

**Philosophies of History and Social Science**

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Apple, orange, and kumquat? The three of us have taken on an intimidating task. The three books we are comparing and criticizing here include a collection of essays, a graduate level textbook, and a synthetic monograph. Having published essay collections, textbooks, and monographs of my own, I can hardly complain about our heterogeneity. But it does rule out the simplest strategy for such a comparison: an item-by-item scorecard with judgments as to who does what better. Fortunately, the outstanding books we are discussing come from Bill Sewell and Art Stinchcombe, authors whose work I have followed and admired for decades. Although I could certainly review them – and praise them -- for writing style, fresh insights, or challenging claims, another less obvious tack seems more likely to raise valuable points for debate. Let me assess the two books as contributions to the philosophies of history and social science. That means asking whether they supply viable visions of the presuppositions historians and sociologists must adopt in order to do work that reduces our collective ignorance. It means dealing with ontology, epistemology, logic, and method.

But don't worry: I have no intention of bludgeoning you with esoteric philosophical concepts. On the contrary, each of the two books, in its own distinctive way, broadcasts a strong message concerning the proper way to generate reliable knowledge of human affairs, taking history into account. For Sewell, relations between history and social science occupy the foreground of his analysis. For Stinchcombe, historical methods take their places along side of quantitative, ethnographic, and experimental methods. But Stinchcombe, a seasoned historical analyst on his own, gives history plenty of attention.

In a recent clarifying essay on the philosophical foundations of political analysis, Philip Pettit distinguishes five relevant branches of philosophy: philosophies of reason, of nature, of mind, of society, and of value. Although we could search out Sewell's and Stinchcombe's presuppositions in all five regards, their books commit them most explicitly on questions of reason and society. The philosophy of reason, according to Pettit, "explicates and examines the presuppositions we make as to what follows from what when we reason on any topic whatsoever, whether of the kind related to deductive or inductive logic, epistemology, or the philosophy and methodology of science" (Pettit 2006: 36). The philosophy of society, he continues "deals with presuppositions about the nature of conventions, norms, and laws, about the possibility of joint intention, communal life, and group agency, and about the character of the citizenry, democracy, and the state" (Pettit 2006: 37).

Pettit also makes a useful distinction between two philosophical concepts of persons, one decision-theoretic, the other discourse-theoretic. Decision-theoretic persons act in response to interactions of their beliefs and preferences, discourse theoretic persons in response to interactions with other persons, mediated by the surrounding culture. In these terms, both Sewell and Stinchcombe engage the philosophy of reason; the word "logic," after all, appears in both their books' titles, although characteristically as a singular in Stinchcombe and a plural in Sewell. Yet on the whole Stinchcombe's book

draws more heavily on the philosophy of reason, Sewell's on the philosophy of society. Stinchcombe, furthermore, stays much closer to decision-theoretic conceptions of persons than Sewell, whose persons mostly inhabit a discourse-theoretic world.

What problems is Sewell trying to solve with his discourse-theoretic philosophy of society? In a collection of ten disparate essays, more than one problem sometimes takes charge. Individual treatments of Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins, for example, necessarily take up different issues from a chapter boldly labeled "Refiguring the 'social' in social science." Nevertheless, one immense organizing question recurs throughout the book: how should historians and social scientists represent interactions of time, culture, and social structure? Such a question might seem to cover the entire field. In fact, it leaves out a whole series of problems that occur to a philosophically alert reader as the book proceeds, for instance how exactly to detect cause-effect connections and what sorts of formal models plausibly represent social processes. Since Stinchcombe's book features just such problems, we see that Sewell has substantially narrowed his field.

Sewell takes up time, culture, and social structure separately at various points in his book, but brings them together in his grandest efforts at synthesis. Remember that bold essay on refiguring the social? It starts by teasing readers with a long exposition of semiotic approaches to social life, but ends by substituting social construction for language as its preferred metaphor. As Sewell puts it,

I claim that discursive or semiotic processes (that is to say, meaningful human actions) are conditioned by and give rise to structures or forces governed by built-environment logics (logics of spatial fixing, material instantiation, accretion, and duration) and that such built-environment logics condition semiotic processes (by stabilizing them, undermining them, or by subjecting them to transformative pressure). An adequate conceptualization of the social must recognize both the semiotic and the built-environment logics and trace out their dialectical interrelationships (Sewell 2005: 368).

Time enters this complex passage in the processes by which semiotic practices generate social environments and those environments subsequently shape semiotic practices. Culture enters as what Sewell elsewhere in the book calls "partially coherent landscapes of meaning" (Sewell 2005: 174), hence in the content of semiotic interaction. Structure enters in the very Giddensian form of negotiated outcomes to that interaction. Together, time, culture, and structure constitute history as meaningful lived experience.

"This is the point," comment Don Kalb and Herman Tak, "at which Sewell's formulations become confusing:

Either culture is autonomous and operates according to a logic of its own, roughly Saussurean if need be; or it is not autonomous and is operated within an

interlocking set of institutional practices, including specialized institutions for culture production, set in motion by identifiable and interested actors, who may or may not face resistance. It is the one or the other, and it makes a difference for how we think and talk about social existence” (Kalb and Tak 2005: 9).

Will this ambivalence do philosophically? Let me identify two large philosophical difficulties that Sewell’s book leaves unresolved. First, the time-culture-structure model of social processes implies that all social construction operates through the mediation of conscious, intentional human minds engaged in language games. Although Sewell makes concessions to unintended consequences, how can we reconcile his model with incremental effects, simultaneous effects, environmental effects, and unconscious effects? Second, to adopt a term that figures prominently in Stinchcombe’s book, what causal mechanisms produce the transformations of culture and structure so central to Sewell’s model? If, for example, we reject the teleological temporality typified by Immanuel Wallerstein and the experimental temporality typified by Theda Skocpol in favor of the eventful temporality Sewell recommends, how shall we specify the causes that make some events more consequential than other events? Must we, in fact, abandon serious efforts at explaining social processes? Since neither the word “cause” nor the word “explanation” appears in Sewell’s index, the book seems to leave the two big difficulties unresolved.

Sewell actually talks philosophy, deploying terms like epistemology and ontology repeatedly. Neither word appears in Stinchcombe’s index, although the word epistemology does sneak into the book’s main text. Stinchcombe presents himself as more of a cracker barrel philosopher than an Aristotle, self-consciously retaining the oral style of his lectures to graduate students. Nevertheless, his book’s very first sentence declares as its purpose “to analyze logically and practically various strategies sociologists have invented to explore for, develop, or test theories of causation in social life” (Stinchcombe 2005: 1). What’s more, David Hume makes his first appearance in the same first paragraph. That sounds a lot like philosophy, indeed like Philip Pettit’s philosophy of reason.

How does philosopher Stinchcombe do his work? He posits a world of phenomena falling into continua along which distances vary from small to big. Those phenomena also compound into units: persons, places, organizations, and more. To the extent that those units serve not merely as convenient points of observation but also as efficacious actors or sites of action, they must be real and causally coherent. If efficacious units are not persons, they must nevertheless possess boundaries within which causal interdependence clearly operates. Representations of distances along the continua occupied by distinct phenomena count as variables, but we must be careful to distinguish between the underlying ontology of phenomena and their representation, which takes place through the observer’s constructs. A Stinchcombian observer faces the problem of disciplining information drawn from the units to test theories about how

the continuous phenomena affect each other. They affect each other by means of causal mechanisms.

Observers of social phenomena can choose among quantitative procedures, historical analyses, ethnography, and experimental intervention as they measure distances by means of variables. To do so, they must adopt or invent concepts. Concepts identify differences worth attending to – differences in one variable that cause differences in other variables. But observers must also shape their theories to the contexts in which cause-effect relations are operating; as Stinchcombe puts it, “Most causal processes in all sciences have boundary conditions” (Stinchcombe 2005: 16). Theorizing consists of producing verifiable statements about relevant cause-effect relations within appropriate boundaries. The wider the range of a theory’s empirical implications, on the average, the more powerful the theory. Testing theory then involves two steps: deriving observable implications, and determining whether those implications are true or false. That sort of two-stage test takes on greater weight when competing theories, all at least superficially plausible, come into play.

Readers who have advanced beyond the first-year graduate methods course for which Stinchcombe originally wrote his lectures will of course find a number of the arguments familiar (see e.g. Brady and Collier 2004, King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). Without using the term, it incorporates a correspondence theory of truth. But with greater lucidity and far more well-worked examples than the average textbook, it lays out a program for inferring causes – not simply correlations – from data. It stands out from conventional presentations not only by identifying practical ways of making causal inferences but also by showing the complementary parts that quantitative, historical, ethnographic, and experimental data can play in pinning down cause-effect relations. Nevertheless, the book’s deep logic resembles that of standard social statistics. As Stinchcombe says:

I believe that these logics are basically the same, but that statistics textbooks do not ordinarily go into where the numbers they calculate with come from. We have gotten near the end of a long book on method before coming to this point, and I believe that most of what precedes ought to be at the beginning of a good statistics textbook (Stinchcombe 2005: 239).

Thus Stinchcombe’s teaching qualifies as superior sociology.

But as philosophy? Like Sewell, Stinchcombe takes us to the edges of a pair of philosophical gorges, but doesn’t tell us how to bridge them. First, what is our warrant for assuming that the observable world divides neatly into continuous phenomena we can plausibly represent as variables? What if everything out there actually consists of boiling plasma from which our puny attempts at measurement only capture occasional spurts of gas? Or what if every apparent continuum actually takes the form of a Moebius strip, forever turning back on itself? To what extent will the observational

procedures Stinchcombe describes so alluringly then produce false positives: apparent verifications of theories that are wholly inadequate? Could it be, as Andrew Abbott asserts, that the general linear model, foundation of sociological statistical analyses, “has come to influence our actual construing of social reality, blinding us to important phenomena that can be rediscovered only by diversifying our formal techniques”? (Abbott 2001: 38).

Second, what about time and its compounding into history? Stinchcombe generously treats historical analysis as one of his four major methods, and provides many an example of effective historical work, including his own. But his causes seem to be instantaneous, reversible, and impervious to sequencing effects. At a minimum, one might have thought that the history of a social unit or social process would affect its behavior at a given point in time. Since Bill Sewell’s whole book argues such a point at length, perhaps I should leave the question there. Can we possibly reconcile or at least adjudicate the confrontation between time-drenched Sewell and timeless Stinchcombe?

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