

LINKERS , DIGGERS AND GLOSSERS  
IN SOCIAL HISTORY

Charles Tilly

New School for Social Research

March 1986

(Revised 4/16/86)

"In recent years," declare Hans Medick and David Sabean, "social historians have been calling into question many aspects of their practice. They are no longer sure in what way the story which they relate is part of a larger story of political change, the struggle for power, and the analysis of the forces of domination. There is a tendency on the part of some of the profession to regard structures, especially those amenable to statistical abstraction, as the proper object of investigation, whilst others centre their interest on an analysis of agency" (Medick and Sabean 1984: 1). Thus begins a book devoted to the exploration of agency, of ethnographic approaches to social history, and of doubts about the determinisms that have so far pervaded the thinking of most social historians. A new debate has opened.

The debate does not concern method alone. It concerns the aims and presuppositions of valid social history. Social historians differ, as is their right, on the proper mission of social history. Some of them see social history as the analysis of articulation between large structures and processes, on the one hand, and the lives of ordinary people, on the other; let us call them linkers. Some social historians conceive of it as an auxiliary to political history, exploring the social bases of the actions that constitute national and international politics; dub them diggers. And some understand their calling as largely hermeneutic: reconstructing significant past actions in terms of the meanings they had for their actors; since these social historians specialize in the interpretation of texts, we might label them glossers. The distinctions run roughly like this:

FOCUS OF ANALYSIS:		
	SOCIAL PROCESS	POLITICS
METHOD:	RELATIONAL	linkers
	HERMENEUTIC	diggers
		glossers

Some glossers, that is, focus on the interpretation of social processes and some on the interpretation of politics, but the differences between them are narrower than the divergences between analysts of relations who focus on social processes (linkers) and those who concentrate on politics (diggers). Although most of my own work belongs firmly in the linkers' camp, this paper will not advocate priorities among the three views. It will take for granted that all three enterprises are legitimate, and ask about their implications -- individual and collective -- for the analysis of systematic variation in social history.

The divergence of views lends spice to social history. It also produces uncertainty about the discipline's boundaries and subdivisions. Any coherent intellectual discipline combines four elements: 1) a set of certified practitioners who communicate with each other; 2) an ensemble of questions that guide the practitioners' inquiries; 3) a body of evidence those practitioners collectively regard as worthy of attention; 4) approved ways of using the evidence to answer the questions. (Most disciplines also include a fifth element: an institutional structure in the form of journals, professional associations, meetings and the like; the institutions matter less for this discussion than do the other four elements.)

Linkers, diggers, and glossers disagree somewhat on all four counts: who belongs to the discipline, what questions have priority, what evidence commands attention, what uses of the evidence deserve credence. Glossers, for example, show greater sympathy for oral history than do linkers or diggers, and have a greater inclination to cast any source as a text to interpret for coherent meaning. Conversely, they prefer sources containing descriptions and narratives, which are more amenable to textual explication than the administrative by-products that fill most archives.

Linkers, on the other hand, frequently employ routine sources, such as tax records and birth registers, that provide little material for interpretation. They turn more readily to the search for patterns in substantial series of documents. That fact supplies the truth in the generally false accusation that they pant after numbers. Linkers, diggers, and glossers, nevertheless, overlap considerably with respect to their definitions of disciplinary membership, proper evidence, and appropriate methods. They disagree especially about the questions worth asking.

Linkers ask a great variety of questions. But those questions pivot around the connections between large transformations and small-scale social experiences. Which large transformations and which small-scale experiences depend, of course, on the periods and places in question. Chinese historians inevitably attend to the expansion and contraction of the empire and to the fortunes of patrilineal descent groups, while historians of the Middle East have no choice but to contend with the transformations and divisions of Islam. Among historians of the western family since 1400, characteristic linking questions concern how industrialization affected household composition, how the strategies of proletarian couples influenced employers' hiring, and whether ideological sea changes such as secularization reshaped relations between parents and children. For most linkers who deal with the recent history of western countries, proper objects of study include population growth, urbanization, changes in family structure, voting preferences, associational life, popular collective action, literacy, capital accumulation, and alterations in popular recreation.

Such diverse subjects have a unifying thread: the connection of large social structures and changes with social experience at the scale of the individual or group. When Lawrence Stone hailed the "revival of narrative" in

historical writing, he suggested that such problems were losing favor among historians, after two decades of dominating the agenda. Analytic history, he claimed, was giving way to narrative and the interpretation of cultures. Eminent linker Eric Hobsbawm replied, however, that Stone exaggerated the strength of the trend, that analytic history continued to flourish, and that much of the new writing Stone had in mind actually consisted of efforts to convey intelligibly the results of analytic history. He summarized:

In short those historians who continue to believe in the possibility of generalizing about human societies and their development, continue to be interested in "the big why questions", though they may sometimes focus on different ones from those on which they concentrated twenty or thirty years ago (Hobsbawm 1980: 4).

The big "why" questions include the diggers' inquiries into social bases of politics, but range well beyond them. They do not ordinarily involve much of the glossers' textual interpretation. Hobsbawm's own work in social history, which extends from studies of bandits, agrarian rebels and tramping workers to general treatments of capitalist development, exemplifies the linkers' effort to relate small-scale social life to large transformations.

At times, the aspirations of linkers reach to "total history" or "the history of society." In the style of a Fernand Braudel, the aspiration leads to the simultaneous discussion of material life, population trends, economic cycles, changes of regime, and ideological innovations. But it also has a more modest, controlled, empiricist form. Adeline Daumard, for example, asks French comparative and quantitative history as "to deepen our knowledge of French society and clarify the nature of the transition from the society of the Old Regime to contemporary society" (Daumard 1985: 1). Her examples bear mainly on empirical analyses of changes in wealth, occupation, and class structure in different cities. Clearly, linkers come in many styles.

Diggers, when they speak about historical method, commonly show less tolerance than linkers for alternative modes of analysis. When Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese decry the "political crisis of social history," they make their judgment unambiguous:

as admirable as much of the recent social history has been and as valuable as much of the description of the life of the lower classes may eventually prove, the subject as a whole is steadily sinking into a neoantiquarian swamp presided over by liberal ideologues, the burden of whose political argument -- notwithstanding the usual pretense of not having a political argument -- rests on an evasion of class confrontation . . . . No amount of superficial enthusiasm for "popular culture" or the symbolic representation of lower-class dissent, much less for ostensibly new methods, can obscure the obfuscation of the continuing class struggle between contending social forces as manifested on politically decisive terrain (Fox-Genovese & Genovese 1978: 214-215).

The condemnation strikes first at linkers, and then at glossers.

Fox-Genovese and Genovese condemn as evasion any social history that does not address the question of political power. As compared with linkers and glossers, they draw a different boundary around the specialty -- doubting, for example, that quantitative political history, population studies, and cliometric economic history belong in the discipline. Although they leave uncertain exactly which bodies of evidence and methods of analysis qualify as valid social history, they state without cavil that the discipline's central questions concern class struggle and political power. Similarly, Tony Judt complains that:

. . . social history is suffering a severe case of pollution. The subject has become a gathering place for the unscholarly, for historians

bereft of ideas and subtlety. The writings thus produced are without theoretical content, a failing disguised by an obsession with method and technique. They represent collectively a loss of faith in history. In their reaction against the chronological imperatives of political and economic history, social historians have all but lost touch with the historical events altogether (Judt 1979: 66).

Other diggers (e.g. Eley & Nield 1980) state their positions more moderately, but still insist that social history's central questions concern the social bases of politics.

Glossers think very differently. Speaking of the elderly woman, the pim who lives with and nurtures the children of the Luo people in Kenya, David Cohen points out that she lives her life "far from the contentions of the slave trade, colonial domination, the emerging city, and capitalist development." But Pim, he remarks,

along with her charges, serves the purposes of social history because she helps us understand the interior architecture of African society. Pim challenges us to comprehend, visualize, and disinter certain routines of behavior at their source, to understand the intimate structure of thought and activity through which simple routines become powerful repertoires, to see how these are given meaning and impulse. She challenges us to observe how this little social mechanism -- aggregated thousands of times in ways pims in their siwindhes over generations each evolved -- produces life and gives it order and logic and direction (Cohen 1985: 195-196; for a rather different view of priorities in African history, see Cooper 1981a, 1981b and 1983).

Thus, for Cohen, the practitioners of social history merge imperceptibly into the adepts of anthropology and archeology. Their evidence consists of observations and residues of routine social practices. Their central analytic

procedures concern the discovery of coherence and significance in those practices. The guiding questions deal with meaning.

Although Cohen certainly includes in African history the rise and fall of kingdoms, creation and recreation of urban networks, fluctuations of the slave trade, and the ebb and flow of European imperialism, he distrusts any history that makes these externally-defined processes the matrix of analysis. Instead, he declares,

We must see how people compose their own lives in order to understand the composite forces around them. We must see how little routines have gathered into arrays, and how they rework the forms of social life. We must see how these forms are given meaning, and how force is imparted to them, and how they generate or rework still newer arrays of routines (Cohen 1985: 227).

The resulting questions take a very general form; they ask about how different kinds of people lived, how they related to each other, how they changed. The amount to a kind of historical ethnography.

David Cohen does not say that the social history of the linkers and the diggers is wrong. He only says that it is dangerous for the study of Africa, where it has led mainly to confusion and misrepresentation. He joins the doubts about structure and agency that haunt Hans Medick, David Sabeau, and their ethnographophile collaborators.

The diverse fragments of social history differ with respect to the importance that they give to the pursuit of systematic variation, and the kinds of systematic variation that preoccupy them. By systematic variation, I mean differences among comparable units that conform to an identifiable principle -- declining over time, rising with wealth, falling into a limited number of well-defined types, or something of the sort. The social units in question



may be individuals, personal networks, households, communities, firms, kinship groups, industries, national states, military alliances, or any number of other entities, just so long as at least three of them exist, and there is a reliable means of determining whether any particular unit belongs to the set.

Obviously, the pursuit of systematic variation requires comparison. But is it therefore identical to comparative history? Regrettably, the phrase "comparative history" has come to imply the simultaneous study of two or more of those fictitious entities called "societies." There the trouble begins. No one has come up with a workable criterion for the identification of a society other than the presence of a national state. Yet theorists insist on endowing societies with properties such as a common culture and a coherent system of social control.

For a few historians, "society" means something quite simple: no more than a population that falls under the jurisdiction of a particular national state. For them, comparison can proceed without too much difficulty. The concept runs into acute difficulty, however, under a number of conditions that often apply to comparisons in social history:

1. where and when national states do not exist, which means most of the world before the twentieth century;
2. in cases where a state abruptly begins, ceases, subdivides, or changes boundaries: Belgium, Panama, Germany, Texas, Manchuria, Korea all provide telling instances;
3. in the presence of distinctive regional languages, religions, and social practices within the same state, the United Kingdom, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, Malaysia, and Lebanon being evident contemporary examples;
4. to the extent that the analyst postulates the existence of a coherent structure and identity for each "society."

At least one of these conditions, it seems to me, usually obtains in efforts to compare societies. To that extent, we would be better off abandoning such comparisons, and turning to the analysis of structures and processes whose existence we can reasonably presume or verify. They need not be smaller in scale than the so-called societies; we may well compare continents, power blocs, national states, mass migrations, famines, or general wars. We may even compare world systems, if we can decide how to identify them. The point is to be clear and concrete about what we are comparing.

For recent history, indeed, national states -- and therefore the very units that many historians have actually had in mind when discussing "societies" -- often provide appropriate units of analysis. National states became the world's dominant organizations after 1400 or so, as conquest and consolidation first created the European state system and then imposed it on all the world. As states grew in power, they helped shape national markets, national languages, national churches, and any number of other nationally-bounded institutions. With the widespread decolonization that followed World War II, furthermore, almost all the world fell into bounded, nominally autonomous states.

Not all these states were similar entities. None came close to the sociological fantasy of an autonomous, coherent society with its distinct value system, general norms, shared beliefs, integrated social roles, mechanisms of social control, and coordinated behavior. The world's recognized states today include Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Australia, Austria, the Bahamas, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Bhutan, Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil, Brunei, Bulgaria, Burma, Burundi, and on through the alphabet to Vanuatu, the Vatican, Venezuela, Vietnam, Western Samoa, North Yemen, South Yemen, Yugoslavia, Zaire,

Zambia, and Zimbabwe. All of them have nominal sovereignty, diplomatic representation, control over some autonomous armed force, and some sort of distinctive governmental organization.

Beyond the defining attributes of a state, however, Albania, Andorra, Bahrain, Brazil, Brunei and Vanuatu have little in common. No one would want to undertake comparisons among them without clear awareness of the limits of any such comparison. Nevertheless, some subsets of these states do lend themselves to comparison, just so long as we recognize that we are not comparing coherent "societies," but populations subject to the jurisdiction of different national states. It makes sense to compare the experience of recently-independent states with respect to military bids for power, and the experience of powerful industrial states in regard to inflation and unemployment. But comparisons must take place within a defensible theory of similarities and differences.

Relevant similarities and differences appear at many scales. The delineation of world-systems -- the largest strongly-connected interpersonal networks -- is never easy. In principle, nevertheless, we can compare whole world-systems. At the other extreme, comparing individuals, households, or interpersonal bonds, one by one, frequently yields important returns for social history. The national scale has no particular priority. Despite much talk about states and societies, in fact, most effective comparisons in social history actually deal with much smaller social units.

Having established bases of comparison, we still have a choice of strategies: individualizing, universalizing, encompassing, and variation-finding. The distinctions among them rest on the kinds of propositions they produce rather than the strict logic of the comparison. The relevant propositions lie along two continua:

This proposition refers  
to a single instance of  
the phenomenon

-----  
This proposition refers  
to all instances of the  
phenomenon

The phenomenon takes  
only one form

-----  
The phenomenon takes  
many forms

single instance/one form = individualizing

single instance/many forms = encompassing

all instances/one form = universalizing

all instances/many forms = variation-finding

Individualizing comparison, then, contrasts specific instances of a given phenomenon as a means of specifying the particular properties of each instance. Thus James Lang (1975) compares the American colonizing strategies of England and Spain in his pursuit of the peculiar differences that came to separate North from South America.

Encompassing comparison locates different instances at various points within the same system in order to explain their characteristics as functions of their variable relationship to the whole system. Thus G. William Skinner (1977) places Chinese cities within the dual hierarchies of markets and imperial administration, then accounts for differences among them by means of their relative positions in the two hierarchies.

Universalizing comparison searches for the common properties of a class of instances on the way to propounding a general rule concerning that class. Thus Everett Hagen (1962) scrutinizes the experiences of Russia's Old Believers, Britain's Protestant Dissenters and Lowland Scots, Japan's commoners, and Colombia's Antiquenos to arrive at a model of the process by which economic innovators arise.

Variation-finding comparison, finally, examines systematic differences among instances in hopes of specifying a unitary explanation of the differ-

ences. Thus Guy Swanson (1967) argues a relationship between a state's authority structure and its religion, and offers variations in the European response to the Protestant Reformation in support of the argument.

If we are searching for the secret of systematic variation, individualizing and universalizing comparison may help clear the way, but they will not get us very far. At their best, the two approaches lead to an accurate specification of a crucial case's peculiarities or the common properties of a class of cases -- no mean accomplishments, but not statements about systematic variation. Our real choice lies between encompassing and variation-finding comparison. On one side, the placement of all cases with respect to some larger structure or process, relations to which help explain the variation among the cases. On the other, identification of some principle of covariation that connects two or more features of each case.

In the realm of national states, the distinction approximates the choice between "externalist" and "internalist" accounts of variation. In the realm of firms, it corresponds broadly to the choice between market-position and organizational accounts. In the realm of cities, to urban-hierarchy and economic-base accounts. As the examples suggest, the choices are not mutually exclusive; many explanations of systematic variation compound position in a system with distinctive traits of individual units, or treat one as the cause of the other. Nevertheless, relatively pure examples of encompassing and variation-finding comparisons exist. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system analyses give high priority to encompassing comparison, while most economic historians' accounts of the same events treat the various national experiences as relatively autonomous iterations of similar processes.

Linkers and diggers separate from glossers at precisely this choice-point. Linkers undertake encompassing comparisons with a bit more enthusiasm than diggers, but the difference is not great. Both linkers and diggers often

search for principles of variation that account for many cases, and challenge any proposed general principle on the ground that it does not fit known cases. Glossers, on the other hand, rarely venture into simultaneous comparisons of many cases, preferring to explicate one or two at a time. A combination of taste and fundamental belief constrains the glossers: they prefer to interpret a single experience in loving detail, cherish uniqueness, and doubt that a regular, knowable world exists. The division between them and linkers or diggers has ontological and epistemological roots. Only linkers and diggers take seriously the search for systematic variation by means of multiple comparisons. To glossers, that search seems a bootless enterprise. If they choose any comparison at all, it will be individualizing or universalizing.

Where, then, do linkers and diggers separate? At the choice of scales for comparison, and at the value of encompassing comparison. Linkers see no difficulty with comparison at many scales, from the individual to the world-system; they only require that the comparison include the experiences of ordinary people. Nor do they hesitate to undertake encompassing comparisons, establishing how the experiences of ordinary people vary as a function of their relationship to large structures and processes.

Diggers maintain a stronger attachment to the national level of comparison -- or at least to those levels at which they conceive genuine politics to operate. They remain suspicious of encompassing comparison, and more confident of individualizing, universalizing, or variation-finding comparison, because encompassing comparison challenges the base/superstructure analysis with which they prefer to work. For diggers, in the last analysis, systematic variation in politics occurs across distinctive, relatively independent social settings, and stems from differences in the fundamental character of those social settings. Under those circumstances, encompassing comparison makes

little sense.

In the short run, no single empirical test -- however grand -- can measure the relative merits of the positions on historical comparison taken by linkers, diggers, and glossers. Yet the choice among them is neither arbitrary nor trivial. In the long run, however, their relative predominance will profoundly influence the character and results of comparative social history. We linkers see both the diggers and the glossers as too narrow, although in different ways. Yet if their premises are correct, much of our work is futile. In that regard, at least, experience will tell. To judge the value of linking, digging, and glossing, let us weigh the actual contributions of the three approaches to social history.

## REFERENCES

Braudel, Fernand

- 1981-      Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century.    New York:  
1984      Harper & Row. 3 vols.

Cohen, David William

- 1985      "Doing Social History from Pim's Doorway," in Olivier Zunz,  
ed., Reliving the Past. The Worlds of Social History. Chapel  
Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Cooper, Frederick

- 1981a      "Africa and the World Economy," African Studies Review 24: 1-  
86.  
1981b      "Peasants, Capitalists, and Historians: A Review Article,"  
Journal of Southern African Studies 7: 284-314.  
1983      ed., Struggle for the City: Migrant Labor, Capital, and the  
State in Urban Africa. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Daumard, Adeline

- 1985      "Histoire sociale comparative de l'epoque contemporaine,"  
Institut d'Histoire Economique et Sociale de l'Universite de  
Paris I. Recherches et Travaux 14: 1-52.

Eley, Geoff, and Keith Nield

- 1980      "Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?" Social History 5:  
249-269.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth, and Eugene Genovese

- 1976      "The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian  
Perspective," Journal of Social History : 205-220.

Hagen, Everett E.

- 1962      On the Theory of Social Change. How Economic Growth Begins.  
Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey.



Hobsbawm, E.J.

1980 "The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments," *Past & Present* 86:  
3-8.

Judt, Tony

1979 "A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians,"  
*History Workshop* 7: 66-94.

Lang, James

1975 *Conquest and Commerce. Spain and England in the Americas.* New  
York: Academic Press.

Medick, Hans, and David Warren Sabean

1984 eds., *Interest & Emotion. Essays on the Study of Family and  
Kinship.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Skinner, G. William

1977 "Cities and the Hierarchy of Local Systems," in G. William  
Skinner, ed., *The City in Late Imperial China.* Stanford:  
Stanford University Press.

Stone, Lawrence

1979 "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,"  
*Past & Present* 86: 3-24.

Swanson, Guy E.

1967 *Religion and Regime. A Sociological Account of the  
Reformation.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Wallerstein, Immanuel

1979 *The Capitalist World-Economy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University  
Press.