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SECTION OF THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Marc Bloch and the Value of Comparative and Historical Research

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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'être* 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.

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Submissions other than short notices should be submitted via email or on diskette [MacIntosh preferred] with wordprocessing format specified. ASR citation format requested.

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FUTURE PUBLICATION DEADLINES:

**SUMMER ISSUE:
JUNE 12, 1993**

**FALL ISSUE:
SEPTEMBER 11, 1993**

FROM THE EDITOR

I assume the editorship of this newsletter with the goal of fostering the widest possible discussion about the relation of sociological 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, responses to previous articles, announcements and news of publications to the newsletter's editors. It is best to send materials to be considered for publication by email or computer disk [Apple Wordperfect preferred, but any wordprocessing program on an Apple or IBM 3-1/2" diskette is o.k.]. Certainly I will want to continue to encourage articles of the sort commissioned by previous 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 *Comparative & 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 significance of historical dimensions for sociological thought has diffused into subdisciplines of sociology 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 sociology began in the 1960s and

'70s. Historians increasingly look to literary theory (and vice versa) as much as to social theory. In addition, the postmodern turn, in the view of some, would require a fundamental rethinking of the methodological basis for historical 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 University of Colorado library in Boulder, "those who know only their own generation, remain forever children." The character of the Historical and Comparative 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 recently completed her Ph.D. at the University Washington, for contributing the first in a series of assessments of historical sociology today. She invokes our heritage of comparison and interdisciplinarity 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.

Comparison is not the only tool useful for reassessing the questions we ask in compara-

tive and historical sociology. Theoretical insight can be just as important (Kiser and Hechter 1991), and then there is plain old intuition. Yet even those insights are best assessed in a comparative framework. Given that we all work from only one cultural standpoint and all the expectations and biases that implies, comparison is always essential.

Rethinking the questions seems a rather intangible and elusive value of comparative and historical sociology, nevertheless it is an important value. It often gets lost in the shuffle in the debate about methodology in comparative and historical sociology. Yet it is this rethinking, more than anything, which can contribute to theory development - the ultimate goal of any science.

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- _____. 1966. "A Contribution Toward a Comparative History of European Societies" in *Land and Work in Medieval Europe*. Harper and Row.
- Henshall, Nicholas. 1992. *The Myth of Absolutism*. London and New York: Longman.
- Kiser, Edgar and Michael Hechter. "General Theory's Role in Comparative-historical Sociology." *American Journal of Sociology* 97, 1: 1-30.
- Lieberson, Stanley. 1991. "Small N's and Big Conclusions: An Examination of the Reasoning in Comparative Studies Based on a Small Number of Cases." *Social Forces* 70 (2): 307-320.

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.

Recent Publications in Historical Sociology

Wilkinson, Doris. "The Segmented Labor Market and African American Women from 1890-1960: A Social History Interpretation." *Race and Ethnic Relations* 6 (1991): 85-104.

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