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 onedimensional world decried by critical theorists, post-modernists describe an n-dimensional world of polyvocalism. 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, Arnowitz 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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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 Ronza-M, 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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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, 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 in the Section for Historical and Comparative Sociology, American Sociological Association

MEMBERSHIP INCLUDES:
* Newsletter
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Cost for ASA members:
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To join, please fill out the information on the reverse, tear off, and mail to:

American Sociological Association
1722 N Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
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


Significance of Race: Call for Papers. Essie Manuel Rugledge 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.

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References


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

Please check one:

- Please register me as a member of the Historical and Comparative Sociology Section. I am a member of the American Sociological Association and have enclosed $10 ($5 for graduate students) for 1994 section membership dues.
- Please send me information on how I can join ASA and the Historical/Comparative Section.

Name_________________________ Address__________________________________________________________