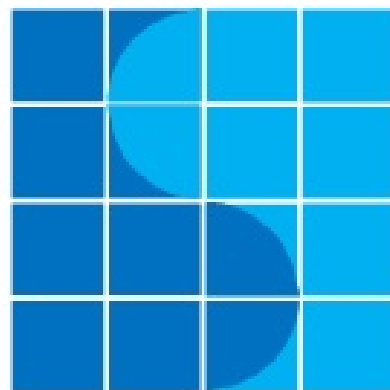


Trajectories

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How Comparative Historical Sociology Can Save the World

As part of this year's "Can Comparative Historical Sociology Save the World?" discussion, in this issue scholars whose own work has used comparative historical methods to address policy-relevant concerns give advice on how to do this kind of research.

For previous discussions, see "Can Comparative Historical Sociology Save the World?" and "Should Comparative Historical Sociology Save the World?" in prior issues (vol27:no1-2) of this year's Trajectories.

Four ways to turn good sociology into policy-relevant sociology

Elisabeth Pearson
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With the questions of whether comparative historical sociology can or should save the world safely settled, I'm grateful we can now turn to the practical question of how to go about it! Obviously I joke — as I sat down

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to write this piece in response to Monica's request, I first re-read the views exchanged in the pages of the two prior issues of *Trajectories* and was reminded anew of how differently many of us feel about the possibility and desirability of policy-relevant sociology. Of course it's not entirely possible to bracket these questions when thinking about the techniques I would recommend to sociologists who, like me, have decided that policy relevance is a worthy goal. Fortunately, diving into the mechanics of producing policy-relevant research may help clarify whether such projects are possible or worthwhile. If the techniques that are necessary to make our work policy relevant are distasteful, we might back away from the conclusion that this is such a good idea in the first place. Or, if it turns out that we are all deluding ourselves that there is such a thing as policy-relevant sociology, we might reconsider whether it's worth making such a fuss about its ethical foundations.

And even if I can't persuasively answer whether comparative historical sociology can or should save the world, Monica's request that I provide some thoughts on how to go about producing policy-relevant research came with a specific question that I found entirely compelling on its own. She noted that these concerns often have particular resonance for younger scholars, who often identify the gulf between policy-oriented work and the type of research that gets published in journals as a major obstacle to doing policy relevant sociology.

When it comes to the question of how to get policy-relevant scholarship published, I think there is really only one answer: it has to be good sociology. That's simply the only criterion that matters for peer-reviewed scholarship. In other words, you don't get extra points just for writing about the issues that show up in policy debates. Luckily, the relationship between policy-related empirical concerns and

sociological significance is not a zero-sum game. There's nothing inherently fruitful about the policy world as a source of compelling evidence — at least no more so than workplaces, families, social movements, refugee camps, board rooms, or anywhere else sociologists seek out data. On the other hand, the years I spent working on tax policy before I entered graduate school gave me a detailed, technical background on these issues, and this knowledge of policy problems generated puzzling and productive questions. Why do states vary so much in the types of taxes that compose their revenue systems? What accounts for the fact that ballot initiatives have been a barrier to adopting new taxes in some states, but not in others? What explains why states that all use similar revenue tools develop very different tax reliance patterns, for instance, with the income tax structured as a flat tax in some states and a progressive, graduated tax in others?

At their most successful, my attempts at answering these questions have unfolded very much like the hypothetical case that Monica described in her piece in the Winter 2016 newsletter, in which "an orientation to solving the problem forces the analyst into a deeper confrontation with the issue." Because I knew something about tax structures and state budget processes — and was already familiar with the comparative landscape of state tax systems — I was able to ask questions about this world that wouldn't have occurred to me otherwise. My policy experience also made me more attuned to understudied venues and actors, such as governors and state legislatures, which proved fertile ground for answering long-standing sociological questions about the relationship between revenue generation and the welfare state.

But I want to provide more specific guidance, if I can. Focusing on the practical side of this issue may be particularly helpful for early-

career scholars looking for a road map. Here are four “how-to” moves I would recommend to comparative historical sociologists who want to aim for policy relevance while building a publication record.

First: seek out opportunities to take your research to policy audiences. I suspect that a key reason my research is seen as policy relevant is because I made an effort to write about it in blogs and opinion pieces or go on podcasts or television shows to discuss it. In other words, if my research is policy relevant, it’s as much because of the things I did around it as for the content of the work itself. This is harder than it looks — it goes beyond just using accessible language to present your

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conclusions. Policy audiences are often less concerned with your careful articulation of your findings than with how your research might advance their point of view, and they are happy to rephrase your conclusions to fit their arguments — sometimes out of genuine enthusiasm for their understanding of your results, and sometimes with less benevolent intent. And, to be fair, I have sometimes found myself tempted in these contexts to push or stretch my conclusions to speak to broader issues of public concern.

I think the key here is to pay attention to whether you agree with yourself in these

moments of boundary-pushing — are the theories you are developing really congruent with the conclusions policy actors want to draw? If not, why not? Are they asking a more interesting question? What would it take to answer their version of the question, or to be able to come up with an answer to the point they are trying to prove with your research? Instead of being nervous at these moments, I try to switch on the creative, evidence-gathering side of my brain and not worry so much about policing the ways that people are talking about my work. There are limits to this creativity; there’s a big difference between talking to journalists about your research — when you really want your conclusions represented precisely and accurately — and being in a room full of social movement activists where you have the opportunity to trade ideas in a more free-flowing fashion. Ultimately, though, it’s hard to do policy-relevant work without drawing policy actors into your research process and finding out what questions are relevant to them, and I have found that these exchanges usually improve my scholarship by prompting me to think more creatively about my own work.

Second, and relatedly, take every opportunity to get your writing edited by professional communications staffers and editors. I rarely hear other sociologists say this, but I think it substantially improves your writing to be edited by smart communications professionals and editors. It is immensely helpful to see how someone transforms your prose when they are just focused on strengthening your arguments. There are professionals out there who don’t have patience for academic turns of phrase, and who will shorten your sentences, make your claims bolder and more declarative, and restructure your paragraphs to actually put your arguments up top and the warrants below. This exercise also forces you to examine your own claims and conclusions in a way that is good for your argument, not just your writing. I

accomplished this by saying yes to any request to write a blog post, white paper, or opinion article, even if I winced at the time it would take to put these things together. Eventually, developing a policy voice and an instinct for the right cadence – which is easier when you see the “track changes” unfold in real time – pays off as you can finish pieces for popular or policy consumption more quickly, even if the first time you write a 500-word blog post it takes all afternoon.

Third: where they exist, seek out supportive academic communities that care about the policy issues your research touches on, not just about the theories or methodologies you employ in your work. For me, the support of the fiscal sociology community I encountered through the workshop organized by Monica, Isaac Martin, and Ajay Mehrotra – and then continued to engage with through annual sessions at SSHA – made a big difference as I sought to develop my voice as a scholar. Sometimes these communities will be located inside the discipline or the academy, but sometimes they won't. Whenever I found someone who liked talking about taxes or state governments or the fun facts buried in 1960s governors' biographies, I tried to touch base every semester to catch up and hear about their projects. Even if you don't share a methodological or disciplinary perspective, hearing from someone else that your research is *prima facie* interesting because it touches on a shared set of policy concerns is a huge morale boost that I was repeatedly grateful for during graduate school. And a key part of doing policy-relevant comparative historical sociology is continually reminding yourself that this is important, exciting work!

Finally, to the extent that your research lends itself to quantitative analysis, developing those skills can boost both your sociological scholarship and your policy relevance. This point might already be obvious to many in the

comparative historical subfield; examples abound of compelling scholarship that uses archival materials to construct original datasets or employs new technological tools to make sense of large quantities of archival data. I started to use some of these techniques only when I was in the later stages of my dissertation writing, as I tried to make sense of a large trove of letters that constituents in four states had written to governors about their views on proposed sales taxes – but I quickly found this project to be one of the most intellectually promising aspects of my research. Policy audiences are always eager for conclusions that have numbers attached. More than that, I have found that the quantitative skills I have developed through my dissertation research have allowed me to draw on useful skills when I participate in the policy world as a practitioner (not just as a sociological researcher). For instance, in my current role as the ASA Congressional Fellow, working as a staffer in a congressional office, I rely on these skills frequently.

While these tips point to practical ways that comparative-historical sociologists can produce policy-oriented, academically-rigorous work, I think it would be disingenuous to imply that there is a straight line from policy-oriented commitments to policy-relevant research and then to policy impact. Ultimately, if comparative-historical sociologists want to be policy relevant, they have to seek out the policy world in some fashion – perhaps expanding beyond observing this world to participating in it and contributing to it. As I've sought out opportunities to do policy as a sociologist, I've concluded that on the whole – and unlike fields like economics and law – our discipline lags behind when it comes to structuring opportunities for scholars to move diachronically between these worlds. The more that sociologists with ambitions of policy relevance can find ways to translate our work for policy audiences or address questions on

the minds of policy actors, the more we might hope that our expertise will be in demand by the policy world – perhaps by serving in an administration, working as a policy advisor, or participating on a high-profile commission. When this happens, I hope sociology as a discipline will encourage, applaud, and reward these moves, even if considerable – and deserved – ambivalence remains about whether comparative historical sociology can or should change the world.

Strategies for saving the world

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"Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Marx, *11th thesis on Feuerbach*, 1845.

"If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life." Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854

Thesis 11 and Thoreau's distaste for do-gooders represent polar markers for a discussion of intentional efforts to positively transform the social world. Thoreau's intellectual descendants are less numerous, but they may more thoroughly share their forbearer's conviction, while the confidence of those hoping to use Marxist theory to change the world has been shaken by the onslaught of history. The endurance of Thoreau's perspective in modern social science is nicely exemplified by James Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, with its famous subtitle – "How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed."¹

The debate can also be turned on its head, making the question not whether comparative historical sociology might destroy or save the world, but rather whether trying to save the world might destroy comparative historical sociology. This might be considered a more immediate concern. Comparative historical sociology's likelihood of having a significant impact on the transformation of global society (at least in the short run) is small, whereas one can easily imagine a world in which sociology (especially comparative historical sociology) is reduced to a position that echoes its status in the dark days of the mid-twentieth century Soviet Union.

My own position is that efforts to save the world, properly understood and strategized, are not a threat to comparative historical sociology and, in some contexts, might even contribute to creating a more sociology-friendly environment. It would be quixotic in any case to try to extract the "save the world gene" from the intellectual DNA of most sociologists (including those who share James Scott's antipathy to the efforts of others to save the world). Trying to suppress this propensity or pretend it doesn't (or shouldn't) exist is probably more dangerous to sociology than trying to figure out how to make the best of it. There are many ways to use sociology to try to save the world. Some are much more misguided than others. If we can't stop sociologists from trying to save the world, we should think about what kinds of strategies are more promising.

I will begin by borrowing some ideas from Michael Burawoy. Burawoy creates four inter-related ideal types of sociology: public, policy, professional and critical. He doesn't denigrate any of the four, but public sociology is clearly his preferred vehicle for sociology's "saving the world."² The key is establishing a dialogic relation with "publics," which is to say constituencies outside of academe.³ The