

## **HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY: DEVELOPMENT AND REORIENTATION**

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### **Summary**

Historical sociology, while having classical origins in the pre-disciplinary writings of Marx, Weber and major historians such as Braudel, as a disciplinary subfield is a product of postwar sociology. Today historical sociology has become post-disciplinary.

### **1. Introduction**

Historical sociology occupies an ambiguous space between history and sociology. While it would be impossible to sum it up in a few sentences, one of its defining characteristics is a concern with the formation and transformation of modernity. In this respect the orientation of historical sociology concerns the present, viewed as both shaped by and shaping the past. Some of its most influential representatives - those in the Weberian, Marxian, *Annales* traditions, for instance - wrote works on long-run historical processes that took the formation of modernity as the key question. Perhaps because they were products of times that had experienced major social crises in modernity, these approaches looked to the defining events in the formation of modernity, in particular those epochal transitions such as the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the formation of the modern state, the revolutionary movements that heralded the modern age, such as the Reformation, the French Revolution, the workers' movement. The works of such prominent figures as Karl Marx, Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, Max Weber, Werner Sombart and F.W Maitland combined explanatory with interpretative methods; they were pre-

disciplinary, being neither exclusively historical nor exclusively sociological. Neither Marx nor Weber, for example, saw himself as a sociologist: Weber, influenced as he was by the German historicism, came to sociology relatively late in his life, and Marx was not exposed to sociology as such. Benedetto Croce was explicitly opposed to sociology, believing that it was not a true science. Yet Braudel, not being a sociologist as such but a historian, consciously drew upon sociology. It is evident that these pivotal figures did not distinguish sharply between history and sociology. German sociology does not have an explicit historical sociology, perhaps because German sociology is already historical in its self-understanding. Similarly, French historiography also lacks an explicit designation of historical sociology, but under the influence of Simiand and *Annales*, French historians have always drawn upon sociological concepts and methods. The turn to historical sociology was a development within postwar Anglo-American sociology, which, awakened by the Second World War, had emerged out of its earlier retreat from history.

## 2. Classical Historical Sociology

The early historical sociology was a product of an older tradition going back to Auguste Comte [1854] and Emile Durkheim [1894], on the one hand, and the philosophy of history as envisaged by Giambattista Vico [1725] and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel [1830], on the other. What distinguished their historical orientations, grounded as they were in sociological or philosophical conceptions, was a reaction against the nationalist historiography that dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, recording the birth and 'progress' of nations and the march of liberty. Indeed, it is in this reaction that the seeds of modern historical-sociological orientation were sown: it was more concerned about the formation of modernity as the essence of the present than articulating 'natural' histories of nations. Yet it was also in this reaction that the seeds of another perspective were sown: Eurocentrism or orientalism. For in beginning to interpret the essence of modernity, new histories in the nineteenth century increasingly turned toward that which ostensibly was never modern - the Orient - and began articulating occidental history as one continuous march toward modernity, beginning with ancient Greece. Throughout the nineteenth century, histories of Greece, Rome and medieval Europe were written from the perspective of articulating a distinct occidental culture while at the same time inventing an occidental tradition juxtaposed against an oriental one. The traces of these seeds would eventually disseminate themselves into the most prominent practitioners of historical sociology, whether as a belief in the 'Asiatic mode of production' (Marx) or 'oriental patrimonialism' (Weber).

If orientalism constituted an unresolved tension of historical sociology, so did scientism. For in concerning itself with the essence of the present as the formation of modernity, historical sociology was split between two orientations: scientific, where this essence was seen as explainable by laws and regularities immanent within societies themselves; and interpretative, where the concern with the present was seen as building narrative series. It was this latter tension that was to dominate the early twentieth century, whereas the former slowly came to the fore in the late twentieth century. We shall return to the tension regarding orientalism later.

The tension between scientific and interpretative approaches opened the twentieth century with a debate over method. This tension was most visible in the well-known attack of Francois Simiand [1903] on the empiricist and positivist historians, accusing them of setting out impossible goals by considering facts as given and attempting to develop laws. Instead, he urged for a sociologically grounded history where the aim would be to develop series. Yet it has been often overlooked that Simiand himself developed a rather rigid view of 'historical sociology' with his emphasis on verification, validity and rules of method. His accent of emphasis was certainly on the sociological rather than on the historical.

When founded by March Bloch and Lucien Febvre in 1929, *Annales d'histoire economique et sociale* owed much to Simiand and his 'historical sociology'. The accent of emphasis was, however, historical rather than sociological. In a remarkable way, the issues of method and the tension that defined the debate in the early century between Simiand and the historians continued to dominate historical sociological imagination throughout the century. Recognizing, then, that the founding figures of the broad field of historical sociology were shaped both by history and sociology and by the tension between the two, it may be suggested that the subsequent trajectory of historical sociology also moved in two directions. These trajectories were disciplinary ones, one emanating more from sociology and the other from history.

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### Biographical Sketches

**Gerard Delanty**, born in Cork Ireland in 1960 and studied sociology and philosophy at University College Cork, obtaining the degrees of BA (1982), MA (1984) and PhD (1987). He was a D.A.A.D. Scholar at Frankfurt University in 1986-7.

He is Professor of Sociology and Social and Political Thought, University of Sussex, UK and has held visiting professorships at York University, Ontario and Doshisha University, Kyoto. He is the author 100 papers and eleven books and has edited several volumes. His books include *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (London, Macmillan, 1995) and (with Chris Rumford) *Rethinking Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005). He has edited (with Engin Isin) *Handbook of Historical Sociology* (London, Sage, 2003), *Handbook of Contemporary European Social Theory* (London, Routledge, 2005), (edited with Krishan Kumar) *Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* (London, Sage, 2006). He is the Chief Editor of the *European Journal of Social Theory*.

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He is a Chair in Citizenship and Professor of Politics in Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Open University. He is also director of the Centre for Citizenship, Identities, Governance (CCIG) at the Faculty of Social Sciences. He is the author of *Cities Without Citizens: Modernity of the City as a Corporation* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992), *Citizenship and Identity* with Patricia K. Wood (London: Sage, 1999) and *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). He has written numerous journal articles and book chapters as well as delivering public lectures. His most recent books are co-edited with Bryan S. Turner and Peter Nyers, *Citizenship Between Past and Future* (London: Routledge, 2008) and with Greg Nielsen, *Acts of Citizenship* (London: Zed, 2008). His edited book *Recasting the Social in Citizenship* (University of Toronto Press, 2008) is about bridging social and political struggles over citizenship.