

## Situating Historical Sociology\*

### Ancestors, traditions and alternatives

Historical sociology, when recognized as a legitimate endeavour (which is still not uniformly the case), is commonly traced back to classical origins in the work of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, and to a rebirth in the 1970s and 1980s. Some qualifications to this picture will seem appropriate. There are good reasons for remembering Abderrahman Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406); his *Introduction to World History* may be seen as the first major treatise on historical sociology, and twentieth-century authors in the field drew on his ideas (Ernest Gellner once described himself as a card-carrying Ibn Khaldunian). But he did not found a tradition. Another ancestor to be acknowledged is Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), whom some sociologists (including T. G. Masaryk) have taken to be the founding father of their discipline. In his case, though, the traditional line of reception – such as it is – belongs to the history of philosophy rather than sociology. Among eighteenth-century Enlightenment sources, the first to be noted is surely Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, also occasionally credited with a foundational role. In short, there are remote but significant ancestors; but most observers and practitioners of historical sociology will agree that the main tradition to be reactivated is the classical one, and the proximate foundation to build on is the late twentieth-century body of work.

That said, we can distinguish trends and alternatives within the rough consensus. Craig Calhoun has proposed a distinction between two fundamentally opposed conceptions: against attempts to domesticate historical sociology by admitting it as simply one more specialized branch of sociology, he defends the broader idea that it should serve to reorient the discipline as a whole. The aim is, in other words, to bring about a much closer and more systematic integration of history and sociology. As Calhoun's own example shows, this latter approach is not exclusively European, but it seems more strongly represented on the European side, and some authors (notably Philip Abrams) have taken it so far that no boundaries between the two disciplines are left untouched. While the proposal for a complete merger seems unlikely to overcome the realities of specialization, we have no reservations about aligning this journal (and the department to which it is linked) with the broader definition of historical sociology; cooperation with historians has therefore been and will remain essential.

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The idea of historical sociology as an overall reorientation lends itself to different interpretations. One version, of major importance for the recent history of sociology, is the construction of paradigms meant to reflect and facilitate the historicization of social inquiry. Here the pioneering role of Norbert Elias should be acknowledged. The concept of human figurations seems to be the first case of a central category formulated in this spirit, with the explicit intention to study social phenomena as constellations in process, and with the programmatic aim of redefining basic sociological concepts in processual terms. Michael Mann's typology of social power and analysis of its networks is a more recent project in the same vein. Mann differs from Elias in that he works with a more pluralistic model of power, but his overlapping networks are no less intrinsically historical than Elias's figurations. For those who regard both approaches as one-sidedly focused on power, it seems more natural to settle for a multiparadigmatic character of historical sociology, similar to the situation that is now widely accepted for general sociology. Rather than on devising new conceptual schemes, the emphasis will then be on interdisciplinary opening and enrichment. And the integration of history and sociology paves the way for further encounters. The historical sociology of archaic states and civilizations, an important field in its own right as well as for comparative purposes, must draw on archaeological and anthropological sources; a recent and representative work of that kind is reviewed in this issue. Another promising path is a closer connection with political science, broadly understood and with particular interest in its less conventional offshoots, such as geopolitics. In this regard, Michael Mann's work deserves special mention; nobody has done more to bring historical sociology into contact with geopolitical factors and perspectives.

### **Modernization and its disillusionions**

The general orientation of our journal reflects this interdisciplinary stance. To explain more specific interests, and with a view to the contents of this issue, we should indicate key themes that have – as a result of the historical-sociological encounter – been highlighted and redefined in particularly revealing ways. Changing visions and understandings of modernization are perhaps the most visible common ground of the two disciplines, and political studies, empirical as well as theoretical, will be an integral part of any sustained reflection on this subject. Modernization theory of the kind that held sway for some time after the second world war was later criticized for relying on unhistorical assumptions rooted in mainstream sociology; notions of unilinear development, self-contained trajectories of nation-states, and progress embodied in advanced societies were rejected as illusions. The rethinking that now seems to have produced a paradigm shift is best described in terms of historicization and pluralization. Different paths to modernity, dependent on cultural legacies, social forces and political constellations, are now widely pursued subjects of comparative analysis. Although a certain idea of distinctive modern cultural and institutional features must be retained, they are increasingly defined without normative judgment; the equation of progress and modernization is questioned at the root level, although progress in specific areas can still be envisaged. But even when normative meaning and force are ascribed to some components of modernity (most often subsumed under the concepts of emancipation, citizenship or autonomy), they turn out to be intertwined with destructive and regressive aspects in ways often difficult to decipher.

The twentieth-century experience of wars and totalitarian regimes, only recently given its due in debates on modernity, is the most massive reminder of these interconnections. All the abovementioned aspects are commonly subsumed under the idea of multiple modernities, introduced by S. N. Eisenstadt in the 1990s and later adopted by other authors who do not always share his specific interests. For present purposes, suffice it to say that the multiplicity in question is itself multiple: the term refers to the plurality of components (institutional and cultural), patterns (national, regional, civilizational and global), trajectories (short-term and long-term), and overall interpretations (ideological, sociological and philosophical).

It is now often argued, on good grounds, that an idealizing vision of the nation-state inspired the notion of society used by early modernization theorists. Conversely, modernization theory served to support simplistic ideas of “nation-building”, and they could – as recent experience shows – be put to dubious political use. A corrective against these trends, gradually assimilated into broader debates, is to be found in the work of historians (and to some extent historical sociologists) who have tried to understand nations as historical phenomena and focused, more or less explicitly, on processes of nation formation. It is worth noting that scholars coming from or working in Prague have been particularly active in this field; Hans Kohn, Karl Deutsch, Eugen Lemberg, Ernest Gellner and Miroslav Hroch are the obvious names to mention, and it may be added that Jaroslav Krejčí's last major work contains the outlines of an original approach to nation formation, which the author did not have time to develop. An important corollary of this historical perspective on the world of nations is that any study of national phenomena must pay attention to their international and transnational contexts. The latter aspects are now often emphasized as alternative foci to be set against traditional fixation on the nation-state, but the real task is to grasp the changing interrelations of the different levels, always important but not to be construed in any supra-historical terms.

### **Authors and themes in this issue**

It is no exaggeration to say that a certain image of the nineteenth century (more precisely, in this case, the years 1815 to 1914) as the time of progress par excellence was decisively important for the rise of modernization theory. Moreover, a tendency to exaggerate both the peaceful character of European history in this period and the ascendancy of the nation-state helped to round off a picture of the century as a paradigm phase. Bo Stråth's proposal for a new narrative, centred on the repeated failure of peace treaties meant to end all wars, stresses the interconnection of geopolitics, international relations, and social transformations, and the links between warfare, welfare and democracy are a particularly striking example of this. Although twentieth-century experiences clearly determine the background to this (or any other) reading of the nineteenth century, some new horizons will emerge when the twentieth century is taken as a direct object of analysis. Peter Wagner does so and raises the question of possible meanings of progress after a transformation of the world that can be roughly dated to the 1980s. This sea change was from the outset subject to mythmaking; but as Wagner argues, it was neither a transition to post-modernity, nor a neoliberal revolution, nor the beginning of the end of socialism. Rather, this decade saw the exhaustion of a certain model of progress, supposedly anchored in the

Enlightenment and conducive to human liberation. In retrospect, it appears to have been based on resistance to domination. Its decline raises the question of a more positive pursuit of autonomy, collective as well as individual. Such interpretations pose problems that also have some bearing on the alternative modernity that collapsed at the end of the 1980s. The Soviet model justified itself as a breakthrough and a vehicle of resistance to domination, but its most determined critics denounced it as an extreme form of domination, coming unprecedentedly close to suppressing resistance altogether. Historians and sociologists, seeking to understand the Soviet trajectory and to avoid sweeping preconceptions, tried to find ways around this dichotomy, but no consensus emerged from their debates; nor did the abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union settle the matter. Mikhail Maslovskii discusses the question of Soviet modernity with a view to clarifying the terms of debate rather than finding a conclusive answer. He stresses the heterogeneous sources of the regime and the complexity of the transformations that followed its demise.

The modern vision of progress and its guiding values are discussed from another angle by Pierre Rosanvallon. His contribution is the text of a lecture given in Prague in 2015. Rosanvallon is one of the foremost contemporary theorists of democracy, and his writings have explored the historical transformations, ideological elaborations and conceptual dilemmas of democratic political cultures. The present text sums up the results of his reflection and proposes a new definition of the society of equals; it is to be conceived in the spirit of social liberalism, and although critical of the currently dominant neo-liberal project, it should link up with the new individualism of singularity.

The transnational dimension appears, in one guise or another, in all the abovementioned papers; Marci Shore's account of Jews and cosmopolitanism approaches it from a distinctive viewpoint. The history of European Jews in the twentieth century is marked by to diverent trends occasionally clashing in individual biographies (there were conversions in both directions): on the one hand the development of a particularly articulate and persistent national movement, on the other a uniquely cosmopolitan tradition, active across a broad spectrum of cultural genres and ideological currents, and variously indebted to the Jewish legacy but not bound by inherited assumptions. This latter aspect has been somewhat undervalued in Jewish studies, and it has not been a focus of attention for the recent advocates of cosmopolitanism. Marci Shore's wide-ranging discussion brings this achievement into proper perspective and invites further contextualizing reflections. The two lines taken by Jewish thought in twentieth-century Europe were to a significant extent responses to the national exclusionism that tended to portray the Jews as its ultimate adversary. At its most extreme and destructive, in the Nazi movement and regime, this current transcended the limits of nationalism; the quest for a racial empire must be regarded as a perverted form of universalism. The overall failure of the Nazis to mobilize international support along these lines led to a lack of interest in specific cases and episodes, but recent scholarship has been correcting that attitude. David O'Donoghue's essay examines one such case, the presence and the unofficial state connections of Nazis in Ireland during the second world war. The Anglo-Irish relationship, still highly contested at the time, makes this example particularly interesting.

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