# Irritating flirtations

## Reflections on the relationship between history and sociology since the 1970s

*Thomas Welskopp*

### History and sociology today – still an odd couple?

There are signs that history and sociology have become interested in each other again and that both disciplines display a new openness to study one another or even to cooperate. The *Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology* may serve as a prime example. It has been designed as an institution where interdisciplinarity is truly practiced, and where mutual inspiration is as welcome as a sharpened sense of what the disciplinarity of either discipline is all about. The new journal *InterDisciplines* is supposed to provide an easily accessible forum for such an endeavor. One of its driving questions is on what common ground history and sociology can meet for a deepened mutual understanding and a prospective intensified cooperation. This essay will both try to explore such a potential common ground in a very preliminary way and to draw some conclusions from earlier flirtations between the disciplines. I will argue that the first close encounter during the 1970s had not been a one-night-stand but rather a short-lived Platonic relationship. Thus a renewed mutual interest cannot easily build upon established traditions but has to start over identifying what might be attractive in sociology for historians and what might be appealing in history for sociologists (Welskopp 2005a).

Despite the legacy of pioneers like Max Weber and a thriving Anglo-Saxon Historical Sociology – to which there is virtually no counterpart in Germany – the interest of sociologists in ›history‹ as a discipline is far from being self-evident. In the Durkheim and Comte tradition, important and sometimes dominant schools of sociology have professionalized

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themselves by explicitly sharpening their own disciplinary profiles in a conscious departure from history (Nelson & Winter 2002). Large scale macro-sociology, with its focus on quantitative variable analysis, has devalued ›history‹ to the opposite of ›systematic‹, to the mere residue of phenomena you cannot explain theoretically but have to describe in a pre-analytical narrative. Only in this sense, John Goldthorpe maintained in 1997 »for any kind of macrosociology, […] ›history‹ will always remain as a necessary residual category« (Goldthorpe 1997: 22, note 18).

›History‹ in such a view is a last resort in case of insufficient modeling or the pastime of some literary romantic too stupid to quantify. A renewed interest in history among quantifiers and especially the more hardcore proponents of rational action theory – if it is voiced at all – then boils down to include more backward data into a retrospective longitudinal analysis. Yet this does not go deeper than to reducing history to a collection of ›things past‹, a vast reservoir of data to be fed into variable-testing models which are not famous for their historical sensitivity. It goes without saying that with such a notion of ›history‹ the social sciences can continue quite well into the future without historians.

During the 1980s and much of the 1990s, many historians, in turn, among them a considerable number of social historians, had forsaken sociology in favor of seemingly more fashionable partners: discourse analysis and literary criticism. This contributed to increased methodological consciousness but privileged language and semantics to a degree where the grip on ›the social‹ threatened to get lost. The questions of generalization and synthesis were pushed into the background without resolve. It is a little irritating to see that some younger discourse historians now look to rational choice models in order to re-identify historical actors and draw the boundaries around discourses. As the essay will argue, it is the methodologically more open social historians of a younger generation and those historians who have gained a ›praxeological‹ approach from the works of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu and the likes who display a renewed interest in sociology and whose practice may in turn be of interest to sociologists.

This implies that some strands of sociology lend themselves to a more productive inspection than others. They comprise, for example, the historically oriented ›mechanisms‹ approach of historical sociologists like Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and the late Charles Tilly. A whole host of qualitative studies may be inspiring for historians even if they cannot apply their elaborate research techniques themselves, due to the fact that most of their study objects are dead. Industrial sociology, especially in the ›classic‹ sense of the 1940s and 1950s, has started to become valuable source material for historians. New Instititionalism (Scott & Meyer 1994; Mahoney & Thelen 2009; Streeck & Thelen 2005; Hall & Thelen 2009) finally resembles much of what historians do if they practice an »actor-oriented institutional analysis« (Welskopp 2002).

Those social scientists increasingly do look at ›history‹ in order to integrate the temporality of social phenomena and their ›historicity‹ into their conceptual thinking. Here, as I will argue, may the common ground be found for an intensified dialogue and potential cooperation. In the best of all worlds a growing interest in ›history‹ as a theoretical perspective on temporality and ›historicity‹ might inspire a deepend curiosity about ›history‹ as a discipline which has become much more theoretical and methodologically conscious since the time it was equated with the naïve narration of past events. The question then is what social scientists and historians can learn from each other, from their respective ways of dealing with theory and methods in a world conceived as profoundly historical (Sewell 2005).

In my essay I want to explore some venues of such an enterprise from the viewpoint of an historian whom his interest in theory has brought into the field of history in the first place. I will start out with a discussion of an influential strand in German historiography whichin the late 1960s and early 1970s programmatically defined history as a ›historical social science‹ and set out to reshape national history writing into a comprehensive, theoretically guided and comparative ›history of society‹ (*Gesellschaftsgeschichte*). In the second part of this essay I want to venture beyond this position, which in my view did not much more than re-establish the conceptual dualism of ›theory‹ that by definition must not con-

taminate the actual historical narrative and of a ›history‹ as a narrative whose theoretical status remained obscure. To be fair, however, acknowledging ›theory‹ as an important topic in the historical disciplinary discourse has been the great and lasting achievement of this specific German variant of social history. It is precisely this sustained explicit focus on ›theory‹ and methodological debate which makes the German *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* a valuable test case for an interrupted convergence between history and sociology.[1]

I will argue in the remainder of this essay that ›history‹ can only exist as a thoroughly theoretical endeavor but that its ›theorizing‹ is profoundly shaped by its self-conception of what temporality and ›historicity‹ mean for conceptualizing the past. In closing I will reflect on how this may influence the theoretical approaches the social sciences are debating when they talk about the necessity to include ›history‹ in their explanations.

## History as *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* and ›historical social science‹

It was only with the jump start of a new generation of social historians in Germany in the late 1960s that a minority strand of the discipline explicitly left the camp of *Geisteswissenschaften* and proclaimed history another ›social science‹. In its initial phase protagonists like Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka professed to an open minded interdisciplinary dialogue with sociology, economics, political science, and, to a lesser extent, psychology. Yet it is crucial to disentangle what that meant. First, the social scientific turn entailed a re-reading of Karl Marx and Max Weber, mediated by the influences of émigrés like Hans Rosenberg or re-

1 German social history, unlike its British or U.S. counterparts, always lacked a positivist tradition which might have played into the hands of an a-theoretical specialization. It also saw a limited trend from Marxism to the post-structuralist Foucauldian discourse analysis, being not really Marxist in the first place and remaining sceptical vis-à-vis the full scale turn towards a new substantialism of language, for a British-American example of this trend from Marxism toward poststructuralism see Eley 2006.

claimed authorities like Eckart Kehr and Otto Hintze. This reception was decisively shaped by the fact that it occurred as a re-import via the U.S. Thus Weber in particular was adopted in a structural functionalist fashion attributed to Talcott Parsons. This is not to say that ›historical social science‹ was structural functionalist in any theoretical sense. Yet its influence stressed the structuralist factor in Weber's work and let him appear first of all as the theoretician of ›rationalization‹, a variant of modernization theory. Another transatlantic import was, second, the reception of modernization theory proper (Wehler 1975; cf. critically Mergel 1997). This was, after all, the first flirtation of German history with the positivist sociological tradition. Yet very much like sociology in Germany, which adopted empirical social research with breathtaking speed despite its peculiar history, social historians never problematized the positivistic implications of the Anglo-American school of modernization. This was due to the fact that, third, a second strand of Weberian thinking, paired with a specific understanding of Marxism, entered the field via the social philosophy of the Frankfurt school, most notably attributed to Jürgen Habermas. This was the ›epistemological Weber‹ as embodied in his concept of ›ideal types‹. ›Historical social scientists‹ were structural realists but never became positivists. Instead, the theoretical coupling of ›knowledge and interest‹ as set forth by Habermas lay the groundwork of their turn to the epistemology of ›ideological criticism‹.

The proclamation of a ›history beyond *Historismus*‹ actually propagated a ›history beyond hermeneutics‹ (Iggers 1984; 1985). German social historians performed a sharp structuralist turn first of all because of the radically anti-hermeneutic inclination to distinguish themselves from *Historismus* and *Strukturgeschichte* alike (Mommsen 1971). On two epistemological levels ideological criticism replaced hermeneutics and lent legitimacy to a particularly strong emphasis on structures: First, social historians systematically called in question that the past could be uncovered by exploring the intentions of the historical subjects. Ideological criticism contended that these lacked full insight into the all-powerful structural constraints they were acting under. History, Habermas had written, was more than »people intended to do reciprocally«. Social historians in Ger-

many charged this formula with the radicalized meaning that history was a matter far different from what the contemporary subjects had been able to experience and comprehend. ›Experience‹, therefore, was distorted reality, distorted by ideology and manipulation. In consequence, the historian had to move beyond the level of past statements and the language of the sources. The structural constraints of action themselves had to serve as the proper focus of inquiry (Kocka 1986: 76 f.; idem 1975: 24 ff.). Second, social historians challenged all historiographical approaches – most prominently *Historismus* – that used hermeneutic methodology in order to ›understand‹ the past through the intentions of the ›personalities‹ involved. They discounted these approaches not only as being methodologically naïve but as being ideologically affirmative and politically apologetic. Only structural analysis critical of the historical ›agents‹ and their hermeneutic historians alike would be able to unveil the ›real‹ past from ideological distortions.

Given the salience the notion of ›structure‹ acquired in ›historical social science‹ it is surprising how little attention it drew in the theoretical discussions among German historians during the 1970s and 1980s. Although social historians like Jürgen Kocka in *Strukturgeschichte* criticized the usage of the term as being unspecific, they did adopt its *strukturgeschichtliche* formulation as set out by Reinhart Koselleck for a completely different purpose. In his »theory of historical time« this notion defined a specifically modern type of ›experience‹: Historical time, he suggested, had accelerated under the conditions of modernity to a degree that even ›structural factors‹ could now be experienced as recurring events (Koselleck 1989: 144-157). Whereas for Conze and Schieder ›structure‹ was a descriptive concept that addressed the basic coherence of social totality and Koselleck made it a junction term between impersonal developments and individual experience, Kocka gave it the above-mentioned epistemological twist. He borrowed Koselleck's argument but drew from this the opposite conclusion to treat ›structure‹ as a force by definition beyond the grasp of human experience. Consequently, in his eyes a truly comprehensive explanation of history required a structural analysis of the conditions, restraints and unintended effects of ›agency‹ taken as far

as possible. ›Agency‹ – beyond interest and conformity to ›structure‹ – thus shrank to a mere residue at the margins of the historical account (Kocka 1977: 167f.; idem 1986: 76f.).

Thus the notion of ›structure‹ in German social history did reflect the dualism of ›secondary systems and mechanisms‹, and historicist hermeneutics were reduced to a marginal phenomenon rather than any understanding as fashioned by the Western sociology of that time. The heritage of *Strukturgeschichte* was unwillingly carried on including its historicist elements. As a descriptive category it bore the burden of indiscriminately relating to institutions and patterns of collective behavior. The term could also simply address statistical proportions. It became charged, however, with a vague materialism that re-established a clear causal chain between the economic, social, and political dimensions of historical analysis. This meant that a concept of ›structure‹ derived from an unacknowledged sociological source (›German sociology‹) was paired with a remotely Marxist model of ›base‹ and ›superstructure‹ that attributed to the economic, social, and political levels of society different measures of ›structuredness‹ and ›agency‹ (cf. the critique Welskopp 1999).

The gist of my argument is that ›historical social science‹ in Germany has never been as receptive to the developments in Western social sciences as it had claimed to be. Its advances towards sociology, political science, and economics remained short-lived and highly selective. Furthermore, its appropriations of approaches from these disciplines were mediated by both a specific structuralism not accounted for and unacknowledged historicist remnants. Social science history did endorse the explicit ›application‹ of theories borrowed for strictly ›instrumental‹ purposes from the neighboring fields. Yet it is doubtful whether the soaring discussions on theory in the 1970s (before they faded out during the 1980s) ever acquired a genuine theoretical quality. In retrospect, they rather featured a mere rhetoric of technicality designed to mark the distance to narrative *Historismus* and to claim superiority for a social history aspiring to the unequivocal terminology of the natural sciences (Etzemüller 2001: 346, note 115). In fact, the example of modernization theory serves particularly well to show that critical reception confined itself to short inau-

gural reflections (Lorenz 2000). These represented claims jumping rather than thorough theoretical scrutiny. Once appropriated, the concepts assumed a rather unproblematic status only subjected to empirical qualification.[2] ›History proper‹ thus came to occupy the space between the model applied and the sequence of diversions from its prescribed standards that were uncovered from context in the course of analysis. When charged with theoretical predicaments, ›social science history‹ professed to cheerful eclecticism. Yet this remained firmly embedded in overarching modernization rhetoric.

Theoretical eclecticism and long-term dedication to modernization theory are symptoms that social history still upheld the unitary notion of history as inherited from *Historismus*. It is striking that, on a closer look, German social historians actually privileged ›process‹ over ›structure‹ – given that for them ›process‹ was structure in motion and ›structure‹ a synchronic constellation of elements. Consequently, they appropriated only those concepts from sociology or economics that represented models of singular linear processes. Hansjörg Siegenthaler has aptly defined such theories as »anticipations of historically singular sequences of events in abstract terms«. Theories of such a linear architecture, turning a somewhat idealized historical path into a normatively charged processual model, were in vogue in contemporary economics (e.g. the ›long waves‹ approach to business cycles) as well as the sociology of that time (modernization, Marxism) (Siegenthaler 1999: 280). The parallel structure of these theories and the underlying idea of an integral historical process facilitated the negligence to discuss the status theory could acquire in history or what history actually was, after all. This was *Historismus* snuck in through the back door.

The structuralism of a genuine, non-sociological nature reveals its salience when we take into account that Jürgen Habermas' social philosophy served as an unquestioned epistemological authority and much consulted political ally but not as a source of theoretical inspiration. In his *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* Wehler does make a reference to Habermas' distinction

2 A very good example is Kocka 1985.

between ›work‹, ›domination‹, and ›language‹, but only to reify it in the very next sentence by translating these terms into ›economy‹, ›rule of the state‹, and ›culture‹, segmented layers of society interlinked by patterns of social inequality (Wehler 1996[3]: 7). This means that Wehler does not follow Habermas in spelling out his twin concept of ›system‹ and ›life-world‹. However skeptical one may be about the feasibility of this concept – it is all too evident that Wehler hypostatizes the perspective of ›system‹. Whereas for Habermas the ›life-world‹ is the sphere of ›agency‹, of the reproduction of ›systems‹, of the confrontations between ›systems‹ and ›life-world‹ and, therefore, the site of history, Wehler treats ›systems‹ as segmented entities that are themselves capable of acting like collective subjects as the driving forces of historical conflict and change (Johnson 1993). When the term ›life-world‹ awkwardly resurfaced in the context of *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) in the mid-1980s, Wehler denounced it as ›neo-historicist‹. What Habermas would term systemic evolution is a unitary process of historical development for Wehler, qualified only by the interference of important ›personalities‹. Communicative action is no part of the ›agency‹ he describes when entering the sphere of ›the political‹.

The uneasy coexistence of materialist structuralism and unacknowledged historicism also shaped the relations of German social history and American historical sociology. In their quest to find allies and inspiring examples to whose authority they could refer, German social historians transcended boundaries and called to attention historical sociology of the kind as practiced by Theda Skocpol, Barrington Moore, or Charles Tilly – among others. When it came to justify the call for historical comparison, social historians readily referred to the pioneering work done in that field, yet without encouraging imitation. Historical sociology remained a friendly but alien ally – alien in the sense that this discipline shared with social history the macro-causal perspective and the inclination to comparative work but differed markedly in other fundamental respects: Social history would just not follow suit with historical sociology's universalist models and theories and its preference for multi-case comparisons (Tilly 1984). Comparison in social science history devel-

oped as a much more contextualized project pairing two or at the most three cases. It was not universalist in outlook but aimed at individualizing the case of foremost interest (Haupt & Kocka 1996). The nation state remained the standard unit of comparison, whereas historical sociology tried to move beyond national boundaries (McAdam & Tarrow & Tilly 2001). It is true that recent comparative work in Germany has ultimately exceeded these limitations (Welskopp 1995). Yet it is evident that even comparison had for a long time been part and parcel of a national history that translated its underlying unitary notion of history into historical singularity. The call for comparison arose when the influential hypothesis of a ›German divergence from the West‹ (*deutscher Sonderweg*) was launched, the attempt to explain the crimes of *National Socialism* by reference to the peculiarities of German national history.

German social science history did re-introduce the task of theoretical reflection to the historian's responsibility. Yet it shied away from the question whether theory building was also a task historians had to confront in the future. It also hedged a limited spectrum of theories and failed to put forth criteria to assess competing theoretical proposals on other grounds than their applicability to a concrete historical subject matter. Thus it could actually not have come as a surprise when more recent revisionist approaches engaged in theoretical discussions of their own, taking them away from the hegemony of social history. Their orientation shifted from sociology to cultural anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, and discourse analysis. This move certainly produced a new one-sidedness and failed to recognize that the theoretical instruments of sociology were undergoing profound change as well. The theoretical discussion, focusing heavily on poststructuralism, completely neglected, for example, the development of ›practice theory‹ in sociology (Reckwitz 2000; 2002). Yet it helped with establishing a theoretical discourse in history that gradually became more than a mere struggle about which theories to borrow from the lead discipline then in vogue.

## Nothing goes without saying – the language of turns

It should be clear from the brief treatment of social history as a ›historical social science‹ that this strand of historiography had aspired to reach a new theoretical quality by becoming as similar to the natural sciences as possible – or to the social sciences of that time which likewise tried to emulate the scientific jargon of their colleagues in the laboratories (Welskopp 2006). This tendency was never exercised to its full promises, however, and finally gave way to a more or less uneasy coexistence of watered-down modernization rhetoric and pragmatic empirical history writing along more traditional narrative lines. The general decrease of theoretical interest within social history made the bold advances of new strands of historical research the more threatening. It became obvious that not only the utilization of certain theories from neighboring disciplines was questionable but that the whole theoretical foundation of history as a discipline was at stake. Among German social historians only Reinhart Koselleck had so far developed his own vision of the genuine theoretical qualities of ›history‹ itself: as a conception both of the temporality of human experience and of the historicity of the language used by the historical agents in the process of shaping and creating their experiences (Koselleck 1972; 1989: 107-207; 2000).

Koselleck pointed out to the central role of semantics for the change and persistence of social and political constellations long before the ›linguistic turn‹ – belatedly – hit Germany. And it seems that after twenty-five years of deconstruction and discourse analysis the early exuberance of dismissing the social agent and charging all concepts and notions of a past ›reality‹ with essentialism has considerably faded away (e.g. Scott 1988a). Ironically, some young proponents of discourse analysis seek refuge in actor concepts derived from the most antiquated rational choice approaches, whereas some current variants of rational action theory display a growing willingness to accept at least a broadening of their actor concepts in order to include cultural factors like ›bounded rationality‹ or ›framing‹ (Graf 2005; Frings & Marx 2005). It has also become evident that some discourse analysts (not the later Foucault) only had replaced the essentialism of ›structural realism‹, of which they found social history

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guilty, with a new essentialism derived from the ontological qualities they tacitly attributed to language. The persistent rhetoric of ›turns‹ in the *Geistes*- and *Kulturwissenschaften* might mask the sobering fact that some aspiring historians have taken a turn too many and reached their point of departure again.

Yet what remains from the quarrels around the ›linguistic turn‹ and what any historian can learn from Koselleck in his (or her) attempts at theoretical explanations is the notion of the profound historicity of social and political language (Koselleck 2007). This means that social scientists and historians alike do not have a terminology at their disposal which is uncontaminated by the historical processes in which historical agents coined the terms that described – and constituted – their social worlds. It also means that any social analysis which ignores the contemporary ways of ›semanticizing‹ social relations and relations of inequality, of inclusion and exclusion, is incomplete because it is in danger of missing the linguistic mechanisms that not only made the world intelligible for those participating in it but provided the verbal tools to shape it.

To acknowledge the historicity of all concepts demonstrates the recognition of the historicity of all social sciences, including history. This must not be equated with relativism – of which the beleaguered social historians found the ›postmodernist‹ historians guilty. It rather draws the methodological conclusions from the insight that our – the historians' – objects of observation are no guinea pigs but human agents very similar to ourselves. Their limited awareness of the conditions and unintended consequences of their actions which we can pinpoint retrospectively must warn us of our own ›bounded rationality‹ and is no reason for intellectual hubris. Their likeness connects the observers and the observed and provides, on the one hand, an epistemological key to all social analysis – a ›fusion of horizons‹, as hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer once said, indifferent of the actual familiarity or unfamiliarity of the observed historical context. On the other hand, as Anthony Giddens maintains, it is this conceptual connection that may actually provoke changes in the observed contexts (cf. Giddens 1991: 210-217). Historical agents – at least as long as they live – may adopt the con-

ceptual offers of social scientists and historians and react to them, thereby unwittingly altering the social constellation originally analyzed. This reflects that the social sciences, again history included, are nothing more but also nothing less than the self-referential loop in societies reflecting on their own present and past (Welskopp 2005a: 126 ff; Welskopp 2007[3]).

## Everyday Constructivists

The ›linguistic turn‹ gave social historians the jitters because of its inherent epistemological contention that there was no ›real history‹ out there but only the talk about it.[3] This virtually vaporized the business principle of ›structural realism‹ most social historians were then operating under (Lorenz 1994). So-called radical constructivism even went a step further in denying that there is something like a ›reality‹ at all out there which preordains social relations and human agency. To the disgust of zealous discourse analysts, the ›radical constructivists‹ went so far as to doubt the ontological pre-existence and, therefore, determining qualities of language, insisting on the constitutive power of situative ›language games‹ to reconstruct and modify registers of language by performative instantiation and discursive usage (Foerster 2008[10]; Glasersfeld 1995; Larochelle 2007).

On a closer look, however, social historians – instead of making ›constructivism‹ a synonym for all evils of the world – could have turned this approach into a powerful argument against the ›essentialism of language‹ of some strands of discourse analysis that have more or less reified the ›discourse‹ into an anonymous system of relations between signs following ingrown rules independent of the awareness or will of the historical interlocutors. In fact, ›radical constructivism‹ does not make the business of the historian an impossible illusion. It rather provides the discipline with a robust epistemological foundation. The key to this lies

3 See the contributions by Keith Jenkins, Joan W. Scott, David Harlan, and Frank Ankersmit in Jenkins et al. 2007. A *locus classicus* Hunt 1989; Scott 1988b.

in the core insight of this approach that the ›constructive‹ nature of all information about ›reality‹ (including ›real‹ history) is not an epistemological problem specific to the social sciences and history but constitutive for all human beings trying to cope meaningfully with the world around them (Hacking 1999; 2002).

Thus every social agent moves about his environment as an ›everyday constructivist‹, trying to get along in his (or her) social relations on the basis of his know how, his theories about the world.[4] Anthony Giddens – following Emile Durkheim – has termed this know how ›practical consciousness‹, and he describes it as the stock of incorporated and mostly tacit knowledge social agents draw upon in their physical interaction with other social beings, artifacts, and their natural surroundings. Although most of this knowledge works without explicit verbal instantiation – through the bodily movements of human agents alone – it nevertheless provides the basis for their ›continuous reflexive monitoring of action‹, their conscious navigation through space and time. In times of crisis or on request human agents, according to Giddens, are able to lift segments of their ›practical consciousness‹ onto a discursive level and make it part of their ›discursive consciousness‹ (Giddens 1984: 41 ff.; Welskopp 2001).

›Practical consciousness‹ is a much more open concept compared to the more hermetic notion of ›habitus‹ as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu (although both variants of a theory of social practices are compatible), which focuses on the ›economics of symbolic action‹ and targets mainly forms of distinctive behavior. Yet to mention Bourdieu's ›habitus‹ in this context is important, because it stresses ›historicity‹ to a considerably greater degree. ›Habitus‹ is literally burdened with history, distilling the essence from experiences of generations into the fuel that keeps the agents moving. It has been inscribed in the social agent over a long time, forming and reshaping his body in the process (Bourdieu 1990: 52-65). This is a distinct possibility in Giddens' structuration theory as well, but his broad view even comprises short-lived encounters and idiosyncratic

4 The ›classic‹ formulation in Berger & Luckmann 1966.

habits, which nevertheless draw upon a repertoire of tried reactions with a history of their own (Giddens 1976; idem 1984: 34 ff.).

For history as a discipline and its ways of conceptualizing its subject matter this means that historians (and social scientists in general) try to observe and explain the behavior of human agents who are forced to constantly construct their environment by means of mobilizing a practical form of knowledge which is profoundly historical in nature. It is safe to assume, however, that these ›everyday constructivists‹ go about their constructive task with more or less ›realistic‹ intentions, since they aspire and expect to ›get along smoothly‹ with the ways they interact with others. ›Radical constructivism‹ loses its frightfulness because everybody does it and most of the ›construction‹ is directed toward very pragmatic ends. In this sense, historians are nothing more than chroniclers of past encounters of constructivist endeavors with the unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences of social action as instantiated in observable social practices.

From the viewpoint of a sociology of science, history as a discipline only systematizes what human agents do anyway all the time: It provides orientation in a present enclosed in two virtual temporal dimensions – the past and the future, both out of reach for the agents who nevertheless need orientation to interact meaningfully with their surroundings. From this need for an orientation better suited to the conditions of the environment than other forms of references to past events there concludes that human agents will have ›realistic‹ expectations when they speak of ›history‹ in contrast, for example, to myths, tales, or fictional fables. There can be no doubt that the ›histories‹ written by historians remain ›constructions‹ which make sense of an unattainable, unstructured past. Yet they write as plausibly as possible about the practices of ›realistic‹ agents for an audience with a ›historical realism‹ in mind and the pretension to be able to distinguish between ›facts‹ and ›fiction‹. Yet the audience's ›realism‹ is directed to somewhat like ›truth‹ rather than (the unattainable) past ›reality‹. History in this sense is the self-referential loop in society's dealing with its past which it does not want to leave completely to memory.

## Practice and discourse

On the level of the social actors' everyday life, language constitutes the self-referential loop regarding their practices. Whereas, as I will argue, speech acts – and eventually discourses – are as much practices as is the handling of artifacts, they do contain, at least potentially, more than one layer of meaning. This makes language the mode of self-reflection, of, as Anthony Giddens has put it, the ›reflexive self-monitoring of social action‹.

So far, one important ›historical‹ characteristic of the historian's way of conceptualizing social phenomena – probably in contrast to some social scientific approaches – has been identified in its focus on the linkage between language and historicity. Within the theory of social practices, the definition of language hereby is very broad. It includes, on the one hand, all sign systems that convey any kind of ›meaning‹ (symbols, icons, pictures, gestures as well as written and spoken words), and on the other hand – think of the concept of ›practical consciousness‹ – vast areas of human agency that can be ›semanticized‹ but which normally are not verbalized. For the latter, ›tacit knowledge‹ is a prime example, a stock of rules and resources agents draw upon without verbal reference, a form of know how observers can describe verbally because it carries its meaning in the very acts of the agents but remains impossible to be reproduced as a ›working knowledge‹ in writing or otherwise.

Yet even the most recent formulations of ›practice theory‹ still reproduce a certain dualism of ›practices‹ and ›language‹ (or ›discourse‹), as if verbal utterings were no form of practice and practices by definition were free of lingual elements (Reckwitz 2003; idem 2006: 3-41). I suggest that it could be useful not to distinguish between ›practices‹ and ›language‹ but to differentiate ›practices‹ (including purely verbal practices) according to the share of verbal elements they entail. Then you have completely non-lingual practices (someone hammering a nail into a piece of wood), solely lingual practices (someone giving a speech), and many forms in between. Yet language-based practices are not just like any other form of practice. Because of the surplus of meaning inherent in any speech act the language elements in practices bear multiple potential connotations which

can prompt other attached practices, additional speech acts for example, to form redundancies to the original practice which eventually may spin off into a state of verbal autonomy (which can be called ›discourse‹). A soccer match, for example, comprises a lot of non-verbal practices (alongside a lot of verbal practices like orders, shouts, card-carrying referees and uncountable insults) which can be represented to a wider audience by means of the purely verbal practices of the reporter commenting on the game. Match and comment may make the newspaper headlines the next day – a scandal may evolve (the hidden foul-play, the incapable referee, the fired coach) which may develop into dimensions that no longer have a lot to do with the original ball kicking on the pitch. I suggest to distinguish practices of a first, a second, a third and so on order, not to declare some practices (of the first order) more important than others, but to get an idea of the linkage between original practices (which may be purely verbal practices) and the mostly verbal practices commenting on and reflecting this original practice (Welskopp 2005b; Biernacki 2000; Sewell 1999.

What will be the historian's gain from this complicated distinction? He (or she) gains a sharpened sense for the origin of his sources, for the level of observation and for the reflection that goes into the practices of the second (and so on) order. This, in turn, enables him to construct his plausible story of past practices in a much finer grain. It is all too evident that this distinction also makes his task of ›historicizing‹ a flow of events much easier. Furthermore, the power of language to constitute and shape social practices has been stressed throughout this essay. Here we can pinpoint this power where it comes to bear. Distinguishing practices of the first and second (and so on) order according to their share of verbal elements and reflexive content makes it possible to explain the actions of a human agent plausible as being ›realistic‹ in the sense of a specifically ›bounded rationality‹ even if he self-confessedly only executes a divine order. Finally, what the historian gains is a real integration of ›practices‹ and ›discourse‹ within an encompassing theory of social practices. Quite analogously to Giddens' enterprise to turn the traditional dualism of ›structure‹ and ›agency‹ into a duality, we find a duality in the

concept of ›discourse‹ which denotes it as practice and its reflective mode at the same time.

This brand of theorizing might not appeal to many sociologists not occupied with practice theory. Yet it may shed some light on the way historians deal with theory in general. It shows why historians tend to receive, develop, and apply theoretical concepts which keep ›in touch‹ with the phenomena blinking through the remnants of a past irretrievably lost. One of the main tasks of theory in history – apart from epistemological meta-reflection and a social theory one might as well call historical ontology – is to make these remnants speak, to constitute phenomena which are then theoretically interpreted and laid out in a narrative containing the details necessary for an adequate historical understanding. Whether one may find this unfortunate or not – historians are not able to produce their own material by a methodically prescribed procedure.

## Institutions, systems, and temporality

Whereas practice theory works for history exceptionally well on the level of ›face-to-face‹-interaction (Barnes 2001; Coulter 2001; Schatzki et al. 2001), the conceptualization of aggregated, ›collective‹ action or institutional ›action‹ requires considerable additional thought, since the theoretical offers at hand – like Weber, Giddens, Bourdieu, Foucault, or, in the current German context, Andreas Reckwitz – do not provide more than unrefined building elements toward an actor-oriented analysis of institutions and systems which I want to advocate here. First of all, it is necessary to note that ›collective‹ action is *not* a simple aggregation of individual actions as suggested by the ›bathtub‹ model of the rational choice people. Following Weber, such rather unlikely instances have to be understood to be very complex processes in which primary group structures, institutions, and systemic relations are involved, concentrated at a specific locale: the focus, and tipped off by a specific constellation of strains and opportunities. Likewise, institutional ›action‹ must not be treated as the action of a ›super-individual‹. I deem it far better to speak of the outcomes of institutional processes as ›institutional effects‹.

The primary distinction, then, is between the human agents that occupy institutions and the institutions themselves which are the situative result of three interlocking sets of social relations. ›Institutions‹ in my sense are conceptualized from the notion of ›organizations‹, although, following Weber again, not all relatively stable sets of social relations which can be termed ›institutions‹ are ›organizations‹ proper (like marriage, therefore the ›relatively‹). The wording, therefore, differs from the usage of ›institutions‹ in the ›New Institutional Economics‹ where the term often denotes ›values‹ or ›contracts‹. ›Institutions‹ in practice theory may be built around ›values‹ or ›contracts‹ but cannot be pictured without a specific social and cultural surplus that holds them together. This view pairs well with the notion of ›institutions‹ as advanced in ›New Institutionalism‹, because it retains the social actors involved and the power relations, micropolitics, and contingency that characterize organizations specifically. In contrast to those variants of organizational sociology which – following a systems theoretical approach – are in search of general features of organizations, ›praxeological‹ historians and ›New Institutionalists‹ alike are interested in the specificity of concrete types of organizations (Thelen 2004; Mahoney & Thelen 2009).

Actor-oriented analysis of institutions thus means an approach that does not make the social agents disappear as soon as they enter an organizational context. Rather, both the agents involved and the institutional structures are characterized by ›material‹ foundations of different qualities. The agent finds his (or her) ›body‹ as the ›material‹ center of his activities, regardless of how non-essentialist we must conceive the body. For our purpose here the ›body‹ simply represents the agents' situating in time and space and in a context that bears an influence on his range of possible actions. An institution or organization ›regionalizes‹ – in Anthony Giddens' terms – the actions of the social agents involved. The institution, in contrast, interlinks the agents internally by relations of communication which are based on ›material technical means‹, on specialized artifacts. It also produces – since it is designed to do so – institutional effects affecting a large number of human agents outside the institution, again via ›technical means‹ that multiply the actions of indi-

vidual members of the institution (Giddens 1984: 319 ff.; Welskopp 1999: 100-119).

As mentioned above, institutions consist of three interlocking sets of social relations: first, the relations between the social agents involved and their social background ›outside‹; second, the internal relations between the members of the institution; and, third, the relations between the institution as an institution and the human agents (or their institutions) affected – those relations I suggest to call ›institutional effects‹. These effects are the raison d'être of institutions in general: to magnify the consequences of individual action beyond the level of ›face-to-face‹-interaction (Welskopp 1999: 100-119; Mahoney & Thelen 2009).

The first rationale behind this conceptualization is that an institution is more of a social cosmos than both the aggregate of its members and the quality of its outcomes can explain. Moreover, it is the feedback loops between the three interlocking sets of social relations that actually produce ›bounded rationalities‹ specific to the respective institution, ›bounded‹ less in the sense of ›limited‹ but rather in the sense of ›geared to a specific internal logic‹. The functional logic of institutions is widely felt by the social agents affected by its effects, but how it works to produce specific ›institutional effects‹ remains hardly intelligible for someone being outside. It is for this reason that organizational complexes are frequently described by organic language, by mechanistic metaphors, as collective individuals, or as manipulative conspiracies.

The second rationale behind this model design is to capture the temporality of institutions. Institutions ›regionalize‹ social action in time and space; therefore it would be more apt to speak of the specific ›time geography‹ institutions command as their organizational resources (Soja 1989). To say that institutions produce effects beyond the level of ›face-to-face‹-interaction means that they both control a qualitatively wider range of social relations over time and space than any individual agent without institutional background, and that they sustain the absence of its members and outside targets. The ability to cover extended spans of time and areas of space is, therefore, another raison d'être of institutions. It can be described as an asset, as a set of resources of the institution

itself. »Binding time and space« – as Giddens puts it – thus becomes a defining characteristic of institutions, and this is a viewpoint that reverses our conventional understanding of time as something chronological and external to social relations which affects all social objects equally and alike. Seen this way, time and space can be accumulated and stored by institutions as ›institutional potentials‹ which may explain institutional development if no other variables interfere, and which must be taken into account as one possible form of change over time that normally escapes social scientific theory building (Giddens 1984: 180 ff.).

Unfortunately, the social world cannot be exhaustively described as a conglomerate of agents and institutions. There are social systems that are relatively stable over time and sometimes extensive in reach which consist of institutions and networks of agents but whose cohesion and functioning cannot be attributed to a single control center, although it seems as if someone must pull the strings. Markets, money systems, and registers of language usually serve as favorite examples. Max Weber termed such societal structures rather helplessly ›as if‹-systems (Weber 1980[5]: 14), and Anthony Giddens takes refuge in projecting these structural sets as organized around ›structural principles‹, shared ›axes of structuration‹, without being able to establish plausibly what these ›axes‹ – decidedly no ›superstructures‹ – actually consist of (they appear as the virtual – and empty – centers spiral nebulae revolve around) (Welskopp 1997).

Here, practice theory might make progress by invoking some basic ideas of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, even if we take into account that his and his followers' mode of theorizing differs fundamentally from the historians' way of conceptualizing. Combining his notion of system with an actor-oriented approach designed to interpret the phenomenological might even send him spinning in his grave. Yet this granted, especially his concept of *autopoiesis* (›self-generation‹) seems useful in this context (Luhmann 1995: 32-38). We can translate *autopoiesis* into the notion of a specific ›functional logic‹ shared by networks of agents and institutions interlinked by mutual relations of exchange which form strong feedback loops. Individuals as well as specialized institutions (e.g. business firms) may participate in common markets shaped by a very specific functional

rationality without somebody laying down the rules or dictating an all-encompassing contract obliging all participants to each other. By this balance we arrive at the notion of ›bounded rationality‹ again, and again this means a special functional logic rather than limitations, only that this ›bounded rationality‹ informs a whole set of agents and institutions, sometimes covering entire sectors of society, like economy (Luhmann 1995: 187-197).

## Time, space, and multiple forms of change

The pervasive influence of temporality and ›historicity‹ on the conceptualizations of historians following some strands of practice theory has been amply demonstrated, and so the question of »what is the specific ›historical‹ in history« may be closer to an answer now. Renate Mayntz put it this way: »First of all, ›historical‹ does not always mean ›past‹, but stresses the fact that it denotes a concrete case (sequence of events etc.) exactly localized in space and time. What distinguishes both disciplines [macro-sociology and history] is more the orientation at explanation than the identification of the objects of analysis in present times or the past« (Mayntz 2002: 9; 2004). History must insist in the relevance of situating agents, institutions, systems, and events precisely in time and space. Their physical uniqueness matters. They cannot be reduced to mere ›cases of x‹ or a collection of variables. The legitimate level of isolating them from their context always remains to be established and justified (as, for example, with comparisons).

This does not mean, however, that history can do without isolating its objects from context at all or do without abstractions altogether. Yet it is a fundamental task not to let the single object get irretrievably lost in some form of summation or aggregation. Basically, all generalizations in history must be able to trace and illuminate the single case and its documentation (since history is even less capable of producing its own evidence than the systematic social sciences). There is no doubt that ›individualization‹ is not the self-serving purpose of history writing, as Leopold von Ranke has been misquoted for a hundred and fifty years by now. Rather, ›individualizing‹ is an ancillary operation in the process of

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generalization, in order to demonstrate that and in how far ›cases‹ are exemplary (representative is a statistical, not an epistemological term in history) for a more encompassing relationship. ›Individualizing‹ also serves to explain exceptions, and in doing so helps to establish the limits on the validity of a model employed. Yet even then, the individual case must not go down the drain. Theoretical concepts in history must not lose touch with the phenomenological, since it is to better explain the phenomenon that theory is applied to history in the first place.

A major consequence for conceptualizations in history following from this is that generalizations are never universalist or all-encompassing but frequently assume the form of typologies. Typologies specify their claims to validity in time and space. They usually consist of several layers of generalizations, reaching a level abstract enough for theoretical debate and comparison, but on a more concrete level illuminating singular phenomena by connecting models with concrete names, times, and locales. This mode of generalization strongly calls for a comparative perspective. Contextualized comparisons are the only mode of reaching generalizations without reducing the compared objects to faceless sets of variables. When I stress the usefulness of contextualizing comparisons, I do not only argue against this methodological reductionism but also against the methodically ›boundless‹ contextualization done in the traditional historical single case study (Welskopp 2010: 8 ff.). Therefore, my notion of contextualizing comparisons meets the view of recent neo-institutional approaches which utilize a comparative perspective to get away from the idiosyncracies of case studies and actually aim for a distancing effect that allows for identifying general patterns and systematic variations across a limited number of cases (as an example Thelen 2004). It is of utmost importance that the objects of comparison are only constituted in the process of establishing the specific comparative logic, by selecting a common theoretical base which makes the objects appear as variations of a *tertium comparationis* and by formulating criteria for the measurement of similarities and contrasts (Heintz 2010: 3-6).

This, of course, has bearings on how historians conceptualize processes. First of all it is important to note that historians are not by definition the scholars of change. They are and must be equally interested in the reproduction of social phenomena, in the conditions and limits of stability. Thinking in terms of the capability to bind time and space points into that direction. From a historical viewpoint it appears more apt to stress the contingent aspects of change. However, contingency in this respect means a greater but nevertheless limited number of possible outcomes, variability rather than chance. The contingent dimension of change results from the complex interaction of potential sources of structural dynamics whose interference may produce sequences of events which are perverse and hard to predict.[5]

Simple models of transformation, like in evolutionary theory, are often correct in describing important aspects of change but do not grasp the whole story (Sewell 1992; 2005: 81-123). Specific evolutionary processes might stop overnight. They mingle with cycles of reproduction, with conjunctures, or sudden episodes (like the complete breakdown of a social order). Evolution, moreover, does not only mean unfolding from a shared origin but also encompasses unpredictable jumps caused by mutation. Luhmann explicitly preferred the latter metaphor in his conceptualization of system change, as embodied in his notion of *autopoiesis*, although, strictly speaking, the large-scale, long-term processes of functional system differentiation do evoke the impression of unfolding. The attribution of the binding capacity of time and space to institutions does not mean that institutions necessarily live this capacity out to its full potential. Even the most streamlined company may fall victim to a hostile takeover financed by some age-honored pension fund from a completely different segment of the economy (and different part of the world). Path dependency is, for historians, a very attractive concept and seems a promising way for historical thinking to make inroads in the social sciences. However, the concept of path dependency is not unequivocal. In some formulations, path dependency focuses on sequences of decisions,

5 On the concept of ›sequencing‹ very illuminating Thelen 2004.

and decisions are but one mechanism to bring about change (Liebowitz & Margolis 1995). The long lasting formative power of certain mentalities, for example, is usually not meant by the term. Path dependency sometimes denotes a critical turning-point which determines the course of events ever after (Abbott 2001: 240-260). Sometimes it is applied to a progressively diminishing spectrum of alternatives as the result of choices taken. Even path dependency, therefore, does not suffice to tell the whole story. Finally, we have to differentiate between changes within and between systems. Business cycles do not by nature transcend capitalism (at least up to now), although each major cycle may transform capitalism in a way unaccounted for in economic theory. This is usually the point where the historian claims his retrospective obstinacy.

## Theory and narration: Perspectives of an interdisciplinary future for history and sociology

History as a discipline has always been ready to forget about its own past. This past, therefore, abounds with aborted learning curves. Thus it may be that the social sciences can point toward the vast number of naïve narratives that historians are still turning out, graveyards of empirical facts nobody really cares for, enclosed by an insurmountable concertina fence of impregnable footnotes. They can turn this into the argument that history as a discipline, after all, has nothing to offer to its neighboring scholarly communities. Yet in my opinion history, under the legitimatory pressure of ›postmodernism‹, has developed into one of the most self-reflective among all *Sozial-* und *Geisteswissenschaften*. There is a large body of research out there now on the history of historiography which is theoretically competent and has more to say than merely to highlight the areas of the discipline's own forgetfulness (as in the case of German historians under National Socialism, for example).

This does not mean, however, that historians will give up narrativity as their foremost means of representing their findings. The anti-narrational turn German social history proclaimed in the late 1960s and 1970s basically led nowhere. Early critics remarked that this was inconsequential and a mere failure to live up to one's own standards. For a very short

time, anti-narrativity just spoiled readable historical prose, some books of the early 1970s dotted with tables and graphs and sporting entire chapters on technical definitions. Yet this was never true for the more prominent scholarly works of the time. Even if dedicated to a distanced vocabulary, historians like Jürgen Kocka or Hans-Ulrich Wehler clung to a narrative plot, and the degree to which Wehler's chapters on politics appear personalized must be surprising with such a self-declared ›structuralist‹. I, in turn, rather think that the continued stress on narration has a theoretical foundation and echoes the expectations of an audience that may naïvely – and in a futile way – yearn for ›historical truth‹ but that also longs for stories with a beginning and an end that are intelligible for people who organize their memory in much the same way.

The theoretical reason for the continued leading role of narration in historians' writings lies in their insistence on situating actors and events in time and space, in the irreducibility of the human agent with his characteristic life cycle, in the embeddedness of cases in their contexts, and in the multiplicity of change. It is a way of dealing with contingency, and the mode of earlier concepts of ›social mechanisms‹ – since then acknowledged as being too sweeping and mechanistic – to dissolve contingency into causality, is no feasible alternative. Of course this cannot justify the old a-theoretical historiography which tended to dissolve contingency into a streamlined narrational flow. This does not mean that theoretical reflections have to be kept away from the book market. On the contrary, the development and production of theory – complete with the representation of findings of this kind in print – are in my opinion one of the main tasks that research-oriented historians have to fulfill. It may be at this level – as maintained throughout this essay – that historians may enter into fruitful discussions with their colleagues from allegedly more systematic disciplines.

There are some encouraging signs that this may be fruitful if pursued systematically. Some political scientists, for instance, experiment with ›analytic narratives‹ as a legitimate form of presenting their research, although it has become clear that Margaret Levi, among others, wants them to supplement rational choice analyses in order to make them more

intelligible for readers. The statement may also be true that it has not become entirely clear what a sociologist actually believes to be an analytic narrative. For the historian, a narrative grounded in theory and reflecting contingency while enabling generalizations would fulfill the promise associated with the term (Bates et al. 1998; Levi 2002).

Interaction analysis and close readings of cultural settings among face-to-face relations – following Erving Goffman's tradition and others – constitute a second field where the interests of historians and sociologists intersect. Whereas most historians are by definition of their subject matter unable to directly observe the symbolic interactions *in actu*, the ›tools‹ of symbolic interactionism still prove very useful for them. Especially historians of the middle ages and early modernity, who are indeed occupied with societal ties acted out in face-to-face encounters, resort to this theoretical perspective. They use the concepts in order to build an imaginary sphere of past action, against which the available sources and scarce remnants of the past can be interpreted in a more intelligible way.

Another area of overlapping interests may be mapped between the ›actor-oriented institutional analysis‹ some historians are doing in a ›praxeological‹ perspective and those neo-institutionalist sociologists and political scientists who also stress the role of agency, power relations, and contingency and who consciously apply a notion of ›history‹ as temporality to their work.[6] One of the methodologically salient features works like Kathleen Thelen's in the ›New Institutionalism‹ share with ›praxeological‹ historians is their inclination towards contextualized comparisons. Although probably more interested in discovering – and pinpointing – causal relationships, they also generalize in the form of typologies and take advantage of the fact that comparisons enable generalizations without reducing the objects of comparison to a numerical sample.

6 An excellent example is Thelen 2004.

I am aware of the fact that these mostly qualitative directions in sociology only represent a minority in the discipline. On the whole, quantitative studies, macro-sociological enquiries, and much abstract model construction seem on the rise here. Rational action theory is no doubt in advance rather than in retreat, countering blames of ›reductionism‹ with the programmatic statement that ›reductionism‹ of this kind was the only way to retain a notion of ›the social‹ in a social scientific world increasingly dominated by cognitive science, life science, and neurobiology. There is certainly not much to expect in terms of the interdisciplinary dialogue between history and sociology here, since not history but the sciences are clearly the addressees of the quantifiers' arguments.

On the side of history, some disciplinary features seem irreducible as well, making a cooperation difficult for sociologists. The narrative story, most importantly, will remain the prominent ›end product‹ of a historian's professional activity. It is his (or her) commodity. But this narrative can be deeply informed by theory; it can be structured along strictly analytical lines; it can imply models and concepts, can compose full fledged comparisons into a coherent storyline and still thrive for an elegant prose readable by more people than a few peers. Narrative structures organize historian's monographs, whether shaped as case studies – which would be digestible for sociologists – or as a storyline linking the start of a book with its ending. Historians are still driven by the illusion that they write for a public broader than the community of their expert peers. There are indeed examples of such mastery out there (unfortunately more in the Anglo-Saxon world than in Germany).

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