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A Note From the Editor

I am pleased to begin my term as newsletter editor with this issue because it includes a symposium that contributes to key debates in comparative historical sociology. I thank John Hall for organizing the symposium, and for his help in putting together this issue. Future issues will continue to present debates on current controversies. To respond, comment, or contribute to the newsletter, send submissions to the address listed on the next page.

-- Carole Turbin, editor

Greetings From the New Section Chair

Andrew Abbott

Welcome to the 1995-96 Comparative Historical Sociology year. We have planned three sessions for next year: one on historical and feminist ethnography, one on relations between new institutional theory and historical sociology, and one on the perpetual question of the relevance of history to policy. There are also roundtables, as we plan again to use the Council time slot to provide more space on the program. Intellectually, historical sociology seems vibrant in many ways, as our program suggests. But scanning this year's job advertisements, one cannot help but conclude that colleges and universities are less persuaded of our importance than they are of that of many other fields. My aim in proposing the session on history and policy is to force us to think clearly about what historical sociology can teach us, how it is necessary to contemporary policy thinking. This issue is raised by work of Theda Skocpol and others, but I would like to see a general and radical investigation of the problem. Just why is historical sociology necessary? Legislators, regents, and deans are probably asking themselves that question. We need to have answers.

Introduction to Symposium

This symposium adds to the heated conversation currently underway regarding the nature and purposes of comparative historical sociology. Charles Tilly contends that the dominant mode of this enterprise, big-case comparisons, is bankrupt, and that it ought to be replaced by a new "relational realism." Mustafa Emirbayer spells out in detail just what such a relational realism might look like, while Jeff Goodwin sets forth a spirited -- although quite relational -- defense of big-case comparisons. We hope that these contributions will not end, but renew the debate.

**Macrosociology,
Past and Future**

Charles Tilly

New School for Social Research

As a program for investigating, writing, teaching, communicating, and job-creating, comparative-historical sociology has seen very good days. Because of the program's very success, those days will soon pass. Vital, vibrant work on big structures, (Continued on page three)

**Symbols, Positions, and
Objects: Toward a New
Relational Strategy of
Historical Analysis**

Mustafa Emirbayer,

New School for Social Research

Charles Tilly speaks of a new relational perspective in historical inquiry, but he doesn't spell out precisely what sort of analytical strategy this perspective (Continued on page four)

**A Case for Big Case
Comparison**

Jeff Goodwin, New York University

The first great comparative-historical analysts, Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx, arrived at many of their insights by examining and often comparing such big cases as "France," "England," "Germany," and "America." Yet we now live in a world in which the borders between such (continued on page six)

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FUTURE PUBLICATION**DEADLINES:**

Spring: February 1, 1996

Summer: June 1, 1996

Section News:**1996 Program**

At the annual business meeting at the ASA meetings in Washington, D.C., members discussed topics for next year's panels, congratulated award winners, praised members of 1995 committees for jobs well done, and selected new committee chairs. Kathleen Blee agreed to chair the Barrington Moore Award Committee, and Robin Stryker will chair the Reinhard Bendix Award Committee. Roy Barnes is chair of the membership committee, and Edwin Amenta chairs the committee on nominations. Several members volunteered to organize sessions, and Jeff Goodwin agreed to organize roundtables.

1. Historical Ethnography and Feminist Ethnography (cosponsored with Sex and Gender Section)

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2. The New Institutionalism and Historical Sociology

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4. Roundtables

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Award Winners

The Barrington Moore Prize Committee (Richard Lachman, chair, Robin Stryker, Phillip Gorski) awarded the prize for Best Recent Article to co-winners, Julia Adams and Roger Gould. Julia Adams' article, "The familial state: Elite family practices and state-making in the early modern Netherlands," appeared in *Theory and Society* in 1994. Roger Gould's article, "Trade cohesion, class unity, and urban insurrection: Artisanal activism in the Paris Commune," was published in 1993 in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

The 1995 Reinhard Bendix Prize for the best paper written in 1993 or 1994 by a graduate student was also awarded to co-winners: Katherine Stovel, a student in sociology at the University of North Carolina; and Dahlia Sabina Elazar, who received her Ph.D. in 1993 from the University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Sociology. The committee (Edwin Amenta, Chair, Kathleen Blee, Lutz Kaelber) praised Stovel's paper, "The structure of lynching: Temporal pattern and spatial variation in the Deep South, 1882-1930," for making "sense of the temporal and spatial distribution" of lynching in the Deep South. Stovel's sophisticated methodological discussion linked spatial regularity in temporal sequencing "to the social organization of the perpetrators." Elazar's paper, "The Making of Italian Fascism: The Seizure of Power, 1919-1922," was published in *Political Power and Social Theory* in 1993. Elazar criticizes class and modernization theories of fascism and theories of the social bearers of fascism for ignoring the role of the fascist organization. Elazar argues that Italian fascism's triumph was "the outcome of concrete political struggles guided by specific strategies."

Macrosociology (Continued from page 1)

large processes, and huge comparisons in space-time will continue in sociology and other social sciences. Historical inquiry will thrive, but not in the mode that has come to define the field during the last scholarly generation: the mode we may call Big Case Comparison, BCC. The lining up of civilizations, societies, cultures, wars, revolutions, and other great chunks of social experience for arguments about causes and meanings will persist as the literary trope it has been for hundreds of years, but will shrivel as a method of systematic analysis. BCC will shrivel for several reasons: because its faulty ontological premises are finally outweighing its undoubted contributions as a means of disciplining inquiry; because the system of distinct, bounded sovereign states that long served as its implicit warrant is rapidly disintegrating; because the rise of relational, historicist, and institutional thinking in sociology is raising insuperable challenges to all portrayals of social life as the work of neatly-bounded, self-motivated, rule-following actors, individual or collective.

Comparison of large social chunks in search of invariant laws has marked the social sciences since their emergence as self-regarding disciplines -- certainly since E.B. Tylor's proud announcement of the Comparative Method in 1889. In different styles, Max Weber, Oswald Spengler, and Pitirim Sorokin exemplified and justified sociologists' investment in vast comparative enterprises. During the 1940s, big comparative-historical inquiries lost much of their lustre in sociology -- in 1959, the ASA-sponsored volume Sociology Today surveyed the whole field, but offered no sustained discussion of historical or comparative analysis -- only to revive handsomely with S.N. Eisenstadt, Reinhard Bendix, Barrington Moore, Jr., and others from the late 1950s onward. That second wave is now subsiding. The sea will survive, but its chief currents already run in other directions.

In their time, historical-comparative inquiries provided wonderful antidotes for unhistorical and antihistorical inanities in sociology. However one disagreed with them on other grounds, such masters as Bendix and Moore made evident how greatly where, when, and in what order some social process occurred mattered to how it occurred. They exposed the bankruptcy of the quasi-evolutionary pseudo-history in which searchers for the secrets of development lined up whole societies, generally identified by the existence of a durable state, along a single continuum from least to most advanced, then inferred the standard developmental path from that continuum -- or, worse yet, from currently-observable characteristics of its most advanced members. They validated concerns about

power, freedom, and human agency bequeathed to sociology by Karl Marx, Max Weber, and other ancestors. They thereby motivated rich, ambitious historical and comparative examinations of human struggles.

From early on, nevertheless, postwar historical-comparative sociology followed multiple paths in addition to the comparison of civilizations, societies, cultures, and momentous events. Inspired partly by a populist hope to reconstruct history from below and partly by collaboration with historians who were trying to renew their own craft through self-conscious adoption of social-scientific procedures, sociological students of family structure, population processes, communities, political struggle, and economic change dug deeply into historical materials without concentrating on massive case-by-case comparisons (Abbott 1994, Monkkonen 1994). Despite strident epistemological challenges from postmodern critics, such studies still thrive today (see, e.g., Haganan 1994).

Yet the emblem of comparative-historical sociology, Big Case Comparison, is now fading. BCC is fading because of 1) ontological inadequacy 2) disintegration of state systems, and 3) relational, historicist, and institutional thinking.

Ontological inadequacy? The presumption that distinctive, autonomous, coherent, self-sustaining civilizations, societies, cultures, and/or great events not only exist but possess their own logics sui generis undergirds the BCC program. Where empirically-identifiable states, organizations, networks, or connected sequences of action constitute the objects of study, to be sure, sociologists have ample reasons to formulate ideas concerning their regularities and to undertake systematic comparisons among them. But presuming their intelligible existence a priori, inferring the coherence of societies from the presence of states, or taking historically-constructed memories of events -- wars, revolutions, social movements, transitions, or others -- as grounds for their comparative study founds analysis on the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Half-aware of the difficulty, many of BCC's most ardent practitioners are abandoning it for historically-grounded studies of social processes (Tilly 1993, 1995).

Disintegration of the state system? Implicitly or explicitly, the BCC program has always relied on presumptions about the division of the world into coherent nations and states, presumptions that only became prevalent with the consolidation of the European state system and its rapid seizure of world power during the 19th century. Whether consolidated states as the world has known them for two centuries are now losing their grip or merely adapting as the world-system changes remains

hotly debated (Tilly et al. 1995). Massive flows of capital, labor, commodities, information, and technology across national boundaries and increasing prominence of such transnational structures as the European Community and GATT are surely both reducing the autonomy of most states and undermining their capacity to regulate activities within their territories. Meanwhile the expansion of communal-ethnic struggles over political power within existing states (Gurr 1994) discredits any easy equation of society or culture with state. Continuation of these trends is already attracting the attention of macrosociologists to non-national webs of social relations; it will eventually destroy the plausibility and interest of comparisons among state-defined societies.

Relational, historicist, and institutional thinking? As approaches in contemporary sociology, we might distinguish **systems theories**, with collectivities (including that great collectivity called Society) following autonomous and compelling logics; **methodological individualism**, with its reduction of social reality to the self-motivated actions of individual actors; **phenomenological individualism**, with its parallel reduction of social reality to the consciousness of actors, individual or collective; and **relational realism**, with transactions, interactions, or social ties serving as starting-points of social analysis. The first three have run their course, while the fourth is gaining strength. In a wide variety of sociologies, furthermore, the idea of incessant human improvisation that lays down subsequent constraints on behavior in the form of memory, culture, institutions, and social ties contradicts any possibility of chopping social life into neatly-bounded, self-motivated, rule-following actors, individual or collective. Macrosociology will benefit enormously from these new ideas about social process, but not through a continuation

of Big Case Comparison. In that sense, the once-dominant program of comparative-historical sociology is now writing *finis*.

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Symbols, Positions, and Objects (Cont. from page 1)

Charles Tilly speaks of a new relational perspective in historical inquiry, but he doesn't spell out precisely what sort of analytical strategy this perspective might entail. Inspired by much the same goal as Tilly, Jeff Goodwin and I, along with other colleagues and students in the New York area, have been striving over the past few years to develop a relational theory of historical process. Our arguments rest upon a simple fourfold distinction. We argue, following upon some of Jeffrey Alexander's recent work in Action and its Environments, and before him Parsons (and Sorokin), that action takes place within a *plurality* of "environments" or structural contexts simultaneously -- which we designate as the cultural, societal, and social-psychological contexts of action. (We differ from

Parsons in not *prioritizing* these contexts in any sort of hierarchy, "cybernetic" or otherwise, and certainly in not regarding them as "action systems" per se.) The ways in which actors act are guided and channelled at one and the same time by all three of these transpersonal, structural contexts, which intersect and overlap with one another and yet are mutually autonomous: they encompass relatively enduring patterns or matrices of relationships, each of which operates according to its own independent logic.

Our contention is that these elements can be reconceptualized in *relational* terms, that we can speak of all three using the same relational (network-analytic) language. We proceed, in fact, from the notion that it is ties and transactions, not entities such as "the individual" or "society"; that truly constitute the legitimate unit of sociological analysis.

What we term the *cultural environment* of action encompasses those symbolic configurations that constrain and enable action by structuring actors' normative commitments and their understandings of the world and of their own possibilities within it. Margaret Somers makes the useful point that the symbolic structures it encompasses can be seen as "conceptual networks," as structured webs, matrices, or configurations of relations among concepts; these formations are relatively autonomous from societal and social psychological configurations (see also William Sewell, Jr., on "idioms"). Important here is that a rich plurality of such cultural structures is to be found in most actual fields of action. A cultural context or environment contains multiple cultural or symbolic structures, just as a societal environment contains multiple, intersecting circles of interaction, in the Simmelian sense.

The *societal environment*, for its part, encompasses all those network patterns of social ties that comprise an institutional or interpersonal setting of action. It includes political, economic, as well as civil and associational (including "public") networks of interaction. (This is more the familiar terrain of network analysis.) Conceptual networks and societal structures often constrain and enable action in different, even incompatible ways. Empirically, of course, these structures usually "fit" together intimately, but analytically they must be kept distinct.

Finally, we speak of a *social-psychological environment* of action, which encompasses all those psychical structures that constrain and enable action by channelling flows and investments of emotional energy. It includes long-lasting, durable interpersonal structures of attachment and emotional solidarity. Here the "nodes," so to speak, in the networks are not symbols (as in the cultural environment), or positions (as in the societal), but rather "objects," as that term is understood by "object relations" theorists in particular: that is to say, actual persons, aspects of persons, or fantasized substitutes for persons. (As Freud argues in his monograph on *Group Psychology*, in place of the "father" one might just as well find a leader, the nation, or some sort of abstract Idea, ideal, or set of principles.) Herein lies another difference from Parsons, Sorokin, and Alexander: we conceptualize this third "environment of action" as fundamentally transpersonal in nature, rather than as an environment of individual personality or psychology. Empirically, we see potential applications for it in a wide range of fields of study, from nationalism and racism to social movements and organizations. Often, students of these phenomena focus upon the patterns of societal interaction (and the societal interests) underlying them, or else upon their discursive aspects, while ignoring their sometimes powerful emotional and psychical (often less than fully conscious) bases.

Important as well to our framework is the notion that action also possesses -- at least in certain empirical instances -- a moment of intentionality as well, which guarantees, in fact, that action will never be *completely* determined or structured. Hence a fourth element in our theory of historical process: namely, *human agency*. We understand by it the *engagement* by actors of their different environments, an engagement that both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. Ann Mische and I (1995) have proposed the idea of a "chordal triad of agency" consisting of three principal tones or components, any one of which might be accentuated within a given field of empirical action. The first of these tones, which we term the *iterational* moment of agency, refers to the selective reactivation of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time. The second dimension, the *projective*, encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to the actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future. And finally, the *practical-evaluative* element entails the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations. Disaggregating agency in this way allows us to relativize -- and thereby to go beyond -- the "practical actor" model of action (action as largely habitual, repetitive, and taken-for-granted) that informs much of sociology today, from Bourdieu's writings to structuration theory to network analysis. In our approach, the iterational moment of agency (the reactivation of past patterns of interaction) is but one of several alternative possible agentic orientations.

All of this, of course, is but a set of analytical distinctions, which have to be developed further through extensive empirical investigation. Perhaps the key payoff at this stage will have been simply to lay out a wide array of theoretical possibilities that prevents the foreclosure of otherwise promising research options, a framework that opens up new questions and prevents the conflation of old ones. This framework is thoroughly relational in its every aspect; it combines the ambitions of general theorists of historical process, past and present, with the "relational realism" of empirical researchers interested in exploding the limitations of substantialist thinking and pointing us in the direction of a new historical and comparative macrosociology.

REFERENCE: Emrbayer, Mustafa, and Ann Mische. 1995. "What is Agency?" *CSSC Working Paper #206*

Big Case Comparison (Continued from page 1)

entities seem increasingly permeable and even irrelevant. Millions of people, enormous material resources, and a variety of cultural artifacts spill over these borders every day. Simultaneously, transnational institutions such as multinational corporations, the World Bank, GATT, and the European Union appear increasingly important. And the widespread proliferation of ethnonationalist movements and contentious "identity politics" further confounds the notion that we inhabit a world of homogeneous "nation-states."

The assumption that "societies" or "countries" are naturally bounded and integrated systems is clearly no longer compelling (and should never have been so). The implausibility of this assumption also undermines the idea that a comparative perspective will reveal the timeless and invariant laws that "cover" all such cases. And yet many sociologists continue to adhere to these notions, which underpin a great many so-called "cross-national," quantitative studies in particular. Fortunately, many other sociologists -- from world-systems theorists to network analysts -- have redirected their attention from categorically defined actors (individual or collective) toward the ties and transactions of actors reconceptualized in relational and interactionist terms.

But does it follow from all this that the comparative study of what Charles Tilly calls "state-defined societies" is now passé? Are generalizations or statements of any kind about such big cases as "France" or "America" simply literary tropes? Not necessarily. Here's a case for our continued need to compare big cases:

First of all, a relational perspective by no means implies that we should abandon the study of big "state-defined societies." This would follow, certainly, if the only consequential social networks were either small or transnational. Yet many of the important processes that interest contemporary sociologists centrally concern the undeniably big networks that connect various state institutions and the people they govern. Understood in this sense, "state-defined societies" are the most appropriate cases for studying such processes as democratization, welfare-state development, warmaking, the formation of public spheres, the institutionalization of ideologies, and virtually all types of political (including revolutionary) mass mobilizations.

Of course, state-society relations have always been embedded within even larger, transnational networks, including the state system; and embedded within state-society relations are important smaller networks, including class-based and ethnic communities, both of which sometimes overflow into other state-governed societies. Astute analysts of big cases, however, have always attended to the ways in which both these larger and

smaller sets of relations may powerfully shape and constrain state-society relations; I have in mind such scholars as Otto Hintze, Karl Polanyi, Stein Rokkan, Immanuel Wallerstein, Theda Skocpol, Robert Wuthnow, and, of course, Charles Tilly. If I were to criticize this group of scholars, in fact, it would hardly be for comparing big cases of social relations, but for a tendency to neglect some important analytic dimensions of these relations (see Mustafa Emirbayer's contribution to this symposium).

Furthermore, neither the growing importance of transnational exchanges and institutions (i.e., "globalization") nor the proliferation of ethnic and other "subnational" identities implies the disintegration of the state system or, perforce, of big state-society networks. In many ways, these developments are strengthening the state system. The fact, for example, that certain states are increasingly coordinating their activities through transnational organizations hardly means that such states thereby forfeit all their power and autonomy; indeed, these organizations sometimes provide states with much-needed resources and legitimacy. (Witness the scramble to join the EU and NATO.) And while states may be increasingly concerned with attracting external sources of capital, that hardly renders them less powerful or less relevant as far as their citizens, "guestworkers," or "illegal aliens" are concerned.

Nor does the recent proliferation of "subnational" identities and movements imply the sudden irrelevance of states or of state-society networks. The very emergence of such identities and movements is very intimately linked to the structure and character of state-society relations, especially "political opportunity structures." Most of these movements, moreover, seek their own states or a share of state power; they are challenging existing states, in other words, not the state system itself. Thus, the collapse of the former U.S.S.R. and Yugoslavia no more foreshadows the demise of the state system than the bankruptcy of a large corporation foreshadows the collapse of capitalism.

Finally, a comparative approach is absolutely essential for refining our understanding of all those processes that are centrally linked to big state-society networks. Such comparisons, to be sure, will not yield invariant laws, but that has never been the main purpose of a comparative perspective. On the contrary, such comparisons are necessary precisely in order to historicize and contextualize our understanding of the causal mechanisms through which social networks work. Comparisons are also helpful simply for weeding out overgeneralized and just plain bad ideas about social processes -- including the illusion that only small or transnational social networks matter.