What is Historical Sociology?

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This book is dedicated to my aunt, Ruth Becker,
who always has encouraged my intellectual curiosity.

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The Sense of a Beginning

Sociology was created to explain historical change. Sociology's founders were convinced they were living through a social transformation that was unprecedented in human history, and that a new discipline was needed to describe and analyze that change, explain its origins, and explore its implications for human existence. As Tocqueville ([1835] 2003, p. 16) put it, "A new political science is needed for a totally new world." The founders disagreed over the nature of that change and over how their discipline should go about studying it. They also were not sure if the theories they developed to explain their own epoch of change could be used to develop a general "science of society." Nevertheless, they all – Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and their less illustrious contemporaries – saw the new discipline of sociology as historical.

Sociology at its beginning was historical because of the questions its founders asked.

For Marx the key questions were: What is capitalism, why did it supplant other social systems, and how is it transforming the ways in which people work, reproduce themselves biologically and socially, and gain knowledge and exploit the natural world? What effect do those changes have on relations of power, domination, and exploitation?

Weber also asked about epochal historical shifts. He sought to explain the origins of world religions, of capitalism, and of rational action, and to see how that species of rationality

affected the exercise of power, the development of science (including social science), religion, and the humanities, the organization of work, government, markets and families, and pretty much everything else humans did.

Durkheim asked how the division of labor, and the historical shift from mechanical to organic solidarity, changed the organization of workplaces, schools, families, communities, and entire societies, and affected nations' capacities to wage wars.[1]

Since its beginnings as a historical discipline concerned with epochal social transformation, sociology has become increasingly focused on the present day and on trying to explain individual behavior. Like the children's book *All About Me* (Kranz 2004), in which pages are set aside for their young owners to write about what they like to do in their "favorite place," to describe their hobby, or to "name three things that make you feel important," many sociologists, especially in the United States, look to their personal biographies or their immediate environs to find research topics. Take a look at the program of the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association. It contains sociology's version of the ages of man. First we are born, and legions of demographers explain why our mothers had us when they were 26.2 instead of 25.8 years old. We become sexually aware and active, and there are sociologists who keep on reliving their teen years in research on losing virginity or coming out of the closet. As adults, we have criminologists to tell us which ghetto youth will mug us and which will become a nerd in his failed urban school. The medical sociologists can tell us why we will be overmedicated and overbilled in our dotage. And most of this research is ahistorical and non-comparative, focused on the United States in the last five minutes.

Meanwhile, in the larger world, fundamental transformations are underway: the world's population grew to unprecedented levels in the past century, even as those billions of people consumed resources at a pace the global ecosystem cannot sustain. Soon whole countries will run out of water or be submerged under rising seas. Global warming will force mass migrations on a scale never seen in human history. Governments lack the organizational capacity and almost

certainly the desire to accommodate those refugees; many, however, will have the military means and popular support to repel needy migrants.

Today service jobs are following manufacturing and agriculture in being replaced by machines, creating the possibility that most human labor will no longer be needed to sustain current or future levels of production (Collins forthcoming; Brynjolfssom and McAfee 2012). The nature of war also is being transformed. Mass conscription – which originated at the end of the eighteenth century, made possible wars between armies with millions of soldiers, and encouraged states to develop weapons capable both of killing thousands of enemy fighters at a time and of targeting the civilian populations that manufactured the weapons and provided the recruits for those armies – has over the past half-century been abolished in almost all Western nations, which now either no longer fight wars or attempt to rely on high-tech weaponry.

Inequality within the wealthiest countries of the world has risen rapidly in the last three decades after declining for the previous four decades, while at the same time some of the countries that before World War II had been dominated by the US and Europe and were mired in poverty have achieved high levels of geopolitical autonomy and are rapidly closing the economic gap with the West. Ever fewer people on this planet live in communities that are isolated from the rest of the world, and the population of farmers that dwindled to a tiny fraction of the people living in rich countries is now rapidly declining in most of the rest of the world. For the first time in human history a majority of the world's population lives in urban areas. Links of exploitation that were established, as Marx first explained, with the advent of capitalism now are joined with various sorts of communicative links that hold the potential for more egalitarian relations within and among nations.

Sociology is especially equipped, analytically and methodologically, to analyze the implications of these early twenty-first-century transformations, just as it was created to explain the complex of disruptive and unprecedented changes that accompanied the advent of modern capitalist societies. But sociology can help us understand what is most significant and consequential about our contemporary world only when it is

historical sociology. As Craig Calhoun (2003, p. 383) rightly notes: "The most compelling reason for the existence of historical sociology is embarrassingly obvious (embarrassingly because so often ignored). This is the importance of studying social change."

My goal in this book is to turn our attention away from the sort of solipsistic and small-bore research that is presented in sociology textbooks, and which dominates too many of the major academic journals, and focus instead on understanding how sociological analyses of historical change can allow us to understand both the origins of our contemporary world and the scope and consequences of current transformations. Since much of that research is confined today to the subfield of historical sociology, this then has to be a book that examines what is historical sociology. My hope is that historical sociology's concerns, methods, and understandings can invigorate the broader discipline of sociology, making it once again a discipline about social change rather than one that confines itself to models and ethnographic descriptions of static social relations.

This book, and historical sociology, will not help you learn all about you. Historical sociology can help you understand the world in which you will live your life. It provides context to determine the magnitude and significance of present-day changes in gender relations, family structure, and demographic patterns, and in the organization and content of work, the economy, culture, politics, and international relations. Because historical sociology is inherently comparative, we can see what is unusual about any particular society, including our own, at each moment in time and to distinguish mere novelties from fundamental social change.

If the sociology envisioned by its founders is very different from much of contemporary sociology, that early sociology was also distinguished from the history written by historians. Since Marx, Weber, and Durkheim were trying to explain a single unprecedented social transformation, they ended up slighting and even ignoring the bulk of the world's history that occurred before the modern era. They also decided what history to study, and how to understand the historical evidence they examined, deductively – in terms

of the meta-theories and master concepts they advanced. That led them to rummage through the works of numerous historians, often taking the latter's findings out of context to construct broad arguments about social change. Professional historians, not surprisingly, found it easy to ignore sociological theories that floated above, and failed to engage, the archival evidence and the specific times and places upon which they define themselves and engage with one another. As a result, Weber and Durkheim and their theories have had little influence on historians.

Durkheim has been easy for historians to ignore, since he almost never referred to or engaged specific historical events. Weber, who drew on a vast range of historical research, has suffered because virtually every contemporary historian of the Reformation rejects his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Fernand Braudel (1977, pp. 65–6) accurately summarizes his profession's judgment: "All historians have opposed this tenuous theory, although they have not managed to be rid of it once and for all. Yet it is clearly false." As a result, historians are not inclined to look to Weber for theoretical or empirical guidance on other historical changes.

Marx has faired better among historians, perhaps because they do not regard him as a sociologist. Yet, historians who define themselves as Marxist, or who seek to draw on elements of Marxism, for the most part use Marx to inform their studies of specific historical eras and problems. Few historians see themselves as contributors to Marx's overarching project of explaining the origins of capitalism or tracing the dynamics of capitalism on a global or even a national scale.

Marx, Weber, and Durkheim's theories also have been challenged by non-European scholars (and by Western scholars aware of the histories and intellectual traditions of the rest of the world) who doubt that the transformation those theories are designed to explain was "anything like a 'universal human history' " (Chakrabarty 2007, p. 3). Instead, Chakrabarty, like other "post-colonial" scholars, sees those early sociological theories and much of what Europeans and North Americans have written since as "histories that belonged to the multiple pasts of Europe . . . drawn from

very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity" (ibid., p. xiii). Or, as Michael Dutton (2005, p. 89) puts it, "Why is it that, when it comes to Asian area studies, whenever 'theory' is invoked, it is invariably understood to mean 'applied theory' and assumed to be of value only insofar as it helps tell the story of the 'real' in a more compelling way?" One of my goals in this book is to explore the extent to which "Western" historical sociology can address social change elsewhere in the world, and also to see how theories and research from the "rest" of the world can inform, deepen, and challenge sociology from and about Europe.

Historical sociologists in recent decades have worked to narrow the distance between their scholarship and that of historians. Yet, the two disciplines have not merged. An aspiring academic's decision to study and pursue a career in historical sociology rather than history still has implications for what sort of intellectual they will become and what sort of research they will undertake. While historical sociologists and historians do interact with each other, they still spend most of their time learning from and seeking to address scholars in their own discipline. That matters because history and sociology have their own histories, and the past intellectual, institutional, and career decisions made by historians and sociologists shape the questions asked, the methods employed, the data analyzed, and the arguments offered within each discipline today. While there are many historians whose work influences sociologists, and some historical sociologists who have won the respect of sociologists, in practice scholars in the two disciplines study history in quite different ways. Often undergraduate and even graduate students are not much aware of those differences and may decide which field to pursue without considering all the implications of their choice. I wrote this book in part to clarify what it means to do historical sociology so that readers who are considering studying that field will have a clear idea of what it is like to pursue an academic career as a historical sociologist.

Charles Tilly offers an apt and accurate generalization of historians: they share an "insistence on time and place as fundamental principles of variation" (1991, p. 87) – e.g., the eighteenth-century French Revolution is very different,

because it was earlier and in a different part of the world, from the twentieth-century Chinese Revolution. As a result most historians are recognized and define themselves by the particular time and place they study, and organize their careers around that temporal and geographic specialization. The boundaries of those specializations coincide with and "are firmly embedded in institutional practices that invoke the nation-state at every step – witness the organization and politics of teaching, recruitment, promotions, and publication in history departments" worldwide (Chakrabarty 2007, p. 41). Today, most academic historians everywhere in the world are hired as historians of nineteenth-century US history, Renaissance Italian history, twentieth-century Chinese history, or some other such temporal-geographic specialization. Usually, history departments will hire more specialists, and make finer distinctions, for the history of their own country than for the rest of the world. Thus a US history department might have a specialist in the military history of the Civil War among a dozen Americanists along with a single historian of China, while in China a department might have one or two Americanists along with a dozen historians who each specialize in a single dynasty.

Historians' country specializations make sense because they "anchor . . . most of [their] dominant questions in national politics," which leads historians to use "documentary evidence . . . [for the] identification of crucial actors [and the] imputation of attitudes and motives to those actors" (Tilly 1991, pp. 87–8). Historians' country specializations, in turn, influence and limit when and how they go about making comparisons across time periods and geographic spaces. "[H]istorians are not accustomed, or indeed trained, to make grand comparisons or even to work with general concepts, and they often view the whole past through the lens of the particular period in which they have specialized" (Burke 2003, p. 59).

Immanuel Wallerstein offers a wonderful example of how national categories shape historical thinking in an essay entitled "Does India Exist?" ([1986] 2000). Wallerstein notes that what today is India was an amalgamation of separate territories, created by British colonization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. India's political, and also cultural,

unity is an artifact of Britain's ability to colonize the entire subcontinent. Wallerstein poses

> a counterfactual proposition. Suppose . . . the British colonized primarily the old Mughal Empire, calling it Hindustan, and the French had simultaneously colonized the southern (largely Dravidian) zones of the present-day Republic of India, giving it the name Dravidia. Would we today think that Madras was "historically" part of India: Would we even use the word "India"? . . . Instead, probably, scholars from around the world would have written learned tomes, demonstrating from time immemorial "Hindustan" and "Dravidia" were two different cultures, peoples, civilizations, nations, or whatever. (Ibid., p. 310)

India's present-day unity is a combined creation of British colonization, the nationalist resistance to British rule, and the inability of other imperial powers (such as France, which tried and failed) to grab part of the subcontinent for themselves. Wallerstein's point is that a contingent series of events, and non-events that failed to occur, created both a political unit and an academic terrain (the study of India) that affects not just scholarship about the era that began with British colonization but also historical and cultural studies of the centuries before then, when a unified Indian polity or culture did not yet exist. Had the contingencies of the past three centuries played out differently, not only would the present-day reality be different, but so would historians' retrospective reading of the distant past.

Historical sociologists, in contrast, organize their research and careers around theoretical questions – e.g., what are the causes of revolutions, what explains the variation in social benefits offered by governments to their citizens, how and why have family structures changed over time? These questions, like Marx, Weber, and Durkheim's questions about social change in the modern era, cannot be answered with a focus on a single era in a single nation. History itself, thus, matters in very different ways in historians and sociologists' explanations. For example, historians are skeptical that knowledge gained about how French people acted during their revolution in 1789 is of much help in understanding how the Chinese acted in 1949 during their revolution.

Historical sociologists instead see each revolution as the culmination of a chain of events that open certain opportunities for action while foreclosing others. Thus, to a sociologist, both the French in 1789 and the Chinese in 1949 gained the opportunity to make their revolutions as a result of previous events that created certain social structures and social relations and ended others. Historical sociologists focus their attention on comparing the structures and events of those, and other, revolutions. What is distinctive about each is secondary, in sociological analysis, to what is similar. Sociologists analyze differences systematically in an effort to find patterns that can account for each outcome. The goal, for sociologists, is to construct theories that can explain ever more cases and account for both similarities and variations.

The differences between history and historical sociology, thus, are grounded in the ways in which those two disciplines have developed. However, it would be a mistake to advance an essentialist argument about the differences between history and historical sociology. Practitioners of both disciplines would agree with Charles Tilly's (1991, p. 86) contention: "To the degree that social processes are path-dependent – to the extent that the prior sequence of events constrains what happens at a given point in time – historical knowledge of sequences becomes essential." In other words, historians and historical sociologists both devote themselves to explaining how social actors are constrained by what they and their predecessors did in earlier times. As Marx put it in his greatest work of historical analysis, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* ([1852] 1963, p. 15), "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances encountered, given and transmitted from the past."

Marx was expressing what Philip Abrams, a historian, describes as the "two-sidedness of the social world . . . a world of which we are both creators and the creatures" (1982, p. 2). We construct historical explanations of how we are creatures of the actions that humans took in the past to form the social world we inhabit and which in so many ways constrains our desires, beliefs, choices, and actions. At the same time, we are actors who are making history, creating a

new social order in the spaces for transformative action that exist in our world. Both how we are constrained and the opportunities we have for transformative action are historically determined. Our constraints and opportunities are different from those of people who lived before us, and our actions ensure that the possibilities for action in the future will be different yet again. That is why Abrams (ibid.) is justified in asserting: "Sociological explanation is necessarily historical. Historical sociology is thus not some special kind of sociology; rather, it is the essence of the discipline."

Not all actions are equal. "Most happenings reproduce social and cultural structures without significant change. Events may be defined as that relatively rare subclass of happenings that significantly transform structures. An eventful conception of temporality, therefore, is one that takes into account the transformation of structures by events" (Sewell 1996, p. 262). Abrams (1982, p. 191) uses the same word, "event," to identify "a portentous outcome; it is a transformation device between past and future."

Historical sociological explanations, therefore, need to do the following:

- first, to distinguish inconsequential everyday human actions from the rare moments when people transformed social structure;
- second, to explain why transformative events occur at particular times and places and not elsewhere;
- third, to show how events make possible later events.

When historical sociology undertakes these three tasks, it is engaged in what Abbott (1992, p. 68) describes as "the case/narrative approach," which he contrasts to the "population/analytic" approach. The population/analytic approach is dominant in sociology: it treats "all included variables as equally salient" – i.e., its goal is to measure the relative influence of many variables across numerous cases. The case/narrative approach pays attention to variables only when they matter in the causal sequence that produces the outcome that we want to explain. "This selective attention goes along with an emphasis on contingency. Things happen because of