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Historical Sociology and Sociological History: Theory and Practice

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Historical Sociology and Sociological History: Theory and Practice[1]

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My topic is the methodological encounter of sociology and history, "methodological" defined broadly to include the framing of questions and answers, as well as the use of evidence. My three basic points will be: (1) sociologists and historians have much to gain from mixing their work, even in face of critiques that have been raised against that; (2) despite this mixing in recent decades, some profound differences between the disciplines remain, and (3) underneath the differences, there are some common needs and some common ground. I do not have a method to propose, or a solution to various problems. I do have some thoughts that might be of use.

Rhetoric

I will frame the topic by talking about "rhetoric." Social scientists have recently been discussing rhetoric in economics, sociology, history, and other disciplines. By this word, they do not mean the art of speechmaking; they mean the methods and assumptions behind *persuasion* in the sciences. How do scientists *persuade* one another of the truth of what they say? This

[1] This paper is a slightly revised version of a lecture presented to a seminar, chaired by Professor Yossi Shavit, at the European University Institute, Florence, March 27, 1995.

concern leads us to the shared assumptions and agreed-upon rules that we appeal to when we try to persuade.

At base, all social scientists share certain common assumptions. We accept basic rules of western logic; we believe that claims have to be assessed against perceptions of the real world that can be shared by others.[2] We do not credit claims based on revelation, personal authority, anecdote, and so forth. Beyond such agreement, there are noteworthy differences. Much of contemporary sociology rests on the *deductive model*, the form of persuasion common in the hard sciences, which requires posing hypotheses for falsification and testing evidence against those hypotheses. Other forms of sociology use the *natural history model,* closer to life sciences, wherein the researcher gathers observations and generalizes from them. The researcher is persuasive to the extent to which he or she can accumulate enough consistent observations. Think here of classic participant-observation studies. A third form, which is history's typical form, is the *narrative model.* The researcher gathers observations and *orders them* in a coherent and meaningful sequence. That coherence is often in the form of a plot structure not unlike those in fiction. (I will discuss plots more later.) And the persuasiveness depends not only on the accuracy of the observations, but also on the extent to which the sequence makes sense — in particular, whether the first observations are necessary and sufficient conditions for the later observations. Are we more persuaded that the foolishness of the royal family led to the French Revolution or that the rise of bourgeoisie did? Which story makes more sense?

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[2] Subjectivist and postmodernist critics claim to cast doubt on this foundation for science, but they cannot. They still make assertions about the nature of the world and hope to persuade others that these assertions are intersubjectively true.

For now, I simply place these distinctions on the table. I will return to them later, after discussing the encounter of sociology and history in recent decades.

I come to this topic as a *sociologist,* but one who has spent more time reading history than sociology in the last decade, who has published roughly as much in history as in sociology recently, and whose latest book, America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940 (1992), has gotten more attention from historians than from sociologists. The study examined how the telephone diffused among residential users in the United States: how it was sold, to whom, for what use and to what end. Empirically, the study includes analyses of internal documents of telephone companies, statistical analyses of telephone and automobile diffusion; oral history; documentary community history; and examination of etiquette manuals -- a total compendium. It falls into the categories of both the history and the sociology of technology, although I like to think it was broader than that. Since that book, I have continued largely reading in American history. One result is that I have become quite sensitive to disciplinary lines.

I need to add that my scholarly expertise rests with *American* history (and American sociology). Within American history, I know best the work in community history. Most of my examples will come from that field. But the applications should be broader than that. In several places, I will use the example of my book on telephone history.

The Convergences of History and Sociology

Over the last 30 years or so, the lines between sociology and history

have blurred as practitioners from both disciplines have undertaken similar projects. One well-known and controversial strand of work is the effort by some sociologists to provide macro-sociological interpretations of history, synthesizing historical studies. I refer to people such as Skocpol and Goldstone. This synthesizing used to be the terrain of grand historians. But I am thinking about even closer mixing of the disciplines than that, of sociologists doing historical research and historians doing sociological analyses.

One example is the study of collective violence. Charles Tilly is certainly the major figure here, with his empirical studies of rebellions and strikes. Other sociologists also have conducted such research, Mark Traugout and Susan Olzak, for instance. But historians, from George Rudé on, have done so, too. They collect original reports on riots and rebellions and try to understand who was involved and why. Another example is historical demography or demographic history. The reconstruction and analysis of family structures long ago, stimulated by Laslett and the Cambridge group, includes sociologists such as Susan Watkins, Barbara Laslett, and Avery Guest, as well as many historians such as Daniel Scott Smith and Tamara Hareven. Both groups examine old censuses, church records, and tax listings to understand who lived with whom. Examples can be multiplied — in the area of women's studies, religion, crime, and others: Sociologists are using history and doing research on historical evidence; historians are using sociology and applying sociological analysis to their materials.

This convergence was institutionalized in the late 1970s with the formation of the Social Science History Association, an organization of scholars from different disciplines who, typically, conduct research on pre-

contemporary periods and use historical — i.e., archival — materials. They also typically study issues raised by social scientists, draw on theories from social science, and apply methods, usually quantitative, developed by social scientists. Key founders of the organization were quantitative historians who felt themselves outcasts within the discipline of history.

Despite this convergence, this fellowship, and this commingling, my experience is that discipline still matters. There remain differences between the way sociologists approach certain questions and the way historians do. These differences are important. I will address them later, but first will address the questions, Why should sociologists do history?, and Why should historians do sociology?, because this convergence has been criticized by practitioners in each discipline.

Why Should Sociologists Do History?

The standard division of labor between history and sociology is that the former study specific cases and the latter develop general theories. Put more crudely, as some historians have, historians are glorified research assistants for sociological theorists. The more sophisticated versions of this distinction describe history as idiographic — concerned with "cultural and historical particulars" — and sociology as nomothetic — seeking "to establish general laws" as natural sciences do.[3] If so, why should sociologists study specific cases, as I did by studying the early history of the telephone in the United States? Why not study a sample of countries, or a sample of technologies? This is one concern, that sociologists get trapped in particular cases.

[3] David Jary and Julia Jary, The Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology.

Another critique, raised by John Goldthorpe for example,[4] is that historical data — "relics" from the past — are inferior as data to what sociologists can obtain today. If the research question is a general one about social phenomena, a sociologist ought to collect his or her own data rather than rely on archival material. That way the researcher can design the data-gathering to make the evidence reliable, valid, and representative, features much harder to obtain with the "found evidence" historians must use. So, in my own case it might be argued that, if my interest was in who adopted the telephone, when, and why, then I should have done a contemporary study. I could have, for example, studied the diffusion of the telephone today in a less developed nation than the United States, or perhaps studied the diffusion of a different technology — the computer, perhaps — in the U.S. Then, I could have designed research that called for just the data I needed and that insured representativeness.[5]

My reply to the general question of why sociologists should do history focusses, for now, on three points.

One, sociology is inherently an *historical science*. It has always been wrong to use physics as our role model. The real role models are the life sciences — zoology, geology, paleontology, especially evolutionary biology. The life sciences recognize that current structures are the results of *historical conjunctures*. To use a common phrase today, current structures are "path-

[4] "The Uses of History in Sociology: A Reply," British Journal of Sociology (March, 1994): 55-77; with debate in the same issue.

[5] Ironically, another scholar and I had made a proposal to the World Bank in the early 1980s to study the process of telecommunications development in a few third-world nations. But the Bank was not interested in the detailed longitudinal, comparative kind of study that would have been needed to resolve the issues.

dependent." If an asteroid had not wiped out dinosaurs millions of years ago, humans may never have existed. If Australia had not separated from Asia, we probably would not have kangaroos today. Similarly, at least some features of current world culture may well have been different if the French had defeated the British in North America. We cannot understand current social patterns except as the products of historical development and historical context.[6] The frequent failure of sociologists to recognize the historical location of their arguments often drives historians mad.

So, with regard to the telephone: The introduction of this technology into society as a novel form of human interaction happened only once. While there is much to be learned from contemporary telephone development elsewhere — who subscribes to it and why — contemporary diffusion takes place in an environment of municipal telephones, radio, television, and so on. If, as I suspect, the introduction of new technologies at the turn of the century was a key historical moment, it only happened once.

Two, it is often critical to know the beginning, middle, and end of the story. How well can one understand, say, mobilization for political action, by just cutting a slice in time and learning who is active at that moment? Mobilization rises and falls; time is critical. That is probably one motivation for the increasing work with longitudinal data even in studies of social

[6] Does that mean that I eschew sociological research that is synchronic or sociological research that seeks general, ahistorical laws? No. I've done that work myself. It vitally informs our understanding of how historical processes might unfold; while the history provides the context for understanding the contemporary patterns. For example, research has demonstrated the general patterns of diffusion of innovation across class; this can be used to understand the cases of the telephone and automobile. History enables us to understand, at least partly, why the working class in the U.S. took to the automobile faster than it took to the telephone: The auto enjoyed much more government subsidy.

mobility and attitudes, an understanding that lifecycle position and cohort are critical. In America Calling, I asked who obtained the telephone, but the answer to that question depended on the year. Telephone subscription meant one thing when only five percent of Americans had telephones at home, another when that percentage went to 30 percent.

Three, historical evidence sometimes is the only evidence we have and can be extremely revealing, despite major problems of sampling, representativeness, and interpretation. For example, scholars interested in economic arrangements among elite families will probably find more evidence about past families than about current ones. John Padgett, for instance, has studied the networks of interconnection of the Medicis. In the U.S., census information is sealed for 70 years, so researchers often know some things more accurately about people's grandparents than about people living today. In the case of America Calling, I was able to find out more about the internal deliberations of the telephone company by reading their century-old correspondence than I could find out today. Also, I was able to link telephone subscriptions to census information in ways I could not do today (in part because so many Americans today have unlisted telephone numbers). And although censuses 70-90 years ago were far from perfect, they had better response rates than most American surveys do today.

There are other arguments, too for sociologists to do history, but these will suffice.

I cannot speak for historians, but there is certainly a debate on that side of the line. I will mention two critiques of the new social history that have arisen. One attacks historians' adoption of sociological theories, whether those theories be functionalist, marxist, or whatever. Such abstractions, it is said, oversimplify historical complexities, ignore the role of agents, and provide mechanistic explanations. Instead, historians ought to return to *narrative*, to telling stories of actors engaged in concrete events, allowing the sequence to provide the explanation. A second critique takes aim at the use of quantitative data. Quantification reduces subtleties to crude categories, goes the argument.

It will be up to historians to fight these battles, but I comment on both points. One: Some historians do employ simple (often outdated) sociological theories and apply them crudely. Also, when historians themselves indulge in broad theorizing, they often mimic the least appealing aspects of sociological theorizing — overreaching, simplification, distance from empirical grounding. Still, the key observation is this (and it has been made by others): *All historical narratives include within them implicit social theory or theories.* I'll discuss this more later, but one implication of this observation is that it may be far better to present and defend explicit theories than to bury them in narratives.

Two: The fear of quantitative data is misplaced. As I repeatedly tell Berkeley doctoral students in my own methods course, the qualitative-quantitative distinction is fallacious. The real issues concern the logic of analysis, particularly how one makes categories and distinguishes cases. If,

for example, one studies organizations, then what are different types of organizations and how can the researcher tell one from another? Or, what are different types of collective violence and how can the researcher tell one from another? How one later chooses to summarize one's observations, by verbal summary ("many" versus "few") or numerical summary ("45%" versus "7%"), is largely a matter of practical convenience.

These are quite broad issues of logic and evidence that arise in the meeting of sociology and history. And arguments about them should not inhibit sociologists from doing history and vice-versa. But in coming together, practitioners discover subtle differences between disciplines that do inhibit a full meeting of minds. I now turn to those.

Disciplinary Differences in Logic and Evidence

In this section, I will discuss three topics: the questions sociologists and historians ask, the answers they give, and the evidence they use. The interesting differences are not the crude ones, but the subtle ones. Recall my earlier distinction among rhetorics based on hypothesis-testing, cumulative natural observation, and narration.

Questions Asked. The simple distinction here is that historians ask what is the story behind a specific event, while most sociologists ask what is the theory that explains a class of events. That is consistent with the distinction in rhetoric I made earlier. So, for example, a historian might ask about the origins of the French Revolution, a sociologist about theories that explain revolutions in general; the historian might ask why Napoleon became a leader and sociologists ask what explains the rise of individuals from

obscurity to power.

While grossly valid, these distinctions — ideographic versus nomothetic, particularizing versus generalizing — often break down in practice. Sociologists frequently study particular cases — the rise of the Civil Rights movement in the U.S.A., or the spread of the telephone. Historians study particular cases, but often do so because they are, in truth, interested in general phenomena. Certainly, the study of specific labor histories is motivated by many historians' desires to understand the general principles behind labor mobilization, just as the study of detailed features of women's history is spurred by the motivation to say something general about women's positions in society. Historians are usually driven by the same general concerns as sociologists, often arising out of contemporary politics or personal issues.

Take, for example, an argument current in American social history over whether colonial American farmers were either early capitalists who engaged, individualistically, in rational economic use of their lands, or tradition-and-community-directed pre-capitalists who only became individualistic capitalists after the growth in commercial agriculture between 1800 and 1850. Why is this question important? Why is this story important? Because many believe that the answer will tell us whether capitalism is good or bad, and also whether future transformation of American individualism is possible or not. If Americans were always individualistic and capitalistic, that implies one prospect; if Americans were not always so, that implies a different vision of change. My point is that historians' concern about this topic is not that different from theoretical issues that drive many sociologists, but historians to try to ask a different question about such issues, a question about story lines.

Disciplinary differences, thus, appear even where there are areas of common interest. It is a matter of foregrounding and backgrounding. The historians put the detailed case in the foreground and leave the general themes as vague background. The sociologists tend to reverse the emphasis. One example of such differences is the search by sociologists for *comparisons* to look for other cases for similarities and differences. For example, I compared the case of the telephone to the case of the automobile, and compared American telephone history to that of Europe. For the historian, these comparisons may seem unnecessary. For the sociologist, they are critical to making the explicit causal claims.[7] It is for similar reasons that sociologists typically entertain counterfactuals. Another distinction that results from emphasizing either story or theory is that historians are less explicit than sociologists would like about the general questions and theoretical presumptions that drive their work, while the sociologists tend to be careful about that and sometimes sloppy about the details of the cases.

Answers Given. Some historians prefer to believe that they do not *explain*, that they *interpret*. (A few even cite anthropologist Clifford Geertz to justify the interpretive rather than explanatory approach.) Here I have to express skepticism. Historians, even Geertzian anthropologists, usually explain. Their theories are latent in the interpretations they give or stories they tell. That shows up in the *narratives* they provide, which brings me to another difference between disciplines: the stress by historians on *narrative* and *agency*, compared to sociologists' stress on *theory* and *structure.*

When historians explain, they do so by imbedding the theory in the

[7] In these examples, both comparisons allowed me to make the case that absence of government subsidy critically shaped the development of American telephony.

story they tell. The preferred manner of exposition is the story, from Act I through Act III. Sociologists do their explaining by presenting a set of variables, showing intercorrelations, and presuming that some are causally prior to others, so that they explain the outcomes. The causal claim is explicit. Historians imbed the implicit causal claim in their story line. In rhetorical terms, historians tend to employ *plots* — conventional story lines — while sociologists often rely on theoretical *ideal types* — patterns of correlations.

As Hayden White has shown, historians tend to rely on common narrative plots to structure their accounts. Much of the persuasiveness of an historical explanation depends on whether it resonates with a classic plot. Among the classic plots available to historians are heroic triumph, tragedy, and farce. In the first, *heroism,* the hero faces obstacles but triumphs in the end. Such plots, which made generals and whole peoples seem noble, are not popular among American historians these days, except perhaps among those trying to write uplifting accounts of oppressed people. *Tragedy* involves a theme of rise and fall, wherein profound meaning is extracted from the story. In American historiography, for example, some accounts of the New England Puritans have this structure: The Puritans built virtuous communities in the wilderness, but the communities contained the seeds of their own destruction, their vulnerability to capitalism. From this story, we learn about the tragedy of modernity. Some histories of immigrant groups in the U.S. also have this tragic structure; their plot lines are the corruption and disappearance of authentic culture. *Farces* deny any original nobility to the protagonists or morals to the story. For example, some accounts of revolutions suggest that the end result of the revolution is to re-establish corrupt authority; it was all a waste.

Historians persuade, then, by imbedding their particular accounts within familiar plots. It is their familiarity that makes them easy to accept. There is a version of American history — now discredited by most — called "progressive" or "consensus" history, which is largely a *heroic* story: Brave Americans built a "new" nation out of the wilderness. The more common story in recent decades is the *tragic* legend called "the decline of community." Once Americans lived in *gemeinschaft* communities.[8] Then, in Act II, trouble came. One version of such trouble might be population growth and urbanization; in another version, it might be commercial agriculture. This trouble ended community and instead we have a "mass society." Implicit in such plots are particular theoretical claims -- for instance, that increases in population undermine social ties.

While the story of decline of community is very broad, it has many specific applications. Take, as an example of a specific subplot, the story of voluntary associations — clubs, lodges, brotherhoods, etc. These grew tremendously in the U.S. during the 19th Century. Many historians who apply the general decline of community plot also posit an implicit psycho-social *theory* about organizations -- a theory one might label the "compensation" model. Joining associations was the way urban Americans in the 19th Century "compensated" for losses of fellowship in their cities and/or for the anxieties of modern life. This somewhat Freudian explanation is often smuggled into a narrative. The historian will first describe an apparent problem, such as rapid turnover in population, or expansion of factories, and then in a subsequent section describe the growth of voluntary associations.

[8] For some this "once upon a time" was as recently as before World War II, in urban ethnic neighborhoods; for most, it was long before the Revolution, in New England villages.

The historian will link the two by a simple phrase, such as "Worried by urban anonymity, Americans joined...," or "To ease their loneliness, Americans joined..." Here is a whole theory of human action smuggled into a narrative. A sociologist might instead, using a quasi-deductive approach, pose a specific hypothesis, such as "19th-Century Americans suffered from social isolation; voluntary associations reduced that suffering; therefore, they joined associations." There would be various ways to test that proposition in standard ways.

If historians hide causal theories in their stories, it is also true that sociologists hide stories in their theories. Hidden in many sociologists' concepts, models, and general perspectives are assumptions about historical differences and sequences. One typical theoretical (and rhetorical) device is the "ideal type." These ideal types are statements abut the systematic correlations among various properties. A classic one is the ideal type of "community," which assumes that certain properties of social relations are correlated: small size, intimacy, permanence, localism, and the like combine to define "community," or *gemeinschaft.* Another ideal type is "modern society," which, in the classic Parsonian formulation, included universalism, affective neutrality, as well as high technological development. But basic also to such sociologists' formulations is an implicit, sometimes explicit, historical claim. "Community" was before, "association" is now; "traditional" was before, "modern" is now, and so on.

Let us take a specific example of such assumptions, one that has intrigued me for years. When many American sociologists write about social problems, or social "disintegration," they often worry about rates of residential turnover. Typically, they treat this as a new, disruptive element, a feature

distinctive of modern, non-community society, because they assume that residential mobility has increased historically. They are wrong about that assumption, about that story, as most social historians could tell them. But, that assumption is often a key part of the ideal types they deal with.

So, *both* disciplines employ *plots* and *theories.* What differentiates them, often, is which is explicit and which is implicit, the story or the causal model; which is foreground and which is background.

A related and familiar distinction that arises in the answers historians and sociologists give is that between *agency* and *structure*. Historians stress the preferences and choices of the individuals, while sociologists stress the structure individuals face that shape their preferences and limit their choices. Clearly, here, some balance is needed. The romanticization in recent years of "agency" may be a useful corrective to overly determinative structuralism, but it can go to far. For example, much of recent writings in the U.S. about oppressed groups — women, racial minorities — has been premised on the notion that too much of previous writing had treated these groups as victims, as pawns of the oppressors, as simply the *objects* of structural forces. So, instead, the new writers stress the extent to which these groups "resisted," were active agents in their own lives and overcame oppressive structures. That is all noble, but, in the end, exaggerates the range of freedom such people had to be agents.

Despite these criticisms of the way historians answer questions, there is much for sociologists to learn. Far too much sociology stays at the level of correlations among structural variables. What is often lacking is a description, a story, of how these variables acted concretely in the world:

Who did what to whom? Until a patterns of correlation is translated into a concrete narrative linking cause to consequence, it is all too abstract. And it is an unsatisfactory explanation. For example, the arguments sociologists make about structural differentiation during modernization are often disembodied, abstract processes, the shift from one ideal type to another. Historians have provided some rich narratives with agency that make those abstractions concrete — for example, describing the process by which master craftsmen became employers of craft labor, separated their families from the workshop, then moved their families into separate neighborhoods. Here, we see one aspect of differentiation in concrete action. Would that more sociologists gave us such narratives with clear senses of agency and thereby made clear what mere correlations often obscure.

I learned a lesson about this point many years ago from a doctoral student of mine. It was a lesson about writing and about rhetoric. We were co-authoring a book and she complained that in my draft all I talked about was *variables.* Level of education did this, gender did that; size of city affected this; etc. *People* should be the subjects of sentences, she said, not variables. She was right and ever since I have been sensitive to this point — not only as a point of rhetoric, but as a point of *logic.* People do things; variables only reflect their action.

To conclude this section on how historians and sociologists *answer questions*, historians tend to answer with stories that have imbedded plots and attribute agency. Theory is there, but hidden. Sociologists tend to answer with theoretical claims that stress structure. But familiar plots are often embedded. Some more awareness of these tendencies would improve each one's work.

Evidence. I begin this topic with a small story from my book on the telephone. Although the book has received positive reviews from historians, a couple of them have specifically objected to one footnote. In this footnote, I explicitly say that I am not much interested in certain kinds of evidence about the history of the telephone: evidence from fiction, movies, or other forms of art. The reason, I argued, was that one cannot tell with art whether the creator is reflecting reality, challenging reality, or playing with reality. I will return to this footnote later.

The basic distinction between the evidence historians use and the evidence sociologists use is between *found* evidence, the "relics" or the "footprints" of human action, and *constructed* evidence, evidence gathered by the researcher specifically to address a question. From this flows all sorts of different practices. For example, historians worry about the provenance of evidence -- who wrote this text and why? How was it preserved and why? Sociologists worry about research design issues such as sampling frames, question-wording, and so on.

The difference is not as absolute as it seems. Sociologists often use found evidence. After all, census data, economic statistics and the like were constructed by other people for other purposes, just like church baptismal records were produced for other purposes than reconstructing family history. And historians have been known to formulate their own evidence, most notably, through the use of oral history. More important, while it may seem that sociologists attend to issues of data representativeness, reliability, and validity, while historians do not, so that the sociologists' evidence is better, this need not be the case. As Marc Bloch described many years ago in The Historian's Craft, a historian "crossexamines" the evidence carefully with

these sorts of issues in mind. I have colleagues in sociology who will state that, in the end, historical materials are more believable than survey data.

Historians do often face the problem of missing evidence. If the record is silent on certain points, one cannot even imagine producing the needed evidence in the ways sociologists can today. For example, I would love to know how Americans 80 years ago weighed the costs and benefits of subscribing to telephone service. But I have found no record of such deliberations, at best only dim reflections of such deliberations. So, historians struggle with silences in ways that sociologists typically need not. (I should say, *in principle*, sociologists need not. In *practice,* sociologists often reach a point in their analyses where they realize that they lack some crucial piece of the puzzle. Some question, now seen to be critical, was not asked. Then, they, too, must deal with silences.) But the critical -- albeit subtle -- distinction lies, I feel, in the difference between being *story-driven* versus *theory-driven.*

Historians, in telling their stories, feel compelled to tell a complete one. To do so, when the record is fragmented, means taking whatever evidence lies around that is at all trustworthy and weaving it into a narrative, particularly taking whatever evidence that can fill the silences. In this regard, I wrote another footnote in my book. It explained the anecdote about the "light under the lamppost." In this story, one dark night, a man comes across another, obviously drunk man searching the ground around a lamppost. The passerby asks the drunk what he is looking for. The drunk replies that he has lost his keys. Where, asks the first, did you lose your keys? The drunk waves his hand in the direction of a dark alley. Then, why are you searching *here*?, asks the passerby. The drunk replies: because this is where the light

is! There is a tendency for historians, being story-driven, to look for evidence wherever the light is and follow that trail wherever it goes, while sociologist remain more directed by the question.[9]

(This, by the way, is one reason, although only one, why social history has taken a turn toward cultural studies. Reconstructing social life, say, the nature of marital relations centuries ago, is hobbled by silences, since few representative couples have left us accounts. But there are many cultural products to study.)

Sociologists, in contrast, look for evidence that confronts theory. It may be partial evidence, incomplete for telling the story, but if it is well-placed theoretically, it suffices. So, for example, in my study of the telephone, one issue was what people used the telephone for. And in that regard, I looked at gender differences. I conducted statistical analyses to identify the effect of there being women in the household on the probability that a household had a telephone; I read industry documents for telephone salesmen's impressions of women's and men's attitudes; and I looked at our oral histories for gender differences. The result was that I found a correlation between gender and telephone use, but not a story.

And, so back to the debated footnote, my dismissal of cultural representations as evidence and the historians' desire to use them as evidence. This disagreement is related to another over what is preferred as evidence: Historians often take observers' comments about social phenomena as

[9] Stephen Lukes has reminded me of another use of the lamppost metaphor, one that can bet turned against the sociologist: The researcher uses statistics as a drunk use a lamppost, for support rather than illumination.

evidence about them, while sociologists are suspicious of such comments. For example, Carolyn Marvin wrote a fine book about the history of the telephone in the U.S. based largely on contemporary comments by journalists and leaders in the industry. I, however, paid relatively little attention to such materials. How could we know whether those commentators were accurate observers? Would such evidence reliably test theory?

One reason that such cultural expressions and observers' comments are valuable to historians, however, is that such materials help fill those silent gaps in the story line. The contemporary observers often serve as narrators of the story themselves. And cultural products allow speculation about hidden processes. For example, if one wants to know how Americans felt about the telephone in the 19th Century, one cannot interview them. But novels, art, popular essays, all these "discourses," can be examined for signs about feelings or consciousness.

As is evident, I have reservations about such evidence. Instead, I worked far more deductively. As a sociologist, I identified points of theoretical leverage and sought out evidence that spoke to those points. For example, another question I had was whether Americans found the telephone threatening or anxiety-provoking. My assistants and I searched for evidence that spoke to this point. We looked at newspaper accounts during the critical period to see how they treated the subject of the telephone; we found market survey research 60 years old that had asked relevant questions; we asked elderly people to recall their experiences of the telephone. These are not ideal types of evidence, but they are much better than, say, contemporary plays that included the telephone.

All this said implies a clear preference for the sociological rather than historical approach to evidence. *But* I underline that there is another side to the debate: Being able to tell the *story* is as important as being able to assess the correlation. So, I *was* concerned with finding evidence that told the story of the telephone industry and of its executives, and to tell the stories of how three communities experienced the telephone from 1890 to 1940, and to tell the stories of specific people's experience with the telephone. The stories matter rhetorically, as a means of persuasion, and logically as a way of understanding how cause and effect works out in concrete cases. Without a persuasive narrative, the correlations are mere abstractions.

Conclusion. It is no surprise that, as a trained sociologist, I find some aspects of how historians analyze questions and treat evidence puzzling and unsatisfactory. But I have learned to appreciate much of their approach. As sociologists and historians continue to work side-by-side on some major issues, it will be important to understand and appreciate what each provides in the common endeavor. As a sociologist, I have become aware that *stories* are needed; they are needed to make sense of theory and to persuade that theories are correct.

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