Chapter 1

Nationalism, History, and Social Change

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The *Methodenstreit* seems never quite to end, though it is sustained by confusion as much as by serious methodological difference. A case in point is the contrast of universalizing to particularizing sciences. This may say something about the characteristic styles of work in history and sociology (or even more in economics). Historians have indeed focused on particularities of time and place and the construction of narratives. Social scientists by contrast have been given disproportionately to the search for transhistorical generalizations and the abstraction of data from narrative contexts. But something is lost in the dichotomy.

Can a basic question such as what produced and distinguished the modern era be understood as either "nomothetic" or "idiographic"? It is a question about social changes so fundamental that they constitute new forms of understanding, existence, and action. Yet the very notion of an epochal change seems lost in the two contrasting visions of science. Both social scientists and historians are apt, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, to say that such concerns should be relegated to "unscientific" philosophers of history, particularly those of an older German sort epitomized by Hegel. But perhaps the part of Hegel's work most helpful to us in this circumstance is not the grand historical synthesis but the dialectical assertion that quantitative changes can render qualitative breaks.

Marx followed Hegel's suggestion in arguing that many gradual historical changes cumulatively produced capitalism, a radically new social formation. A crucial moment in his analysis is the discussion in *Capital* of how concrete work – something which certainly existed before capitalism – came to be constituted as labor in a new and special sense when organized through the commodity form and capitalist production

relations.[1] Old categories could no longer suffice for either practical action or scholarly understanding. In the present paper, I want to focus on another basic social change that turns on a crucial abstraction, one that helps to constitute some of the basic variables of social science, the nature of modern political communities, and deep aspects of contemporary human identity: the idea of nation. Together with its correlated and cognate terms, this idea – or, more precisely, the discursive formation of which it is a part – is crucial to the way in which we make sense of and thereby construct our social world. "Nation" is not a radically new term, but it takes on a radically new and basic significance in the modern era. And along with other such innovations it is central to what makes the modern epoch distinct.

My intention is to argue that many attempts to conceptualize the difference between history and sociology are misconceived. To this end, in the first part of the paper I shall briefly review some general approaches to the phenomenon of social change, situating my specific concern for categorical transformations. With this in mind, I shall use John Goldthorpe's recent and polemical attempt to distinguish sociology from history as a foil for clarifying why history is crucial to social theory and not simply an optional source of (usually inferior) data. Then I shall use the specifically modern discourse and politics of nations and national identities as an example of what it means to take seriously basic transformations in history and the constitutive roles discursive formations may play.

Varieties of social change

Social change is ubiquitous. Although social scientists have often treated stability as normal, and significant social change as an exceptional process deserving special explanation, scholars now expect to see some continuous level of change in all social organizations. Sharp, discontinuous changes are of course rarer, but still a normal part of social life. As Pierre Bourdieu (1980) and Anthony Giddens (1985) suggest, therefore, we need to see human social life as always structured, but incompletely so. "Structuration," to use their term, is as much a process of change as a reflection of stability. Indeed, the existence of stable social patterns over long periods of time requires at least as much explanation as does social change.

1. See Postone (1993) for a helpful discussion of this aspect of Marx's work.

Cumulative social change must be distinguished from the universal, processual aspect of all social life. Both sociologists and historians study the latter by focusing attention on those dynamic processes through which the social lives of particular individuals and groups may change, even though overall patterns remain relatively constant. Marriages and divorces are thus major changes in social relationships, but a society may have a roughly constant marriage or divorce rate for long periods of time. Likewise, markets involve a continuous flow of changes in who holds money or goods, who stands in the position of creditor or debtor, who is employed or unemployed, etc. These specific changes, however, generally do not alter the nature of the markets themselves. Researchers both study the form of particular transactions and develop models to describe the dynamics of large-scale statistical aggregations of such processes.

Sometimes, however, specific processes of social life undergo long-term transformations. These transformations in the nature, organization, or outcomes of the processes themselves are what is usually studied under the label "social change." A familiar example is the so-called "fertility transition." This generalization from the history of the world's richer and more industrialized economies suggests that advances in material standards of living can produce permanent changes in mortality and fertility. As first one and then the other falls (in those settings where the model fits) this radically changes the nature of family life, the impact of childbearing on women's careers, and the familiarity children are apt to have with death.

Human social history is given its shape by such cumulative social changes. Many of these are quite basic, such as the creation of the modern state; others are more minor, such as the invention and spread of the handshake as a form of greeting; most, such as the development of team sports, fast food restaurants, and the international academic conference, lie in the broad area in between. Cumulative social changes may thus take place on a variety of different scales, from the patterns of small group life through institutions such as the business corporation or church to overall societal arrangements. Significant changes tend to have widespread repercussions, however, so it is rare that one part of social life changes dramatically without changing other parts.

While some important changes are basically linear – such as increasing population – others are discontinuous. There are two senses of discontinuity. The first is abruptness, such as the dramatic shrinkage of the European population in the wake of the plague and other calamities of the 14th century, or the occurrence of the Russian revolution after centuries of Tsarist rule and failed revolts. Secondly, some social changes alter not just the values of variables, but their relationships to each other. Thus, for much of history the military power and wealth of a ruler was directly related to the number of his subjects; growing populations meant an increasing total product from which to extract tribute, taxes, or military service. With the transformation first of agriculture and then of industrial production in the early capitalist era (or just before it), this relationship was in many cases upset. Increasingly from the 16th through 18th centuries, for example, the heads of Scottish clans found that a small population raising sheep could produce more wealth than a large one farming; their attempt to maximize this advantage helped to cause the migration of Scots to Ireland and America. This process was of course linked also to growing demand for wool and the development of industrial production of textiles. These in turn involved new divisions of social labor and increased long-distance trade. At the same time, the development of industrial production and related weapons technologies reduced the military advantages of large population size by contrast to epochs when wars were generally won by the largest armies; indeed, population may even come to be inversely related to power if it impedes industrialization (such is the argument in China after observation of the Persian Gulf War).

Sociologists have generally taken three approaches to studying cumulative social changes. The first is to look for generalizable patterns in how all sorts of change occur. Sociologists may thus look for characteristic phases through which any social innovation must pass – e.g. skepticism, experimentation, early diffusion among leaders, and later general acceptance. William Fielding Ogburn was a pioneer in this sort of research, examining topics such as the characteristic "lag" between cultural innovations and widespread adjustments to them or exploitation of their potentials (Ogburn, 1922/1950). For example, when improved health care and nutrition make it possible for nearly all children to survive to adulthood, it takes a generation or two before parents stop having extremely large families as "insurance policies" to provide for their support in old age. Earlier researchers often hoped to find general laws

explaining the duration of such lags and accounting for other features of all processes of social change. Contemporary sociologists tend to place much more emphasis on differences among various kinds of social change and their settings. Their generalizations are accordingly more specific. Researchers might limit their studies to the patterns of innovation among business organizations, for example, recognizing that these may act quite differently from others. Or they might ask questions such as why innovations gain acceptance more rapidly in formal organizations (such as businesses) than in informal, primary groups (such as families), or what sorts of organizations are more likely to innovate. The changes may be very specific – such as the introduction of new technologies of production – or very general – such as the industrial revolution as a whole (Smelser, 1958). The key distinguishing feature of all these sorts of studies is that they regard changes as individual units of roughly similar sorts and aim at generalizations about them.

The second major sociological approach to cumulative change has been to seek an explanation for the whole pattern of cumulation. This was long the province of philosophies of history, culminating in the sweeping syntheses of the 19th century. The most important contemporary efforts are based on evolutionary theories and attempt causal explanations. Gerhard Lenski, for example, has argued that increases in technological capacity (including information processing as well as material production, distribution, etc.) account for most of the major changes in human social organization. In his synthesis he arranges the major forms of human societies in a hierarchy based on their technological capacity and shows how other features such as their typical patterns of religion, law, government, class inequality, or relations between the sexes are rooted in these technological differences (Lenski et al., 1990). In support of the notion that there is an overall evolutionary pattern, Lenski points to the tendency of social change to move in only one direction. Thus there are many cases of agricultural states being transformed into industrial societies, but very few (if any) of the reverse.[2] Of course, Lenski

2. One might argue that Chinese society has alternated periods of increasing industrialization and commercialization (fengjian) with eras in which agriculture and military prowess figured more prominently (junxian); see Schrecker (1991). More generally, the cyclical character of Chinese history has made it an important test case for evolutionary theories and called forth a number of explanations for its failure to escape from a relatively wealthy peasant society into a more fully industrial model.

acknowledges that human evolution is not completely irreversible; he notes, however, not only that cases of reversal are relatively few but that they commonly result from some external cataclysm. Similarly, Lenski indicates that the direction of human social evolution is not strictly dictated from the start, but only channeled in certain directions. There is room for human ingenuity to determine the shape of the future through a wide range of potential differences in invention and innovation. There are a number of other important versions of the evolutionary approach to cumulative social change. Some stress different material factors, such as human adaptation to ecological constraints; others stress culture and other patterns of thought more than material conditions.[3] Some versions of Marxism have attempted a similar explanation of all historical social change in terms of a few key factors – notably improvement in the means of production and class struggle (e.g. Engels, 1884/1994). Other readings of Marx suggest that his mature theory is better understood as specific to capitalism (Postone, 1993).

Adherents of the third major approach to cumulative social change argue that there can be no single evolutionary explanation for all the important transitions in human history. They also stress differences as well as analogies among the particular instances of specific sorts of change. These historians and historical sociologists place their emphasis on the importance of dealing adequately with particular changes by locating them in their historical and cultural context and distinguishing them through comparison (Abrams, 1982; Skocpol, 1984; Calhoun, 1991a). Weber was an especially important pioneer of this approach. Historical sociologists have argued that a particular sort of transformation – such as the development of a capacity for industrial production – may result from different causes and hold different implications on different occasions. Thus, the original industrial revolution in 18th- and 19th-century Britain developed with no advance model and without competition from any established industrial powers. Countries industrializing today are influenced by both models and competition from existing industrial countries (not to mention influences from multinational corporations). The development of the modern world system thus

3. Materialist theories include Harris (1979) and White (1949). Culturally oriented theories include Habermas (1978, 1984–1988) and Parsons (1968).

fundamentally altered the conditions of future social changes, making it misleading to lump together cases of early and late industrialization for generalization (Wallerstein, 1974–1988). Similarly, prerequisites for industrial production may be supplied by different institutional formations; we should compare not just institutions, but different responses to similar problems.

Accident and disorder, moreover, have also played crucial roles in the development of the modern world system (Simmel, 1977; Boudon, 1986). Wallerstein shows the centrality of historical conjunctures and contingencies – the partially fortuitous relationships between different sorts of events. For example, the outcomes of military battles between Spain (an old-fashioned empire) and Britain (the key industrial–capitalist pioneer) were not foregone conclusions. There was room for bravery, weather, strategy, and a variety of other factors to play a role. But certain key British victories (notably in the 16th century) helped to make not only British history but world history different by creating the conditions for the modern world system to take the shape it did. Against evolutionary explanation, historical sociologists also argue that different factors explain different transformations. Thus, no amount of study of the factors that brought about the rise of capitalism and industrial production would provide the necessary insight into the decline of the Roman empire and the eventual development of feudalism in Europe, or into the consolidation of China's very different regions into the world's most enduring empire and most populous state. These different kinds of events have their own different sorts of causes.

Certain basic challenges are particularly important to the study of cumulative social change today. In addition to working out a satisfactory relationship among the three main approaches, perhaps the most important challenge is to distinguish those social changes which are basic from those which are more ephemeral or less momentous. Sociologists, like historians and other scholars, need to be able to characterize broad patterns of social arrangements. This is what we do when we speak of "modernity" or "industrial society." Such characterizations involve at least implicit theoretical claims as to what are the crucial factors distinguishing these eras or forms. In the case of complex, large-scale societal processes, these are hard to pin down. How much industrial capacity does a society need to have before we call it "industrial"; how small must employment in its increasingly automated industries become before we

call it "postindustrial"? Is current social and economic "globalization" the continuation of a long-standing trend, or part of a fundamental transformation? Though settling such questions is hard, debating them is crucial, for we are unable to get an adequate grasp on the historical contexts of the phenomena we study if we try to limit ourselves only to studying particulars or seeking generalizations from them without seeking to understand the differences among historical epochs (however hard to define sharply) and cultures (however much these may shade into each other with contact). Particularly because of the many current contentions that we stand on the edge of a new age – "postmodern," "postindustrial," or something else – researchers and theorists need to give strong answers to the question of what it means to claim that one epoch ends and another begins.

Many of the most prominent social theorists have treated all of modernity as a continuous era and stressed its distinction from previous (or anticipated future) forms of social organization. Emile Durkheim (1893/1976) argued that a new, more complex, division of labor was central to a dichotomous distinction of modern (organically solidary) from premodern (mechanically solidary) society. Max Weber (1922/1968) saw Western rationalization of action and relationships as basic, and as continuing without rupture through the whole modern era. Karl Marx (1867/1978) saw the transition from feudalism to capitalism as basic, but held that no change in modernity would be fundamental unless it overthrew the processes of private capital accumulation and the commodification of labor. Recent Marxists thus argue that the social and economic changes of the past several decades mark a new phase within capitalism, but not a break with it (Mandel, 1974; Wallerstein, 1974–1988; Harvey, 1989). Many sociologists would add a claim about the centrality of increasing state power as a basic, continuous process of modernity.[4] More generally, Jürgen Habermas (1984–1988) has stressed the split between a lifeworld in which everyday interactions are organized on the basis of mutual agreement, and an increasingly prominent systemic integration through the impersonal relationships of money and power outside the reach of linguistically mediated cooperative understanding. Common to all these positions is the notion that there is a general process

4. See e.g. Tilly (1990), emphasizing the distinctive form of the national state.

(not just a static set of attributes) common to all modernity. Some would also claim to discern a causal explanation; others point only to the trends, suggesting these may have several causes but there exists no single "prime mover" to explain an overall pattern of evolution. All would agree that no really basic social change can be said to have occurred until the fundamental processes which they identify have ended, been reversed, or changed their relationship to other variables. Obviously, a great deal depends on what processes are taken to be fundamental.

Rather than stressing the common processes organizing all modernity, some other scholars have pointed to the disjunctures between relatively stable periods. Michel Foucault, for example, has emphasized basic transformations in the way knowledge was constituted and an order ascribed to the world of things, people, and ideas (Foucault, 1973). Renaissance culture was characterized by an emphasis on resemblances among the manifold different elements of God's single, unified creation. Knowledge of fields as diverse (to our eyes) as biology, aesthetics, theology, and astronomy was thought to be unified by the matching of similar characteristics, with those in each field serving as visible signs of counterparts in the others. The "classical" modernity of the 17th and early 18th centuries marked a radical break by treating the sign as fundamentally distinct from the thing it signified – noting, for example, that words have only arbitrary relationships to the objects they name. The study of representation thus replaced that of resemblances. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, still another rupture came with the development of the modern ideas of classification according to hidden, underlying causes (rather than superficial resemblances) and an examination of human beings as the basic source of systems of representation. Only this last period could give rise to the "human sciences" – psychology, sociology, etc. – as we know them. Similarly, Foucault (1977a) argued that the modern individual was a distinctive form of person or self, produced by an intensification of disciplining power and surveillance. Where most theories of social change emphasize processes, Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge" emphasizes the internal coherence of relatively stable cultural configurations and the ruptures between them.[5]

5. This is somewhat truer of Foucault's earlier works than of those of his last decade, including Foucault (1978–1988).

Foucault's work has recently been taken as support for the claim (which was not his own) that the modern era has ended. Theories of "postmodernity" commonly argue that at some point the modern era gave way to a successor.[6] Generally, they hold that, where modernity was rigid, linear, and focused on universality, postmodernity is flexible, fluidly multidirectional, and focused on difference. Some postmodernist theories emphasize the impact of new production technologies (especially computer-assisted flexible automation), while others are more exclusively cultural. The label "postmodernity" has often been applied rather casually to point to interesting features of the present period, without clearly indicating why they should be taken as revealing a basic discontinuous shift between eras. At stake in debates over the periodization of social change is not just the labeling of eras, but the analysis of what factors are most fundamentally constitutive of social organization. Should ecology and politics be seen as determinative over, equal to, or derivative of the economy? Is either demography or technological capacity prior to the other? What gives capitalism, feudalism, a kinship system, or any other social order its temporary and relative stability? Such questions must be approached not just in terms of manifest influence at any one point in time or during specific events, but also in terms of the way particular factors figure in long-term processes of cumulative social change.

Is historical sociology crucial?

In an article presented in Norway as a lecture at an earlier conference in the present series, John Goldthorpe has challenged the merits of historical sociology. Goldthorpe seeks to dissuade sociologists from doing historical research except when absolutely necessary. Sociology fulfills its purposes only when it is nomothetic, he claims, when sociologists seek the most generalizable explanations of social processes and structures; by contrast,

6. Harvey (1989) offers an excellent critical review. Some postmodernist thinkers (e.g. Lyotard, 1984) have been more subtle, arguing against the implications of the very label "postmodern" that they mean not a simple historical succession but rather a recurrent internal challenge to the dominant "modernist" patterns. Though it renders the term postmodern misleading, this is a sounder approach; unfortunately it is commonly undercut (including in Lyotard's work) by a rhetoric of transcending modernity. See the discussion in Calhoun (1993b).

historical knowledge is and should be specific to time and place. "History may serve as, so to speak, a 'residual category' for sociology, marking the point at which sociologists, in invoking 'history,' thereby curb their impulse to generalize or, in other words, to explain sociologically, and accept the role of the specific and of the contingent as framing – that is, as providing both the setting and the limits – of their own analyses" (Goldthorpe, 1991, p. 14). While granting history a sharply reduced positive role for sociologists, Goldthorpe emphasizes the negative: the price sociologists will have to pay in quality and comprehensiveness of data when they turn from contemporary to historical research.

Though he focuses his critical attention partly on Skocpol, Goldthorpe's real target is those who would deny a basic difference between history and sociology. This is a substantial and diverse crew – more so than Goldthorpe seems to realize. Not just Philip Abrams and Anthony Giddens, whom Goldthorpe emphasizes, but Pierre Bourdieu, Fernand Braudel, Eric Hobsbawm, and Gareth Stedman Jones have all argued that, in Braudel's phrase, "history and sociology are one single intellectual adventure."[7] As should be evident, this is not just a list of armchair sociologists anxious to have historians serve as their "underlaborers," digging up facts for them to theorize. Their claims are more basically that a strong understanding of social life must be both historical and sociological at the same time. Goldthorpe grants in passing that sociologists ought to know about the historical contexts and limits of their findings, but his main argument is that sociology and history need to be kept distinct on methodological grounds. Historians can only interpret the "relics" of the past, whereas sociologists can create new and better data through contemporary research. Sociologists who turn to history take on (often poorly recognized) challenges posed by the paucity of available data. This much is undoubtedly true. What is more in doubt is whether it offers any principle for distinguishing history from sociology. Goldthorpe inadvertently reveals how confusing the definition of boundaries can be when he takes the work of a prominent historian, Michael Anderson, as an example of the limits of historical sociology, and categorizes Charles Tilly as a historian. Beyond such gaffes, and Goldthorpe's attempt to

7. Braudel (1980), Abrams (1982), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Giddens (1985), Hobsbawm (1971), Jones (1976). See the review of this discussion in Calhoun (1987, 1992).

demonstrate his case by critique of Barrington Moore and Kai Erickson rather than any of the major newer works, there are more fundamental problems with his argument.

The distinction between historical facts as inferences from relics and the facts of social science as the results of new, more perspicuous, more complete, and repeatable observations has more limited purchase than Goldthorpe imagines. It reflects both the ideology of many historians, which overstates the extent to which they rely solely on the relics they have inspected in archives (the dustier the better), and the ideology of sociologists that it is possible rigorously to study such objects as class, industrial organization, or social integration entirely from controlled, contemporary observations without massive (and usually unexamined) historical inductions. No doubt it is correct that contemporary data gathered specifically to address an analytical problem are better suited for many sociological purposes. Specifically, to the extent that we seek generalizable, lawlike statements about specific aspects of social life, contemporary data will usually be better (though just as we would want these data to reflect a wide range of contemporary settings and subjects in order to avoid spurious claims to generality, so we would presumably want to test their historical scope as well). This tells us nothing, however, about how adequate a knowledge of social life we can in fact construct from such more or less generalizable statements about various of its specific aspects. It tells us nothing about where the categories of our sociological inquiries come from and how they remain shaped by their empirical and practical origins.

All this also tells us too little about how to differentiate sociological from historical data. How old, we might ask, do demographic data have to be before they count as historical relics rather than purpose-built sociological information? The data a fieldworker can generate from observation and interview are indeed enormously richer than those normally available to historians on some aspects of social life, but not on all. If the fieldworker is studying a protest movement, will she refrain from consulting such "relics" as handbills passed out by the protesters, television footage, or police records (if they are promptly rather than only "historically" available)? More basically, we need to grasp how extraordinarily limited the practice of historians would be if they could rely only on first-order inferences from relics. History would be reduced to the narrowest of primary source investigations with no broader attempts at

understanding historical phenomena based on the intersection of many projects. And, perhaps more surprisingly, sociology would also be radically narrowed. Sociologists would no longer seek to answer such time- and place-specific questions as: Is racial violence increasing in France? How have fertility patterns changed in postwar America? Have recent British educational reforms increased social mobility? They would seek, on Goldthorpe's account, to understand racial violence, fertility, and social mobility only as more or less generalizable phenomena.

Goldthorpe's methodological arguments against historical sociology could largely be rephrased as useful advice: for example, pay attention to the availability, biases, and limits of primary sources, or be careful to consider how historical facts are not "modular" and easily lifted from a book but often deeply implicated in complex interpretations. This amounts to saying that historical sociologists ought to take the same sort of care over evidence that historians do, which is quite right but hardly a convincing basis for declaring the two disciplines to be necessarily separate. Indeed, on this dimension of his argument Goldthorpe seems mainly to be saying either that history is too hard for sociologists, or that one who pays careful attention to historical evidence cannot reasonably address questions of any breadth beyond the immediate case (not even, for example, asking rigorously what it is a case of).

Goldthorpe's more basic argument for a separation of disciplines lies in his call for nomothetically generalizable observations.[8] Interestingly, he is in agreement with Theda Skocpol here (though unaware of it). She has never argued that sociology and history are indistinguishable, and indeed has suggested that the disciplinary turf of historical sociology needs to be kept distinct from that of history. Her call for macro-analytic comparative strategies is, in fact, designed precisely to encourage the very pursuit of generalizable explanations (rather than accounts of specific cases) that Goldthorpe also advocates. Thus, Skocpol (1979) tries to use her case

8. In drawing on this terminological heritage of the *Methodenstreit*, sociologists in recent decades have implied that theory must be exclusively a matter of the so-called nomothetic. This reflects a very distinct and problematic view of theory, however, and accordingly neglects both the extent of genuine theory developed in historically and culturally specific – putatively idiographic – analyses, and conversely the extent to which even apparently very general theory is intrinsically specific itself, its conceptualizations rooted in their empirical referents; see Calhoun (1995, chs. 2 and 3).

studies not to advance analysis of the French, Russian, or Chinese revolutions as such, but to develop a better sociological account of states and social revolutions in general. This is why comparison is methodologically so important to her.[9] Along with Somers, she also perceives a need to answer arguments such as Goldthorpe's not simply with substantive arguments about either (a) what aspects of social life sociologists would be forced to ignore if they did not rely on historical research, or (b) the ways in which sociological theory depends intrinsically on historical understanding and therefore had best develop it seriously rather than through reliance on happenstance, casual reading, and secondary school education.[10]

At a minimum, the first of these two sorts of argument involves recognizing four sorts of social phenomena that cannot be dealt with adequately through purely contemporaneous data sources:

9. Goldthorpe really has a further claim about the level of analysis in works such as Skocpol's and Moore's. He leaves this rather undeveloped, however, because he confounds it with the easier task of showing that Moore's use of historical sources (Moore, 1966) is sloppy (something which has been argued at length before). He does not really develop the underlying argument which, I think, would need to go something like this: Moore and Skocpol work by putting together accounts of individual cases at the national level from published historical works. Such accounts are apt to reflect both an inadequate grasp of the historical specifics of the individual cases and a poor ability to discriminate among the conflicting arguments of historians. Even where this was not true, such works would still be too "grand" in their aims. By attempting to explain very big questions directly with variables which they can measure only based on extremely complex inferences from inferences (and which in any case are composites of other more specific variables), they render their analyses dubious at best. Crucially, they are not able (because of the limits of historical data) to get at the really basic variables which constitute the more complex phenomena and which would need to be examined to produce a really satisfying explanation. They are like biologists reasoning from phenotypes in the absence of genetic information (or even a good classification based on reproductive organization and descent rather than appearance). This improved form of Goldthorpe's argument has some merit but (a) has little purchase on the distinction of history from sociology except insofar as sociologists imagine that historical relics are adequate sources of data for developing knowledge of such quasi-universal building blocks of social life, (b) implies an assumption on Goldthorpe's part that microsociology is intrinsically simpler than macro (because it is about building blocks rather than complex structures built of them), and (c) implies the further assumption that it is potentially possible to aggregate an adequate understanding of the whole social world (including its largest-scale structures and dynamics) from such building blocks.

10. Skocpol and Somers (1980). Somers has since changed her position significantly; see Somers (1996).

1. Some important sociological phenomena, such as revolutions or settler societies, occur in only a small number of cases (Skocpol, 1979; Goldstone, 1991; McMichael, 1984). This makes it impossible to study them by most statistical techniques, and often makes it difficult or impossible to use interviews, experiments, or other contemporary research methods to good effect because the rarity of the events means that a researcher might have to wait decades for the chance and/or it might be difficult to be on the scene at the right time.

2. Some particular events or cases of a broader phenomenon are theoretically important or have an intrinsic interest. For example, the case of Japan is crucial to all arguments about whether the origins of capitalist economic development depended on some specific cultural features of Western civilization (i.e. Europe and societies settled by Europeans). Could capitalism have developed elsewhere had Europeans not gotten to it first?[11]

3. Some phenomena simply happen over an extended period of time. Many sociological research topics focus on fairly brief events, such as marriages and divorces, adolescence, or the creation of new businesses. Other phenomena of great importance, however, happen on longer time scales. For example, industrialization, state formation, the creation of the modern form of family, and the spread of popular democracy all took centuries. Simply to look at present-day cases would be to examine only specific points in a long trajectory or course of development. This could lead not only to faulty generalizations but to a failure to grasp the essential historical pattern of the phenomenon in question.

4. For some phenomena, changing historical context is a major set of explanatory variables. For example, changes in the structure of international trade opportunities, political pressures, technologies, and the like all shape the conditions for economic development. The

11. Anderson (1974). In general, case studies are important supplements to statistical research because they allow detailed knowledge of specific instances of a more general phenomenon, as well as statements about the average or the overall pattern. Case studies are often misunderstood by those who ask whether cases are "typical" or "representative." Case studies are often especially illuminating when focused on non-typical examples where they point up the limits to theoretical generalizations.

world context in which any one country tries to advance in economic terms will be an important determinant of which strategies work, which ones fail, and how far development will get (Wallerstein, 1974–1988). When Britain became the world's first industrial capitalist country in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it did not have to compete with any other such powerful economic producer. When Japan became an industrial capitalist power, there were already many such, and there are even more to compete with new capitalist producers today.

Even an emphasis on the empirical holes which must be left in a sociology which neglects history does not, however, fully bring out the importance of historical sociology. The rest of that importance lies in the challenge which historical sociology poses, ideally, to (a) the canonical histories (and anthropologies) which have been incorporated into classical social theory and its successors, (b) the attempt to apply concepts and develop generalizations without attention to their cultural and historical specificity, and (c) the neglect of the historicity of all of social life. It is for these reasons that all sociologists need to be historical, at least in some part. A strategy of disciplinary legitimation that results in a historical sociology compartmentalized as a subfield, especially one defined vaguely by methodological approach, greatly impoverishes its potential contributions.[12]

Perhaps most basically of all, a neglect of historical transformations in what I have called the constitutive categories or abstractions of social life makes it all but impossible for sociology to grasp social change at its most basic. In different theories, a variety of societal transformations appear as definitive of epochs. Perhaps the most basic of all notions of epoch, however, is the idea of "modernity" itself. This is not the place to consider all the different forms and theoretical contexts in which the notion of a modern era

12. It would be hard in any case to find the methodological principle which unifies the major "classics" of the resurgence of historical sociology in the 1970s. Is it a method (or set of methods) which joins Wallerstein (1974–1988), Tilly et al. (1975), Anderson (1974), and Skocpol (1979) in a common discourse or makes them exemplars to generations of graduate students? One might at least as well point to their common bias in favor of broadly "structural" accounts and against either voluntaristic approaches to action or cultural interpretation. Surely, however, the importance of the works just mentioned derives primarily from their contributions to addressing important substantive theoretical or empirical problems or questions.

has been invoked. Rather, I want to argue both that certain social changes force us to rethink our very theoretical categories, and that some of these changes themselves work by changing the characteristic – or even constitutive – abstractions with which agents organize social life. The modern discourse of nations and national identity is an important instance of this.

The discourse of nationalism

The idea of nation is basic to modern political and cultural discourse (whether or not evoked by that specific word). Claims to sovereignty, for example, are almost always grounded in reference to a putatively self-organizing and bounded nation – the collective "self" of terms such as "self-determination." At the same time, a wide variety of social movements, state policies, and other forms of practical activity are labeled (and label themselves) "national" or "nationalist." Social scientists have studied various such instances of "nationalism" in search of general explanations. Tilly, for example, has looked at nationalism as a centrist, unificationist ideology associated with the building of consolidated states in various West European countries (Tilly, 1975, 1990). Hechter (1975) has studied nationalist movements as separatist responses to unequal economic development on the part of those at the periphery of an integrated economy and state. Greenfeld (1992) has seen nationalism as an ideology produced by the *ressentiment* of new elites against either older elites or other countries. Though these and other studies often illuminate particular cases or aspects of nationalism, they do not cumulate in a general theory of nationalism (or a satisfactory placement of nationalism in the context of a general theory of something else). This is so, first and foremost, because such studies do not work with the same understanding of what nationalism is. Indeed, they cannot do so because, at the level of concrete movements, policies, and conflicts, nationalism is not a single material phenomenon amenable to a single explanation. But, most crucially, nationalism is a rhetoric, rooted in a characteristic abstraction – the idea of nation – that helps to constitute the modern world as we know it. The rhetoric is invoked in a wide range of struggles and descriptions and sometimes applied to phenomena that also existed before the modern era. The employment of the rhetoric is itself transformative.

Nationalism is not simply an attribute of discourse, it is productive of

discourse (and thereby of knowledge, imagination, and social action – all of which are in turn shaped by the discursive conditions of their production). In this sense, it is what Foucault called a "discursive formation" (Foucault, 1969, 1977b; Brennan, 1990). Nationalist discourse is generative. Its characteristic ideas – of nation, of obligation to one's nation, that nations are indivisible, that individuals belong directly and unequivocally to nations, that the world is divided into nations – are not simply stable descriptions of material or cultural conditions but ways of thinking that are essentially contested, that provoke actions and struggles and more and more discourse (Gallie, 1967). Thus, when we speak of nationalism, we speak both of a manner of making and understanding claims to identity and sovereignty or other political rights and of a way of thinking that keeps such claims recurrently problematic. The continuing prominence of nationalist discourse is partly produced by other factors including material and geopolitical conditions that make nationalist agitation and movements seem to some actors to be in their interests. But the discourse cannot be explained solely by such external factors. It has an internal logic and set of tensions that is itself productive of more discourse.

It is not possible to specify neatly the boundaries within which this rhetoric is in use and beyond which it is not. It is common, for example, for nationalist claims to be brought forward on behalf of populations putatively possessing the size and capacity to be self-sustaining, but we cannot rule out a priori the use of the rhetoric by populations that do not make such a claim (and still less determine objectively which populations are indeed potentially "self-sustaining" and exclude others from study). The discourse of nationalism has been employed by movements for ethnic secession, both popular and top–down mobilizations linked to state-building, resistance to colonialism, hostility to immigrants, etc. – each reflecting a different mix of underlying factors and specific local conditions, each influenced by previous examples of its kind and previous use of the discourse. The specific movements and activities in which the discourse of nationalism is used are shaped by many heterogeneous factors besides that discourse.

The rhetoric of nationalism has several characteristic tropes: claims to sovereignty and/or governmental legitimacy in the name of the people of a nation; claims that the people have arisen en masse; claims that the unity of a people is due to their perduring common culture; claims that the individuals of a population cannot realize their personal freedom unless the population is "free" in the sense of political self-determination; demands that the members of a putative nation adhere to some common standard of behavior; demands that a posited nation be treated as an equal to all others. None of these characteristic tropes is decisive as a criterion of definition.[13]

By the same token it is not particularly relevant to the present argument to try to adjudicate claims as to whether nationalism originated in the tensions that led to the English Civil War (Kohn, 1929; Greenfeld, 1992), in Latin American independence movements (Anderson, 1991), in the French Revolution (Alter, 1989; Best, 1988), or in German reaction and Romanticism (Kedourie, 1994; Breuilly, 1985). It suffices to indicate that by the end of the 18th century the discursive formation was fully in play; how much sooner this was so is subject to dispute, though before the modern era there was no point where most of these dimensions were simultaneously important. Each dimension of course has an older history of its own; indeed, the very term "nation" and many notions of national identity have histories before their use was reshaped by their situation in the modern discourse of nationalism. And, of course, some specific nations have histories before the discourse of nationalism.[14]

The discourse of nationalism is part of a transformation in categories of understanding that make it possible both to think and to enact the modern world. It joins with other characteristic abstractions such as the category of individual or the modern notion of revolution as a fundamental transformation. It is linked to both – for example to the idea that "the people" constitute an individual writ large and can be a historical actor. This conception was distinctively a product of the Enlightenment and especially the French Revolution. As Steiner has put it:

13. On the difficulty of defining nationalism and the dissent over all definitions so far proposed, see Smith (1973, 1983), Connor (1978), Seton-Watson (1977), Alter (1989).

14. Thus, the English nation is rooted in Anglo-Saxon history and shaped by the Norman Conquest. Conflicts among England, Scotland, and Wales helped give each a distinctive identity. But the England (not Britain, as it happens, though both Welshmen and Scots fought) that Henry V took into war against France became an object of properly nationalist discourse with later claims on the memory of Agincourt in new political and social contexts. It was Shakespeare and later historians, who made "King Harry" a nationalist, and even then incompletely.

> In ways which no preceding historical phenomenon had accomplished, the French Revolution mobilized historicity itself, seeing itself as historical, as transformative of the basic conditions of human possibility, as invasive of the individual person. (Steiner, 1988, p. 150)

This new idea of historical action was carried forward vitally in nationalism, and in many cases coupled with a distinctive notion of national destiny, a new teleology of history. Such conceptions were not limited (as stereotype sometimes suggests) to German "ethnic" nationalism. Think of France's *mission civilisatrice* and ideas of "manifest destiny" and being "a city on a hill" in United States history.

Nationalism has a complex relationship to history. On the one hand, nationalism commonly encourages the production of historical accounts of the nation. Indeed, the modern discipline of history is very deeply shaped by the tradition of producing national histories designed to give readers and students a sense of their collective identity. On the other hand, however, nationalists are prone, at the very least, to the production of Whig histories, favorable accounts of "how we came to be who we are." A nationalist history such as Nehru's *The Discovery of India* (1949) is a construction of the nation; it works in part as a performative act. The point is not just that such a history is not neutral. By its nature, nationalist historiography – that which tells the story of the nation, whether or not it is overtly bellicose or ethnocentric – embeds actors and events as moments in the history of the nation whether or not they had any conception of that nation. Not only does *The Discovery of India* transform both Dravidians and Mughals into Indians, it gives them narrative significance as actors constructing and reconstructing a common and putatively perduring phenomenon, India. Both victors and vanquished in dynastic wars and invasions become part of the story of India.[15]

The same process is at work in the narratives of Western national histories. The very "War between the States" helps to constitute a common American history for descendants of those killed on both sides of that bloody conflict (as well as for Americans whose ancestors arrived later or kept their distance). This is one reason that the theme of fratricide is so

15. Nehru's book is hardly the only example of this, even in India, though it is one of the best. Nor is Nehru in this text making a nationalist move that Gandhi eschewed. See Gandhi (1947, 1951) and discussion in Chatterjee (1986, 1993).

prominent in narratives of the war. That brother fought brother helps to establish that both sides were really members of one family (Anderson, 1991, p. 201). In perhaps the most famous essay ever written on nationalism, Ernst Renan grasped the importance of the tensions masked in nationalist invocations of history:

> Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality. (Renan, 1990, p. 11)

The "brutality" Renan has in mind is exemplified by the massacres of Protestants and putative heretics by Catholics in France, but the cultural or symbolic violence involved in forging unity could also be brutal.[16] The eradication of once quasi-autonomous cultures, or their reduction to mere regional dialects or local customs, are continually echoed in the subordination of once vital (and perhaps still important) differences in the construction of national histories. Anderson summarizes one English version:

> English history textbooks offer the diverting spectacle of a great Founding Father whom very schoolchild is taught to call William the Conqueror. The same child is not informed that William spoke no English, indeed could not have done so, since the English language did not exist in his epoch; nor is he or she told "Conqueror of what?" For the only intelligible modern answer would have to be "Conqueror of the English", which would turn the old Norman predator into a more successful precursor of Napoleon and Hitler. (Anderson, 1991, p. 201)

Ironically, the writing of linear historical narratives of national development and the claim to primordial national identity often proceed hand in hand. Indeed, the writing of national historical narratives is so embedded in the discourse of nationalism that it almost always depends rhetorically on the presumption of some kind of pre-existing national identity in order to give the story a beginning. Atlantic crossings thus make Englishmen into Americans whether or not they ever thought themselves part of an autonomous American nation. Similarly, I happened to attend a 1994 Swedish National Museum exhibit that began with fur-clad cave-dwellers,

16. On cultural or symbolic violence, see Bourdieu (1990) and other works.

who, it confidently assured its viewers, were Swedish cave-dwellers. Such nationalist claims to prehistory are not unique to Sweden.

Conclusion

Nationalism, I have argued, is one of the most important examples of a specific and basic kind of social change. This is the creation of new historical epochs through the transformation of the categories that constitute social and cultural reality. The conditions of action, the relationship among other aspects of existence, the meaning of long-standing ideas are all altered by such transformations.

Such epochal transformations are rare. While categories of understanding change constantly – if usually not terribly rapidly – not every such category is equally deeply constitutive of our understanding. Some abstractions, in other words, can reasonably be seen as mere tools. They are used in the pursuit of various practical projects but their use does not either greatly alter the world or generate the indefinite production of new discourse and action. Abstractions of this sort can be addressed more easily by historians and social scientists because they lend themselves to clear descriptions and operational definitions. Not so nationalism, because it too basically constitutes the very terms of our academic discourse. Do we write of Spanish history? Does it include Basque and Catalan and Castilian history? Is Navarre part of the Basque story or the Spanish story or one unto itself? It is all but impossible to find a point of view outside the discourse and the debate from which to offer neutral definition. The same goes for the units of analysis of comparative sociology. Why are they almost always nation-states? Not for reasons of objective, universal truth, but because this is how the modern world is organized – and therefore, among other things, how its social scientists and bureaucrats collect and organize data.

We could trace philological roots back indefinitely for the term "nation" and its cognates. But though this might be salutary and might give a reassuring sense of historical continuity, it could also be misleading. For one of the most important things to realize about nationalism is the way in which it is embedded in, and constitutive of, modernity. Only by recognizing the deep significance of certain such categories of understanding can we make clear what we mean by notions such as modernity. We bandy them about rather casually, but taking historical social change seriously means taking seriously the difference between superficial and basic, epoch-making social changes. This will also allow us to give more serious answers than usual to questions such as whether we have passed from the modern epoch into some new era of postmodernity.

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