

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

Spring, 1995

Vol. 7: No. 3

Issues in Sociohistorical Inquiry:

Contextualizing Organizations in Society and History

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"Organizations," writes W. Richard Scott (1992, 25) in his influential text, "are systems of interdependent activities linking shifting coalitions of participants; the systems are embedded in—dependent on continuing exchanges with and constituted by—the environment in which they operate." Such a broad definition would apply to every sort of shared human activity regardless of its location in time and space. Indeed, the definition is so abstract, ambiguous, and encompassing that it is indistinguishable from a general concept of social organization. Scott's definition is not unusual. Most sociologists who use a concept of organization in their work today treat the term as a generic concept that covers the full range of the ways that humans systematically coordinate their activity.

Such a broad definition for organization harkens back to the first uses of the term, in the late 19th and early 20th century, when social scientists initially deployed the word to describe the systematic ways that people interact with each other. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1971, p. 2008) cites Herbert Spencer, in his 1873 book, *The Study of Sociology*, as the first to use organization to mean an "organized body, system, or society." Spencer may or may not have been the first to use organization as a general term for all social bodies, but from that point on the term quickly came into general use,

particularly in the United States, where the idea of organization became one of those central conceptions that identified the intellectual climate of an entire generation of thinkers. At the turn of the 20th century, these thinkers *discovered* that people were organized in systematically formed groups that were supposedly "greater than the sum of their parts." This intellectual discovery both reflected and fueled the organizational revolution that was occurring throughout Western societies in those years, a revolution that left no area of life untouched.

Today, an organizational perspective continues to serve as one of the pillars supporting the entire discipline of sociology, but this perspective is now being reconstructed. Over the years, subfields formed around the adjectives that specialists added to the word organization, subfields such as formal organization, social movement organization, business organization, medical organization, and so on. For a while, these subfields appeared to be distinctive areas of inquiry, but recent interdisciplinary reevaluations have shown many uniformities among these organizational fields and the need for core theorizing about organizational societies. The "new institutionalism" that has appeared in practically every social science discipline carries with it a new vision of organizations, a vision of societies of interacting organizations, worlds of interdependent organizations. It is a vision that replaces the earlier perspective of "organizations in society."

Scott's definition reflects this reevaluation. Institutions, environments, systems, interdependencies, reflexiveness, actor choice, and rationality—all important concepts in

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Comparative & Historical Sociology

published quarterly, is the official newsletter of the Section on Historical and Comparative Sociology of the American Sociological Association.

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FUTURE PUBLICATION DEADLINES:

Summer: June 15, 1995

Fall: September 15, 1995

Editorial**The Section, the Discipline, Historical Inquiry, and Our Future**

"Interpreting Historical Change at the End of the 20th Century: The Challenges of the Present Age to Historical Thought and Social Theory" is a conference title designed by a committee. But the title also reflects serious questions about how to practice historical inquiry informed by the diverse methodologies of the social sciences. The conference, held in February at the University of California-Davis to celebrate the (approximate) twentieth anniversary of *Theory & Society*, achieved something close to the "collegium" that *Theory & Society* editor Jan Gouldner sought.

I would hardly claim to summarize the conference's debates here, but I do think that the collegium's capacity for interdisciplinary communication offers an important barometer for historical sociology. On the one hand, within our own discipline, historical and comparative sociology has become fantastically successful in the past three decades, to the point where approaches that acknowledge the significance of historicity and the importance of case comparisons now permeate the entire spectrum of sociological subfields. Historical/comparative sociology threatens to become "the mainstream," filling the vacuum created by the eclipse of grand theory. This success is double-edged, of course, for while the substantive knowledge created through historical/comparative methods has exploded, the methodologies have become more differentiated, and the specific claims for the section's distinctive mandate have become submerged in the greater shift toward historicity in the discipline of sociology as a whole.

There is another way in which success contains its dialectical opposite. For many historians, the dramatic flowering of historical and comparative sociology has been overshadowed by "the linguistic turn," by the rise of inter/trans-disciplinary cultural studies, and by specific practices such as "the new historicism." In effect, many historians have become profoundly suspicious of historical and comparative sociology precisely because of what they see as its pretensions to "theorize" history. Although itself infused with theory, "the linguistic turn" can be pursued as a retreat from theoretically informed historical and comparative sociology. (Ironically, in this retreat, historical practice becomes aligned with cultural studies that derive a good deal of their inspiration from other kinds of social theory-- among them, feminist theory, hermeneutics, dramaturgy, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and social constructionism.)

Several cultural lags are operating at once here. People outside sociology often think of "Theory" in a way that is at least ten or fifteen years out of date (perhaps reflecting their own personal odysseys away from one or another grand theory). Big theories tend to sacrifice nuance and credibility. For this reason, they are easy targets for historicists who want to purge social theorizing from historical analysis. Historical and comparative sociologists have reflected the broader interdisciplinary trend--by our turns toward narrative and toward methodologies that display greater reflexivity and less methodological formalism. But in this process, we leave open the question of what, if anything, is distinctive about *sociological* approaches to historical inquiry. How long the label "historical/comparative sociology" will endure is itself a historical question. What the conference, "Interpreting Historical Change at the End of the 20th Century," demonstrated is that historical and comparative sociologists can contribute a great deal to the emergent debates, but only if we are willing to reach beyond the boundaries of our own historicized practices and invent new forms of inquiry.

John R. Hall

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the sociological awakening in the 19th and early 20th centuries—are again back in vogue, reshaped for use in theoretical discussions of institutionalized environments, embeddedness, structural constraints, and cultural contexts. Ironically, the former distinction between formal organization and social organization that Blau and Scott (1962) so painstakingly described is now blurred and may soon disappear altogether. In place of this distinction, some larger idea of social organization appears to be reemerging as our chief concern.

Historical, comparative sociologists should have an important role to play in this theoretical discussion, but to date we have had relatively little to say. There are certain key concepts in the new institutionalism that beg for historical and comparative analysis. The central concepts of institution and institutionalization are murky at best, as the discussions in Powell and DiMaggio's edited book (1991) reveal. Powell (1991) himself calls for more historical investigation to clarify the processes of "institutional reproduction" and "path dependent trajectories" for organizational change. Meyer's (1994) discussion of globalizing rationalized environments also seems to call out for detailed historical analysis.

My own feeling is that our chief role in these theoretical discussions will be to qualify the concept of organization and to contextualize its use—to put organizations back into societies and back into history. There many studies that we can draw on. In the first decades of the 20th century, Max Weber saw this as his task as well. In response to the enthusiastic "sociologizing" that was occurring in Europe in his day, Weber (1978, p. XXXVII) wanted to make clear distinctions among modes of group formation and cautioned his colleagues not to "chase after 'analogies' and 'parallels'" between eras and locations. Genuine comparison, he stressed (1978, p. XXXVII), "should be concerned with the distinctiveness" among groups in different times and places. More recently, Michel Foucault (1979), too, made clear distinctions between the institutional structures of absolutism and those coming immediately afterwards. Foucault shows the sharp discontinuity between the eras and argues that organizations, defined as social bodies, systemic wholes with functioning parts, are strictly modern creations. I suspect that neither Weber nor Foucault would have jumped on

the "new institutionalism" bandwagon, although they undoubtedly would have had something to say about these theoretical trends.

The new theoretical developments also should be qualified and contextualized on comparative grounds as well. Louis Dumont's (1980) study of the caste system does not inspire confidence that "organization," regardless of what adjective might be added, is the right concept to illuminate human activity in India. Fei Xiaotong (1992) makes the same point with his demonstration that the Western logic of organization is incommensurable with the ways Chinese constitute their society. Clifford Geertz (1980) says much the same thing in his study of Negara, the 19th century Balinese political community, where the state had no boundaries, where power did not emanate from exercising will, and where authority had nothing to do with chains of command. Even within the Western orbit, Steinmetz (1993) and Dobbin (1994) have shown that cultural understandings of how to organize groups differ within Europe, and that these differences have important historical consequences.

If we agree with Dumont (1980, p. 266) that "comparative sociology requires concepts which take into account the values that different societies have, so to speak, chosen for themselves," then we might also want to argue that the concept of organization itself is theoretically loaded in advance of any attempt to define or refine its meaning. Westerners, so to speak, have chosen the idea and the value of organization to be their own, to be a concept of self-representation. If we, as historical, comparative sociologists, are to understand and to use the concept in a knowing analytic fashion, then we must first address how the concept is embedded in a way of thinking that is both Western and historically delimited. Only when this task is done can we begin to understand how organizations, as labels applied to certain forms of controlled human interaction, emerged in the first place, changed over time, diffused to other locations, and have come to dominate modern societies in ways unimaginable 100 years ago when the effervescent idea of social organization first emerged. These very important tasks are ones that come naturally to us by virtue of our interest in history and in comparison, and we should embrace them. ■

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Recent Books...

A Century of Revolution: Social Movements in Iran, edited by John Foran, University of Minnesota Press, 1994. Essays on national movements in Iran from 1890 to the present using cultural analysis, neo-Marxism, resource theory, gender analysis, etc.

Power In Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics, by Sidney Tarrow, Cambridge University Press, 1994. Historical analysis of the rise of the national social movement and its contemporary dynamics.

Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique, by William Minter, Zed Books and Witwatersrand University Press, 1994. Comparative study investigating interacting global, regional, national, and local factors in wars of the 1980's.

The Comparative Political Economy of the Welfare State, by Thomas Janoski and Alexander Hicks, Cambridge University Press, 1994. Authors explore topic through newer comparative/historical methods, such as time-series, pooled time and cross-sectional, event history, and Boolean analyses.

Bandits and Bureaucrats, by Karen Barkey, Cornell University Press. Archival based analysis examines state-society relations in the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Geshichte und Gesellschaft: Ansätze Historisch-Komparativer Sociologie, by Heinz-Gunter Vester, Quitessenz Verlag, 1995. Explorestwelve distinct approaches to critically examine the relationship between history and society in historical-comparative sociology.

Max Weber's Comparative-Historical Sociology, by Stephen Kalberg, University of Chicago Press, 1994. Reconstructs Weber and compares his methodology to recent schools of comparative-historical sociology.

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