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Contents,  
From the  
Chair &  
Seminar

# Comparative & Historical Sociology

The newsletter of the Comparative and Historical Sociology Section  
of the American Sociological Association.

## From the Chair

by Ewa Morawska.

### ASA Didactic Seminar

by Jack Goldstone (with  
bibliographical references!)

## Essays

### **Symposium on *The People's***

***Lobby*** by Elisabeth Clemens, with  
comments by Jason Kaufman and  
Pamela Walters and a reply by the  
author.

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*"In a stratified world society like ours, irreconcilable interests arise out of the asym-metrical interdependency between developed, newly industrialized, and underdeveloped countries. But these conflicts can be minimized by devising institutionalized procedures for a trans-national political process that induces those few collective actors most capable of global action to give priority not merely to their own interests but also to the advantages of 'global governance'."*  
—Jürgen Habermas

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## **FROM THE CHAIR**

by **Ewa Morawska**,

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The close of the century, which also marks two decades since the renaissance of historical approaches in American sociology, has prompted historical sociologists to assess the state of the art in the field (e.g. Abbott 1994; Sewell 1996; Somers 1996; Calhoun 1996; Isaac 1997). Their reflections suggest our collective self may be of two minds: there is a sense that historical approaches have made remarkable strides in American sociology since the early 1980s and, at once, a recognition that not much has been done to make (mainstream) sociology "intrinsically historical."

There is no contradiction between these two assessments. A sense of accomplishment refers to the successful institutionalization of historical sociology within the discipline and its recognized scholarly contributions, in particular, to comparative methods of sociological analysis and to the study of "big structures and long processes" of societal transformations. In addition, in a number of sociology's subfields historical past and historical-sociological studies that examine it have become standard references. But neither the domestication of the comparative-historical study in sociology nor increased familiarity with "the past" among mainstream sociologists means that Philip Abrams's (1982) call to making "sociology and history [into] what in terms of their fundamental preoccupations they actually are, the same thing," has been realized.

"Anniversary reflections" on the reasons for historical sociologists' failure to meet this call, that is, to refocus sociology's analytic attention on social events as processes of structuration wherein time and place play not only the limiting (contextual) but also the constitutive role as media of ideas and practice, can be summarized in three observations. Anxious to see their new enterprise accepted in the discipline, the spokes(wo)men on its behalf in the 1980s strongly emphasized the social-"scientific" method of historical sociology and its resolute commitment to sociological theory, using as a contrast historical modes of inquiry (cf. debate on historical sociology and social history in a special issue of *Social Science History*, spring 1987). This emphasis and the priorities of the trend-setting representatives of the field have, in turn, contributed to the re-creation within it of the same sociology versus history dichotomy that originally led to the "rebellion" of historically minded sociologists against the presentist-generalist orientation of mainstream sociology. Of particular consequence in the non-fulfillment of the founding purpose of historicizing sociology have been basically ahistorical, "teological" or "experimental" modes of conceptualization of temporality (Sewell 1996) dominant in historical-sociological work. (The vigorous defense of the "scientific" and "experimental" strategies of the historical sociological explanation at the 1999 *Social Science History* meetings in Fort Worth, Texas indicates, however, that this view has not been unanimous.)

Yet another factor contributed, I believe, to the lack of success in convincing our mainstream colleagues that there are tangible epistemic gains to be derived from historical strategies of inquiry and explanation, namely, the concentration of most historical sociological studies on past events and processes. I conducted a quick survey during the ASA meeting last August, asking the randomly approached participants (non-historical sociologists) what they thought "historical sociology" was about: "about the past," "[it's] the sociological study of the past" were the standard answers (resembling the common perception in the discipline that gender is "about women"). Of course, historical sociologists' interest in the past is only natural, and analyses of historical (past) processes have been exemplars of the masterfully executed applications of different theoretical and research strategies informed by this orientation. But this almost exclusive focus of historical sociological work tends to marginalize our endeavor and diminish its relevance from the standpoint of mainstream sociology's present-time concerns.

Refocusing some historical-sociological analyses on the present phenomena—cultural concepts and "knowledge cultures," social categories and identities, political decisions and responses to these

decisions, economic structures and their transformations— and demonstrating their inherent historicity informed by the “eventful” (rather than teleological or experimental) notion of temporality and location that conceptualizes social interactions and the cultural meanings they embody not as isolated events but as path(past)-dependent yet open-ended processes “fraught with conjunctures and contingency” (Griffin 1992: 168) might “convert” more sociological souls to historically sensitive strategies of inquiry and, thus, more effectively historicize sociological analysis, than could excellent studies of witch hunting in 17th-century New England, working-class consciousness formation in 18th-century England, Negro lynchings in the post-Reconstructionist South, or political revolutions in early modern Europe.

Such analyses of the past-in/to-the present could retrack long-term macroscale and short-term microscopic social processes as well. (As Andy Abbott [1994] rightly pointed out, Erving Goffman’s interaction micro-sociology is “deeply historical” in that it concerns process or exchanges and identities negotiated over time in its different dimensions [Aminzade 1992]). They could, too, consider not only actual outcomes but also counterfactual developments, nonactions and nonevents —“possible worlds” as “repressed historical contingencies that just might have made a dramatic difference not only in local historical process but in the broader course of history” (Isaac 1997: 8). Such past-in/to-the present exercises in historical sociological analysis may also apply a range of methods used by its practitioners from innovative formal analyses (see, e.g., special issue of *Historical Methods*, winter 1997 on research in historical sociology), through “narrative positivism” (Abbott 1994) to narrative explanations “with the humanistic coefficient” (e.g., special issue of *Social Science History* 1992 on narrative analysis in social science; Morawska 1997; Somers 1996; for an encompassing overview of all these strategies see Hall 1999).

One of the Comparative-Historical Section’s sessions at the ASA meetings in 2000 will be devoted to the past-in/to-the present theme —worth trying, as I have argued, as one strategy of historicizing sociology and also appropriate for the turn of the millenium when the discipline’s attention is focused on the present-in/to-the future even more than usual. (We have also applied —very late, as it turns out, as these things are settled two years in advance— for a didactic seminar with the same focus; should our proposal be accepted, John Hall has agreed to conduct it). The purpose of this mini-essay is to explain why this particular theme for next year was chosen and to invite everybody to a conversation about possible ways to make sociology a genuinely historical enterprise.

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**ASA Didactic Seminar on  
COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY  
Conducted by JACK A. GOLDSTONE**



At the 1999 ASA meeting in Chicago, former section chair Jack Goldstone (UC-Davis) conducted a well attended seminar on the joys and tribulations of comparative sociology. This is a brief overview of the themes discussed at the seminar (based on notes compiled by Mathieu Deflem during the seminar that were later reviewed by Jack Goldstone). Also included is a [reference list!](#)

**What is comparative sociology?** Comparative sociology is a method, not a subject matter, which applies various techniques to various units. It involves the use of multiple, detailed observations on a modest number of cases, designed to uncover causal patterns. A case is a detailed understanding of a particular unit.

**How does it work?** At least three issues are involved in the execution of a comparative-sociological research: 1) Process tracing: the discovery of particular on-goings and their components over a period of time; 2)

Combinations of causes and outcomes must be charted under varying conditions; and 3) Detective work: moving beyond correlation there should be a search for explanation, i.e. one must make sense of a link between variables. Also, attention is to be paid to an efficient picking of cases and to the formulation of a clear research question. Interestingly, a one-case study can be comparative inasmuch it implies an implicit comparison with the universe of cases that back up accepted wisdom. Universal generalization is not a necessary goal of comparative research.

### Can comparative sociology be formalized or quantified?

Comparative sociology (as any other sociology) is always based on narrative. However, a clear structure should also be revealed. For instance, particular combinations (x, y, f, z) of events A and B can take place: A occurring with or without B, and A not occurring with or without B.

	A	not A
B	x	y
not B	f	z

Or various cases (1, 2, 3) can be compared in terms of certain characteristics (A, B,...):

	CASE 1	CASE 2	CASE 3
A	x	x	x
B	x	x	
C	x	x	
D	x		x

Such a structured presentation is not an explanation, but instead allows for multiple interpretations. Among the strategies of analysis are non-parametric analysis and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (designed by section Chair-Elect Charles Ragin) that uses Boolean algebra to implement principles of comparison (see Ragin's helpful website: <http://www.nwu.edu/sociology/tools/qca/qca.html>).

**The 3 C's of comparative sociology:** The essentials of comparative sociology can be summarized as: Cases: to be designed across time, space, and units; Causes: the establishment of plausible connections and/or hypothesis testing; Comparisons: to test hypotheses, to illustrate causal connections, and/or to show variance in conditions and outcomes.

## Reading List

Compiled by Jack Goldstone (UC-Davis)  
and Andrew Bennett (Georgetown University).

Jim Mahoney, of Brown University, has two outstanding articles on case study methods. The first is "Nominal, Ordinal, and Narrative Appraisal in Macro-Causal Analysis," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 103, no. 4 (January, 1999). The second is "Strategies of Causal Inference in Small N

Analysis," forthcoming in the journal *Sociological Methods and Research*.

The APSA Comparative Politics newsletter, currently under the editorship of David Collier of Berkeley, has several excellent short analyses of qualitative methods. See especially the Winter 1998 and Summer 1998 issues, and his bibliography of comparative historical studies @ <http://www.polisci.berkeley.edu:9000/faculty/dcollier.html>

Charles Ragin and Howard Becker, "Introduction" to Ragin and Becker, *What is a Case?* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1-17.

John Ikenberry, *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays* (Scott-Foresman, 1989) pp. 1-12.

Keohane, King, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, pp. 3-33, 99-114.

Andrew Bennett and Alexander George, "Case Study Methods in History and Political Science: Similar Strokes for Different Foci," in Colin and Miriam Elman, eds., *International History and International Relations Theory: Respecting Differences and Crossing Boundaries*, forthcoming from MIT Press, 1999.

Jeffrey T. Checkel, "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory," *World Politics* (January 1998), pp. 324-348.

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Arthur Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories* (Harcourt, Brace, 1968) pp.130-148.

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David Waldner, *State Building and Late Development* (Cornell, 1998) pp. 230-240.

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Ian Lustick, "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias," *American Political Science Review*, September 1996, pp. 605-618.

Henry Brady, "Symposium on Designing Social Inquiry," *The Political Methodologist*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (Spring 1995) pp. 11-19.

Charles Ragin, "Turning the Tables: How Case-Oriented Research Challenges Variable-Oriented Research," *Comparative Social Research* Vol. 16, 1997, pp. 27-42.

Gerardo Munck, "Canons of Research Design in Qualitative Analysis," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Fall 1998.

David Collier, "Translating Quantitative Methods for Qualitative Researchers: The Case of Selection Bias;" Ronald Rogowski, "The Role of Theory and Anomaly in Social-Scientific Inference;" and Sidney Tarrow, "Bridging the Quantitative-Qualitative Divide in Political Science," in *American Political Science Review* vol. 89 no. 2 (June, 1995) pp. 4461-474.

APSA-CP: Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section in Comparative Politics, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 1998) articles by David Collier, Tim McKeown, Roger Petersen and John Bowen, Charles Ragin, and John Stephens.

Stanley Lieberman, "Small N's and big conclusions," in Charles Ragin and Howard Becker, *What is a Case?*, pp. 105-118.

Stanley Lieberman, "More on the Uneasy Case for Using Mill-Type Methods in Small-N Comparative Studies," *Social Forces* June 1994, pp. 1225-1237.

John Goldthorpe, "Current Issues in Comparative Macrosociology;" Dietrich Reuschmeyer and John Stephens, "Comparing Historical Sequences-A Powerful Tool for Causal Analysis;" Jack Goldstone, "Methodological Issues in Comparative Macrosociology;" and John Goldthorpe, "A Response to the Commentaries," all in *Comparative Social Research* Vol. 16 (1997) pp. 1-26, 55-72, 107-120, and 121- 132, respectively.

Timothy McKeown, "Case Studies and the Statistical World View," *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Winter, 1999) pp. 161-190.

Ira Katznelson, "Structure and Configuration in Comparative Politics," in Mark Lichbach, and Alan Zuckerman, eds., *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure* (Cambridge, 1997) pp. 81-111.

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