EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

EUI Working Paper **SPS** No. 2004/18

From the Industrial Reserve Army to the Invention of Unemployment Between Social History and Historical Ontology

MARÍA GÓMEZ GARRIDO

BADIA FIESOLANA, SAN DOMENICO (FI)

All rights reserved.
No part of this paper may be reproduced in any form
without permission of the author(s).

(maria.gomez@iue.it)

© 2004 María Gómez Garrido
Published in Italy in November 2004
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50016 San Domenico (FI)
Italy
www.iue.it

From the 'industrial reserve army' to the 'invention of unemployment'. Between social history and historical ontology.*

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the tension between two different ways of doing historical research: historical sociology and *historical ontology* (Hacking 2002). The first seeks to write a history of 'real' processes, such as industrialisation, or transformations in the forms of production, and the related conflict between different social groups. The second focuses on the history of the formation of categories as a process of objectification of a particular situation, and, in turn, the impact these categories have on identity-formation. It is a tension that divides two different theoretical approaches in the historiography: the *logical positivist*, represented here by Anglophone historical sociology (in the works of Theda Skocpol and Charles Tilly), and the *interpretative* and *historicist*,[1] represented by two main authors – Foucault and Koselleck. This tension is illustrated through a particular case that has been studied from both sides: the history of unemployment as a category for public action.

Introduction

The crisis in the welfare state has allowed historians to revisit some old questions. The particular arrangements sewed into European societies after the Second World War and the narratives and categories of representation that gave sense to those societies have come to be seen in a new light. This is an invaluable opportunity to reflect on the implications that the specific policy arrangements had for the citizens at that time, as well as the changes that have taken place since then. But as I try to show in this paper, this revision of the history of policies becomes also a favoured theme for methodological and theoretical discussions on the practice of historical research.

---

* An earlier version of this paper was presented to the historical sociology network at the Congress of the European Sociological Association held in Murcia in Septermber 2003. I am grateful for the comments and suggestions of the participants. This paper has also benefitted from very helpful conversations with Oscar Moro and Leopoldo Moscoso. However, none of these parties are responsible for errors that persist in the final result.

[1] The meaning I use of 'historicism' in this paper is 'placing things in its context'. In other words, to try to be as accurate as possible with the concrete meaning that concepts and categories have in their specific temporality. In that sense it tries to avoid placing any developing logic on the subject studied. For a criticism to this later approach, Chakrabarty (2000): 22, 23.

The paper is divided into four sections. I will first present the emergence of a scientific program for historical sociology at the end of the seventies; its main aims, research questions and methodology, and how this program has been applied to the general question of the development of the welfare state. In the second section, I will analyse the rupture initiated by Foucault, and the shift in the angle from which public policies should be observed. This challenge has been taken up by some of the researchers within the 'scientific group', who have tried to integrate it into their perspective. Their efforts notwithstanding, I argue that these researchers fail to assume the main thrust of the argument: the mistaken anticipation of the *thing-to-come* by the eyes of the observer. The third section presents in more detail the methodological propositions of a *genealogy* (Foucault) and *conceptual history* (Koselleck) as useful paths for exploring questions related to the history of social policies. Recent literature dealing with the conceptualisation of unemployment shows these possibilities in the fourth section. I conclude by supporting a research program in social history that includes a study of the active processes of construction of concepts and categories.

I. Social history with a scientific flavour: the emergence of the *historical sociology* program.

If we survey Anglophone sociology and political sciences journals of the 1970s we find towards the end of the decade a sudden preponderance of the term *historical sociology*. As used by Theda Skocpol and other historians, the term presented a systematic research program that closed the debates held during the previous decades on the relations between history and sociology, or rather, between history and theory (Steedman Jones 1976). Among other referents, Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) was taken as the cornerstone of a new way of doing historical research.

The book actually had not been written with the intention of creating a new methodology. Its main aim was to question the evolutionism and functionalism that had dominated historical works after the Second World War, and in which both actors and conflicts were omitted. It was one of Moore's students, Theda Skocpol, who specifically set about examining a methodology for a quasi-new discipline – historical sociology. In an effort to present a systematic program, she co-edited the book *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (1980). Here comparativism was presented as the common element of a series of

different methodological approaches, among which the editors favoured 'macro-causal analysis' for its explanatory power. As they depicted it: 'the macro-causal analysis proceeds by selecting aspects of historical cases in order to set up approximations to controlled comparisons (…) This is always done in relation to (one or more) hypotheses about likely causes' (Skocpol and Sommers 1980: 182, 183).

Neither Moore nor Bendix, and certainly even less Geertz – all of whom were taken as representatives of the new method – would have ever tried to develop causal arguments from the historical materials. Nevertheless, during the 1980s the term *historical sociology* became associated to macro- causal analysis. Skocpol tried to apply such methodology through a continuation of the work done by Moore in order to develop a theoretical model in which the specific revolutionary outcomes that characterised each of the three classical historical cases (France, Russia, China) could be explained (Skocpol 1979). During the next years many other works followed this example.

The other main representative of a strong program for historical sociology (that is, when possible always including causal explanations) was Charles Tilly. Particularly renown for his theoretical model of revolutions and collective action, he placed the explanatory key of these outcomes in the presence of an organisation that channelled protest and established strategic alliances with the fragmented polity.[2] Tilly shares with Moore an antipathy to holism and he has consistently sought to criticise Durkheimian approaches to social change in his work. In contrast to Moore, however, Tilly has been influenced by organisational theory in economics, and consequently s*trategic action* has been a key concept in his research.

The optimism of the strong program produced throughout the early eighties a large number of works that put the emphasis on explaining revolutions, state-formation, or welfare states. In all these different historical processes certain irreducible elements were identified as explanatory variables that gave account not only of the large phenomenon as a dependent variable, but also of its 'variation'. Some of these main explanatory variables were *political mobilisation* (aided by resource mobilisation theories), *institutional constraints and opportunities*, and (later) aspects such as *state capacity* or *bureaucratic autonomy*.

It is difficult to refrain oneself from placing this scientific program in a particular context. The dynamism of Neo-Marxism clearly impressed many departments of history and sociology in the United States during the 1970s. Hence the theoretical formulation of the so-called 'political model' accepted certain assumptions without much question: first of all, *mobilisation* (namely of labour) as the root of any change within the polity (including the recognition of new rights). This idea of mobilisation was then qualified by elements such as the *political opportunities structure*, which looked at whether the system was more open or closed, whether there was a crisis within the polity, or whether possible strategic alliances were established. In other words, a series of factors which facilitated or hindered that the demands of the different social groups became recognised and incorporated by the government.

Since the program simultaneously sought recognition for the discipline of history amongst positivist social scientists, there was no possibility of entering into deeper qualitative aspects, such as the conceptual changes entailed in new rights demanded, or the changing identities of the social groups studied by the observer. The pressure to establish hard natural-like variables pushed the research in directions that necessarily overlooked these questions.[3]

As years have gone by, the optimism of the earlier works has been tempered. And either the number of cases has been limited (dual comparisons, or one case study) as in the recent work by Skocpol; or the idea of large processes has been abandoned in favour of middle-range scopes that try to capture c*ausal mechanisms*. This latter bet on which Tilly is focusing his energies, maintains the ontological individualism of his previous works which presuppose strategic actors.[4]

The development of welfare policies

The development of social rights has often been used to test possible hypotheses within the methodological program of comparative historical sociology. Two main approaches have

---

[2] Tilly (1978).

[3] And perhaps the problem lay not only on the attempt to emulate the natural sciences, but also on a series of more general practices within the academic communities that demand fast results, or in other words, quick publications. But this problem certainly goes beyond the particular case analysed here.

[4] For a summary of this program, Tilly (2000) and (2002b).

been adopted in this regard. One of these sees the welfare state as 'an answer to basic and long-term developmental processes and the problems created by them' (Flora and Heidenheimer 1981). From this view, social rights are related to general processes such as industrialisation, breakdown of previous rural communities, and local forms of solidarity.

The other, more closely related to the political program presented above, sees social rights as the result of political conflict and negotiation, rather than the outcome of some logical and universal development derived from a sort of modernisation or civilisation process. From this theoretical starting point the package of different policies that are constitutive of social rights (unemployment insurance, pensions, prevention against industrial accidents…) are explained as the result of those political processes. The political model had, in the study of social policies, its 'modernising' interlocutor in T. H. Marshall [1949], and in order to challenge his narrative, certain concepts and research questions were inevitably put on the research agenda, overemphasising the role of conflict and strategic action. The first generation of these researchers looked at labour as the driving force behind the development of social policies and social provision.[5] Later arguments, however, have made the picture more complex by including other collective actors (agrarian groups, middle classes, war veterans…) who, each under different circumstances, may establish alliances with labour in favour of social policies.[6]

II. Michel Foucault. The power of knowledge[7]

On the other side of the Atlantic, but during the same years, a series of conferences and publications by Michel Foucault started to draw attention to the constitution of different *policies* in relation to the transformations in the forms adopted by knowledge and objectivity. What had been seen by one group of historians as the result of a process of political struggles

[5] The main representatives of the power resource approach to social policies are Korpi (1989) and Esping-Andersen (1990). These authors actually use Marshall's analytical framework of civil, political and social rights, but in contrast with him they try to distinguish among different outcomes in relation to the power resources of labour.

[6] Weir, Orloff and Skocpol (1988), Baldwin (1991).

[7] It might have been wiser to title this section 'Power *and* Knowledge' following the great pains that Foucault took at trying to distinguish analytically these concepts. Nevertheless, I hope that the emphasis on *knowledge* as a potential for acting upon things, for changing the course of historical processes will help to illuminate the points of tension with a 'materialist' historical sociology.

for rights, becomes here an act of *governing*, a process of *constitution* of the subjects. This radical shift stems from an epistemological and theoretical reflection: the 'things' we study (we can think of unemployment, pensions…) did not pre-exist before a name was given to them. On the other hand, this act of naming goes beyond the demands expressed by particular groups.

The categories we study have a long and concrete history related to the changes in the formulation of questions and problems; they have a moment of emergence, in which some of those accumulated layers of discursive formulations acquire a new public articulation. In this process of public articulation, similar situations become represented under a concept, a category that becomes effective for action.

Foucault's notion of *discourse* is intimately related to the production of knowledge as objectivity. In this light, more careful attention is paid to legal agreements, a new economic theory, or a prison sentence. All these elements, dismissed by materialist historians as 'ideology', were now to acquire a material status in themselves.

This way of proceeding is, however, very far removed from intellectual history. Foucault launched a criticism of materialism, but the bricks of his work were drawn from half a century of reflections carried out within the *Annales* group (Burke 1993). The question of *unbelief* in the sixteenth century, or the collective meaning of the ritual practices by the *rois thaumaturges* are but two of the many research topics through which the authors tried to give an account of a historical period as being the result of the different forms of relations which yielded established practices. Standing out from those practices was the common sense that informed the actions and perceptions in each historical time and place (*mentalités*). From this legacy of the *Annales* group it is easy to understand why Foucault's *genealogies* are neither intellectual history, nor rigid theoretical models.

Foucault's research examines carefully the workings of institutions, as much as the discursive formations within which different historical actors must place themselves in order to become visible, to make a demand, and more generally, to act publicly. These

institutionalised practices, as well as the contemporaneous discursive practices create a certain identity, an image that any historical actor must face.

The path opened by Foucault was later enriched by the reflections coming from a new sociology of sciences (*science studies* to use the expression of their authors), as well as by the philosophical critique of the narratives that 'modern' social sciences have imposed. The combination of these three general critiques has produced, from the early eighties, a series of works on the social construction or the historical emergence[8] of different categories of social life – madness, womanhood, poverty…

Unemployment, however, far too naturalised in Western societies as to be questioned, passed through this de-constructivist, or rather, this historising gaze only a little later. It is from the mid-eighties, in a situation in which the category had entered into a crisis with respect to what it represented[9] that a series of researchers tried to apply this perspective to the question of unemployment as well. Hence, instead of asking about the development of unemployment insurance, they took one step further back and looked at the *invention or the birth of unemployment*[10]as a starting point.

With this way of asking the question, the reader is puzzled. The narrator, in turn, takes her from the *capacities* and *opportunities* of various social groups in the struggle for rights to the *construction* or *emergence* of an issue. This implies not only changing completely the order of the research, but also an invitation to enter other spaces: not the Silk Weavers' Association, but the offices of some technical expert at the Labour Bureau, or even of some professor in a University department.

[8] Both a historicist and social-constructionist perspective hold a non-naturalist approach to social categories. Nevertheless, their theoretical implications are different.
[9] The Repport on unemployment (1984) entrusted by Jacques Chirac to the director of the INSEE, Edward Malinvaud marks this moment of crisis of the category in the French context. The report indeed did not study *unemployment* as such, but rather the *category of unemployment* in relation to what it represented.
[10] Salais, Bavered, Reynaud (1986). Topalov (1994).

The transformation of scientific historical sociology

The challenge was taken up in the Western side of the Atlantic, and even if the polemic name was almost never cited, the scientific historical sociologists have taken 'knowledge' and a relational approach into account. As Tilly recounts:

> "The critique developed by idealism and postmodern skepticism led realist social historians to investigate more seriously than before the political processes that intervene between the routine formation of social relations and interests, on the one hand, and the public articulation of identities and programs, on the other" (Tilly 1995: 4).

Here I present two efforts that have been done in this direction. The first emphasised the importance of the organisational capacities of a group in order to achieve certain claims. The second looks at forms of organisation in a wider sense (including processes of institutional development), but this time as the way to impose a certain view of the world.

I. The *organisation* as the machine for the achievement of rights-entitlements.

In the collective work 'Citizenship, Identity and Social History' published in the *International Review of Social History* (1995), the authors express as their objective to give an account of the various processes related to the formation of citizenship (civil rights movements, state-citizen relationship, or social policies) by taking a more 'contingent and contextual approach'. Notwithstanding this declaration in the introduction, most of the articles develop some sort of rigid explanation: class as the basis of collective action, union membership, compulsory military service and so on and so forth.

The articles show that historical outcomes vary, and different structural or contextual situations are included in order to understand those variations (shortage or excess of labour supply, wars...). These structural conditions favoured or hampered the potential power of different social groups. But in most of these accounts there is a clear *prize* to gain (the concrete social program), which is defined in these terms from the present point of view of the observer that is looking into the past.

Thus, in discussing unemployment policy, Cohen and Hanagan (1995) try to introduce contextual elements (namely shortage or excess of labour supply and migration) that were at the basis of different ways of dealing with unemployment in Britain, France and the United

States during the first half of the twentieth century. Their approach looks at those groups that are systematically excluded from unemployment policy (married women and immigrants), and by so doing it challenges the optimistic narrative of T. H. Mashall, for whom the development of social rights came as a consequence of the previous recognition of political rights for certain groups.

According to Cohen and Hanagan:

> Universal suffrage has never benefited all the newly enfranchised. In the struggle over unemployment policy in the period under study and in all three countries, the plight of married women was typically ignored. In the United States, black benefited less than ethnics from the New Deal reforms (…). These outcomes cannot be attributed solely or even principally to the lack of consciousness of political leaders. They are also constrained by the availability of allies and the extent of group mobilization (1995: 127).

The inequalities in social entitlements (in this case unemployment insurance) are explained by the different organisational power of each of these groups. When it came to affect their interests, white-male workers (that is, the core of the national working class movement) organised themselves against those other groups.

But the authors are only describing the result and consequences of a previous process, one in which it takes place the formation of social groups, some of which may also become recognised collective actors. The achievement of social entitlements cannot simply be the result of the organisational power of one group against the other. As many cases of women's history testify, there can be social groups (to the eyes of the observer) that would never have considered creating a union-like form of association. In the historical account by Cohen and Hanagan women were in the labour market. Nevertheless they probably did not create any organisation to defend their alleged interests. In order to understand these different processes we would need to pose the question (dismissed as useless by the authors) of the development of discourses that given sense to a *we.*[11]

Furthermore, as the authors themselves recognise in some of the paragraphs, there were cases in which it was the employers themselves who demanded the stabilisation of the labour market through the development of unemployment insurance.[12] By the same token,

[11] Mouffe (1993), *cf* Cohen and Hanagan (1995): 126.
[12] The authors mention it in passing for the Birmingham employers (1995: 97, 111).

some workers' organisations looked on the development of unemployment insurance by the state with suspicion, and preferred to organise themselves in mutual aid associations.[13]

What is missing form this account that looks at different outcomes and hence at each historical context? To historise the social actors implies to look at the discourses that create them. This does not deny the possible strategic organisation of white-male-national workers, who under certain circumstances may use that form of power against other social groups. But in order to understand the process, we need to introduce other temporalities, such as for example, the formation of competing discourses on gender and race as a way to illuminate more clearly the existing tensions, and the roots of the power relations. In that sense, for example, an alternative approach would examine the rise of the male bread-winner and the parallel emergence of the *housewife* as a category that made women *be* in a particular way, and perhaps not even think of organising themselves for equal right to work.[14]

In order that rights can be explained through a process of bargaining (that is, to see rights as 'enforceable claims'), Tilly has correctly observed that the parties (the different social groups, the state, and other third actor, normally other states) must have durable identities and relations with each other (Tilly 2000a). When the researcher affirms from a theoretical point of view, that a right stems from a process of tough bargaining, (s)he assumes among other things, that those rights are part of the *interests* of the claimant. That implies presupposing a certain identity, frozen in time, of the historical actor whom we were supposed to have identified through the research process.

II. The *organisation* as a machine for the imposition of a view of the world.

In 1996, D. Rueschmeyer and T. Skocpol edited a volume with a significant title: *States, Social Knowledge and the Origins of Modern Social Policies.* The authors who participated in this collective enterprise sought to bring *knowledge* into the picture. And thus they travelled through the first established university departments, the clubs and organisations of

[13] One of the reasons why many of these associations preferred to keep their autonomy is that they were also a form of solidarity in case of strike and the consquent lost of salaries. Their incorporation in a public program necessarily implied the strict regulation and exclusion from public funds of those situations provoked by a strike.

[14] This is nothing else than to historicise *difference* and the processes of emergence of categories for social differenciation. See Joan W. Scott (1996).

social science amateurs, as well as various philanthropic and reformist groups that during the first decades of the twentieth century collaborated with governments.

In spite of this effort to visit other places, to read other texts, substantive aspects of discourse are treated only marginally, favouring an analysis of actors, and overlooking possible *semantical changes*, transformations in the *ordre du discours* (in the kind of sentences enunciated, the emergence of new concepts, and how they relate to existing names). Furthermore, some of the articles still present an excessively strategic view. If before the explanatory key of the development of social policies was the workers organisations and their strategic alliances with other collective actors, now the main explanatory variable is the intellectuals' organisations. It persists an extremely delineated and teleological narrative: There is a pre-set destination – social policies. And there is a key actor, which tries to achieve such end bring – in this case the social reformers who try to bring in these reforms. The different policy outcomes are ultimately explained in relation to the different spheres where the protagonists exercise their activity (in the University, in philanthropic clubs…). These spheres are partly seen in the light of the historical developments that had given way to the political culture and institutions created in each country. But the focus on the social reformers' organisations and the limited temporal horizon leaves the actual social transformations presented by new policies unexamined.

This disregard for changes in the semantic field, for the ways in which the different experiences are conceptualised is, I would argue, what allows the authors to present a strategic vision of knowledge, i.e. knowledge as an instrument. The instrumental view of knowledge places the actors outside or above it. Instead, an interpretative and historicist view cannot place the actors except within the discursive and conceptual formations.

III. Historicising categories, historicising the subjects.

Discourses and practices.

The task of a *genealogy* is first to put the supposedly natural objects that we want to study in relation to the concrete and bizarre theories that have changed at some point the relations between things, and thus their meaning. Then the practices that make these theories effective,

and that so objectify the matter under consideration (in this case, unemployment) at a particular moment in time, are also examined.

Hence, to give importance to the formation of concepts and categories does not mean a return to intellectual history. Foucault's later writings marked a new point in which the author realised of the futility of carrying out an internal history of ideas (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Chartier 1998). And recent research within the fields of history and philosophy of sciences is making this point more evident. It has been shown how in many cases, a theory or a technical solution to a problem existed in periods previous to their public articulation. But precisely because of that, these theories did not have any immediate impact, and remained completely marginal. An important part of science studies has thus turned to humanities in order to study the enormous effort, networks, and institutional apparatus needed in order to maintain a category, including an object of scientific research (Latour 2000).

Foucault investigates in those remote places where we can find the roots of the articulation of a new discourse (that is, a change in the order of things, in the sentences, a new potential for certain categories…). This is a task more akin to *archaeology.* But this discursive formation is not effective until those sentences and statements become part of a public space, and part of the common use within the institutions of a society. A study of the link between discourses and practices is the task undertaken by a *genealogy* (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 104 - 117).[15]

The different ways in which discourses and practices operate can justify the use of separated analytic frameworks in order to study them. But this does not mean that one is more real than the other is. Both are fragments of reality, and one of the main objectives of the research is precisely how the articulation between one and the other takes place (Chartier

[15] There are still some authors who do not want to separate one from the other: "Discourse *is* practice insofar as discourse defines the space within which one must situate oneself in order to be 'within the bounds of truth" (Delaporte 1998: 287). Delaporte's analysis deals with 'scientific practices', which entail precisely the formation of those procedures and norms that define 'the bounds of truth' in each epistemological period. Things get more complicated as we move from these practices to the discourses (scientific or otherwise) applied to non-scientific practices. Put differently, when we more from the natural to the social sciences. This distinction

1998). Such articulation, on the other hand, can hardly be deduced from a theory, for it is different in each historical period.

In that sense a change can be observed in Western societies since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Knowledge, understood as the discourses on society produced then by the new social sciences (Wagner and Wittrock 1991), acquired from that moment more powerful normalising consequences for human activity than what different discourses did in other historical periods. The public recognition of the human sciences as supportive agencies of the governments has made this connection very explicit, a connection that Foucault studied meticulously in his work on prisons, clinics, and on hospitals. These connections are investigated for their consequences, rather than their hypothetical causes (such as the intention or program of a particular group or social actor).

The specific role that knowledge takes with the development of the human disciplines in the last two centuries is a historical case of a more general concern that guides Foucault's works throughout all historical times: the different ways in which we are *objectified* as subjects, the different sentences and categories that in specific spaces make us *be* in a particular way (Foucault 1982). 'Historical Ontology' is the term that Ian Hacking (2003) has used for this form of historical research.

In Foucault's seminal essay (1984) 'What is Enlightenment?' three main axes on which we constitute ourselves were identified: '*truth* through which we constitute ourselves as objects of knowledge, *power* through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others and *ethics* through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents' (Hacking 2002: 2). Following this program, the researcher is pushed to historise more radically each category in order to understand its relation to experience.

Conceptual history as a tool for social history

A semantical and historical reflection on categories is the basis of a *conceptual history* as theorised by Reinhart Koselleck. This large and complex collective project started as a

---

between the natural and the social sciences can probably be better understood by the distinction developed by Hacking between *indifferent* and *interactive* kinds Hacking (1999).

critique of two different shortcomings in historiography. First, the uncritical transfer towards the past of expressions of social life that belong to the present. Second, a history of ideas that presented these as constants that were simply articulated in different historical configurations without essentially changing their meaning (Koselleck 1993). Historicism and a critique of sources are the starting points that lead the authors towards a well-documented research of the relationship between words and their meaning in historical context: new words that can bring forth new things, words that remain but no longer mean the same thing. This reflection on the historical semantics of words constitutes a methodological program that goes beyond a philological approach, or in other words, beyond an internal reading of the texts.

Although different in their concerns and methodologies, there are two points of connection between Foucault and Koselleck (neither of whom would probably ever recognise the others' contribution to his own work). First, *Begriffsgeschichte* starts from the evidence that the linguistic representations of the world do not have a univocal relation to it (to its institutions, its objects). If Foucault investigates the gap between linguistic representation and non-linguistic aspects of social life as the articulation between discourse and non-discursive practices, the combination of *onomaseology* and *semiasiology*[16] is the way that Koselleck deals with it. This methodology allows him to study the variations among different constructed categories, the transformations that these categories propose and the reinterpretations of which they are objects (Werner 1997).

Secondly, linguistic representations – discourse and concepts – have, on the other hand, a potential to act directly upon reality. As Koselleck puts it: 'A concept is not only an indication of the contexts that it includes, it is also a factor of them' (1993: 118). This reflection stems from Nietzsche's *Genealogy of morals*, the seminal piece that inspires Foucault's work. A 'concept' in Nietzsche is an indication that allows the researcher to study socio-political transformations. The introduction of a new concept can transform historical actions and their expectations (Villacañas and Oncina 1997: 32).

[16] Semiasology refers to the study of meaning; onomasiology to the study of names. Combining both we can study the relations between concepts, words and things, and how these relations change over time. The distinction between *concept* and *word* is essential for Koselleck's project.

It must be remarked, however, that Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* studies 'high' terms, that bring with them a completely new period and way of being in the world: *revolution*, *citizen*, *nation*…Words that imply deeper historical changes than the more prosaic *unemployment.* Nevertheless, the reflections provided by conceptual history have also been incorporated in the area of the history of public policies by investigating the emergence of different categories for public action, and the meanings they acquire in each historical setting. The desubstantialisation of our categories leads to a temporalisation of their meanings (Koselleck 2002: 9). In the next section I will present the historicist approach to public policies.

IV. Social policies from a historicist perspective

The impression that one has when reading the various investigations by historical sociologists as reviewed in the first section is that we are dealing with sociology applied to historical material, rather than with social history or any history at all. The rigid theoretical models of a particular type of sociology impose categories that belong to the observer's perspective. Even if we admit that we cannot avoid translating categories from the past to those shared by the different research communities, the operation here becomes more problematic inasmuch as it imposes a particular logic onto the historical process. In contrast with this methodology, I will try to illustrate how the reflections opened by a historicist perspective as described above can be used for the study of the history of social policies.

The historicism that characterises the reflections developed by Foucault and Koselleck leads the observer to examine the different processes by which the categories of public action have emerged. In other words, the observer cannot start from a pre-established catalogue of social rights waiting to be claimed, the actualisation of which just depends on the higher or lower influence that organised labour or any other key actor can exert within government. The strategic approach presupposes that any such catalogue of rights precedes the mobilisations rather than the other way round (L. Moscoso 1999). Instead, how a right or a claim became conceptualised should be a subject of research by itself.[17] In what follows, I

[17] Procacci (1989), for instance, has delineated the process by which the 'right to labour', which, in the revolutionary movements of 1848, was formulated as an individual citizenship right to be recognised by the state, was later reframed as a 'duty' in relation to the belonging to a social organisation. The emerging social sciences played a fundamental role in this reconceptualisation and thus promoted a new strategy of 'government

will show how some authors working on the history of 'unemployment' have dealt with these questions.

Christian Topalov (1994) traces the "birth of unemployment" in Britain, France and the United States. His research focuses precisely on the emergence of the category rather than the coming of the phenomenon as such. As he remarks:

> "Ce n'est pas par goût du paradoxe que l'on peut considérer que les masses d'ouvriers sans travail, dont les mouvements ont marqué le siècle de fer, n'étaient pas des chômeurs. En tout cas, à cette époque, les contemporains ne disposaient pas des catégories nécessaires pour se représenter le phénomène du chômage et la situation du chômeur comme ils le seront par la suite. Le vocabulaire longtemps utilisé pour désigner les travailleurs sans ouvrage en est un témoignage" (1994: 24).

Keyssar had noted the same ambiguity when studying the formation of unemployment in the United States. Thousands of workers had experienced the situation of being out of work, especially after the dramatic crisis of the 1870s. Nevertheless, for some decades this 'unemployment' remained invisible (1986: 9).

Topalov investigates the emergence of the new category as the result of a process of discussion and research carried out by social reformers in each of these countries. The international conferences and intellectual exchanges that took place at the end of the nineteenth century created a common space for these social reformers in which a common language emerged that tried to represent the problem of joblessness across borders.

His focus on the work of social reformers can have a revisionist reading according to which the Welfare State would be the result of a series of actions by the progressivists groups working within the governments and public institutions rather than the consequence of the working class mobilisations. But this is rather secondary, for the main concern of his narrative is precisely to draw attention to the fact that there was a moment of semantic uncertainty previous to the creation of the new category. Before the conceptualisation of unemployment insurance as a right, then, there was a process of *objectification* of a category:

---

of the social'. Sewell (1980), on the other hand, has shown how the mobilisations of 1848 were framed within the conceptual framework of the old guilds, in a dialectic that opposed the Enlightenment's individualistic principles, but at the same time, included some of these new ideas, such as to make the State the main source of authority to which the claims were laid.

unemployment and the unemployed. The advent of this category indicates a historical change, by which the semantic field of poverty and assistance became reorganised. The concept opened a series of new classifications by which the *poor* were separated from the *workers* without work. Moreover, as theorised by W. Beveridge the concept aimed at changing the habits of the working class population through the stabilisation of wage labour.

Topalov places his research in a very concrete historical period: 1880 – 1914. This rather short span allows him to identify concrete actors, with the consequent emphasis on *action*. The focus on a short period thus presents the emergence of the concept of unemployment as a process of construction, that is, as if it were an artisan activity in which we can identify the hands that make the work.

But research on the objectification of a category can also take a longer view. From such a *longue-durée* perspective, the coherence of purposive action is sacrificed for the entanglement of different temporalities. On the other hand, such a perspective allows the researcher to investigate the different layers that had accumulated before a general sense of the idea of 'unemployment' could emerge. This is the task undertaken by Robert Salais *et al.* (1984). The authors sketch two main historical moments that are at the basis of the 'invention' of unemployment in France. The first, at the end of the nineteenth century, when the first labour censuses were carried out. The unemployed became identified as those who, having worked within an organisation (*établissement*), had ceased their activity for different reasons. The emergence of labour law and the codification of the labour contract gave form to the juridical belonging of the worker to the organisation. Looking at labour censuses of the beginning of the twentieth century, Salais finds larger figures of unemployment in industrial areas. In contrast with most accepted interpretations (unemployment as a consequence of industrial concentration), Salais argues that unemployment figures derive not from 'concentration' but from the 'objectification' of a situation through the fact of belonging to an organisation. The regulations included in the labour contract created the basis for this homogenisation of different situations. The second moment takes place in the 1930s with the coming of the new theories of scientific management and the standardisation of working rhythms. Different types of activity became homogenised by the same time-measure which were then translated into a salary.

From this longer perspective we get a map of how we have arrived at the common-sense understanding of the concept of unemployment, as it was known in the early 1980s. The different layers acquire their meaning in each temporality; but this map is not a picture that embodies any coherent logic. At least not in the movements that lie behind its formation. These movements, on the other hand, are not particular social groups, but rather discourses and general processes that cut across different historical actors.

Finally, a third perspective has radicalised even more the premises of the *tournant historique*. Concerned with getting theories of action back in, these researchers have tried to incorporate the epistemological reflections on the history of categories with pragmatist approaches to action. Some of the starting points of this perspective are a critique of the Foucaultian approach, and in general, of the first *Annales* generation. They are criticised for presenting an extremely structuralist and coherent vision of historical processes. This concern has led researchers to examine more closely the active processes of constitution of a category. Within this radical historisation, diversity is studied through two procedures. The first investigates the specific meanings that a label such as 'unemployed' acquires in each country or region.[18] The second tries to discern different non-discursive practices that underlie a same conceptual or discursive formation.[19]

The inductivism on which this approach is based looks at different processes of categorisation. In contrast with the history of *a category* that implicitly assumes some essentialist characteristics, the historical picture is here enriched, and each story probably

---

[18] B. Zimmermann (2002) has explored the 'economical' meaning of *unemployed* in Germany (the person deprived of the means necessary for his existence) and she has found that it is a residuum of the influential role of the municipalities in the organisation of unemployment insurance before the Weimar Republic. The non-interventionism of the German State, and the exclusion of the unions from central discussions, left the space for action on this field to the municipalities, which continued applying the previous economic dimension. These political processes operated in favour of a particular definition of the concept, a definition that can be found as a residual even in today's national codification of unemployment statistics.

[19] N. Whiteside and J. Gillespie (1991) have shown how inter-war unemployment insurance failed to accomplish the aim that Beveridge expected of it: the regulation of the labour market through de-casualisation. Thus, in spite of the official definitions, during this period unemployment insurance was conceded to the large amount of casual workers that had the country, without actually exercising any change in these practices.

On a different item, Biernacki (1995) has shown the historical configurations that gave way to a concept of labour in Britain and Germany which embodied different meanings. Through a detailed archive research aided by linguistics, he arrives at identifying diverse practices in the sell of labour force and the forms of accounting its product that crystallised in different symbolic representations of labour.

becomes more accurate. The possible risks of creating single detailed local accounts, in which a general question is lost, have been contested by the proponents for whom:

> L'historicisation ne s'y confond pas avec une contextualisation qui pousserait toujours plus loin l'investigation historique, afin d'arriver à une représentation plus détaillée du passé et de ses rapports avec le présent. Elle est au contraire construite et circonscrite en fonction d'un objet et d'une problématique, permettant d'identifier des temporalitées pertinentes et ainsi de borner le processus d'historicisation (Werner and Zimmermann 2003 : 22)

In order to rend historical change intelligible, we need to circumscribe historical research in relation to an object and a question. No doubt more detailed research on different national and local cases of the same problem can enrich the perspective and help to formulate new questions. But when we get engaged in doing the history of a category, there is somehow an implicit acceptance that the category has brought with it a new common-sense, a different organisation of the semantic field, which is the reason why it becomes an object of study (Ogien 1996).

The history of the category unemployment has become especially fruitful at a moment in which this category of public action had reached crisis. Behind the crisis of this category was the crisis of a model or organisation around work: the stable wage relation. The transformations of this now-updated form of social relation indicate a general change in European societies. We can probably clarify concrete trajectories that make the French articulation different from the German or from the Italian one. Nevertheless, a general change in the role that this concept plays – and that is related to new discursive practices (or *dispositives*) around work and employment – can probably be applied to all these different cases.[20]

[20] That general change is what makes works like Robert Castel (1995)'s *Le Metamorphoses de la Question Social* useful for understanding the social transformations that have taken place in different forms of organisation of two broad areas, work and assistance, even if his empirical material is all based on the French situation. Nevertheless, since some form of translation needs to take place in order to carry out the history of a category in different historical contexts, the equilibrium between accuracy and meaning becomes more vulnerable when we move onto other more distant societies. At the end of the day, despite their differences, European societies have maitained a continous interaction that makes them be part of a same heritage. When we move to other areas, however, areas which have an equally rich and complex heritage, but have not participated

Conclusions

The *invention of X*, or the *construction of Y*, are titles that always provoke feelings of uneasiness in some scholars. In these lines I have tried to illuminate why it becomes almost impossible to do a *social history* without doing a history of the processes of categorisation and representation of reality. I have argued that the attempts carried out by strategic historical sociology to incorporate some of the interpretative and historicist reflections fail to be convincing. And this is probably due not only to the fact that they still practise a logical positivist model of social sciences, but also because they have not assumed the structural consequences of discursive practices and concepts.

This does not imply necessarily that one needs to proceed through an over-arching notion of discourse, as a completely anonymous force that imposes itself upon historical actors. There are ways to incorporate the role of different social actors, and work within a notion of social action as it has richly been shown by the research focused on the political struggles that historically have taken place around the meaning of categories. A change in the meaning of a category, via a new general use of it, or its symbolic appropriation by different social actors can be as powerful as to assault the Winter Palace. In that sense, (and to keep on with mythical loci), it can be affirmed that when in the writing of *Capital* Marx labelled the masses of jobless that populated the cities *the industrial reserve army*, he was not just producing a direct observation of reality, of a new phenomenon, he was also *acting* upon that reality.

These lines are not, however, a plea for the *linguistic turn* in a general sense. This movement has taken too many different perspectives, and some of them focus more on questions concerning the practices of the community of researchers, rather than those of the subjects they study.[21] Although it is difficult to study one without engaging in the other debate, these 'conversations' (to use a currently trendy term) put emphasis on different

---

in the same historical interaction, the risk of doing *colonialism* through theory becomes greater. For these issues, see Chakrabarty (2000).

[21]For a useful reflection on these questions, that is, on discussions concerning the practices of the community of researchers – in this case, historians-, see K. Jenkins (1995). To my view, some of the writings under the *linguistic turn* exagerate the illusion of autonomy and creativity of the (sometimes isolated) observer. An interesting effort to reflect more deeply on what is 'culture' and 'language' in general, and to recover the systematicity of previous approaches by taking them into account, in Bonnel and Hunt (1999).

questions. Here I was more concerned with the discussions that researchers have around the actions and practices of the social groups under study (including intellectual representations of their surrounding world).

When historising the social categories we study, some general common-sense of a concept or category must probably be kept in order to understand social change. No doubt that common sense is tied to a particular period, and the task of the researcher is precisely to identify those different historical periods. Within this *historicist turn*, first of all no particular social identity or logic to the historical processes is assumed. The researcher lets the sources talk. As they talk, and as the researcher descends to find different traces of what people did in other times, certain formulations of problems emerge. The historical formulations of those problems and their possible changes over time are the main objectives of the researcher. Both the *problems* and the *social units of action* (Koselleck) are thus historicised. On the other hand, this historicism cannot be a return to a detailed register. We need to proceed with some analytical generalisations in order to give a sense of the historical process. As Foucault put it:

"Que nul n'entre ici s'il n'est ou devient philosophe".[22]

[22] *Cf.* Veyne

REFERENCES

— Baldwin, P (1990), *The politics of social solidarity : class bases of the European welfare state, 1875-1975*. New York : Cambridge University Press.

— Biernacki (1995), *The fabrication of labour. Britain and Germany, 1640 – 1914.* Berkley: University of California Press.

— Bonnell, V. and Hunt, L. (1999), *Beyond the Cultural Turn*. Berkley: University of California Press.

— Burke, P. (1993), *La revolución historiográfica francesa. La Escuela de los Annales: 1929 – 1989.* Barcelona: Gedisa.

— Chakrabarty, D. (2000), *Provincilizing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.* Princeton: PUP.

— Chartier, R. (1998)[1994], "La chimère de l'origine". Foucault, les Lumières et la Révolution française", in *Au bord de la falaise. L'histoire entre certitudes et inquiétude.* Paris: Albin Michel: 132 – 160.

— Cohen, M. and Hanagan, M. (1995), "Politics, Industrialization and Citizenship: Unemployment Policy in England, France and the United States, 1890 – 1950. In Tilly (ed).

— Delaporte, F. (1998), "Foucault, epistemology and history", *Economy and Society*, Vol. 27, Numbers 2 & 3. May: 285 – 297.

— Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982), *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

— Esping-Andersen, G (1990), *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Princeton : Princeton University Press.

— Foucault, M. (1982), "Post-Scriptum", in Dreyfus and Rabinow (ed)

— Hacking, I. (1999), *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press.
— (2002), *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

— Keyssar, A. (1986), *Out of Work. The first century of unemployment in Massachusetts*. Cambridge: CUP.

— Korpi, W (1983), *The democratic class struggle.* London: Routledge & K. Paul.

— Koselleck, R. (1993) [1979], *Futuro pasado. Para una semántica de los tiempos históricos.* Barcelona: Paidós.
— (2002), *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

— Latour, B (2000), "On the Partial Existence of Existing and Nonexisting Objects", in Daston, L, *Biographies of Scientific Ojbects*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

— Moore, B (1966), *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Boston: Mass.

— Moscoso, L. (1999), "La lucha por la inclusión. Los ciudadanos sin derechos y la democracia americana", in Pérez Ledesma, *Ciudadanía y democracia.* Madrid: Fundación Pablo Iglesias.

— Ogien, A (1996), "Que faire de l'instabilité de la définition des faits ? Aux sources du chômage, 1880-1914", *Annales* 1996 (3), 539-549.

— Procacci, G (1989), "Sociology and Its Poor", *Politics and Society* 17, no 2: 115 – 162.

— Rueschmeyer, D. and Skocpol, T. (1996), *States, Social Knowledge and the Origins of Modern Social Policies.* Princeton: PUP.

— Salais, Bavered, Reynaud (1986), *L'invention du chômage. Histoire et transformations d'une catégorie en France des années 1890 aux années 1980.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

— Scott, J.W. (1996), "Introduction", in Scott (ed), *Feminism and History.* New York: Oxford University Press.

— Sewell, W.H. (1980), *Work and Revolution in France. The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848.* Cambridge: CUP.

— Skocpol, T (1979), *States and Revolutions*. Cambridge: CUP.
— Skocpol, T. and Sommers, M. (1980). "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry". *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22: 174 – 97.

— Stedman Jones, G. (1976), "From historical sociology to theoretical history", *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27, Number 3, September: 295 – 305.

— Tilly, C. (1978), *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Masachussets: Reading.
— (ed) (1995), "Citizenship, identity and social history", *International Review of Social History*. Supplement 3, Cambridge University Press
— (2000), "Processes and mechanisms of democratization", *Sociological theory*, March 18:1: pp1-16
— (2002a), "Where Do Rights Come From?", in *Stories, Identities and Political Change.* Oxford: Roman & Littlefield Publishers.

— (2002b), “Event catalogs as theories”, *Sociological theory*, July 20:2: pp.248-254

— Topalov (1994), *Naissance du chômeur, 1880 – 1910*. Paris: Albin Michel.

— Veyne, P (1980), “Foucault revolutionne l’histoire”, in *Comment on* écrit l'histoire. Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1980: 203 – 242.

— Wagner, Wittrock and Whiteley (1991), *Discourses on Society: the Shaping of the Social Sciences Disciplines.* Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

— Weir, Orloff, Skocpol (1988), *The politics of social policy in the United States.* Princeton: PUP.

— Werner, M. (1997) “Preface”, in Koselleck, Escudier, Werner, *L’Experience de l’histoire*. Paris: Gallimard: 7 – 14.

— Werner and Zimermann (2003), “Penser l’histoire croisee: entre empirie et reflexivite”. *Annales HSS,* 58 (1), janv. – fevrier 2003: 7 – 36.

— Whiteside and Gillespie (1991), “Deconstructing unemployment: development in Britain in the interwar years”, *Economic History Review,* XLIV, 4 (1991), 665 – 682.

— Villacañas and Oncina (1997), “Introducción”, in *Reinhart Koselleck, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Historia y hermenéutica.* Barcelona: Paidós.

— Zimmermann, B. (2002), *La constitution du chômage en Allemagne. Entre professions et territoires*. Paris: Maison des Sciences del Homme.