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Historical Sociology, Narrative and Event-Structure Analysis: Fifteen Years Later



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Historical Sociology, Narrative and Event-Structure Analysis: Fifteen Years Later

by Larry J. Griffin

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Introduction

Out of fashion for decades in American sociology, historical sociology in the U.S. gained force and then took off in the 1980s. Inspired by sociology's holy trinity – Marx, Durkheim, and Weber – and by latter practitioners of the craft, particularly Reinhard Bendix, Barrington Moore, and Immanuel Wallerstein, a handful of sociologists began in that decade to forge a methodologically self-conscious historical sociology, one often with a strong comparative dimension. Most responsible for this resurrection were Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol. Tilly, of course, had been labouring in the vineyard of history for years, but in two books, *As Sociology Meets History*, and, more conspicuously and successfully, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* [Tilly 1981; 1984], he issued assertive programmatic visions of comparative historical sociology. For her part, Skocpol had already begun to reorient sociological inquiry with her hugely influential comparative-historical study, *States and Social Revolutions*, an analysis of revolutionary processes in three *ancien regime* states, pre-1789 France, czarist Russia, and Imperial China. But it was the her 1984 edited volume *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, and, for my money, at least, her introduction and conclusion [Skocpol 1984a; 1984b] to that book that fuelled and cemented her authority in the practice of historical sociology [see also Bonnell 1980; Skocpol and Somers 1980].

Skocpol and Tilly, of course, were not the only ones who, at about the same time, were pushing the frontiers of the discipline by urging us to emphasize comparisons and/or to historicize sociological inquiry. In 1987, Charles Ragin's *The Compar-*

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Comparative historical methods examines historical events in order to create explanations that are valid beyond a particular time and place, either by direct comparison to other historical events, theory building or with reference to the present day. CHS is highly interdisciplinary in nature. Using readings drawn from disciplines such as sociology, history, geography, anthropology, institutional economics and political science, this course discusses the methods of comparative and historical sociology – mainly qualitative aspects and, to some extent, mixed methods. Narrative, Event-Structure Analysis, and Causal Interpretation in Historical Sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(5), 1094. <https://doi.org/10.1086/230140>. Hawkins, J. R. (2014). Well-written historical narrative has the power to promote students' analysis of historical causality—of how change occurs in society, of how human intentions matter, and how ends are influenced by the means of carrying them out, in what has been called the tangle of process and outcomes. Few challenges can be more fascinating to students than unraveling the often dramatic complications of cause. And nothing is more dangerous than a simple, monocausal explanation of past experiences and present problems. A related trap is that of thinking that events have unfolded inevitably—that the way things are is the way they had to be, and thus that individuals lack free will and the capacity for making choices. Historical sociology is a branch of sociology focusing on how societies develop through history. It looks at how social structures that many regard as natural are in fact shaped by complex social processes. The structure in turn shapes institutions and organizations, which affect the society - resulting in phenomena ranging from gender bias and income inequality to war.