1 Like a Phoenix Rising

The post-war resurgence of historical sociology

Fifty years ago historical sociology was on the verge of extinction. Fascism and Stalinism were deeply hostile to its critical perspective. It remained weak throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. However, since then it has emerged from the ashes like a phoenix. By the 1970s and 1980s it was soaring high. Works by Immanuel Wallerstein, Michael Mann, Perry Anderson, Anthony Giddens and others display enormous ambition. Authors like Simon Schama and Paul Kennedy have found a massive audience. This mix of intellectual dynamism and popular attention gives historical sociology a great opportunity to make its mark on civic culture. Through their work, historical sociologists have the chance to give their fellow citizens knowledge and skills which may help them to assess competing views about what is 'possible' or 'impossible'. In brief, historical sociology can be a positive force for democratic citizenship.

At its best, historical sociology is rational, critical and imaginative. It looks for the mechanisms through which societies change or reproduce themselves. It seeks the hidden structures which frustrate some human aspirations while making others realizable, whether we appreciate it or not. This knowledge is well worth searching for. After all, it is useful to know, in any particular case, whether you are pushing against an open door or beating your head against a brick wall. One of historical sociology's objectives should be to distinguish between open doors and brick walls and discover whether, how, and with what consequences, walls may be removed.

The search for mechanism of social reproduction and transformation is closely related to a second concern. This is to explore the social preconditions and consequences of attempts to implement or impede such values as freedom, equality and justice. In the post-war period this

line of enquiry has involved leading practitioners such as T. H. Marshall, E. P. Thompson, Reinhard Bendix and Barrington Moore. Historical sociology is used to dealing with power and values.

We are now on the crest of the second long wave of historical sociology. The first wave began in the mid-eighteenth century, in Britain and France especially. Like the second, it was driven by the need to make sense of contemporary political events. These presented a formidable intellectual challenge. For example, the British crown was humiliated twice by its own subjects – during the Glorious Revolution and the American Revolution – yet it defeated absolutist France in India and Canada. An Ernest Gellner put it: 'A strong civil society, conjoined with a relatively weak or at least non-dominant central state, constituted a unit more powerful than more thoroughly centralized polities. The Enlightenment pondered the lesson' (1988, p. 115). The French Revolution, British industrialization, the American democratic experiment, and German nation-building all posed equally difficult problems in subsequent decades.

This first long wave – from Montesquieu and Hume, Tocqueville and Marx to Durkheim and Weber – finally crashed against the wall of totalitarianism, right and left, in the late 1920s. Regimes which 'knew' the future and invented the past rejected historical sociology. Most disastrously, German intellectual life was devastated. Its most creative people were driven underground or overseas. American society at that time was a harsh place of sanctuary for historical sociology. Big business and big science were the main repositories of values and knowledge in the leading capitalist democracy. They did not like foreign intellectuals offering competition. Anti-Semitism played its part, too.[1]

Historical sociology survived. The questions it had wrestled with did not go away. They were the central moral dilemmas of western liberalism. For example, Max Weber had worried about the nature of rationality and the relationship between justice and order. Such moral concerns were preserved through the 1930s and 1940s in the writings of European exiles like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the studies of Chicago sociologists like Robert Park, and the thoughts of evolutionist sociologists such as Morris Ginsberg working in the tradition of L. T. Hobhouse. During the 1950s, these issues became prominent once more, in the work of T. H. Marshall and Reinhard Bendix. By that time the second long wave was under way.[2]

Between 1958 and 1978, American doctoral dissertations in social history quadrupled. In two successive three-year periods during the 1970s, the number of articles with significant historical content in the *British Journal of Sociology* rose from nine (1973–5) to twenty-four (1976–8). *History Workshop*, *Social History*, and the Social History Society were all founded in 1976.[3] By the early 1980s, nearly a quarter of the articles in the main sociological journals had a historical dimension. Comparative Historical Sociology was one of the largest sections in the American Sociological Association. This was, it was said, 'the golden age of historical sociology' (Collins, 1985, p. 107).

What is historical sociology?

To oversimplify, historical sociology is the study of the past to find out how societies work and change. Some sociologists are 'non-historical': empirically, they neglect the past; conceptually, they consider neither the time dimension of social life, nor the historicity of social structure. Similarly, some historians are 'non-sociological': empirically, they neglect the way processes and structures vary between societies; conceptually, they consider neither the general properties of processes and structures, nor their relationships to acts and events. By contrast, historical sociology is carried out by historians and sociologists who investigate the mutual interpenetration of past and present, events and processes, acting and structuration. They try to marry conceptual clarification, comparative generalization and empirical exploration.

There is considerable internal specialization within this intellectual field. However: 'The important lines of difference all cross disciplines [and] . . . are substantive: they lie in the arguments put forward, which are inescapably, if not always systematically, theoretical' (Calhoun, 1987, p. 625). In fact, 'there simply are no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history – appropriately conceived' (Giddens, 1979, p. 230). History and sociology are 'one single intellectual adventure' (Braudel, 1980, p. 69). The two disciplines may be integrated 'as a single unified programme of analysis' (Abrams, 1982, p. xviii).

There is a danger that these assertions might simply become empty ideological slogans for a new academic vested interest. According to Charles Tilly, the institutionalization of historical sociology – 'fixing of a labeled speciality in sections of learned societies, journals, courses, a share of the job market' – could have a stultifying effect: 'first, because the "field" lacks intellectual unity and, by its very nature, will forever lack it; second, because institutionalization may well impede the spread of historical thinking to other parts of sociology. The other parts need that thinking badly' (1988, p. 709).

In fact, the danger identified by Tilly is far less serious than domination by a rigid orthodoxy, as occurred in the 1950s when historical sociology was held in check by the strait-jacket of structural functionalism. It broke free during the 1960s. By the 1970s and 1980s it was presenting ambitious world-views intended to fill the void left by the collapse of cold-war certainties. This book analyses that process through the work of scholars centrally involved. In the final chapter it also asks what kind of an intellectual field historical sociology has become, and how it might develop in the future.

The focus is on Britain and the United States. However, the *Annales* school of French historians is very relevant. Their work has become familiar and influential in the English-speaking world in the last few decades. Between the wars, the *Annalistes*, under the leadership of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, were 'marginal men and *heretics*' (Stoianovich, 1976, p. 14; emphasis in original).[4] Things improved after World War II. Following the student troubles of 1968, and the French university reforms of the early 1970s, the academic heirs of Bloch and Febvre acquired a solid base in the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. They became increasingly well-known across the English Channel and across the Atlantic.[5] Many of their works have since been translated into English, including Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society*, Braudel's work on the Mediterranean, and his three-volume series on civilization and capitalism between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. In view of their influence in the English-speaking world, all three works will be examined in later chapters.[6]

Three phases of post-war historical sociology

The current revival of historical sociology has so far passed through three phases, to be discussed in successive chapters. Each phase has been marked by a specific political 'conjuncture' and a characteristic mood among historical sociologists. The first phase, before the mid-1960s, was shaped by the battle with totalitarianism. Liberal orthodoxy insisted that capitalist democracy could solve any major human problems without fundamental institutional changes. The 'American way' ruled. In Britain the liberal establishment retained great self-confidence. Key figures in this first phase were Talcott Parsons and T. H. Marshall, although the argument will also bring in Neil J. Smelser, S. N. Eisenstadt, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Reinhard Bendix.

Marc Bloch and Norbert Elias became more widely known in the English-speaking world during the early 1960s. Their ideas contributed to the second phase, although its tone was mainly set by contemporary politics: especially, protest movements for student rights, Black power, and an end to the Vietnam war. Marxian approaches became fashionable, almost respectable. Historical sociology rediscovered domination, inequality and resistance movements. Key figures in this second phase were Barrington Moore and E. P. Thompson, although, once again, others will also be discussed, especially Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol. Major publications by these writers appeared throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The current of protest flowed on into the 1970s and 1980s, energized by the women's movement. This movement was quite slow to develop. A paper composed in the early 1960s recorded that 'the organized feminist movements, if they continue at all today, can only be counted alongside vegetarianism and nudism as bordering on the cult' (Banks and Banks, 1964a, p. 548).[7] By the late 1960s consciousness-raising classes had become common, especially in colleges and universities. The impact on historical sociology was felt during the 1970s and 1980s.[8] The link between feminism and historical sociology was dramatized in the early 1980s by the well-publicized protest against gender discrimination over tenure filed at Harvard by Theda Skocpol. Skocpol, 'a woman from the sixties', later wrote: 'the general esteem in which protest against perceived injustice is held by my generation gave me the courage to sustain what turned out to be a many-year game of "chicken" with the leaders of the most arrogant university in the Western world' (1988, p. 638). She won her case.

The third phase overlaps the second. It began in the mid-1970s, under the impact of the fragmentation of the stable bi-polar world of the Cold War. In 1974 key works were published by Perry Anderson and Immanuel Wallerstein. Their wide-ranging surveys of historical development, especially in Europe, marked a new level of ambition and self-assurance among historical sociologists. This third phase saw American retreat from Vietnam, Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, growing anxiety about Japanese economic power, and revolutionary uprisings in Eastern Europe. As old political boundaries became more permeable, new imaginative resources were brought into play. Anderson explored the East/West division in Europe from a fresh angle. Wallerstein produced a novel interpretation of relations between the First, Second and Third Worlds. Braudel brought back into focus the old trading networks linking Europe, the Americas and Asia. Mann worked on a canvas stretching from Mesopotamia to the Atlantic.

Skocpol – whose work, like Tilly's, overlaps the two phases – brought three revolutions, clearly separated by history, geography and ideology, into one interpretative framework.[9]

Randall Collins set out to codify 'a powerful science in the making' (1975, p. ix), beginning with over four hundred theoretical propositions in his *Conflict Sociology* (1975). The following year, Anthony Giddens published his *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976). Both authors surveyed existing contributions, juxtaposed them in a new way, and laid down the foundations for large-scale projects of their own. Collins's approach was explicitly historical from the beginning, Giddens's implicitly so: three years later, he criticized the division of labour whereby 'sociologists have been content to leave the succession of events in time to the historians, some of whom as their part of the bargain have been prepared to relinquish the structural properties of social systems to the sociologists' (Giddens, 1979, p. 8).

Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s a stream of books and articles expressed the heightened self-consciousness of historical sociology (e.g. Genovese and Genovese, 1976; Zeldin, 1976; Tilly and Tilly, 1980). Meanwhile, interest in methodology increased. For example, in 1978 there were books by E. P. Thompson, Arthur Stinchcombe, G. A. Cohen and Norbert Elias. These were followed by many others.[10]

This third phase had a paradoxical aspect. On the one hand, historical sociology achieved increasing institutional success within academe, especially in the United States. On the other hand, political tendencies moved against the critical spirit of historical sociology – especially the Marxian approaches adopted by Wallerstein and Anderson. Public affairs in the 1980s were dominated by the right-wing rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The dominant intellectual emphasis among historical sociologists gradually changed. Debates within Marxism (of the Thompson vs. Anderson vs. Wallerstein variety) were displaced from centre stage by arguments which marginalized Marxian approaches. The same pattern was found in attempts to build grand theory (e.g. Randall Collins, W. G. Runciman, Anthony Giddens, Ernest Gellner). The wholesale collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe late in 1989 undermined still further the residual prestige of Marxian approaches.

Ironically, this has brought a new ideological crisis in the West. Current forms of capitalist democracy can no longer be legitimized simply by pointing to tyranny in the East. Until some new devil is found (Islam? Japan?), critics of our own political, economic and cultural institutions will not be so easily dismissed as 'disloyal'. Meanwhile, there is intense interest in how to make power 'moral', how to make capitalist democracy 'work'. Before tackling those questions, we will look at the three phases through which historical sociology has passed so far.

Chapter two looks at the first phase, when historical sociology was emerging 'out of the ashes' during the 1950s and early 1960s. Chapter three traces the process of 'taking flight' in the mid and late-1960s and during the 1970s. Chapter four deals with the most recent period, when historical sociology has been 'soaring high'. The final chapter considers historical sociology in the 1990s. It asks: what are the characteristics of historical sociology as an intellectual field? How are its past, present and future development related to the challenges posed by successive phases of capitalist democracy? Who are the audience for historical sociology? And what can it give them?