These publics range from local groups organizing undocumented, informal workers to congressional staffers looking for research than is relevant to policy debates.

Will the SSN be able to mitigate the exclusion of sociology and other social sciences from participation in policy debates and increase the ability of local publics to marshal social science ideas on their behalf? Comparative historical sociologists will appreciate the impossibility of making this judgment on the basis of the SSN's short, five-year life span. But, the SSN certainly illustrates the continued creative evolution of efforts to better deploy sociological knowledge in the service of saving the world.

Endnotes

1. I am not going to worry here about defending disciplinary boundaries or excluding non-sociologists. Scott's work, for example, is completely relevant to comparative historical sociologists, regardless of the fact that his degree and his academic appointment are in Political Science.

2. Burawoy has written dozens of articles on public sociology. To simplify the discussion, I am drawing only on the published version of his original ASA Presidential address "For Public Sociology" (Burawoy 2005).

3. "Public sociology brings sociology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversation"(Burawoy, 2005:7).

4. To be fair, Burawoy (2005:10) is insistent on the necessity of strong norms and practices internal to the discipline: "There can be neither policy nor public sociology without a *professional sociology* that supplies true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks. Professional sociology is not the enemy of policy and public sociology but the *sine qua non* of their existence—providing both legitimacy and expertise for policy and public sociology."

5. For a fascinating and original "revisionist" version of how a counter-intuitive set of publics in support of neoliberalism was constructed, see Johanna Bockman's *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* (2011).

6. See: http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org. Once again, disciplinary and sub-disciplinary affiliations are beside the point – SSN membership includes a gamut of social scientists.

7. The exact number of members and chapters is a moving target with more members joining each month and new chapters being formed.

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How comparative historical sociology can change the world (for the better)

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I take the topic of this symposium to mean, How can Comparative Historical research (CH) change the world for the *better*, and I will understand "better" to mean "freer of social domination and injustice." So I will take my remit to address how CH research can help move the world toward more just and humane social arrangements.

Of course CH can contribute a great deal to the pursuit of social justice. There are three questions involved here – what is the relation between historical research and social change, second, should it pursue such ends, and third, how might it effectuate them? As to the first, it has a great deal to contribute, but not

necessarily more than other methodological divisions within sociology. The basic approach that it would need to take contains two steps. First, to identify patterns of interaction, or social norms, that are deemed in some way normatively relevant – in other words, social facts that are considered either conducive to justice, or in some way undermine its pursuit. Examples of the former would be the rise of democracy, labor organizing, greater equality in gender relations, the rise of social democracy, etc.; examples of the latter would be the consolidation of racialized states, the shift to less redistributive policies, inequities in the labor market, etc. Facts such as these are selected because these are social outcomes that we feel we need to understand, either as phenomena that we need to bring about, or to dislodge or dissolve in some way.

The second step is then to understand the causal processes by which such outcomes are brought about or sustained. By this I mean that we seek to identify that mechanisms that we think are responsible for the phenomenon to occur or to persist over time. So, if your interest is in understanding the persistence of racial oppression in modern societies, your research strategy will be to first identify a case of such oppression that endures over time, and then to uncover the mechanisms that maintain it. And this is where the comparative component of CH comes in. The biggest problem with the identification of causal mechanisms is the danger of latching on to spurious ones – ones which hang around without contributing to the outcome. For historical and qualitative research setting up relevant comparisons is one of the most reliable ways of screening away spurious causal factors, and thereby raising one's confidence on the candidate factor that one has settled upon.

This sounds a lot like conventional social scientific practice. What, if anything, sets CH apart? What makes CH distinctive is simply that it is able to pose questions that other methodologies might not. So, for example, quantitative sociologists might very well be interested in changing the world, in the sense I have taken it to mean. But the particular constraints on statistical research makes it harder for them to investigate certain issues, since many of the most interesting questions from a normative standpoint don't lend themselves to these techniques. And even when the questions might lend themselves to quantitative analysis, many of the most promising hypotheses available for testing come out of historical or comparative research. In my view, a carefully conducted, closely researched CH study has no match in the search for the causes behind important social phenomena. Hence, it is hard to imagine the success of the spate of quantitative research on the rise of democracy by people like Daron

What makes CH distinctive is simply that it is able to pose questions that other methodologies might not. So, for example, quantitative sociologists might very well be interested in changing the world...[b]ut the particular constraints on statistical research makes it harder for them to investigate certain issues, since many of the most interesting questions from a normative standpoint don't lend themselves to these techniques....In my view, a carefully conducted, closely researched CH study has no match in the search for the causes behind important social phenomena.

Acemoglu, James Robinson, Carles Boix, and Adam Przeworski without the antecedent work of Barrington Moore, John Stephen, Evelyn Stephens, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and others.

What does not set CH apart, and what should not, is that it might somehow be unique in embracing such an agenda. What sets CH apart is methodology, not its goals. And indeed, the methodological distinctiveness of CH cuts both ways – just as it is able to pose certain questions that other methodologies are not, so it is also limited in its own ways. This means that CH should ideally work in a coordinated and complementary fashion with other methodologies, all of which should be motivated by the same basic goal of changing the world. In other words, changing the world should be a fundamental goal of all social sciences. And why not? It is hard to see what other reason there might be for doing social science at all. If the goal of science is to understand the causal structure of the world, it seems morally outrageous to not direct this ambition at uncovering the mechanisms that perpetuate unjust social arrangements.

Won't this undermine objectivity?

We come now to the second issue, viz. should CH be in the business of changing the world? A call to embrace an explicitly normative agenda often raises concerns that in so doing, we might undermine the objectivity of our scientific practice. I think this is a very valid concern – but it is based on a confusion of objectivity with *neutrality*. Objectivity requires only that we respect the integrity of scientific work, of the findings it generates, even if we don't like them. But neutrality is very different. What it requires is that we abjure any judgments about the moral or political significance of the practice in which we are engaged. It demands that we not make any judgments about the issues that we take up in our research, whether it pertains to our motivation or to our findings. The worry is that if we let our judgments influence either end of our practice – its motivation or the outcomes – we would be tempted to distort the work to suit our ends.

But it is a simple enough matter to see that the worry, while germane, is unfounded. It is of course possible that scientists let their views bias them. But there is no reason to believe that the embrace of normative commitments must lead to such an end, or even that it significantly raises the likelihood of it. Indeed, I would urge that the very opposite is the case – that a commitment to changing the world is a recipe for *better* scientific practice. A social scientist with the commitments I endorse is no different than an epidemiologist embracing the goal of eradicating a disease, or a mechanic seeking to build a better engine. All three are cases of scientists committed to a normative goal – reducing the incidence of an illness, or making a more efficient automobile, or reducing unemployment – and generating a research agenda that serves this purpose. We do not often worry that the epidemiologist's passion will interfere with his science. Indeed, we typically take his commitment to his cause as laudable, as a source of energy and dedication to his vocation.

A sociologist seeking to understand the causes of long-term unemployment is, in principle, no different from the epidemiologist. And if the commitment is genuine, then not only will it fuel her pursuit of the goal, it will encourage her to *more fully* respect the facts of the matter, not distort them, precisely because she actually *wants* to know the truth, so that she might effectively intervene in the social world. It is of course true that particular individuals might let their passion interfere with their objectivity – but this is not built into the fact of being passionate. The worry that social commitments will undermine objectivity depends on the corrosive effects of normative commitments being a predictable consequence of holding to

the latter. If all it means is that in some cases these commitments might intrude, it is no more worrisome than any other occasional slip in scientific rigor.

Effectuating change

The upshot of the argument this far is that, far from being in tension, moral commitment and scientific objectivity are in fact natural bedfellows. But how will this bring about change? Naturally, for ideas or knowledge claims to actually have any traction, they have to find anchor in some kind of social force. In the case of social science committed to the pursuit of social justice, that force cannot be the power centers that serve to uphold the status quo, or the groups that benefit from it – for reasons that should be obvious. This is not to say that research laid at the feet of elites cannot help change things. It most certainly can on those issues that do not touch the basic power and prerogatives of dominant groups. Where the implications of committed research do not undermine dominant interests, there is reason to suppose that the latter groups might use it toward desirable ends. But in cases where elite interests would suffer, the recommendations issuing from committed research will either be ignored … or land the researcher into some degree of discomfort.

…if it really wants to change things, CH needs to understand that there is only limited utility in "Speaking truth to power" … because "power" isn't listening.

So if it really wants to change things, CH needs to understand that there is only limited utility in "Speaking truth to power" … because "power" isn't listening. Since many of the truly unjust social institutions are directly maintained by elite groups, if CH or any other stream of research wishes to actually change the world, it will benefit from turning its attention to those groups and organizations that have an interest in the same ends. The most obvious way of course is to be directly connected to institutions and organizations committed to social justice. For decades, this was a common practice among socially committed intellectuals. They were members of political parties, worked with trade unions or activist organizations, published in their magazines, etc. The degree of their proximity and the intensity of their relationship varied of course. Some became full-time researchers for the organizations while others maintained a friendly, but serious, conversation. Nevertheless, for such intellectuals, such political groupings provided a moral anchor as well as a potential vehicle for the ends to which they were committed. But a direct involvement with these organizations is just one, albeit most intense, manifestation of such an orientation. It can also take more indirect forms – such as adopting research agendas that might be useful to them, publishing in a language they can use and disseminate, helping train their functionaries, etc.

All of these strategies are ones that academics engage in routinely without thinking twice – when they are connected to elite institutions. They apply to establishment research institutes, appear on the corporate media, struggle to get op-eds published in the establishment newspapers, etc. What I am suggesting is that for scholars interested in making the world better, there is a greater utility to turning toward the smaller, more marginal, and less prestigious institutions of social change.

It is my impression that many, if not most, of the people within CH are in fact quite open to changing the world in the sense suggested here. The problem is that within sociology, CH is today a somewhat marginal field, and

becoming more marginal by the year. This is in part because the discipline itself is returning to a kind of narrow and quite blinkered research agenda. We do not see the "big questions" taken up in anywhere near the proportion that they were a generation ago, and CH has always been associated with "big question" research. But another dimension of it is the intense speed-up that is being pushed in the leading departments, where graduate students are being pressured to finish up in five or six years. The shortening of time-to-completion structurally discourages CH research, which inevitably takes longer than the typical ethnographic or quantitative dissertation. It might not be an exaggeration to say that at this moment, the most pressing question is not how CH can save the world, but how it can maintain its weight and presence within the discipline of sociology.

Sent for: how to engage public policy

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It was a Tuesday in September of 2013 when José Quiñonez, an Ashoka Fellow who founded The Mission Asset Fund,1 headed to the US House of Representatives to explain the consequences of not having a credit score. The hearing was slated for the Rayburn House Office Building, described by *The Washington Post* as "Middle Mussolini, Early Rameses, and Late Nieman-Marcus." Today's hearing would be about building credit scores for people who pay their bills on-time but remain invisible to credit card companies, banks, employers, landlords, and other service providers who make life-altering decisions about who gets access to what under what terms. Some in attendance viewed credit visibility as just one more manifestation of a financialized economy sustained by predatory consumer credit. Like social reformers before them, Quiñonez along with Congressmen Keith Ellis (D-MN) and Congressman Michael Fitzpatrick (R-PA), the principal sponsors of the legislation, understood credit as justice. This notion is not a new one, particularly if we look to the experience of the Feminist Federal Credit Union in the early 1970s as well as the set of hearings sponsored by Senator William Proxmire pushing for the Consumer Credit Protection Act of 1968. The National Urban League and other civil rights organizations have long recognized the role of credit for participating in social and economic life in the US (Hyman 2011; Prasad 2012).

> ***I, as a sociologist, needed to take on the role of a doctor at my patient's bedside, explaining an alternative course of treatment.***

Quiñonez had invited me down to DC to get a feel for the players in these ongoing debates. This was a natural extension from the field site where I was shadowing staff of the Mission Asset Fund and sitting in on staff meetings. He also offered some useful advice for how best to engage with his organization, reminding me exactly what they are up against. Organizations serving low or moderate-income families are confronted by a broad set of assumptions about the poor and their money. More damaging, those holding such assumptions may be policy makers and foundation program officers who bracket family relationships along with cultural and moral concerns in order to focus on incentives and cognitive biases merely in need of a nudge. While thinking about the psychological foundations of decision-making proved useful, there remained too little attention paid to the relationships shaping cognitive processes.