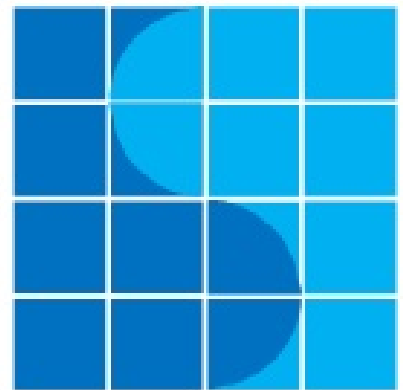


Trajectories

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Should Comparative Historical Sociology Save the World?

As part of this year's "Can Comparative Historical Sociology Save the World?" thematic focus, in this issue George Steinmetz, Mathieu Deflem, Greta Krippner, and Monica Prasad discuss whether adopting a policy orientation in scholarship is a good idea.

Historical Sociology, Ethics, Policy, and Politics

George Steinmetz
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Historical sociology is barely able to reproduce itself, given the intense presentism and methodological nationalism of most sociology today. So one might wonder, after reading the prompt to this debate, how could historical sociology possibly contribute to saving anything, let alone "the world"? Despite this initial skepticism, I think that the question posed here about the relevance of historical sociology for politics and policy is an extremely important one, as long as we do not read it as a command that all historical

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sociology must be “relevant” or demonstrate an “impact” on the extra-academic world. I would also like to add an additional keyword to this discussion from the start, one that is inseparable from policy and politics, namely “ethics.”

I will try to approach this question by discussing the “is” and the “ought” of social scientific conditions of production and the possibility of research that is relevant to policy, politics, and ethics. With regard to the material and ideal conditions of research, we should recognize that sociology has continually been pulled into dependency on public and private clients and that it is never entirely immune from broader intellectual trends. For anyone interested in improving the scientific quality of sociological research, resisting pressures to instrumentalize sociology or to make it immediately useful for political, economic, and social clients is an urgent and ever-present problem. The history of universities and science policy provides at least one unambiguous lesson: the conditions for carrying out non-applied research are tenuous and fragile.

This is not to say that sociologists should erect an insurmountable wall between their work and politics. But what sociologists need to understand first is the relationship between their research activity and their activity as a *zoon politikon*. We may no longer accept Weber’s resolution of the “conflict over values,” and Weber probably would not expect us to do so, since he explicitly connected his analysis to the historically specific conditions of the Wilhelmine university, with its deeply conservative professoriate.¹ But Weber made a very useful distinction between professors’ political activities in the classroom and their political activities in the political arena. Pierre Bourdieu also argues that the scientific, political, and state-administrative fields are

relatively autonomous from one another. But Bourdieu rejects the “escapism of *Wertfreiheit*” and insists that autonomy and engagement can be combined. Indeed, he writes, “you have to be an autonomous scholar who works according to the rules of *scholarship* to be able to produce an engaged knowledge” (2002: 472-3, 465).

Another argument I will make is that policy research is just one of the ways in which social research is political, and it is not necessarily the most important or effective one. Merely telling the truth about the social world is already a critical and political act. Why should we assume that sociological or other scientific research is not already part of a desired outcome in and of itself? To clear up this misconception we need to redefine political progress and human “flourishing” (more on that below) to encompass knowledge creation - including social and natural science and other kinds of intellectual and artistic knowledge. In its disparagement of scientific autonomy and such diverse phenomena as authorial voice, narrative, and complex, contingent accounts of social events (Healy 2015), US sociology often echoes the raging anti-intellectualism of American society.² Even social science discussions of utopia have been loath to recognize scientific, intellectual, and artistic creation as an integral part of any desired society. In a very real sense, good social science, including historical sociology, is already contributing to “saving the world” simply by existing. That may not be enough, but for sociologists that has to be acknowledged in all discussions of these matters.

The Demon of Cameralism

Over the course of its prehistory and disciplinary history thus far, sociology has faced much more pressure to prove its usefulness than to be “value free” or critical.

The most direct ancestor of sociology is Cameralism, also known as *Polizeiwissenschaft*, meaning police or policy science.³ The origin of much proto-sociology in practical policy already tells us something important about the historical connections between social science and policymaking. This also helps to explain why the period in which sociology was founded as a university discipline in Germany, France, and the US involved efforts to hold politics and policy science at arm's length.⁴

Nonetheless, the Cameralist demon has resurfaced again and again. As the meticulous research by Carsten Klingemann has shown, sociology in Nazi Germany was essentially applied policy research, both within the Nazi "Homeland" and in occupied East and West Europe. Most of the German historical and cultural sociologists were driven into exile and

Sociology has never suffered from a lack of emphasis on applied or policy-oriented research. The forces bullying sociology in this direction today are as powerful as ever.

those who remained turned to policy or went into "inner exile" (Steinmetz 2010a). If ever there was a cautionary tale about sociology and policy research it is this one.

American and European sociology were sucked into the applied policy machinery during and after WWII (Hollinger 1996; Calhoun 2007). The British and French sociology fields were reconstituted after 1945 around two expanding practical sectors, both of them dwarfing the older grouping of theoretical sociology. One group worked on practical questions like labor relations in the metropole, while a second group focused on the social and political problems of "development" in the overseas

colonies (Heilbron 2015; Steinmetz 2013).⁵ In the US, Lazarsfeld, Sewell, and Wilensky (1967) discussed sociology's relationship to its environment as one of scientist and "client." Gouldner argued that this dominant type of sociology, which he called the "N+I science," was providing American capitalism and the welfare state with expert solutions to "noneconomic social problems" (Gouldner 1970: 91-93). If sociologists' policy proposals were only rarely implemented, this does not gainsay the fact that they felt compelled to proclaim the applied value of their work (Steinmetz 2005).

Other extreme examples arose in Scandinavia, where sociology was dominated by applied research for the welfare state.⁶ In Denmark professional sociology was mobilized by the National Institute of Social Research in 1959, and in 1986 all Danish sociology departments were closed down. The University of Copenhagen's Sociology Department was reestablished in 1994 with an official strategy emphasizing alliances with "policy-oriented and applied research institutions" and management schools (Kropp 2015, Ch. 4; Johansson, 2015). Most recently the British Research Excellence Framework (REF) called on sociology and all other disciplines to demonstrate their "impact" beyond academe (Shepherd 2009). REF echoes earlier British and French government efforts to channel science into promoting economic growth (Paul 1985; Gilpin 1968; Hull 1999) and represents the most coordinated assault on the autonomy of the human and natural sciences in any major democratic country since 1945.⁷

In sum, sociology has never suffered from a lack of emphasis on applied or policy-oriented research. The forces bullying sociology in this direction today are as powerful as ever.

The Politics of Autonomous Historical Sociology

Historical sociology (along with ethnography, cultural sociology, and social theory) has provided a partial refuge from the perennial calls on sociologists to demonstrate “impact” in order to be funded or taken seriously. This is not because historical sociologists are any less political or moral than other kinds of sociologists. Instead, historical sociologists tend to relate to politics in a different way. Like historians, historical sociologists remain alert to the role of contingency, conjuncture, and overdetermined complexity in accounting for the past, and most of them reject philosophies of science rooted in the idea of general laws, Humean “constant conjunction of events,” or universal models. Behaviorist approaches to policy questions are thus anathema to historical researchers. Most historical sociologists are interested in social transformations such as revolutions and the rise and fall of states, empires, and elites, rather than in the repeated series of events or so-called “demi-regularities” (Lawson 2013). And where a demi-regularity does exist, the historian frames it as a puzzle to be explained - a paradox of social reproduction - rather than seeing it as a normal state of affairs.

The *historicist* historical sociologist (Steinmetz 2010b) understands the social world as an open, overdetermined system (Bhaskar 2008 [1975]), while the Humean understands the social world as a system of empirical regularities. These alternative philosophies have important implications for policy science. Policy interventions based on the premise of social regularities are unlikely to succeed, except in the narrowest contexts, because of the openness of the social. Indeed, historical research reveals that social scientists rarely anticipate the ways their ideas are received and applied (Bourdieu 1991; Hauchorne 2009), not to mention the downstream “unintended consequences” (Merton 1936) of their ideas (Steinmetz 2004, 2007). The only thing that is entirely predictable in historical social science

is unpredictability. But this does not mean that social scientists should resign themselves to some vague middle ground of “middle range” phenomena. Instead they should investigate the relations between demi-regularities and structure-changing events.

Historical sociologists resist having their research questions, methods, or theories dictated by the fashions of the enviroing disciplinary field, by university administrations, governments, and foundations, or by prevailing “regimes of historicity” (Hartog 2015). This does not mean that social scientists can come up with their research agendas in complete isolation. But it is especially dangerous for sociologists to succumb to determination by the very external forces that are trying to reshape their work.

That said, historical sociology can be political in a variety of ways. We need to start by making an initial distinction between trying to “save the world” via policy research and carrying out semi-autonomous social research. All sociology is political insofar as it embraces a politics of knowledge as unmasking (*enthüllen*), or revealing the extra-theoretical determinations and functions of ideas, and a politics of “refuting,” which targets the correspondence between knowledge and its objects (Mannheim 1929; Hacking 1999: 53-58). There is nothing more political than revealing the truth about social relations and social institutions, including their causal underpinnings, effects, and pathologies (Carlheden 1998; Honneth 2012), as well as their arbitrarily naturalized historical origins (Bourdieu 2001).⁸ Historical writing can be political simply by “giving voice to the voiceless, countering male and Western-dominated historiographies, handling the historical record with integrity” (Paul 2014: 362), or by entering into dialogic relations with past authors and actors (Day 2008:420; Gadamer 1975).

The political valence of historical sociology is perhaps most evident when it focuses on epochal transformations and massive social processes such as war, genocide, revolution, colonization, slavery, the formation or collapse of states and empires, transformations of elites, changes in regimes of social governance or capitalist accumulation, or disinvestment and abandonment of American inner cities. An historical analysis of slavery, colonialism, or the Holocaust, for example, is necessarily an intervention into battles around political memory and contemporary politics. Even if historical research can never discern general historical laws (since they are non-existent in the social world), it may be able to identify causal constellations in the past that should be avoided in the future. History *can* provide lessons, even if they are not simple ones.

Ethics and Historical Sociology

If Pierre Bourdieu already called for a combination of scientific autonomy and engagement, we need to add a third element to this program: an explicit ethical theory. In this section I want to move to the question of the ethical justification of action, including political action. This taps into an even more basic problem than the fact that sociologists cannot usually predict the likely effects of their policy interventions, which is that they usually cannot even *justify* the outcomes they are trying to obtain through policy. Social analysis may in some cases be able to help eliminate social “evil,” but for this move to be rationally grounded rather than arbitrary, something more is required: an explicit ethical philosophy.

This is a complex issue and I don’t have time to go into it in any great detail. What I want to do is to call attention to two different approaches to the ethical question among social scientists. The first of these is closely connected to Pragmatism. Here the analyst examines social norms that are actually practiced, or that have

been practiced in the past. This approach seeks to describe the “ethical impulses, judgments, and goals” that are features of “everyday life” (Keane 2015:3; also Lambek 2015; Honneth und Sutterlüty 2013). If we follow Dewey’s *The Public and its Problems*, for example, we may be able to reconstruct the ways in which democratic publicness emerges from cooperative divisions of labor (Dewey 1927; Honneth 1998). Historical research could be useful in describing the forms of normative reflection and practice that have actually occurred in different times and places. Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), for example, describes forms of publicness that actually emerged in a particular time and place.

The second approach diverges from these broadly pragmatic approaches and starts from the argument that we need to be able to distinguish between “norms that are *merely socially practiced*” and norms “that are *morally justified*” (Honneth 2014a: 818; my emphasis). A pragmatist approach cannot tell us why we should prioritize egalitarianism, democracy, publicness, enlightenment, or any other ethical principles that emerge from actual human practice. Pragmatic orientations are of limited use in complex decisions involving questions like whether to abolish property, allow assisted suicide, or go to war (Walzer 1977), or in situations lacking the predictable regularities that provide cues for more routine ethical decisionmaking based on habit or “knack” (Hills 2015: 22; Gorski 2013: 550). More explicit intellectual ethical deliberation is especially needed for decisions about justice and beneficence (Hills 2015), for situations in which virtues do not have “a one-to-one relation with goods” (Paul 2014: 360), or in situations requiring us to weigh one set of goods against another. Empirical social science is of limited use in answering these kinds of questions.

These issues have been addressed by a group of philosophers known as Neo-Aristotelians, who focus on concepts such as *eudaimonia* (flourishing), goods, human virtues, capacities, and skills (see Zagzebski 1996; Hursthouse 1999; MacIntyre 1999; Annas 2011; Gorski 2013; Smith 2015). Some Neo-Aristotelians prize the fully virtuous person who “explicitly grasps why her action is right and ... can always explain why it is right,” for whom virtue is a honed skill (*techne*) rather than mere habit (Hills 2015: 9). Anyone can develop these ethical skills, but they take time, effort, and education.⁹

In short, we need to be able to establish that the outcome we are trying to attain is a good worth achieving. Only then can we try to identify the policies or variables that may produce that outcome. Explicit, deliberate, intellectually articulated ethical judgements need to take the place of procedures and decision rules based in instrumentalism, utilitarianism, mimicry, or tacit, habitual moral principles. Once we begin trying to connect our ethical goals to specific policy goals, historical social research can re-enter the fray. Historical research may be able to help us at this point to detect noxious social institutions and practices and to identify them as deserving targets of reform or elimination. But this leads to an additional question, which is how to go about eliminating the social conditions we have identified as immoral.

Sociologists as Scientists, Intellectuals, and Citizens

I hope it is clear by now that I am not advocating an apolitical or policy-free sociology. Nor am I suggesting that sociologists should behave like Prussian bureaucrats and abstain from political activity as private persons (Süle 1988). I am simply sounding a note of caution about the ways politics and policy have often been approached in sociology. I suggest that we should approach

politics and science as distinct, semi-autonomous fields and investigate the causal paths linking them, in both directions (the effects of states and politics on science and the political effects of science).

I endorse two models of sociological intervention in policy and politics that stem from this basic distinction between the scientific and the political. One involves activity by sociologists acting as citizens in the political field. Second is the model of the “specific intellectual” associated with the traditions of the Durkheimian (Dreyfusard) sociologists, Foucault, and Bourdieu, and differentiated from the models of the intellectual as prophet, “total intellectual,” or *doxosopher* (Bourdieu 1972). When

I suggest that we should approach politics and science as distinct, semi-autonomous fields and investigate the causal paths linking them, in both directions (the effects of states and politics on science and the political effects of science).

sociologists intervene in politics as specific, autonomous intellectuals, their actions are based on their “specific competences linked to the exercise of their *métier* as social science researchers.” This approach differs radically from both “the positivist ban on all normative interventions” (Lebaron and Mauger 1999: 297) and the policy science model in which “independent variables” are manipulated with an aim to producing a change in “dependent variables.”¹⁰

This distinction between the specific intellectual and the sociologist-citizen is crucial because there are always emergencies that call on us to act before it is possible to engage in social research or ethical deliberation.

Conclusion: Treading Carefully

This paper has argued that there are several distinct disadvantages to a fullscale adoption of a “policy orientation in CHS research” - disadvantages both for historical sociologists and for the supposed beneficiaries of those policy interventions. There are more than enough cautionary tales to warn us against sending our subfield down this path. Indeed, writing the history of the human sciences, including their policy adventures and misadventures, should be a core part of historical sociology, along with an adequate philosophy of science and ethics. Historical sociology would benefit enormously from deeper connections to the history and philosophy of (social) science.

This does not mean that policy and politics should be off limits. But we should reject any implication that a policy orientation is inherently ethical or that policy recommendations should take the form of a “constant conjunctions of events” model of causality. We should adopt a radically different understanding of the relations between social science, policy, politics, and ethics than the ones prevailing in corporations and governments, which tend to demand research programs packaged in a scientific way (change variable a, b, and c in order to achieve situation d), or among the enthusiasts of prophetic public intellectuals. We should recognize that one of the most urgent policy matters pressing down on all academic researchers involves policies around science and research, and that a central goal of science policy should be to insulate scientists from pressures to produce immediately applicable results. And we should remember that policymaking is just one of the ways in which social and historical researchers can be political and relate to the outside world, and not necessarily the most important one.

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Notes

1. Weber pointed out in 1917 that “the problems causing him to argue in favor of value-free science did not exist in the same sense 40 years earlier” (Josephson 2004: 205; Weber 1917).
2. Thanks to Greta Krippner for pointing this out to me.
3. Cameralism was most strongly associated with the Russian and Central European states in the 17th and 18th centuries but was also present in Portugal, Spain, Scandinavia, and Italy. On the history of Cameralism and its connections to social science see Small (1909); Steinmetz (1993); Lindenfeld (1997); Tribe (2006); Wakefield (2009); Michalski (2010).
4. See Deegan (1988), Bannister (1987), Rammstedt (1988), Glaeser (2014).
5. Raymond Aron is said to have described postwar British Sociology as “essentially an attempt to make intellectual sense of the political problems of the Labour Party” (Halsey 2004: 70). On the metrocentric half of the postwar French sociology field see also, in addition to Heilbron (2015); Borzeix and Rot (2010), Chapoulie (1991), and Paulange-Mirovic (2013). On the colonial half of the postwar French and British sociology fields see Steinmetz (2013; forthcoming).
6. On the close connections between Swedish sociology and social policy see Larsson and Wisselgren (2006); Wisselgren (2015).
7. “Thank God I got out,” writes one leading British historian who moved from the UK to an American university (Fernández-Armesto 2009). Not surprisingly, “impact scores” for the first year (2014) of the REF were “particularly high in the life sciences,” lower in the social sciences, and lowest in the humanities and arts (Jump 2015; Holmwood 2011).
8. For an excellent study of the ways Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad construed their own autonomous social investigations in late colonial Algeria as a political intervention, see Perez (2015).
9. Smith (2010, 2015) and Keane (2015) combine these two approaches, using empirical research in psychology and other fields to generate what they think of as a universal palette of human virtues.
10. The same underlying ontology of constant conjunctions underlies recent behavioral economics (“Nudge Theory”).

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Obstinate Observations on Sociological Saving

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It can perhaps not surprise many an American sociologist today that my writing of this brief missive does not take place without some trepidation. Unless the march of the sociological profession over this past short decade has blinded even more than it has silenced me, readers will recall my publically voiced objections to the politicization of our discipline under the guise of the benign label of so-called public sociology (see Deflem 2005 for the gist of my position, and Deflem 2013 for a historical account). Whatever else the outcome of my interventions may have been, I must begin by noting that it brought about a disturbing measure of ridicule, especially in the once reasonably flourishing sociological blogosphere, even from those who should be colleagues.¹

Changing the World

The question if comparative historical sociologists should save the world assumes that sociologists in general can as well as should save the world and that there is a world that needs to be saved. Let me forego the notion that there is anything special about comparative historical sociologists which sociologists at large, i.e., those professionals with other declared specialty interests, would also not share. Besides, as Durkheim was the first to remind us, all sociology is by definition comparative (Durkheim 1908; see Deflem 2007).

At the same time, it has to be understood that the very word 'world' assumes a distinctly comparative focus, including an outlook that is also international and/or global. From such a perspective, I agree that it is constructive, if not downright necessary and inevitable, for