What is the use of comparative and historical sociology? Although we may be convinced of its utility, others have questioned the contribution of comparative and historical sociology to the development of sociology as a science (most recently Lieberson 1991). In this essay, I remind ourselves of an often overlooked, but nevertheless important, merit of comparative and historical research. For this I turn to one of the great practitioners and advocates of comparative history, Marc Bloch.

In his essay on the historian’s craft, Marc Bloch began to outline what he saw as the purpose of the study of history, as well as how it should be practiced. He never finished the essay, but he did provide some thought provoking ideas on the nature and raison d’etre of history. Although meant for historians, these ideas have special relevance for comparative and historical sociologists.

Bloch felt that the value of history came from its relevance to the present. The true object of the study of history was to discover the nature of humankind in life. To this end he advocated the comparison of societies across both space and time.

According to Bloch, comparison was useful not so much for answering questions about social life, but for formulating the questions themselves. When we examine one society and/or time period in depth, the questions are always “why is this the way it is?” Comparison changes the question to “why is this not some other way?” By overturning our conditioned ways of thinking and revealing the possibilities in social life, comparison helps us revise the very questions we ask.

Bloch thought that changing our questions allows us to better interrogate the historical data sources themselves. Even the most abundant data can yield very little of interest if the right questions are not asked of them, while the right questions asked of even the scantiest data can yield very fruitful results. According to Bloch, it is by changing our questions that the greatest insights into the workings of social life are obtained.

(to page 3)
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FROM THE EDITOR

I assume the editorship of this
newsletter with the goal of fos­
tering the widest possible discus­
sion about the relation of socio­
logical thought to the analysis of
historicity in all its forms. That
discussion will depend very much
on the active participation of
readers like yourself. Please feel
free to communicate your ideas
about possible articles and issues
to cover, and send letters, re­
sponses to previous articles,
announcements and news of
publications to the newsletter’s
editors. It is best to send materi­
als to be considered for publica­
tion by email or computer disk
[Apple Wordperfect preferred, but
any wordprocessing program
on an Apple or IBM 3-1/2" disk­
ette is o.k.]. Certainly I will want
to continue to encourage articles
of the sort commissioned by pre­
vious editors, for example, those
about historical sociology in other
countries, and pieces relevant to
the themes of sessions at the
annual meetings of the ASA. In
general, I want to insure that Com­
parative & Historical Sociology
is a publication in which a wide
range of current concerns can
come to the fore. By now, as
others have noted, the signifi­
cance of historical dimensions
for sociological thought has dif­
fused into subdisciplines of soci­
ology in a way that may raise
questions about the distinctive
mission of the Historical and
Comparative Sociology section.
Then, too, the relation of history
to sociology is no longer the close
alliance that was envisioned when
the renaissance of historical soci­
ology began in the 1960s and
70s. Historians increasingly look
to literary theory (and vice versa)
as much as to social theory. In ad­
dition, the postmodern turn, in
the view of some, would require
a fundamental rethinking of the
methodological basis for histori­
cal and comparative sociological
research. Finally, the trajectories
of the generations of historical
sociologists are important. There
are great scholars of the founding
renaissance generation who
remain active, and I hope that
they will feel called to offer their
assessments. Others, trained at
their sides, are now in the full
stride of their careers, and
younger generations are coming
into their own. To paraphrase the
granite-etched words at the Uni­
versity of Colorado library in
Boulder, “those who know only
their own generation, remain
forever children.” The character
of the Historical and Compara­
tive Sociology section will be
constructed out of the infusion of
a rich and continuing heritage
with new approaches and voices.
I am especially grateful, as the
new editor of the newsletter, to
have three able assistant editors
— James Curiel, John Dale, and
Maureen Sullivan—all graduate
students at the University of
California-Davis. And I thank
Rosemary Hopcroft, who re­
cently completed her Ph.D. at the
University Washington, for con­
tributing the first in a series of
assessments of historical sociol­
ogy today. She invokes our heri­
tage of comparison and interdis­
ciplinarity in her appreciation of
the historian Marc Bloch.
Marc Bloch (from page 1)

Bloch’s search for universal history parallels closely the sociologist’s search for generalizations and theoretical principles in social life. Similarly, sociologists have much to gain from comparative research, and for the same reasons. In fact, the necessity for comparison is even greater in sociology than in history. Comparison can reveal the universal, which is the essence of theory building. In a discipline explicitly devoted to developing theoretical generalization this is fundamental.

Historians have in the main neglected Bloch’s advice to be comparative. There are a variety of reasons for this. First there are disciplinary blockages. As one recent writer noted, historians who stray from their area of expertise expect to be savaged, and so stay “close to home” (Henshall 1992). There are substantive reasons also. The time necessary to develop a thorough understanding of one society in one particular period, for the knowledge of all the historical sources and their limitations, the knowledge necessary for an intelligent reading of the documents and other evidence; this is usually more than one individual can manage in a lifetime.

Yet sociologists cannot afford to reject Bloch’s advice. Unfortunately, many of the same pressures which mitigate against historians being comparative also pressure sociologists to turn away from comparative research. The effort to be more rigorous, quantitative, and to better analyze the primary sources themselves inevitably leads back to particu-
larism. Recent concern in sociology with the validity of comparative research’s findings (see Lieberson 1991) is symptomatic of this.

This concern with the validity of the findings of comparative and historical sociology is laudable. However, the nature of comparative and historical sociology ensure that these concerns will never disappear. For instance, comparative and historical research is often inherently unquantifiable. The statistical data are often too scanty, unreliable, or simply does not exist. The numbers of cases are almost always too few for tests of statistical significance. Often the only measure of the success of comparative research is the reader’s evaluation of the insights it provides.

Yet all these problems weigh less heavily if we consider, as Bloch reminds us, that the real gain of comparative and historical sociology is not in the answers it provides, but that it enables us to rethink the questions themselves. Who can deny that Wallerstein’s research, by significantly changing the nature of certain historical and sociological questions, has not added to our understanding of social and economic life? Many years ago Homans changed the study of medieval history and our understanding of human family systems by examining the English family system in the thirteenth century from a comparative point of view. This list could go on.

Yet sociologists cannot afford to reject Bloch’s advice. Unfortunately, many of the same pressures which mitigate against historians being comparative also pressure sociologists to turn away from comparative research. The effort to be more rigorous, quantitative, and to better analyze the primary sources themselves inevitably leads back to particu-

REFERENCES


New Editors at Sociological Inquiry, Invite Historical Sociology Submissions

The new editors of Sociological Inquiry are Joane Nagel and William G. Staples at the University of Kansas. They replace the current editor, Dennis L. Peck of the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. Sociological Inquiry among the oldest general sociology journals in the United States, began at the University of Southern California in 1931. The new editors intend to continue and extend past efforts to publish papers of high quality and broad diversity. They are especially interested in publishing work which reflects not only established, but also emerging themes and trends in the discipline. They are committed to publishing the very best papers available regardless of substantive area, theoretical perspective, or methodological approach. Authors are encouraged to submit articles to: Joane Nagel or William G. Staples, Editors, Sociological Inquiry, Department of Sociology, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045. The journal office can be reached by e-mail at SOCINQ@UKANVM.

Nagel received her Ph.D. from Stanford University and has taught at the University of Kansas for 16 years. Her books and articles focus on ethnicity, social movements, political sociology, and international educational development. Staples received his Ph.D. from the University of Southern California and has taught at the University of Kansas for 4 years. His work has centered on developing historically grounded accounts of disciplinary practices and in exploring the political and material means of their reproduction.

Book Series Includes History of Social Thought

“Culture, politics, and social theory” is the subject of a new book series edited by Craig Calhoun, professor of sociology and history at the University of North Carolina. The series is explicitly based on the thesis that “interdisciplinary currents are rekindling excitement in social and political theory. Two themes are especially prominent: the centrality of culture to both social and political analysis, and the importance of relating empirical to normative theory.” Included in the kinds of books sought for the series are “works in the history of social and political thought with direct implications for contemporary theory.” Of particular interest among contemporary theories are “works of critical theory in the broad sense of those that subject their own assumptions, conditions of production, and social contexts to continuous challenge and examination.” The series also seeks to attract works that thematize problems of difference, identity formation, and feminist and cross-cultural perspectives. Proposals, inquiries, and suggestions of appropriate titles for translation should be sent to: Craig Calhoun, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27599-3130.

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PLAN NOW FOR HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGISTS' SESSIONS, BUSINESS MEETING AT FONTAINEBLEAU HILTON IN MIAMI AT A.S.A. ANNUAL MEETING, AUGUST 13 - 17, 1993.