THEORY AND METHOD IN HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY
SOC 6401H

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We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist.

Marx & Engels (1845)

Every social science—or better, every well-considered social study—requires an historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials.

C. Wright Mills (1959)

SYNOPSIS:
Can the major constraining dichotomies and polarities that have skewed the history of the social sciences over the past two centuries—voluntarism/determinism, agency/structure, nominalism/realism, micro/macro, objectivism/subjectivism, nomothetic/idiographic, maximizing rationality/cultural specificity—be resolved and transcended through use of a contextual-sequential logic of explanation, as offered in Historical Sociology? In an effort to answer that question, we will examine the central ontological and epistemological issues and controversies raised by recent efforts to develop a fully historical social science, a fully sociological historiography.

We will open with a review of the celebrated Methodenstreite that shaped the formation of the social science disciplines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—disputes that turned heavily on disagreements regarding the proper relationship between historical inquiry and sociological theorizing. The program of positivism—to model social science after the nomological natural sciences—gained institutional ascendancy, and history was driven to an “external” and largely “auxiliary” status within disciplines such as sociology and economics. Nomological-deductive modes of explanation, abetted by the probabilistic logic championed by statistics and sundry technical advances in quantitative methods, defined the grounds of proper theorizing. Hermeneutics, genealogy, and narrative—the analytical “logics” of historiography—were deemed preliminary to full scientific explanation, which sought to specify the determinant relations of social forces and variables “abstracted from” or independent of time and place considerations.

Over recent decades, there has occurred a significant resurgence of historically-oriented and informed social science—though this still remains a sectional speciality rather than a general current. Inspired in the main by the pioneering legacies of Marx and Weber, this movement has been led by distinguished scholars such as Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Immanuel Wallerstein, Perry Anderson, Braudel, E.P. Thompson, Hobsbawm, Eric Wolf, Marshall Sahlins, Bourdieu, Giddens, and Michael Mann. Directly challenging the traditional idiographic-nomothetic antinomy, and insisting upon the mutual and necessary interdependence of history and sociology, the work of these scholars is currently forcing a return to the contested and divisive issues of the earlier Methodenstreite, all of which were—and remain—keyed to the fundamental question of whether the social sciences are, or are not, inherently historical disciplines.
In critically assessing the merits and viability of the emerging transdisciplinary project of historical social science, this course will address the following thematic foci:

I. Philosophy of Science

i. the ontology of the social-historical
   * time and place as constitutive mediums of social life, intrinsic to both meaningful agency and processes of structuration
   * the formation of minded selves, roles, institutions, and social orders as historical phenomena
   * on causality and contexts

ii. the epistemic foundations of historiography: critical realism or skeptical, postmodern “constructivism”?
   * the past-as-it-happened and past-as-imagined, as ideologically reconstructed, commemorated
   * the “historiographical operation” (Barthes, De Certeau, Hayden White)
   * “arduous confrontations” of evidence and theory (E.P. Thompson)

iii. levels of abstraction and concreteness in historical social science
   * ideal types revisited - analytical vs. historical concepts

II. Historical Social Science as Theory

i. the logic of contextual-sequential analysis
   * the via media between transhistorical generalizations and particularistic narrations: social phenomena to be explicated by tracing both their genesis and their intrinsic relations to other mediating structures and processes
   * history as part of the present, owing to the rootedness of present structural and cultural arrangements in past practices; of “chronotopes” and “trajectories”

ii. concept-formation and historical-comparative generalization
   * cases and the so-called “small N” problem
   * excursus on the use of secondary sources

iii. theorizing agency, structure, and culture as temporal phenomena
   * on time and place as culturally defined apperceptions that provide essential frames of meaning for social action (i.e., the sequentially-ordered and site specific nature of most forms of reflexive agency)
   * on path-dependence: present arrangements—organizations, cultural forms—are the cumulative and
selectively reproduced products of past social actions, which in turn provide the basis for future endeavours and aspirations.

III. Methods in Historical Social Science

i. on historical evidence: remnants, records, residua

* typically clustered, catenated & so “narrative entailing”
* as objectifications of human intentionality, and thus characterized by “social authenticity” and “implicative density” (or multivalence)

ii. hermeneutics and the “construction” of narratives

* canons of interpretation, verstehen, and the hermeneutic circle
* colligation, emplotment, rhetoric
* on the integration of so-called “first-order” accounts (phenomenological or ideological representations by the agents themselves) and “second-order” synthesizing narratives that objectively situate and contextualize the subjective experiences of the actors
* from “chaotic chronicle” to the narrative logic of situated social action (historical sociology)

iii. reflexive protocols for enhanced objectivity

* source criticism
* the sociology of knowledge and “epistemic vigilance”

TEXTS and READINGS:

For background, you will find these two volumes quite helpful:


& A list of digitally available assigned readings, addressing methodological and theoretical concerns, as well as exemplars of historical-sociological research.

One Essay, due at the end of term (50 pts), based on your research interests or field (~8000 words); Five Position Papers (4 pts each = 20 pts), drawing out key implications from the readings (~800 words each); One Seminar Presentation (20 pts), to provide a critical overview and discussion platform for the readings and related works for the weekly topic of your choice (one of the Position Papers can expand upon your presentation); One short critical Reflection Piece (10 pts. ~1000 words).

This course will follow a conventional seminar format: dialogue and reasoned argumentation will constitute the operating principles for our shared inquiry and exploration. Your questions, observations, and criticisms are necessary in promoting rounded and reflective discussion, and will be appreciated.
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Week 1  
Introduction: History and the Social Sciences  
Sept. 13


*** A comprehensive collection of foundational texts is now available, in Historical Methods in the Social Sciences, IV volumes, edited by John A. Hall & Joseph M. Bryant, Sage Publications, 2005:

Volume I.  Historical Social Science: Presuppositions and Prescriptions
Volume II.  Foundations of Historical-Sociological Inquiry
Volume III.  The Logic of Historical-Sociological Analysis
Volume IV.  Social Worlds in Flux: Legacies and Transformations  [Call number: HM487]

Week 2  
On Scientific Explanation: The Methodenstreit Revisited  
Sept. 20


Week 3  

**On the Ontology of the Social-Historical:**

**Nominalism, Social Realism, and Dialectical Totality**


Week 4  

**Questions of Causality and Temporalities of the Social**


What If? Counterfactual History and the Agency-Structure Dialectic

Oct. 11


Week 6  
Laws that “Cover” or Narratives that “Bind”?  
Oct. 18


Week 7  
History and Historiography I.  
Oct. 25  
On Historical Evidence and the Logic of Hermeneutics


Week 8

History and Historiography II.

On Historical Evidence and the Logic of Hermeneutics


Week 9

Emplotment, Rhetoric, & the “Historiographical Operation”: Assessing the Postmodernist Challenge


Week 10  **Reflexivity and the Quest for Objectivity:**  
Nov. 15  **On Source Criticism and the Sociology of Knowledge**


Week 11  **Historical Sociology: Advocacy and Critique**
Nov. 22


**Week 12**  
**Formalization, Quantification, and Historical Sociology**

Nov. 29

Readings:  

Supplemental:  
Larry Griffin and Marcel van der Linden (eds.) *New Methods for Social History*, 1999, offers a cutting-edge collection (on which see the review by Chris Lorenz). Challenging technically but critically important are the essays in *Causality in Crisis? Statistical Methods and the Search for Causal Knowledge in the Social Sciences*, edited by Vaugh McKim and Stephen Turner, 1997.  

**Week 13**  
**Beyond the Methodenstreite?**  
**Mills and the Sociological Imagination Revisited**

Dec. 6


*There may be no end of the poets who communicate to us what they see in an object with reference to their own individuality; what it was before they saw it, in reference to the aggregate human mind, will be as desirable to know as ever.*

*Robert Browning, "Essay on Shelley"

*Ashes denote that Fire was—*  
*Emily Dickinson*

*Description is revelation. It is not*  
*The thing described, nor false facsimile.*  
*It is an artificial thing that exists,*  
*In its own seeming, plainly visible,*  
*Yet not too closely the double of our lives,*  
*Intenser than any actual life could be,* ...  
*Wallace Stevens, "Description without Place"*
The historical investigation of the development of a science is most needful, lest the principles treasured up in it become a system of half-understood precepts, or worse, a system of prejudices. Historical investigation not only promotes the understanding of that which now is, but also brings new possibilities before us by showing that what now exists is in great measure conventional and accidental.

Ernst Mach

Philosophy of science is, like all philosophies, not simply a rehearsal and recitation of what is done and said; it is also an analysis and an appraisal of the rationale and logical justification of scientists doing and saying what they do. Norwood Russell Hanson

It is not sufficient for a theory to affirm no false relations; it must not hide true relations. Henri Poincaré

To have mastered ‘theory’ and ‘method’ is to have become a self-conscious thinker... To be mastered by “method” or “theory” is simply to be kept from working, from trying, that is, to find out about something that is going on in the world. C. Wright Mills