

NEWSLETTER OF THE *Comparative & Historical* SOCIOLOGY SECTION OF THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Issues of the Section:

The State of Historical Sociology as Viewed from the 1994 Roundtables

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Co-organizing our section's Roundtables for the 1994 ASA meeting in Los Angeles confirmed two of my long-held concerns. First, the Comparative and Historical Sociology Section is changing in ways not fully acknowledged. Second, the Roundtables are not being used to full advantage.

With respect to the evolution of the section, there is a decline in comparative sociology at the grass-roots, even as the work of leading comparativists earns national recognition. Among the thirty papers to be presented at the 1994 Roundtables, only one compares cases representing different instances of a general phenomenon. From the perspective of the strict comparativist, the remaining empirical papers are case studies, although few treat their material as such. Section members ought to give some thought to the scarcity of truly

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Responses? Comments?

To comment about articles or issues of the Section, please write to the editors. See page 2 for details.

Issues in Sociohistorical Criticism:

Historical Sociology and Hypercritical Theory

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I should like to invert the central issue in recent debates over the place of general theory in comparative-historical sociology. What about the place of history in the theoretical enterprise? Here I pursue this point with reference to two theoretical developments that strongly express one of modern academic life's deepest impulses, namely, to cultivate an antagonistic relationship to the larger social world.

In the near future, the postmodernist wave of social theorizing will continue to supply pessimistic accounts of advanced capitalist culture formerly supplied by critical theory. In place of the one-dimensional world decried by critical theorists, post-modernists describe an n-dimensional world of polyvocality. Whereas the former ascribes distorted communication to vested interests, the latter proclaims a dissipation of objectivity, blamed on a more general crisis of representation. The affinity between these developments appears in a growing number of works that advocate or describe a convergence between postmodernism and critical theory (e.g., Agger 1991, Aronowitz 1990, Best and Kellner 1991, Jameson, 1991, Luke 1990, Kellner

1989, Rosenau 1992). Seidman (1992) sees postmodernist theory filling a void in "leftist politics" left by the demise of Marxism.

This development presents an interesting opportunity for historical sociology as postmodernism stimulates interest in communicative developments in society. Like critical theory, postmodernism sustains its critique of modern culture by invoking a largely implicit model of communicative change in modernization. (Hence, the importance accorded Habermas's 1962 [1989] historical study of the public sphere.) Meanwhile, social historians such as Chartier, Darnton and Eisenstein have developed an impressive body of work that explores communicative developments in elite and popular cultures that eventuated in what is now disparagingly referred to as the modernist project. The opportunity for historical sociology, then, lies in the unexplored relevance of early-modern historical studies for visible and contentious debates in the rarified world of sociological theory.

Both critical theory and postmodernism derive pessimistic assessments of modern culture from a dour parable, in which communicative change undermines communication. The parable describes

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FUTURE PUBLICATION DEADLINES:

Summer: June 1, 1994
Fall: September 15, 1994

Section Roundtables...

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comparative work. One explanation might be the development of new research fronts that are initially explored through single cases. For example, the upcoming Roundtables include a table on "Social Change in Eastern Europe," with papers on Hungary (Johanna K Bockman, Akos Róna-Tas, and Matthew McKeever), Poland (Jack Bloom), and the former German Democratic Republic (Eric Larsen). Alternatively, recent critiques of small-N, inductive research may be stifling comparative research. To address this problem, we need more papers like "The Scope of General Theory: Methods for Linking Deductive and Inductive Comparative History" (Terry Boswell and Cliff Brown), which will be presented at the 1994 Roundtables.

In sharp contrast to the dearth of comparative research, the 1994 Roundtables tap a plethora of historical research. Many papers examine changes over time to explain a significant event. The table "Historical Perspectives on the Intersection of Class, Race, and Gender" features papers on community life among working men and women in nineteenth century New England (Karen Hansen and Cameron McDonald), the 1937 strike wave (Frank Wilson), interracial labor solidarity in the 1920s and 1930s (John Brueggemann), and workplace control in the steel industry in the first half of the twentieth century (Teresa Ankney). My sole concern with the fine historical papers at the 1994 Roundtables is that most were originally submitted to other sessions without so much as a second priority for our section. This submission pattern suggests that historical sociology is being practiced by many who do not identify with our section.

These observations on the evolution of our section can be summarized as: a simultaneous

contraction of comparative sociology within the section and an expansion of historical sociology beyond the section.

Concerning the use of the Roundtables themselves, some rethinking also is in order. As we all know, roundtable presentations are treated as the second-class citizens of the annual ASA meeting. As a result of ASA policy which allows dual submission of papers to regular and section sessions, our 1994 Roundtables received only nine direct submissions, four of which listed us as second priority. Past section organizers can testify to the great effort needed to actually fill the Roundtables. For the first time, the 1994 ASA meeting has open refereed roundtables (preliminary listings look very impressive), which will further deplete the stock of papers available to section roundtables. The "forum of last resort" approach to the Roundtables is not as it should be.

Our 1994 Roundtables include two new activities that begin to upgrade its status.

- Ann S. Orloff, section chair, will start the Roundtables with some brief opening remarks. Future section chairs should consider continuing this practice, which will give a sense of common purpose to otherwise isolated tables. A "state of the section address" might also recruit new members, since a good proportion of roundtable presenters do not belong to the section. I also recommend that future organizers send the current issue of the section newsletter with the letter accepting a paper for presentation at the Roundtables.

- Section sessions have become increasingly specialized. The Roundtables provide an opportunity to address general issues of concern to section members and sociologists with related interests. This year Ann S. Orloff will be hosting a roundtable discussion on "Teaching Comparative and Historical Methods."

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Hypercritical Theory (cont. from page 1)

cultural dynamics in modernization as a process of differentiation followed by dedifferentiation. For critical theory, more critical uses of reason in public life arose in a public sphere, whose social and institutional boundaries separated (protected) discourse from market forces and unreflective societal traditions. In advanced capitalism, mass culture undermines the public sphere as it dissolves the boundary that shields critical reason from the base interests and instrumental reason of capitalism. Thus, the modernist project arises from the differentiation of cultural production from its societal context and disappears in the subsequent dedifferentiation effected by the mass culture industry.

Postmodernism advances essentially the same model of cultural change, though it offers a more sweeping indictment of modernist reason as a logocentric language game. But whereas critical theory analyzes the eclipse of reason in terms of the collapse of culture into capitalist civilization, postmodernism describes the reverse: "the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion" (Jameson 1984, p. 87). Thus, dedifferentiation is again the culprit, but in postmodernism it leads to the n-dimensional thesis, signification run riot. The eruption of signification creates a world of endless simulation, where distinctions between signifier and signified have no ground.

Both perspectives rely on an idyllic view of past communicative practices, as a foil for emphasizing novelty in economic and technical developments in twentieth-century communication, respectively, in its commercialization and its growing capacity to reproduce and disseminate texts. Yet both crass commercialism and mediation of discourse by reproduced texts are important features of early-modern communication. Moreover, both are integral features of progressive developments in bourgeois culture (democracy, universalism, critical reason).

From a historical standpoint, the principal problem in hypercritical theories about the impossibility of making reasoned choices in public and intellectual life is exaggerated claims about the novelty of

twentieth-century communicative change. Let us grant that today there may be more commercialism and greater ability to reproduce texts. But if these same factors in the early-modern period were constitutive of progressive developments in modernism, claims about their negative impact on both the public sphere in politics and objectivity in academic life would require reevaluation. Hypercriticism thrives on claims by representatives of modernism who describe reasoned discourse as a decontextual activity conducted by talking heads. But must we choose between the untenable claim of modernism that it embodies pure reason and the hypercritical alternative that taxes modern culture for making reasoned choice impossible?

Historical sociology can, I think, develop an alternative position, historicist to the core, that contextualizes modernist reason and its accomplishments. More critical uses of reason in public life emerged in a context framed by the capitalist organization of print culture in early-modern Europe. The authority of reason in public life developed as part of, and not in isolation from, this context, as critical theory holds. Moreover, increased ability to reproduce texts in print culture facilitated this development, by portraying political conflict as a dialogue. This textual imposition of dialogic order on conflict is a prerequisite for reasoned debate in public life. (Contemplate public debate in a world where no mechanical or electronic means for reproducing texts existed.) Postmodernism misses this positive implication of increased technical ability to reproduce texts and, instead, focuses narrowly on its negative consequences. A more balanced view would show that negative consequences in the "crisis of representation" and dialogic imposition of order, mystification and enlightenment, are both consequences of technical shifts in communication.

If these suppositions are correct, research on communicative developments in early-modern Europe could have important theoretical implications, providing a much-needed historicist alternative to trendy, hypercritical theories that proclaim the inability of scholars and citizens to make reasoned choices.

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MEMBERSHIP INCLUDES:

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Section Roundtables (continued from page 2)

Please be sure to attend the Roundtables to help launch these new initiatives. Additional efforts to invigorate the Roundtables might include the following.

- Given their expertise and national reputations, section officers should contribute to the Roundtables in some way. Participation by section officers could include presiding over a table; hosting a table to discuss a recent publication (a miniature "author meets audience"); and making some remarks at the close of the roundtable.

- The call for papers might include specific roundtables needing an organizer. These tables could address issues basic to the section, such as "The Decline of Comparative Sociology?" and "The Diffusion of Historical Sociology." Organizers could also be solicited for tables on important substantive topics. The 1994 Roundtables include a table on "Historical and Cross-National Variation in Citizenship" organized by Connie L. McNeely.

- Section Roundtables could be combined with those of another section. Combining Roundtables would free up a session to be shared between sections or used on an alternating annual basis. Donald Tomaskovic-Devey (Political Sociology) has expressed an interest in this possibility.

In conclusion, our section needs to do much more to define its sociological mission and constituency. Our section's Roundtables at the annual ASA meeting are an underutilized resource that can aid in this mission. ■

Editor's Publication Note

"Networks, Culture and Agency," by Mustafa Emirbayer, New School for Social Research), which appeared in the Winter 1994 issue of the Newsletter, is part of a larger project of assessing network theory, in which Mustafa Emirbayer has collaborated with Jeff Goodwin of New York University. A paper based on this collaboration, "Network Analysis and the Problem of Agency," will appear in the *American Journal of Sociology* in the May, 1994, issue. ■

Significance of Race: Call for Papers. Essie Manuel Rutledge and Doris Wilkinson announce a call for papers on the significance of race in the race-gender equation in the U.S. The project centers on issues of race and gender, social organization, human relations, and other dimensions. Manuscripts submitted for the anthology must highlight the influence of race and demonstrate its economic, political, and social potency in the creation of status hierarchies and differential treatment. For further information, contact Doris Wilkinson, Director, African-American Studies, University of Kentucky 40506-0027 or Essie M. Rutledge, Dept. of Sociology, Western Illinois U., Macomb, IL 61455.

Hypercritical Theory (continued from p. 3)**References**

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Historical and Comparative Sociology, ASA Section (22) Membership Form

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