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Prasad's Reply:

It's late November as I write this, and here are "yesterday's newspaper" headlines: Turkey shoots down a Russian fighter jet, Syrian refugees continue to flee Daesh, and the pharmaceutical industry consolidates. Nothing comparative or historical about any of that! Indeed, the "big questions" are the ones the whole world is struggling with, and therefore exactly the ones always in the newspaper headlines. As for the slow pace of comparative historical research vs. the fast pace of policymaking, I am not as worried as Krippner, because most of the real issues (how do you solve poverty? how do you bring peace to the Middle East?) are not going away any time soon, and allow plenty of time for relaxed reflection.

There is some slippage in how Krippner talks about "norms." Her project as she describes it was to explain what financialization was, and how it happened. But these are not questions of "ultimate ends" at all, of the kind that she says CHS is best suited for. Rather, norms only come into it at the stage of explaining why and how financialization happened. I suspect scholars would be better off doing what Krippner does (examine the causal origins of a broad, policy-relevant concern, with norms as one possible causal factor) rather than what Krippner says (focus on the "ultimate ends").

Steinmetz says "action is often much worse than inaction," referencing recent American foreign policy. Of course we may come to the

conclusion that inaction is the best course - that is a policy conclusion as much as any other. What is not warranted is inaction because we're perennially trying to figure out our complete ethical philosophy (because we'll never get there), or because we are afraid of unintended consequences (because inaction can also have unintended consequences).

Steinmetz says "surely we would not want to ban sociologists from dealing with these complex moral questions." I outlined a procedure for addressing complex moral questions in point 3 above, one which applies equally well to the new round of "complex issues" Steinmetz invokes. If you think that colonialism did both good and harm, identify why the local powers were not able to bring about the good themselves, or what we can learn now about how to realize the good and minimize the harm. If you are a feminist but worry about imposing your views on other contexts, identify the indigenous feminists in your fieldsites (there are always indigenous feminists) and investigate the history of why and how their voices are mobilized out of politics, while anti-feminist voices are promoted. It is not necessary to resolve these issues theoretically to move the debate forward empirically - indeed, the more complex an issue, the less likely it is to admit of theoretical resolution no matter how long one studies it, and the greater the need for an empirical path forward.

I suspect on most of these issues my differences with Steinmetz are not actually so great, but there are three areas where there are clear differences. First, Steinmetz suggests that lessons from history can only be drawn if and when *everything is the same* as in the original episode, giving his own work as an example. But it is an empirical question whether genocides emerge only under the exact set of factors Steinmetz identifies. In fact, comparative analysis of genocide might find

that “dehumanizing racism” is the dominant factor, or dehumanizing racism in the context of economic or political instability, and these are certainly causal determinants that are likely to re-emerge in the future. Whether any of these are subject to understanding or control, and precisely what is the spatial and temporal extent of “demi-regularities,” are subjects for empirical research, not matters that can be determined ahead of time in order to dismiss a policy-oriented approach.

Second, Steinmetz’s enemy is behavioralism, and fighting it is his main concern. For me, the debate about behavioralism is over in sociology, and the real danger today is rather a certain lack of ambition that plagues the discipline and the sub-discipline. CHS is the subfield in which a graduate student once sat down in her study and decided she would teach

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the world why revolutions happen. But a Theda Skocpol in graduate school today, enabled by excessively strong assumptions about the causal power of discourse, would surely set out to teach us only how people *talked about* revolution in France, Russia, and China. Ironically, it is this very lack of

ambition that is crippling the battle against behavioralism beyond sociology: if the only suggestions on offer for how to reduce poverty or prevent climate change are behavioral ones, how can politicians be expected to favor non-behavioral approaches? A scholar who truly worries about behavioralism has to fight it in ways that will actually defeat it, namely by providing convincing non-behavioral alternatives to questions of concern to audiences currently in thrall to behavioralism. I suggested above that one reason for the lack of ambition in current CHS is that young scholars don’t really know how to do more than describe, even if they want to do more. Therefore I suggest they ask “what would I have to know or learn if I actually wanted to solve this problem” as a heuristic to help them formulate deeper analyses of the world.

Finally, Steinmetz worries that in moving in a policy direction we will lose space for comparative historical sociologists who do *not* want to save the world. But how do we preserve space for such sociologists? Precisely by convincing outside audiences (department heads, administrators, students choosing classes) that at least some of what we do is relevant to their concerns - especially because their concerns are, after all, also our concerns. Steinmetz seems at times to suggest that in order to preserve the autonomy of CHS, a scholar who wants to research why children are starving around the world must resist doing so, because someone external to the discipline might be interested in the answer and we must not “kowtow” to their concerns. My interpretation of the lessons of recent CHS history is very different. My read is that comparative historical sociology flourished in the 1960s and 1970s because Barrington Moore and his generation of scholars showed that CHS was indispensable for an analysis of the two most important political questions of the day: the rise of fascism and the origins of communist revolution. These scholars made a

space for CHS in the academy, and in that space others with less immediately relevant concerns could thrive. If we want to protect the next brilliant George Steinmetzes, we have to nurture the next Barrington Moores.

A policy direction can bring the force of comparative historical methods to bear on important social problems, can lead to more intellectually interesting analyses than are currently being produced, and can broaden the subdiscipline by appealing to external audiences - and it is clear that many in the subdiscipline want to move in this direction. And yet, in reading these replies from prominent sociologists, I was reminded that one reason graduate students have such a hard time conducting policy-relevant research is that faculty advisers can be so eloquently dismissive of it. Nor is there much support from the section for scholars who want to adopt a policy orientation. Indeed, in re-reading this debate I see we do not even have a precise language for what we are discussing (policy-relevant, policy-oriented, problem-solving,

real-world, engaged, “big questions”) and that may be the cause of some of the disagreement. The discussion this year is meant to address these problems. In the next issue of the newsletter, we present advice from several scholars who have successfully conducted policy-oriented comparative historical sociology.

Meanwhile, if you would be interested in helping us think through what an infrastructure of support and guidance for CHS scholars doing policy relevant research would look like, email me (m-prasad@northwestern.edu). And if you are a grad student interested in doing problem-solving sociology of the kind I describe above, but find yourself with an adviser who discourages this, also feel free to email me. We'll work through your interests and figure out a way for you to approach your topic that will excite your advisers. And they never need to know that you are trying to save the world.

What do you think?

The debate continues online at: <http://policytrajectories.asa-comparative-historical.org/2016/01/should-chs-save-the-world/>

If you are interested in having your thoughts on this debate appear in the next issue of *Trajectories*, please email Matt Baltz (mjbaltz@ucla.edu). If you would like to be involved in the "Can CHS Save the World" effort, email Monica Prasad (m-prasad@northwestern.edu).