

## A Defence of Historical Sociology

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### Abstract

Since gaining popularity as a research tradition, historical sociology's validity has been questioned on a number of fronts. Some have critiqued its focus on the past, arguing that sociologists should investigate the present. Its authenticity, as a field of study, has also been challenged on the basis that historical sociology shares certain features with the discipline of history. Commentators have ridiculed the methods associated with historical sociology, accusing the latter of being unsystematic and unreliable. This article offers a response to these criticisms and defends historical sociology as a valid research tradition. A historical sociological analysis of the tradition is presented and the complexities and contradictions of the critiques levelled against it are exposed.

### Introduction

Historical sociology is a tradition within the field of sociology that seeks to understand how the social world has changed over time. The tradition itself, much like the social history that it strives to negotiate, has developed since the founding of the sociological discipline. With these changes, historical sociology has faced numerous criticisms. The aim of this article is to offer a response to three of the most prominent challenges to historical sociology's validity.

The article is divided into three sections, each of which deals with critical issues. The first section considers a criticism made famous by Goldthorpe in 1991, which maintains that sociologists should not study the past, but rather focus on the present. To build evidence for why historical sociology should exist, a historical sociological outline of the tradition is offered, which summarizes its origins and social history. This outline also supplies context, in terms of the tradition's developments, while illustrating why it is prudent and useful for sociologists to study past historical shifts. In the second section, the idea that the disciplines of history and sociology are one and the same is challenged by looking at how each of the respective disciplines has different goals and research styles. The third section focuses on the critique of the investigative tools used by historical sociologists. In response, it is argued that different methods are suitable for different research questions, and that historical sociology still produces valuable research.

The article concludes that it is reductionist to limit sociology's output to nomothetic, present-centred results, produced using modern quantitative methods. To restrict the discipline in such a way negates the reasons why sociology was developed in the first place, while also narrowing the scope of knowledge creation. In consequence, this work advocates diversity and collaboration in the social sciences. Researchers should not be limited by differences, but instead ought to utilize them so as to advance academic understanding.

### Sociology and the Scientific Study of the Past

In his widely cited critique of historical sociology, Goldthorpe argued that sociologists 'should leave history to the historians' (Mennell, 2017: 1). His justification for this was that sociological data collected in the present allows for 'rigorous' testing and the opportunity to grapple with 'reliability and validity' (Goldthorpe, 1991: 216). To exemplify his controversial point, Goldthorpe stressed that 'social change' can be studied by 'life-course, cohort or panel studies', which all take place in the present (ibid). For him, such studies do not have the same limitations as historical enquiry, as relics<sup>13</sup> are always 'partial and lacunary', meaning that so too are the 'inferences that can be drawn from the fragmented remains of the past' (Bryant, 1994: 4). Thus, Goldthorpe implied that historical sociology is unscientific because it unsystematically attaches theories to incomplete fragments of social pasts. This article does not share Goldthorpe's view and instead will argue that historical sociology is needed to scientifically understand social change. Evidence in support of this can be found by considering the origins of sociology.

Comte (1798–1857) was among the first to observe a need to study the social world in a scientific manner. Developed between 1830 and 1842, his two laws – the law of three stages and the encyclopaedic law of scientific development – led to his classification of *physique sociale*, 'social physics', which he would later rename *sociologie*, 'sociology', in 1839 (Gane, 2006): 'logie' referring to a subject or body of knowledge, and

<sup>13</sup> 'Relics' is the term Goldthorpe adopted to refer to 'existing available traces, artifacts and documents' (Šubr, 2012: 406).

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‘socio’ from the Latin ‘societus’, which translates to ‘society’ (Taneja, 2005 [2003]; Walia, 2008). ‘Sociology’ is therefore the scientific study of society and social matters, and the body of work that is devoted to doing so.

The founding fathers of sociology, Karl Marx (1818–1883), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Max Weber (1864–1920), followed in Comte’s footsteps by considering the social world scientifically. That said, Marx was less concerned with the academic discipline to which he contributed, famously complaining that the philosophers had spent too much time interpreting the world, rather than changing it (1969 [1888]). He believed that his scientific socialism was ‘a theoretical praxis and a practical theory’ (Löwith, 2003 [1993]: 46). For Durkheim, ‘sociology is not the appendage of any other science; it is itself a distinct and autonomous science’ (1982 [1895]: 162). Weber is famed for likening the study of the social to a science because of its ability to identify causal relationships and explanations for social actions/behaviours.

All four men, despite their differing aims and intentions, employed the tools of the new discipline to contribute to a systematic, scientific understanding of the social world. Yet, this is not the only connection that linked these scholars; they all used socio-historical methods. As Lachmann noted, ‘[s]ociology at its beginnings was historical because of the questions its founders asked’ (2013: 1). Comte looked at historical shifts in order to understand human development and present his case for the positivist period, from which sociology was born. Marx analysed the historical shifts that led people to live under capitalism and how major social change could lead them to a new age of equality (ibid). Durkheim’s concern was the historical shift from mechanical to organic solidarity (ibid). Weber focused on the historical shifts that helped to shape religious practice, human action, and capitalism (ibid).

Sociology’s founders had developed new ways of scientifically thinking about the social world by looking at past historical change. This, in essence, is the definition of historical sociology. Despite this, after their deaths, the sociology that these scholars had pioneered faced a political threat. In Europe, from the 1920s–1950s, fascism and totalitarianism stunted the growth of historical sociology. ‘Regimes which “knew” the future and invented the past rejected historical sociology’ (Smith, 1991: 2). With strict control over academia in Europe, sociology developed in the United States of America. Adams, Clemens and Orloff claimed that this aided the institutionalization of the discipline, and that it ‘took shape in the United States’ (2005: 4). However, they also acknowledged that sociology’s ‘historically-informed theoretical vision gave way to more ahistorical models of social and cultural change’ (ibid). ‘In America, sociology became a discipline from which scientific outputs with clear practical use were expected’ (Šubrť, 2017: 5). Theory concerning the social world was of little interest; research had to be scientific, practical, rational, empirical, usable, and, more often than not, quantitative. In the words of Smith, ‘[b]ig business and big science were the main repositories of value and knowledge in the leading capitalist democracy’ (1991: 2).

Despite the institutional (economic) worth granted to sociology that had practical utility, scholars of the 1950s and 1960s readopted historical sociology. According to Šubrť, ‘[b]y this point, sociologists had recognized that sociology could not be based on empirical research alone’ (2017: 5). Lipset (1950; 1963), Bendix (1964), Tilly (1964), and Moore (1966) all ‘engaged in fundamentally historical questions’, which would lead the way for ‘the next generation of historical sociologists’ (Adams, Clemens and Orloff, 2005: 5). In the 1970s and 1980s, historical sociology was on the rise in both America and Europe. Wallerstein (1974; 1983), Paige (1975), Tilly (1975; 1978; 1981), and Skocpol (1979) all made breakthroughs in studying social change by adopting historical sociological standpoints. With this resurgence came criticism. As noted by Calhoun, these self-established historical sociologists gained attention from ‘many leaders of the dominant quantitative, scientific branch of the discipline’ who were to ‘dismiss their work as...somehow not quite “real” sociology’ (1996: 305).

As is evident from Goldthorpe’s critique, since the resurgence, some commentators still do not see the value of historical sociology. Mennell (2017) has argued that these views may be the product of physics envy<sup>14</sup>, which has been a lasting problem in sociology and other disciplines within the social sciences. Yet, this article posits that such commentators are missing the point of sociology in general. Since its origins, sociology has always been the scientific study of past historical shifts and changes. In fact, historical shifts and social changes have done much to benefit sociology as a discipline, in more than just the subject matter that it covers. Due to the European academic constraints of the 1920s–1950s, sociology was to further develop as a discipline and incorporate new methods. Life-course, cohort, and panel studies, which provide valuable results, are examples of such methods. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that these methods were built on the foundation of historical sociology.

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Physics envy’ refers to a perceived need for research to be considered as ‘valid’, ‘logical’, ‘quantifiable’ or ‘empirical’ as that which is found in the discipline of physics.

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The development of methods that allow a researcher to study the present does not mean that historical sociology should, itself, be left in the past. As Calhoun has rightly stated, '[t]he most compelling reason for the existence of historical sociology is embarrassingly obvious (embarrassingly because so often ignored). This is the importance of studying social change' (2003: 383). The world existed in a state of flux prior to the development of sociology as a discipline and, as a result, sociology still needs to understand historical shifts and social change. This view was echoed by Mikl-Horke, who believed that Goldthorpe 'overlooks the fact that every social reality has an historical nature and all sociological data will finally become part of history' (cited by Šubrt, 2012: 405). Indeed, as Mennell (2017) has made clear, Goldthorpe's own sociological work is now a relic. The present of today will always become the past of yesterday, and there exists no method to preserve all relics.

## History and Sociology

If, since its creation, sociology has existed to study change in the social world, it is not surprising that sociologists such as Runciman (1970), Giddens (1979), and Abrams (1982) have claimed that it is no different from history. After all, at their core, both fields focus on human change. Yet, as argued by Mann (1994), Lachmann (2013), and, to an extent, Goldthorpe (1991), there are some similarities between history and sociology, but there are also many differences between the two disciplines. History is defined as the study of the past using written records and, because of this, it remains an incredibly broad discipline. It is linked to prehistory, which is the study of the human<sup>15</sup> past before written historical records. Other disciplines, like sociology, focus on humans, but despite this shared connection, (pre)history and sociology remain highly distinct. As Lachmann has posited, 'history and sociology have their own histories, and the past intellectual, institutional, and career decisions made by historians and sociologists shape the questions asked, the methods employed, the data analysed, and the arguments offered within each discipline today' (2013: 6). This view is echoed by Šubrt, who notes that 'the fact remains that sociologists and historians do not speak a common language' (2017: 7).

One of the key reasons why sociology and history are so divergent as disciplines is that (pre)historians often specialize in a particular time period, which is linked to a geographical location, e.g. British Mesolithic or Ancient Egyptian (Tilly, 1991; Burke, 2005; Lachmann, 2013). Conversely, sociologists tend to focus on a specific question that concerns social matters. For example, Durkheim questioned the cause of the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity, while Marx analysed how capitalism developed as a mode of production. While their enquiries turned to history for answers, they were not grounded in a precise time period or geographical location. The historian would not ask questions about Russian communism if they were researching tribal equality in the Mesolithic period, but the sociologist might do so. The way in which studies within the respective disciplines are structured is drastically different too. There are advantages and disadvantages to both methods<sup>16</sup>, but it is clear that '[w]hat distinguishes historical sociology from history is that it uses history for an explicitly sociological purpose' (Delanty and Isin, 2003: 3).

## Historical Sociological Research

Despite agreeing that history and sociology are independent disciplines, Goldthorpe argued that sociologists should focus on the present, while historians should focus on the past. He held that present-centred sociological data was of a superior scientific quality. Yet, he also thought that sociologists are not limited by time and place in terms of evidence collection: 'Historians...are concerned with finding evidence from among a stock of relics. In contrast...sociologists have open to them the possibility that is largely denied to historians...[sociologists] can generate evidence...when they engage in "fieldwork"' (Goldthorpe, 1991: 214). In consequence, Goldthorpe was of the opinion that sociologists should produce their own evidence, in the present, which could be tested empirically in order to develop general social laws.

Although Goldthorpe's style of sociology can be said to produce valid results, it is reductive to condemn other ways of understanding the social world. As previously noted, sociology is necessarily historical and needs to study the past so as to understand historical shifts and social change. Even so, Goldthorpe would counter this by saying that these shifts and changes can be investigated in the present. He illustrates this by claiming that if a sociologist is studying industrial societies, it is only 'sensible' for them to look at contemporary industrial societies (Goldthorpe, 1991: 214). This is problematic insofar as industrialization has existed, throughout the ages, in many different forms and guises. To illustrate, the Peruvian industrialization seen today is not the same as the Peruvian industrialization of the nineteenth century. In turn, it remains controversial to believe that a sociologist's aim would be to develop a theory that is applicable to 'all industrial societies' (ibid). Indeed, it is

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<sup>15</sup> History, prior to the appearance of the human species, is typically explained by those who study earth science, which is linked more closely to the discipline of geology than history.

<sup>16</sup> See Burke (2005) for a detailed account.

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argued that many early sociologists did have nomothetic goals, and some sociologists – historical or otherwise – still strive to produce generalizable macro theories. However, sociology can also view the social world on a micro scale. Not being confined to time or place, sociologists can study past and/or present forms of industrialization, in specific locations, without the aim of creating a theory that would apply to all industrial societies.

Researchers have autonomy in respect of the questions they ask, and they are free to select the method that is most suitable for answering them. As Mann has stated, ‘there are differences between methods appropriate for studying the past and present. . . sociologists of the present cannot go out and create whatever data they like’, and nor can a historical sociologist (1994: 38). ‘[A]s E. P. Thompson said, “you can’t interview tombstones”’ (Gittins, 2003 [1998]). Equally, you cannot collect survey data from some, very alive, elites. As such, if studying successful industrialists, for example, it could be more fruitful to turn to history for answers than to receive no response from elite contacts. No single research method is free from limitations or problems, but it is the responsibility of the researcher to select the most appropriate method.

The point that Goldthorpe misses is that, depending on the object or area of research, historical methods can be more appropriate than methods used to study the present. In light of this, his argument invokes sociological reductionism by placing a greater value on methods that are deemed to be more valid or of a higher quality due to their application in the present and their reproducibility. He also overstates the importance of creating new data, when, if relics are perfectly accessible, there is little to no value to be found in generating more ‘evidence’ when said ‘evidence’ already exists and can provide a better means of study. This is not indolence on the part of the sociologist; it is simply logical and systematic.

## Conclusion

Goldthorpe’s argument is reductionist from the outset. Not only is he critiquing historical sociology, but he is also trying to re-centre the discipline of sociology more generally. For Goldthorpe, sociology should be present-centred, nomothetic, and testable, and it should make use of modern (quantitative) methods. Sociology has undergone a number of social changes of its own, which have positioned it as a rich and diverse field of study. Sociologists now adopt an assortment of research methods, align themselves with varying schools of thought, ask wide-ranging questions about the past, present, and future of the social world, and work in collaboration with people in industry and other academic disciplines. Thus, in agreement with Bryant, who rejects Goldthorpe’s ‘call to halt or reverse the trend towards interdisciplinary synthesis’, sociologists should instead push this trend forward (1994: 15).

In closing, this article calls for researchers to embrace their differences in order to further inform the globalized academic world. To illustrate, in order to rectify Eurocentric and Western-centric perspectives in social-scientific accounts of human development, a sub-branch of historical sociology has recently emerged known as ‘international historical sociology’. The expansion of this tradition, which allows for more inclusive and informed voices, is one of the many advantages of academic globalization. Historical sociologists are not limited to the confines of sociology itself, and can easily pool their resources with colleagues from other fields, including historians, economists, psychologists, geographers, and physicists from across the globe. It is high time that researchers stopped subjecting their disciplines to reductionist frameworks in order to claim to be the pinnacle of validity. Instead, an emphasis should be placed on collaboration, via inter-departmental, interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and inter-cultural research. Rather than viewing difference as a weakness and something to criticize, it can be used to diversify and strengthen the validity of knowledge.

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