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SOCIOLOGY AND HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

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Abstract

This paper identifies the nature and limits of sociological and historical explanations and of the responsibilities of sociologists and historians to policy-makers. It argues that generalization is central to explanations of both historians and sociologists. Their generalizations do not rest on homologies but on analogies. They are a means to construct interpretative narratives of particular events rather than to arrive at general laws. It thus concurs with Philip Abrams' view that 'there can be no relation between' history and sociology 'because, in terms of their fundamental preconceptions, history and sociology are and always have been the same thing.' (Abrams 1980: x) If sociologists cannot establish general laws, but must always limit their claims to explanations of particular events, they cannot provide policy makers with knowledge in a form which can be applied to provide prescriptive answers to problems of social policy. As Max Weber argued in November 1918, in the period of the German revolution, sociologists and historians should remain committed to their calling as scientists, to understand the world. They may inform policy makers but should not serve them. Politicians bear the responsibility for making decisions and for their consequences.

In 1966, Barrington Moore jr. published *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. This major work sought to return sociologists' attentions to the questions concerning the origins of contemporary societies, capitalist and then communist, the differences in the trajectories of their histories, and the importance of agrarian social structures in shaping these diverse patterns of change. The work of Moore and his successors raised anew older questions about the relations, if any, between the craft of history and the practice of sociology.

Science and History

In 1906, Max Weber set out the standpoint of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (the Review for Social Science and Social Policy) in an essay entitled 'Objectivity in the Social Sciences and Social Policy' (Weber 1949). In doing so, he drew explicitly on Heinrich Rickert's *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science: an Introduction to the Historical Sciences*, published in 1902 (Rickert 1986), which addressed the issues defined by Wilhelm Windelband in his 1894 rectorial address at the University of Strasbourg on history and the natural sciences (Windelband 1980, cited Rickert 1962: 56; see also Oakes 1980, 1986: ix-xiii).

Windelband rejected the substantive distinction between the *Geisteswissenschaften* (sciences of the mind) and the *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences). Instead, he distinguished the 'idiographic' *methods* of historical investigations, which 'are concerned with what was once the case' - 'the past in its unique and unrepeatable reality' - from the 'nomothetic' *methods* of the natural sciences which are concerned with 'what is invariably the case' (Windelband 1980: 175, 182).

Rickert sought to identify the limits of the application of the methods of the natural sciences in order to clarify the forms of knowledge specific to the historical sciences. In his view, history is the study of culture. Culture is: 'The totality of real objects to which attach generally acknowledged *values* or complexes of meaning constituted by values and which are *fostered* with regard to these values.' (Rickert 1962: 28-29). Rickert (1962: 81) argued secondly that the cultural significance of an object depends on what distinguishes it from all other objects.

The argument is thus a two-fold one. The natural sciences study objects as nature; that is, following Kant, as 'the existence of things "as far as it is determined according to universal laws"' (Rickert 1962: 5, 99-100). History, as a cultural science, *understands* the objects of its study in their *particularity* (Rickert 1962: xii-xv; 1986: 48, 161-164). '*Empirical reality becomes nature when we view it with respect to its universal characteristics; it becomes history when we view it as particular and individual.*' (Rickert 1986: 54, cited Rickert 1962: 57, his emphasis).

The second strand to the argument, that the significance of historical events arises from their uniqueness does not depend on the first, that historical explanations need to interpret people's actions in the light of the values to which they are oriented. The 'individualizing method' is as appropriate to the history of nature as it is to the history of culture (Windelband 1980: 126; see Gould 1989: 277-282). If Rickert is right about the study of cultural phenomena, there would seem to be no place for a social science; beyond the universal laws pursued in the natural sciences, there can only be history.

Several responses are possible to his arguments. One would draw on Windelband's and Rickert's insistence that the cultural and the natural sciences

are distinguished by differences of method not of subject matter (Windelband 1980: 175-6; Rickert 1962: 15; 1986: 19). This way, historians can be allowed their concern with the particular while sociologists are granted the possibility of generalizing about social behaviour. Human action may then be studied from radically different methodological presuppositions.

As John Goldthorpe, adapting Windelband to bring in the social sciences, states this view: historians are 'idiographic'; they seek 'to *particularise* through the description of singular, unique phenomena.' Sociologists are 'nomothetic', they seek 'to *generalise* through formulating theories', which apply to 'categories of phenomena' (Goldthorpe 1991: 211-12). In the radical version of this argument, both are possible but each differs fundamentally from the other. They are, as it were, separate but equal.

An alternative to the separation of sociology and history is that the forensic skills of the historian might be combined with the analysis of the sociologist. They could come together in a fruitful partnership. Explanations of particular phenomena may draw on more general insights and generalizations be enriched and tested by the study of individual instances. Sociologists and historians may each find their distinctive place in the academic division of labour but their relations may be complementary and their concerns convergent. Boundaries may be blurred and sociologists and historians may cross over into one another's territory. New boundary markers may then be erected. Historians may wish to protect their long-established turf from the claims of upstart sociologists; sociologists to find a distinctive place for their more precarious discipline.

Max Weber sought to integrate the methodological requirements of the hermeneutic tradition, with its concern for interpreting meanings, and the claims of science to causal explanation. Sociology, he declared, is concerned 'with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences.' (Weber 1978: I, 4) Sociological explanation has to be adequate both at the level of meaning and at the level of causation. Interpretive understanding is achieved not by gaining direct access to others' understandings and intentions but by offering a hypothetical account of their intentions and actions in their cultural and material context. Sociological explanations are therefore always based on 'as if' accounts; such interpretations are necessary to a causal explanation. But are causal explanations particularizing or generalizing?

Weber identifies generality as a criterion of causal adequacy. In 1920, he wrote in *Economy and Society* that 'The interpretation of a sequence of events will ... be called *causally* adequate in so far as, according to established generalizations from experience, there is a probability that it will always occur in the same way.' (Weber 1978: I, 11-12) The validity of the interpretation clearly depends on the degree of probability. And sociology, he tells us, 'seeks to formulate concepts and generalized uniformities of empirical processes' whereas

history 'is oriented to the causal analysis and explanation of individual actions, structures and personalities possessing cultural significance.' (Weber 1978: 22).

But in 1906 Weber had stated, following Rickert, that 'In the cultural sciences, the knowledge of the universal or general is never valuable in itself.' (Weber 1949: 80) 'We wish to understand on the one hand the relationships and the cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestations and on the other the causes of their being historically so and not *otherwise*.' (Weber 1949: 72, cf. 111; see Kalberg 1994: 82-83).

Philip Abrams introduced his *Historical Sociology* with the radical claim that there can be no relation between the disciplines of history and sociology since, in their subject matter and their procedures, they are the same. They are both concerned to

understand the relationship of personal activity and experience on the one hand and social organization on the other as something that is continuously constructed in time. It makes the continuous process of construction the focal concern of social analysis. (Abrams 1980: 16)

This must seem to many historians to be the rankest form of sociological imperialism. But it might also assimilate sociology to history and deny sociology's own claim to make a distinctive contribution to human knowledge.

A Question of Evidence

It is this challenge which John Goldthorpe took up in his 1991 polemic 'The uses of history in sociology'. Goldthorpe begins the article, and ends his 1994 reply, by explicitly countering the claims made by Abrams, and by Anthony Giddens (1979: 220), that history and sociology are the same thing.

Regrettably, Goldthorpe does not discuss Abrams' rich accounts, and criticisms, of the works of significant sociologists and historians nor his accounts of their methods of inquiry and strategies of explanation. Instead, Goldthorpe turns his argument to a different issue, the nature of evidence. He argues that sociologists can do more than make what sense they can of the relics of history. In addition to drawing on evidence inherited from the past, sociologists can go out and generate their own evidence to answer their questions; historians will always be left guessing, relying on speculative hypotheses to fill in the gaps which the available records have left open. This is not an advantage which sociologists should surrender lightly (Goldthorpe 1991: 213-14, 225-26; 1994: 63-64).

Goldthorpe's critics (Bryant 1994, Hart 1994, Mann 1994) question the radical distinction between the limits of what historians can say from their finite and incomplete relics and the possibilities opened up by setting out to collect our own

evidence. The argument concerns the nature of the differences between found and generated evidence.

Goldthorpe explicitly recognizes the problematic nature of generated research (Goldthorpe 1991: 214). Evidence generated by surveys and interviews is, like other evidence, generated for specific purposes. It is shaped by the sorts of questions which are asked and the contexts in which they are answered. It provides, at best, indirect accounts of the social facts and patterns of distribution of social phenomena of which we seek knowledge. And as we examine the results of our research we find that they raise new questions to which we did not seek the answers.

By interacting with people from whom we seek information or whose activities we observe, we are, in the research situation, bringing new information to light - and bringing new social facts into existence. The responses which historians or sociologists get to the questions they put to people will often refer to the past. Answers in the present or future tense are, themselves, dated; they do not escape their historical context. Indeed, as Joseph Bryant points out, the information we seek may not be accessible and only disclosed, if at all, to historians in the future (Bryant 1994: 7).

This is not to accept Bryant's claim (1994: 7-8) that historical relics are facts of nature whereas sociological research produces artificial constructs. All our evidence is of artefacts. We always have to ask how, and for what purposes, the evidence on which we draw came to be produced. As Nicky Hart observes, all evidence has the quality of relics: 'Even during the process of generation and certainly as soon as it is complete, data begin to fossilize and the possibilities of multiple adaptation and re-interpretation begin to diminish.' (Hart 1994: 28-29)

Both historians and sociologists seek to make sense of human interaction from a variety of sources of knowledge, collected, interpreted and presented by different people in different sorts of ways. Evidences from different sources need to be brought together if we are to make sense of the worlds we live in but they cannot necessarily be translated into a common textual format for sociological analysis. There are differences among types of evidence and there are real advantages to being able to go out and ask people new questions about the past and about the ever-disappearing present, even about their future intentions. But do they justify Goldthorpe's claims for the distinctiveness of sociological investigation from historical interpretation?

Historical Sociology in the Grand Manner

Goldthorpe mounts a powerful attack against 'Grand Historical Sociology' and its claims to develop sociological generalizations from the findings of historical research. Their building blocks are insecure. They are engaging 'in interpretation of interpretations of, perhaps, interpretations.' Such 'facts as are here available cannot be understood as separate, well-defined "modules", easily carried off for sociological construction purposes, but would be better regarded simply as strands in heavily tangled, yet often still rather weak skeins of interpretation.' (Goldthorpe 1991: 222)

It is significant that Mouzelis (1994: 31) and Mann (1994), in defending the ambitions of Grand Historical Sociology, reject Abrams's insistence on the identity of sociology and history. Mann quite bluntly accepts that historical sociologists use evidence from the past to fulfil their 'systematizing drive'. Mann defines sociology:

as the science of society - regardless of tense. By 'science' I mean systematic knowledge, the attempt to use a systematic methodology to generate a generalized form of knowledge.

Macro-sociologists use the past in three main ways. (i) An *historico-causal* analysis of origins ... (ii) A quest for *variation* (iii) A more abstract-comparative macro-sociology ... analyses the past to test more general propositions about human communities. Yet none of these three methods ... is much interested in the particularities of history. Evidence from the past is essential to their systematizing drive. (Mann 1994: 37)

No wonder then that so much grand historical sociology is bad history. As Goldthorpe says, 'the links that are claimed, or supposed, between evidence and argument tend to be both tenuous and arbitrary ...' (Goldthorpe 1991:222). Durkheim warned 'As long as sociology has to intrude, like a stranger, into the historical domain for the purpose of removing, as it were, those things which concern it, it will find only meagre fodder.' (Durkheim 1896-97, iii)

The solution is not to require historical sociologists to draw their conclusions from primary sources as Goldthorpe seems to imply they should. This would be a salutary discipline but professional historians do not build their edifices exclusively on such sound foundations. They combine the exploration and interpretation of primary sources with the findings and explanations of other historians. Interpretations of processes covering large areas and extended periods necessarily rest on 'interpretations of interpretations'. These need to be critically examined; they cannot be taken as 'given' any more than the evidence generated by survey research or official statistics.

Goldthorpe and Mann both claim for sociology the task of 'generalizing'; they disagree on the status and problems of the evidence from which such generalizations are to be constructed. Abrams's argument is a different one. For Abrams, historical sociology is not history rewritten in the grand manner but the craft of history itself. Where then does sociology come in?

The General and the Particular

Goldthorpe himself is careful to insist that 'sociologists can never "escape" from history'. Historical evidence constrains the sociologists. It curbs 'their impulse to generalise or, in other words, to explain sociologically'; the 'specific and the contingent' provide the 'setting *and* the limits' for sociological analyses (Goldthorpe 1991: 225). Though the distinction between idiographic and nomothetic explanations is, according to Goldthorpe, one of the nature of evidence not one of principle, it does appear to provide the basis for his distinction between the craft of the historian and the task of the sociologist.

Where is the link which Goldthorpe makes between sociology as a 'generalizing science' and its ability to generate new evidence? It lies in a neo-Popperian account of the hypothetico-deductive method. From our knowledge of particulars, we frame a hypothesis, in a general form; from that we deduce the consequences which are logically entailed by our hypothesis and then we can identify the evidence by which the claims of our initial hypothesis can be tested.

Goldthorpe allows 'narratives' to play their part in the production of the generalizations to which sociology aspires. He argues that 'we need to invest the regularities that we describe statistically with ... an "action story line", or "narrative" of a kind that will allow us to say that we *understand* the courses of action, and in turn the process of social interaction, by which the regularities are generated.' (Goldthorpe 1993) Our interpretation should, in principle, be open to correction on grounds of logic and evidence, including further statistical analysis of the original or of additional evidence. Hermeneutic approaches are therefore, according to Goldthorpe, complementary to statistical analyses.

Statistical analysis offers a powerful tool for identifying the presence, or absence, of relations among characteristics of categories of phenomena. They may reveal the inadequacies of the particular narratives offered by sociologists or historians in accounting for the events they describe. But they are not designed to adjudicate among alternative accounts which draw the threads of their narratives together from different sets of observations constructed along different rhetorical lines. Historians write narratives; so do the actors in their scripts who interpret and reinterpret their own experiences and expectations and those of others within shared frames of reference. Narratives may include multiple story lines which reflect on one another and back again on themselves. They may escape the limits imposed by the regularities identified by statistical observations.

We need not rely on statistically representative examples. Critical cases may be examined to test our hypotheses, to see whether the possible exception can prove the rule. Clyde Mitchell distinguished the rationales of statistical and logical inference. Statistical inferences state the degree of confidence we may have that the relationships observed in our sample are true of the parent population. Logical inferences provide reasons for claiming that 'the theoretically necessary or logical connection among the features observed in the sample pertain also to the parent population.' Extrapolation from statistical samples requires both sorts of inference. 'In case studies, statistical inference is not invoked at all. Instead the inferential process turns exclusively on the theoretically necessary linkages among the features in the case study. The validity of the extrapolation depends not on the typicality or representativeness of the case but upon the cogency of the theoretical reasoning.' (Mitchell 1983: 207).

The procedure adopted in generalizing from case studies may be stated in the following way. We observe a complex of phenomena over this period in that place. If these are not insulated from the wider world, then we can argue that the society and period from which the case study is taken must have certain characteristics which would be necessary or just likely for the observed phenomena to exist. These features of the wider society will have implications for other situations though they will not necessarily take the same form or be affected in the same way as the observed case. We may then seek further evidence on the case at hand, from other situations, and about the wider society to see whether it supports our account, enriches it or requires us to revise or even abandon our explanation. It is not a matter of subjecting a general proposition to the test of falsification but of incrementally building up our understanding of specific events and social processes by exploring evidence and trying out interpretations.

Interpretations of case studies foreground some aspects of the situation they describe: 'in interpreting the events in any particular case theoretically the analyst must suppress some of the complexity in the events and state the logical connections among some of the features which are germane to the interpretation.' (Mitchell 1983: 205). These selected features need to be placed in their context lest they be generalized beyond the limits within which the relevant conditions obtain. Statistical models similarly require the abstraction of aspects salient to the model from the multiplicity of events they are analyzing. Statistical analyses should be situated carefully in the context of accounts of social actions taking place in historical time and geographical place from which the relevant observations were made lest their inferences be extended beyond the specific contexts to which they apply (Franzosi 1996: 362, 371-375).

Goldthorpe (1996) identifies three problems with inferences both from case studies and from the statistical analysis of variables. The first is the problem of drawing conclusions from few cases ('the small N problem'); the second is the

likely interdependence among the explanatory ('independent') variables; the third is the 'black box' problem - we need to be able to explain how the observed 'inputs' generate the observed outputs. All three, Goldthorpe argues, arise in generalizing from case studies as well as from the statistical analysis of variables. If the case studies are intended to provide the foundation for propositions which are generally valid across a range of instances sharing identified characteristics, then they will be inadequate to the task of testing our prior hypotheses. If the 'purpose of all science ... is to coordinate our experiences into a logical framework' (Einstein 1978: 1), then the contribution of evidence from case studies to scientific knowledge rests not on its claims to representativity but on its exemplary status.

The claim for case studies is that they provide insights into general processes which may only be observed through an examination of individual instances; they do not exist outside such instances. There is only a small N problem if the cases are intended to represent a parent population to which the characteristics of the sample are extrapolated. Whereas, in interpreting case studies, we need to conceptualize the ways in which processes interact with one another and identify their 'course and consequences'. The issue is one of the uses to which case studies may appropriately be put. What are general propositions in sociology for - whether they are derived from statistical analyses or from studies of particular cases?

Explanations in History

Let us return to Rickert. He argues that explanations of history are a matter of interpreting particular events in their cultural context. Clearly, the complex of signs, practices, conventions, rules and understandings which give shape to cultural life are neither static nor uniform across societies, however bounded. Nor do we all experience them in the same way. Nevertheless, we construct our lives, in most circumstances, on expectations of a degree of consistency in social practice and a capacity to share understandings and communicate our experiences. Culture is social, not individual, and extends beyond particular events. This makes it possible for us to understand aspects of cultures, those we have grown up or lived in and those we have not, and this is why we can situate human actions in their specific cultural contexts.

To give an account of an event is to bring discrete observations into relations with one another. This itself supposes that they have some bearing on one another. To explain the event requires us to construct an account of what those relations are. This may, indeed it probably should, lead us to ask further questions and to seek to find out about yet other events. Phenomena which we observe in a specific place, or which involve only a few people, may well be explained satisfactorily only with reference to events far distant, in place or time,

to the matters observed. These connections are not self-evident. Their validity depends on our capacity to bring them together into a plausible story line and to see if that story line fits the available, and not-yet available, evidence. What makes the postulated connections plausible? Surely, the assumption that, in comparable cases, we would expect similar circumstances to yield similar outcomes (cf. Windelband 1980: 182-3; Weber 1949: 79). Indeed, it is from our knowledge of comparable cases that we may have identified connections which others have not recognized or come to look for evidence which others have not thought of finding.

Our stories are selective. People, including those involved in the activities described, can and do tell them differently from one another. We do not necessarily ask the same questions or look for the same meanings as one another in any sets of related events. In that case, the objects that we describe are therefore not quite the same as each other. We may construct a shared account of a phenomenon and establish common ways of accounting for types of phenomena but this is the outcome of the shared assumptions and rules of the discourses or procedures through which we account for them rather than of the properties of the phenomena themselves. In describing what happens we provide an explanatory structure for sequences of events.

When we give an account of a series of events we imbue it with some notion of consequence. In describing events, we treat them, implicitly or explicitly, as the outcomes of intentional actions or causal processes. Narratives are structured by explanatory connections.

If our accounts of particular events rest on more general propositions, does the explanation of the particular then lie with the application of general findings to specific instances? Complex events are not susceptible to single explanations. It is likely that there will be several plausible ways of ordering the elements included in an explanatory account, whether it takes a narrative or a statistical form (Abbott 1983: 132, 134). We may think of sets of events as the outcomes of the interactions of several processes. These may, for example, be represented in models of interactive factors through which we can interpret the likely impact of changes in the numerical values assigned to variable factors. Statistical procedures allow us to identify the extent to which the patterns and variations in the values of selected factors (dependent variables) may be accounted for by the extent and changes of the values of others (independent variables). Reliance on single-equation models pre-empts the interpretation of reciprocal patterns of social interaction. The capacities of statistical packages to process numbers may displace sociological interpretations of action and process. These may require more subtle statistical procedures which do not lay causal chains out along a linear pathway (Franzosi 1996: 373-383, forthcoming).

The explanatory power of models does not, in the end, depend on the extent to which they can accurately replicate our empirical findings, leaving the least

possible 'unexplained' variance. Models allow us to think about the logic of social processes, abstracted from the contingent contexts in which they operate. Generalizations rest on abstractions, often of heroic proportions. They model aspects of social situations, which are 'more or less present and occasionally absent' in specific cases (Weber 1949: 90, cf. 102-103). Other things are never equal. *Generalizations in the social and historical sciences, therefore, do not rest on homologies but only on analogies.*

Analogies and Questions

Analogies are never complete. The interesting questions typically arise at the point where they break down, when things do not appear to be much as we expect them to. They are therefore good for asking questions. Where several instances follow a general pattern, the similar circumstances or common origin which brought about to the pattern will often seem fairly obvious. The exceptional case, which stands out from the rest, invites us to explain why it is different and to reconsider which specific conditions gave rise to the features common to all the other cases. For example, where 'rational choice' models fit with observed courses of human action, they merely redescribe, in abstract form, aspects of our behaviour. But when people do not act in the way in which plausible models of strategies of action suggest, they require us to ask new questions.

Karlin observed, in a lecture to the Royal Society, that: 'The purpose of models is not to fit the data, but to sharpen the questions.' (Karlin 1983) Statistical analyses of evidence about phenomena and sets of phenomena reveal patterns, of surprising similarities and unexpected differences, which invite further inquiry. Franzosi (1995; 1996: 370-375) considered a series of hypotheses about the determinants of the incidence of strikes in different periods in post-war Italy and uses statistical models to confirm, or disconfirm, them. He then asks how these results stand up against the 'test of history' and generally finds them wanting. The 'discrepancies between statistical and historical explanations' which he encountered set new puzzles, requiring richer and more complex solutions than multivariate analysis could provide.

Analogies enable us to establish intellectual environments within which we can interpret specific events. They provide a framework for a comparative study of historical events which may both reveal common patterns and draw attention to significant divergences among the cases compared and suggest possible lines of interpretation for yet other circumstances. They are insufficient to provide sufficient foundations for the 'systematizing drive' to which 'comparative macro-sociology' aspires.

Generalizations, implicit or explicit, guide the work of historical interpretation. There is merit in clarifying the assumptions which underlie our claims about the

connections among observations and events. There are virtues to drawing comparisons between cases and identifying their relevance and limits. Social action is shaped by contexts which extend across time and space. To understand events we need to explore multiple periods and different spaces. The events are the outcome of interactive processes and of the interactions among different processes producing divergent chains of consequences. Mathematicians have demonstrated that simple and entirely deterministic processes may generate entirely unpredictable outcomes (May 1976), even without taking account of the contingent effects of their interactions with other processes.

Sociologists and historians study the specific ways in which humans interact to produce the conditions, intended or otherwise, in which they act to produce new conditions. It is not possible for social scientists to discover the general laws which a nomothetic science aspires to or for historians to produce purely idiographic accounts of events. They are both constrained by limits which are common to their methods of inquiry. To explain particular events, we draw on more general insights and on formal models, themselves taken from our knowledge of specific instances, to create an explanatory narrative. As Weber wrote in 1906, 'the knowledge of causal *laws* is not the *end* of an investigation but only a *means*' (Weber 1949: 79, also 80).

Understanding the World and Changing It

As an editor of the *Archiv fur Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Weber was concerned not only with social science but also with social policy. What are the implications of our argument — that the purpose of sociological explanation is congruent with the tasks of the historian: in Abrams' words, to make sense of 'the relationship of personal activity and experience on the one hand and social organization on the other as something that is continuously constructed in time' — for the relations of sociologists and historians to policy makers.

Sociologists, if not historians, are called upon to demonstrate the relevance of their disciplines to practical policy makers, not just to interpret the world but to change it. In the new South Africa, their task is defined in terms of their contribution to 'Reconstruction and Development'. In Britain, the Economic and Social (formerly Social Science) Research Council (ESRC) refers research proposals to 'users' for their prior comment — a procedure which makes explicit the utilitarian justifications for the creation of the SSRC (King 1996).

If sociology can deliver generalizations, which may be expected to hold good across different contexts, then they may provide the building blocks for an applied science in which the expertise of the sociologist can be applied to solve the problems raised by policy-makers. If, as we have argued, the explanations of social scientists are limited in their application to specific contexts, they cannot

be expected to provide the answers to the problems of social policy. The contingent and conditional form of their conclusions makes them inappropriate to the demands of policy makers. How then are historians and sociologists to relate to the holders of power and politicians to the research of social scientists?

The concerns of historians and sociologists with theories and explanations are different from those of politicians. Historians work to uncover and to interrogate further evidence about the past. The ways in which they plan and carry out their research will shape the manners in which evidence is disclosed or even, for example through interviews, brought into being. Sociologists who seek to come to grips with current realities may interact with events as they unfold or try to find ways of observing them from a safe distance. Historians value especially the benefits of hindsight, after some of the dust has settled, while sociologists often want to be there while the dust is settling — and even to adjust the way it falls out so that some of it can be taken away for inspection and further examination.

There are a variety of forms of social and historical research and strategies of social and historical explanation. They distinguish historians (or sociologists) from one another as much as they separate the professional styles of historians from the ways in which sociologists go about their business. None of their approaches offer a perspective from which the results of research can be evaluated with a detached objectivity. The various research strategies cannot easily be classified in ways which distinguish the logic of sociological research from the logic of historical investigation and place sociologists neatly on one side of a line leaving historians together on another. Both sociologists and historians can, in the end, do no more, and no less, than draw on evidence of specific events and on analytic models to construct narrative accounts which selectively interpret and describe the 'continuous processes of construction' of social relations and social action.

Historians and social scientists create and deploy conceptual and practical tools to provide accounts of the elements which constitute the world they are describing and to offer analyses of the relations among them. They work, explicitly or implicitly, with models for interpreting their representations of events. As students of the social world they should relate to their hypothetical worlds creatively and openly, clarifying their assumptions and evaluating their appropriateness while deploying them in constructing their narratives and explanations. They may address their work to specific audiences but will find it difficult to determine how that knowledge is interpreted, appropriated and put to intellectual and practical use by others.

The task of politicians is a different one. They may, but do not generally, create models of hypothetical worlds but rather tend to choose among the alternatives on offer. They have to make judgements about which worlds can be brought into being. They relate to their hypothetical worlds coercively. They have

to decide which of these worlds they can, and would like, to achieve and try to find ways of turning them into self-fulfilling prophecies. They are required to make things happen. What they can do, and how they can do it, will be shaped by the forms of the state which they have inherited and through which they exercise power. Their capacity to take advice and to act on it will, in turn, depend on the ways in which these institutions work; those who wish to advise the holders of political office need first to understand the possibilities and constraints involved.

Politicians, Experts and Scientists

Policy makers may consult 'experts' on, for example, land reform, reorganizing distance education, the patterns of infection of TB and HIV among mineworkers, or the likelihood that people may contract Creutzfeld-Jacob disease from eating cattle infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Consultants may be required to give policy makers exclusive access to their findings. They are likely to be expected to provide analyses which confirm the direction of policies. At best, they will be asked to answer the questions put by policy makers without being able to question the assumptions underlying the debates over policies. The questions which can be asked are narrowed by the nature of the audience they are addressing. If they are allowed the scope, they may be able to identify pitfalls, bring more precision to the questions being asked and broaden the choices of policies to be considered.

If consultants are to be effective, they will need to present their findings selectively, adopting acceptable language and responding to the concerns of policy-makers. The forms in which knowledge is presented shapes the substance of what can be said or even thought. The consultant's message may prove unacceptable, especially when it identifies the failures of the policies themselves and not just of those who implement them.

Politicians, not surprisingly, wish to take credit for achievements and avoid responsibility for failures. They may hide behind an administrative relationship to the worlds they conceive, construct and effect, a dominant characteristic of the old order in South Africa and a blatant feature of the avoidance of responsibility by British government ministers for everything from arms sales to Iraq to prison escapes. This sort of relationship allows politicians and public servants to distance themselves from the actions of the institutions they serve, displacing their own ethical judgements with the requirements of the state, the party and its leaders. They may, alternatively, hide behind a consultative relationship to other people, a feature of the leaderless discourse which is prevalent in much of the new South Africa.

Policy makers often cite 'research' and 'evaluation' to lay claim to the procedures of 'science' as a way of legitimating policy without concern for the quality of the studies commissioned or cited or attending to the findings or

caveats of researchers. They may bring people together to be consulted as an exercise in public relations and a way of legitimating decisions about policies.

Politicians do, and should, consult with advisers, researchers and members of affected constituencies but must then adopt a position either, to borrow from Habermas (1970), of a merely 'instrumental' sort of implementation, eschewing responsibility, or of 'leadership' in implementing decisions in which they take responsibility for interpreting, intellectually and in practice, the views they have considered.

The task of the historian and the sociologist is to interpret the world; the task of the politician is to make it work. As Max Weber (1992a: 115-128) warned in the immediate aftermath of the German revolution of November 1918, those who would contract with the demon of politics must accept the responsibilities which follow. Their actions must be judged, not by their intentions or principles, but by their consequences. The dilemma is an awesome one: they cannot presume to know the outcomes in advance. What we can expect from them is the exercise of judgement.

Policy makers' judgements should be sociologically sensitive and historically informed. There is much to be learnt from past and from comparable experiences. Policy-makers have ignored the findings of social scientists to their own cost and to the cost of others. The 'development community' has too often failed to consult the archives before undertaking yet another project which imposes on its 'beneficiaries' the errors of previous projects and policies. It is important to consider the patterns of interactions revealed by sociological research into events in different places and at different times. Politicians should recognize that their actions intervene in multiple and dynamic chains of consequences, whose outcomes may not be predictable and constrained to remain within the parameters in which policy-makers wish to limit them. Even when they succeed in realizing their proximate goals they are setting under way a plurality of effects which will continue long after their specific targets has been reached. All that can, perhaps, be predicted is that things will generally turn out differently from what was intended. The irreducible gap between understanding the world and changing it remains.

Sociologists and historians can identify alternative possibilities and alternative ways of thinking about possibilities. They cannot claim the authority to provide prescriptive answers to the question 'What is to be done?' (Offe 1996). The sociologist, like the historian, is contracted to the demon of 'science' (Weber 1992b: 151-155). Science rests on pursuing the demands of evidence and logic wherever they lead. Social scientists need to be able to separate themselves off from the responsibility of making the world work so that they can take on the responsibility of making science work, which will at times create discomfort and prove embarrassing. A critical science is reflexive: it inquires into the assumptions underlying forms of knowledge and the material conditions which

shape social practice, including its own as well those of the people would shape policy and 'develop' others. Science may inform the practitioners of 'development'. It does not serve them.

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