

task that remains as pressing today as it was in 2009. But it must also be acknowledged that engagement in policy, tied to the imperatives of a fast-moving political process, does not in most instances permit careful reflection on our deepest human aspirations and the institutional arrangements most conducive to achieving them. As an interpretative social science that tends to work on a large canvas, pursuing complex, multiply determined social processes across contexts and over expansive time scales, comparative historical sociology is especially inclined toward such reflections. The worry is that as comparative historical sociologists become pulled into the exigencies of policy formulation – as invariably will occur, for the siren call of “relevance” is difficult to resist – we perhaps foreclose on the opportunity to make the contribution to “saving the world” that we are best equipped to make.

Notes

1. I explore the turn to finance in the context of the inflation crisis of the 1970s most directly in Krippner (2010). See also Wolfgang Streeck (2011) for an argument about the sequence of debt expansions that have followed the crisis of the 1970s that is convergent in important respects with my own account.

2. As Albert Hirschman (1980) observed, as long as inflation remained at relatively low levels, it served to dissipate distributional tensions. This reflected the fact that inflation created a game of “leapfrog” in which it was never totally clear who was winning and who was losing. For example, a trade union that obtained a favorable wage settlement momentarily secured an advantage, until these higher wage costs translated into higher prices, eroding the real value of the goods and services that the wage could purchase. Once these price increases became generalized across the economy, workers whose real wage had decreased would push for another wage increase, starting the process again. This cycle could repeat endlessly, with each group securing only temporary gains, and yet the sequence of moves and countermoves tended to vent distributional conflict (see also Goldthorpe 1987). Of course, once inflation increased beyond a certain threshold, the consequences of price changes for distributional outcomes became clear, and inflation exacerbated rather than eased underlying social tensions.

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Problem-Solving Sociology

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I thank Steinmetz, Deflem, and Krippner for engaging with the question so thoughtfully. I invited seven or eight people to participate in this conversation, hoping to get a debate going, but the only three brave souls to fulfill the assignment have all responded in the negative. It thus falls on me to defend the affirmative, although I hope that others will chime in at the blog discussion of this feature (address below).

Deflem and Krippner give two reasons why comparative historical sociologists might not want to adopt a policy orientation: adopting

policy concerns will prevent us from taking the detached attitude that we should be taking as scientists; and CHS is best equipped to give long-term perspectives rather than policy relevant answers. Steinmetz's essay is more nuanced, but he also gives three clear warnings: we need to understand what we mean by saving the world before taking any steps to try to do it; sociology should not have its practices dictated by external concerns; and we don't have to worry about adopting a policy orientation, because we are already behaving politically simply by conducting research.

(1) Deflem's worry is that adopting policy concerns pulls us into a normative focus that draws us away from scientific detachment. This is an important worry. But cancer researchers who think cancer is bad do not have to lose their scientific detachment, nor should poverty researchers who think poverty is bad have to lose theirs.

I think the answer is to adopt a *problem-solving* rather than an *activist* focus in our scholarship. By an activist focus, I mean the kind of scholarship that already knows the answers before any research is actually done. (You know the kind of thing: "neoliberalism is increasingly colonizing marginal spaces" or "the words of such and such group both reflect and reproduce gender binaries" or "race is deeply encoded in public discourse.") Some activism in scholarship is perhaps necessary to call attention to neglected issues, but I am not sure that we need as much of it as we currently get.

On the other hand, problem-solving scholarship asks questions like: "Which states have managed to reduce carbon emissions, and through what mechanisms?" "When does racism decline?" "How can we prevent genocide?" "How have different countries tried to engage men in the project of women's liberation?" "Why have some countries been

able to develop when others have not?" "How should we regulate finance so it doesn't blow up the economy?" "How do you pay for the expenses of a welfare state without losing economic competitiveness?"

Notice that you can only answer these questions if you adopt a detached stance. It benefits no one to get the answers wrong because you were emotionally invested in one

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answer rather than another. And notice that if done carefully, policy-relevant work has to consider and come up with provisional answers to the biggest sociological questions. You can't engage the problem of genocide without thinking through theories of social order. You can't examine development or the welfare state or carbon emissions or financial regulation without getting pulled into large questions about the evolution of global capitalism. Of course, no single piece of scholarship is likely to actually solve these issues. The test of a good piece of policy-relevant research is whether it brings us one step closer to solving it.

(2) Krippner argues that comparative historical sociology is better at giving long-range perspectives than answers to immediate policy questions, but this seems to me a false dichotomy, as can be shown by the very example she cites, her own work on financialization. If financialization is indeed about the erosion of a normative compact (I have discussed elsewhere my doubts about this interpretation) the policy solution would be to

think through how and why norms erode and can be resurrected. It was not clear to me why Krippner thinks this is not a policy relevant conclusion.

(3) Steinmetz argues that we need to have a thorough and complete ethical philosophy before taking action. The problem, as anyone who has tried to follow an ethical debate knows, is that ethical debates have no end. There are many reasons why we might want to study or discuss ethics, but looking for a guide to practical action is not one of them.

Indeed, the problem is even worse than that, because while we spend our lives studying to become “the fully virtuous person who ‘explicitly grasps why her action is right and ... can always explain why it is right,’” we are not taking explicit action - and inaction is action. If children are dying from hunger on the streets of the world, if the climate is being destroyed, if people are being raped and murdered in wars and genocides, and if we decide not to do anything about all this because we have not yet thoroughly elaborated our ethical philosophy, we have, in fact, taken and acted upon a strong decision. We have decided to do nothing - a decision that is, itself, ethically ungrounded, and a decision that can also have unintended consequences.

But the situation is not hopeless, because even the most complex issues lend themselves to empirical research. Steinmetz mentions assisted suicide, abortion, and just war as issues that are so complex that they need ethical resolution before historical research can be conducted on them. I think these are exactly the issues that need historical research *rather than* ethical debate. We may not agree on whether or not abortion is murder, but we can examine the social and historical circumstances that prevent women who want children from being able to afford them, or we can study how to minimize unanticipated pregnancies. We may not be

certain if a particular war is just, but even just wars create refugees, and we can try to understand how to integrate refugees into new societies, or how to get countries to honor conventions on refugees. We may see both sides of the assisted suicide debate, but we can still try to understand whether there are social problems that lead some people to despair of life.

By all means, study the issue for a few months, but if after a few months you still don't know which position is ethical, it's time to figure out how you can move the debate forward without having a complete ethical philosophy.

(4) Steinmetz's main worry is that if we adopt a policy focus, sociologists will lose autonomy, and have our concerns dictated by external criteria. But a distinction needs to be made between sociologists deciding, by themselves, to conduct policy relevant research, and sociologists being led by external agents to pursue policy relevant research. It is not clear to me why the former would lead to the latter. If anything, a strong autonomous infrastructure within the sub-discipline that allows scholars to collectively determine the policy issues they want to address would be one way to resist the external pressures that Steinmetz worries about. Lack of such an infrastructure leaves scholars who want to be involved with thinking through the main issues of the day, but who do not find this stance rewarded in the sub-discipline, nowhere to turn but into the arms of external agencies who do value this orientation.

(5) Steinmetz suggests that “good social science, including historical sociology, is already contributing to ‘saving the world’ simply by existing” and Deflem also seems to agree with this. There are several different ways to understand this claim: all scholarship contributes to creating a civil society, and a robust civil society is a prerequisite for politics; by keeping themselves separate from politics,

scholars create a space that is seen as above politics, and can therefore be trusted as honest brokers in the rough and tumble of political debate; and knowledge is valuable for its own sake.

As for the first, I am not sure how strong the “robust civil society” claim actually is. One could argue that scholarship that is not explicitly studying the major issues of the day is, rather, part of a machinery of pacification of

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the public that works to reinforce the status quo. As for the “honest brokers” argument, we have seen that even the most apolitical research, such as on evolution or climate change, is dismissed and called political when it suits the needs of the critics. As for the knowledge for knowledge’s sake argument, certainly there are many ways to live a worthwhile life, and serving knowledge is one of them; but we should not confuse ourselves by calling a quest for knowledge for knowledge’s sake “politics.”

Of course, the fate of most policy advice is to be ignored, and it is not clear that attempting to save the world will, in fact, lead to any actual improvement in any way.

But I would still argue that a concerted effort to collectively organize the sub-discipline around trying to find solutions to big social problems is

worthwhile, because my wager is that, whatever effects a policy-relevant comparative historical sociology might or might not have on the world, it will lead to *better sociology*.

Consider a scholar who decides to study human trafficking in two countries. Without a policy orientation, she might be overwhelmed as soon as she enters the field, and when she gets her act together she will probably conduct some interviews with victims and some interviews with NGO workers, and produce a dissertation on “the comparative discourses of human trafficking.” Worthy, but not particularly exciting intellectually. The kind of thing that crosses our desks and inboxes every day.

Now consider if she enters with the idea of actually solving the problem. Doing so first requires her to think about who benefits from human trafficking. She goes forth and interviews these people - not easy to get access, but because she has known for years that this is what she needs to do, she has worked for months to find them - and with these interviews she has already taken the analysis beyond where most scholars leave it.

But because she wants to solve the problem, she can’t stop there: she has to think about what it would take for her interviewees to change their behavior. Perhaps her interviewees tell her they did not really choose this line of work, but fell into it. Perhaps they leave when better economic opportunities come along. Perhaps this makes her start to think about human trafficking not only as a crime, but also as an industry. This brings her to economic sociology, but she doesn’t always find what she needs there, and perhaps writes a paper about that (“Economic sociologists emphasize the actions of the state in creating and sustaining markets. But markets have always existed that the state does not condone, and which it sometimes actively seeks to suppress...”). She formulates a general sociological question:

what does it take to disrupt a market? She thinks hard about how sociological work on the creation of markets would have to be reformulated to think through the fragility of markets, and conducts a historical analysis of her two countries' policies using this framework.

Think how excited you would be if something like *this* crossed your desk. It is not going out on much of a limb to suggest that a piece of scholarship that does nothing more than describe a situation can always be made more interesting if pushed in a policy direction, because an orientation to solving the problem forces the analyst into a deeper confrontation with the issue - even if she abandons the search for solutions along the way because she discovers an intellectually exciting side path.

Finally, let me briefly address Steinmetz's observation that comparative historical sociology can barely reproduce itself. If this is true, surely part of the reason is that the idealistic young students who start sociology programs find themselves uninterested in a sub-discipline that does not seem to speak to their concerns about the shape of the world. A policy orientation will be good for the sub-discipline in intellectual as well as pragmatic terms.

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I am grateful to Isaac Martin, Peter Evans, and Richard Lachmann for comments on earlier versions of this essay.

Deflem's Reply:

I thank colleagues George Steinmetz and Greta Krippner for contributing to this debate and am hopeful they are not embarrassed by my presence. Their ideas are divergent and not alone therefore useful. I leave judgments on the merit of their arguments to the reader, but offer

a few reflections on our respective positions.

The position of my programmatic essay is reasonably close to, or at least compatible with, the one George Steinmetz articulates in admirably historical-comparative terms. In his demarcation of 'is' and 'ought' questions, Steinmetz rightly makes a distinction between policy and (different kinds of) politics and dutifully brings out the relevance of the Mertonian notion of unintended consequences. I was pleased to see Steinmetz bring up the case of the *Polizeiwissenschaften*, which has been the subject of some of my own research. In that connection I must make the ironic observation that many contemporary proponents of attempts to marry sociology with non-sociology are almost completely ignorant of the distinctions between policy sociology, public sociology, applied sociology, sociological activism, and so on. The notion of a '*gute Policiey*' (good police), incidentally, does still today inform quite a bit of work in the balkanized field of criminology, an area that is, ironically mostly as a result of its policy-orientation, generally pooh-poohed among many mainstream sociologists. Steinmetz's comparative focus also lays bare the distinctly American character of the question that is before us. I agree that sociology is inevitably located in the political (and that the real problem is how this relationship should be developed) but also urge to think of sociology's location in broader terms to include the economic, the social, and the cultural, the latter of which I indeed understand in the most Durkheimian and Parsonsian sense possible.

Greta Krippner also tackles the question before us in a manner related more closely to the interests of the ASA section on Comparative and Historical Sociology than I do in my essay. She and others may be interested to learn that my initial attraction to sociology as an undergraduate was wholly dominated by a