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Theory and Society, Vol. 9, No. 5, Special Issue on Social History (Sep., 1980), 679-681.

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Two Callings of Social History

Charles Tilly

Social history has two callings, one the echo of the other. The first calling is retrospective: it consists of asking how the world we live in came into being, and how its coming into being affected the everyday lives of ordinary people. That inquiry necessarily begins with some sort of moral, political, and ideological commitment, however vague or veiled, for we cannot begin the inquiry without making some features of our own world problematic, thereby assuming or neglecting others. I believe, for example, that the two great circumstances which distinguish life in our own era from life at any other time are the extraordinary power of the strange organizations we call national states and the prevalence of work for wages under conditions of expropriation. If so, the retrospective inquiry must single out for analysis the implantation of national states, the process of proletarianization, and the joint consequences of those two large changes for the everyday lives of ordinary people.

Social history's second calling is prospective: it consists of asking what could have happened to everyday experience at major historical choice points, and then inquiring how and why outcomes which actually occurred won out over other possibilities. The prospective inquiry is, if anything, riskier than the retrospective: full of history in the as-if, vulnerable to dubious causalities and vulgar determinisms, impossible to pursue without strong theoretical commitments. It requires a curious combination of hubris and humility; the provisional adoption of hypotheses spanning reality and potentiality, the readiness to alter or jettison those hypotheses as the evidence unfolds. We must, for example, be prepared to ask whether the frequent, concrete, partly realized demands for popular sovereignty that appeared in the collective action of North American colonists from the Stamp Act crisis onward could have informed a more thoroughgoing democratic revolution, and how. Yet we must also be ready to conclude that the Revolution was not actually a major choice point, that the structure of power that emerged from the Revolution had locked unshakably into place long before.

The retrospective and prospective inquiries echo each other like rockfalls on opposite sides of a steep ravine. Our sense of what is problematic in our contemporary world depends, in part, on a notion of what other shapes the world could have taken. But the alternatives somehow visible in the contemporary world provide likely starting places for hypotheses concerning what could have happened in the past. We may dream of synthesizing the retrospective and prospective inquiries in an account of the selective creation of the world we know out of all the forms of social life which could have come into being. For the most part, however, the retrospective and prospective analyses take us to different hypotheses, methods, and bodies of evidence. The social sciences have roles in both of social history's callings. In both cases, oddly enough, the chief contribution the social sciences can make is not methodological, but theoretical. Not that history should fulfill the fears of Gareth Stedman Jones, and become the proving ground for theories manufactured by non-historians. Not that historians should content themselves with being harvesters of Facts for the great mill of Economic Theory. The social sciences have a theoretical

role to play in social history because their practitioners spend a good deal of their time codifying, crystallizing, and making visible the same sorts of theories that historians commonly employ. As a consequence, they generate an accessible record of the successes and failures of different theories, of the assumptions, methods, and evidence they entail, and of the points at which they genuinely contradict each other. Social historians can save themselves plenty of grief by observing closely what happens when sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and economists attempt to apply or test theories of modernization; on the whole, the outcomes are disastrous. For the retrospective mode of social history, the social sciences provide a convenient inventory of problematic features of the contemporary world, and a partial codification of alternative accounts of their emergence. For the prospective mode of social history, the social sciences offer crude but comprehensive maps of likely directions in which social life could move from any particular origin.

Far from being sopped up by the sponge of social science, however, social history – retrospective and prospective – has an opportunity to clean up the social sciences. The greatest need of the social sciences today is for historically-grounded theories and analyses. By “historically grounded” I mean taking place and, especially, time explicitly and seriously into consideration. Theories of work-discipline that deduce the forms of control over producers in setting after setting from the logic of production itself, without systematic variation by place and time, lack historical grounding. To the extent that such theories take the cumulative experience of capitalists and workers as part of the explanation of the character of work-discipline under capitalism, those theories acquire historical grounding. Historically-grounded theories are not all sound or fruitful; explanations of changes in industrial organization as results of a continuous, world-wide process of invention and diffusion, for instance, are historically grounded but, to my mind, seriously misleading. Some of the ideas now parading under the banner of “world-system theory” must be wrong, if only because they contradict each other. Historical grounding does not guarantee truth. Still, in the present state of the social sciences even inadequate historically-grounded theories are more useful than the timeless, placeless accounts of social change which now prevail. Social history, properly pursued, will identify and elaborate the superior brands of historically-grounded theory. That is a good reason for applauding the renewal of marxist theory in social history; historically-grounded marxist work is beginning to reshape the thinking of social scientists about changes in family structure, statemaking, popular protest, and a wide variety of other topics. Social historians, the students of the interplay between large social transformations and everyday life, have two callings which can, if intelligently heeded, renew the social sciences.

Has social history gone awry? The last few years have certainly been a recession for the enthusiasms of ten years ago: for studies of everyday life, for quantification, for self-conscious use of models and methods plucked from the social sciences. One source of that recession seems to be the jockeying for position which occurs inevitably in an overstuffed profession faced with a long period of contraction. A disproportionate number of the historians now competing for senior positions in North America and Western Europe come

from those cohorts of graduate students who responded most eagerly to the call of social history. Meanwhile, college and university curricula – and therefore the jobs to staff those curricula – have shrunk back toward their hard core of political history. Should social historians get those jobs, and the resources that go with them? If so, other sorts of historians will not get those jobs, and the future of the profession will be correspondingly different. The bottleneck in employment, fellowships, and financial support threatens every teacher of graduate students in history. It lends urgency to the debate. A second, more important, reason for the recession in enthusiasm for social history lies within the enterprise itself. It is disillusion among those who once held large hopes for the transformation of historical inquiry as a whole by means of collective biography, quantification, social-scientific approaches, and rigorous studies of everyday behavior. They have discovered some important truths:

1. These forms of social history require a great deal of work for an uncertain outcome.
2. On the whole, the social-scientific approaches historians have adopted are better at specifying what is to be explained than at providing explanations - especially explanations which other historians will recognize as such.
3. The consequence of an extensive deployment of collective biography or other standard social-historical methods is often negative: the discovery that the original question was faulty, a finding of no relationship, and so on. With other historical methods, however, it is harder to discover that one is wrong.
4. Data collected for their own sake rarely yield arguments or conclusions. Massive evidence, however refined, is no substitute for reflection disciplined by theory.
5. Historians working in any particular time-place field normally hold to a well-defined, if often implicit, agenda: some questions are worth asking, while most questions are not. They pay attention to work that poses challenging answers to established questions. A social historian who takes up new subjects, materials, or methods has the choice of a) showing how the results bear on questions about which other historians already care; b) attempting to change the agenda; c) forming a new discipline with its own agenda; or d) getting no recognition for his/her effort.

By and large, recent calls for anthropological work, for the study of *mentalités*, and for more rigorous marxist analyses reflect a recognition, however dim, of these truths. They call for a rapprochement of social-historical work with the established historical agenda, and for the introduction of explanations other historians will more readily recognize as explanations. The truths are important; everyone should have known them a decade ago. I hope social historians can learn them, absorb them, surmount them, and then get on with the effort without abandoning their callings: asking how the world we live in came into being, and how its coming into being affected the everyday lives of ordinary people; asking what could have happened to everyday experience at major historical choice points, and then inquiring how and why the outcomes won out over other possibilities. The abandonment of these two great callings would impoverish the whole historical enterprise.

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