

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE PAST AND PRESENT: A TYPOLOGY AND ANALYSIS¹

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One would think it would be taken for granted in any social science discipline that one of the most important goals would be to link the past and present, and thus that specialists in analyzing the past would be in central and high status positions, but that is not current practice. The study of history is often marginalized and low status, and surprisingly few scholars attempt to link the past and the present, other than a few framing comments in introductions or speculations in conclusions.

In political science, there is no separate category of “historical political science” – most of the people doing historical work (a very small proportion of the discipline) are in the “comparative politics” category. As the label suggests, the comparative part of the comparative-historical approach is stressed over the historical part, and most people doing comparative politics study parts of the contemporary world outside the US.

In economics, due both to the overvaluation of mathematical theory and the emphasis on policy relevance (economists provide more advisors to governments than other social science disciplines), economic history is a marginalized, low status subfield in the discipline. Here’s one example, illustrating that even the best people in economic history are devalued in the discipline. The economics department at the University of

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Washington a few decades ago had great strength in economic history and (mostly non-mathematical) property rights theory with Doug North, Yoram Barzel and Steve Cheung (at this time North was most famous for a book on the rise of the west). However, most members of the department were unhappy about having their main area of strength in a low status subfield, so they consciously chose to move out of this area and into what they considered more mainstream mathematical economics. As a result of this unwise decision to move away from studying the past, North and Cheung left, and North was awarded the Nobel prize not at the University of Washington, but at Washington University in St Louis.

In sociology, those who study the past are not low status, but we are also not central to the discipline – we're usually considered interesting but esoteric, a luxury good that most departments can easily do without (Monica Prasad has felicitously referred to this as our "Prada bag" problem). The reason for this is that most sociologists, especially in the US, focus exclusively on the contemporary United States. Unfortunately for me, I can also illustrate this problem with an anecdote from my university. Several years ago, my department was considering hiring someone who specialized in the study of China. Several of my colleagues objected, arguing that the candidate was too narrow, since he studied just one area of the world, and that we should instead be hiring more general sociologists. The hegemony of the presentist, America-centered bias in our discipline is so great that the people making this claim were unaware of its ironic nature, since they were all themselves specialists in only one time and place, it just happened to be the contemporary United States. Pointing out that they were themselves not general

sociologists but “Americanists” as they would be called in Political Science, didn’t change their minds.

In history, the problem is different, but the outcome – a failure to link past and present – is all too often the same. Many historians (and to a much lesser extent in other social scientists) stress the uniqueness of the particular place and time they study. They are of course right in a precise ontological sense, no two times or places are exactly the same. However, the strong version of this view has draconian epistemological consequences – if each time and place is so unique that generalization to any other time or place is precluded, then each era in the past will always be analytically separated from the present (and eras in the past will be separated from each other, unless one is involved the origins or development of another). So even in history, the past and present are often not linked.

Why and How We Should Link Past and Present

So what is lost by the failure of many social science disciplines to prioritize scholarship linking the past and the present, other than the fact that most of us in this room are not as central or as influential as we would like to be? There are at least three general arguments for the importance of linking past and present, and I’ll be brief here because I know I’m preaching to the choir. First, there is a scientific justification. Simply put, the overconcentration of our efforts and resources on the contemporary United States is an extreme form of sampling bias. Looking at the past as well as the present, and at other countries as well as the US gives us both more data and more variation in both independent and dependent variables of interest to us (and in fact introduces many additional variables not found in the contemporary United States). Even

the most positivist of our colleagues should accept this argument. Second, there is an historical justification. The only way we can fully understand the present is by knowing its origins in the past, and by contrasting the present to the many alternatives in the past. Carr (1961:141) put it best: “the dual and reciprocal function of history is to promote our understanding of the past in light of the present and of the present in light of the past.” Third, there is a policy-oriented justification. This is essentially an applied version of the scientific and historical justifications: good policy recommendations must be based on broader data and greater knowledge of history. Public sociology needs historical sociology, and doesn’t get enough of it these days. The attempt to bring historical sociology and public sociology together should benefit both, providing a much needed historical dimension to policy-making and broadening the audience for historical analyses. Of course, the onus is on us to prove that -- historical sociologists will be unable to contribute to public sociology unless we are able to show how our knowledge of the past can contribute to contemporary policy debates.

This gets us to the most interesting, and no doubt the most controversial issue: if we agree that linking the past and present is essential, what are the best ways to do it? I’m going to argue that in order to link the past and present, we need to accomplish two related tasks. First, we need general theories with abstract scope conditions that facilitate the transportability of models and causal mechanisms across time and space, and that allows us to analyze the complex interrelations between agency and structure. Second, we need detailed empirical analyses of the relevant conditions in the past and present societies being compared, in order to both reveal how they are similar (the basis for comparison), and how they are different (allowing us to tailor our arguments or policy

recommendations to fit the unique features of particular cases). Because we cannot assume that the cases we compare in the past and present are either equivalent or independent, we cannot use positivistic, Hempelian theory modeled on physics, and we cannot treat time like what Sewell (1996) has called “experimental time.” The type of theory we use must be not only general but historical, since we cannot assume cases are equivalent. It should focus on differences across time as space as well as similarities (Weber’s ideal types are a wonderful model for this), and it must analyze the connections between cases in the past and those in the present, instead of assuming they are independent. I accept Sewell’s (1996) criticisms of positivist “experimental time,” but argue that a realist perspective, focusing on models and causal mechanisms, can link the past and present with theory that is both general and historical (see Emigh 2005 for a similar approach). Evolutionary biologists do just that, and we can too (Kiser and Welser 20xx). I’ll conclude this talk with an example that illustrates this approach, but first I’m going to discuss a couple of more problematic ways of linking the past and the present.

Two Wrong Ways to Link Past and Present, and what We Can Learn From Them

Perhaps the simplest way of linking the past and present, and both to the future, is by the extrapolation of trends. There are inductive and deductive versions of this, but the basic method is the same – certain trends are identified, the assumption is made that these trends will continue, and outcomes are predicted. Stage theories of history are one version of this, but they are too easy a target, so I’ll illustrate the shortcomings of this approach with two other examples.

Paul Ehrlich’s dire predictions about the consequences of population growth are an example of inductive trend extrapolation. (Ehrlich’s work is not purely inductive, it

relies on a few simple Malthusian ideas about population growing faster than the resources necessary to support it, but it consists mainly of simple trend extrapolations of population growth figures and speculations about their consequences.) In the late 1960s, Ehrlich (1967) predicted that as a result of continuing rapid population growth, hundreds of millions of people would starve to death in the next two decades, and that the prices of basic commodities would increase dramatically. We now know that Ehrlich's predictions were wrong – the death toll from famines declined during that period, as did the prices of basic commodities. In 1980, Julian Simon bet Ehrlich that the prices of five metals would decline over the next decade. Ehrlich took the bet, purchased \$200 worth of each of the five metals, and in 1990 was forced to write Simon a check for \$576.

So why were Ehrlich's trend extrapolations wrong? I'm not going to get into the details of this ongoing argument now, but the general answer is simple – he underestimated the ability of human agency to alter macro-level trends, or, as Sewell (1996:272) puts it, “the reconfiguration of structures by social action.” In Merton's terms, Ehrlich's predictions were self-negating prophecies – certain actors saw the trends, feared their negative consequences, and altered their behavior to prevent those consequences from occurring. (Obviously a more complete argument would have to unpack the vague term “certain actors,” but I'm not going to take the time to do that now.)

Similar problems arise with deductive trend extrapolations, as illustrated by Marx's argument about how the contradictions in the capitalist mode of production will lead to its demise. Marx argued (among other things) that as capitalism evolved there would be a concentration of capital, leading to a polarization of class structures with a

few increasingly rich capitalists monopolizing each industrial sector, and an increasingly large working class living at subsistence level, creating the structural conditions necessary for revolution (the rise of class consciousness would provide the other necessary condition). This is a brilliant and elegant argument, and for a while it looked as though it was true – in the US in the 1880s and 1890s these trends were playing out much as Marx predicted. Yet ultimately Marx was wrong, these trends did not continue. And he was wrong for the same reason that Ehrlich was wrong – his macro-level trend extrapolation paid insufficient attention to countervailing micro-level forces. Whether we accept the argument that enlightened capitalists used the states they controlled to limit themselves, or the argument that social movements from below forced states to restrict unfettered capitalist development is unimportant for my purpose since both make the same general claim – people saw the negative consequences of these trends and acted to prevent them. Anti-trust laws limited the concentration of capital and welfare state provisions and progressive taxation prevented the extreme polarization of class structures that Marx predicted.

As both of these examples illustrate, the extrapolation of macro-level trends is not an effective way to connect past, present, and future – we need theories that model the effects of human agency, as well.

A second type of problem that arises in linking the past and the present is viewing the past through the political lenses of the present. This is the facile use of the past to make a political point in the present (or about the future) that we see all too often used by politicians (and sometimes by academics, although the latter are also often especially good at debunking it). There are many versions of this, but all have the same problem –

the past is so vast and heterogeneous, that in the absence of any general theoretical criteria for selecting proper precedents or lessons from it, anyone who knows a bit of history can find something from the past to make her/his point, and so can someone arguing the exact opposite.

One version of this is “see how far we’ve come” – pointing to the flaws in the past to support a progressivist story about the present. Narratives about the history of technology often take this form. A related, teleological version of this shows how the entire past history of the world was leading up to where we are now – the “end of history” accounts about capitalist democracy are an obvious example. There is also a comparative analog to this – the “see how much better we are than they are” story that highlights the flaws in our competitors to show how good we are (this one was especially popular on both sides during the cold war). But the same sorts of problems arise when the goal is to paint the present (and often the future) in a bad light relative to the past. The classic version of this is the story of the past as nostalgic ideal. Luddite versions of the history of technology take this form, as do stories of the virtues of rural or small-town life compared to the decadence of life in cities (recall Sarah Palin’s “real America”). Histories of the family that praise the virtues of the 1950s ideal of the “Leave it to Beaver” family with its distinct roles for men and women (Parsons and Bales 19xx provided the academic support for this) are yet another illustration. I’m sure we all agree that this type of political use of the past to support contemporary political or theoretical positions is problematic, but how can we avoid it? The problem that allows it to happen is that there are no good criteria for agreeing about which things in the past are similar enough in relevant respects to be used to compare to the present. Each thing that

happened in the past has multiple features, as does the present, so it is always easy to find things in the past that are in some ways similar to things in the present, or equally easy by focusing on other features to argue that they are different, and thus not useful sources of precedents or lessons.

Evolutionary biology, another historical science, faced similar problems in trying to organize the data from the fossil record into a coherent picture (evolutionary tree) of the evolution of different species. How they solved this problem provides some useful lessons for us. (Yes, I realize that I am making an implicit assumption that these two disciplines are similar enough in relevant dimensions for one to provide useful lessons for the other, and I will be glad to justify that assumption in the Q&A).

The foundation for all biological science is ‘systematics’ – the process of describing, naming, and classifying species by charting their historical evolution.² Beginning with Linnaeus, biologists have concentrated to a much larger extent than we have on outlining and debating different methods of classification. Linnaeus revolutionized the field of taxonomy. He argued that classification should be based on ‘important’ characteristics, but the determination of what was important was arbitrary – based essentially on the intuition of individual taxonomists.

Evolutionary systematics began as a Darwin-inspired reaction against Linnaeus. The key insight is that the groupings and hierarchy of organisms should reflect the evolutionary process of their origination. Systematics thus represents the first attempt to develop a theoretically guided system of classification in evolutionary biology. The main problem with evolutionary systematics has been the lack of precise principles of

² The next few paragraphs draw on Kiser and Welser (20xx).

classification. Originally, they followed Linnaeus in grouping according to “important evolutionary characters,” but they lacked a clear notion of what determined importance.

The numerical pheneticists arose in response to the somewhat arbitrary and intuitive process of classification in evolutionary systematics. They returned to the Linnaean emphasis on overall similarity (as opposed to evolutionary relationship/origin) as the fundamental foundation for classification.³ However, they rejected the attempt to classify according to ‘important’ characteristics, based on the argument that there was no precise method of determining the relative importance of different characteristics. In short, they argued that classification should be based on systematic empiricism. The desire to classify on the basis of similarity coupled with the rejection of the idea that some traits are more important than others led pheneticists to develop complex classification systems based on the presence/absence of long lists of characteristics, all equally weighted. This strategy runs into the core problem that plagues all inductive/empiricist attempts to capture the totality of empirical reality. Just as no historical sociologist can ever list all of the features of even the smallest slice of historical time and space, so too numerical pheneticists can never list and compare all characteristics of entities being classified. In both cases, some selection from the total is necessary. As a result, depending on which characteristics are selected by pheneticists, different organisms will be grouped together. Since a fully complete empirical account is impossible (as it is in historical sociology), the numerical pheneticist project was at some point bound to fail.

³ Their main argument against the use of lineage and descent in classification is that due to the fragmentary nature of the fossil record, we almost always lack the necessary data to make precise delineations.

Cladistic principles of biological classification reject similarity as the main principle of classification, and return to the idea that some traits are more important than others as bases for classification. Cladists' most significant contribution is to develop a solid theoretical foundation for assigning relative importance to different traits and inferring evolutionary relationships. Cladists argue that groups can be defined by identifying unique derived characteristics. "Unique" denotes a characteristic that evolved only once, and "derived" means the character state is a modification of an antecedent state. Identification of ancestral vs. derived characteristics is done by systematically comparing groups thought to be similar or closely related to an "outgroup" thought to be more distant.⁴ The general principle underlying cladistic classification is parsimony. As Futuyma (1998:96) puts it, "cladistic parsimony holds that among the various phylogenetic traits that can be imagined for a group of taxa, the one that is best supported by evidence is the one that requires us to postulate the fewest evolutionary changes." A simple example is the grouping of dogs, dolphins, and sharks. Although sharks and dolphins share many traits appropriate to waterborne animals, grouping the species together would force us to postulate the independent evolution of all the traits associated with mammals in dolphins and in dogs. If instead we assume that dolphins and dogs are more closely related then we need only postulate that a streamlined shape and surface adaptations like fins evolved separately in sharks and dolphins. By providing this unambiguous theoretical rule, the principle of parsimony eliminates the ad hoc and

⁴ Sister groups are outgroups that are the closest known relatives to the in group being defined, and thus the most relevant for comparison because they allow fine-grained classification.

intuitive groupings common in earlier systems. In other words, they use theory to mitigate the problems caused by incomplete data.

Linking Past and Present with Historical General Theory: Modes of Tax Administration, Then and Now⁵

I have argued that the best way to link past and present is with Historical General Theory, consisting of general models and causal mechanisms, detailed comparisons of the conditions within which the causal factors of interest are embedded, a focus on agency as well as structure, and an explicit analysis of the extent of dependence of present cases on the past. It should be clear from this long list of requirements that this is not an easy task.

In order to illustrate it in more detail, I will briefly take an example from my own recent work with Audrey Sacks on recent administrative reforms in African states, more because it is an example I know well than because it is a perfect one, since it isn't. We begin by outlining the general theoretical model we use, then summarize our comparisons of past and present cases, and conclude by outlining some of our findings. This summary will be much too brief to recap any of these elements in enough detail to make the arguments compelling, my intent is only to outline the approach we used.

Using agency theory as a general model of tax administration, we model tax collection systems as agency relations in which the ruler is the principal and state officials, to whom authority to carry out state policies is delegated, are agents. Principals and agents have different interests, and agents generally have better information than principals, so principals always face a problem of controlling agents. The causal

⁵ This section draws on Kiser and Sacks (Forthcoming A, Forthcoming B).

mechanism driving the model is the choices made by principals and agents trying to realize their interests. With several different co-authors, I have used this model to analyze a wide variety of premodern states and empires. This model allows us to outline the general problems faced in tax collection, the range of institutional solutions available to mitigate these problems, and the conditions under which different solutions will be more or less effective.

The central proposition derived from agency theory, is that when monitoring capacity is poor (due to poor communications, transportation, and record-keeping), decentralized and privatized administrative systems will be more efficient than centralized bureaucratic tax administration.⁶ In premodern states, the most common tax administration equilibrium is various types of patrimonial decentralization for the collection of direct taxes and privatization (tax farming) for the collection of indirect taxes. Our most general empirical claim is that the conditions within which tax administrations in contemporary African states are embedded are in some important respects similar to those present in premodern states – both face structural conditions that limit their monitoring capacity. Thus, we can learn something about current administrative policies in the former by looking at the history of the latter. Centralized bureaucracies are not expected to work well in either case. Our theoretical expectation was that contemporary African tax administration would be more efficient if it was more similar to the premodern equilibrium of decentralization and privatization. In fact, given the lack of adequate monitoring capacity and the resulting failure of centralized

⁶ We define an efficient system as one that produces the highest net tax revenue. By net tax revenue we mean total tax revenue minus the costs of collection (administrative costs), corruption by officials, and evasion by taxpayers.

bureaucracies in the African context, over the past two decades, many African states have begun to replace centralized bureaucracies with partially decentralized and partially privatized administrative systems, in some respects similar to those used in premodern states.

So far the story might sound a lot like positivist experimental time, with the general features of premodern states and contemporary African states being compared using abstract general theory – but this is only part of the story. First, we do not assume that these cases are independent (that would be an absurd assumption in this case), but instead analyze their multifaceted dependence. These African states are post-colonial states, the reason they were centralized and bureaucratized in the first place is that they inherited these state structures from colonial powers. Moreover, they were encouraged to mimic the structures dominant in Europe and the US by modernization theory, which argued that all modern states must take a particular form, and by the international agencies on which they were dependent for economic aid. Their adoption of more decentralized and partially privatized administrative systems was also not independent, but in large part a function of a shift in intellectual orientations in the developed world away from modernization theory and toward institutional economics. Second, we do not assume these cases are equivalent, that the conditions faced in contemporary African states are the same as those faced in premodern states. Following our theoretical model that suggests that monitoring capacity is the key factor, we do detailed comparisons of technologies of communications, transportation, and record-keeping in our two cases (and of course look also at variance within each of them, since neither premodern states nor contemporary African states are homogeneous categories). We find, to provide a

very rough summary, that African states in general have monitoring technologies that are somewhat better than most premodern states, but much worse than those in contemporary developed states. As a result, we expect the most efficient administrative forms in these states to be partially decentralized and partially privatized. Preliminary analysis suggests this might be true.

Conclusion

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