsters’ tent?,” pointing out that he and Dietrich Rueschemeyer are the same age. Moreover, Perry Anderson is chronologically and generationally the peer of some of the authors in the volume.) Naturally, each chapter embodies a distinctive point of view, influenced by the kind of work and the aspirations for scholarship that its author brings to the task. The arguments would certainly have been different had different authors been involved, and this suggests an obvious point worth underlining: In no sense are these definitive evaluations of the achievements of Marc Bloch, Karl Polanyi, S. N. Eisenstadt, Reinhard Bendix, Perry Anderson, E. P. Thompson, Charles Tilly, Immanuel Wallerstein, or Barrington Moore, Jr. They are simply genuine, thoughtful discussions by people who themselves do historical sociology. Reading and comparing these essays ought to inspire not fixed judgments but reexaminations of the important works discussed and, above all, new efforts to practice historical sociology at the level of excellence achieved by every one of the major scholars surveyed here.

A word of explanation is in order about the particular scholars selected for discussion in this book. Some readers may think that major works by sociologists such as Seymour Martin Lipset, Kai Erikson, Gerhard Lenski, Joseph Ben-David, Alvin Gouldner, Robert Bellah, Morris Janowitz, Daniel Bell, and others might entitle them to a place in a volume about historical sociology. Others will wonder why, if nonsociologists by discipline were included, Marc Bloch was chosen

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rather than say, Fernand Braudel, or Karl Polanyi and E. P. Thompson rather than any number of other equally relevant scholars. In response, I can only admit that I chose the scholars included here partly by guessing that Eisenstadt, Bendix, Moore, Wallerstein, and Tilly are so prominently and automatically identified as major historical sociologists—rather than as political sociologists, theorists, or sociologists of religion and so forth—that they simply had to be in the book. Beyond that, I proceeded by selecting other figures, including nonsociologists, whose works could be fruitfully compared to the works of the other scholars, and who have so positively influenced younger historical sociologists that I could readily find excellent authors willing to write engagingly about them. In short, beyond the “indispensable” five, I mostly let the willingness of good authors to come forward determine the four additional scholars to be included in a book that, for reasons of length, needed no more than nine core chapters. The result, I believe, is a set of essays that complement one another in many fascinating ways. But I will not pretend to comprehensiveness, or try to disguise a certain degree of arbitrariness in deciding which historical sociologists and other, sociologically relevant, historical social analysts to include and which, by default, to omit.

In addition to the nine chapters on the work of the scholars chosen for inclusion here, the introductory and concluding chapters discuss the long-standing tradition of historically grounded research in sociology and identify alternative strategies for bringing historical evidence and theoretical ideas to bear upon one another. These research strategies continue to be used to address a wide range of significant problems in what is proving to be a golden period of historical sociology in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* looks not only to past accomplishments but also to the present and future of an energetic and growing set of endeavors. An Annotated Bibliography on Methods of Comparative and Historical Sociology is likewise offered as an aid to ongoing research and pedagogy.

The conference that laid the basis for this volume was partly funded by an advance from Cambridge University Press, partly by a small grant from the Millard Fillmore Fund, and partly by a Problems of the Discipline Grant from the American Sociological Association. The authors and I are indebted to these funding sources for their support, and we also appreciate the editorial help and patience of Susan Allen-Mills at the New York office of Cambridge University Press. The following participants in the 1979 conference made many helpful contributions:

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Victoria Bonnell, Walter Goldfrank, Bruce Johnson, Michael Hechter, and Jonathan Wiener. During the time the book was being prepared, I benefited greatly from stays at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. David Brain at Harvard University did library research for this project at the time of the 1979 conference, and during 1982–83 Elisabeth Clemens at the University of Chicago provided skillful editorial assistance and made useful suggestions about themes to be covered in the Introduction and Conclusion. Bill Skocpol helped in countless ways from the intellectual to the practical. Further acknowledgments are recorded just before the notes accompanying each part of the book. Altogether, many people contributed to the completion of this project, and we are grateful to every one of them.

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