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Social History and Historical Sociology: Contrasts and Complementarities

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OVER THE TEN YEARS of its existence, the Social Science History Association has been a meeting place for groups in rebellion against the dominant orthodoxies of their disciplines. Thus it is fitting that an SSHA panel should assess the accomplishments and relationship of "social history" and "historical sociology," two movements that have grown up as critiques of formerly dominant orientations in (respectively) the disciplines of history and sociology.

Olivier's Zunz's book, *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History* (1985), synthesizes the accomplishments of many social historians over the last two decades and suggests promising directions for the future development of social history. Especially in its concluding editorial essay, my book *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Skocpol, 1984), analogously examines the recent accomplishments and current potentials of historical sociology. Juxtaposing these two books can tell us a great deal about the different preoccupations, strengths, and weaknesses of social history and historical sociology. This juxtaposition can also help us to identify the shared concerns of these movements, and the

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areas in which future theoretical, methodological, and substantive dialogues between social historians and historical sociologists are likely to prove most fruitful. It will become clear as this essay proceeds that I think social history and historical sociology are likely to remain somewhat distinct enterprises. Nevertheless, I also believe that they can and must continue their efforts as self-consciously *complementary* endeavors.

DISCIPLINARY CONTEXTS AND THE CONTRASTING PREOCCUPATIONS OF SOCIAL HISTORY AND HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

Both social history and historical sociology are identified with the post-World War II transitions and—especially—with the reverberations of the 1960s in their respective disciplines. As Olivier Zunz argues (1985: 3–4), the growth of social history was prompted in part by the "demographic surge of historians" produced by the postwar baby boom and expansion of western universities. And the young historians attracted to social history "actively participated in the new pluralist vision of the 1960s. . . . By devising methods which allowed them to build judgements from thousands of observations of ordinary people, they could investigate groups heretofore ignored or at best misunderstood." Similarly, I point out (Skocpol, 1984: 3–4) that in sociology between the 1950s and the 1980s, "the reverberations of political conflicts inside the United States and across the globe" led increasing numbers of younger sociologists, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, to question static or evolutionist structure-functionalism or Marxism, and to "reintroduce concerns for sociocultural variety, temporal process, concrete events, and the dialectic of meaningful actions and structural determinants into macrosociological explanations and research."

But for all that social history and historical sociology have been similarly associated with postwar transitions and the coming of age of "the generation of the 1960s," these scholarly movements have also been profoundly marked by the quite different disciplinary orthodoxies against which they rebelled. Looking back at the emergence of these two tendencies, we can see that work in the human sciences remains deeply embedded in disciplinary con-

texts even when intradisciplinary rebels self-consciously turn for fresh ideas to one another's disciplines.

Social history, as Charles Tilly underlines (1985: 13) in his contribution to the Zunz volume, "grew up in opposition to political history, defined in terms of statecraft and national politics." Although G. M. Trevelyan's pronouncement (1944: preface) that social history "might be defined as the history of a people with the politics left out" is obviously an exaggeration, it is nevertheless true that social historians have rebelled against what Tilly calls "narrow" political history. Social historians have opposed a vision of historiography as the use of archival holdings of individuals' papers to reconstruct detailed chronological narratives of national politics and diplomacy in terms of the maneuverings of elites with one another. In place of this, social historians have offered a "populist" vision of historiography, premised on the notion that not merely elites but also large numbers of ordinary people experience and make historical events and long-term trends. To make good on this vision, social historians have exploited new sources of evidence, such as police and court records and parish registers, in order to construct "collective biographies" portraying the experiences of large numbers of non-elite individuals, sometimes with little concern for events or chronology. Moreover, social historians have self-consciously borrowed explanatory approaches and new research methods from the social sciences.

The explanatory approaches applied to their materials by social historians have included Durkheimian ideas about societal modernization, along with Marxian ideas about modes of production and class conflict. In the realm of methods borrowed from the social sciences, the use of computers, as Zunz writes (1985: 4) "has allowed social historians to redefine the concept of an archive and to make sophisticated connections between sources not achievable by traditional methods." Typically, however, social historians have relied upon linear statistical techniques applied to data about aggregates of individuals. In the disciplinary context of history, this mode of quantification has seemed "revolutionary" enough.

Meanwhile, fighting on their own disciplinary turf, historical sociologists have been in rebellion against the twin orthodoxies (to use terms from C. Wright Mills, 1959) of "grand theory" and "abstracted empiricism" that dominated sociology until the late 1960s.

Against the abstraction and the timelessness of grand theory—and especially in opposition to Durkheimian-style modernization theory, as reworked by Parsonsian structure-functionalists—historically minded sociologists have reintroduced the variety, conflict, and processes of concrete histories into macroscopic accounts of social change. Moreover, historical sociologists have opposed the fetish of much of empirical sociology for statistical quantification—a fetish, it sometimes seems, for quantification at *any* cost in terms of the significance of questions posed in research and the validity of answers considered. Against any rigid preference for quantification—especially defined as the application of linear statistical methods to synchronous, aggregate data—historical sociologists have insisted that their discipline recognize the usefulness of a broader array of evidence and methods, including new kinds of quantitative techniques sensitive to temporal processes or suitable for analyzing organizations and networks rather than the characteristics of individuals (see Abbott, 1983). Yet most historical sociologists have been nonquantitative or even "anti-quantitative" in their orientation. They have imported historical methods as well as findings into sociology, including archival methods associated with traditional historiography.

Indeed, although historical sociologists have often employed sources of evidence similar to those used by social historians (e.g., Bonnell, 1983; Chirot, 1976; McMichael, 1984; Traugott, 1985; Zelizer, 1985), many of them have also made use of "secondary" evidence from already published historiographical works (e.g., Castles, 1985; Fulbrook, 1983; Skocpol, 1979; Starr, 1982), including narrative political histories that might be considered "old fashioned" by social historians. Yet this makes perfect sense when one realizes that one of the major missions of historical sociology has been to rework traditional macrosociological ideas about large-scale structures and medium-to long-term patterns of social change. For this purpose, it has been quite useful to debunk the impersonal functional universals of structural-functional modernization theory, or the inexorable logics of economic-determinist Marxism, with the aid of narrative histories of the varied and nonlinear conflicts and transformations experienced by putatively "modernizing" countries.

In sum, social historians have rebelled against narrative political history and have gained leverage against it with the aid of

sociological concepts and methods, including modernization theories and aggregate statistical techniques. Simultaneously, historical sociologists have rebelled against grand theory and quantitative empiricism, sometimes drawing upon historical works and approaches that their social history counterparts would consider just as "old fashioned" as the historical sociologists consider some of the concepts and techniques used by the social historians. If, therefore, social history and historical sociology seem in some ways like trains passing in opposite directions in the night, the reason lies in the disciplinary orthodoxies each has sought to criticize and surpass.

By now, in the mid-1980s, both social history and historical sociology are robust, maturing tendencies—and their practitioners are, not surprisingly, seeking to integrate their concerns and accomplishments with the enduring proclivities of their respective disciplines. In part, Olivier Zunz's collection and my own can both be read as attempts to situate the tendencies they represent in a more comfortable relationship to their home disciplines. Thus, the integrative themes emphasized in the two books are rather traditional for historians and sociologists, respectively. *Reliving the Past* is organized around times and places, surveying the findings and debates of social history for western Europe, the United States, pre-1900 Latin America, Africa, and "modern" China. Obviously, synthetic works of narrative political historiography have long been produced within similar geotemporal frameworks. Similarly, my *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* invokes two ancient tribal fetishes for sociologists: first, the ideal of continuing and improving upon "the classical tradition" of sociological scholarship handed down from Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Tocqueville and, secondly, the ideal of having regularly recognizable and teachable "methods" through which ongoing research can be done. If Olivier Zunz's book is, in effect, saying that the work of social historians, despite its new departures in methods and subject matter, can be integrated into history's traditional time and place frameworks, then my book is analogously saying that the work of historical sociologists, despite its challenges to the grand theory and abstracted empiricism of the 1950s, can now be integrated into sociology's longstanding core concern with "theory" and "methods."[1]

Thus, in both their initial rebellious phases and their current

attempts to become more respectable, social history and historical sociology have been profoundly shaped by the disciplinary contexts of history and sociology, respectively. So I have argued thus far. But what does this set of observations tell us that we as "social science historians" should care to know? It tells us, I think, why social historians and historical sociologists often feel that one another's doings are a bit odd or old fashioned. Shall we conclude, however, that the prospects for cumulative interdisciplinary achievements are poor, because social historians remain historians and historical sociologists remain sociologists in so many basic ways?

I do not intend any such pessimistic message. In truth, both social historians and historical sociologists have significantly reoriented their disciplines, or at least major sectors of them, so that history and sociology now incline more toward one another than they did in the 1950s, making interdisciplinary conversations more meaningful for everyone. Moreover, social historians and historical sociologists have now done enough research that they can reflect together on the ways that their respective strengths and weaknesses to date have been complementary. Likewise, some genuinely overlapping tendencies and concerns can be identified as the basis for common efforts in the immediate future.

THE COUNTERBALANCING STRENGTHS OF SOCIAL HISTORY AND HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

As a leading contributor to both social history and historical sociology, Charles Tilly (1981, 1984, 1985) has done the best job of identifying the juncture at which the two movements can meet—and of exhorting both sets of scholars to orient their research agendas toward that juncture. On the one hand, as in his contribution to *Reliving the Past*, Tilly speaks to social historians. He argues that social history is not fruitfully understood as anything so grandiose as the historiography of all past social relationships. Instead, Tilly insists (1985: 31) that the tasks of social historians are "(1) documenting large structural changes," in particular the development of capitalism and the growth of national states, "(2) reconstructing the experiences of ordinary people in the course of those changes, and (3) connecting the two."

Surveying the achievements of social historians of Europe in particular, Tilly points to various ways in which the research of social historians has respecified the forms and periodizations of capital accumulation and statemaking as major structural transformations. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that social historians, armed with new sources of evidence and the techniques of "collective biography," have done best at documenting the experiences of ordinary people, and he concludes (Tilly, 1985: 33) that social historians have so far met the challenge of connecting structural transformations and people's experiences with "less imagination" than they have brought to the first two tasks. This is because European social historians have too often "relied on crude correlations: dividing the entire population into several rough categories to establish that their social experiences differed, using local populations as proxies for distinct social groups, or pointing to a broad correspondence between the fluctuations in time of the measured social experience and of a large structural change" (Tilly, 1985: 33).

When addressing sociologists, on the other hand, Tilly shades his exhortations and assessments in a slightly different way—but with the goal of prodding historically oriented sociologists, from a different starting place, toward the same basic research agenda as that delineated for social historians. In *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, Tilly (1984) argues that sociologists should not theorize about "social change in general." Rather they should recognize specific epochally bounded structural transformations as basic since 1500—namely capitalist development and national state formation. Sociologists should become more historically oriented, in order to study and seek to explain the varying interconnections of capitalist development and nation-state formation with one another, as well as the connections of these structural transformations with the changing aims and forms of "collective action" by affected populations. Tilly also exhorts sociologists to stop thinking of "societies" as reified wholes, or as "social" relations with politics and the state left out. In this sense, he reflects an already well-established tendency in historical macrosociology to "bring the state back in" as an organizational structure and as a potentially autonomous actor (Skocpol, 1985; Tilly, 1975). Finally, Tilly (1984: 105–115) also criticizes otherwise con-

genial historical macrosociologists like me for ignoring the kinds of detailed local and regional variations in popular experience that social historians have specialized in documenting.

By thus looking over Tilly's shoulder as he speaks to social historians, on the one hand, and historical sociologists, on the other, we gain a good sense of the accomplishments and relative lacunae that each set of scholars brings to the potentially shared agenda that Tilly has so ably identified. Social historians have excelled at bringing the grand structural transformations of Western and world history down to the ground, reworking our sense of exactly when and how socioeconomic and political relations have been variously transformed, and helping us to understand how ordinary people in particular understood, reacted to, and to some degree created those changes. At the same time, social historians have sometimes left politics and states out of their investigations, or else pushed them to the periphery. And social historians have often downplayed the situations and outlooks of elites, so as to overestimate and excessively romanticize the role of popular groups in bringing about social change.

Moreover, as Tilly indicates, the methodological preference of many social historians for collective biography, and for studies of single groups or communities, makes it hard to pin down causal arguments about the connections between structural transformations and group experiences. Often it seems that social history proliferates descriptive specializations, adding divisions by groups —such as "peasants" or "women"—or by areas of life—such as "the family"—to traditional historiographical divisions by time and place. The end result can be to make it harder than ever for scholars and their audiences to achieve integrated understandings of history.

Historical sociologists, meanwhile, have excelled at arguing with preexisting explanatory frameworks about social change and collective action. Keeping their eyes on the big picture even as they bring the variety and detail of history to bear, historical sociologists have been the ones to teach us that national state formation rivals urbanization, industrialization, and (more fundamentally) capitalist development as a "basic structural transformation" in the creation of the modern world. Historical sociologists, moreover, have in the last fifteen years fundamentally reworked our understanding of the causes and forms of collective

action and revolutions (e.g., Bonnell, 1983; McAdam, 1982; Skocpol, 1979; Tilly, 1986; Traugott, 1985). They have developed new, historically grounded and sensitive analyses of such phenomena as working class formation (Katznelson, 1981, 1985; Katznelson and Zolberg, forthcoming), ethnic relations (Wilson, 1980; Lieberson, 1980), and the development of modern welfare states (Castles, 1978; Esping-Andersen, 1985; Flora and Heidenheimer, 1981; Orloff and Skocpol, 1984; Skocpol and Ikenberry 1983).

Nevertheless, historical sociologists have, like most social scientists before them, remained largely Western-centric in their theorizing and research. And they have not solved—or even, in many cases, adequately addressed—the problem of how to mediate between evidence of local and regional patterns and conclusions about national-level or international processes. Too often, historical sociologists have reified nation-states as arenas of research, even when nation-states are not legitimately the appropriate sites of analysis (as they are, for example, in studies of revolutions, which happen to entire states rather than to regions within them).

SHARED AGENDAS FOR THE FUTURE

If I have accurately summarized them, the strengths and weaknesses of social history and historical sociology are largely offsetting, and scholars in each enterprise could benefit from more dialogue with their counterparts—especially if they can pinpoint some genuinely shared research proclivities, where concerns are already converging. In general terms, Tilly has told us that convergence is likely to come in studies of *the relationships between* structural changes and concrete group experiences and activities —and I think this is fine as far as it goes. But it needs more substance. As a historical sociologist perusing *Reliving the Past*, I found indications of three ways in which many social historians and historical sociologists might already be coming together within the broad terms of this agenda. Let me discuss each in turn.

First, social historians and historical sociologists have been converging on what Tilly (1985: 18–19) calls "organizational realism," the recognition that the real units of research are not just simple aggregates of individuals, on the one hand, or reified totalities like "societies" or "social systems," on the other. Rather, *social rela-*

tionships are the key objects of research, as embodied in networks, communities, associations, or large-scale complex organizations. The best works in both social history and historical sociology already speak exclusively of such concrete, relational units. And it is through them that lived experiences and structural transformations meet. To the degree that social historians and historical sociologists can become jointly self-conscious about their laudable proclivity toward "organizational realism," they can ensure that their research endeavors are increasingly analytically complementary.

Second, social historians and historical sociologists seem to be converging on studies of state-society relations, or more generally, of the interrelations of social structures and political organization. Unquestionably, both the social bases of politics and the formation and social impacts of states and parties have been the prime substantive concerns of historical sociologists throughout the last two decades. Many of the works mentioned briefly or assessed at length in *Vision and Method* fall into this broad area. And I was struck by the convergence of several contributors to *Reliving the Past* on this theme. In addition to Tilly's essay on European social history, William Taylor's essay (1985) on Latin American social history makes an especially eloquent case for "connecting the state and society" as the most fruitful goal for future research in social history.

Taylor offers some conceptual and methodological pointers sure to be helpful for social historians and historical sociologists alike. Investigators should, he argues (1985: 147), treat the state not just as a set of formal offices, but as sets of relationships among all who "participated in some identifiable behavioral interaction connected with state actions." For example, in early Latin America, the state included, in addition to the hierarchy of royal officeholders, "local elites and priests (and their relatives), as well as semiformal brokers like notaries, supernumeraries, attorneys, messengers, and others who were personally connected to magistrates, priests, generals, and tax officials and who could influence these officials' decisions through advice or the timing of their own actions" (Taylor, 1985: 147). This basic relational approach to the state could, it seems to me, be applied with profit not only to the Latin American materials to which Taylor refers, but also to a full

range of other settings—from Imperial China to nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States. Were this common approach to state-society relations to be broadly applied by social historians and historical sociologists, the basis would be laid for powerful further analyses of relationships between lived experiences and structural transformations.

This brings me to my third and final point about the common agendas that social historians and historical sociologists might embrace for the future. The greatest progress in both endeavors will be achieved through explicitly *comparative* research, including the sort of "variation finding" across places and times that Tilly (1984: ch. 7, 1985) especially recommends, and the sort of macroscopic comparisons across nations or world-areas that I often advocate. Rigorous, fully comparative research is difficult to design and usually very demanding to carry out successfully. Nevertheless, social history and historical sociology alike must have much more comparative research to overcome their respective weaknesses. Thus social historians can get a handle on causal connections only to the degree that they break out of studies of single groups or communities in isolation. And historical sociologists can only arrive at good explanations of group actions and structural transformations when they look at more than single cases at a time, even if they stop far short of looking at huge numbers of cases at once. Both sets of scholars, moreover, need to be willing to cross traditional time and place boundaries to get at the connections among structural transformations and between structural changes and group experiences.

CONCLUSION

As research proceeds in both social history and historical sociology, differences will surely remain that are traceable to their disciplinary contexts. As the late Philip Abrams (1983: 194) wisely put it—even in the midst of a book arguing for the common purposes and methods of history and sociology—the "historian uses a rhetoric of close presentation (seeking to persuade in terms of a dense texture of detail) while the sociologist uses a rhetoric of perspective (seeking to persuade in terms of the elegant patterning of connections seen from a distance)." These differences will re-

main, ensuring that social historians will continue to have more to say about lived experiences, while historical sociologists will have more to say about structural transformations.

Yet to the extent that social historians and historical sociologists agree to work at Charles Tilly's basic agenda of connecting structural transformations and group experiences—and to the degree that they converge on organizational realism, on examinations of states and social structures, and on the use of wideranging comparisons across communities, regions, and nations—to this extent will social historians and historical sociologists have even more to say to one another. Then both groups will find themselves in a strong position to make good on Philip Abrams' faith about the convergence of history and sociology. At their best, Abrams (1983) argued, history and sociology are a common enterprise devoted to understanding the interplay in time of structural constraints and purposeful human activities. Probably history and sociology as entire disciplines will never converge. But there remains much room for social historians and historical sociologists —through their complementary efforts as well as their shared concerns—to further this appealing vision of a unified historical social science.

NOTE

1 It is worth underlining, however, that *Vision and Method* argues against dividing historical sociologists into "Weberian" versus "Marxist" versus "Durkheimian" camps, and it is also meant to discourage separate followings for contemporary paradigm-builders such as Wallerstein and Tilly. The conclusion to the book deliberately stresses the ways in which alternative methodological styles of historical sociology cut across theoretical orientations.

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