FROM THE CHAIR

All Sociology is Historical and Comparative

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As chair of the section, I decided to take this as an opportunity to engage in a rant, a rant defending what folks who are members of this section do.

I am sitting and writing this in a hotel in Barcelona. It is November 20, 2011 and today is an election. In Spain there is twenty percent unemployment and the knowledge that even more fiscal austerity is coming. In the wake of this, one might expect more social unrest and a left wing social movement. But today, if the polls are right, the Popular Party, a Center Right Party, will sweep the election bringing into power a man who has campaigned on a platform to cut the size of government substantially. Across Europe, in the past two weeks, two governments, Greece and Italy have fallen. The financial crisis has replaced them both with men whose main claim to fame has been close ties to the European Un-
ion and the European Central Bank. From close up, it looks like democracy has been circumvented in these two countries and the so-called technocrats look mostly like people in sympathy with the bankers who brought us the financial crisis.

The situation in the U.S. is shockingly similar. Our right wing social movement, the Tea Party, is funded by people who made their fortunes in the financial community. Their proscription for America is less government, lower taxes for the wealthy, and a plethora of onerous measures designed to cut back on the American welfare state. The most likely Republican candidate for president, Mitt Romney, made his money buying up companies, loading them with debt, and laying off workers.

The past few months have witnessed a more populist social movement, the Occupy Wall Street movement. A few weeks ago, in a dozen of the well over one hundred cities with occupations, mayors (who have grown tired of the occupiers) coordinated an attack to clear off many of the largest of these encampments. What happens next remains to be seen. A year out, most polls suggest that in spite of the “Occupy” social movement, we will once again have a Republican president.

The past few weeks have seen the issuance of a series of reports about poverty and wealth written mostly by economists (and these reports have been coming on and off for the past twenty years). These reports, because of the Occupy Movement, are finally gaining traction in the press. But I have been struck by how much of the press is trying to ignore the movement, its size, and its spread across the country and the world.

So where are we sociologists in all of this? I am sad to report that the American sociological presence studying the financial crisis here (and abroad), the increasing inequality in income and wealth in America (and abroad), the assault on the American welfare state (and abroad), and almost every other important historical event in America (and around the world) of the past thirty years is sadly lacking. I can count the number of American sociologists interested in Europe on my two hands. Even more troubling, I can say the same thing for the number of sociologists who have done serious work on the changing nature of income and wealth inequality and the transformation of work in the United States which has led to lower pensions, less secure health care, and of course, greater fear of job loss. American Sociologists, for all of their professed interest in social change, have to a large degree missed many of the important social changes in their own society of the past thirty years.

Why is this? I would argue that our field has become overly concerned with creating smaller and smaller subfields, most of which attempt to take their subject matters as a reality sui generis that have no history and have no place. This causes them to fetishize the present and encourage them into a kind of myopia that makes them unable to understand how these things have come to be and why they are always in the process of dynamic transformation. It has relegated historical and comparative sociology to being a method, not part of how one thinks about any particular area of study. It has treated historical and comparative sociology as a backwater whereby sociologists are interested in quaint things like other countries or other times that are by definition on the periphery of sociology. From the dominant perspective, this is because the core of sociology is supposed to be about something called “theory.” But what counts for theory in most sociological subfields are conceptual differences of opinion that mainly divide scholars into even smaller tribes of self-referential groups.

This is not good. As history is producing a series of mind numbing changes, the ongoing
world financial crisis, the Arab spring, and the continued development projects going on in Brazil, India, and China, sociology is left with little or nothing to say. Most sociologists interested in American society have shown little sense of how it has all changed in the past thirty years. The core of many sociologists’ interests is American social problems. But, the narrowness of the definition of these problems means that many scholars have failed to appreciate how the past thirty years have changed work, the sources of poverty and opportunity, and the slow decline of the American middle class. If you want to know anything about these changes, you read labor economics not sociology.

For all of this, I have one cure: historical and comparative sociology is not just a section, a method, or a set of unconnected studies that people engage in for obscure reasons. It should be at the core of how we look at any social process. One cannot study social stratification without understanding its dynamics over time. One cannot do political sociology without a historical sense of institutions and the nature of their current crises and how they are resolved. It is impossible to study the economy without realizing that how firms make profit and their linkages to the government have evolved over time and this has had a profound effect on people’s life chances. Sociology that tries to create understandings of society without regard to context or history cannot help but miss what is going on.

The next time someone who is a sociologist studying a narrow slice of America (without realizing it) asks you why you are studying something either historical or in another society, you should tell them that what they study is historical (it is happening now) and comparative (in the U.S.), but they just don’t realize it. Then, if this does not come off as too snarky, suggest that you might be willing to help them do better.

Letters

Editors’ Note: Last issue we featured a letter to the editor by Saïd Amir Arjomand’s and replies by James Mahoney and Immanuel Wallerstein. This issue we are pleased to add a letter by Edward A. Tiryakian to the debate.

Edward A. Tiryakian
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The challenge issued earlier by Saïd Arjomand to deal more adequately with comparative social change has generated in the Spring 2011 issue of Trajectories a lively round of discussion. What is lost from sight is that beyond the best of single state historical analyses, there are all too few comparative analyses of civilizations. It is the latter which deserve recognition as macro units of socio-historical change, with a distinguished list of contributors from Weber and Mauss down to Benjamin Nelson, Sorokin, Elias, Huntington, and the late S.N. Eisenstadt. Recently, in addition to Arjomand’s own work on Islam, Luis Roniger, a political scientist and student of Eisenstadt, has taken up Eisenstadt’s lead on taking Latin America as a civilization, not as a congeries of states.

In his reply to Arjomand, Immanuel Wallerstein indicates his disdain for “civilization” and “culture” as analytical tools in contrast to his “historical system”. Of course, his “world-system” system provided macrosociology with an interesting road map, but it is one which needs to be updated by noting the “cultural turn” that a renovated civilizational analysis has sought to bring about (Arjomand and Tiryakian 2004). This on-going theoretical exploration gives a central place for civilizations as dynamic, large bundles of cultural capital (Tiryakian, forthcoming) within the world setting. Given that Wallerstein’s own analysis of “world-system” began with the same 16th Century start as did Weber’s point of departure, a broader and more contemporary comparative analysis might treat this as what we have started to call a “civilization of modernity”. Getting out of the frame of viewing civilizations and culture as static concepts
would assist in a new and more adequate road map for comparative historical analysis.

**References:**

Editors’ Note: We sent a short survey to the comparative-historical section email list-serv. We would like to sincerely thank all who participated as well give extra thanks to the chair, Neil Fligstein, who received a large proportion of replies and assisted above and beyond the call of duty. All topics that received more than one vote are presented in the graphs. A significant amount of editorial discretion was exercised in grouping answers; a condensed version of all answers are included in the appendix. There were 28 respondents, 122 separate answers, and some answers were counted towards more than one category.

Question 1: What are the most important theoretical, substantive, and/or methodological issues in comparative historical research today?
**Question 2:** To what issues should the field as a whole be directed?

- Elites
- Inequality
- Effective Institutions
- Political Transformation
- Economic Change
- Culture
- Economic Crisis
- Disasters
- Military/Violence
- Less Europe/More Comparisons
- Macro-Social Change
- Other

**Question 3:** How should the field relate to the discipline at large/contribute to the definition and practice of sociology in general?

- Central to Sociology
- Distinct and Separate Subfield
- Closer to Policy (should be)
- Interdisciplinary
Appendix: Responses

Question 1:
- Set Theory Logic
- Causal Analysis
- Culture
- Global Economy
- Collective Goods
- Philosophy of Social Science
- Relation to History
- Sociological Historicism
- Empires and Colonialism
- Forms of Capitalism
- Collective Action
- Intellectuals and Science
- Ancient World
- Transnational Comparison
- Archival Methods
- Events in Time
- Small N Problem
- Micro-foundation of Macro-structures
- Development
- Democratization
- Rise of Nation States
- Achieving Gender Parity
- Democratization
- Industrialization
- Decline of Violent Conflicts
- Dynamics of Capitalism
- Moving beyond Eurocentricism
- Religion
- Less Europe, More Asia
- Non-Western Societies
- Global History
- Agency
- Relation of Culture and Structure
- Comparative Modernities
- Coherent Research Program
- Economic Development
- Tenure for Junior Faculty
- Bad Phrasing of Question
- Wrong Question
- Theorizing Units of Analysis
- Informal Coordination of Research
- Mixed Methods
- Economic Development
- Institutional Change
- Arab Spring
- Political Instability of Nation States
- Modernization of China
- Economic Crisis
- Macro-social Long-term Change
- Rise and Decline of Civilizations

Pooled Cross-section & Time Series Analysis
- Ethnographic Research
- Patrimonialism
- Authoritarianism
- Totalitarianism

Question 2:
- Elite Classes
- Oligarchy
- Inequality
- Effective Institutions
- Rise and Fall of Political Forms
- Collective Action and Contestation
- Evolving Economic Systems
- Epochal Cultural Shifts
- Relation of Knowledge/Science to Economic Change
- Economic Crisis
- Disasters
- Inequality
- Global Warming
- Violence
- Stupid Question
- Gender/Sexuality
- Culture
- Social Change
- Developing Core Knowledge
- Moving Beyond Eurocentrism
- Religion
- Non-Western Societies
- Military and Violence
- Large-scale Historical Perspectives
- Modernization Processes
- Desire for Centralized Governance
- Regime Change
- Culture
- Relation between State and Economy
- Inequality
- Technology and Social Change
- Religion and Social Change
- Theory and Method, not Substantive Topics
- Recreating Social Conditions of the Past
- Comparative-Historical Method
- Less Euro/US-centric
- Culture
- Global Warming
- Macro-historical Changes
- US State
- Financial Crisis
- Comparison across Nations
- Global Institutions
Question 3:
Distinctive Methodology
Reflexive Critique
Relating Structure, Events, Practices
Relating Structure and Culture
New Perspectives
Stupid Question
New Perspectives
Distinctive Subject Matter: Social Change
Theoretical Development
Moving beyond Eurocentrism
Historicizing Assumed Notions of Research
Global Crises

Macro-Processes
Historical Perspective
Big Picture People
More Policy Relevant
Stay Separate
Centrality to all Research
Progress
Interdisciplinarity
Defined and Well-populated Subfield
Center of the Field
Distinct Subfield
Improved Perspective for Entire Field


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