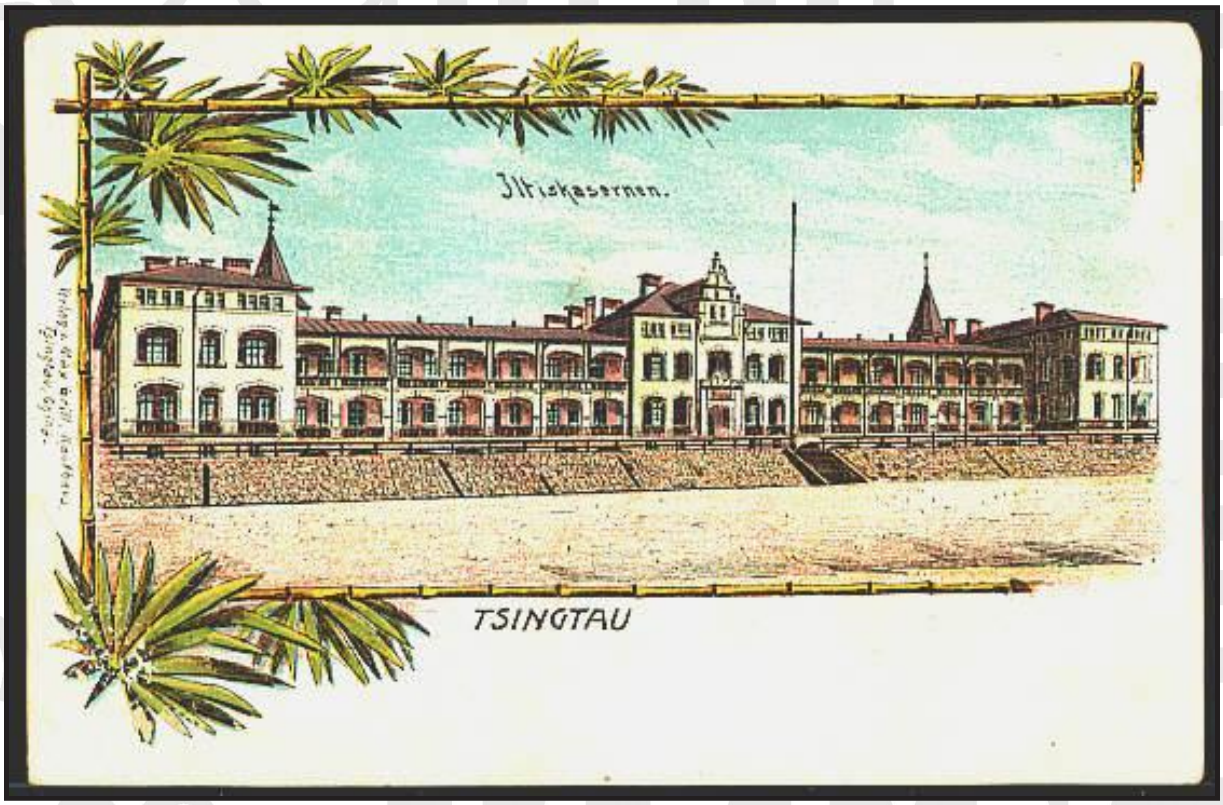
UnderstandingSociety

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Innovative thinking about social agency and structure in a global world

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Plasticity of the social

Friday, November 02, 2007

I maintain that virtually all social entities are "plastic": their properties change significantly over time, as a result of the purposive and unintentional behavior of the socially constructed individuals who make up a society. Organizations, labor unions, universities, churches, and social identities all show a substantial degree of flexibility and fluidity over time, and this fact leads to a substantial degree of heterogeneity among groups of similar social organizations and institutions. This points to a general and important observation about the constitution of the social world: The properties of a social entity or practice can change over time; they are not rigid, fixed, or timeless. They are not bound into consistent and unchanging categories of entities, such as "bureaucratic state," "Islamic society," or "leftist labor organization." Molecules of water preserve their physical characteristics no matter what. But in contrast to natural substances such as gold or water, social things can change their properties indefinitely.

This interpretation interprets “plastic” as the contrary to “static and fixed”. A second way in which an entity might be unchanging is as a dynamic equilibrium. A social structure might be a self-correcting system that restores its equilibrium characteristics in the face of disturbing influences. The temperature in this room is subject to external influences that would result in change; but the thermostat provides cool or warm air as needed to bring the office temperature back to the equilibrium value. When I say that social entities are plastic, I also mean to say that they are not generally determined within a dynamic equilibrium (as sociological functionalism maintains, perhaps), with powerful homeostatic mechanisms that correct for disturbing influences. There is no “essential” form to which the structure tends to return in equilibrium.

This ontology emphasizes a deep plasticity and heterogeneity in social entities. Organizations and institutions change over time and place. Agents within these organizations change their characteristics through their own behavior, through their intentional efforts to modify them, and through the cumulative effect of agents and behavior over time and place. Social constructs are caused and implemented within a substrate of purposive and active agents whose behavior and mentality at a given time determine the features of the social entity. As individuals act, pursue their interests, notice new opportunities, and innovate, they simultaneously “reproduce” a given institution and also erode or change the institution. So institutions are not fully homeostatic, preserving their own structure in the face of disturbances. This is not to say that institutions lack such homeostatic mechanisms altogether; only that we cannot presuppose that a given institution or organization will persist in its fundamental characteristics over extended time and space.

A familiar example will illustrate the kinds of plasticity and variation that I am thinking of. Take the tenure process in American universities. We can see an overall similarity in processes, rules, and goals in the tenure processes at various institutions. Organization is to some extent influenced by function. But we also see substantial variation and drift in both process and content (criteria and processes for awarding tenure). For example, there are some universities that are incorporating “community service” into tenure criteria. Different universities give a different balance of faculty review and provost and dean review. There are different cultures of seriousness in review by faculty committees and academic administrators. Different institutions define different institutional goals: enhance national reputation of the faculty (through research productivity), improve teaching, orient

faculty to community service, … There is a visible push-pull by stakeholders on these institutions: deans, provosts, presidents; faculty governance units; individual faculty. There have been changes in the past 20 years that have affected many institutions: post-tenure review, greater willingness to do reviews leading to removal, … So tenure institutions display the variability and plasticity that I believe is inherent in all social institutions.

So far I have focused on institutions and organizations. But features of social consciousness and social identity are also variable across time, place, and group. The mechanisms through which social identities and mentalities are transmitted, transmuted, and maintained are varied; inculcation, imitation, and common circumstances are central among these. But the transmission of an identity is a bit like the transmission of a message through a telephone chain. Because of "noise" in the system, because of individual differences among the transmitters, and because of multiple other influences on micro-identities, we should expect great variation within and across groups with regard to the particulars of their social identities. In fact, it appears that the plasticity of identities, norms, and mental frameworks is particularly great. The mechanisms of transmission invite variation across successive instances and generations. Local variations will take root in sub-populations. There are limited mechanisms of homeostasis. And individuals and groups have the ability to modify the content and meaning of these elements of social consciousness more or less indefinitely over time. Small variations in locally-embodied content proliferate through imitation and parent-child transmission.

Finally, we might also say that individuals too are "plastic". The social psychology of the existing person is the product of the individual's earlier experiences, education, and training. So this particular person—perhaps now a "rational maximizer with racial prejudice and a fear of flying"—has been constructed through a concrete set of experiences. But (a) this concrete present individual herself can be brought to change some basic motivational and psychological characteristics through additional experiences—perhaps diversity training and a positive experience with a person of another race; and (b) other individuals from a similar background can be brought to have a different set of motivational characteristics through different circumstances of development. So the individual's basic characteristics of personality, belief, and motivation are plastic.

In each case we find that institutions, practices, and social identities show a substantial degree of plasticity over time and place. And this is what we should expect--fundamentally, because we can sketch out the social processes and mechanisms through which institutions are formed, maintained, and modified. Institutions are human products and are embodied in human actions and beliefs. Sometimes an institution is designed through a deliberative process; sometimes it results through a series of uncoordinated adaptations and appropriations by a number of participants. Institutions solve social problems; they coordinate individual activity, control resources, allocate benefits and burdens. And institutions either maintain their structure or change depending on the interests and actions of the participants. The participants in institutions interact with the particulars of the organization in ways that improve the effectiveness of the organization, or better serve a particular set of interests, or some combination of both. Leaders may determine that a modification of the institution would increase the capacity of the organization to deliver services, reduce costs, or improve their own ability to control activities within the organization. Participants may modify the organization in their own ways—through spontaneous local modifications of process; foot-dragging as a way of impeding the functioning of unpopular aspects of the organization; collaboration with

other participants to modify the institution in directions more favorable to their interests; etc.

So it is important for social scientists to avoid the fallacy of "naturalism"--the idea that social science should resemble natural science, and the idea that social entities have a similar constitution and ontology to natural entities.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:27PM (-04:00)

International social research?

Saturday, November 03, 2007

I find it intriguing to imagine the sociological insights that might come from a discussion of a specific social problem that brings together the perspectives of some of the international visitors to this web site. How would observers from Manila, Lagos, Shanghai, and Detroit be able to contribute different perspectives on the issue of rising income inequality? Or the issue of racial discrimination? Or the issue of corruption? Or the challenge of an aging population?

Is there a place in the task of creating a new discipline of sociology, for the networked intelligence of observers throughout the world?

Does existing sociological theory and practice give us a basis for analyzing the important social problems that surround us -- or do we need to seek out new theories, new perspectives, and new methods?

Can the richness that is present within a distributed community of thoughtful observers be the basis for a better science of sociology?
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:20PM (-04:00)

New approaches to social research?

Saturday, November 03, 2007

I believe we need to create significantly new approaches to the study of the social. Positivistic sociology, formalistic political science, highly mathematicized economics--these dominant paradigms in several disciplines proceed on the basis of misleading or overly narrow conceptions of science and the social. We need to do a much better job of crafting theories and research methods to the particular features of a social research topic. And we need to be much more open to the innovations and new perspectives that are emerging in various areas of the social sciences (for example comparative historical sociology). This means that there needs to be a freeranging, innovative consideration of the ways in which it is possible to study and explain various social phenomena. (See "The Heterogeneous Social" for more discussion of this critique.)

(Ian Shapiro's The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences is an interesting contribution.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:27PM (-04:00)

Human behavior and institutions

Saturday, November 03, 2007

Ultimately social phenomena are the aggregate result of the behavior of socially constituted persons who are acting within the context of locally embodied institutions. If there are regularities within the social realm, they derive from common features of individual agency, common features of institutions, and common processes of aggregation of effects.

This implies that social scientists should always keep in mind the real underlying behavioral and institutional settings that constitute the social processes or patterns they are interested in.

It also implies that social scientists should expect plasticity and heterogeneity of social processes.

There is more discussion of this perspective in "Levels of the Social".
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:30PM (-04:00)

What is "power" in the twenty-first century?

Saturday, November 03, 2007

Is "power" different in the twenty-first century?

Is power the same as "ability to influence behavior"?

Do the internet and new forms of communication and social networking create new opportunities for power--for good or bad purposes?

Think about the ways power was created and used in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries: the power of the state to regulate and enforce; the power of the police to arrest and confine; the power of Europe and North America to administer global empires; the power of the press to focus attention on subjects of concern (political corruption, tainted food, child labor).

These forms of power turn on a few more basic ideas: the ability to use force in order to coerce or threaten; the ability to use mechanisms of communication to influence public opinion and action; the ability to deploy a dispersed bureaucracy in order to organize the actions of distant actors.

Has the balance of power shifted between organized states and networked anti-state organizations?

The exercise of power is a crucial mechanism of social causation, and the analysis of the sources and organization of power is an important task for social science and social theory.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:31PM (-04:00)

Positivism and social science

Saturday, November 03, 2007

There is a strong current of positivism in contemporary sociology --in fact, one might say this is the dominant paradigm. Other paradigms exist -- feminism, Marxism, comparative historical sociology, and ethnographic sociology, to name several. But the claim of science is generally couched in terms of a positivist theory of science and inquiry. This is unsurprising, in that several of the founders of sociology (Comte, Mill, and Durkheim in particular) were most emphatic in asserting the necessary connection between the two ideas, and Comte invented both "positivism" and "sociology" as modern terms.

The core assumptions of positivism include these: that social science is identical in its logic to natural science; that science involves the search for general laws about empirical phenomena; and that discovery and explanation depend upon a rigorous empirical scrutiny of the phenomena under question. Positivism is doubtful about the role of theory, preferring instead to make do with empirical observations, classes of empirical phenomena, and generalizations across classes of phenomena. Finally, positivism is dubious about the reality of causal connections between empirical phenomena.

It is true that science requires rigorous empirical inquiry. But much of the rest of the positivist program turns out to be badly suited to social science research and explanation. This is so for several reasons. First, social phenomena do not fall into fixed and distinct "types", in which the members of the type are homogeneous. We can generalize about "water", but not about "revolution", for the simple reason that all samples of pure water have the same structure and observable characteristics; but not so for all "revolutions". The category of "revolution" is not a "kind", and we should not imagine that we can arrive at a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in this group.

Second, there are few lawlike generalizations about social entities and processes (if any at all!). Each revolution, for example, proceeds according to a historically specific set of causes and circumstances. And there are no genuinely interesting generalizations across the whole category.

Third, it is important in social science to formulate hypotheses about unobservable mechanisms of causal interconnectedness. So "theory" is an important component of social-science thinking and the sociological imagination.

Finally, explanation in the social sciences requires that we identify the causal mechanisms that connect one kind of social circumstance with another. If we believe that improved transportation causes a change in habitation patterns, then we need to be able to provide a hypothesis and analysis of what the social mechanisms are that create this result.

Positivism is a poor guide for social science inquiry. Instead, we need to approach social science research with a readiness to find contingency, heterogeneity, path-dependence, and particularity among the phenomena that we study--corresponding to the plasticity of human institutions and human agency.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:58PM (-04:00)

Why "false consciousness"?

Sunday, November 04, 2007

The most frequently visited page on my research web site (out of more than 90 articles) is an encyclopedia article on false consciousness. Moreover, many of these visitors come from the developing world, including especially the Philippines. I am curious about these facts.

False consciousness is a Marxist concept. It refers to the hypothesis that oppressed people have a worldview that systematically conceals the reality and causes of their oppression. The concept is associated with Lukacs, Althusser, and Gramsci.

But once again, why so much current interest in the concept? It is common to observe that "Marxism is dead"--no longer a useful tool of analysis in the 21st century. But here we find a lively interest in a particular Marxist concept. Why is this concept so frequently searched on Google?

I cannot confidently answer the question. But here are a few possibilities.

First, oppression and economic exploitation are certainly not gone from the scene. And yet there is little organized economic struggle going on in the world today. Perhaps critical thinkers in developing countries are turning to false consciousness as a possible diagnosis.

Second, the rhetoric of globalization suggests that everyone gains from these processes of international trade and the global movement of capital. And yet the locally visible realities appear quite different in Chiapas or Manila. So perhaps the mis-match that appears to exist between representation and reality about the effects of globalization brings thoughtful observers back to the theory of false consciousness.

Third, it is a fact that media (including the Internet) have massive and growing ability to shape public consciousness and ideas. Perhaps this is the most visible mark of the twenty-first century. It is natural to ask, in whose interests does this shaping take place? And what kinds of systematic and deliberate bias are embedded in this media stream? What is the connection between "interest" and "representation"? Perhaps it is logical that third-world thinkers are turning to Lukacs and Gramsci in order to find tools for analyzing this system of consciousness-formation.

So perhaps the interest we found on the topic of false consciousness is understandable, a response to some current and powerful features of the current economic and social system.

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:32AM (-05:00)

More on "plasticity": hospitals

Sunday, November 04, 2007

Let's think more about the extent and pace of plasticity in social organization by considering an example: hospitals. Hospitals are complex social organizations geared towards providing health care for moderately to very needy patients. And the internal organization of hospitals provides a fertile locus for examining issues of institutional change.

The complexity of a hospital derives from numerous factors: the specialization of medical knowledge (resulting in numerous departments), the multiplicity of business functions (billing, marketing, finance and budget, supervision of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, support staff), the logistical demands of patient care (food, medications, room and bed cleaning), social work needs of patients and families, the regulatory environment, governance institutions, and communication to the public, simply to name the most obvious functions. So a hospital requires the coordinated efforts of hundreds of experts and perhaps thousands of skilled and semi-skilled workers, embodying tens or hundreds of functions. (A mid-sized regional hospital employs several thousand people.)

Diversity and plasticity comes into this story in several ways. At the mid-level of analysis there are alternative ways of organizing the various functions of the hospital--different ways of organizing human resources, billing, or patient services. That is, structure is underdetermined by functional needs. There are organizational alternatives, and we can expect that there will be actual variation in hospital organization and implementation across the US health system.
This variation can be observed at a range of scales: within a region (Atlanta), across regions (Atlanta versus Detroit), or throughout the national system (midwest versus Pacific coast). At the most macro-level, we may observe differences in organization across national systems--US versus Germany or China. (Frank Dobbin's Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain, and France in the Railway Age explores this sort of national-level comparison in application to technology policy frameworks in three countries.)

But diversity may also be observed over time at the level of the individual hospital. This is sometimes described as "organizational learning"--internal reorganization and redesign so as to better serve patient and business needs in a changing environment. Plasticity comes in here: the organization "mutates" in response to changing needs and new environmental challenges. (Consider some of the ways that hospitals will change as a result of new public reporting requirements concerning cost and morbidity.)

This mutation may be the result of deliberate choice on the part of hospital administrators (redesign of process). But it may also be the result of broader societal changes leading to changing behavior within the hospital, eventually leading to a change in the routine practices and organizations of the hospital. For example, the operating room of the US hospital of the 1990s is a social space governed explicitly and implicitly by the surgeon (usually male). But imagine the result of a broad values shift towards greater gender equality and less respect for hierarchical authority. We might expect a gradual shift in the operating room towards a team-based approach to surgery. That approach might be confirmed by a record of greater safety (as safety experts in fact expect). And the change might become entrenched in new formal operating rules and procedures--thus changing the institution for a while.

These arguments show the impulse towards differentiation across hospital structures. There is also an important "centripetal" force that works towards convergence to some degree. This is the process of imitation and the search for "best practices". Consultants are summoned; " how are other hospitals handling this problem of IV infections?" And successful efforts are imitated.

This example suggests a process of mutation, differentiation, imitation, and occasional convergence. Overall, it supports the vision of institutions as plastic and malleable and responsive to changing individual and societal needs.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:35PM (-05:00)

A world sociology?

Sunday, November 04, 2007

Contemporary sociology developed in consideration of western social processes and western ideas about science. Central defining problems included state formation, social solidarity and cohesion, urbanization, and the politics of class. (The experienced reader will recognize the imprint of the classical social theorists here--Weber, Durkheim, and Marx especially.) But it is worth considering that sociology might take a very different course if we placed the problems and processes of the developing world at the center rather than the periphery of sociological inquiry. Would we arrive at the same central concepts? How would the paradigms change?

This question is not purely hypothetical. It is very reasonable for social scientists in developing countries to take a fresh look at the basic problems and concepts that can give future direction to a sociology for the twenty-first century. We ought not assume that existing paradigms will provide the resources necessary to understand and resolve the problems of social behavior and process found in China, Indonesia, or Mexico today. And it is likely enough that the new insights and theories that emerge from this new thinking in Shanghai or Mexico City will in fact provide new ways of looking at Chicago and New York.

One likely result will be that next-generation "world" sociology will be less interested in formulating master theories of large social processes--urbanization, ethnic conflict, demographic transition--and more interested in disaggregating large social processes into smaller component processes. The processes creating mega-cities in Africa, Brazil, or the Philippines have numerous dimensions and tempos. And it seems plausible that the best sociological investigations of urbanization of the future will result from an eclectic effort to discover the multiple social causes that lead to social behavior resulting in rapid urban growth.

So this is a critical time for sociologists and political scientists in the developing world. Will they seize this opportunity to refocus the research agenda and the tools of theory that will give rise to a more adequate sociology for a global world? Or will the paradigms and methods of positivist sociology continue to define the social-science agenda?

A paradigm shift along these lines is already underway--in the field of economic history. A current generation of economic historians of China has argued for a non-eurocentric comparison of Europe and Asia, with the view that both historical experiences have distinctive mixes of institutions and economic imperatives. Historians like Bin Wong and

Kenneth Pomeranz argue that both Europe and Asia can be understood better on the basis of a more balanced consideration of the other. (See "Eurasian Comparisons" for some relevant discussion.)

There is also an important precedent for the creaton of a new sociology for a changed world, in the experience of the Chicago School of sociology in the early twentieth century. Chicago school sociologists stepped away from the certainties of classical sociology, in order to formulate theories and methods that worked better for handling the messy, complex realities of a great city. The results were more eclectic, more middle-level, and more open to the idea of innovations in sociology than the master paradigms of classical sociology. Sociologists in Beijing, Manila, and Mexico City can do the same.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:00PM (-05:00)

Methodological localism

Tuesday, November 06, 2007

How do social causes work?

Some social theorists have treated social constructs as unified macro-entities with their own causal powers. Structuralist theories maintain things like "capitalism causes people to value consuming more than family time" or "democracy causes social cohesion." Likewise, some theorists have held that moral systems and cultures cause distinctive patterns of behavior--"Confucian societies produce cohesive families." Each of these claims places a large social entity in the role of a causal factor.

Is this a coherent way of talking? Can large structures and value systems exercise causal influence? The problem here is that statements like these look a lot like "action at a distance". We are led to ask: HOW do capitalism, democracy, or Confucianism influence social outcomes? In other words, we want to know something about the lower-level mechanisms through which large social facts impact upon behavior, thereby producing a change in social outcomes. We want to know something about the "microfoundations" of social causation.

One point seems obvious--and yet it is often overlooked or denied. Social behaviors are carried out by individuals, and individuals are influenced only by factors that directly impinge upon them (currently or in the past). Consider a particular voter's process of deciding to support particular candidate. This person experienced a particular history of personality formation--a particular family, a specific city, a work history, an education. So the person's current political identity and values are the product of a sequence of direct influences. And at the moment, this socially-constructed person is now exposed to another set of direct influences about the election race---newspapers, internet, co-workers' comments, attendance at political events, etc. In other words, his or her current political judgments and preferences are caused or influenced by a past and current set of experiences and contexts.

This story brings in social factors at every stage--the family was Catholic, the city was Chicago, the work was a UAW-organized factory. So the individual is socially influenced and formed at every stage. But here is the important point: every bit of that social influence is mediated by locally experienced actions and behaviors of other socially formed individuals. "Catholicism", "Chicago culture", and "union movement" have no independent reality over and above the behaviors and actions of people who embody

those social labels.

This perspective is sometimes called methodological individualism. I prefer to call it methodological localism. We never lose the social in this story. But it is always a locally embodied social, conveyed through pathways that directly impinge upon the socially constituted person. It is then a subject of real sociological interest, to discover the pathways and variations through which the large social entities are embodied. And in this way we avoid the error of "reification" of the large social entity.

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:16AM (-05:00)

A new philosophy of history?

Tuesday, November 06, 2007

Why would we want a philosophy of history? And what is wrong with the one we've got?

First, why? Philosophers want to know how good the claims are for "knowledge" in various fields. So we have philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of logic, and so on. This is one reason for pursuing a philosophy of history: what is the status of specialists' knowledge of the past? What methods exist for arriving at knowledge about the past? How broad or narrow is the range of uncertainty about different kinds of historical claims?

In a similar vein, philosophers are interested in exploring and resolving some of the difficult conceptual problems and assumptions that arise in various areas of thought. There are many such puzzles in historical claims to knowledge: What are "contingency" and "necessity"? Are historical beliefs "objective" or "biased"? What is the relation between history and memory? Are there "periods" and "epochs" in history? Are ther civilizations and peoples?

Some philosophers have also pursued questions about the content ofhistory itself. Does history have direction or meaning? Does history shape a people? Is history an integrated fabric with common processes, or is it an amalgam of distinct and unrelated events? Is there such a thing as "the Russian Revolution" or "the Great Wall of China"?

So there is a reasonable subject matter for the discipline; but what is wrong with the philosophy of history we currently possess? First, writings on this subject don't really add up to a coherent and reasonably comprehensive set of ideas. Certain topics have grabbed the stage--Are there laws in history? What is a narrative? Is history teleological?--and have refused to give the spotlight to the other characters. So we might say, we need fresh thinking by talented philosophers who can re-identify a leading set of topics for discussion.

But second, and more fundamentally, philosophers have engaged "history" at too great a distance from great historians. Read any really excellent piece of historical writing today--Spence, Schama, Darnton, Bloch--and you will be struck by a raft of interesting philosophical and conceptual issues. And a new philosophy of history needs to incorporate as much of this range of working historical reasoners as possible.

Finally, why does it matter? It matters because history matters. At any point in time we are created, influenced and formed by our histories. And philosophy reasonably should

shed some light on this fact.

(See The Philosophy of History in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy for more on this subject.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:18AM (-05:00)

Is globalization unjust?

Wednesday, November 07, 2007

Globalization has many aspects. But consider this narrow definition: extension of international economic interdependence through unfettered international trade and investment. This process leads to a shifting of centers of economic activity as investors and entrepreneurs seek out favorable locations for business activity--mining, manufacturing, financial services, transportation and logistics, etc. Businesses will seek out low-cost environments for doing business activities. Among other factors, labor costs, environmental costs, and resource availability will drive patterns of investment. The process results in economic growth -- that is, an absolute increase in the wealth and income created by the system as a whole. The resulting patterns will have consequences for incomes, environmental effects, and the flows of wealth among places on the planet.

Neo-liberal trade theory asserts that this international trading system will be welfare-enhancing overall: the gains to winners will exceed the losses to losers. The theory also disaggregates: a poor country will make better use of its resources and will be better off than before globalization. Let's take these points as true for the sake of argument -- though many critics of neo-liberal economic theory would dispute the assumptions that this assessment makes.

So, once again, is this process just, or does it simply perpetuate the debilitating effects of past injustice?

Before we can even begin to answer the question, we have to decide what we mean by "justice" in a global economic setting. Is a just system one in which everyone gets what he or she deserves? Or one in which everyone's outcome corresponds to his or her contribution to the product? Or one in which everyone's outcome is sufficient to permit him or her to satisfy basic needs for human development? Might we say that a just system is one that treats all parties fairly? And where does "fair equality of opportunity" come into the formula -- would we want to say that an outcome is just whenever it has resulted from a non-coercive, rule-governed process in which conditions of fair equality of opportunity have been assured for all participants? And, of course, what do each of these formulas come down to in practical terms?

One reason why problems of justice are so difficult to think about in the context of global development, is the fact of the extreme inequalities that existed, and continue to exist, internationally -- both before and during the processes of globalization. Many of these inequalities were manifestly unjust -- because they derived from coercive and unfair relations between countries of very unequal power (colonialism and conquest, for example). So what would be a just pathway of transition, from an unjust prior distribution of wealth and
power, to a later more just distribution of wealth and power?

We might also say that the situation of global justice is a bit similar to the situation of bargaining among parties with grossly unequal prior assets. Some people would judge that an unforced agreement between two parties is guaranteed to be fair by the fact of consent; the fact of consent implies that each party judges that he/she is better off with the agreement than without it -- so each has improved his/her welfare. (This is what underlies the theory of Pareto-optimality.) But if the bargaining situations of the parties are significantly unequal, then it is easy enough to see how the stronger party can "take advantage" of the weaker party (the central result of bargaining theory). The division of the benefits of cooperation will be tilted towards the more well-off party; so is this a fair division of the fruits of cooperation?

So consider three different answers to the question, is globalization unjust?

* No, globalization is not unjust in the ideal circumstance in which every country and region can make free choices about the use of its resources and the agreements it makes with other parties. Each country will strive to make the choices that maximize the creation of
wealth and income it produces within the global system. What would make globalization unjust is if the process depends on coercion, corruption, and fraud.

* Yes, globalization is unjust, because the benefits of global cooperation are enormously biased to favor the interests of the rich and powerful. And even if the rules of international cooperation are unbiased (a claim that is often disputed), the superior bargaining situation of the wealthy nations guarantees a division of the benefits of cooperation that favors the wealthy over the poor.

* It is too early to say either way. The answer depends on what the outcomes are in fifty years. If international trade theory turns out to be true; if every region is able to develop its resources and human talent; if every region experiences significant economic growth and improvement of human development -- then we may judge that globalization was a just process. If inequalities and human deprivation are even greater in some parts of the world in fifty years, then the process has proven to be unjust.

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:08PM (-05:00)

What kind of thing is a religion?

Thursday, November 08, 2007

The idea of a religion is apparently a very familiar one. It is a set of beliefs about the sacred shared by a group of people. It embodies some fundamental norms that guide and constrain believers' conduct. It is a potent social force that can determine the outcomes of presidential elections.

But notice the many complexities that these statements conceal. There is the question of the individual's psychology and mental life; how are religious beliefs and values embodied and acquired, and how do they function in the person's deliberative and affective schemes?

Second is the question of the group's religious characteristics. An individualist would say that the group's religious identity is simply the sum of the religious characteristics of the individuals who compose it, and that there is normally a distribution of variants around

each dimension or element of the religious identity. (In other words, the members of thexgroup are not homogeneous in their beliefs and behavior.)

Third, we could dwell quite a while on the problem of formulating a theory of the core content of the religion, including beliefs, norms, and practices. The differences mentioned above imply that formulation of "core" beliefs is likely to be deeply controversial--witness the violence connected with schisms within religious traditions.

Finally, we need to consider the concrete social institutions and organizations through which religious groups and movements do their work: promulgate their religious commitments and knowledge to the young and converts, mobilize the followers to collective action, and function as a community of belief and action.

Notice the variety of disciplines that are invoked here in this still-brief account of the social efficacy of religion: personality psychology, social psychology, interpretative anthropology, political science, social movements theory, sociology, and the humanistic disciplines of philosophy, criticism, and hermeneutics.

We find, then, that religion is not one single thing, and it exercises causal powers in very diverse ways. "It" is many psychological, semiotic, organizational things, loosely held together by the idea of a group of co-believers. And causal-sociological stories pass through this station in many directions and on many levels. The causal efficacy of religion refers sometimes to the power that ideas and values have over individual believers. Sometimes it refers to the power a group of believers wields over other members of the group. And sometimes it refers to the power that religious organizations have over other persons through their sources of influence and threat -- a very secular exercise of power.

This comes down to several forms of efficacy -- the ability to
influence behavior through the grip of ideas, the ability to mobilize supporters, and the ability to marshall other more secular forms of power and influence.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:07AM (-05:00)

Racial inequalities as a social science research topic

Thursday, November 08, 2007

W. E. B. Dubois described the problem of the twentieth century as the problem of the color line. He was right -- except in his expectation that the problem would be resolved within the century. It has not been resolved. American cities from east to west show the encrusted social residues of racism, racial discrimination, and racial disadvantage for African Americans. The most basic statistics and geographical patterns of most old American cities bear this out. Patterns of extreme residential and economic segregation persist in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Cleveland, and Peoria. And these patterns of residential segregation are overlain by patterns of significant inequality in the most important dimensions of human welfare. African American families suffer greater incidence of illness, lower income, lower educational attainment, and lower levels of wealth ownership. The color lines in American cities are all too legible, and what they demarcate are major differences in social wellbeing across black and white communities. (Thomas Sugrue's book, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar

Detroit, offers an eloquent and rigorous description of these geographical outcomes in Detroit.)

There must be social mechanisms that maintain these differences. These are not "natural" outcomes. And the social sciences should help us uncover those mechanisms. But where should we look for explanations and rigorous, honest empirical investigation? What areas of the social and behavioral sciences are most likely to offer satisfactory explanations of these patterns? And what mechanisms, at what social levels, are most likely to prove to have major impact in entrenching these patterns of racial segregation and difference over so many decades?

Several areas of social and behavioral research seem particularly relevant: the social psychology of bias and discrimination; the study of the politics and finances of urban public schooling; the study of the dynamics of public health outcomes (asthma, diabetes, heart disease); the empirical sociology of employment and employment opportunities; the politics and logistics of urban transportation systems; the culture and economics of nutrition; the sociology of the family; and, of course, the histories of American cities. It is likely that the facts of racial difference that persist are the results of a complex and interconnected set of social causes; we will need many areas of social science research and theory to allow us to sort these out.

Parallel to the question of social causation is the question of public policy: what policy choices exist for governments and other organizations to intervene in ways that begin to reduce these forms of racial disadvantage? What policy tools are efficacious in improving inner city schools, the nutrition and health of poor people, and the educational attainment of inner city youth? What policies of banking and employment can help to address the persistent inequalities of opportunity that exist with regard to borrowing and hiring? How can public policies reverse the pattern of segregation and inequality of opportunity and outcome for black and white families?

Some pressing questions--

* Are there any examples of American cities or states that have demonstrated success in redressing these patterns of racial inequality?

* How do these facts compare to the situation of other sizable minority populations in other countries--for example, France or Germany?

* When will political leaders place this persistent fact of racial inequality and diminished opportunity at the center of the political agenda for change?
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:23PM (-05:00)

Sociology as a social science discipline

Friday, November 09, 2007

Sociology is one of the core disciplines of the social sciences, along with political science, economics and anthropology. So one might imagine that it is a coherent, unified, and comprehensive science with a well-defined subject matter and a clear set of methods. But as most practitioners will agree, this is not the case. And that is a good thing, because the social world is not a unified system that can be reduced to a small number of theoretical premises.

Since its founding (or emergence?) in the nineteenth century, sociology has taken on a somewhat meandering set of topics for study: classification of whole societies, analysis of large social factors (race, crime, urbanization), study of the behavior of groups, provision of tools for social policy design, and study of particular institutions, social movements, globalization, and the organization of businesses. In 2007 the American Sociological Association includes 44 sections devoted to particular topics and methods. The methods of inquiry and the models of explanation are equally varied, including quantitative analysis of large data sets, small-N comparisons, micro-sociological investigation, process-tracing, Marxism, functionalism, structuralism, and feminism.

What does this diversity of topic, method, and theory imply about the discipline of sociology today? Is it a unified discipline, or a patch-work melange of many topics and approaches, unified only by the fact that the subjects of investigation have to do with social processes and social behavior? One possible interpretation is that the vast range of potential research subjects for sociology are covered by this patchwork structure. Another possibility is that the current range of sub-disciplines is itself the product of many "random walks" down particular research approaches, with heavy coverage of some areas of potential research, sporadic coverage of some problems and no attention at all to other problems. The latter possibility suggests in turn that there is ample room for future development of sociological research, in the formulation of new empirical problems and new theoretical approaches. The discipline of sociology can continue to evolve and grow -- possibly in ways that lead to significant innovation in approach and explanatory strategy.

An earlier posting on "Racial Inequalities" illustrates this point well. There is no single methodology or theory that is uniquely suited to attempting to understand the racial outcomes that we observe in American society. Instead, we need to combine the insights of many fields and approaches, in order to have a basis for explaining the patterns of segregation and inequality that we observe.

The diversity and multi-dimensional aspects of contemporary sociology is in fact a scientific advantage, in my view. This aspect of the discipline permits researchers to seek innovative approaches and innovative explanations of the social phenomena that they consider. In fact, it is the occasional impulse towards trying to make the discipline "more scientific" by enforcing a paradigm of research and theory on junior researchers that is most debilitating to the progress of knowledge -- whether it is the rational choice paradigm in political science, Marxism in Chinese social science, or the quantitative methods paradigm in sociology. Methodological and theoretical pluralism is an intellectual advantage. Sociological researchers who are receptive to analyzing the multiple aspects of a social problem from several different points of view are more likely to arrive at truly illuminating analysis. Not all these approaches will be equally fruitful; but a mixed "portfolio" of research strategies and theoretical models is more likely to be adequate to the messy reality of a changing social world.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:53PM (-05:00)

Generalizations about cluster items

Saturday, November 10, 2007

What is the basis of classification of items into groups? And how do classifications fit into scientific inquiry and theory? First, what different types of classification are there?

Essential: The items may share a common defining characteristic (e.g. "liquid", "metal")
-- Etiological: The items may share a common cause (e.g. "viral illness")
-- Structural: The items may share a common underlying structure (e.g. "protein", "elm")
-- Functional: The items may share a common function (e.g. "weapon", "school")

Non-essential: The items may lack necessary and sufficient conditions but share some overlapping characteristics.
-- Symptomatic: The items may share a set of observable characteristics or symtoms (e.g. "pneumonia", "schizophrenia")
-- Cluster: the items may share some among a list of characteristics (e.g. "game", "leader")

(It is a bit curious to observe that this amounts to a classification of systems of classification.)

Now let's consider some social science terms and see where they fall in this scheme: riot, civil war, bicameral legislature, ethnic group, democracy, charismatic leader, financial city, working class organization.

Several of these concepts are symtom or cluster concepts: riot, democracy. Several others are etiological or structural: civil war, bicameral legislature, financial city. One combines structural with functional criteria: bicameral legislature.

Now suppose we have identified a set of things as being "democracies". They share some among a set of features that are associated with democracy, and there is no set of features shared by all instances. What kinds of social science inquiry can we do? First, we can do comparisons within the group of democracies we have identified; we can look for similarities and differences across the group. And second, we can ask whether membership in this group is associated with membership in some other group beyond what chance would predict. In other words, we can consider whether there are true statements like "all democracies are X" or "most democracies are Y."

It is not the case that "all pneumonias respond to penicillin"--for the reason that there are two causal and structural kinds of pneumonia, and only one of these involves organisms treatable with penicillin. The causal heterogeneity of this group means that strong generalizations are difficult or impossible here.

The concepts of riot, revolution, and democracy are similarly heterogeneous, both causally and structurally. So we should expect only weak generalizations across this group and other social charactistics. On the other hand, the tools of social comparison are most valuable here. We can discover through additional comparative work within the category, whether there are similar structural and causal processes at work among instances of this concept.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:07PM (-05:00)

Who has a "social identity"?

Saturday, November 10, 2007

Think about the multiple ways that "identity" comes into social life. We think we know what someone means when he says he is African-American, Southern, gen-X, and professional. But of course the reality is much more complex, both within the person and across the group. Each identity label brings with it a cluster of values and attitudes that hang together across a population of people. These clusters are cross-cutting: it may be that there are values shared by many Southerners, both white and black, that differentiate them from Northerners and constitute a dimension of social identity; likewise there is a cluster of values and attitudes shared by African-Americans in both South and North; and so on for youth culture and work culture. (This is sometimes referred to as "intersectionality" and the politics of intersectionality.)

One question we can ask is how these various identities co-exist in one person. How does the individual's psychological system incorporate and process features of identity? How does political and social cognition work at the level of the individual? What determines whether one identity is more salient than another in a given context for a given person? How do the various identity configurations interact within the person; how do behavior and preference result from the several identity configurations? Is there a problem of coherence among the identities? Can one be conflicted over the dictates and affects of the several identities he or she possesses? (Is this illustrated by religious conservative gay politicians?)

Another challenging question is how these identity configurations vary across a population of people who can be said to possess the identity. It is clear that identities are not uniform across a population; it is not the case that there is one profile of "American Baptist" that fits all Baptists. So we need to have some way of conceptualizing how a given identity is instantiated in different ways across individuals within a given group.

We also need a theory of the mechanisms of transmission and maintenance that serve to proliferate an identity across generations and through a population. What are the processes through which individuals and groups acquire their identities? There are some obvious mechanisms--personality development within the family, exposure to values and identities in schools and faith institutions, exposure to identity commitments through the media and the internet. But it would be very useful to have more focused and detailed studies of the ways in which identities are transmitted at the level of the developing individual.

Each of these questions -- the individual-level question and the group-level question -- has implications for political choice and behavior. A political movement requires mobilization of a group of people who are willing to act together for an outcome. And mobilization often depends on the ability of the political organization to amplify some elements of identity within a population and damp down other elements. In India, for example, it is possible to track the efforts of Hindu nationalist parties like the BJP aimed at making religious identity more salient than other civic or economic identities. Contrast this strategy with the strategy of parties like the CPM of West Bengal, which bases its political mobilization on an identity of class.

(Atul Kohli's Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability is an excellent discussion of some of these features of identity politics in India.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:59PM (-05:00)

Is morality a social factor?

Saturday, November 10, 2007

Is morality a concrete sociological factor that has social consequences? Or is it simply a theoretical construction by philosophers and other moral theorists and advocates?

Human beings act, and their actions are often influenced or even determined by their moral values. This seems to be an empirical fact. (They also act out of self-interest, out of cruelty, out of disregard for others, out of impulse, and in a variety of other ways in which ethics plays no part.) An adequate theory of human deliberation and agency appears to require an account of how values and moral commitments figure into ordinary decision-making and agency. This fact, in turn, seems to provide the beginnings of a basis for a "yes" to the question of whether morality is socially real. Ethical values and norms are a behavioral reality; and this fact about individuals also has aggregative consequences for group behavior (in politics and in ordinary life).

But now shift the focus a bit and consider "philosophical ethics" -- the writing and thinking about ethical principles by philosophers (Mill, Sidgwick, Kant, Aristotle, Rawls, for example). Philosophical ethics is mostly about debates concerning ethical theories. Is the principle of utility the foundation of moral truth? Is the categorical imperative rather the foundation? Are there rational grounds for choosing Kant's moral system over Bentham's? What does the principle of utility require -- maximizing average utility or total utility? Should utility consequences of an action be assessed through the consequence of this particular action or general rules of action that might govern this particular act? Do philosophy and logic have a basis in rationality to allow confident judgment about fundamental questions of ethics? These are abstract, theoretical debates. And it is hard to see how they could have direct behavioral effects. So we might say, "philosophical ethics is not a social factor."

So far, then, we have "morality in social behavior" and "ethics in philosophy". Is there a connection between the two realms? One possible connection is this: Our theory of human decision-making might incorporate a rational faculty of deliberation; so when people act "morally", a part of their deliberation is a consideration of reasons for and against a certain conduct. This is an empirical question. If we pursue this avenue, then ordinary actors are also moral philosophers; they are probing for reasons and facts that would tip the scales of judgment.

On the other hand, our theory of moral psychology might go in the direction of habit and inculcation rather than rational deliberation. We might hypothesize that individuals absorb a set of values and prohibitions, analogous to food preferences and aversions, and that these values are beyond rational deliberation and judgment. (Can one reason herself out of an aversion to eating dog?) On this approach, there is no connection between rationality and moral behavior, and philosophy and real social behavior do not intersect.

From a sociological point of view, it seems we need theories at several levels. We need a theory of the ways that individuals think, reason, and deliberate when they act (an empirical theory of practical agency). We need a theory of the social mechanisms and institutions through which individuals come to have the parameters and content of their deliberative systems set in particular ways. We need empirical descriptions of the real

content of human moral deliberation in various groups and cultures.

Of particular importance for a sociology of morality is the question of the social mechanisms through which moral values and commitments are transmitted -- analogous to the question of how languages and practical skills are transmitted. How are value systems and styles of moral reasoning transmitted from one generation of individuals to another? That is, we need a theory of the "micro-foundations" of moral psychology and social development. And we ought to have an account of how it is that the psychological capacity for moral thinking has emerged through human evolution; are there "moral emotions" that support the efficacy of moral thinking in action? (Allan Gibbard provides some very interesting discussion on these issues in Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment.)

The perspective I favor is one in which we understand the individual as a deliberative reasoner, subject to non-rational as well as rational factors. The individual has a spectrum of choice; he or she can consider the nature of the action being contemplated, its fit with other values he adheres to, and the consequences of the action for others. Actions are not causally determined by an antecedent set of likings and aversions. So the individual has the capacity for functioning as his own philosophical consultant. On this perspective, the philosophical concepts of "deliberation" and "reflective equilibrium" are useful and illuminating about real human reasoners. So philosophy can contribute to our understanding of social cognition and decision-making.

At the same time, it strikes me that professional philosophers can contribute best to ethical deliberation and moral development when they refrain from foundational assertions and simply provide good illustrations of how deliberation and consideration of circumstances and consequences can most thoughtfully proceed. Philosophers should consider themselves as "deliberative consultants" rather than "deductive inference engines" when it comes to ethical reasoning.

This perspective allows for morality to play a role in social causation that is analogous to the role of rationality in economics and political science. Descriptive moral sociology can function in a way that is logically similar to rational choice theory, in that it represents a hypothesis about the nature of agency: when agents deliberate in such-and-so a way, within the framework of such-and-so moral commitments and such-and-so interests and goals, they are likely to behave in such-and-so a way.

(Thomas Nagel's The Possibility of Altruism is a particularly interesting and provocative work bringing together ethical theory and theories of real practical reasoning.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:55PM (-05:00)

Variation across a social identity

Sunday, November 11, 2007

What does possession of a social identity come down to, for the individual? And how do identities vary across the population of people who possess this identity?

First, let us stipulate that an identity is a feature of consciousness, an aspect of mentality. And let us stipulate further that an identity comes to one as a result of one's experiences in the world, and one's attempt to make sense of those experiences. These assumptions are not indisputable -- it might be maintained that one can be unaware of one's social

identity, or that one's social identity is constituted by one's position in society (a structural fact rather than a fact about one's experience). But these are credible beginnings.

Next, it is clear that an identity is not one unified element of consciousness--an ineffable but uniform sense of being "Irish," "Southern", or "Hindu". Instead, an identity must be more like a flavor or a scent: a complex but distinctive blend of more basic elements (tastes or smells). This feature already implies several broad forms of differentiation across an identity group: the mix of elements may be different (a little rosemary blended into the scent of a rose), and there may be differences in the intensities of various elements in the mix.

What are the components of which an identity is composed? Here are some plausible candidates: memories and stories, values, emotions, ways of reasoning, factual beliefs, a sense of justice. (Notice that some of these are content and some are mental process--beliefs versus reasoning, for example). Presumably there are other components that should be considered; but these will do for now.

Where do these elements come from for the individual? Through learning and lived experience. One's rich and intimate experience of living with others -- family, friends, neighbors -- who possess values and who tell stories about "who we are" is a thick form of personal development. And one's own experience of the values and emotions of others -- the experience of racism and discrimination if one is black and gay -- is a powerful catalyst for shaping one's view of the world. This experience shapes one's values, sense of justice, and key memories.

Now return to the question of variation across a group. It is clear that an identity shaped along these lines will show great variation across individuals. Each individual's experiences are somewhat different. And each person will process those experiences somewhat differently. What makes an identity a socially shared identity is the fact that some groups have a high degree of commonality of experience -- both through exposure to the prior generation and through one's own experiences in everyday life. But at the same time it is apparent that there will be substantial variation in values, memories, narratives, and styles of thought within the identity group. So the social identity of being "Latino", "Polish", or "disabled" should not be expected to be a uniform and homogeneous feature of consciousness. The metaphors of "flavor" and "patchwork" serve us better.

This brings us to a preliminary conclusion: social identities should be expected to show significant variation across individuals.

[It is intriguing to note that it would be possible to pursue this theory of the psychological constitution of a social identity by trying to measure and map the variations of the components across a population. Opinion surveys would permit measurement of the distribution of certain diagnostic values and judgments of injustice, for example. We could then ask questions like these: Are these characteristics correlated within the population? Do some variables show more variance than others? How do these distributions of the variables compare with those of the general population?]

(See Mentalités, Identities, and Practices for more on this subject.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:03PM (-05:00)

Historians and the philosophy of history

Monday, November 12, 2007

How should the philosophy of history interact with the practice of working historians?

The philosophy of history is challenged to discover and explore the most fundamental questions about historical inquiry and knowledge. How should this research be conducted? And how should the philosopher's development of the subject make use of the practice of the historian? Look at this question from the point of view of the historian, and we will find that the separation between "doing" and "reflecting upon" history is not as sharp as it might appear.

For the best historians, there is no recipe for good historical inquiry and exposition. There are methods and practices of archival research, to be sure, and there are general recommendations like "be well informed about existing knowledge about your subject matter." But the great historians take on their subjects with fresh eyes and new questions. They often arrive at novel ways of framing their historical questions; they find new ways of using available historical evidence, or finding new historical evidence; they discover new ways of drawing inferences from historical data; they arrive at new ways of presenting their knowledge and narratives; and they question existing assumptions about "causation," "agency," or "historical period." As the historian grapples with the topic of research and the evidence that pertains to the topic, he or she is forced to think creatively about issues that go to the heart of historical inquiry and reasoning. In other words, the historian is forced to think as a philosopher of history, in order to achieve new insights into the problems she considers.

There is a less creative approach to historical research, of course. One can choose a familiar topic; seek out some new sources that have not yet been fully explored; adopt some familiar theoretical motifs; and place the findings into a standard narrative for publication. This mechanical approach resembles "normal science" for historians. But the results of this type of approach are inherently disappointing; it is unlikely in the extreme that new historical insights will emerge.

So when we consider the work of really imaginative historians, we find that the researcher is functioning as a philosopher of history at the same time as he or she is developing an innovative approach to the historical question under examination. And this means that the philosopher can gain great insight by working very carefully with the writings of these great historians. The philosopher can probe questions of historical inquiry, historical reasoning, historical presentation, and historical knowledge, by thinking through these questions in conversation with the working historian.

Consider a few examples that illustrate this productive possibility. First, consider the evolving state of affairs in historical treatments of the French Revolution. In the past forty years historians have taken a shifting series of perspectives on the events, social conflicts, cultural circumstances, and political realities of the Revolution. New research and new narratives have emerged on the Ancien Regime, the revolution, the Terror, and the consolidation of power by Napoleon. Fertile historians such as Soboul, Cobb, Darnton, Schama, Sewell, or Chartier have tested and explored a variety of new perspectives -- from Marxism, from social history, from cultural studies. And they have provided a much more nuanced body of knowledge about the social and cultural reality of the Revolution. This body of work provides a rich domain of conceptual and

historiographical material for the philosopher of history.

A second example is the lively debate that has occurred about comparative economic history of England and China. In the past 15 years historians of Chinese economic history have challenged standard models of economic development and have argued for a more balanced comparative economic history for Eurasia. This debate has moved into great detail in the effort to answer such basic questions as whether China's agricultural economy was declining, static, or rising in productivity in the 17th century; or whether the standard of living was higher or lower at opposite ends of Eurasia. Once again, a philosopher of history can find great stimulation to further conceptual and philosophical research by studying this debate in detail; the debate provides a living example of how historical knowledge is born.

So my answer to the primary question here is this: that the philosophy of history needs to be fully immersed in some specific historical debates involving the most creative and imaginative historians. Careful study of these debates and sustained interaction with historians like these will lead in turn to much more developed understanding of the nature of historical reasoning.

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:25AM (-05:00)

Is industrial agriculture sustainable?

Tuesday, November 13, 2007

The world's food system depends largely on a farming system with post-green-revolution techniques: new seed varieties, substantial use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, large-scale irrigation, machine-based cultivation, production for large markets, and separation of production from consumption by long distances. This system shows the highest productivity the world has ever seen, whether measured in terms of labor, land, or cost. And the system does a fairly good job of producing enough food for the world's 6 billion people.

But is this system sustainable?

Several large issues arise. First, the system is energy-intensive, so it poses significant demands on the petroleum economy. The use of petroleum and energy pervades the process: fuel for cultivation and transport, energy and inputs into the production of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, energy consumed in irrigation. So a part of the sustainability question has to do with the energy challenge the globe faces.

Second, industrial agriculture has massive environmental effects. Fertilizer and animal waste runoffs lead to groundwater and river pollution (extending into the Gulf of Mexico). Degradation and loss of topsoil is another large and longterm environmental effect with serious consequences for future agricultural productivity. And methane produced by large-scale cattle- and swine-rearing represents a measurable component of global warming. So the environmental effects of industrial agriculture are very large--once again raising the question of global sustainability.

Finally, industrial agriculture, and the integrated global commodity markets from which this system is inseparable, have large and destructive consequences for traditional agriculture and the communities built around traditional farming. The effect of NAFTA and

the export of US corn to Mexico has been massive in its disruption of maize-based culture and communities in Mexico.

Three questions are central. First, is this system sustainable in the narrow sense, or will it collapse of its own burden of soil, water, and air pollution in the next 50 years? Second, is it a potential part of a larger sustainable global system of production and consumption from an environmental point of view? Or does global sustainability require radical change in agriculture? And finally, are there feasible alternative systems that would be less environmentally harmful, more sustainable, and less disruptive of agrarian communities? Are these alternatives scaleable to the needs of mass societies, large cities, and a global population of 6-8 billion? Can alternative systems achieve the productivity needed to feed the world's population?

Environmentalists, global justice activists, and food activists have argued that there are alternatives. The Fair Trade movement is trying to get first-world consumers to favor fair-trade-certified products in their consumption--giving greater security and income to third-world farmers. Organic farming advocates argue that a system of smaller farms, organic fertilizers, innovative pest control, and farming techniques more suited to the local environment would have a smaller environmental footprint. "Local food" activists support the idea of shifting consumption towards products that can be grown locally--thus reducing transport and refrigeration and giving more of a market for small farmers.

So there are alternatives in technique and policy that could result in different farm characteristics that are more favorable from the points of view of justice, sustainability, and community. The hard question is whether these alternatives could be scaled to the volume needed to feed a mass population. And this is a question that demands careful scientific analysis.

(An excellent current critique of industrial agriculture is Michael Pollan's The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:27PM (-05:00)

Social knowledge: measurement of properties in diverse groups

Wednesday, November 14, 2007

When we gain knowledge about silver, DNA, or cholera, we can study virtually any samples of the item and arrive at a description of its properties and causal powers, and this description will correspond accurately to other instances as well. We learn about the type by learning about the individuals, and we don't have to worry about substantial differences among individuals in the type. Cholera is cholera, whether it occurs in Mexico City or Bangalore. So knowledge we acquire about a few instances can be generalized to other instances. This feature of "type-uniformity" is found in many of the types of entities studied in the natural sciences.

There are exceptions in the natural sciences; there are classes of phenomena that embody substantial variance among individuals in the class. Hurricanes and volcanoes are examples of "type-heterogeneous" concepts in the natural sciences. In these examples, the phenomena are grouped together in terms of a set of crude observable characteristics; it is then a question for research to determine whether there are common

structures and causal backgrounds that constitute one or more sub-groups of items within the classification. But more typical types of entities in the natural sciences fall into "natural kinds" with common structural and causal properties.

Consider now what is involved in arriving at knowledge about a complex social reality -- the city of Chicago, for example. The social reality of Chicago is constituted by the social behaviors of the individuals who live in Chicago and the institutions that these individuals populate. Consider some of the topics concerning which we might want to gather knowledge:

- What is the health status of Chicagoans?
- What is the climate for race relations in Chicago?
- What is the standard of living in Chicago?
- What is the rate of economic growth in Chicago?
- How do people in Chicago feel about higher education?
- What is the climate for new-business startup in Chicago?
- How well do the institutions of the mayor's office and the city council work?
- How are the Chicago public schools performing?

Notice that almost all these questions invite us to consider the heterogeneity of the population and its organizations. There is an average level of heart disease in the city. But the average is a poor indicator of any particular person's health, because there are socially significant differences across groups with respect to almost all these questions. So a study of health in Chicago requires that we consider some of the ways in which different groups are affected by a variety of circumstances in ways that systematically affect their health status.

These facts suggest that a statement about a social characteristic of a large population needs to be nuanced, indicating the degree of variation of the characteristic across individuals and groups within the population as well as the most significant sub-populations showing the greatest variance from the group mean behavior. Race, ethnicity, gender, geography, age, income, employment, labor-union membership, and education might be variables that define groups with significantly different measures of the variable of interest. And once we have determined that certain social characteristics (race, income, and union membership, let us say) are associated with the outcome of interest (health status, say), then we are stimulated to ask the causal question: what are the social mechanisms at work that produce the associations that are discovered?

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:11PM (-05:00)

The heterogeneous social: groups

Saturday, November 17, 2007

A social whole -- the city of Chicago, for example -- is a densely various empirical reality. At virtually every level of scale there is variance with respect to social characteristics -- income, health status, ethnic or social identity, political adherence and preference, age, race, or occupation. Neighborhoods differ from each other -- but equally, we find variance within neighborhoods as well.

Given this fact of radical non-homogeneity of social characteristics, what is involved in arriving at knowledge about such a reality?

It is evident that we are forced to arrive at generalized descriptions, at some level of scale

or granularity. It is neither feasible nor explanatory to provide a "fully" detailed description of a population, individual by individual. Instead, our challenge is to arrive at some ways of segmenting the population into groups that will prove felicitous in revealing causal connections among attributes or circumstances. Groups may be defined with unlimited range: geographically, occupationally, racially or ethnically, educationally, politically, ... We can then observe and measure the distribution and means of various characteristics across these groups (attitudes towards the Patriot Act, for example) and we can consider whether there are meaningful differences across groups with respect to these characteristics. Finally, we can try to find causal explanations of these differences. Are Arab-Americans more distrustful of national security laws than Asian-Americans? Are poor people more prone to asthma than affluent people? Are doctors more favorable to higher taxes than skilled-trades workers? What factors might causally explain these differences?

The point here is that social knowledge requires recognition of the inherent heterogeneity of social phenomena and a fertile effort to find ways of segmenting this heterogeneous reality that shed light on social causation and patterns of behavior. And, importantly, it is important to recognize that any level of granularity of analysis could be further partitioned and more fully described--sometimes with important insight.

There is no "fundamental" or "optimal" level of analysis and description that captures the whole of Chicago. Instead, anthropology; sociology, and political science can continually pursue the upward and downward research journey of discovering meaningful group-level patterns or regularities, and pressing into a deeper understanding of the diversity of the phenomena under study.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:54PM (-05:00)

The heterogeneous social: institutions

Sunday, November 18, 2007

Populations and groups are inherently diverse; virtually any property that might be attached to an individual shows variance across the group. So we have to pay special attention to specifying what we mean when we ask for a "measurement" of a property of a group. This is the basic ontological fact that undergirds a critical approach to quantitative social and behavioral science. And it means that we need always to be considering the variance within the group with respect to the property, the shape of the distribution, as well as the mean value of the property.

It turns out that social phenomena are heterogeneous at the level of institutions, mentalities, practices, and causes as well. Later posts will consider other forms of social heterogeneity. The topic here is institutional heterogeneity. An institution is a system of rules through which a set of social behaviors are mediated. Rules may be enforced through clear third-party enforcement powers (formal institutions) or diffuse participant enforcement practices (informal institutions). Examples of institutions include contract law (formal), cooperative labor-sharing (informal), marriage systems (formal and informal), and tenure systems (formal). Institutions are embodied in the beliefs, values, attitudes, and motivations of socially constructed individuals at various levels of action; they act to constrain and incentivize individual behavior in ways that are to some extent independent of the actions and preferences of those individuals. (That is, the individual is rarely in a position to directly change the rules of the institution so as to serve his/her goals better.) So institutions are both caused by (embodied in) the social consciousness of an

extended set of social actors, and are causal in shaping the future behavior of an extended set of social actors.

Institutions have origins -- they come into being at a time and place. So we can ask the question, "what explains the fact of the emergence of the institution and the particular characteristics it possesses at that point?" And institutions undergo processes of development over time -- they undergo change in some characteristics, incorporate new scope and function, and gain new coalitions of supporters and opponents. So we can ask the question, "what factors explain the processes of change that the institution undergoes?" (Kathleen Thelen's How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan provides a very good account of the ways in which we need to investigate the origins and development of various important social institutions.)

Institutions are sometimes grouped together into broad categories or classes in terms of social function (what does the institution do?), observable characteristics (what does the institution look like?), and social functioning (how does the institution work?). So, for example, we might want to study institutions of marriage-partner selection, irrigation management, or institutions that regulate common property resources such as forests or wetlands; Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action. In each case the group of institutions is defined in terms of the common social problem that they solve.

Now we can frame the task of one important area of sociology and political science research: to undertake careful comparative research concerning the instances of institutions included within a category. In what ways are different examples similar and different from each other? How have parallel or divergent institutional complexes emerged to solve broadly similar social problems? What causal processes can be observed in the workings of these several examples? How do these institutional matrices influence and constrain the forms of behavior that flow through them? (So, in the book by Kathleen Thelen mentioned above, the author considers the national-level institutions of skilled-labor training that have evolved in Germany, UK, USA, and Japan; she considers the effects that these different regimes have on the flow of skilled workers; and she analyzes the political coalitions that were relevant in establishing a particular configuration of the institution.)

Here, finally, we can address the issue of institutional heterogeneity. Given the ways that institutions are formed, changed, and embodied, we should expect that there will be two forms of diversity among institutions. First, it is clear that there are normally multiple ways of solving a particular social problem (training workers for industry, managing prisoners, administering social welfare subsidies). So we should expect that there will be a range of institutional matrices that have emerged across societies to handle these challenges, and we can learn quite a bit about social causation by examining these differences and how they work. And second, given that institutions are "malleable" and dynamic, we should expect that institutions will show diversity within their own life courses. As powerful agents and coalitions shift in their powers and needs, as other constituents acquire more or less influence in setting the agenda for the institution, we should expect an ongoing process of modification of the institution over time.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:56PM (-05:00)

Are there historical structures?

Monday, November 19, 2007

The French Revolution began in 1789. It was caused by conflict between the aristocracy and the monarchy. Eventually it developed into violent conflict in every region of France. It created more lasting change in French society than did the Russian Revolution.

These statements purport to refer to an extended but unified historical thing, the French Revolution. This thing is assigned a place within a causal system, being caused by one set of factors and having causal consequences for other factors. It is considered a suitable topic for comparison with other such things (the Russian Revolution).

But what does the historical reality of the French Revolution consist in? Notice, to begin, that the revolution comprises a huge constellation of events and actions, both small and large. Were any of these events "the definitive moment" in the revolution--the decisive event that constituted the constellation as a revolution rather than a "period of unrest"? Is it possible to distinguish clearly between core events and peripheral, minor events--not to speak of events that are wholly unrelated to the revolution? Most radically, would it be possible to construct the events of 1789 in such a way that no revolution occurred at all?

One possible answer to these questions is to reply that the events directly associated with the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a different form of political power constituted the essence of the revolution. But what if later historians were to conclude that the transfer of power was illusory, and that the same interests in society continued to govern? In fact, if the monarchy had been restored in 1830 we might reasonably say that "no revolution occurred, only an interruption of monarchy." Would either of these possibilities represent a refiguring of the historical picture in which the seizure of power is minor and background rather than major and foreground? And would this not be a basis for doubting that "a revolution occrred in 1789"?

It seems best to understand "the French Revolution" as an intellectual construction--one possible way of knitting together the congeries of events that occurred during this time in France. Some constructions of these facts are more plausible than others, so it is possible to have rational dispute about the alternative construals of the constellation of events. But there is no essential fact of the matter that a revolution occurred in France in 1789. This doesn't derogate the status or facticity of the constituent events. But it does assert that the historian's act of composing events and actions into a large historical structure is an act of construction rather than recognition.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:55AM (-05:00)

A simple sociology

Monday, November 19, 2007

What is involved in providing a scientific study of society--a scientific sociology?

Several features of science are crucial. Scientific claims are intended to be true and rationally supportable. Scientific knowledge is based on empirical research and rigorous reasoning. Science provides a basis for explaining the phenomena it considers. And science depends upon the idea of critical research communities: peers and collaborators

who challenge, test, evaluate, and extend a set of results. In addition to these core features, positivist philosophers have added a few features drawn from the experience of the natural sciences. These observers hold that science involves the discovery of strong generalizations and laws that describe and govern empirical phenomena; that explanation means subsumption under some of these laws; and that natural phenomena constitute a law-governed, interconnected system.

Positivism is a poor theory of the social sciences, because the phenomena of social life do not conform to the law-governed ontology stipulated for natural phenomena. But let us stick with the minimal set of features and consider what kind of science is possible for social life.

First, sociology involves description. Social phenomena are observable, and it is straightforward to design rigorous research efforts aimed at establishing the facts about a particular domain. This aspect of sociology involves rigorous empirical study of social phenomena. Examples of descriptive research include ethnographic research and micro-sociology along the lines of the Chicago School. But large-scale description is feasible as well, including empirical description of large social patterns and institutions.

Descriptive findings often take the form of statistical estimates of the frequency of a feature within a group--for example, rates of suicide among Protestants (Durkheim). Properties may be correlated with one another within a given population; variation in one variable may be associated with variation in another variable. Descriptive research can thus sometimes reveal patterns of behavior or social outcomes--for example, patterns of habitation and health status. And patterns such as these invite efforts to find causal relationships among the characteristics enumerated.

Second, sociology involves discovery of social causation and mechanisms. Is there such a thing as social causation? What does social causation derive from? What is the ontology of "social necessity" (analogous to natural necessity)--the way in which one set of circumstances "brings about" another set of outcomes? In general we can begin with an ontology grounded in purposive social action by agents within institutional settings and environments. Social causation derives from the patterns of behavior that are produced in this setting. (For example, we can explain the degradation of environmental quality of a common resource as the consequence of free-riding behavior.)

Third, sociology can provide explanations of some social outcomes as a causal consequence of proposed social mechanisms. Once we have a generic idea of what social causal mechanisms look like, we can turn to specifics and try to discover the processes through which behavior
is created and constrained. So we can try to discover or hypothesize the mechanisms through which tropical agriculture tends to under-serve farmers (Bates). Social theories are hypotheses about social causal mechanisms; so theories provide a basis for explanation of social phenomena.

Research and explanation along these lines creates major and visible limitations on the degree of systematicity, interconnection, and determination that sould be expected of social phenomena. The social world is highly contingent, the product of many independent actors. So we should only expect a weak degree of systematic variation among social phenomena.

Finally, the epistemic setting provided by the disciplinary institutions offers a basis for

estimating the rational credibility of social science knowledge: journals, peer review, tenure evaluation. Social research and explanation remains fairly close to the level of the facts. Researchers in the disciplines and sub-disciplines are charged to test and explore the empirical and theoretical claims of their peers.

The results of a science including these components will be empirically disciplined, theoretically eclectic, and systemically modest. The goal of providing an over-arching theory that demonstrates the systematic integration of the social is abandoned.

(It is worth noting that there is a period in the history of sociology when the epistemic values of the discipline were most consistent with this view. That was the period of the Chicago School. See Andrew Abbott's Department and Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred).

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:22PM (-05:00)

Varieties of social causation

Monday, November 19, 2007

What are some chief mechanisms through which social behavior is shaped and social outcomes are caused? Ideally the best answer to this question would result from a survey or inventory of many explanations. But consider some high level possibilities that could serve as a causal mechanism bringing about a social phenomenon of interest.

Selection mechanisms. Why are passengers on commercial aircraft better educated than the general population? Because most airline passengers are business travelers, and high-level and mid-level business employees tend to have a higher level of education than the general population.

Evolutionary explanations. Why does the level of firm efficiency tend to rise over time? Because the net efficiency of a firm is the product of many small factors. These small factors sometimes change, with an effect on the efficiency of the firm. Low efficiency firms tend ultimately to lose market share and decline into bankruptcy. Surviving firms will have features that produce higher efficiency.

Imitation mechanisms. Why did the no-huddle offense become so common in the NFL in the 1980s? Because it was successful for a few teams, and others copied the offense in the hope that they too would win more games.

Rational-intentional explanations. Why do rebellions often fizzle out? Because participants are rational agents with private goals, and they make calculating decisions about participation.

Aggregative explanations (aggregate consequences of individual-level strategies). Why does technological innovation occur continuously within a market-based society? Because manufacturers are constantly looking for lower-cost and higher-value-added methods of manufacturing, and this search leads them to innovations in products and technologies.

Conspiracy explanations (covert strategems of the powerful). Why did the United States move away from passenger railroads as the primary form of intercity transportation?

Because powerful interests took political actions to assure that private automobiles would be encouraged as the primary form of transport.

Mentality explanations (behavior is changed by changing beliefs and attitudes). Why were so many Quaker men conscientious objectors at great personal cost during World War II? Because their religious beliefs categorically rejected the violence in war and they refused to participate in this immoral activity.

Historical / path-dependency explanations. Why do we still use the very inefficient QWERTY keyboard arrangement that was devised in 1874? Because this arrangement, designed to keep typists from typing faster than the mechanical keyboard would permit, was so deeply embodied in the typing skills of a large population and the existing typewriter inventory by 1940 that no other keyboard arrangement could be introduced without incurring massive marketing and training costs.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:21PM (-05:00)

How does transportation function as a mid-range social cause?

Wednesday, November 21, 2007

Transportation systems function to move people, goods, and ideas. Rail systems, road networks, airline systems, and water transport provide links between places that permit more reliable and low-cost movement of people and goods from point to point than previously available. The history of transportation is simultaneously a history of technology change, population movement, colonialism, economic growth, business development, and the spread of disease.

Transportation systems are particularly interesting when we consider their capacity for conveying social causation. Consider these examples of causal relations mediated by transportation systems:

- Extension of a rail network stimulates the growth of new towns, villages and cities in North America in the 1880s.
- Establishment of a direct air travel link between A and B causes the more rapid spread of disease between these locations.
- Breakdown of the administration of the rail system leads to logistics bottlenecks and military defeat of the French army in the Franco-Prussian War.
- Regular river travel throughout the Canton Delta in China leads to the rapid spread of revolutionary ideas during the Republican Revolution, as travelers and merchants move easily from place to place.
- Commodity price correlation increases between Chicago and New York as a result of regular and cheap rail transport between these two cities.
- New business institutions (grain futures markets and grain elevators) are created to take advantage of cheap regular rail transport (Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West).

Examples can be multiplied. But the central point is that transportation is a robust causal mechanism that mediates many important social processes and outcomes. And its causal effectiveness is fairly transparent: new transportation opportunities create new options for social actors, who take advantage of these opportunities in choosing a place to live and work, in pursuing political goals, in moving armies, and in generating income. So

transportation is a causal mechanism whose microfoundations are especially visible, and whose causal consequences are often very large.

(See "Transportation as a Large Causal Factor" for more on this subject.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:56AM (-05:00)

Are social facts reducible to something?

Wednesday, November 21, 2007

What is the relationship between facts about society and facts about individuals?

Reducibility means that the statements of one scientific discipline should be logically deducible from the truths of some other "more fundamental" discipline. It is sometimes maintained that the truths of chemistry ought in principle be derivable from those of quantum mechanics. A field of knowledge that is not reducible to another field R is said to be "autonomous with respect to R". Philosophers sometimes further distinguish "law-to-law" reduction, "type-to-type" reduction, "law-to-singular-fact" reduction, and "type-to-token" reduction.

Are social sciences such as economics, sociology, or political science reducible in principle to some other more fundamental field--perhaps psychology, neurophysiology, or the theory of rationality?

To begin to answer this question we must first decide what items might be reduced: statements, truths, laws, facts, categories, or generalizations. Second, we need to distinguish several reasons for failure of reduction: failure in principle, because events, types, and laws at the social level are simply not fixed by states of affairs at "lower" levels, and failure for reasons of limits on computation. (The motions of a five-body system of stars might be determined by the laws of gravitation even though it is practically possible to perform the calculations necessary to determine future states of the system.)

So now we can consider the question of social reduction in a reasonably clear form. Consider first the "facts" that pertain to a domain of phenomena--whether these facts are known or not. (I choose not to concentrate on laws or generalizations, because I am doubtful about the availability of strong laws of social phenomena.) Do the facts of a hypothetically complete theory of human psychology "fix in principle" the facts of economics or sociology, given appropriate information about boundary conditions?

One important approach to this problem is the theory of supervenience (Jaegwon Kim, Physicalism, or Something Near Enough). A level of description is said to supervene upon another level just in case there can be no differences of state at the first level without there being a difference of state in the second level. The theory is first applied to mental states and states of neurophysiology: "no differences in mental states without some difference in neurophysiology states." Supervenience theory implies an answer to the question of whether one set of facts "fixes in principle" the second set of facts. (It has been taken as obviously true that social facts supervene upon facts about individuals; how could it be otherwise? What other constitutive or causal factors might influence social facts, beyond the actions and ideas of individuals?) If the facts about social life supervene upon facts about the psychological states of individuals, then it follows that the

totality of facts about individual psychology fixes in principle the totality of facts about social life. (Otherwise there would be the situation that there are two total social worlds corresponding to one total "individual psychology" world; so there would be a difference at the social level without a difference at the level of individual psychology.)

So this provides the beginnings of an answer to our question: if we believe that social facts supervene upon facts about individuals, then we are forced to accept that the totality of facts about individuals "fix" the facts about society.

However, supervenience does not imply "reducibility in principle", let alone "reducibility in practice" between levels. In order to have reducibility, it is necessary to have a system of statements describing features of the lower level which are sufficient to permit deductive derivation (or perhaps probabilistic inference) of all of the true statements contained in the higher-level domain. If it is a social fact that "collective action tends to fail when groups are large", then there would need to be set of statements at the level of individual psychology that logically entail this statement. Two additional logical features would appear to be required for reduction: a satisfactory set of bridge statements (linking the social term to some construction of individual-level terms; "collective action" to some set of features of individual agents, so there is a mapping of concepts and ontologies between the two domains), and at least some statements at the lower level that have the form of general laws or law-like probabilistic statements. (If there are no general statements at the lower level, then deductive inference will be limited to truth-functional deduction.)

Now it is time for a speculative leap: a judgment call on the question of whether we ought to look for reductive links between social facts and individual-level facts. My intuition is that it is not scientifically useful to do so, for several reasons. First is the point about computational limits: even if the outcome of a riot is "fixed" by the full psychological states of participants ex ante and their strategic interactions during the event--it is obviously impossible to gather that knowledge and aggregate it into a full and detailed model of the event. So deriving a description of the outcome from a huge set of facts about the participants is unpromising. Second, it is telling that we need to refer to the strategic interactions of participants in order to model the social event; this means that the social event has a dynamic internal structure that is sensitive to sub-events that occur along the way. (Jones negotiates with Smith more effectively than Brown negotiates with Black. The successful and failed negotiations make a difference in the outcome but are unpredictable and contingent.) Third, the facts at the social level rarely aggregate to simple laws or regularities that might have been derived from lower-level laws and regularities; instead, social outcomes are contingent and varied.

So for a variety of reasons, it is reasonable to take the view that social facts supervene upon facts about individuals, but that social explanations are autonomous from laws of psychology. (This final point might be paraphrased as "the laws of psychology underdetermine social outcomes.")

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:15PM (-05:00)

Basis for the social science disciplines

Wednesday, November 21, 2007

Is there a reason or rationale underlying the scope and methods of the social science disciplines? Or is the current division of the subject matter arbitrary and contingent on accidents in the history of thought (as perhaps Michel Foucault believes in The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language)?

There are abbreviated definitions of the subject matters of sociology, political science, of economics -- "Sociology is the study of groups and norms," "political science is the study of the institutions and behavior through which political decisions are made," "economics is the study of rational behavior in the context of scarcity". And likewise for the core methods of inquiry and explanation. But the questions remain: Is this a logical way of covering the domain of possible inquiry?Are there areas of phenomena that are overlooked in this taxonomy? And pragmatically--is this combination of topics, scopes, and methods likely to solve the problems of explanation and policy to which we would like the social sciences to contribute?

It is worth noticing in this discussion that each of the core disciplines of the social sciences is actually an umbrella encompassing a wide range of sub-disciplines, and these sub-disciplines themselves show significant variation in assumptions about subject matter, ontology, and methodology. Within political science, for example, there are wide rifts between new institutionalists, rational choice theorists, comparativists, area specialists, and American politics specialists, and there is no common perspective that gives substantial coherence across these divides. Similar observations are true of economics, anthropology, and sociology as well.

So how should we begin to analyze the status and adequacy of the current definitions of the social science disciplines?

What would we want from a division of the disciplines in a large field of study (biology, physics, social science, psychology)? This is an epistemic question: we want to know how best to go about acquiring knowledge about a broad domain of phenomena. We would want to be sure that the most fundamental processes and the most practically important phenomena are given close scrutiny. We would want to be sure that there are a variety of methods of inquiry that are well designed and effective in probing the nature of the phenomena under study. And, of course, we would want the disciplines to be organized in such a way that practitioners are motivated and evaluated towards valid discovery. Finally, it would appear logical that we would want there to be mechanisms of scientific communication through which discoveries and insights in one discipline may inform or deepen the discoveries of other neighboring disciplines.

This last point deserves emphasis. Disciplines provide focus; they encourage researchers to dig deeply into the specialized problems and methods that have been defined by the discipline. But it is also true that specialization creates tunnel vision -- with the result that scientific understanding of a complex phenomenon may miss essential parts of the process because they overlap disciplinary definitions of subject matter. So a logical expectation of the organization of scientific knowledge would presumably include a process through which interdisciplinary sharing is encouraged and facilitated.

It needs also to be noted that it is entirely possible for a discipline to be mis-conceived.

The founders may have taken a wrong turn in highlighting what appeared to be the most important phenomena and mechanisms; the discipline may have adopted methodological commitments that were fashionable at a time but poorly fitted to the research problems of the subject matter (extreme behaviorism in psychology, for example); the disciplinary institutions (journals, universities) may have designed procedures of peer review that were discouraging to genuine progress in the discipline's ability to gain knowledge about the subject matter.

There are many threads that this subject opens. But a few preliminary observations are justified. First, it is worth observing that the social world does not come to us with a prior division of phenomena into "economic," "ethnographic," or "sociological." So the social world itself does not dictate the way in which we parcel out research problems across specialists. Almost all social phenomena have dimensions of each of these characteristics, and the methods of each of these disciplines are relevant to inquiry and explanation of a single phenomenon. So the insistence on using only the methods of one's discipline in analyzing a complex social phenomenon is a problem--along the lines of the saying that "to a person with a hammer, everything looks like a nail". Second, it is noteworthy that each of the major social science disciplines has undergone harsh "methodology wars" in the past several decades--between rational choice theory and more empirical research in political science, between quantitative and qualitative researchers in sociology, or between interpretive and materialist ethnography methods. Are these disputes productive of further discovery into the workings of the social world? It is not evident that they are. And third, the points made above about the general utility of interdisciplinary communication and collaboration seem especially applicable to the social sciences. Given the inherently complex and mixed nature of social phenomena, surely the social sciences would benefit from a greater degree of interdisciplinarity and mutual respect. Pluralism in theory and method would seem to best serve the goals of the social sciences.

(See Andrew Abbott, Chaos of Disciplines, for a lively and illuminating examination of the social science disciplines.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:37PM (-05:00)

Why are tastes and aversions beyond rational control?

Thursday, November 22, 2007

Rational choice theory is a powerful foundation for thinking about social behavior (at least in its moderate versions). People have beliefs and goals; they survey the environment of choice and they arrive at actions that are intelligently related to the achievement of their goals.

However, as an exclusive, abstract description of human behavior, rational choice theory confronts a few major problems. A minor problem is the fact that people do not always act deliberatively. They may act out of impulse, habit, or example -- without devoting the thought processes to their current choices that would be necessary in order to formulate a rational plan in the circumstances. This is a minor problem, because this behavior itself may be rational in the "satisficing" sense: the stakes may be so low that it doesn't make sense to commit time and energy to the task of calculating what the best overall solution

to the problem is. (Shall I take the triple cappuccino or the iced mocha today?)

More challenging is a much more substantial fact about human action and choice: there is a powerful set of psychological imperatives and constraints that make certain choices psychologically impossible even when they are "goal-maximizing". Take food and clothing choices as examples: the fact that fish heads are perfectly nutritious and cheap will never induce most Americans to order them on the menu. The fact that a pair of Bermuda shorts is a perfectly suitable attire in some settings will not induce someone to wear them to a black tie gala in place of the tuxedo. It is as if the decision-making system is loaded with constraints of taste, preference, aversion, and norm that make some decisions simply impossible.

This fact might be described as the workings of "culture"; it might be categorized under the heading of "norms and values"; or it might be assigned to the "workings of personality and affect." But whatever description we offer, it is plainly a factor that needs to be incorporated into a full theory of human agency and choice.

It is not particularly difficult to model a "decision-making system" that incorporates the workings of tastes, aversions, and norms as well as goal-directed rationality. The more challenging task lies at the level of psychological theories of individual development (how does the individual acquire and incorporate these cultural and normative constraints?) and sociological theories of transmission of these sorts of constraints. What are the institutional and cultural mechanisms through which a system of tastes, aversions, and norms are transmitted throughout a group or population?

And, finally, there is the task for behavioral science of incorporating the empirical findings that this set of observations permits concerning the ways in which real agents process experience and arrive at decisions, into aggregate models of collective behavior. How should the abstract models of rational choice theory be extended to include these factors of affect, taste, and aversion? Are these non-rational factors so idiosyncratic that they cannot be incorporated into behavioral science? Or are there regularities at the level of individuals that permit aggregate consequences at the level of group behavior? (And is it possible that we have arrived here at the theoretical nexus of "marketing science" -- the discipline aimed most directly at understanding and controlling the behavior of groups of consumers?)

(An interesting edited volume by Lupia, McCubbins and Popkin explores some of these issues: Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice, and the Bounds of Rationality .)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:08AM (-05:00)

How does rational choice theory relate to social facts and individu...

Thursday, November 22, 2007

Rational choice theory is a mid-level theory of human agency, intended to capture core features of human decision-making in order to provide a basis for abstract and generalized theories of the dynamics of various areas of social behavior. The disciplines of political science and economics make particularly extensive use of versions of rational choice theory (decision theory, expected utility theory, game theory, theories of parametric and strategic rationality) in designing theories and models of stylized

circumstances of social action (e.g. market decision-making, production decisions, voting decisions, collective action decisions). Homo economicus -- the rationally self-interested preference- or utility-maximizing individual -- stands at the foundation of typical models in economics and political science.

The theory of economic rationality can be specified in numerous ways. In all its versions it is an abstraction from real human behavior, in two senses. The theory abstracts from idiosyncratic differences in reasoning across individuals; and it abstracts from other, perhaps systematic, factors that might influence reasoning (emotions and morals, for example). The theory allows for differences across individuals, of course, but primarily in the individual's preferences or utility function. (The nature of the decision rule is also a variable: more risk averse or less, optimizing or satisficing, maximin or maximize expected utility).

The question here is, what role does rational choice theory play in social explanations and in formal models in political science and economics, and how does it function in description of individual psychology and behavior?

Some formalistic economists and political scientists treat the assumptions of rational choice theory as purely formal axioms that can provide the basis for a mathematical treatment of a stylized problem -- solution to an n-person non-zero sum game, for example. These theorists are not concerned about the descriptive adequacy of the axioms, but rather the feasibility of employing the axioms to derive a solution to the problem.

This approach is unsatisfying, however, if we think that the results of formal economic or political analysis are supposed to be explanatory in some sense of actual social phenomena. Suppose we explain the low level of public contribution to public radio, by saying that the "contribution/non-contribution" game is an n-person prisoners' dilemma, and the mathematical solution to such a game demonstrates an equilibrium of low contribution. This mathematical finding is only potentially explanatory if we have some reason to think that the model bears a relevant relationship to the system of behavior it is modeling; the model assumes rationally self-interested maximizers; so the model is potentially explanatory of the public radio result only if the listeners are to some degree approximately well-described as "rationally self-interested maximizers." In other words, the rational-choice explanation of this real social situation appears to require that there be some degree of realism in the assumption of individual rationality. The purely formalistic interpretation of the axioms would render the account devoid of explanatory value.

This suggests a different approach to the question. It suggests that we should regard the assumption of rationality as an approximately true description of most human beings. Rational choice theory is an empirical theory of human behavior, at a high level of abstraction. "Abstract" in this context means "disregarding of interfering or contrary factors" -- as the theory of ideal gases is abstract in its disregard of intermolecular forces. In other words, the theory of rationality might be construed as a particularly abstract part of an empirical theory of human psychology.

If we take this approach, then we are naturally invited to test and improve upon this theory of human decision-making. Are there other factors of deliberation and action that need to be introduced? Are there differences across human groups and cultures with respect to the system of reasoning that individuals employ in practical decisions? Is the theory of maximizing rationality true of at least a certain range of individuals and decision-

making problems? (Perhaps, for example, we are maximizing decision-makers when it comes to choosing a loaf of bread, but are influenced by emotions and commitments when it comes to choosing a political party to support.)

The advantage of a simple, abstract theory of deliberation (the theory of economic rationality) is that it provides a mathematically tractable way of modeling certain common situations of social action. If we advance a theory of deliberation and agency that postulates more nuance at the individual level and more variation across individuals and cultures, we may lose the ability to put forward models that result in equilibrium. More empirical adequacy may reduce the theoretical or deductive adequacy of the disciplines. However, it seems unavoidable that social science is better served by a theory of human agency and deliberation that is somewhat more faithful to actual human practical cognition. And it would remain possible that the narrow assumptions of economic rationality emerge as being adequately descriptive in certain well defined problem circumstances (the circumstances of anonymous markets, for example). Finally, it may be that other methods of aggregating from individual-level assumptions to models of collective behavior are feasible -- for example, the agent-based models that are advocated by the Santa Fe Institute.

There may be one additional reason why rational choice theory asserts a centrality that separates it from the rest of social psychology -- that is the role that rationality plays in a normative sense. We might think that reason and rationality are especially important human creations, and that it is valuable to have a theory of pure rationality (and its implications) even if the typical human reasoner falls far short of its assumptions.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:04PM (-05:00)

What is a social structure?

Thursday, November 22, 2007

Are there such things as "social structures"? In what do they consist? What sorts of social powers do they exercise?

Consider a few candidates: the global trading system, the Federal government, the Chinese peasantry of the 1930s, the English class system, the Indian marriage system, race in the United States, the city of Chicago. Are these items examples of "social structures"?

What are the central assumptions we make in designating something as a social structure? (Note that the term "social structure" can be used in at least two important senses: first, as a causally operative institutional complex (the state or the market as causal social structures), and second, as a description of facets of the organization of society (demographic structure, urban-rural structure, structure of race and ethnicity, income structure). Here I will focus on the first sense of the term.)

Several ideas appear to be core features in our ordinary understanding of this concept. A social structure consists of rules, institutions, and practices. A social structure is socially embodied in the actions, thoughts, beliefs, and durable dispositions of individual human beings. A social structure is effective in organizing behavior of large numbers of actors. A structure is coercive of individual and group behavior. A social structure assigns roles and powers to individual actors. A social structure often has distributive consequences for individuals and groups. A social structure is geographically dispersed. Social structures

can cause social outcomes involving both persistence and change.

We might try to reduce these intuitions to a definition: a social structure is a system of geographically dispersed rules and practices that influence the actions and outcomes of large numbers of social actors.

Now back to our original question: do such things exist? Before proceeding to a answer, a few points are evident. Any social entity must possess microfoundations in human mentalities and actions. There is no such thing as a social entity that lacks human embodiment--any more than there are works of art that lacks material embodiment. Social entities "supervene" upon human individuals.

This point also applies to any statements we might make about the putative causal powers of a social entity. So claims about the causal properties of social structures must be supplemented by a theory of the microfoundations of those powers. How does an extended social structure exert influence over the actions of located individuals?

And there is a final parallel point about claims about the geographical scope and coherence of a social entity. If we want to maintain that an entity exercises influence as a coherent and extended entity, we need to be able to specify the mechanisms through which this takes place. How does the Federal state exert its control and influence over the vast scope of the United States and its population?

So, with these qualifications about the unavoidable need for providing microfoundations--are there social structures?

Several of the instances offered above fit the terms of our provisional definition. They are large complexes of rules and practices that influence behavior and outcomes. And it is straightforward to begin to provide a description of the microfoundations upon which they exist: the social components through which these structures are embodied and through which they exercise influence on individuals and groups. The US Federal Government functions as a system of branches of government, each with its own departments governed by formal and informal rules. And the "reach" of the state down to the local and individual level is secured by the socially implemented forms of power that are locally expressed (bank inspectors, law enforcement agencies, tax auditors, ...).

This is an example of a large social structure that operates through a high degree of formal institutionalization. But some of the examples mentioned above depend primarily on informal mechanisms -- the workings of widespread beliefs and attitudes, along with a diffused willingness of individuals to "enforce" the requirements of the structure. Structures relying primarily on informal mechanisms include the Indian marriage system or the English class system.

Is "race" a structure in American society? Plainly it possesses some of the key elements identified above. The reality of race leads to an uneven distribution of opportunities and outcomes, so "race" is a social fact with distributive consequences. It has the element of coercion: racial prejudice and patterns of discrimination are imposed on individuals without an "opt-out" possibility. And we can identify many of the social mechanisms through which race and racial discrimination work; so the category possesses microfoundations. Today many of those mechanisms are "informal" rather than "formal"; but of course the legal institutionalization of racial discrimination is a recent fact in American history. So "race" is a structural feature of American society.

Several of the examples mentioned above appear to fall outside the category of social structure, however; for example, "Chinese peasantry". These examples appear to be large factors that play a role in large social structures, but are more akin to elements than systems. So the structure that defines "Chinese peasantry" is the system of property, agriculture, and kinship that defines the peasant's role and opportunities in society; the category of "peasant" identifies one node within that system or structure.

What about "the city of Chicago"? Is this a structure or some other category of social entity? I am inclined to say that the city of Chicago is a complex social entity, not a structure. It falls within a variety of structures in America and the world--the global trading system, the electoral process, and the politics of national funding for large cities; and it embodies within it a variety of smaller structures--the public school system, lending practices, nepotism. But the city itself does not function as a regulative system coordinating the activities of large numbers of individuals. Rather, it is a complex social entity composed of a mix of social practices, behaviors, systems, and relationships.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:08PM (-05:00)

What kind of knowledge can philosophy offer?

Saturday, November 24, 2007

Let us say that knowledge is "a set of true statements based on compelling reasons." (This is the same as the familiar definition of knowledge as "justified true belief".) Philosophers offer a variety of claims, and they offer arguments for their positions. But do they offer knowledge about anything? Is it possible to say that "Philosophical statement P is true", or only that "Philosophical statement P is supported by strong and compelling reasons"? Are philosophical topics within the domain of things concerning which we can have knowledge at all?

We know what kind of knowledge *empirical science* provides: factual knowledge about the world and inferences or theories supported by empirical observation. We also know what kind of knowledge is offered by *mathematics and logic* : deductive knowledge derived from a set of axioms in one or another of the fields of mathematics. And we can specify the nature of the knowledge provided by *linguistics and semantics*: expository knowledge of the meanings of various words and phrases in ordinary usage. Putting these areas of inquiry very crudely, we might summarize them as "inductive knowledge," "deductive knowledge," and "semantic knowledge." But what does philosophy add to our knowledge and understanding of human experience and knowledge?

Notice that knowledge and truth are interrelated. Truth, in turn, has to do with correspondence and reference. Statements refer to things and properties; statements are true or false depending on whether the things to which the statement refers in fact possesses the properties attributed to it. So a statement cannot be a piece of knowledge if it does not permit of correspondence to some independent set of facts.

Now consider the kinds of reasoning and statements that occur within philosophy.

First, philosophy offers assertions based on rigorous analysis of concepts and conceptual relationships. This exercise looks a bit like the linguistics/ semantics option above; but philosophers offer "value-added" by providing *rational reconstruction* of the concepts they consider. They reconstruct and improve upon the concepts of everyday language.

Second, philosophy may provide constructive analysis and further development of the methods and conceptual systems of various disciplines, including the empirical sciences. Here the philosopher is purporting to offer substantial findings that will improve upon the epistemic characteristics of existing scientific practices. Crudely, a deeper understanding of the logic of evolutionary explanation and the mathematics of natural selection is a philosophical effort, and it is a substantive contribution to the philosophy of biology and to biological theory. Here, we must ask whether there is a credible basis for the contribution. In what respect does the philosopher possess a distinctive basis for providing rational assessment and recommendations about the structure and practice of empirical science? Typically, philosophers would respond by saying that philosophical argumentation about the methods of science gains credibility through the understanding of rationality and reasoning that philosophers possess.

Third, philosophy can construct ethical theories that possess some degree of justification, beyond ordinary moral opinions. When John Rawls asks, "What is justice?", he begins with some ordinary associations with the concept, but then builds out a theory of justice that goes far beyond ordinary language. And he offers a range of philosophical justifications in support of his theory of "justice as fairness".

A major problem in answering the key question, what is the nature of philosophical knowledge, is the fact that we ordinarily divide knowledge into "empirical/contingent" and "formal/necessary" (or what Quine calls the "analytic/synthetic" distinction). But philosophers seem to advance their theories in a way that implies they are neither empirical nor purely formal. Kant puts this point in the form of a category of knowledge that is "synthetic a priori" -- that is, knowledge that is based on purely philosophical reasoning but that is nonetheless not purely formal. (Kant's claim that the statement "reality is spatially organized in Euclidean three-dimensional space" is true synthetic a priori asserts that the statement is necessarily true but is not a truth of logic.)

One possible stance that we might take is to restrict the concept of "knowledge" to statements about empirical states of affairs (where truth and falsity are possible), but to then postulate other categories of belief that have a degree of rational credibility without correspondence to the empirical world. On this approach, empirical statements, suitably supported, can constitute knowledge of the empirical world. Philosophical statements -- statements about scientific method, the nature of beauty, or ethical principles -- can be offered with rational justification but do not have the referential structure that would permit them to be "true" and do not count as knowledge. If we take this approach, then we may be justified in accepting the proposition "Justice is fairness," but we would not be justified in thinking it is "true." And therefore the statement is not an example of "knowledge".

This approach sounds a bit parallel to the position of early twentieth-century logical positivism, which maintained the verificationist theory of meaning -- the meaning of a sentence is the set of conditions that establish its truth or falsity -- with the result that theology, philosophy, or ethics are strictly speaking meaningless. However, the two views are not the same, because this view permits that philosophical discourse is meaningful and rational; it simply denies that the statements that philosophers make either correspond or fail to correspond with facts about the world.

The conclusion to this line of thought is somewhat startling: philosophy does not offer knowledge at all. However, it does provide opinions and statements that are founded on good reasons, and we have rational grounds for believing these statements.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:32PM (-05:00)

The social science disciplines

Sunday, November 25, 2007

The social sciences consist of a variety of disciplines, subject areas, and methods, and there is no reason to expect that these disciplines will eventually add up to a single unified theory of society. Political science, sociology, history, anthropology, economics, geography, and area studies all provide their own, largely independent, definitions of scope, research agenda, and research methods. And there is no grand plan according to which the disciplinary definitions jointly capture all that is of scientific interest about the social.

History rather than logic explains the particular configuration of social science disciplines that we now face. The major social science disciplines have grown up in the past century and a half by creating stylized answers to these topic areas: the "political" concerns institutions of coercion and governance; the "economic" has to do with production, exchange, and distribution of goods and services; the "anthropological" has to do with the cultures, values, and practices through which individuals and groups conduct their local lives. Area studies are defined according to a different axis; Asian studies or Latin American studies demand that we cut the social differently: not from the point of view of social domains, but from the point of view of geographical complexes of related social, cultural, economic, political, and normative regimes.

At the same time, we as "users" of the results of social inquiry have no inherent interest in the intra- and inter-disciplinary debates that have led to the constitution of the disciplines of the social sciences as they currently exist. The social world does not come to us labeled as "political," "economic," or "ethnographic." We ordinary citizens have questions that cut across these boundaries recklessly: Why does the US state so commonly ignore the needs of poor people? Why are Indonesian rice farmers reluctant to make use of HYV rice strains? Why did the hi-tech bubble occur in the American economy in the 1990s? How do police departments succeed in recruiting good potential officers? When is the practice of charitable giving most likely to thrive or falter? Why did the Chinese Communist revolution occur? Why did it succeed? Note what a mixture of topics, human interactions, and methodologies is invoked by this collection of questions. Some of these queries raise the question of why individuals behaved as they did; some focus on group action, while others single out individual choices; some have to do with the institutions within which individuals live; some suggest turning to ethnography, comparative economics, or political science; and so forth.

The upshot is this: Users of the social sciences have a different way of parsing "the social" than is found in academic social science. We are interested in human agency and behavior — individual and collective. We are interested in the ways social relations and institutions work, and how they affect the behavior and choices of the individuals who operate within them. We are interested in how large agglomerations of human activity work — how they emerge, how they behave over time, and how they go wrong (cities, states, corporations, networks of friends, …), and we are interested in the dynamics of face-to-face social interaction.

This suggests that new thinking about the social sciences needs to start with the idea of acquiring a strong commitment to interdisciplinary study of common social topics.

(Here are several other posts on "social science disciplines" (tag).)
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:15PM (-05:00)

How not to create a classification system

Sunday, November 25, 2007

Does social science require systems of classification?

From Jorge Luis Borges' description of a fictional Chinese classification of animals:

“These ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies remind us of those which doctor Franz Kuhn attributes to a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled 'Celestial Empire of benevolent Knowledge'. In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” Jorge Luis Borges, Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952

The lesson? That a system of classification needs to rest upon a coherent, logical assessment of the causal and structural properties of the things being classified, so that the classification may lead us to a better understanding of the range of phenomena encompassed by the system.

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:33PM (-05:00)

Does historical materialism have a place in today's social sciences?

Sunday, November 25, 2007

Marx's theory of historical materialism came with a few central concepts, a large hypothesis, and a heuristic for social research. The concepts include class, the forces and relations of production, the economic structure, the superstructure, and the idea of determination ("in the last instance", as Althusser and Poulantzas put it) between the economic structure and elements of the superstructure. The heuristic is, "Look to the circumstances of property and class -- the material circumstances of society -- in order to discover the causal relationships that exist in large social change across history." The large hypothesis is that the historical dynamic created by tension between the forces of production (the level of technology and labor skills) and the relations of production (the property relations) creates a set of imperatives and constraints for social change that leads to the formation and transformation of other social elements, such as the state, morality, or culture. Class and class conflict play a central role in mediating the effects of the economic structure on other aspects of society.

Are these elements of historical materialism still of value to sociology and historical explanation?

The concepts associated with the theory of historical materialism are legitimate macro-

sociological tools for organizing and analyzing social institutions and structures within particular societies. Their utility depends on the degree to which they permit the historian to identify and explain in detail the real social processes that are underway in the society under examination. There is no a priori basis for judging that this conceptual scheme is superior to other alternatives (as Marx sometimes seems to suggest). Rather, we need to evaluate the materialist conceptual scheme through its fecundity in identifying causal mechanisms and processes within the empirical phenomena under study.

The heuristic too remains insightful -- as long as we keep in mind the fact that historical change has many causes. It is fair to say that material factors have historical influence -- levels of technology influence other social institutions such as the educational system, the property system creates a set of interests that have important political effects on mobilization, and struggle over the control of social wealth is plainly an important historical factor. And it is a productive strategy for historians to examine in details the ways in which material circumstances produce other kinds of social change through the actions of historically situated actors. Further, careful study of the material circumstances of a society shed important light on the circumstances of life for the almost invisible ordinary people.

The master hypothesis of historical materialism is the least enduring. Marx's reading of history within the lenses of historical materialism was simply too deterministic, too unidirectional, and too single-factored, to provide a credible basis for explaining historical change. The difficulty with the hypothesis is its comprehensiveness and its suggestion that there is only one major historical dynamic. But take any particular historical outcome of interest -- the dynamics leading to a rebellion in North China, for example. Material conflicts of interest are likely enough to be part of the motivations of the participants, and the powers associated with various groups derivative from their control of wealth and property are plausibly related to the ability of various groups to play an influential role in the developing events. However, there are plainly other social and causal factors that are unrelated to the property system -- for example, a history of drought or flooding in the region, the structure and tenacity of kinship systems, the nature of local morality and justice sensibilities, the degree of transportation interconnectedness of the region, and indefinitely many other factors.

It is implausible, then, to suppose that a single factor -- whether material class circumstances, ideology, or other social characteristics -- is the sole important causal factor in large historical processes. Historical processes are contingent and conjunctural, so the effort to discover a single key to explain all large historical processes and outcomes is futile. At the same time, it is plausible enough that the circumstances and institutions associated with technology and property have historical effects; and in fact, it is straightforward to describe the microfoundations through which these institutions interact with ordinary human behavior and choice to lead to social outcomes. This assessment suggests that historians and sociologists are well justified in including the concepts and heuristics of historical materialism in their tool kit, but that they would be well advised to reject the almost metaphysical certainty of the grand hypothesis.

(See Gerald Cohen, Karl Marx's Theory of History, for an analytic philosopher's pathbreaking treatment of historical materialism.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:41PM (-05:00)

Is it an interesting sociological fact that "urban people are bette...

Tuesday, November 27, 2007

Let's suppose that this statement about urban-rural differences in educational levels summarizes census data by calculating the average number of years of formal schooling for people in cities and people in rural areas. Is this brute fact about two large populations a valid description of the two populations? Is it an important or illuminating sociological fact?

There are several types of questions we need to ask about this fact. First, there are questions to address about the statistical features of the data themselves. How are these two populations distributed around the mean? How wide is the variance around the mean? Do we get a different result if we measure the median number of years of schooling as opposed to the mean? Which of these measures is a more meaningful description of the population as a whole -- median or mean?

Consider a hypothetical set of results. If the rural population is quite homogeneous around a mean of 10 years of schooling, while the urban population is widely distributed in a range from 5 years to 20 years, the fact that the urban mean is 11 years is somewhat misleading; the majority of urban people in this hypothetical case have less than 9 years (so urban is less well educated), while at the same time 20 percent of urban people have at least 14 years (so urban population is better educated). The point is this: the brute fact of a difference in the means is not particularly insightful in estimating the educational resources of the two populations.

Second, there are important sociological questions about the internal differentiation of the population into groups with very different educational patterns. Do women and men show different profiles in the two large populations? How about members of ethnic or racial groups? How about groups identified by income, wealth, or home ownership? What about groups defined by whether a parent had attended college? Arriving at this set of questions requires sociological imagination. The investigator needs to consider what internal differentiations within the large population might affect the sub-group's educational characteristics.

Finally there is the question of finding possible causal explanations of the differences that are discovered across major populations (urban and rural) and within sub-populations (ethnic, gender, or class-defined groups), and tracing out some of the ways in which these patterns in turn cause other social outcomes (future inequalities of income, for example). Those causal mechanisms might be various: differences in the opportunities that are presented to members of different social groups (including the possibility of discrimination), differences in values and cultures, within families, differences in gender treatment, differences in religious traditions and practices, and differences in access to resources, to name a few.

Now suppose we have done quite a bit of empirical, theoretical, and causal analysis along these lines. Suppose we have found that the internal structures of eduational attainment statistics are quite different between urban and rural populations; that the taxonomy of sub-groups is different; and that the causes and social mechanisms of the differences in attainment across the rural-urban divide are substantially different as well.

What salience does the original brute fact continue to have (that the means are different in the two populations)?

We might say that the brute fact is in fact a valid empirical observation; that it needs to be substantially further analyzed; and that the genuinely valuable and insightful sociological findings only emerge once we have further disaggregated the statistics across salient groups and have provided some hypotheses about the mechanisms that influence the educational attainment profiles of the various sub-groups. At that point we have some idea of the underlying sociology that produces the brute fact. But the brute fact itself is largely unilluminating.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:36PM (-05:00)

Historical comparisons

Wednesday, November 28, 2007

Historians are sometimes interested in comparing two cases or events in order to discover something of historical importance -- common causal mechanisms, important institutional differences between the cases, or ways in which the cases illustrate some larger historical pattern. For example, Kenneth Pomeranz offers an extensive comparison of European and Asian economic development in The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy. Other examples of historical comparisons might include the Russian Revolution and the Chinese Revolution; the build-out of railroads in Britain versus France; the collapse of the French Army in 1870 versus 1940; the colonial experience in Senegal versus Kenya; the development of London versus Tokyo; and many others.

The question to be considered here is this: what standards or heuristics ought to govern the choice and definition of units of comparison? Would it make sense to compare World War II with the war in Bosnia? Or the scientific cultures of Bologna in 1400 with that of London in 1960? Or the Spanish Civil War with the culture clash of the United States in the 1960s? What factors make for a historically insightful comparison?

Part of an answer is obvious at the start: there is no hard-and-fast answer to the question. It is always possible that there is a basis of comparison across apparently radically dissimilar cases. So the Spanish Civil War comparison with Madison SDS activism might seem to single out two cases that are too incommensurable to be valuable -- until a creative historian notices that each historical moment revealed deeply different political and moral worldviews and that these ideological differences led to substantial inter-group hostility and conflict in each case. And this comparison might then lead this historian to ask the productive question: why did one instance result in years of warfare and the second resolved into peaceful protest?

Further, it is evident that comparison depends upon the background set of questions that we want to answer; useful comparison is topic-dependent. Comparing Bologna 1400 with London 1960 might be useful if we are investigating the cultural transmission of ideas but useless if we are investigating the causes of urban unrest. And comparing Paris 2006 with Detroit 1967 might be valuable on the second topic but beside the point for the first.

Historically insightful comparison also requires that we not be dazzled by the fact that similar language is used to describe or categorize multiple events. The Chinese Revolution and the Russian Revolution might be described in very similar terms:

revolutions resulting from the overthrow of a pre-modern state by a militant party of revolutionaries leading an emerging under-class population. But this description is misleading on its face and in what it conceals. These historical events were actually very different in their political composition, the role and behavior of parties, and the relations that existed among other social forces. The Russian Revolution might be re-described as an opportunistic seizure of power by a minor political party, and the Chinese Revolution might be described as a long, slow mobilization of a mass population in support of revolutionary change. Other descriptions are possible as well. The point is that the common label of "revolution" should not mask the possibility or likelihood of extreme differences in processes, politics, parties, and mobilizations in the two instances.

To get some guidance, we need first to reflect on what the goal of the comparison is. And there are numerous goals that a historian might have. For example --

- discover "generalizations" about similar processes. ("Each of the revolutions studied contains "state crisis" as a causally necessary factor.")
- identify concrete historical mechanisms that are at work in the cases -- whether or not they recur in other cases as well. ("Political mobilization in the first case proceeds through pre-existing religious organizations on the ground; in the second case it proceeds through control of the national media.")
- identify causally salient differences across cases that explain divergence of outcomes. (Here the idea would be an argument something like this: cases A and B are similar in many ways. However, A leads to X, while B leads to Y. What explains this divergence of outcome?)
- discover some of the substantial variety that exists underneath the surface in events that seem superficially similar. (We might pursue this "difference" strategy in urban history and choose a set of examples that will illustrate the many ways in which the world's cities have evolved and are organized and governed.)

Thus the selection of cases will depend on what the purpose of the comparison is. But in general, the only reason to engage in comparison is the likelihood that we will learn something from the comparison that we would not have learned from study of one of the individual cases.

All this said -- we might consider the heuristic that says that the cases need to be similar enough to permit comparison in terms of structures, processes, and causes; different enough to invite inquiry about the causes of the differences; and integrated enough to allow us to say that this level of unit of analysis possesses the complex set of historical characteristcs under study as a whole.

Let's flesh this heuristic prescription out by considering one specific historical question: How did "European economic development" compare with "Asian economic development"? Before we can begin to try to answer this question, we need to give a more thoughtful definition of the units of comparison. Should the comparison be between continents, between countries, between regions within countries, or between selected cities and villages? Kenneth Pomeranz and others argue that continents and nations are too large to serve as a basis of valuable economic comparison, in a very specific sense: they encompass too much variety of social and economic processes to permit valid comparison. Pomeranz argues instead that Eurasian comparison is most valid if we select integrated economic regions of roughly comparable size; large enough to encompass the range of economic, social, and political arrangements that plausibly influence economic development, but not so large that the scale obliterates distinctive patterns and outcomes. Based on these sorts of considerations, he argues that it is most

useful to consider a comparison between the core economic regions of England and the Lower Yangzi Delta in China. (James Lee offers an even more disaggregated basis for comparison of demographic regimes; he argues for a comparison based on descriptions of populations at the community level, ignoring nations and large economic regions altogether; Life Under Pressure: Mortality and Living Standards in Europe and Asia, 1700-1900.)

(See Eurasian Historical Comparisons for more on one aspect of this issue.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:38PM (-05:00)

Wittgenstein on the science of psychology

Saturday, December 01, 2007

Wittgenstein's comments about the science of psychology have some resonance with the current state of the social sciences:

“The confusion and barrenness of psychology is not to be explained by calling it a “young science”; its state is not comparable with that of physics, for instance, in its beginnings... For in psychology there are experimental methods and conceptual confusion... The existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 1968, II xiv, 232e).

We need a philosophy of social science because the methods, concepts, and framing theories of the social sciences are not yet adequate. We haven't yet fully thought through what the central challenges of social inquiry are, and how to think about "the social" as a field of study.

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:47AM (-05:00)

Social properties: Persistence, change, and stochastic social proce...

Saturday, December 01, 2007

How can we explain social change and social persistence?

Society is a complex, compositional entity. Both persistence and change require explanation in such entities. Because there is a third alternative condition of such an entity: chaos, randomness, and Brownian motion of individuals in interaction with each other. Succinctly -- the current state of the ensemble is simply the sum of the states of the lower-level units, and their states are in turn determined by a stochastic set of encounters with other individuals in the prior period. Both persistence and patterned change are non-random outcomes for a compositional system, and each demands explanation. (It is as if crystals formed periodically in boiling water among the micro-particles observed in the solution.) So if we observe either persistence or patterned change in spite of underlying stochastic processes, there must be causes of these non-random outcomes; so we want to be able to discover the causes of both.

To consider change and persistence, we need to answer a prior question: change and persistence of what? Logically, an ensemble demonstrates change and persistence with respect to some set of characteristics: features of organization, patterns of distribution of lower-level properties (e.g. income, attitudes), characteristics of "meso"-level behavior. In biological terms, the ensemble possesses structures, functions, and dynamics of development. And we need to be able to explain each of these gross features in a way that is consistent with the compositional nature of social entities.

We can easily produce examples of each type of condition in social life.

- Persistence: The Federal Reserve Board retains its institutional form and its functional role within the US economy over a 50-year period. Baseball is still governed by the same basic rules as it was in the nineteenth-century (with minor variations).
- Change: American attitudes about race shift measurably over 50 years. The percentage of workers in labor unions falls dramatically from 1970to 2000.
- Stochastic: The frequency of the name "Harry" falls dramatically from 1950 to 1990. Traffic on Skype fluctuates from minute to minute.

Given that the ensemble is composed of lower-level elements (individuals), we want to know what it is that constrains, impels, and conditions the behavior of the individuals, such that the ensemble comes to have the observed features of persistence and change.

In order to explain either persistence or change in social arrangements, what do we have to work with? Only two sorts of things, fundamentally. We have the behavioral characteristics of the individuals who constitute the society; and we have the behaviorally relevant features that are embodied in current social institutions and practices (rules, incentives, opportunities, forms of social cooperation and social punishment). The latter "social" facts are themselves embodied in the behavioral characteristics of the persons who constitute them; but at any given time they function with apparent autonomy with respect to particular actors.

Fundamentally, then, the explanation of both persistence and change in society requires that we uncover the features of individual motivation that guide their behavior (interests, values, preferences, identities, practices); the features of the current social environment that empower and limit individual strategies; and the processes of aggregation through which the individuals' actions come together into collective behavior in either reinforcing or disrupting the social facts of current interest. This intellectual model for social explanation is what I refer to as "methodological localism."

(See "The Heterogeneous Social" for more on methodological localism.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:20PM (-05:00)

Power: social movements

Sunday, December 02, 2007

Social movements usually have to do with change rather than persistence. And they usually emerge from "under-class" groups who lack meaningful access to other official and institutionalized means of power. They are among the "weapons of the weak", and their effectiveness usually turns on the ability of a sub-population to mobilize in collective action with determination and courage. Examples include the American Civil Rights

movement, the use of strikes and boycotts by coal miners in the Ruhr after World War I, and the Solidarity Movement in Poland in the 1970s.

The question here is, what are the scope, limits, and mechanisms of social power wielded through social movements? Is it possible for a social movement to cause change in basic structures, policies, and distributions of wealth and power in society? (I am not thinking primarily here of revolutionary movements, but rather more prosaic struggles for improvement of some set of conditions for the under-group.)

The question arises because the terms of the problem essentially raise a social contradiction: a numerous but powerless group, advocating for a change of structure or distribution that harms the interests of the powerful, aligned against the most powerful forces in society. It would seem that this contest is inherently determined by the disproportion of powers held by the social actors. And yet we can provide memorable examples of success. So the question is, how does this work?

The first factor that provides an obvious source of potential power for the under-class group, is the size and functional role of the group in society. Several of the most obvious tactics for a social movement depend on this structural fact -- the strike, boycott, and mass demonstration. By mobilizing, the group can interfere with the smooth workings of society, compelling other parties to negotiate. And it can demonstrate its broad, mass-based support.

But the obstacles to these mass-based tactics are severe – classic collective action problems, problems of coordination and communication, and the need for competent organizations and leaders. And the tactics available to the powerful (the state, police, mine owners) are imposing: repression and intimidation, divide and conquer, co-optation, control of media, and a greater ability to wait out the struggle.

Besides mass mobilization, there is the tactic of broadening the movement through alliances. This strategy requires "changing consciousness" in the broader society by the actions of the under-class group. The group (primarily through its organizations and leaders) can strive to broaden the base of its movement through alliances with other like-minded groups and with the general public. And this depends upon successful communication -- setting the terms of the struggle in such a way that it aligns with the moral values and material interests of other groups.

Once again, the tactical options and advantages residing with the powerful are substantial. The powerful control the media; they have an advantage in setting the agenda; and they have an extensive ability to co-opt potential allies of the popular movement (side deals, special accommodations, playing off divisions within the mass population). But not all the face cards rest with the powerful.

So here we have several kinds of tactics for the social movement -- direct mass mobilization, broadening of alliances, and a deliberate campaign to capture the moral discourse for the public. But let's push forward and consider what comes next. Suppose there is a social constituency for an important structural change. Suppose this group is fairly strongly mobilized (in terms of the engagement of members), that it has competent organization and leadership, and that its members collectively play a significant role in the economy. Let us further suppose that the group has now engaged in all the tactics above -- large peaceful demonstrations in several cities, a few successful boycotts, and a successful communications campaign that has strengthened public support for the

movement. Now what, in a constitutional democracy? (The analysis will look different within a dictatorship -- for example, the situation of labor unions in pre-war Nazi Germany).

It isn't implausible to conjecture that this scenario results in legislative action in support of the program. The public visibility and popularity of the struggle seem to lead to the inference that voters care about the issue, and legislators listen. So the social movement has won the day and has secured its objective. It has won the battle. But has it won the war -- is the change of policy a genuine and enduring change of structure in favor of the under-class? And here we can speculate again: the long, slow "tectonics" of power and privilege will turn back these gains in the future. The popular coalition cannot sustain its vigilance and mobilization forever; whereas the interests and strategic advantages of the powerful persist like great tectonic plates.

So on this line of thought, we can come to a provisional assessment of the causal powers of social movements in democracies: they have a fighting chance of securing tactical victories, but the prospects for achieving enduring structural change seem more remote. Their ability to change the rules of the game in a sustainable way seems limited in the face of entrenched and enduring interests opposed to such a change.

(Perhaps the Civil Rights movement is the rare exception to this statement. The rules of the game have plainly changed since 1953 with respect to race relations in the US -- in spite of the pressing need for further transformation.)

(There is of course a huge literature on social movements. A few interesting sources are Charles Tilly, Social Movements, 1768-2004, Gary Marx and Douglas McAdam, Collective Behavior And Social Movements: Process and Structure, Peter Ackerman, Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century, and James Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:27AM (-05:00)

Social structures as causal factors

Tuesday, December 04, 2007

The continuing question here is this: how and through what mechanisms do various social entities exercise causal influence with respect to social outcomes? (This will also be relevant to the question: how does power work in a given society?) We think the Gulf Stream wields influence with respect to weather and climate change, but not the circulation numbers of the NYT. And we can specify a lot of detail about the climate-system micro-mechanisms through which this influence is conveyed. We need comparable insight into social causation and various putative social causes or influences.

In that spirit -- do social structures wield causal powers, and through what mechanisms do they do so?

Let's take one specific example -- a mid-size social structure such as the higher-education system found in various countries. This is a complex of institutions, funding arrangements, internal practices and organizational forms. Can the higher-ed system be called a structure? And can it exercise causal influence on the society in which it is embedded?

First, is it a social structure at all (as opposed perhaps to simply an agglomeration of miscellaneous lower-level institutions)? There is no doubt that this system is "heterogeneous" in the sense discussed in prior posts. There are many varieties of public universities, many types and strata of private universities, and many distinctive variations across individual universities. Moreover, these institutions are only somewhat loosely connected together. Nonetheless, British, Russian, French, Mexican, and US universities are different from each other, they have different institutions, values, and philosophies, and they serve in different ways to educate the post-high school populations of their countries. And these institutions have very important distributive consequences in their settings: the credential of baccalaureate gives the young graduate different opportunities than he or she would have otherwise. So it seems justified to describe these systems as "structures".

The causal influence of the higher education system in a given country is fairly easy to address. The features of the higher education system in a country determine the skill level of the educated population and the "culture" of educated people. Schooling systems that favor technical and vocational education will have one sort of influence on economic development, different from a system that favors a broader "general" education. Systems that provide broad and affordable access across social classes have an effect on the inequalities that the society will embody in the future; and these effects are different from those of systems that are class-exclusive. Universities are places where young people learn a lot of their political culture; so a system that embodies a culture of left-ism will have different political consequences than one that embodies quietism or consumerism.

The causal mechanisms of these influences are also easy to discern: effects on individuals (skills and political values) leading to the creation of new economic and political opportunities for society in the next iteration. Other effects are a bit more subtle -- for example, the influence that universities have through creation of a variety of social networks (on Wall Street, in Washington, in the military or intelligence world). In each case the causal powers of the institution are readily disaggregated into the microfoundations through which the institution shapes and constrains the individuals who pass theory the institution.

And we can also reason on first principles (to be tested through comparative research) that different national complexes of institutions, practices, and values in higher education will make for observable differences in those societies' institutions, performance, and collective behavior. This is the central point of the new institutionalism: different institutional complexes doing the same social work will have different outcomes for behavior and the further development of institutions.

So here is one medium-scale example that responds in the affirmative: concrete social structures do possess causal properties; these powers work through the features of constrained agency that they guide; and that we are likely to observe the different workings of these causal properties in different country settings.

(I believe we could work out similar analysis for other social institutions, such as social-property systems, kinship systems, or systems of media ownership and control.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:34PM (-05:00)

Explaining fascism

Friday, December 07, 2007

Kevin Passmore's short introduction to fascism comes out at a good time (Fascism: A Very Short Introduction). Passmore does a great job of framing the problem. He poses a definitional question -- what is fascism -- and demonstrates that this apparently semantic issue requires careful historical and theoretical analysis. Arriving at a good definition of fascism is itself an empirical and historical task. Passmore asks a set of causal questions: How do the fascisms of Europe relate to important social forces in the early twentieth century (for example, the role of great social classes in conflict)? And he addresses the issue of saying what is involved in explaining fascism (the role of analysis and theory). Passmore also presents a very sophisticated treatment of the variety and diversity of human institutions -- issues raised elsewhere under the topic of "heterogeneity".

Of special interest for us is the question, Is fascism a particular social system (dictatorship with such-and-so attributes)? Or was it first and foremost a historically distinctive political and social movement with characteristic values and ideology (violence, nationalism, anti-communism)? Is it a historically specific moment, or is it a systemic development stimulated by some structural feature of modern society (deadlocked conflict between workers and the bourgeoisie)? Crudely -- is fascism a social formation, an ideological complex, a social movement, or a type of government apparatus? And our efforts of explanation will depend on what sort of answer we give to these ontological questions.

These alternative definitions of fascism would give rise to very different explanatory challenges. And in fact, there is a wide variety of explanatory and causal questions that can be considered: Why did the fascist movements arise? Why did they gain a mass following? How did the social realities of capitalism affect the emergence and form of fascism? How important were the particular qualities and ideas of Hitler, Mussolini, or Franco in the evolution of fascism as a social system? Why did fascist dictatorships take the form they did? Why did official and affiliate group violence take the virulent forms that it did? How did fascist governments maintain power? Did these governments gain "legitimacy" and support in their populations? Is there a characteristic "pattern of development" for fascist regimes, or are their political histories deeply contingent on events and persons? Are Germany, Italy, and Spain variants of one social form, or are they simply independent social systems possessing some family resemblances in ideology, propaganda systems, and propensities for violence?

We might also consider whether explanation needs to occur at a lower level -- not "why fascism?" but rather, "why the Iron Guard in Romania", "why this or that feature of Italian fascism", "why this particular feature of Spanish state-military relations in Franco's fascism?". Here the point might be that there are no general or comprehensive explanations of the emergence and development of fascism in all the places it occurred; no common causes that were always or usually instrumental; but rather that each national history needs to be treated in its own terms. But, as Passmore demonstrates, this would be somewhat too skeptical; there certainly were some large international and national forces that facilitated fascist mobilization and seizure of power in many different countries.

The historical phenomena of fascism are interesting and important, because they represented powerful social forces (movements and governments that had great

influence on events in the twentieth century). We would like for historical social science to have something substantive and illuminating to say about the causes and trajectory of fascism. And, of course, we would be well advised to notice the warning signs if there are any!

(Another excellent very short introduction from Oxford that is relevant to this topic is Helen Graham, The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:24PM (-05:00)

Aggregating social trends

Saturday, December 08, 2007

Would we say that discerning and aggregating social trends is an important kind of social knowledge? What about explaining social trends? What is a social trend, anyway?

Suppose people notice that crimes are getting less frequent but more violent; or that Thai restaurants are replacing Chinese restaurants at the bottom end in Chicago; or that young people are using instant messages more than telephone or email. Are these social trends? I suppose that, most simply, these are statements about changing frequencies of certain kinds of social occurrences over time. And "noticing" means counting and tracking the results of past observations. There are important conceptual and measurement issues here -- how we identify the kinds of events whose frequency is "important" or "of interest"? How do we assure that we are counting in a way that is accurate -- not over- or under-reporting? But the basic logic is fairly clear. To say that there is a trend for X is to say that the frequency of X relative to the population is changing in a sustained way.

Is the discovery of social trends an important effort for sociology? Probaby so, for several reasons. We are interested in knowing "how society is changing" -- and the frequencies of various kinds of social actions are themselves an important component of social change. So discovering and documenting changing patterns of social behavior -- "trend-spotting" -- is an important piece of sociological discovery.

But there are two other reasons to think trends are important for sociology. A trend (more Thai restaurants) may be an indicator of some other more important social change -- aging of the Chinese population in Chicago, or an influx of Southeast Asian immigrants in a certain time period. But, second, some social trends may function as causes of other future changes in social behavior. A rising trend in male-female sex ratios in China or India may be a potential cause of future social disorder; A rising frequency of soccer violence may be both an indication of rising youth alienation and a cause of future state action (more repression, more social welfare intervention). A trend towards longer sentences for non-violent crime may produce a rise in violent crime in the future (as non-violent criminals "graduate" to violent crime through longer exposure to violent criminals). Finally, discovery of trends can produce strategies of adaptive behavior -- trends in consumer taste may permit some businesses to create a whole new market for a product, trends in violent crime may produce new policing strategies, and trends in young voters using the web for communication may suggest new campaign tactics.

Finally, it should be noted that some "trends" may not be true features of social behavior at all, but rather the reslt of heightened awareness of certain kinds of social behavior. (Teachers often say "our students are getting worse every year" ... even though the

statistics on performance say the opposite.)

We asked above what is involved in explaining social trends. Surely there must be a range of different social mechanisms that would produce change in the frequencies of various social behaviors: incentives, filters, external shocks, imitation, changes in the composition of the underlying population. For example, suppose we observe a trend towards fewer incidents of purse-snatching in Miami, and we observe as well that the median age of the population has
increased from 50 to 60. The change in the age structure may explain the trend. In this case, there may be no change at all in the behaviors of the various age groups -- no trend there -- but a change in frequency relative to the total population nonetheless.

(This discussion of "social trends" places the concept in the domain of "changing distributions of individual social behavior". Is there a structural counterpart about collective entities? Can we make true and justified statements about the trends of change among -- labor unions, states, churches, or universities?)

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:18PM (-05:00)

What is a "moral intuition"?

Tuesday, December 11, 2007

We have all had this experience: we hear of a complicated social or personal event, and we think inwardly, "that's wrong!" A co-worker tells us an embarrassing private story about another co-worker; we hear on the news that the number of children in poverty has increased; we read about a mining company that has dumped toxic chemicals into fishing rivers for years. And we have a moral intuition about what we hear -- not only a quick judgment about its goodness or badness, but also a sketch of reasons: "She shouldn't violate Frank's privacy that way"; "so much suffering of the innocent is awful"; "how can a company have such disregard for the people whose lives depend on those rivers." In other words, we have intuitions about complex situations that evidently rest upon some kind of reasoning -- but we haven't deliberated about the case.

What is the nature of such an intuition, and what kind of cognition does it represent?

As I've sketched it out, these "intuitions" are cognitively complex -- not just an inward "ugh!", but a sketchy representation of facts, assumptions, and relevant principles or rules. Our thought processes have somehow organized the description of the event into a story of sorts, along with some collateral judgments or principles about how people and institutions ought to behave. In the moment of intuition, we are also involved in judgment; and judgment involves something like reasoning and analysis. And yet the intuition itself is revealed in a moment -- not as a developing piece of analysis and deliberation, but an apparently instantaneous moment of moral perception.

If this description is phenomenologically correct, then moral intuitions are a feature of human judgment that involves complexity in something like the way that sizing up an auto accident occurs for the experienced investigator -- a quick cognition of the likely speeds and directions of the vehicles, the evasive action that appears to have occurred (skidmarks), etc. Following Kant, we might call this an act of "apperception", happening below the level of consciousness but bringing to bear quite a bit of analysis, knowledge, and principle in the construction of the resultant perception. And we might refer to an

individual's overall set of interpretive frameworks as his or her "moral sensibility". Our moral sensibility provides us with a set of framing possibilities within the context of which we can begin to understand and represent the complicated human situations we encounter.

Now we can give a bit more content to the roles that moral analysis and principle play in this story. We are more or less forced to hypothesize that the person possesses a mental process of moral / social cognition that assembles a representation of a situation, including incorporation of a background set of principles or interpretive rules as well as a set of facts about the case, that eventuates in a morally tagged picture or narrative. The person is able to dig down into some of the underlying architecture of this picture if pressed; this accounts for the fact that we can give some analysis or explanation of our moral intuitions when asked, "why do you think this situation is wrong?". And the principles or rules that play an evaluative role are themselves learned through some concrete process of social development. (Though it is interesting to consider whether there might be a component of social cognition that is hard-wired through our evolutionary history; Alan Gibbard, Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment).

So one's moral intuitions are not grounded in something like "direct apprehension of moral facts"; rather, they are the result of a complex, conditioned, and fallible process of sub-conscious reconstruction of the circumstances of a case. And for this reason we might suspect that there will be significant differences across individuals and across cultures in the contents of people's moral intuitions about cases.

(It is worthwhile to contrast the idea of a moral intuition with John Rawls's idea of a "considered judgment". Rawls's idea captures the conception of a full, deliberative consideration of a case in detail, considering all the relevant facts and principles, the fit between a given judgment and many other judgments we make, and a host of other constraints of coherence. This picture is one of full, transparent moral reasoning and deliberation. The account of moral intuition just provided is non-deliberative but not for that reason non-rational.)

(This treatment of moral intuitions converges somewhat with Malcolm Gladwell's Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:55AM (-05:00)

Explaining large social formations: fascism

Wednesday, December 12, 2007

In a previous post I discussed the problem of explaining fascism. Let's return to this issue as a topic for historical and social inquiry.

There are clearly a number of different explanatory questions we might have in mind: why did fascist movements emerge and gain popular support in the first three decades of the twentieth century? Why did these movements prevail in several countries and not in others? (This version parallels Skocpol's question about revolutions.) Why did fascist states develop the political institutions they did in Germany, Italy, and Spain? How did fascist states and leaders exercise power? What prevented the rise of powerful fascist movements on France and Britain -- in spite of the presence of ultra-nationalist leaders and organizations?

These are all different questions -- even if there are relations among them. A particularly central question concerns the factors that were conducive to the emergence of extremist beliefs and organizations in certain periods and what factors favored the growth and power of some of these movements. This is a bundle of questions about the conditions that favor collective mobilization and ideological formation on a mass society. It is the sort of research question that Chuck Tilly and other scholars of popular mobilization have been concerned with.

Another set of questions about the course of fascism has more to do with institution building and state formation. Given the goal of creating powerful stare institutions within the general framework of fascist ideas and goals, what institutional and organizational possibilities existed? Here we might refer to the repertoire of mass organization that fascist "revolutionaries" brought to their movement, as well as the historical and practical options that existed. This area of inquiry may provide a basis for answering questions about the
particular nature of fascist political institutions.

Finally, the distinct question of why it was that fascist movements and leaders were able to defeat democratic movements and states requires that we identify some of the circumstances that weakened democratic regimes. This may be a wide range of factors: challenges of war, ideological conflict with communists and other critics of the state, and the economic circumstances of the great depression. (These fall in the same category as the circumstances that Skocpol brings forward as being relevant to the success or failure of revolutions.)

It would appear that social scientists and historians have better tools for addressing the issue of successful mobilization than the institutional or causal conditions surrounding seizure of power and state building. Schematically, we might consider a causal narrative along these lines: Conditions that favor fascism include the presence of a marginalized group of young people who are subject to great economic insecurity; an ideology that combines nationalism, ethnic
suspicion, and disaffection from established social institutions and values, and a compelling narrative of how and why this group ought to wield power. To this we might add a few propitious international conditions: the threat of war, a widening economic crisis, and a broad
view that the modern state isn't up to handling these challenges.

This approach sketches out a view of what might be a basis for an explanation of the rise of fascist social movements. Here we have singled out several causal-social factors that facilitate popular mobilization and the politicization of social movements. What it doesn't yet explain is why and in what circumstances these movements are likely to grow powerful enough to challenge the existing state structure; this remains for another discussion.

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:48PM (-05:00)

Area studies and social science knowledge

Friday, December 14, 2007

How do the social sciences complement the study of particular regions and cultures? How do the researches and theories of political science, sociology, or anthropology extend our understanding of China or Mexico?

There is one answer to this question that can be disposed of fairly quickly: many sociologists, economists, or political scientists are also specialists on China or Mexico. In this case the social scientist finds his/her empirical data in a particular place -- and the research findings produced through this specialized inquiry is a substantive contribution to understanding of the particular region. In this sense the specialist is a contributor to the area studies literature on China or Mexico (or Latin America and East Asia).

But area studies is more than simply the accumulation of knowledge of a region based on several distinct disciplines. Somehow we think that area studies researchers need to be inter-disciplinary experts. The scholar of East Asia needs to be able to synthesize the best
available insights from a range of disciplines. When we ask, what are the important processes underway in China today, we want to have a response that incorporates observations and judgments that include sociology, popular culture, economic policy, demography, and urban change. So an area specialist is not primarily a discipline specialist -- even though he/she normally has received primary training in one discipline or another. Instead, the area specialist is a specialist of the region, encompassing all its social and cultural aspects.

Put this way, are there any genuine area experts? There are some leading writers on China whose work is interdisciplinary in a meaningful way -- Ezra Vogel, for example. And there are journalists who have developed broad and deep knowledge about Africa, Latin America, or East Asia. However, as a general rule, the deck is stacked against the "discipline-generalist, region-specialist" combination. This has partly to do with the discipline-based standards of rigor that define scholarly excellence; partly the sheer difficulty of mastering multiple areas of disciplinary knowledge; and partly with the epistemic value that we associate with detail and precision over breadth and lower resolution.

So if a real "area specialist" is likely to be a rare creature, what should we look for when we want knowledge of a region or area? The most promising answer is the inter-disciplinary working group and the inter-disciplinary scholarly association. A center for Chinese studies is likely to include experts across the social sciences and humanities; and they are all likely to acquire new perspectives through their cross-discipline interactions. And perhaps the best knowledge we can reach about a region and culture is the multithreaded fabric that emerges from the research seminars and writings emanating from the area-studies working group. Certainly organizations like the Asian Studies Association and the Middle Eastern Studies Association have proven their worth in bringing together a variety of disciplines and perspectives on their regions; and arguably, the scholars who participate in these associations have come to a broader perspective on their own particular areas of research.

So, once again, what is the relation between knowledge of a region and knowledge of a social science discipline? The area specialist needs to be informed by the best social

science knowledge of the region. Second, he/she needs to be fluent with the best models and theories being developed in the social sciences, in order to be able to use these theories in explaining various patterns or developments in the region of interest. But, third, the area specialist should keep always in mind the cross-disciplinary nature of the subject matter. It is important not to be seduced by the power of the hammer, into thinking everything is a nail.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:11PM (-05:00)

Empirical constraints on sociological theories

Tuesday, December 18, 2007

What makes sociology "scientific"? An important component of a reply is that assertions, hypotheses, and theories are subject to the test of empirical evidence. Hypotheses need to be evaluated in terms of observations of how the real world behaves. We should evaluate our assertions in terms of their fit with the empirical facts. This is the "empiricist" constraint.

Post-positivist philosophers of science have noticed that these simple ideas raise many of puzzles, however. Consider these points:

- No set of observable facts guarantees the truth of a scientific assertion.
- There is no sharp distinction between observation and theory; our observations of the empirical facts commonly depend upon the assumption of some elements of scientific theory. Observations are "theory-laden".
- Even the empirical "facts" are subject to multiple interpretations; it is often possible to redescribe a set of observations in a way that appears to support contradictory hypotheses.

In the social sciences there are additional complexities about how to arrive at empirical observations and measurements.

- Social observations require us to "operationalize" the empirical facts we want to observe. For example, we may want to observe the standard of living of the working class. But we cannot achieve this directly. Instead, we need to arrive at "proxies" that are plausibly indicative of the property in question. So the wage basket that can be purchased with a given average money wage may be the index we use for measuring the standard of living. But there are other defensible ways of operationalizing the standard of living, and the various criteria may yield results that behave differently in given times and places.
- Social observation requires aggregation of measurements over a diverse group of individuals. We have to make judgments and choices when we arrive at a process for aggregating social data -- for example, the choice of using the gini coefficient rather than the share of income flowing to the bottom 40 percent as a measure of income inequality, or using the median rather than the mean to observe changes in income distribution. These choices must be made -- and there are no decisive empirical reasons that would decide the issue.
- Social concepts are needed to allow us to break down the social world into a set of facts. But there are plausible alternative conceptual schemes through which we can understand the nature and varieties of social phenomena. So, once again, we cannot hold that "observation" determines "theory".

These are familiar logical difficulties with the basic requirement of empiricism. However, they are not fatal difficulties. At bottom, it remains true that there is such a thing as social

observation. It is necessary to accept that observations are theory-laden; that no observation is uncontrovertible; and that empirical evaluation depends upon judgment. All this accepted, there is a range of social observation that is relatively close to the ground and to which we can attribute some degree of epistemic warrant. Finally, there is available to us a coherence epistemology that permits a holistic and many-sided process of conveying warrant.

My view, then, is that the situation of sociology is less like physics (highly dependent on long chains of reasoning in order to assess empirical warrant) and more like journalism (grounded in careful and reasoned constructions of observations of the social world). The social world is reasonably transparent. We can arrive at reasonably confident observations of a wide range of social facts. And we can provide a logical analysis of the degree of credibility a given sociological theory has, given a fixed set of (corrigible) observations. Much of sociology is closely tied to descriptive inquiry, and the epistemic challenges come in at the stage of building our observations rather than our theories.

Moreover, the common views that natural science theories are "under-determined" by all available evidence (so that multiple theories can be equally well supported) and that scientific theories can only be supported or undermined as wholes (with no separate confirmation for parts of theories) appear to be largely inapplicable to the social sciences. Rather, social theories are more commonly of the "middle range", permitting piecemeal observation, testing, and empirical evaluation.

This also means that the celebrated hypothetico-deductive model of confirmation is less crucial in the social sciences than the natural sciences. The key explanatory challenge is to discover a set of causal processes that might explain the observed social world. And sophisticated observation is often the bulk of what we need.

(See "Evidence and Objectivity in the Social Sciences" for a little more on this topic. Ian Shapiro's recent book, The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences, is a tough critique of excessive formalism and theor-ism in the social sciences.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:43PM (-05:00)

What kind of social knowledge does a football coach have?

Friday, December 21, 2007

I am struck by the difference between the football game that I watch, as a not-very-involved fan, and the one that the experienced coach or sportswriter sees. For me the game is a series of fast-moving passes, tackles, runs, interceptions, touchdowns, and athletic movements. But it doesn't make a lot of sense as a whole -- either within a single play or over an extended period of the game. Contrast that with the perceptions of the game by an experienced, expert observer. A football expert sees more than the individual movements; he sees an organized play unfolding; a missed assignment; an opportunistic change-of-plan by the quarterback; and a feature of a game plan that can gradually be inferred. In other words, the expert sees the movements of the players as a complex of strategic behavior, skilled performance, planning, and opportunistic adjustment.

What kind of cognition is this? What is the cognitive difference between the expert and

non-expert observer? And how does this relate to social knowledge more generally?

Let's take the last question first. Observing the football game is a lot like observing many other kinds of complex relational social interactions: a political campaign, a disaster involving hundreds of victims and responders, or a riot. The football game involves coordination among an number of purposive actors; a degree of organizational structure; the design and implementation of plans; processes of communication (successful and unsuccessful); and the ability of actors to respond to each other's movements on the fly. (To change sports -- when Larry Bird stole the inbound pass from Isiah Thomas in the last seconds of a celebrated playoff game against the Pistons, his teammate Dennis Johnson was already streaking to the basket in anticipation of the possibility of a stolen pass; he then made an uncontested layup and won the game.) These are common features of complex social interactions. So the football game is a complex, structured, and layered social event that unfolds over time; and the meaning and causes of particular actions and events are obscure to the casual observer, whereas they are apparent to the expert.

Perceiving the football game as a social event unfolding in time requires more than simply registering the movements of the players on the field. It is necessary to frame these movements within an apperception of the strategies and intentions that lie behind the actions: the attempt to deceive the opponent (fast footwork, the hidden ball trick); the sudden break to the center of the field by the receiver; the quarterback's effort to buy time until a receiver becomes open. We need to have a basis for saying "what they are doing" that goes beyond a description of the movements and steps taken. And for the expert, a rich framework of understandings of actions, intentions, and strategies is brought to the observation of the particular play. The expert is able to place the actions of the quarterback, the left tackle, and the three receivers into a context of understandable actions and choices; and he is able to discern when something has gone wrong (receiver turned left rather than right, left tackle missed a block, quarterback panicked and threw the ball away ...).

I want to suggest that the expert's perception of the play on the field is a complex but veridical observation of a concrete relational social phenomenon; that it is more akin to perception than to theory formation; and that it reflects a complicated cognitive process through which the expert assembles a lot of knowledge about the game, about the habits and practices of players, about common strategies and tactics -- and that all of this gets sized up in a quick apperception of the specific play. Finally, I want to suggest that this apperception is enormously richer than the crude empirical observations that the non-expert makes: "the center seems to have slipped, the pass was complete".

If this analysis of the situation of the two observers -- expert and duffer -- is plausible, it has important implications for the knowledge that we have of other, less trivial forms of social interaction. Does the experienced labor organizer have a similar ability to size up a crowded shop floor and see where the stress points are, and who the likely leaders are? Does a field officer in the infantry have the ability to mentally organize the flow of the battle through the fog of war and arrive at a perception of how things are going -- and what might work as a tactic for the next day? Does the ethnographer have the ability to put together the social cues that permit him or her to conclude that "there is some angry disagreement among members of the village today"? In each case I suspect that there is a good basis for saying, "yes, this is how observation of complex social situations goes for the expert observer." And this implies that there is a kind of social knowledge that is analogous to perception even though it involves a very great amount of cognitive

construction.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:48AM (-05:00)

What is to explain about violent crime?

Saturday, December 22, 2007

Every city has a crime rate -- the incidence of murders, assaults, car thefts, or burglaries per 100,000 residents. And there are very significant differences across cities and countries with respect to the incidence of violent crime. In particular, some cities in the world experience extremely high levels in the incidence of violent crimes (for example, Johannesburg, South Africa). Compare these national statistics describing "murders per 100,000 population": England/Wales, 1; USA, 6; Brazil and Russia, 21; Columbia, 58; South Africa, 59. Why is this? Why are some cities and countries so much more violent than others? What are the most important factors that cause a community to have a high (or low) rate of violent crime? Why do individuals in some societies have a higher propensity for violent crime than in others?

The study of the causes of violence and crime has been a part of western sociology since the beginning. A variety of causes have been suggested: the incidence of absolute poverty, the extent of inequalities, the phenomenon of relative deprivation, the drug trade, the breakdown of traditional community and family values, and the effects of racism, to name a few.

Notice that we can put the causal question in several ways:

- What causes variation across communities with respect to crime rates?
- What factors increase the likelihood of a particular individual becoming a violent criminal?
- What social factors cause an increase or reduction in the crime rate?

That is, we can ask about explaining variation across cases; we can ask about explaining particular individuals' behavior; we can ask about "inducing" and "inhibiting" causes of changes in the crime rate; and there are other causal questions as well. The final pair of questions have to do with explaining variation within a case across time.

Consider this small set of possible causal factors that might influence behavior:

- rational incentives (risk and gain calculation)
- material circumstances (unemployment, education)
- community cohesiveness
- a broad sense of injustice (exploitation, unfair exclusion)
- moral and religious values
- alienation and disaffection
- racial or ethnic polarization
- imitation of the behavior of others
- organizations (gangs, youth groups, social networks)
- laws and policing

Now we might try to construct an agent-centered theory of violent crime based on these sorts of factors conjoined with a description of the social environment at the time -- and then predict variation across time and place as a behavioral result of the incorporation of these factors influencing action.

A very different approach -- and one that is probably closer to the quantitative-methodology mainstream in sociology today -- is to assemble a set of cases (a list of US cities, for example); measure a number of variables for each city (unemployment rate, index of social capital, level of education, degree of neighborhood segregation, presence/absence of mass transportation, ...); and then test the degree of correlation that one or more of these variables has with the observed variation in the crime rate. Do variations in the incidence of violent crime correlate with levels of unemployment? Then unemployment is a plausible causal factor in determining the level of the crime rate. Does some measure of social capital correlate negatively with variations in the crime rate? Then the social cohesion that is hypothetically linked to higher scores for social capital in a community is a negative causal factor in variations in the crime rate. And so forth.

Both these approaches are compatible with the research methodology associated with trying to identify causal mechanisms. If it is in fact true that a young person's disposition to engaging in violent crime is decreased if he/she is a member of a church -- then we ought to find at the macro-level that a higher index of church membership will be associated with a lower crime rate. Reciprocally, if we discover a positive correlation between "degree of neighborhood segregation" and the crime rate -- then we need to be able to disaggregate the story and discover the individual-level mechanisms through which segregation increases individuals' propensity for violent crime.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:42PM (-05:00)

What is "understanding social life"?

Tuesday, December 25, 2007

There have been two very different approaches to social explanation since the nineteenth century, and they differ most basically over a distinction between "explanation" and "understanding" or "cause" and "meaning". This distinction divides over two ways of understanding a "why" question when it comes to social events. "Why did it happen?" may mean "What caused it to happen?"; or it may mean "Why did the agents act in such a way to bring it about?".

The verstehen approach holds that the most basic ontology of social life is the meaning of an action. Social life is constituted by social actions, and actions are meaningful to the actors and to the other social participants. Moreover, subsequent actions are oriented towards the meanings of prior actions; so understanding the later action requires that we have an interpretation of the meanings that various participants assign to their own actions and those of others. (Central exponents of this tradition include Weber, Dilthey, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer.)

This approach places interpretation of meaning at the center of social inquiry. And it drew much of its methodology and tools of inquiry from the hermeneutic tradition -- the tradition of biblical and literary interpretation stemming from Dilthey and other nineteenth-century German thinkers. This tradition is adapted to the "human sciences" by using the metaphor of action as text. The interpreter (a biographer, for example) considers the many elements of the action, life, or complex of actions, and attempts to arrive at an interpretation that makes sense of the various parts.

A central problem that authors in this tradition wrestle with is the "hermeneutic circle" -- the fact that there is no neutral, external standpoint from which to objectively measure the meaning of a system of signs or actions. Instead, interpretation begins and ends with the

given -- the text or the action -- and the only evidence available for assessing the interpretation is interior to the text itself. So it may appear that interpretations are self-confirming -- an unhappy conclusion if we think that social explanations ought to have rational justification and empirical support.

The hermeneutic approach got a large boost from the fertile field of interpretive anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s, especially through the work of Clifford Geertz and Turner. However, there is little evidence of a direct intellectual connection from hermeneutic philosophy to interpretive anthropology.

There are several valid insights that the verstehen approach depends on. Most important is the insistence on the point that social action is meaningful and intentional, and that it is both desirable and feasible to arrive at interpretations of these meanings. Moreover, being able to arrive at such interpretations is often essential to historical and ethnographic explanation. Geertz's interpretation of the Balinese cock-fight and Darnton's interpretation of the great cat massacre both illustrate this point: in neither case would we understand the behavior without a deep interpretation of the significances the participants attribute to their actions.

This said, it is incorrect to imagine that the verstehen approach is inconsistent with the causal approach. Rather, the two approaches are compatible and complementary. It is a fact that human action is meaningful and intentional, and all social science must take account of this fact. But it is also true that actions aggregate to larger causes and they have effects on social outcomes. Meaningful, deliberate action is often the mechanism through which a given set of institutional arrangements (a property system, say) cause a social outcome (slow investment in new technologies, say). So meanings are themselves causes and causal mechanisms (a point that Donald Davidson makes in the case of individual action).

Finally, a social science that restricted itself to hermeneutic interpretation would be radically incomplete. It would exclude from the scope of social science research the whole range of causal relationships, structural influences on action, and the workings of unintended consequences in social processes.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:05PM (-05:00)

Social causal explanations

Thursday, December 27, 2007

To explain an outcome is to demonstrate what conditions combined to bring it about -- what caused the outcome in the circumstances, or caused it to be more likely to occur. The most fundamental aspect of an explanation is a hypothesis about what caused the circumstance we want to explain. So social explanation requires that we provide accounts of the social causes of social outcomes. (There may be non-social causes of social outcomes -- e.g. "The Roman Empire declined because of the high concentrations of lead in wine vessels"; but these extra-social explanations don't really fall within the social sciences.)

So we need to raise two sorts of questions. First, what kind of thing is a social cause -- how do social facts cause other social facts? And second, what kind of social research can allow us to identify the causes of a social outcome or pattern? (Notice that explaining an outcome is very different from explaining a pattern.)

Generally speaking, a cause is a condition that either necessitates or renders more probable its effect, in a given environment of conditions. (For the philosophers, this means that "C is sufficient in the circumstances to bring about E or to increase the likelihood of E.") Normally a cause is also necessary for the production of its effect -- "if C had not occurreD, E would not have occurred." (The probabilistic version: "If C had not occurred, the likelihood of E would have been lower.) (Wesley Salmon explores the intricacies in much greater detail -- Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World.)

This account depends upon something that Hume abhorred: the idea of necessity. For natural causes we have a suitable candidate in the form of natural necessity deriving from the laws of nature: "C and the laws of nature => necessarily E." However, there are no "laws of society" that function ontologically like laws of nature. So how can there be "social necessity"? Fortunately, there is an alternative to law-based necessity, in the form of a causal mechanism. A mechanism is a particular configuration of conditions that always leads from one set of conditions to an outcome. Mechanisms bring about specific effects. (So we might say that mechanisms are widgets of natural laws.) For example, "over-grazing of the commons" is a mechanism of resource depletion. And it is the case that, whenever the conditions of the mechanism are satisfied, the result ensues. Moreover, we can reconstruct precisely why this would be true for rationally self-interested actors in the presence of a public good. So we can properly understand a claim for social causation along these lines: "C causes E" means "there is a set of causal mechanisms that convey circumstances including C to circumstances including E."

Are there any social mechanisms? There are many examples. "Collective action problems often cause strikes to fail." "Increasing demand for a good causes prices to rise for the good in a competitive market." "Transportation systems cause shifts of social activity anad habitation."

So this provides an answer to the first question: explaining a social outcome or pattern involves providing an account of the social-causal mechanisms that typically bring it about, or brought it about in specific circumstances.

Now let us turn to inquiry. How would we detect social causation? Fundamentally there are only three ways. We can exploit the mechanism requirement and seek out particular or common social mechanisms. Both social theory and process-tracing can serve us here. Second, we can exploit the probabilistic implications of a causal claim by looking for correlations and conditional probabilities among the conditions associated with hypothesized causal mechanisms. This feature underpins standard "large-N" quantitative research methods in social science. And third, we can exploit the "necessary and sufficient condition" feature by using comparative methods like Mill's methods. In each case, we must keep fully in mind the centrality of causal mechanisms. A discovery of a statistical association between X and Y is suggestive of causation, but we need to be able to hypothesize the mechanism that would underly the association if we are to attribute causation. Likewise, the discovery that a study of multiple cases suggests that A is necessary for E and A&B are sufficient for E requires us to consider the question, what is the concrete social mechanism that links A, B, and E?

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:44PM (-05:00)

A "peasant" revolution?

Thursday, December 27, 2007

The Chinese communist party became a peasant revolutionary party after the spectacular destruction of the urban basis of the movement by Chiang Kai-shek in Shanghai in 1927. But who and what was a peasant, and how did this group become a revolutionary group?

In one sense the answer is obvious. China's population consisted of a majority of poor farmers at the time of the collapse of the Qing dynasty, under a variety of forms of land tenure. They were poor, had little land, and were subject to exploitation by landlords, lenders, and the state. So we might say that this answers both questions: peasants were poor farmers, they were a large majority throughout China, and they were potentially revolutionary as a result of their poverty and exploitation. All that was needed was a party that could mobilize and activate them.

This response is too simple, however, for several reasons. First, the concept of peasant is a social and political construction. A "farmer" is an agricultural producer; but this fact about production status tells us little about how rural people defined their own social realities or the way that others defined them.

Second, the mobilization of "peasants" along class lines requires an organized political effort by a party that aggressively makes for the salience of class over other affinities -- kinship, lineage, regional identity, or ethnicity. Marx expressed his assessment of the lack of solidarity of the French peasantry of the 1840s in these terms: "A small-holding, a peasant and his family; alongside them another small-holding, another peasant and another family. A few score of these make up a village, and a few score of villages make up a Department. In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes" (Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte). In order for a population to become a self-conscious identity group, it is necessary for a deliberate process of identity-formation to take place. The CCP worked single-mindedly to create this affinity with class identity throughout the 1920-30s in rural China. (Lucien Bianco, Peasants Without the Party: Grass-Root Movements in Twentieth-Century China; Odoric Wou, Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan.)

And third, it turns out that the politically defined status of "peasant" incorporated its own definition of internal inequality -- between rich, middle, and poor peasants. These terms of internal differentiation played a prominent role in the mobilization strategies and policies of the CCP in its drive to revolution. The CCP emphasized conflicts within the class of peasants as much as the conflicts between peasants and others.

The mobilization strategies of the CCP of the 1930s were aimed at creating a large and energized supporting population of poor and middle peasants. They pursued this goal by recruiting local cadres who could communicate the party message to their intended supporters and by offering a program of land reform and social reversal that would strongly appeal to this group. Their efforts were successful in several important base areas, and the CCP was in fact able to cultivate a loyal base among poor and middle peasants. Moreover, this group increasingly provided recruits for middle and higher positions of leadership in the military and political organizations of the party.

So we might say that the peasant movement was in fact created and shaped by CCP doctrines in the 1930s as a contingent but portentious social force in China. And for the first 30 years of the Chinese communist state serious efforts were made to retain the loyalties of this social segment.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:51PM (-05:00)

How does philosophy help guide the sciences?

Friday, December 28, 2007

Philosophy observes the sciences. But it has also played a role in the formation of the sciences. And this is especially true in the case of the social sciences.

The idea here is an elusive one. It is that the founders of the social sciences – perhaps similar to all intellectual or creative founders – possessed framing assumptions, presuppositions, or intuitions about what their eventual product ought to look like. Various ideas capture some of this: presupposition, paradigm, guiding framework, tacit knowledge, or "style". A style of technology or architecture is a "mindset" that guides the creator into affirming one set of choices and denying another; ruling out certain solutions to a problem while favoring others. And many of these ideas derived from philosophy -- for example, empiricism, rationalism, deductivism, atomism, or reductionism.

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century founders of the social sciences had a set of intellectual interests that led them to ask questions about the way that society works. They were led to engage in careful, disciplined study of social phenomena. But how to proceed? What should the results look like? What modes of explanation should be pursued? What should they expect to find? None of the founders proceeded with a "blank slate". Instead, they were guided by specific intellectual hunches and presuppositions about what a scientific treatment of a subject ought to involve. The histories of physics, chemistry, and biology were very well known to the founders, and the chief logical characteristics of the science of these domains were also well understood. The "stylized facts" about what a domain of inquiry is and what a scientific study of a domain involves were fairly specific. It turns out that these facts were misleading in deep and broad ways when applied to the social world. And contemporary sociology continues to bear the imprint of these early presuppositions.

We might be tempted to call these assumptions about domain, method, and theory a "paradigm", but it is better to think of them as constituting a "proto-paradigm". "Paradigm" describes a more advanced stage of the formation of a field of knowledge. The framing ideas that guided the founders were less specific; they represented high-level, abstract presuppositions about the nature of science and the nature of any subject matter that is amenable to scientific study and explanation. They constitute a framework of advanced commonsense about the subject matter. We might describe this framework as a "folk philosophy of knowledge" that is to some extent unexamined but that guides the pursuit of knowledge, the form that it takes, and the ways in which it is evaluated.

Given these historical circumstances, naturalism as a "proto-paradigm" for the social sciences is unsurprising—even though it is profoundly misleading. The strongest — really, the only — examples of scientific achievement in the nineteenth century were in the fields of chemistry, physics, medicine, and biology. There was a developed "proto-theory" of nature that was the object of scientific study (the characteristics and metaphysics of law-governed natural phenomena). The natural world was conceived of

as a system of law-governed events and processes. And the logical characteristics of natural science theory were reasonably well understood as well: induction, discovery of laws and regularities, explanation through assimilation within a set of natural laws, confirmation.

There is a fundamental problem with this set of "naturalistic" presuppositions: social phenomena are constituted by a fundamentally different ontology. "Agents in structures" are the fundamental "molecules" of social life -- and this ontology should not be expected to give rise to strong regularities. Instead, we should expect a substantial amount of heterogeneity and plasticity among social entities and processes, and we should expect contingency and path-dependency in the unfolding of social phenomena.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:16AM (-05:00)

A non-naturalistic approach to social science

Friday, December 28, 2007

The most basic error that is conveyed by the naturalist framework into the premises of sociology—the folk epistemology—that was shared by Durkheim, Mill, and Comte, is the assumption that all phenomena are subject to laws; that the relevant laws are abstract and obscure; and that there is an orderly relationship between gross phenomena and a rising level of natural laws that embrace those observable phenomena. The task of scientific study is to discover this rising pyramid of regularities and laws (motions of planets ENCOMPASSED BY elliptical orbits ENCOMPASSED BY gravitational attraction ENCOMPASSING other phenomena such as tides). This model is then used to frame the sociologist's expectations of the orderliness of sociological observations and regularities. The social world is assumed to be a system of phenomena governed by hidden regularities and causal laws; the task of social science research is to discover these governing regularities and laws. . However, this conception of the world does not fit the domain of the social at all.

We can provide an alternative social ontology—a better grounding for sociological research. The social sciences could have begun with a greater degree of agnosticism about the orderliness of social phenomena. We could have started with the observations that—

- Social phenomena are created by human beings (deliberately, intentionally, or unknowingly)
- Human beings behave as a result of their socially constructed beliefs, values, goals, attitudes, modes of reasoning, emotions, …
- There is a wide range of variation that is visible among social arrangements and institutions, across cultures, across space, and across time (long duration and short duration)
- Social institutions, organizations, and structures have a degree of observable stability across cohorts and generations of the human beings who make them up
- There are social causes, and they are ordinary, observable, and mundane. They are variants of the agent-structure nexus.

These initial ontological observations would have led us to some framing expectations about the social and about the likely results of social science inquiry:

- contingency of social outcomes
- Variation of social trajectory

- Plasticity of social institutions
- Heterogeneity among instances of a “type” of social thing
- No “laws of motion” for development or modernization

And we might have set several research objectives for the social sciences:

- To study in some detail how various institutions work in different social settings (empirical, fact-driven observation and analysis)
- To study human behavior, motivation, and action – again, with sensibility to variation, without the assumption that there is one ultimate human nature or governing mode of behavior.
- To be as aware of variation and plasticity as we are attentive to the discovery of social regularities
- To discover and theorize some of the causal mechanisms that can be observed within social processes
- To identify weak regularities of behavior and institution through observation
- To theorize these regularities in terms of agent-structure dynamics; aggregation of features of decision-making; unintended consequences. For example, free rider phenomena (economists) and self-regulating commons (common-property resource institutions)

We then might have arrived at a different conception of what a “finished” social science might involve: not a deductive theory with a few high-level generalizations and laws, but rather an “agent-based simulation” that embodies as many of the characteristics and varieties of behavior as possible into the simulation, and then projects different possible scenarios. The ideal might have been “sim-society” rather than deductive-nomological theory.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:36AM (-05:00)

Power: corporations

Saturday, December 29, 2007

How do large corporations wield power? What are the kinds of outcomes that corporate leaders want to influence? What are the instruments available to them through which they can influence outcomes? And are there impersonal means through which corporations influence society -- i.e., wield power or exert causal influence?

Consider first the outcomes. Corporations are businesses with interests. These include first and foremost profitability -- short, medium, and longterm. Profitability is influenced by a number of economic, legal, and political factors: a favorable trading environment; a favorable environment for secure property and contract rights; a favorable regulatory environment; favorable and predictable relationships with the workforce and unions; and favorable attitudes from consumers and the public. So corporate officers are charged to do everything possible to bring about positive results for the company in all these spheres.

Lobbying is a central activity through which the corporation pursues its agenda. The corporation employs professionals at a range of levels whose job it is to persuade and influence political and agency actors -- legislators, staffers, agency officials, lower-level agency workers who can influence regulations and findings. Lobbying works through personal relationships, campaign support (including campaign gifts), and other forms of influence. (The subject of corruption and conflict of interest and commitment comes in

here, but not all lobbying effort
falls in that category.)

Advertising, communications, and public relations are related efforts by the corporation through which the corporation exercises influence. The corporation expends substantial resources to "get its message out" -- and these expenditures have measurable effects. Targeted audiences change their opinions and behavior as a result of these efforts.

So far we have identified instruments of suasion and incentives -- persuading various actors to act in ways that are favorable to the corporation. And these efforts are substantially effective because of the weight of the resources the corporation can devote to the effort. Are there also more coercive means available to the corporation? There are. A company can threaten various constituencies through redirection of business activities to compel actions favorable to its agenda. For example, it can threaten to close a factory, or to lay off a group of workers, or to move production to overseas locations. These threats influence the behavior of municipalities, state governments, and unions.

In some historical circumstances corporations can also use violence and the threat of violence as part of its strategy for achieving its agenda. Examples of violence and intimidation can be found in China and Columbia today, and in the British and American business- labor struggles of the past. Violence and intimidation are among the tools through which strategic actors may pursue their goals.

This inventory indicates that businesses behave strategically in pursuit of their interests; that they have means of influencing powerful political and social actors through resources, organization, and intimidation; and that the results of this strategic action over time significantly influence the social space in which business activity, political rule-setting, and labor activism occur. In other words, corporations have significant causal powers in modern societies, and corporations constitute a significant locus of power in the contemporary world.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:04AM (-05:00)

Impersonal social causes?

Sunday, December 30, 2007

There is a substantial place in social causation for mechanisms that link the intentions of powerful actors to the specific features of the outcome. "The outcome came about because the powerful actor wanted it to." Why are there no petroleum refineries in mid-town Manhattan? Because zoning and planning boards have deliberately excluded such activities.

But what about causal mechanisms that are not the result of strategic choices by social actors? Are there impersonal social causes?

There are rare but real instances of social changes that occur without any intermediary of social action -- for example, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the extinction of Pompeii. But these events fall outside the scope of the social sciences. And there are important social explanations that begin in impersonal features of the natural environment -- for example, the configuration of rivers in China's early history. But what makes these into social explanations is the analysis of the social behavior through which agents adapt

these conditions to their needs. (See Mark Elvin's truly excellent environmental history of China for more on this; The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China.) But social explanations always involve actors -- and that means that intentional social action always comes into the picture in some way. So we might begin by saying that there are no impersonal social explanations, if by that we mean "explanations of social outcomes that do not involve the actions of persons."

It is important to observe that there are actually two distinctions that are relevant here. There is the "personal-impersonal" distinction, and there is the "intended-unintended" distinction. In an obvious sense all social causation is "personal", in the sense that social causal mechanisms are always embodied in the constrained actions of socially constituted actors or persons. So the actions of deliberate actors are part of all social causation. But the intentions of the actors are often unrelated to the social outcome we are trying to explain. So in these cases the outcome is not caused by actors' intention that it should come about. In the refinery example -- it may be that there is no regulation prohibiting this kind of activity, but the cost of real estate makes the proposition unattractive from a cost-benefit perspective. On this scenario we would have the result occurring as an unintended consequence of the choices of a large numbers of independent actors.

These are the most interesting social explanations: explanations of social patterns or outcomes that are not the result of design or intention, but that nonetheless emerge through the purposive actions of large numbers of agents. These are "unintended consequences" explanations or "aggregative" explanations. We can quickly identify dozens of such examples: the silting of river deltas as a result of flood-management strategies upstream; the expansion of black-market sales of cigarettes as a result of new taxes on tobacco; the expansion of traffic flows as a result of the opening of the third harbor tunnel in Boston; etc. These explanations are "aggregative" in the sense that they work by "aggregating" the lower-level choices and preferences of individual actors into a higher-level social pattern. (Thomas Schelling offers numerous intriguing examples along these lines in his book, Micromotives and Macrobehavior.)

So now we can answer our original question. There are no social causes that work entirely independently from social actors, and actors are purposive. So all social causation stems from "intentional" human behavior; persons are always involved in social outcomes. However, there are many social outcomes that are unintended and unrecognized by all the participants. The participants' intentions are local and parochial; whereas the social outcome is large and unforeseen. These instances are the most interesting problems for social inquiry. We might refer to these as "agency-based explanations of unintended and unforeseen outcomes."

This suggests a different way of classifying social causes: outcomes that are the intended result of specific powerful actors (conspiracy, leadership, dictatorship); outcomes that are the result of strategic interaction among a small group of purposive agents (bargaining, collusion, cooperation); outcomes that result from concerted collective action by large groups with some sense of collective goals (boycotts, strikes); and outcomes that are the aggregate result of uncoordinated but constrained choices by large numbers of independent agents (markets, habitation patterns).

This classification also makes it more apparent why the concept of power is central in social explanation. The first three categories imply a distribution of powers across specific agents and groups, in order to account for the postulated connection between the agent's

purposes and the eventual outcome. And the fourth category implies the exercise of power by some other agency, to account for the observed constraints on choice that constitute the heart of this type of explanation.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:17AM (-05:00)

Social "laws" and causal mechanisms

Wednesday, January 02, 2008

Are there social regularities? Is there anything like a "law of nature" that governs or describes social phenomena?

My view is that this is a question that needs to be approached very carefully. As a bottom line, I take the view that there are no "social laws" analogous to "laws of nature", even though there are some mid-level regularities that can be discovered across a variety of kinds of social phenomena. But care is needed because of the constant temptation of naturalism -- the idea that the social world should be understood in strong analogy with the natural world. If natural phenomena are governed by laws of nature, then social phenomena should be governed by "laws of society." But the analogy is false.

Of course there are observable regularities among social phenomena. Urban geographers have noticed a similar mathematical relationship in the size distribution of cities in a wide range of countries. Durkheim noticed similar suicide rates among Catholic countries -- rates that differ consistently from those found in Protestant countries. Political economists notice that there is a negative correlation between state spending on social goods and the infant mortality rate. And we could extend the list indefinitely.

But what does this fact demonstrate? Not, I want to argue, that social phenomena are "law-governed". Instead, it results from two related facts. First, there are social-causal mechanisms; and second, there is some recurrence of common causes across social settings.
Take the mechanism of "collective action failures in the presence of public goods." Here the heart of the mechanism is the analytical point that rationally self-interested decision-makers will take account of private goods but not public goods; so they will tend to avoid investments in activities that produce public goods. They will tend to become "free riders" or "easy riders." The social regularity that corresponds to this mechanism is a "soft" generalization -- that situations that involve a strong component of collective opportunities for creating public goods will tend to demonstrate low contribution levels from members of affected groups. So public radio fundraising will receive contributions only from a small minority of listeners; boycotts and strikes will be difficult to maintain over time; fishing resources will tend to be over-fished. And in fact, these regularities can be identified in a range of historical and social settings.

However, the "free rider" mechanism is only one of several that affect collective action. There are other social mechanisms that have the effect of enhancing collective action rather than undermining it. For example, the presence of competent organizations makes a big difference in eliciting voluntary contributions to public goods; the fact that many decision-makers appear to be "conditional altruists" rather than "rationally self-interested maximizers" makes a difference; and the fact that people can be mobilized to exercise sanctions against free riders affects the level of contribution to public goods. (If your neighbors complain bitterly about your smoky fireplace, you may be incentivized to purchase a cleaner-burning wood or coal.) The result is that the free-rider mechanism

rarely operates by itself -- so the expected regularities may be diminished or even extinguished.

What I draw from this is pretty simple. It is that social regularities are "phenomenal" rather than "governing": they emerge as the result of the workings of common social-causal mechanisms, and social causation is generally conjunctural and contingent. So the regularities that become manifest are weak and exception-laden -- and they are descriptive of outcomes rather than expressive of underlying "laws of motion" of social circumstances.

And there is a research heuristic that emerges from this discussion as well. This is the importance of searching out the concrete social-causal mechanisms through which social phenomena take shape. We do a poor job of understanding industrial strikes if we simply collect a thousand instances and perform statistical analysis on the features we've measured against the outcome variables. We do a much better job of understanding them if we put together a set of theories about the features of structure and agency through which a strike emerges and through which individuals make decisions about participation. Analysis of the common "agent/structure" factors that are relevant to mobilization will permit us to understand individual instances of mobilization, explain the soft regularities that we discover, and account for the negative instances as well.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:46AM (-05:00)

Social description as science

Thursday, January 03, 2008

Descriptive research and writing in the social sciences is generally looked at with a degree of condescension. The complaint is that science should be explanatory, and descriptive work is both shallow and trivial. We can almost hear the doctoral supervisor responding to the candidate who has spent a year in primary research in the field and in tax offices in Indonesia, producing a finely detailed descriptive study of how the fiscal institutions actually work across levels and regions: "That's well and good, but what do you make of your findings? What patterns have you discovered? Why do the variations you've documented occur as they do? Where's your theory?"

The "shallow and trivial" criticism is unfounded and unjust. Our talented field researcher will have found an enormous and surprising range of variation among the institutions and practices he has studied. And these variations cannot be inferred from some general theory of fiscal institutions. They must be discovered and documented on the ground. Further, we can't come up with any useful theory of institutions in the absence of some rigorous, concrete, and particular descriptions of a variety of institutions. We need the complexity and texture of good, rigorous description to help produce genuinely explanatory theories. (Robert Klitgaard's treatment of corruption fits this description nicely; Controlling Corruption.)

So detailed descriptive research is important -- because the social world is unruly and varied, and there is no single rule or law that generates this diversity; and it is difficult, in that it requires extensive and disciplined efforts at observation and discovery. Moreover, descriptive research is theoretical in one important respect: deciding upon the features of the phenomena that are worth recording is itself the result of preliminary hunches about what is salient or significant. (Of course there is no such thing as pure description.)

At the same time, the critic is right in one important respect: having documented variation in practices and local implementation of the basic fiscal institutions, it is quite reasonable to expect the researcher to try to find some explanations of this variation. Our graduate student now needs to reconsider the manuscript and try to determine whether any of the variation and particularity makes sense from the point of view of known social mechanisms. Why did the Indonesian fiscal system evolve into the variegated structure it now consists of? And this is where social theory is most useful -- not as a grand explanatory scheme, but as many small bits of theory capturing some relevant features of behavior and institution-building in these particular circumstances. So, for example, our graduate student may notice that principal-agent problems are endemic in fiscal institutions. Given that taxes are being assessed and paid, all the participants have some motivation to subvert the process. So it may be that some observed variants can be explained as strategic efforts to solve principal-agent problems. Or as another example -- limited and unreliable forms of communication may exist in some parts of the country under study, and features of the fiscal system in these under-served regions may have been selected because they are less reliant on swift, accurate communication.

Maybe this gives a basis for assessing the role of descriptive inquiry in the social sciences.

- Because social phenomena are heterogeneous and plastic, there is an important and enduring role for careful descriptive inquiry. The task of discovering and documenting the variety and diversity of social phenomena is both important and intellectually challenging.
- Because social phenomena emerge from purposive human agency, there are an open-ended number of social mechanisms that are potentially relevant to the diversity that is discovered.
- And because we are ultimately interested in explaining as much variation as we can, it is desirable to bring those theoretical widgets to bear on various elements of the diversity that is discovered in the descriptive research.

And, finally, it is unrealistic to imagine that either description or theorizing can be conducted solely independently. Instead, description requires theorizing and conceptualizing, and theorizing requires some accurate descriptions of the world to work with. As Kant wrote in a different context, "Concepts without percepts are empty, percepts without concepts are blind."

(As I imagine the hypothetical example above I think of Alfred Russel Wallace's fine and detailed descriptions of the flora and fauna of the Malay archipelago, and the role that this detailed natural history played in the formation of his own and Darwin's theories of natural selection. The purpose of the theory was to find some degree of order in the intricate diversity of the biological domain. But the biology of species had a major advantage over the sociology of institutions and practices: there was in fact only one governing mechanism, random variation and selection, so it was possible to encompass the full range of observed diversity under a single ecological theory. The case is different in the social world because there are multiple independent causes leading to social differentiation.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:04PM (-05:00)

Biography and personality psychology

Thursday, January 03, 2008

Think about the relationship between researching a biography of a complex individual and compiling a set of theories about personality development. The individual, Mr. X, is a particular person whose life and personality took shape through a long series of contingent happenings. The biographer's task is to arrive at some insights into Mr. X's motivations and desires; his features of character (courage, magnanimity); his weaknesses; as well as providing an illuminating account of some of the shaping events and choices that Mr. X made along the way. Mr. X's actions and choices are comprehensible -- but in order to understand them we need to know what he thought, wanted, intended, resisted, and chose, and why. In other words, we need a fairly detailed profile of Mr. X's personality, preferences, and vanities. We need to know Mr. X as a particular and unique person.

Now it is worth commenting that this biographical description is itself a generalization. When we write that "Mr. X was concerned about how his actions were perceived, and often acted out of a desire to put his actions in a good light" -- we are making a generalization across Mr. X's lifetime of choices. And we are also hypothesizing something not directly observable -- a persistent feature of Mr. X's subjective world of choosing, his self-consciousness. In the course of the biography we might make statements such as "Mr. X chose to stay in his job at the New York Times because it was very prestigious; whereas Ms. Y was more adventurous in her career and moved to Slate.com." This comparison implies that both X and Y have persistent traits of personality -- traits that led them to make different choices under similar circumstances.

So a biography is a compilation of several different kinds of assertions or observations: some of the things that happened to the subject, some of the actions and choices the subject made, some hypotheses about the subject's personality and motivational system, and an interpretation of the causes and reasons of some of these choices. The biography asserts a degree of consistency over time -- Mr. X can be counted on to behave similarly in circumstances that raise the same intra-personal issues -- even as it documents the particularity and uniqueness of Mr. X in contrast to other persons in similar circumstances. So a biography combines particularity and a certain kind of generality.

Now consider a textbook in personality psychology. The textbook too is interested in explaining why people behave as they do. But it approaches the problem from the point of view of taxonomy, causal analysis, and generalized explanations. The taxonomy part comes in through the effort to describe a handful of personality "types" -- individuals sharing a cluster of personality characteristics that make them similar in action to each other and different from others. The causal analysis comes in through the door of a set of hypotheses about what constitutes a personality; how features of personality are embodied in the individual; how they are cultivated or shaped through development; and how they manifest in patterns of action. And the generalized explanations enter in the form of statements about groups of people sharing common personality features: "Ethnic massacres often occur as a result of manipulation of group emotions through the media." The task of the theories of personality psychology is to provide a basis for explaining behavior; but unlike biography, personality psychology singles out the common features of personality that are found in a whole group of actors.

Now, if the classification exercise could be done in a really successful way -- so that we

conclude that there are personality types A, B, and C, and here are the behavioral dispositions of the three types -- then biography would be unnecessary. All we need to know is whether Mr. X is an A, a B, or a C. In fact, however, we know that people are more varied than this. At best the small handful of personality types associated with personality theory can be construed as ideal types, pure versions of the various hypotheses; but we will also understand that very few people exactly embody exactly one of these ideal types. Instead, people's motivations and personalities are a blend of numerous currents; and the role of biography is to identify these particular confluences in the subject of interest.

This is an interesting contrast for the social sciences, because there is a parallel distinction in the description and analysis of social particulars. Sometimes social scientists are primarily interested in stripping the "individuals" they consider (wars, revolutions, cities) down to a small list of characteristics about which they attempt to arrive at generalizations. And sometimes they are interested in treating the "individual" as a complex particular with its own life history and personality. The urban geographer may want to consider all United States cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants as a group, and then to arrive at some hypotheses and generalizations about this set of cities. This is analogous to the personality psychology of the distinction. Or the urban geographer may want to focus in on the particular identity and persona of one city -- Chicago -- and treat it as a biographer might treat Franklin D. Roosevelt. Both approaches are legitimate. The second, however, is perhaps undervalued in the social sciences because of its particularity. As discussed in the previous posting, however, there are good reasons for thinking that understanding the richness of empirical detail of a city like Chicago is itself a worthwhile sociological task.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:31PM (-05:00)

How can race be a cause of something like asthma?

Friday, January 04, 2008

Though I've posed this posting around the question of "race and asthma," the question here isn't really about public health. It is rather concerned with the general question, how can a group characteristic be a causal factor in enhancing some other group characteristic?

Suppose the facts are these: that African-Americans have a higher probability of developing asthma, even controlling for income levels, education levels, age, and urban-suburban residence. (I don't know if the facts support this statement, but it is the logic that I am concerned with here.) And suppose that the researcher summarizes his/her findings by saying that "being African-American causes the individual to have a higher risk of developing asthma." How are we supposed to interpret this claim?

My preferred interpretation of statements like these is to hypothesize a causal mechanism, presently unknown, that influences African-American people differentially and produces a higher incidence of asthma. Here are a few possibilities:

- (a) African-Americans as a population have a lower level of access to quality healthcare and are more likely to be uninsured. Asthma is a disease that is best treated on the basis of early diagnosis. Therefore African--Americans are more likely

to suffer from undiagnosed and worsening asthma. This hypothesis is inconsistent with the assumed facts, however, in that the assertion is that the pattern persists even when we control for income.

- (b) Asthma is an inner-city disease. It is stimulated by air pollution. African-Americans are more likely to live in inner-city environments because of the workings of residential segregation. So race causes exposure which in turn causes a higher incidence of the disease. (Again, this hypothesis is inconsistent with the stated facts that stipulate having controlled for residence.)
- (c) There might be an unidentified gene that is more frequent in people with African ancestry than non-African ancestry and that makes one more susceptible to asthma. If this were correct, then we would expect the discrepancy to disappear if we control for frequency of this gene. Groups of white and black people randomly selected but balanced so that the frequency of the gene is the same in both groups should show the same incidence of asthma.
- (d) It could be that there is a nutritional component to the onset of asthma, and it could be that cultural differences between the two communities lead the African-American population to have higher levels of exposure to the nutritional cause of the disease.

And of course we could proliferate possible mechanisms.

In each case the logic of the account is similar. We proceed by hypothesizing a factor or combination of factors that increase the likelihood of developing asthma; and then we try to determine whether this collalateral factor is more common in the African-American community. Some of these stories would amount to spurious correlations, while others would constitute stories in which the fact of race (as opposed to a factor with which race is accidentally correlated) plays an essential role in the causal story. (Reduced access to healthcare and inner city air pollution fall in this category, since it is institutional race segregation that causes the higher-than-normal frequency of urban residence for African-Americans.)

So this is a potential interpretation of the causal meaning of a statement like "race causes an increased risk of X." But is this now a fact about individuals or groups? Do the causal interpretations here disaggregate from group to individual? Does "higher incidence in the population" disaggregate onto statements about the factors that influence the individual's separate risk? It appears that this causal mechanism interpretation does in fact disaggregate to the individual level, since each describes a factor that pertains to the individual and that directly influences his/her likelihood of developing the disease.

What would be most perplexing is if there were multiple sets of causal mechanisms, each independent of the others and each creating a race-specific difference in incidence of the disease. For example, it might be that both exposure to air pollution and lack of health insurance lead to a higher incidence of the disease; and further, it might be that inner-city residents do in fact have adequate healthcare but exposure to inner-city pollution; while suburban African-Americans might have less healthcare and limited exposure to air pollution. In this set of facts, both African-American populations would display higher-than-normal incidence, but for different and unrelated reasons.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:19PM (-05:00)

What does rational choice theory explain?

Monday, January 07, 2008

Rational choice theory could be advanced as a pure set of axioms embodying a formal representation of individual choice under circumstances of uncertainty and strategic interaction. Decision theory incorporates the idea of maximizing utility under circumstances of uncertainty and risk. The basic rule is that the decision-maker could collect information about the utility and probability of each feasible choice, and choose the option that affords the maximum expected utility. (Here the decision-maker is playing against nature.) Game theory expands the range of decision-making situations by giving a representation of strategic interaction: situations in which the actor's outcome depends upon the choices or strategies made by one or more rational opponents. Mathematical game theorists have demonstrated that this problem too admits of rational solution. The actor needs to discover the choices available to him/her and each other player and he/she needs to assign utilities for each possible outcome for each player. It is then demonstrable, for both zero-sum and non-zero-sum games, that there are one or more equilibrium sets of strategies for each player. This means that there is a single strategy or a mixed set of strategies with the property that, given rational choices by the opponent, there is no other strategy available to self that would produce a higher utility for self. (It may be observed that for games with many strategies for each player, discovery of the equilibrium set may not be practical.) Certain two-person games have received a great deal of analysis, including the prisoners' dilemma, the game of chicken, and a range of cooperative games.

So much for the formal theory. In what sense does rational choice theory or game theory provide a basis for an explanation of real social outcomes?

We might begin a response to this question by saying that the axioms have empirical content as descriptions of real human decision-making. Real decision-makers do consider alternative choices in terms of the value and probability of the outcome. Moreover, actors who systematically break the expected utility rule will do less well than those who act according to the rule. So non-expected-utility actors will either learn or disappepear if the stakes are high. Likewise, in strategic situations (those depending on the independent actions of other deliberative agents), actors try to choose their strategy based on an analysis of the future choices of other players. So, once again, rational choice theory appears to capture an important dimension of real human decision making.

As noted in a prior posting, it goes without saying that human reasoners are not entirely conformant to the axioms -- norms intervene, computational limits interfere, and the assesment of risky situations appears to be systematically divergent from the expected-utility model. In fact, these deviations create the subject matter for experimental or behavioral economics. (Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases.)

But given that there is some degree of correspondence between RC axioms and real human reasoning, we might say that RC theory provides an empirically grounded way of modeling certain real situations of decision making and strategic interaction. The pressing question is whether the empirical failures of the axioms as a description of real actors are sufficient to thoroughly invalidate the models. And it would appear that there are specific social settings that are likely to represent something like the pure case of rational decision-making as hypothesized by RC theory.

This implies in turn that there is a realistic basis for treating RC theory as a possible source of real empirically grounded explananations of observed social behavior. For example, suppose we are interested in the distributive features of WTO treaties or the incidence of peasant rebellions in late imperial China. We might model the WTO problem by treating nations as rational actors, attributing a set of utilities and probabilities to them, and using the findings of bargaining theory to predict the nature of the distribution of benefits and burdens in a series of agreements. Or we might regard the occurrence of a rebellion as a choice situation for each potential rebel that involves multiple outcomes, each with a utility and a probability. And we might hypothesize that rebellions will be most frequent in situations where the costs of participation are lowest and the rewards are greatest (James Tong, Disorder Under Heaven: Collective Violence in the Ming Dynasty).

In each case we have taken an abstract mathematical system, used it to create a model of the actual social situation of interest, and have then solved the terms of the model. This solution can then be interpreted as a prediction or post-diction of the actual situation, and we can compare the model's results with empirical and hisistorical facts.

(A very negative assessment of the empirical utility of rational choice theory is offered in Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science. Their skepticism is taken on by many authors in Jeffrey Friedman's edited volume, The Rational Choice Controversy: Economic Models of Politics Reconsidered.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:57PM (-05:00)

Collective behavior and resource mobilization theory

Monday, January 07, 2008

The study of collective behavior and social movements has been a central sub-discipline of sociology since the 1970s. This is understandable for several reasons -- first, because collective behavior is inherently an important sociological process, and second, because the 1960s and 1970s witnessed particularly significant social movements in the US and other parts of the world. The US civil rights movement, the Vietnam anti-war movement, Czechoslovakia and France in 1968, and a variety of anti-colonial struggles in Asia, Latin America, and Africa made social movements particularly salient for sociologists in the 70s and 80s.

There are several different kinds of research questions that can be posed about social movements. One line of inquiry is descriptive and ethnographic. Researchers could immerse themselves in the concrete details of specific examples of social movements, discovering some of the specific characteristics and processes that were to be found in specific examples. Moreover, researcher could recognize the importance of failure and provide a similar level of description and narrative for failed social movements as well. This kind of descriptive research is very important in the study of any complex social phenomenon.

Second, given the interest that sociologists have in the explanation of social processes, it would be natural for sociologists to attempt to discover the causes of successful social mobilization. Comparative sociologists might approach this task by trying to discover

some macro-social factors that would appear to distinguish successful from unsuccessful mobilizations. In other words, they might isolate a handful of examples of successful and unsuccessful social movements, and then use sociological theory and imagination to identify a set of macro-factors that might be thought to be conducive to (or inhibiting of) successful social mobilization. This strategy suggests use of Mill's methods to sort out necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the outcome. And it would issue in pronouncements like "successful social movements require X, Y, and Z as necessary conditions."

A third possible approach combines some features of both of these. This third approach acknowledges that each social event embodies a great deal of particularity and contingency -- thus requiring a substantial amount of descriptive research. But this third approach also postulates that there are causes of successful and unsuccessful mobilization and that these take the form of concrete social-causal mechanisms. So this approach directs the researcher to engage in concrete research with the goal of discovering some of the concrete social mechanisms that appear to have been critical. This research in turn has some promise in providing the basis for some limited generalizations in the study of social movements. If we find that there are some common challenges that efforts at social mobilization confront, this is a beginning of a more general treatment. And if we find that there are a handful of key mechanisms that recur in many cases, this further supports the development of more generalized statements about mobilization. (This is roughly the approach that McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly take in Dynamics of Contention.)

Now let's return to the role that resource mobilization theory plays in the study of social movements. This concept is said to be one of the primary theories of social movements. Its primary competitor on the 1980s was "political process theory." My question here is a simple one: in what sense do either of these concepts function as theories of social movements? If they are intended to serve as nouns in sentences like these -- "Social movements always occur in circumstances where there is more X in the social context" -- then I want to say that neither concept is likely to serve well and neither really functions as a theory of collective behavior. This usage is attempting to fulfill the second project above, namely, offering an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions of mobilization. However, given the contingency and heterogeneity of social events, it is unlikely that there are any such conditions. But the situation is much better if we take the view that both "resource mobilization" and "political process" theories serve to describe social mechanisms that are found in many different instances of social movements -- though often in different forms and levels of importance. On this approach, "resource mobilization" is a theory of a social process or circumstance that is a relevant causal mechanism in many different instances of social movements. But it does not function as a general theory of social movements; instead, it is a developed description of a social mechanism that can be recognized in a variety of contexts (not all of which involve social movements).

In other areas of science a theory of a domain is thought to be a compact set of hypotheses that explain all the phenomena of the domain. "Resource mobilization" and "political process" cannot function in this way. However, each of these concepts can function as a description of a limited but real social mechanism; and in this way they each can play a constructive role in explaining important instances of collective mobilization and social movements.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:18PM (-05:00)

Is there such a thing as capitalism?

Tuesday, January 08, 2008

Marx's central theoretical concept is "capitalism." He wanted to provide a theory of the capitalist mode of production; he wanted to discover the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production; and he believed that there was a compact structural identity that is shared by capitalist economies. Later Marxist economists refined the concept somewhat by distinguishing among various stages of capitalist development, with thinkers such as Ernest Mandel and Paul Sweezy focusing on "late capitalism".

My question here is a simple one. From the point of view of social ontology and concept formation in sociology -- does it make sense to think of capitalism as a single thing with multiple instances across time and space? Is there a reason to think that "England, 1880," "Germany, 1910," "Japan, 1960," "United States, 1980," and "France, 2000" are all instances of a single economic system?

Consider briefly Marx's account of the core features of capitalism. It is an economic system based on a particular and distinctive property system: private property in the means of production (capital) and private ownership of labor by the worker (labor). The worker is free to sell his/her labor power to multiple owners of capital; but, having been separated from all other forms of access to means of production, the worker is not free to withhold his/her labor altogether. So the worker is dependent on the capitalist for access to the means of subsistence; and the capitalist is dependent upon the worker as the creator of surplus value. It is a system that is premised on surplus extraction by owners of capital from the producers of value (workers). It is a system based on accumulation: constant growth and expansion of the appropriation of surplus value (profits). And it is a system based on accumulation rather than consumption. And, finally, Marx believes that these social institutions create an institutional logic for capitalist economies that is different from other modes of production -- a tendency towards technological innovation, a tendency towards a falling rate of profit, the creation of an "industrial reserve army," and the creation of a tendency towards economic crisis. It is this claim that permits Marx to assert that he has produced a theory that encompasses a whole class of social formations, rather than being simply a description based on a single case, British capitalism of mid-nineteenth century.

In order to carry this concept through, we would need to postulate that there is a core set of economic features and institutions that constitute the "essence" of capitalism; that these core features recur across multiple historical social formations; and that the differences that exist across historical cases are non-essential, accidental, epiphenomenal, or super-structural.

And differences there are, of course. One important dimension of difference is the degree and nature of state involvement in the economy. But other differences are equally important: the subtle but distinctive differences in property systems that exist in England, Germany, Japan, or the United States; the differences that exist in regulatory regimes (such as those documented by Frank Dobbin); the cultural differences that exist across "capitalist" societies with respect to attitudes towards wealth, the environment, or inequalities; and so on for a continuing and broad range of differences across societies.

Given this fact of sociologically important differences across historical instances of capitalism, we appear to have two theoretical choices. The first is to postulate that the

common, core institutions of capitalist societies impose a logic of development on capitalist societies that is more fundamental than any of the evident differences across instances. The other is to judge that the concept of capitalism is simply a nominal social category, grouping together a number of societies which have some similarities and also important differences. Or, following Weber, we might say that capitalism is an ideal type, an organizing and idealized concept that singles out a set of features that often hang together, but recognizing that no particular society perfectly exemplifies all these features.

It seems to me that Marx fell into a fetishim of his own in reifying the capitalist mode of production as a general historical category. We are better off following the lead of the new institutionalists, recognizing that every society has a somewhat different configuration of basic institutions; and acknowledging that these differences make a difference in the development and historical trajectory of these societies. There are important commonalities across many or most of the societies that Marx would call "capitalist" -- a deep conflict of interest between capital and labor, a likelihood that economic property ownership will support political power and influence, and other common features. But to judge that "every capitalist society develops in the same way" goes well beyond what history or theory would support. Instead, we need to have specific, factual analysis of each of the societies we are interested in, and should highlight the differences that exist as well as the commonalities that recur. This finding takes us further down the road of emphasizing particularity and difference as much as generalization and regularity in social science theorizing.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:33PM (-05:00)

Coverage of the social sciences

Thursday, January 10, 2008

Suppose we took the view that the social sciences ought to provide sufficient conceptual and methodological tools to analyze and explain any kind of social behavior. This would be a certain kind of completeness: not theoretical or explanatory completeness, in the sense of having a finished set of theories that can explain everything, but conceptual completeness, in the sense that there are sufficient conceptual resources to give a basis for describing every form of social behavior, and methodological completeness, in the sense that for every possible research question there are starting point for inquiry in the social sciences. And, finally, suppose we stipulate that there are always new hypotheses to be discovered and new theories to be invented.

If this is one of the ultimate aspirations for the social sciences, then we can ask -- how close is the current corpus of social science research and knowledge to this goal?

One possible answer is that we have already reached this goal. The conceptual resources of anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology serve as a "fish-scale" system of conceptual coverage that gives us a vocabulary for describing any possible configuration of social behavior. And the most basic ideas about empirical research, causal reasoning, hypothetical thinking, and interpretation of meaning give us a preliminary basis for probing and investigating any of the "new" phenomena we might discover.

Another possible answer goes in the opposite direction. The concepts of the social science disciplines are parochial and example-based. When new forms of social

interaction emerge we will need new concepts on the basis of which to describe and represent these social behaviors. So concepts and empirical knowledge must go hand in hand, and new discoveries will stimulate new concepts as well.

Consider this thought experiment. Suppose the social sciences had developed to this point minus micro-economics. The reduced scheme would involve many aspects of behavior and thought, but it would have omitted the category of "rational self-interest." Is this a possible scenario? Would the reduced set be complete in the sense described above? And what kind of discovery would be required in order for these alternative-world social scientists to progress?

The incompleteness of alternative-world social science is fairly evident. There would be important ranges of behavior that would be inscrutable without the concept of rational self-interest (market equilibria, free-rider problems). And the solution would appear fairly evident as well. These gaps in explanatory scope would lead investigators to ask, what is the hidden factor we are not considering? And they would be led to discover the concept of rational self-interest.

The moral seems to be this: it is always possible that new discoveries of anomalous phenomena will demonstrate the insufficiency of the current conceptual scheme. And therefore there is never a point at which we can declare that science is now complete, and no new concepts will be needed.

At the same time, we do in fact have a rough-and-ready pragmatic confidence that the social sciences as an extended body of theories, concepts, and results have pretty well covered the primary scope of human behavior. And this suggests a vision of the way the social sciences cover the domain of the social as well: not as a comprehensive deductive theory but rather as an irregular, overlapping collection of concepts, methods, and theories -- a set of fish-scales rather than an architect's blueprint for all social phenomena.
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:34PM (-05:00)

Charting inequality

Tuesday, January 15, 2008

Inequality is a central and familiar topic for sociological research (as it is for social and political philosophy). But it is worth probing what kinds of inequality may exist in society and what kinds of explanations might serve to account for these various social processes and outcomes. What do we want to know about social inequalities?

Most evidently we can observe inequalities across individuals and groups with respect to the level of attainment of various important social goods: income, wealth, home ownership, health status, educational attainment, and employment, to name several. It is trivial to observe that there are differences across individuals with respect to these goods -- John has higher income and better health than Phil. What is less trivial is the discovery that members of a group, defined in terms of one or more socially significant properties, show differences with respect to these outcomes: inequalities of income between men and women, inequalities of incidence of diabetes across white and black adults, differences in educational attainment across rural, suburban, and urban residence, and so forth. Once we have identified inequalities like these across social groups, we want to have a causal explanation of the differences. What are the social processes through

which these differences in outcome arise?

A related kind of inequality is somewhat less tangible. It has to do with unobservable social properties like status, power, or privilege. We can't directly measure this person's total social power or that person's social status. But we can arrive at comparative judgments about the relative level of status and power for various individuals, and we can likewise make comparative judgments about these qualities as exhibited by various social groups. Once again the question of social causation arises: what are the social processes that give rise to different levels of power, status, or privilege for various social groups?

In each instance we want to know what the social processes and mechanisms are that proliferate outcomes differentially across groups defined by such characteristics as race, gender, income status, etc. What factors and processes cause the occurrence of inequalities with respect to a social good across social groups defined by a socially salient property (race, gender, age)? If there is a measured difference with respect to the social property across two groups, there must be a causal factor that distinguishes the groups. A natural hypothesis is that human talents and personalities are randomly distributed across all human beings. On this assumption, we should expect that there will be no differences of outcome across social groups that are purely based on differences of talent, since by hypothesis there is no difference in the distribution of talents across randomly selected groups. So if there are observed differences in outcome, we need to find a social process that would explain the differences across groups. There must be a causal factor that explains the difference.

We might say that there are only a few basic possibilities. Members of the groups might possess personal characteristics differentially that causally produce the good. This might be the result of filtering or differential recruitment into the group. Second, the mechanisms assigning the good to individuals might discriminate on the basis of the property or a correlated property. Third, membership in the group might give members differential access to resources or opportunities that are themselves productive of the good.

So far we have formulated the problem as one of explaining inequalities across groups defined by some other feature. But there is a separate issue about inequalities that sociologists address. Suppose we notice that the “rich” are gaining a higher percentage of income over time and the “poor” a falling percentage. These two groups are defined with respect to the very property with which they are measurably unequal. Formulated from this perspective, the question is this: what are the causal factors possessed by the group of “rich” that accounts for their high income, and conversely for the “poor”? Upon investigation we might find that the two groups are different in a variety of ways: amount of higher education, place of residence, race, age. This might lead us to ask the question, are some of these factors causal with respect to income; are other factors collateral effects of high income; and are yet others simply the non-causal correlates of the truly causal factors?

This suggests two angles of approach on the question of inequalities across groups. One is to single out the two populations at opposite ends of a particular spectrum of difference and examine their various characteristics. The other is to single out a socially salient property (race, for example) and investigate whether there are differences with respect to the social good (income). The first cut raises the question, what factors distinguish the high-achieving and low-achieving groups that might explain the observed differences; the second asks, why is the property causally relevant to the distribution of the good?

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:01PM (-05:00)

Alienation and subjectivity

Saturday, January 19, 2008

Marx provided a rigorous basis for analyzing the facts about exploitation in a class society. This is on the materialistic side of the equation -- interests, resources, consumption. But he also provided what must be considered pathbreaking writing about workers' subjectivity -- their state of consciousness, their subjective frameworks for understanding the world they inhabit, and the ways in which their identities are forged. At a distance of one hundred seventy years, this effort at analysis of subjectivity seems remarkably current. It harmonizes with the cultural turn in some of the social sciences and with feminist theorizing about the lived experience of women. It suggests the value of empirical ethnographic work on the experience and mentality of workers. And it is unfinished business.

What Marx had to say about the subject is mostly expressed in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. The concept of alienation refers to separation from something important. In EPM Marx analyzes the structure of the production process in a factory in capitalism. And he finds that the nature of this process works to alienate the worker from the product (limited consumption), the labor process (because his/her labor is commanded rather than freely expressed), from one's social nature (because of factory work rules that prohibit talking and collaborating), and from "species-being" (the worker's essence as a free, social, self-directed creator). So the causes of worker alienation are to be found in the workings of coercive relations of production that deny the worker the opportunity for free creativity and self-expression.

There are several other concepts in Marx's work that get some grip on subjectivity -- the fetishism of commodities, the idea of class consciousness, and the idea of ideology and ultimately false consciousness. These are all concepts through which Marx sought to explore the main features of worker subjectivity -- the ways in which ideas and mental frameworks structure one's experience of the world and the ways in which these mental structures are "determined" or influenced by social relations. And a central concern of Marx's was to understand the subjectivities underlying political consciousness and mobilization.

There are two important points here. First, there is the formulation of an important intellectual task -- that of formulating a set of concepts that permit us to analyze and explore mentality or consciousness. And this body of research should also give us a basis for understanding political behavior. People's thoughts and assumptions influence their politicl behavior. Second, and more distinctive of Marx, is the formulation of an agenda of explanation, a sociology of consciousness. Marx wants to discover some of the ways that historical circumstances, economic structures, and social relations of production influence or determine these features of historically situated consciousness. He wants to know how it is that "the hand mill gives you the feudal lord". The theory of ideology is one such effort -- a causal theory that says that the interests of powerful people shape the consciousness of the worker. But it is evident that this theory is just the beginning.

Likewise, Marx offers a materialist theory of alienation. Social circumstances -- the social relations of production and the factory system -- produce a subjective effect -- the

worker's alienation. And similarly with commodity fetishism, reification, and false consciousness. These ideas moved forward in the twentieth century in the hands of Antonio Gramsci (in his concepts of hegemony and the intellectual) and in the thinking of theorists in the Critical Theory tradition (Horkheimer, Adorno, Wellmer).

The reason I think it is worthwhile recalling this history in a few hundred words is that our goal is to -- understand society. This means finding the concepts necessary to probe objective social factors and causes. But equally it requires coming to grips with subjectivity and its historical and social conditions. So finding the tools that will allow us to describe, analyze, and explain the fluid formations of mentality, identity, and consciousness is a leading challenge for a more satisfactory social science. And Marx's early ideas about alienation and fetishism provide some good starting points.

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:12AM (-05:00)

Alienation and anomie

Sunday, January 20, 2008

It is interesting to compare Durkheim and Marx on their ideas about modern consciousness. Durkheim focused on social solidarity as one of the important functions of a social order: individuals had a defined place in the world that was created and reinforced by the social values of morality, religion, and patriotism. He observed that these strands of solidarity are stronger or weaker in different societies, and he also observed that some modern social forces tend to break down these moral strands of social cohesion -- the creation of large cities, for example. In his theory of suicide, he highlights the situation of "anomie" to refer to the circumstance of individuals whose relationship to the social whole is weak, and he explains differences in suicide rates across societies as the result of different levels of solidarity and its opposite, anomie.

Marx's concept of alienation involves a somewhat different kind of separation and breakdown -- separation of the person from his/her nature as a free producer and creator, and separation of the person from his/her natural sociality. Marx thinks of affirming social relations as founded on equality and freedom. So modern capitalist society is destructive of true sociality.

What is interesting in this comparison is that both Durkheim and Marx appear to be diagnosing a similar feature of modernity. In Durkheim's case there is an implicit contrast between a pre-modern world in which individuals have a well-defined social and moral place and the contemporary world in which these strands of solidarity are breaking down. In Marx's case the contrast is forward-looking. Marx compares the present -- the factory -- with the future -- a society of free, equal, social producers. But in each case the theorist is grappling with an absence in modernity -- an absence of a social and moral setting that gives the individual a basis for self-respect and sociable collaboration with others. The social itself is breaking down. (This is a theme with other social theorists as well; for example, in Tönnies' distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. Peter Laslett's title The World We Have Lost, England Before the Industrial Age captures some of the same idea.)

Coming forward to the social theories of the late twentieth century, these issues continue to fascinate some social observers. Robert Putnam's work on trying to measure the

changing density of civic involvement (social capital) is a different perspective on Durkheim's concept of solidarity. (Another great title -- Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community.) Sociologists who focus on disaffected young people are raising similar issues. And the New Left sociology and theory of workers' alienation from society picks up where Marx left off on this issue.

Is the time right for a new round of thinking about the nature of social consciousness and social solidarity? Do we need some new concepts of how ideas and identities contribute to a social whole? Is the study and theorizing of social subjectivity an important aspect of the challenge of sociology?

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:36AM (-05:00)

Interview with Mayer Zald

Sunday, January 20, 2008



This week I completed an interview and discussion with Mayer Zald in the department of sociology at the University of Michigan. (The interview is part of an ongoing project of mine and is posted on my webpage and on YouTube.) Mayer's career has been a long and productive one -- his first publication was over fifty years ago, and his ideas have shaped quite a bit of the discussion in the past several decades in the fields of social movements and the sociology of organizations. Mayer did his Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Michigan in 1961, and has taught at Michigan and Vanderbilt during a long and distinguished career. Mayer was very much influenced by some of the ideas and approaches of the Chicago school of sociology, and these influences persist in his thinking today. As he puts it in the interview, "I was trained as a social psychologist, and George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley were the founding fathers for American social psychology."

Mayer surprised me at the beginning of the interview by defining social phenomena in terms of "signifying" and communicating -- rather than in terms of rationality, purposive behavior, and collective action. Given how important collective action and social movements have been in Mayer's research, I had expected that strategic behavior and purposive choice would be the organizing concept, but it wasn't. (He pointed out that rational choice theory doesn't have a lot of credibility in sociology, though there is a difference between the formalisms of rational choice theory and the more general concept of social action as guided by purposive, intentional agents.)

Like all creative thinkers -- in the social sciences and in other fields as well -- Mayer continues to think freshly about the puzzles and processes that the social world confronts us with. He continues to wonder whether there are new approaches that might be taken to shed more light on the sociological processes that we observe. For example, Mayer has paid a lot of attention in the past several years to the question of how the methods and approaches of the humanities might be valuable in sociological research.

Mayer also has a very reflective perception of the way in which sociology has developed over the past fifty years, and the ways in which the sub-disciplines have proliferated. And he has taken a fresh look at the question of what counts as "progress" or cumulativeness in the social sciences.

What I find fascinating and valuable about doing these interviews is the insight that comes from talking with a smart, innovative and experienced researcher with a long view of the social science disciplines. Somehow this level of discussion seems very different from reading the scholar's published work. It is possible to probe into issues that don't necessarily come into central focus in the published work, and it is possible to watch the gifted scholar's mind at work. And it is possible to get past the big headlines of the person's work and dig more deeply into the intellectual challenge of understanding society.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:27AM (-05:00)

Social construction?

Sunday, January 20, 2008

It is common to say that various things are "socially constructed". Gender and race are socially constructed, technology is socially constructed, pain and illness are socially constructed. I am inclined to think that these various statements are reasonable -- but that they mean substantially different things and are true in very different ways. So it is important to be more explicit about what we mean when we refer to social construction.

There is one broad distinction that is most fundamental in this context -- the distinction between the construction that happens in the formation of knowledge and that which occurs in the social process involving self- and other-representing agents. The distinction is one between the observer and the observed, and it is not absolute. Participants are themselves knowledge producers, and what we will recognize as their social construction involves their creation of schemes of representation. Nonetheless, there is an important line to draw between the constructions of the observer and the participant.

The crux of the issue is whether social reality is the creation of the men and women who make it up, or whether the reality is shaped and created by the conceptual lenses through which the observer frames the social phenomena. As a social realist, I want to maintain the separation between the social reality as constituted and experienced by the actors and the conceptual schemes of the observer. This position implies rejection of the epistemological version of social constructivism, the view that the observer's concepts determine social reality.

There is a complication that needs to be addressed but that doesn't change the basic perspective of realism. This is the point that in some unusual circumstances it is the case that scientific concepts and theories feed back into behavior and thought of participants. The definition of some mental illnesses is a good example, as is the form of a variety of human institutions such as the factory or the prison: concepts constructed by social theorists and critics feed back into the design of the institution with the result that the next iteration of the institution is indeed partially the construction if the theorist. But these are exceptions, not the rule.

So in what sense are gender, race, or technology instances of social construction from a realist perspective? It is a social reality that societies embody identities for various groups

of individuals and these identities are framed by the thoughts, behavioral, and strategies of people in society. Moreover, these thoughts and behaviors change over time as a result of the contestation that occurs around the identities. So the formulation of the identity of "African-American professional," "Jewish garment worker," or "gay Texan" is ultimately the result of a process of contestation, repression, and interactive social behavior. It is socially constructed through visible social processes and mechanisms. And it is constructed, not by the external observer, but by the active and subjective participants.

And what about technology? In what sense is the evolution of a technology like the bicycle or automobile socially constructed? (Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change) What historians of technology usually mean by this assertion is a denial of the idea that there is an inherent pathway of technology change that is implied by efficiency and the natural properties of materials and designs. Against this inevitable-ism of function, historians note that the actual path of technology development is most commonly driven or constrained by cultural preferences and expectations. Young men wanted an exciting adventure in their automobile in the 1910s -- and so the boring electric car was doomed (Gijs Mom, The Electric Vehicle: Technology and Expectations in the Automobile Age). Weapons designers shared a culture of precision -- and so inertial navigation superceded radio-guided systems (the predecessor of GPS) (Donald Mackenzie, Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance). In other words -- technologies are socially constructed by the imperatives of culture in the surrounding society.

So there is a sense in which social constructivism is true and informative -- and thoroughly consistent with social realism. And there is another sense in which the phrase is extreme, philosophical, and inconsistent with an empirical and realist study of social reality.

(Ian Hacking has an interesting take on these issues in The Social Construction of What?.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:57PM (-05:00)

Was Alexis de Tocqueville a social scientist?

Thursday, January 24, 2008

Alexis de Tocqueville is sometimes counted among the founding influences in modern sociology -- one of the intellectual progenitors of the discipline in the 1830s-50s. An aristocrat in post-revolutionary France, de Tocqueville played several roles in his life: historian, politician, traveler, and social observer. My question here is a specific one: in what ways did Tocqueville's writings and thinking make an important contribution to sociology? And is there anything in his writings that can serve as an important angle of view today as we consider new approaches to sociology?

Tocqueville's relevance to sociology derives from at least three features of his thinking: his enormous interest in social observation -- in France, in Britain, in Algeria, and in America; his historical approach to understanding society -- the importance of placing contemporary changes into a historical context; and his causal and comparative imagination -- his desire to discover the causes of some of the patterns and differences he discerned in comparable societies.

I suppose that the books that brought him the greatest recognition reflect these three features of his intellectual persona. Democracy in America combines his appetite for discovering and describing the small but telling details of a society -- the features that mark it as an individual distinct from other contemporary societies, along with an interest in discovering the causes and effects of large features of the societies he observed. This is an intriguing combination of the particular and the general, the small and the large in a modern society. (This feature of his sociological imagination makes me think most of Simon Schama's historical writing -- for example, in Landscape And Memory.) On the side of explanation, Tocqueville was interested in finding the ways in which environment, morality, and civic arrangements combined to produce distinctive patterns of behavior and modes of thought; these become large causal factors in his writings, to which he attributes some of the distinctive features of American values and behavior. And he singled out large features of American society for special study -- democracy, town and village life, the relations among the classes of society, the workings of education, and the workings of American market institutions.

The Ancien Regime and the Revolution illustrates Tocqueville's historical imagination and his effort to place the largest event of the century -- the French Revolution -- into a context of moral and civic factors that combined to make the revolution inevitable. And other lesser books, such as his Recollections of 1848, reflect a combination of these interests in the particular details of a social event with an effort to provide a causal analysis of the way in which it unfolds -- the revolutionary upheavals in Paris in 1848. (These are, of course, the same upheavals to which Marx referred in the Communist Manifesto as the "spectre that is haunting Europe.") It is very interesting to contrast Tocqueville's first-hand observations of the June days of the revolution of 1848, including especially the bloodshed against the workers of Paris, with Marx's more theoretical writings about the same short period of time in The Civil War in France. And it is interesting as well to note that Tocqueville was by no means a neutral observer of these events -- any more than Marx was. Tocqueville was a partisan, supportive of the repression inflicted by the state in the name of order. This too is of some interest when we consider Tocqueville's relation to the founding of sociology.

But in the end, I think it is not a mistake to conclude that Tocqueville brought an important set of ideas to contemporary sociology -- the effort to create a scientific understanding of the modern world. All of the features identified here -- a passion for close observation and description, an interest in the discovery of social causes, an imagination that proceeds through comparison and contrast, and a framework of thought that emphasizes the importance of history -- are in fact useful intellectual components for contemporary sociology. Tocqueville's conservative view of the world certainly interacted with his observations and recommendations. His was certainly not "dispassionate" or value-free social science. But at the same time, we might consider whether a Tocqueville in Shanghai today might not discover some pretty interesting details, processes, and mechanisms that could contribute a deeper sociology of China. And the fact that Tocqueville's thinking did not proceed from the naturalism that motivated others of the founders -- Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim, for example -- is on the positive side of the balance sheet as well. Tocqueville did not operate on the assumption that there must be a single underlying law that explains the processes that he observed in Manchester, Boston, or Algiers; instead, he was content to observe the diversity of the social phenomena he discovered and to tease out some possible, historically limited causal hypotheses about how these historically specific phenomena might work.

So as we reconsider the intellectual composition of the discipline of sociology, it is

worthwhile reconsidering Tocqueville.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:22PM (-05:00)

Social science history and historical social science

Saturday, January 26, 2008

I talked recently with Tom Sugrue about his approach to historical research, and he had quite a few interesting things to say. (Tom is professor of history and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and author of The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit. The interview is posted on YouTube.) One topic we discussed was the relationship between historical research and social science research -- especially those areas of social science research that take history seriously. Tom's central observation is that historians pay very close attention to the empirical and historical data that they work with -- the surprises and gritty texture that will be encountered in the archives. But historians sometimes lose track of the larger questions that ought to give focus to their work. This is where historical social science can be helpful; the social scientists are interested in large questions such as power, class, race, or economic structure. But the social scientists have their own symmetrical weakness -- they often give too little attention to the empirical details of the cases or events they include in their analysis. So Tom seems to be saying that history and social science can both contribute most strongly when the macro-disciplines work together, bringing theoretical vision and factual specificity into play.

This contrast has come up quite a bit in the past twenty-five years. Barrington Moore and Theda Skocpol offered social science theories of the causes of large political upheavals such as dictatorship and revolution. Moore's Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World was pathbreaking in the way it defined the intellectual challenge of explaining fascism and dictatorship. In Skocpol's important book States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China she offered a comparative treatment of the Russian, French, and Chinese Revolutions, in an effort to tease out the social causes that brought about successful revolutions in these cases. This is an important and compelling question for social scientists, and Skocpol's analysis has been highly influential. But historians of each of those revolutions often complained that her treatment wasn't historical enough: it wasn't based on her own archival work, it was more abstract than a good history of the French Revolution would be, and it was offered as an effort to arrive a some causal generalizations -- rather than an account of this one specific messy historical complexity. So there was a macro-disciplinary difference of perspective between the comparative historical sociologists (Moore, Skocpol, Goldstone) and the historians.

I am inclined to think that the tension between the two disciplines is inherent and healthy; the historians and the comparative sociologists are trying to accomplish fairly different intellectual tasks. The comparative sociologist is looking for some sort of causal or structural similarity across cases -- instances of dictatorship, revolution, or labor union -- and necessarily reduces the historical complexity of the cases to an analytical framework. This means putting aside much of the messy complexity of the actual cases -- the particular strategies used by the Chinese Communist Party in a base area, the rhetoric of competition between the Parisian parties in 1790, the accidents of history that intruded

into the particular cases. The historian, on the other hand, is primarily interested in the particulars. How did the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans proceed in this city in this time period?

We might push the question a little bit deeper and ask, what resources can the social sciences offer working historians? One part of the answer is conceptual: social scientists have framed a number of conceptual frameworks in terms of which to characterize and interrogate historical reality. Marx's theory of class, Durkheim's theory of anomie, Tocqueville's highlighting of civic associations -- these are all instances of an effort by a social theorist to formulate a concept and a set of correlative theories in terms of which to analyze the historically given. Second, social theorists devote much of their intellectual energy to discovering and analyzing common social mechanisms -- free-rider problems, class conflict, collective action, ethnic violence. Historians can benefit by borrowing from each of these areas of knowledge. And third, some people think that social scientists aim to discover laws or regularities that govern social phenomena. If this were so, then the task of the historian would be very simple: go through the relevant social science literature, dredge up the pertinent laws, and explain the particular in terms of the workings of the laws. Unfortunately, no such laws exist; there are no "laws of motion" of modern society. So the historian's intuition -- that every historical event has its own individuality -- is born out. At the same time, the social sciences can provide concepts and mechanisms on the basis of which the historian can do a better job of formulating and explaining the historical event of interest.

As Tom Sugrue says in the interview, both these perspectives benefit from deep immersion in the findings and research efforts of the other. But I'm inclined to think that they are not simply different ends of a spectrum. Rather, they are different kinds of intellectual activity, and the criteria of success are different as well.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:24AM (-05:00)

The power of the authoritarian state

Sunday, January 27, 2008



If any collective entity possesses power, surely it is the state in a dictatorship – the Burmese military dictatorship or the single-party states of Cuba or China. So how does an authoritarian state exercise power?

It is common to equate power with the ability to coerce and threaten in order to compel behavior. And certainly force and repression play a crucial role in authoritarian politics. But even within a dictatorship the instruments of coercion are less than total. When the priests and young people of Burma went into the streets of Rangoon a few months ago, the military rulers were able to use a mix of violence and restraint that permitted them to prevail against a budding democracy movement in Burma. But in the past twenty years rulers in the Philippines, Czechoslovakia, and Tbilisi have found that their arsenal of water cannons, secret police, and truncheons have not sufficed to silence the streets. Plainly, then, control of the forces of repression is an

important component of the power base of an authoritarian dictatorship; but its scope is not unlimited.

As was true in other postings about power, we have to begin by asking about the relational situation of the relevant actors. What is the will of the state? What is the scope of behavior that the state wishes to control? Who are the agents who are subjects to the state's power? We might put the geometry of state power into a simple diagram: goals and priorities => levers of influence (repression, persuasion, bribery, cooptation, horse trading) => varied actors (civil servants, military officers, community leaders, bandits, citizens) => behavior. From the dictator's point of view, there are two sets of actors over whom power needs to be exerted: intra-state actors – persons charged within the government to carry out the dictator's will; and actors in civil society – the citizens and organizations that make up mass society. Intuitively, the power of a state is measured by its ability to constrain the behavior of a set of actors in ways that permit it to achieve its goals.

Let's look first at the intra-state actors. A state is a bureaucratic entity with decision-makers at a range of levels. Ministries and organs of the state -- the police and military for example -- have their own sources of power and domains of influence that are not fully within the control of higher authority. So the highest authority -- president or general – has only a limited ability to directly impose his will upon lower levels. In the extreme case the executive can discipline or remove the lower-level director. But this lever is imprecise; it leaves the agency director a certain amount of undetectable freedom of action. So we can readily envision the situation where the executive has announced a certain priority for his government, and where two important ministries come into conflict over what to do. And one or both may be motivated by local interests rather than the priorities of the state. (This seems to be an important clue in explaining some current developments in China. Central policies enacted in Beijing are ignored or reconsidered in regional government offices.) In this instance we need to ask, what levers of power and influence does the executive have within the government itself through which it can compel compliance by both agencies?

At this level we find the familiar processes of cooptation, alliance, inducement -- as well as threat -- found in all organizations. Perhaps a singular difference is that the use of violence is closer to the surface in dictatorship than in other political organizations. But the task facing the fascist dictator has much in common with that of the executive of other large organizations with multiple agendas. The 20th century confronts us with some extreme cases -- Stalin's terrorism extended within his government as well as towards Soviet society at large, and Stalin used purges and executions to compel bureaucratic compliance. But it is an important question in organizational studies to assess the degree to which force and violence can effectively run a complex organization. And it seems likely that more ordinary mechanisms of persuasion and cooperation must usually be invoked.

So much for the problem of exercising power within the state. Now consider the larger and more interesting question of power used against civil society and ordinary citizens. The issue of power arises only when the state wants a certain kind of behavior and citizens don't want to behave in this way. Take the large issues over which states want to exercise their will over citizens: taxation, conscription, and delivery of agricultural products. There is, first, the use of the threat of punishment to compel conformance. Draft dodgers can be hunted down and punished, villages can be threatened with violent retaliation if villagers avoid taxes, and food can be withheld from non-compliant regions

(for example, Stalin's war on the kulaks; see Lynne Viola, ed. The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside). Moreover, if the state can establish a pervasive network of police and informants, it can make its threats credible -- with the result that compliance with law and dictum is reasonably high. So the organs of repression are certainly an important element of power for the authoritarian state.

Beyond violence, beyond effective enforcement, what other levers of behavior modification exist for the state? Two come to mind immediately: propaganda and the market. States often have a substantial degree of control over the instruments of thought formation -- schooling, media, and communications technology. And experience has made it clear that there is a substantial degree to which a population's behavior can be altered through these tools. Markets and other impersonal social mechanisms are another important mechanism for shaping behavior. China's one-child policy was successful in altering the reproductive behavior of hundreds of millions of Chinese people. And these policies turned on a combination of coercion, enforcement, and financial incentives.

So perhaps the question of how authoritarian states exercise power is somewhat straightforward to answer: through organized repression, through artful command of a bureaucracy capable of acting cohesively, through the development of alliances with actors inside and outside of government, through cooptation of some actors to the disadvantage of other actors, through management of large social structures such as the market, and through the ability to set the terms of political behavior through the media and schooling.
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:52PM (-05:00)

What is global about globalization?

Sunday, January 27, 2008

Of course we live in a globalizing world. But what does that really mean?

One point that might be made emphasizes the local and the regional rather than the global. This is the observation that every part of the world is undergoing its own process of social change in a distinctive way. China, Brazil, and Nigeria are experiencing very different processes of economic growth and change. Mexico, Kenya, and Sri Lanka are coping with different forms of insurgency and ethnic conflict. India, Spain, and Guatemala witness very different social processes affecting peasants and rural society. So we might say that the whole world is changing -- but with different processes and dynamics everywhere. On this line of thought, the global world is really just a patchwork of the many peoples, regions, and processes that are found in various countries.

What is genuinely global is the working of a handful of large social processes of change that have effects in virtually every part of the globe. These mechanisms serve to convey causation rapidly throughout the globe -- sometimes with integrative effects and sometimes with the effect of creating new sources of conflict. International trade and investment, and the international institutions that support these, are the most obvious such processes. But the cultural interconnections that are facilitated by new technologies of communication, transportation, and entertainment represent another factor with global influence. The fact that people in virtually every country on the planet can interact in the blogosphere is one manifestation of the global reach of the internet. The fact that

missionaries, revolutionaries, and executives can travel easily from Los Angeles to Seoul and La Paz is a token of the rapid transmission and diffusion of ideas. And the transmission of the carriers of violence and aggression is likewise a global phenomenon -- from Pakistan to London and from Washington to Baghdad. And the websites that serve as the nucleus of extremist groups demonstrate the global reach of small groups of violent activists.

Another source of global integration is the seriousness of the problems the world faces as a whole: climate change, new epidemic diseases, financial system insecurity, social violence, and warfare. Global warming and avian flu pandemic will plainly demonstrate interdependence -- even as these disasters will predictably have very different consequences in different parts of the world.

So there are real strands of social connection that justify us in saying the world is becoming more global. But still we might say that the language of globalization is sometimes overdone. It is true that there are significant international forces that operate to bring the peoples of the world into closer contact and interdependency. But it is also true that cultures, societies, and peoples are historically situated and particular. And if we are to understand these particular processes, we need to consider the particular social fabric in which they unfold.

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:44PM (-05:00)

Innovative social science research

Thursday, January 31, 2008



What are some ways in which the community of social science researchers can arrive at useful innovations in theory and method in order to do a better job of understanding society? This is a central topic in the conversation I had with David Featherman this week at the University of Michigan. David is professor of sociology at Michigan and the founding director of the Center for Research and Solutions for Society (CARSS). David has been a national leader in the development of the social sciences as a previous president of the Social Science Research Council and as a former director of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. CARSS is a genuinely original collaborative effort at stimulating new thinking in the social sciences, and the interview gives a good exposure to some of the thinking that gave rise to the center. (The interview is posted on YouTube and iTunes.) The goal of CARSS is to serve as an incubation place for collaborative research aimed at contributing to solutions to some large social problems -- for example, more effective K-12 education, sustainable transportation systems, and responses to pandemic diseases. In each case there is a prominent role that is played by complex human behavior in the unfolding of the issue, and the solutions that policy makers attempt to design need to be well informed by the best thinking about how behavior is motivated and influenced.

Two threads in the conversation were particularly significant for me. First was David's

emphasis that CARSS projects are interdisciplinary and usually involve practitioners as well as academic scientists. We discussed the forms of knowledge that experienced practitioners bring to a discussion of a complex social problem -- in the genre of expert local knowledge -- and some of the intellectual challenges involved in trying to integrate theoretical and local knowledge into a solution. And we talked about the challenges associated with bringing widely separated forms of academic research into a single conversation -- engineers, lawyers, and sociologists attempting to understand the transportation systems of the future, for example.

A second important thread was the idea of engagement of the social sciences with social issues and problems. This was very much the case with the Chicago school of sociology in the 1920s through 1940s. But David makes the point early in the conversation that the social sciences made a turn in the 1960s towards greater disciplinary narrowness and a sharper separation between theory and practice. The social sciences became more narrowly confined to the academy and its disciplinary institutions.

But David and I agreed that two things were true: that the sciences ought to be shaping their disciplines and research programs with an eye to helping to solve some of society's problems -- for the good of society; but more deeply, that perhaps the quality of the science itself would increase as a result of this engagement. These are important ideas that we need to talk about as we consider the directions the social sciences should take in the coming decades.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:12AM (-05:00)

Power and violence in China

Saturday, February 02, 2008



Several recent postings on this blog have focused on power. Ultimately power depends upon a threat of violence. And recent reports from China have thrown the spotlight on the use of violence against innocent citizens who are challenging one aspect of power or another. The photo at left is taken from a news story reporting the results of homeowners' protests in a Beijing neighborhood against unplanned buildings on the greenspace of their neighborhood. (Reportage and more photos are available here.)

What this incident reflects is a disturbing and apparently growing incidence of the use of violence by private security companies against groups of citizens in China who are engaging in a variety of efforts to protect their interests or advance their claims. These incidents of violence also occur at the hands of Chinese police -- for example, the beating death of a newspaper editor that was reported in an article in the New York Times a few years ago.

These reports are somewhat rare -- not because the behavior is rare, but because it is very difficult for journalists to do the sort of investigating and reporting that would be needed in order to uncover these outrages. (Remember Amartya Sen's theory that a free press in India is the best explanation of the absence of famine since Independence; think

how different China's political scene would be with a practice of unfettered investigative journalism.)

But what these reports suggest is a very sober reality: that under current conditions in China, ordinary groups of Chinese people are subject to the imposition of serious violence if they come together to press their claims. There are reports of violence by paid thugs concerning migrant workers, factory workers, peasants subject to land confiscation, and ordinary poor people who have somehow gotten into conflict with the authorities.

What this also suggests is that the forging of an effective and binding legal order in China -- one that clearly articulates and defends the civil and individual rights of citizens that are valid even in circumstances of conflict between the powerful and the powerless -- creation of this legal order is a profoundly important goal for Chinese society. Only on the basis of these kinds of legal guarantees can civil society be an arena in which citizens and groups can advocate for their interests in a peaceful and progressive manner.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:23PM (-05:00)

Reasoning about agents

Tuesday, February 05, 2008

Rational choice theory usually advances a highly abstract theory of decision-making -- utility-maximizing choice among discrete options -- and then draws deductive conclusions. But actual human reasoners don't look much like this abstract ideal. It is interesting to consider how much one can explain while weakening the heroic assumptions about agent rationality. It turns out that it is possible to explain quite a bit of social behavior on the basis of a theory of agency that incorporates only a few qualitative assumptions about practical agency: purposiveness, deliberation, comparison, and choice -- without the specific mathematics of utility theory. And this gives a basis for a “practical agency” type of social explanation that doesn’t fall directly under the many criticisms that are offered of formal rational choice theory. And it represents a framework of analysis that corresponds fairly directly to Aristotle’s conception of deliberation.

First, purposiveness. We assume that agents have purposes -- states of affairs that they want to bring about. Their actions are intended to bring about their goals. (This is the basic assumption of means-end rationality.)

Second, deliberation. We assume that agents collect information about the courses of action that are feasible in the moment. And they collect information about the likely consequences of the various actions that they are considering. Within a deliberative process they choose an action to pursue.

Third, comparison. We assume that the agent deliberates by considering the advantages and disadvantages of each action (costs and benefits) and the degree to which the possible or probable effects of the choice serve the set of purposes the agent pursues. Further, the agent may compare choices on the basis of the nature of the action itself rather than solely on the basis of consequences -- that is, the agent may combine deontological considerations with utilitarian considerations (this represents an element of Kant’s theory of moral decision-making). That is, the agent chooses on the basis of full comparison of the choices.

So far we have described purposive deliberation without invoking utilities. We have

invoked the idea of preference in this account, because we have assumed that the agent prefers outcomes that better fulfill his/her purposes. And we have likewise invoked comparison and the idea of “more and less” of something in ranking outcomes. The apparatus of utility theory is one way of articulating or modeling these features -- but we are not forced to attribute a full apparatus of utility measurement and aggregation in order to attribute purposiveness and comparison. It will suffice if the agent can judge "X is better than Y in fulfilling my purposes."

So let's refer to this less abstract description as a “broad theory of purposive agency”. The question here is a simple one: does this description give us enough to get a social explanation going? I believe that it does, and that this demonstrates that the conception of agents as purposive decision-makers is more durable than any particular formal theory of decision-making.

I support this observation with a single inconclusive illustration. We can reproduce the public goods problem, and the derivation of the rationality of free-riding, using only the comparative resources of the reduced theory of agency. And we can simultaneously prepare a theoretical location for future empirical research for those instances where free-riding does not materialize as expected.

First the derivation of the tendency toward free riding in the presence of public goods. The agent has preferences among the possible outcomes of possible collective action. He/she recognizes that the probability of realizing the collective good is not significantly altered by participation. Agent further recognizes that there is a cost to participation. Agent decides to not participate, based on costs and outcomes: the benefit of participation and non-participation is equal and the cost of participation is greater, so non-participation is preferred.

But now consider what happens when we turn on a deontological component of the comparison. Agent notes that non-participation involves taking unfair advantage of the actions of others. Agent prefers actions that are fair. Agent therefore chooses participation.

Finally, we might further complicate things by allowing that agent allows tradeoffs between the cost-benefit comparison and the deontological comparison. In some instances the weight of fairness prevails and agent chooses the less-good alternative. In other cases the situation reverses. Agent sacrifices minor unfairness and chooses the better outcome.

There are many, many examples of explanations in sociology, anthropology, and history that account for an outcome based on analysis of the situation of deliberation confronting a hypothetical set of purposive agents; and substantial explanations ensue. (As one example, consider Jean Ensminger’s explanation of Kenyan cattle-tending and bride price practices as a solution to a principal-agent problem between cattle owners and cattle tenders; Making a Market: The Institutional Transformation of an African Society.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:24PM (-05:00)

Social progress in India?

Thursday, February 07, 2008



How much social progress has India made since Independence sixty years ago? According to economist V. K. Ramachandran, not very much when it comes to life in the countryside. (Hear my interview with Ramachandran on iTunes and on my web page.) Ramachandran gives a profile of the social problems faced by India at the time of Independence -- depths of income poverty, illiteracy, avoidable disease, and the worst forms of caste, class and gender oppression in the world -- and then judges that, appallingly, these same problems continue in the countryside without significant change. And this failure derives from the country's failure to solve its agrarian question. Poverty, inequality, and deprivation continue to be rampant in rural society. And this persistence derives from the failure to address the fundamental relations of property and power in the countryside. Moreover, the processes of globalization and liberalization have, if anything, intensified these problems.

Professor Ramachandran is a research professor at the Indian Statistical Institute in Kolkata, and is the author of Wage Labour and Unfreedom in Agriculture: An Indian Case Study.

Professor Ramachandran takes issue with the view of India that appears to be emerging in Japan and the United States -- as a country with shopping malls, hi-tech companies, and rapid economic growth. These images are true of some places in India -- but they have little relevance to conditions in rural India. (And the population of India continues to be at least 70% rural and agricultural.) The progress that has occurred in the countryside is meaningful -- agriculture has increased its productivity significantly since 1960, and India is now grain-self-sufficient. India is no longer locked into a "ship-to-mouth" existence. But these changes in the productivity of agriculture have not been associated with changes in the basic institutions present in the countryside -- what Ramachandran refers to as the "agrarian structure." And these social relations continue to create a system that entrenches inequality and deprivation for peasants and agricultural workers. Ramachandran maintains that three "new" inequalities have emerged -- inequalities between regions, inequalities between crops, and inequalities between classes. (As an expert on agricultural workers, Ramachandran is in a good position to observe what has happened for this segment of India's rural population.)

Ramachandran is an activist-scholar, and he is involved in a large collaboration with other scholars to provide a review of conditions in villages in a growing list of states in India. Ramachandran underlines the point that there is great variation across the map of India. The goal of these studies is to provide a detailed snapshot of the social conditions in the villages -- studies of the oppressed classes, tribes, and women; the state of village amenities (sewerage, clean water, roads, education). Over a number of years the goal of the research effort is to arrive at a more nuanced description of the conditions of rural life across many states in India. This research is highly valuable, since it permits disaggregation of descriptions of the countryside that are often based on aggregated

data.

An interesting feature of this research project is the fact that it is deliberately linked to the activist organizations of peasants, workers, and women. The researchers consult with the agrarian activists to discover what the most important issues are -- and then to focus research effort on discovering the social details associated with these issues. And Ramachandran is emphatic in saying that the rigor of scientific investigation can and should be combined with this collaboration with the activist organizations. In fact, he indicates that the organizations themselves are insistent about this point. "Don't lose your academic rigor," the leaders of the organizations insist.

There is a lot more in the interview. But the bottom line is that Ramachandran offers a really good example of the engaged scholar. And the kind of social research that he and his colleagues are doing is well designed to help to diagnose some of the changes and public policies that are needed in India.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:29AM (-05:00)

Large social forces?

Saturday, February 09, 2008



We often analyze the world around us in terms of large social forces and trends -- globalization, the rise of ethnic identities, the spread of global capitalism, the rise of China as a coming super-power. These large forces are the "folk theories" through which we try to make sense of the world as it changes around us. But do these constructs actually make sense from an analytical, social scientific point of view? Or are they more akin to the large supra-historical categories advanced by pseudo-historians such as Toynbee or Spengler?

One reason for drawing that last conclusion is a justified skepticism about large impersonal social causes. We need to know what the microfoundations are, the concrete local mechanisms through which any social force works -- and merely postulating that "the forces of globalization are producing more social unrest", for example, doesn't provide the necessary illumination at that level.

This critical concern comes along with another: the observation that "folk" concepts of large social forces (for example, "spread of extremism" or "globalization") often encompass a pretty wide and heterogeneous set of lower-level processes. Presumably globalization works differently in Australia, Kenya, and London. So the term is more of an umbrella than a specific theory of how the world works.

But all of this said -- is there any rigorous and scientifically justifiable use for the idea of large social forces?

I think there is such a use. The concerns just mentioned are entirely valid. But they don't exclude the possibility that there are some processes of change in the world that are

large and systemic, and that do have the requisite degree of microfoundations at the disaggregated levels. The examples I can think of come largely from the economic realm, but I am sure we could come up with cultural and social examples too.

--- The global effects of the Great Depression in the 1930s. The stock market crash of 1929 created financial and business consequences all over the United States. And the alterations in demand and price for commodities such as cotton or coal had consequences throughout the world. Small peasant farmers in North China were forced to reconfigure their cropping regimes as a result of events that took place on Wall Street. So we can say that the Great Depression was a large social force and one whose consequences were global in scope.

--- The Asian financial crisis of 1997 likewise created a cascading series of effects that were eventually felt everywhere in the world.

--- The SARS epidemic of 2002-2003 was an example of the possibility of global pandemic caused by the rapid transmission of exposure from China to Canada through the air travel system.

In each case we have an example of a large social cause. And we have a good understanding of the "transmission belt" through which these local events can have global consequences. It is the degree of integration among separate agents and groups that is created by national and global markets, communications systems, and transportation systems. Markets have foundations that are both global and local. They signal future events to millions of independent actors throughout space. These actors modify their behavior. And these shifts in turn create new market situations. So the rapid transmission of information, people, and products constitutes the microfoundational account that is needed for asserting the large social force.

There are similar stories that can be told for the transmission of ideas and cultural variations -- e.g. new forms of Christian or Muslim activism. (Stephen Greenblatt has some great examples of the transmission of cultural ideas in Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World.)

So the forces of globalization are real enough. And they depend upon mechanisms of transmission that create a systemic interdependence of behavior in widely separated places. Moreover, the examples give us an idea about how to characterize the idea that "globalization is changing the world." We can break this claim down into the idea -- an empirical one -- that asserts that there is a rising level of integration across societies, achieved by communications systems, transportation systems, and economic interdependency, through which the actions of people in Indonesia and the UK are much more systemically interconnected than they were a century ago. The analytical task is to be as specific as possible in identifying the pathways through which global influence of a factor is achieved, and not to engage in lazy thinking about big social forces that we really don't understand.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:03PM (-05:00)

Structure, psychology, power

Monday, February 11, 2008

Political and social power involves the exercise of social resources to compel various kinds of unwilling behavior by others. What creates power in society? What are the sorts of social and structural factors that permit individuals to exercise power? And what features of personality lead a given individual to choose to use the instruments of power to achieve his/her will? In short -- how does power pertain to "structure" and "agency"?

This is one of the categories in social analysis that requires that we bring together both agency and structure. Individuals wield power; but they only do so on the basis of resources and advantages that are conferred upon them by existing social relations. The enduring social relations that exist in a society -- for example, property relations, administrative and political relations, or the legal system -- constitute a structure within which agents act, and they determine the distribution of crucial social resources that become the raw materials on the basis of which agents exercise power over other individuals and groups. So the particular details of a social structure are crucial in determining the forms of power that exist in the society. For example, a privileged position within the property system -- the possession of significant income and wealth -- confers a resource advantage on people in that position. They can use their wealth to solicit powerful allies; they can purchase media outlets; they can influence politicians -- all with an eye to achieving their goals in spite of the contrary wishes or interests of others.

Likewise, a privileged position in the communications system -- a television news producer or newspaper publisher, for example -- can use his/her position to alter the way in which stories are presented in such a way as to change the way the public thinks about the issues; and these changes in thought can lead to changes in behavior. And an elected official can exercise power by setting the agenda for others -- by including or excluding various options from consideration.

So one's position within these various social structures -- systems of social relations -- determines the volume of social resources upon which one can call in the effort to constrain or compel the actions of others. Position determines one's capacity for power. But it does not determine the exercise of power. To be said to exercise power, it is necessary to have the goal of compelling people to do things they don't want to do. This is where agency or the "will to power" comes in. It is possible for a person with access to great power resources to nonetheless behave in ways that do not make use of power but rather depend on building consent and consensus. We might contrast Churchill with Stalin in mobilizing society for war; Churchill persuaded the British people to sacrifice in support of the war effort, whereas Stalin used the coercive power of the state to achieve his war mobilization goals.

This fact suggests that we need to consider something of the psychology of power. This is a topic that Adorno and other critical theorists invoked through the concept of the "authoritarian personality" -- an idea invoked largely in an effort to understand fascism. Others might attempt to assimilate the willingness to use power under the category of "opportunistic" or "instrumentalist" decision-making: coercion is considered as simply one out a menu of feasible strategies for achieving one's will. (This is perhaps the foundation of Hobbes's understanding of the pursuit and use of power.) And here we might speculate that the "democratic personality" is a set of dispositions to behavior that lead the agent to seek out persuasion and consensus rather than force, deception, and

coercion as instruments through which to achieve one's goals. (Taken to the limit, we might say that a proper democracy creates an environment in which there is neither opportunity nor impulse towards the exercise of power.)

On this way of laying out the landscape of power, there are several dimensions to be considered: the social arrangements that make it possible for some individuals to pressure, coerce, and compel other individuals to do their bidding; the social arrangements that create profound conflicts of interest in the context of which the incentive to wield power naturally arises; and the circumstances of social psychology and personality that lead some individuals to choose to make use of resources of power to coerce, while others choose strategies that depend on willing consent to achieve collective purposes.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:46PM (-05:00)

A normative aspect to power

Monday, February 11, 2008

It sometimes seems as though there is a normative dimension to our concept of power. What if we defined "power" in these terms: an agent exercises power when he/she undertakes to compel individuals or groups to act in ways they prefer not to act, against their interests and without the justification of a legitimate state underwriting the compulsion. Notice that the last qualification entails that the exercise of power is by definition "illegitimate"; legitimate authority compels behavior but does not exercise power. So on this definition, there is a behavioral element and a normative element in the proposition that "A exercises power over B": A compels behavior by B and A does not have a legitimate political or moral right to do so.

This might appear to be largely a semantic question: what do we mean by "power"? Is the exercise of the enforcement of law within a procedurally and substantively just polity an exercise of "power"? Or is it rather the exercise of rightful authority?

Certainly it is correct to observe that the behavioral aspect of involuntary compulsion is present in both types of cases. The criminal who is imprisoned for his crimes is treated coercively, in that he is confined against his will; so the state has the ability to "compel individuals to act contrary to their will". If we took the element of compulsion and coercion as uniquely central, then both the lawful state and the extortion gang are exercising power -- over criminals and innocent citizens respectively. If, on the other hand, we think that coercively backed authority is something different from "power", then a democratically established legal authority cannot be said to be exercising power over its citizens (though it may do so over its international adversaries).

If we go down this road in analyzing power, then there is a close relationship between power, social justice, and democracy.

How would we decide this question? And does it have any importance for the purposes of social and political explanation, or for the design of social policies?
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:42PM (-05:00)

"Folk" sociology

Tuesday, February 12, 2008



All of us are sociologists, at some level. We have social concepts in terms of which we analyze the social world around us -- "boss," "working class guy," "politician," "evangelical", "millennial generation". (Stereotypes of groups defined in terms of race and class probably fall in that category.) We operate on the basis of stylized schemata about social causes -- what sorts of things influence what other things. And we operate with some stylized social facts. ("Bad economic times make people more suspicious," "Big cities are more unsafe than towns," "Elections are decided by big campaign contributions," "Midwestern people are more socially conservative than Californians.") Putting all these sorts of assumptions together, we can say that we possess a conceptual framework and causal theory of the social world, which helps us to navigate the social relationships, conflicts, and needs that we have in ordinary life. Action proceeds on the basis of a representation of the world.

What this comes down to is the obvious point that humans are cognitive beings who undertake to conceptualize and explain the world around them; they come up with conceptual schemes and causal hypotheses about how things work, and they construct their plans and actions around these frameworks. We are "cognitive" -- we undertake to represent the world around us, based on observation and the creation of organizing concepts. And, of course, many of those concepts and hypotheses are badly grounded; they don't divide the world in a way that is really illuminating, or they offer stereotypes about how things work that aren't actually true. ("Don't bet on red -- it's come up four times in a row, so it's not likely to come up next time." That's a false statement about a series of randomly generated red and black events, and the player who follows this rule will lose to the player who is guided by probability theory.)

This sort of everyday social cognition is similar to what philosophers of psychology call "folk psychology" -- the ordinary categories of thought and action that we attribute to each other in order to describe and explain each other's behavior (intention, belief, pain, anger, ...). And philosophers have asked whether there is any relation at all between folk psychology and scientific psychology. (Ian Ravenscroft treats this issue in the philosophy of psychology in his article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.) Some philosophers have argued that the most fundamental and scientifically satisfactory explanations of individual behavior will be couched in terms that bear no relation at all to the concepts of ordinary mentalistic psychology.

So what is the status of folk sociology? We can ask several questions about this common sense framework of social cognition and expectation. First, where does it come from? What are the social processes of learning through which we arrive at the specifics of the social assumptions and concepts that we employ? Second, to what extent are there important differences across individuals with respect to the features of their social frameworks? (For example, we can explore whether there are cultural and national differences, gender and race differences, or generational differences across different groups and cohorts.) Third, we can examine the degree to which these categories and assumptions are rigid, or whether they are open to modification through additional experience -- "learning".

A different question, though, is also important: What is the relationship between these ordinary sociological frameworks and scientific sociology? Is there a relationship at all? Can scientific sociology learn from common sense? And can common sense improve its grasp of the social world through interaction with scientific sociology? Might we speculate that ordinary common sense does a fairly good job of picking out the salient features of the social world? Or, on the contrary, might we judge that the categories of "folk" sociology are about as misleading as pre-modern, magical concepts of nature? Or perhaps, might we say that rigorous scientific sociology can serve to refine and improve upon our "folk" concepts of the social world -- lead us to abandon categories such as race, for example, in our efforts to understand Obama, Michael Jordan, and DuBois?

The example of the natural sciences would lead us to one set of answers on these questions: "folk" knowledge of the natural world was not in fact a good guide to scientific physics, and the concepts of modern physics bear little intelligible relationship to common sense concepts of ordinary experience of tables and chairs. One way of putting this is to say that physics concepts are "theoretical", whereas common sense concepts are "phenomenological" (based on immediate experience).

Whether that is a valid distinction or not in physics, it probably is not a valid distinction in the social sciences. Social life is more transparent than the physical world; so our best scientific understanding of the social ought to bear some understandable relationship to the categories of ordinary social cognition. Common sense may not be highly specific in theorizing the concept of "power" in social life; but the phenomena of power are in fact fairly visible, and ordinary common sense captures these phenomena reasonably well. It is possible to paraphrase virtually any esoteric sociological thesis about power, in terms that are understandable in ordinary social experience. And likewise for exploitation, alienation, disaffection, racism, prejudice, discrimination, and affinity groups (to list a grab bag of sociological concepts): each of these concepts can be related to ordinary experiences and ordinary, common sense categories of social interaction.

So here is a possible answer to our original question -- how do ordinary social concepts relate to those of scientific sociology? We can say that there ought to be a critical but intelligible relationship between the two sets of concepts. Scientific sociology can point out the limitations and blind spots of ordinary ways of representing the social world. But ordinary social observation and conceptualization constitute the real content of sociological hypothesis and theory. So both systems of social knowledge fruitfully interact with each other, and -- ideally -- lead to a rising level of competence in cognizing and understanding society.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:35PM (-05:00)

Agent-based modeling as social explanation

Friday, February 15, 2008

Logical positivism favored a theory of scientific explanation that focused on subsumption under general laws. We explain an outcome by identifying one or more general laws, a set of boundary conditions, and a derivation of the outcome from these statements. A second and competing theory of scientific explanation can be called "causal realism." On this approach, we explain an outcome by identifying the causal processes and mechanisms that give rise to it. And we explain a pattern of outcomes by identifying common causal mechanisms that tend to produce outcomes of this sort in circumstances like these. (If we observe that patterns of reciprocity tend to break down as villages

become towns, we may identify the causal mechanism at work as the erosion of the face-to-face relationships that are a necessary condition for reciprocity.)



But there are other approaches we might take to social explanation and prediction. And one particularly promising avenue of approach is "agent-based simulation." Here the basic idea is that we want to explain how a certain kind of social process unfolds. We can take our lead from the general insight that social processes depend on microfoundations at the level of socially situated individuals. Social outcomes are the aggregate result of intentional, strategic interactions among large numbers of agents. And we can attempt to implement a computer simulation that represents the decision-making processes and the structural constraints that characterize a large number of interacting agents.

Thomas Schelling's writings give the clearest exposition to the logic of this approach Micromotives and Macrobehavior. Schelling demonstrates in a large number of convincing cases, how we can explain large and complex social outcomes, as the aggregate consequence of behavior by purposive agents pursuing their goals within constraints. He offers a simple model of residential segregation, for example, by modeling the consequences of assuming that blue residents prefer neighborhoods that are at least 50% blue, and red residents prefer neighborhoods at least 25% red. The consequence -- a randomly distributed residential patterns becomes highly segregated in an extended series of iterations of individual moves.

It is possible to model various kinds of social situations by attributing a range of sets of preferences and beliefs across a hypothetical set of agents -- and then run their interactions forward over a period of time. SimCity is a "toy" version of this idea -- what happens when a region is developed by a set of players with a given range of goals and resources? By running the simulation multiple times it is possible to investigate whether there are patterned outcomes that recur across numerous timelines -- or, sometimes, whether there are multiple equilibria that can result, depending on more or less random events early in the simulation.

Robert Axelrod's repeated prisoners' dilemma tournaments represent another such example of agent-based simulations. (Axelrod demonstrates that reciprocity, or tit-for-tat, is the winning strategy for a population of agents who are engaged in a continuing series of prisoners' dilemma games with each other.) The most ambitious examples of this kind of modeling (and predicting and explaining) are to be found in the Santa Fe Institute's research paradigm involving agent-based modeling and the modeling of complex systems. Interdisciplinary researchers at the University of Michigan pursue this approach to explanation at the Center for the Study of Complex Systems. (Mathematician John Casti describes a number of these sorts of experiments and simulations in Would-Be Worlds: How Simulation is Changing the Frontiers of Science and other books.)

This approach to social analysis is profoundly different from the "subsumption under theoretical principles" approach, the covering-law model of explanation. It doesn't work on the assumption that there are laws or governing regularities pertaining to the social

outcomes or complex systems at all. Instead, it attempts to derive descriptions of the outcomes as the aggregate result of the purposive and interactive actions of the many individuals who make up the social interaction over time. It is analogous to the simulation of swarms of insects, birds, or fish, in which we attribute very basic "navigational" rules to the individual organisms, and then run forward the behavior of the group as the compound of the interactive decisions made by the individuals. (Here is a brief account of studies of swarming behavior.)

How would this model of the explanation of group behavior be applied to real problems of social explanation? Consider one example: an effort to tease out the relationships between transportation networks and habitation patterns. We might begin with a compact urban population of a certain size. We might then postulate several things:

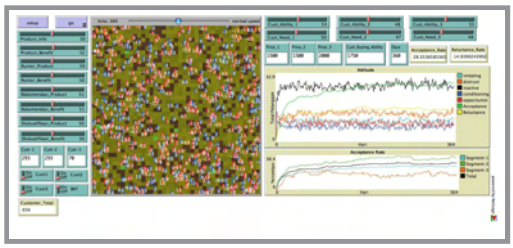
- The preferences that each individual has concerning housing costs, transportation time and expense, and social and environmental environmental amenities.
- The postulation of a new light rail system extending through the urban center into lightly populated farm land northeast and southwest
- The postulation of a set of prices and amenities associated with possible housing sites throughout the region to a distance of 25 miles
- The postulation of a rate of relocation for urban dwellers and a rate of immigration of new residents

Now run this set of assumptions forward through multiple generations, with individuals choosing location based on their preferences, and observe the patterns of habitation that result.

This description of a simulation of urban-suburban residential distribution over time falls within the field of economic geography. It has a lot in common with the nineteenth-century von Thunen's Isolated State analysis of a city's reach into the farm land surrounding it. (Click here for an interesting description of von Thunen's method written in 1920.) What agent-based modeling adds to the analysis is the ability to use plentiful computational power to run models forward that include thousands of hypothetical agents; and to do this repeatedly so that it is possible to observe whether there are groups of patterns that result in different iterations. The results are then the aggregate consequence of the assumptions we make about large numbers of social agents -- rather than being the expression of some set of general laws about "urbanization".

And, most importantly, some of the results of the agent-based modeling and modeling of complexity performed by scholars associated with the Santa Fe Institute demonstrate the understandable novelty that can emerge from this kind of simulation. So an important theme of novelty and contingency is confirmed by this approach to social analysis.

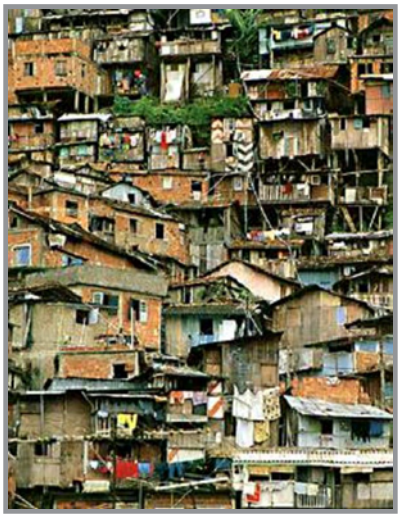
There are powerful software packages that can provide a platform for implementing agent-based simulations; for example, NetLogo. Here is a screen shot from an implementation called "comsumer behavior" by Yudi Limbar Yasik. The simulation has been configured to allow the user to adjust the parameters of agents' behavior; the software then runs forward in time through a number of iterations. The graphs provide aggregate information about the results.



Posted by Daniel Little at 10:49AM (-05:00)

Social science and social problems

Saturday, February 16, 2008



Several of the interviews that I've conducted in recent weeks have agreed on an important point: that the social sciences ought to be directed towards addressing important social problems, and that the research agenda for social science ought to be influenced or shaped by the constituencies in society who are most affected by these social problems. At bottom – the social sciences ought to be engaged in a serious way in improving the quality of life for the people of the globe. They can best do this, it would seem, by discovering some of the causes of persistent social problems and providing a sound basis for designing policies that have a chance of ameliorating them. And they can focus their research agendas by working closely with practitioners and the ordinary people who experience these social problems.

What is the reality, however? To what extent do the social sciences conform to this ideal? As David Featherman expresses in his interview, the social sciences in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s took a turn away from goals of social engagement and problem solving, and they really haven't yet turned back. Instead, the major social science disciplines took on the model of disinterested, academic theory formation. The natural sciences provided the role model, and the driving goals were quantifiability, theoretical parsimony, and formalizability. "Applied" research was devalued.

Re-establishing the connection between social science and social problems should be a high priority for all of us -- social scientists and citizens alike. The social problems we face are crucially important, they are intractable, and they are often trending in the wrong direction. Consider this partial list of particularly pressing problems facing our society and the world.

- United States
  - Endemic urban poverty
  - Racial segregation
  - Urban decline and despair
  - Rising inequalities of income, wealth, and quality of life

    - Lack of universal provision of health services
    - Rising social cost of health care
    - Failing delivery of education for children and adolescents
- International --
- deepening poverty in many countries
- deepening inequalities of wealth, income, and quality of life
- Violence against individuals and groups
    - Ethnic violence
    - Genocide
    - Crime
    - Thuggery
    - Oppressive states
- Oppression of women and girls
- Global environmental crisis
    - Climate change
    - Resource exhaustion
    - Environment degradation
- Political regimes
    - Persistent authoritarian regimes
    - Imperfect democracies
    - Corruption
    - Inadequate systemic response to disaster

These are all problems with massive consequences for human wellbeing. Each of them is itself the manifestation of complex social and behavioral forces. And solutions will require the artful design of new institutions and new ways of coordinating social behavior. In short -- these are problems that are much more challenging, intellectually and practically, than decoding the human genome or controlling a nuclear reactor or putting a human on Mars. The best efforts of talented and committed researchers will be needed in order to understand and change these conditions.

Fortunately, there are some signs that mainstream social scientists are beginning to turn their gaze back in the direction of concrete social problems. There is significant, sustained work going on in sociology and political science on the topics of poverty, inequality, racial segregation, and social disaffection, and this work is taking on some of the urgency and relevance that was displayed in the research of the Chicago school of sociology seventy-five years ago. The Center for Advancing Research and Social Solutions at the University of Michigan is an example of a group of researchers coming together with a commitment to bringing social science research to bear on social problems. (See the Featherman interview for a description of CARSS.) A recent symposium published in The Yard, Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences magazine, features a group of Harvard social scientists under the heading, "The New Social Science," and the discussion focuses almost entirely on these social problems and some of the methods that can be used to address them. Featured in the article are Edward Glaeser, William Julius Wilson, Mary Waters, Claudia Gay, David Cutler, and Robert Putnam. (Unfortunately this publication doesn't have a web presence.) It is very good to see research at this level of empirical detail and practical focus coming into the spotlight.

There seem to be two large meta-goals that the social sciences should have in confronting social problems. One is the problem of understanding these problems in detail – both the empirical details of how the problem is distributed and evolving, and the causal issue of discovering some of the factors that produce and reproduce the problem. What are the trends in urban and suburban social evolution? Why is urban poverty so

intractable over multiple generations? Why have urban schools been unsuccessful in providing a high-quality education to all the children that they serve?

The second large meta-goal for the social sciences is to be able to provide a basis for policies and interventions that have a meaningful probability of solving the problems that we care about. Policies should be driven by the best possible understanding of the social and behavioral dynamics of the problems they are designed to address. And the social sciences should endeavor to provide sober assessments of the likely consequences of various proposed policies.

But nothing is simple in social life – and it is clear enough that there are complex interactive causal processes at work in the creation and sustenance of most social problems. The scope of prediction in the social sciences is limited, and this means that it is rarely possible to provide a categorical prescription such as this: “do this, and such-and-so will result.” Instead, the social sciences are perhaps most useful when they help to identify some of the behavioral complexities that might turn into “unforeseen consequences” – and thereby help to design policies that are more fault-tolerant.

None of this is simple. But there is no doubt that our society needs the knowledge and methods that the social sciences can provide, if we are to have a good chance of solving the problems we face. And this means that the social sciences need to take on the task of practical engagement with seriousness and commitment.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:56PM (-05:00)

What was E P Thompson up to?

Sunday, February 17, 2008

Let's think about E P Thompson. His 1963 book, Making of the English Working Class, transformed the way that historians on the left conceptualized "social class." But what, precisely, was it about?

Whereas other Marxist historians focused particularly on the large structures of capitalism, Thompson's eye was turned to the specific and often surprising details of artisanal and working culture in pre-industrial England, the many ways in which the working people at the bottom of English society conceived of themselves and created their own organizations for education and politics in the last half of the eighteenth century. Neither peasant nor middle class, the many segments of working people in England were socially organized by trade and skill, and with remarkably distinct cultural traditions, songs, and political repertoires. They were not, in fact, a "class". And yet, they became a class -- this is the "making" that Thompson's title refers to.

(Harvey Kaye's British Marxist Historians offers an excellent survey of the major British Marxist historians -- Hobsbawm, Hilton, Dobbs, Thompson, and others.)

Commentators often describe Thompson's central contribution as being the provision of a detailed understanding of "class consciousness" in counterpart to Marx's conception of a "class in itself" -- a group of people defined in terms of their relation to the system of property relations. On this line of interpretation, Thompson provided one of the missing links within Marxist theory, by demonstrating how the transition from "class in itself" to "class for itself" was accomplished.

This is too simplistic a reading of Thompson, however. For one thing, Thompson's book demonstrates the very great degree of contingency that attached to the historical construction of the English working class when we consider this process in cultural detail. But to find that the process is contingent, is also to negate the Marxist idea that there is a necessary and direct connection between a group's structural position in the property system and its social consciousness. For another and related reason, Thompson's story goes well beyond Marx's in its emphasis on the independent agency of English working people. Their organizations, their ideas, and their political strategies were not simply derivative of the structural situation of "labor and capital", but rather were the result of specific acts of leadership, creativity, and popular mobilization.

So let's consider the main elements of Thompson's historiography. What was his goal as a historian of this period of England's social history? In writing the book, Thompson took a huge step forward in creating the field of social history, and he established a paradigm of historical writing that guided a generation of historians. His goal is almost ethnographic: he wants to discover the many threads of thought and culture that passed through the many segments of English working people. He takes ideas and ideology very seriously -- and recognizes that the ideas of English Methodism and the rhetoric of liberty were profoundly important in these segments of English society. In particular, the ideas and the modes of organization that were associated with Methodism, were deeply formative for the laborers' and artisans' consciousness that was being forged.

Just as important as these elements of "high" culture, Thompson articulates his concept of the "moral economy" of the crowd -- the idea that there is a shared set of norms in popular culture that underlie social behavior. He identifies popular disturbance -- riots, strikes, and expressions of grievances of various kinds -- as a crucial indicator of political behavior and popular consciousness. And he tries to demonstrate that the popular disturbances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were governed by a set of norms that were popularly observed and enforced -- about price, about social obligation, and about justice. The "bread riot" was not a chaotic or impulsive affair. And this becomes an important theme in the consciousness of the working class that Thompson describes: a consciousness that denounces political oppression as deeply as it decries exploitation.

In other words, Thompson's version of working class consciousness invokes liberty and justice as much as it does deprivation and material factors. "In the end, it is the political context as much as the steam-engine, which had most influence on the shaping consciousness and institutions of the working class" (197). "The people were subjected simultaneously to an intensification of two intolerable forms of relationship: those of economic exploitation and of political oppression" (198).

The culmination of this retelling of the multi-threaded histories of English working people is indeed "a working class consciousness" -- a more or less coherent social and political philosophy that supported a political program and a morality of equality and solidarity. "Thus working men formed a picture of the organization of society, out of their own experience and with the help of their hard-won and erratic education, which was above all a political picture. They learned to see their own lives as part of a general history of conflict between the loosely defined 'industrial classes' on the one hand, and the unreformed House of Commons on the other. From 1830 onwards a more clearly defined class concsiousness, in the customary Marxist sense, was maturing, in which working people were aware of continuing both old and new battles on their own" (712).

Thompson's book remains an innovative and pathbreaking classic -- and one that can continue to provide new ideas about how to understand society.

(See this post on ChangingSociety for more discussion of E. P. Thompson.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:58PM (-05:00)

Politics and science

Tuesday, February 19, 2008

In the idealized version of science, the enterprise of scientific knowledge discovery follows its own logic without extraneous non-cognitive or non-rational influences. But this is unrealistic. Science is a social activity, conditioned by institutions, governments, and other social forces. So it is worth considering how politics influences the course of science and how these influences affect the rationality or veridicality of the enterprise. Does the fact of political influence on science make science either less rational or less true?

There are at least two ways in which science can be affected by social or political factors: in terms of the formulation of research questions and priorities, and in terms of the content of the findings of scientific research. Pernicious examples of the second kind of influence are easy to find in the history of science. For example, Stalin's insistence on the correctness of Lysenko's adaptationist theory of species led Soviet biology into a biological science that was profoundly untrue: organisms do not evolve according to the processes or mechanisms attributed to them by Lysenkoism. So the political imperative from Stalin to the adoption of a particular scientific hypothesis led to erroneous science. It was also irrational science (because it depended on criteria of acceptance that were political rather than empirical).

This form of influence of politics on science is clearly anti-scientific and anti-rational. And, regrettably, we appear to have clear instances of this kind of substitution of political expediency for rational scientific judgment in the behavior of the current US administration, in the form of its efforts to control the content of scientific judgments about climate change (article).

So one form of political influence on science is clearly anti-scientific. When politicians substitute their wishes for the judgment of capable scientific researchers, it is inevitable that the result will be bad science. And, of course, bad science is a bad basis for future problem-solving.

But consider the other form of influence mentioned here: the setting of priorities for scientific research, especially through funding strategies. Is this kind of influence inherently inconsistent with the empirical and rational claims of science?

It is obvious that science is subject to this kind of influence. When the National Institutes of Health decides to give higher priority to one kind of cancer rather than another, or to diabetes research over Alzheimer's research, this national institution is setting the agenda for university researchers throughout the country. When the US government gave priority to space exploration research over atmospheric or oceanic research in the 1960s, it likewise gave encouragement to certain scientific disciplines and inhibition to others. And, predictably, there was more progress in the scope and depth of scientific

knowledge in some disciplines than others, following the spending priorities. Science requires resources, and one of the duties of a democratic government is to decide about priorities in the expenditure of public moneys.

What this kind of influence does not do, is to dictate the content of the findings. Once the resources are committed, it is essential that the normal processes of science -- empirical study, peer review, experimentation, theory development -- should take place without interference from political or social pressure.

So we might say that the "priority-setting" influence of politics on science is benign from the point of view of scientific rationality. The political decision-makers decide what scientific problems are most important from the public's point of view; and the scientists, following the funding sources, then do their best to understand and solve those problems. But this means that one of our crucial political goals ought to be to create and defend institutions that assure the political independence of scientists, so their research findings are the result of empirical investigation and theory formation rather than pressured conformance to the state's expectations.

Now let's bring these ideas back to the social sciences. Social science research has been subject to both kinds of political influence in American history. There have sometimes been intense pressures on social scientists and historians about the content of their research -- for example, the field of China studies during the period of McCarthyism. When social scientists arrive at unpalatable truths, they are sometimes subjected to shameful political pressures. But second, the social sciences have certainly been shaped in the past forty years by the spending priorities of federal and non-profit funding agencies. This influence isn't necessarily bad, or anti-scientific. In fact, it is unavoidable. But, in the social sciences especially, it may have the insidious effect of pushing social science research away from some difficult or controversial topics; and this may be so, even when those topics turn out to be particularly important for arriving at a better understanding of where our society is going.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:50PM (-05:00)

The "dis"-unity of social science

Wednesday, February 20, 2008



One of the central goals of Vienna Circle philosophy of science was the idea of the unity of science. The idea included at least two separable parts: methodological unity and unity of content under a single system of laws. On the methodological side there was the idea that the logic of explanation and confirmation should be the same in all the empirical sciences. If there were to be differences across disciplines, these should be heuristic rather than epistemic differences. (Jordi Cat provides an extensive discussion of the unity of science doctrine in an article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.)
The more basic goal for unity was the idea of a single comprehensive theory that would, in principle, provide the foundation for the theories of all the special sciences. Physics was the intended foundation, and the goal was to demonstrate that all the fields of the

natural sciences could be derived in principle from the laws of physics. For example, the hope was that the properties and laws of chemical elements and molecules should be derivable from fundamental physics.



The reasons for wanting to see a unified physical theory were a preference for parsimony and simplicity and a metaphysical conviction that all of nature must really derive from a single set of fundamental laws.

The fate of the unity of science doctrine can be pursued elsewhere. Here the question is whether there is a similar aspiration for the social sciences. The parallel principle could be stated along these lines: there should be some set of basic facts about individuals in social interactions that is sufficient to permit one to derive all varieties of social behavior, given relevant knowledge about context and boundary conditions.

The attractions of such a unified social science are the same as in the natural science case: parsimony, simplicity, and comprehensiveness. And, in fact, unifying theories for social explanation are sometimes advanced. The most thorough-going attempt is the effort by rational choice theory and microeconomics to unify all social action as the consequence of preference-maximizing individual rationality within constraints.

Attractive as this effort might be from an abstract or aesthetic perspective, it is profoundly misguided when if comes to understanding society. Social phenomena are not the law-governed consequences of a few underlying facts and features of individuals. Rather, they are the contingent and mixed results of an inherently heterogeneous set of motives, psychologies, and institutions. The fundamental problem is that the social world is not a system at all in the natural science sense. Instead, it is the contingent and dynamic sum of a variety of shifting processes and contexts.

A better metaphor for the social world -- better than the metaphor of a table of billiard balls governed by the laws of mechanics -- is a large urban flea market. The wares on sale on a particular Saturday are simply the sum of the accidents of circumstance that led a collection of sellers to converge on that particular day. There are some interesting regularities that emerge over time -- in the spring one finds more used lawnmowers and in times of dearth one finds more family treasures. These regularities require explanation. But they do not derive from some governing "law of flea markets" that might be discovered. Instead, the flea market and the larger society are, alike, simply the aggregate result of large numbers of actions, motives, circumstances, and structures that turn kaleidoscopically and produce patterned but non-lawlike outcomes.

So where does this take us with regard to "unified social science"? It leads us to expect something else entirely: rather than unity, we should expect eclectic theories, piecemeal explanations, and a patchwork of inquiries at a range of levels of description. Some explanatory theories will turn out to be more portable than others. But none will be comprehensive, and the social sciences will always remain open-ended and extensible. Instead of theoretical unification we might rather look for a more and more satisfactory coverage, through a range of disciplines and methods, of the aspects of the social world we judge most interesting and important. And these judgments can be trusted to shift

over time. And this means that we should be skeptical about the appropriateness of the goal of creating a unified social science.

(See an earlier posting on "Coverage of the Social Sciences" for more relevant comments on this topic.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:19PM (-05:00)

The flea market analogy

Friday, February 22, 2008



Is the flea market a helpful analogy for understanding the social world ("The Disunity of Science")? Does it serve to provide a different mental model in terms of which to consider the nature of social phenomena?

What it has going for it is heterogeneity and contingency, and an obvious share of agent-dependency. The people who show up on a given Saturday are a contingent and largely disorganized mix of humanity. And the products that wind up on the jumble tables too are highly disorderly and random. Each has its own unique story for how it got there. There is no overall guiding design.

But there is also a degree of order underlying the apparent chaos of the jumble tables. All is not random in a flea market. The participants, for example: there are regular vendors, street people, police officers, health inspectors, jugglers, and pickpockets -- as well as regular shoppers, tourists, school children, and occasional shoppers looking for a used toaster or a single kitchen chair. In most cases there are reasons they are there -- and the reasons are socially interesting. Moreover, the ethnographer of the flea market is likely enough to spot some seasonal or social patterns in the products and people present in a certain month or time of year. So -- a blend of chaos and order.

But the order that can be discerned is the result of a large number of overlapping, independent conditions and processes -- not the manifestation of a few simple forces or a guiding system of laws.

Both accident and order are characteristic of the larger social world as well. The helter-skelter of the flea market is in fact highly analogous to many aspects of social phenomena -- army recruitment, incidents of crime, mortgage defaults. But it is also true that there are other social phenomena that aren't so accidental. So the jumble sale is perhaps less good as an analogy for highly organized and managed social processes -- a tight administrative hierarchy, an orchestrated campaign event, or a coordinated attack in battle.

This addresses the "accidental conjunction" part of the analogy. What about the "composite order" part of the analogy? This element too works pretty well for many examples of social phenomena. When students of the professions discover that there are interesting patterns of recruitment into accountancy or the officer corps, or discover that there are similarities in the organizations of pharmacists and psychotherapists -- they

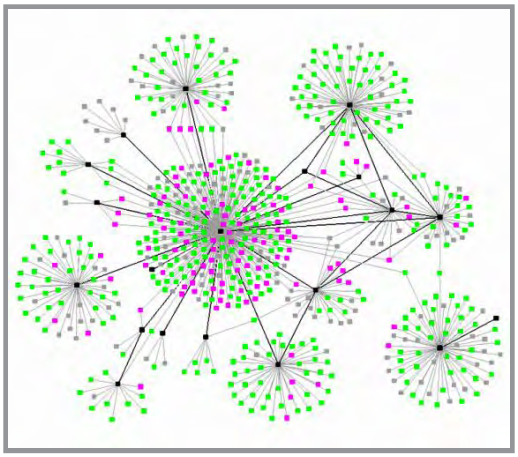
also recognize that these patterns result from complex, intertwined patterns of strategic positioning, organizational learning, and economic circumstances. In other words, the patterns and regularities are themselves the result of multiple social mechanisms, motives, and processes. And these processes are in no way analogous to laws of nature.

So, all considered, the analogy of the flea market works pretty well as a mental model for what we should expect of social phenomena: a degree of accident and conjunction, a degree of emerging pattern and order that results from many independent but converging social processes, and an inescapable dimension of agent-dependency that refutes any hope of discovering an underlying, law-governed system.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:41PM (-05:00)

Is network analysis inconsistent with agent-centered explanation?

Monday, February 25, 2008



Quite a few researchers who study dynamic social processes are making use of some of the tools of network analysis. And it is sometimes maintained that this approach is inconsistent with an agent-centered approach to social processes. Some of these researchers take the view that "it's not what is in the heads of various actors, but rather their relationships in networks that provide the causal underpinnings of social change." And they sometimes maintain that the actor's psychological states can't even be identified in isolation from his/her social relationships. So, once again, explanation cannot rest upon facts about individuals alone. And this sort of finding is thought to cast doubt on methodological individualism in particular, and agent-centered explanatory strategies more generally. (Chuck Tilly and co-authors sometimes take a view along these lines; for example, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, Dynamics of Contention.)

There is something right about the intuition that we can't ground social explanations on assumptions that are too narrowly confined to features of individual psychology. Individuals are socially constucted and socially developed, and our explanations of social processes need
to reflect this fact. This is why I prefer the phrase "methodological localism" to "methodological individualism." But both ontologies are agent-centered. So the question remains: does the causal salience of social networks demonstrate that agent-centered accounts are inherently incomplete -- or even worse, inherently unworkable (because we can't even specify the individual agent's powers and motives independently of his/her networks)?

I don't think so, for several reasons. First, what is a network but a set of socially constructed agents in concrete relations with each other -- communication, coordination, power, subordination, and recognition? The facts about the network are exhausted by a

description of the social beliefs of the relevant actors and their material relations to each other.

Second, it is certainly true that an agent's possibilities for exercising power are a function of facts beyond his/her own psychological characteristics. So Albert, the peasant activist in the tiny Breton village, is much more empowered than his psychological twin across the border in Normandy, by the fact that he alone has strong relationships with leaders in both the Catholic Church and the wine-growers' guild. His social networks permit him to amplify the scope of action and effect he may attempt. What this means is that Albert's social networks are a causal component in his ability to wield influence. In this sense it is reasonable as well to attribute causal status to the network and to characterize this standing as being independent of Albert as an individual.

But it remains true that all of the causal powers associated with the network depend on the states of agency of the many persons who make it up. We therefore need to be able to provide an agent-centered account of the network's causal powers, distributed over the many agents who make it up. We must have "microfoundations" for the claim that the network exercises social influence. If the actors who constitute nodes within the network didn't have the right mental frameworks, motivational dispositions, or bodies of knowledge, then they would not in fact behave in a way that was sustaining of the network's social-causal properties.

So, it seems inescapable that, when we say that "Albert's power as a peasant activist depends upon the social fact that he is part of such-and-so networks" -- that we have only uncovered another field of research where more agent-centered research is needed. The network's social-causal properties must themselves disaggregate onto a set of facts about the agents who constitute the network. The current causal properties of the network and the agents who make it up are the complex and iterative result of many inter-related actions and alliances of prior generations of agents.

And this in turn demonstrates that network analysis is by no means inconsistent with an agent-centered approach to social explanation.

(See "Levels of the social" for more on this subject.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:25PM (-05:00)

Paired comparisons

Thursday, February 28, 2008

Sidney Tarrow is a gifted and prolific student of comparative politics. (Listen to my interview with Professor Tarrow.) He has spent much of his career trying to understand social movements, contentious politics, and the causes of differences in political behavior across national settings. And one of his special contributions is his ability to think clearly about the methods that social scientists use.

Tarrow attaches a lot of weight to the idea of "paired comparisons" as a method of research and discovery: Locate a few cases that are broadly similar in many respects but different in a way that is important, interesting, or surprising. Then examine the cases in greater detail to attempt to discover what explains the difference between the two cases.



(One of his early books that employs this method is From center to periphery: Alternative models of national-local policy impact and an application to France and Italy.)

Nothing special turns on "pairs" here; what Tarrow is describing is really the logic of small-N comparative research. The point about the broad similarity that is the basis for choosing the cases follows from the logic of causation: if we presuppose that the outcome P is caused by some set of antecedent social and political conditions and we know that C1 and C2 have different outcomes -- then the more factors we can "control" for by finding cases in which these factors are constant, the better. This is so, because it demonstrates that none of the constant factors in the two cases are the cause of variation in outcome. And this limits our investigation of possible causes to the factors in which the cases differ.

If this sounds like Mill's methods of similarity and difference, that's appropriate -- the logic is the same, so far as I can see. Here is Mill's method of difference:

A B C D -E => P
A B -C D -E => -P

And in this case -- making the heroic assumption that A,B,C,D,E exhaust all possible causes of P, and that the cause of P is deterministic rather than probabilistic -- then we can infer that the presence of C causes P.

This reasoning doesn't take us to a valid conclusion to the effect that C is the only factor that is causally relevant to the occurrence of P; it is possible, for example, that there is a third case along these lines:

-A B -C D -E => -P

This would demonstrate that A is a necessary condition for the occurrence of P; withhold A and P disappears. And each of the other factors might also play a role as a necessary condition. So it would be necessary to observe as many as 32 cases (2^5) in order to sort out the status of A through E as either necessary or sufficient conditions for the occurrence of P. (The logic of this kind of causal reasoning is explored more fully in my essay, "An Experiment in Causal Reasoning," which is also published in Microfoundations, Methods, and Causation.)

But I don't think that Tarrow is intending to advance the method of paired comparison as a formal method of causal inference, along the lines of inductive or deductive logic. Instead, I think he is making the plausible point that this method should be understood as a part of an intelligent research strategy. Social processes are complex. We are interested in explaining variation across cases. And we probably have the best likelihood of discovering important causal relationships if we can reduce the number of moving parts (the other kinds of variation that occur across the cases).

Tarrow gives an example of the application of the method of paired comparisions in the

context of his early study of the political fortunes of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the south of Italy. In this case the paired comparison involves northern Italy and southern Italy. Both are subject to the same national political structures; both populations speak Italian; both populations have an Italian national identity. However, the PCI was fairly successful in mobilizing support and winning elections based on a militant political program in the north, and was persistently unsuccessful in doing these things in the south. What explains the difference?

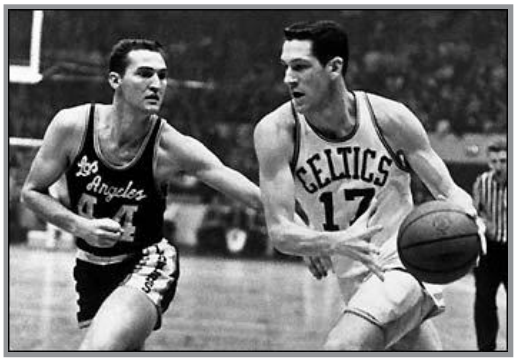
As Tarrow explains his reasoning, his expectation in conducting the research was a "structural" one. He expected that there would be large structural factors in post-war Italy -- features of economic and political institutions -- that would explain the difference in outcome for PCI political activism. And there were indeed large structural differences in social organization in the two regions. Northern Italy possessed an economy in which industrial labor played a key role and constituted a substantial part of the population. Southern Italy was agrarian and backward, with a large percentage of exploited peasants and only a small percentage of industrial workers.

But, very significantly, Tarrow now believes that these "structural" expectations are probably too "macro" to serve as the basis of social explanation. Instead, he favors the importance of looking at the dynamics of social processes and the specific causal mechanisms that can be discovered in particular social-historical settings. This means looking for causal factors that work at a more strategic and meso level. In terms of the southern Italian PCI outcome that he was interested in explaining thirty years ago -- he now believes that the causal mechanism of "brokerage" would have shed much more light on the political outcomes that were of interest in Italy. (This is the heart of the approach that he takes, along with Doug McAdam and Chuck Tilly, in Dynamics of Contention.)

This finding doesn't invalidate the heuristic of paired comparisons. But it probably does invalidate the expectation that we might discover large "structure-structure" patterns of causation through such comparisons. Instead, what the method facilitates is a more focused research effort on the part of the comparativist, in the context of which he/she can search out the lower-level causal mechanisms and processes that are at work in the various settings under study.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:44AM (-05:00)

Micro cultures?

Sunday, March 02, 2008



Is there such a thing as a "micro"-culture -- a culture that is somewhat distinctive of a particular community in a specific time and place, and different from the culture of similar communities in other places?

The sorts of communities I'm thinking of might include sports teams, university faculties, union locals, church congregations, street gangs, or rural villages. Is it possible that Village X is a friendlier place than Village Y? Or that Local W is more militant than Local Z? Or that

Gang S is less willing to use violence against younger brothers of rivals than Gang T is? And is it possible that these differences are real, persistent, and self-reinforcing through mechanisms that constitute a basis for dynamic cultural continuity?



Take the Boston Celtics. The players and coaches are all recruited in a national and international labor market; they generally are well acquainted with each other through their high-profile college basketball careers, camps, and leagues; and the NBA spends a lot of money in cultivating a national NBA culture rather than a micro-culture for particular teams. So you might imagine that every team would be simply a generic expression of national basketball culture. And yet it's possible that the Boston Celtics are a distinctive team, in terms of a number of characteristics. They might have more of a team ethic than, say, the Los Angeles Lakers; they might have some traditions that play out in practices and games; they might have a lore about the Celtics greats of the past -- Havliceck, Bird, Dennis Johnson, and they might conceivably have a style of play that persists through changes of coaches and players. So here the question is whether the national culture of NBA basketball is the key, or whether there are important differences in behavior, values, practices, and style that persist for specific teams over time. This speculation raises two sorts of questions: How would we attempt to determine whether there are such differences? And what sorts of social mechanisms would serve to preserve and reproduce such cultural specifics?

The basketball version of this story is pretty speculative on my part -- few of us have the close acquaintance with professional sports to have an opinion on the subject of local team cultures. But university faculties -- that's a different story. Here I feel more confident in asserting that there are indeed significant differences of culture across institutions, even institutions that are otherwise very similar. Among select liberal arts colleges, for example, there are wide variations on different campuses about the value of "university citizenship" (service on college committees, for example); the expectations and duties associated with teaching undergraduate students (high commitment versus low commitment to spending time with students; a felt obligation to provide meaningful commentary on student writing assignments); and probably differences around the standards of what is acceptable in gender relations (for example, the acceptability of romantic relationships between faculty and students or senior faculty and junior faculty). A little less tangibly -- it seems to me that there are visible differences on different college faculties concerning the depth and extent of social relationships among faculty members. Some faculties are tight-knit, with a lot of socializing independent from official functions; and others are more distant, with few serious friendships among faculty members. Some faculties give an impression of welcoming newcomers; others give a more standoffish or even unfriendly impression. (As a young faculty member on the job market years ago I was very aware of the reputations that different philosophy departments had for the way in which they conducted interviews with prospective assistant professors. One department was legendary for positioning the members of the search committee in a semi-circle surrounding the candidate, so that the candidate couldn't actually see everyone at once.)

One way of rephrasing the question here is this: is the climate and culture of a place (a university or a basketball team) just the net result of the personalities and idiosyncracies of the group of people who happen to have been recruited into the group; or does the

culture of the group have a certain normative persistence, capable of transmission to new arrivals? The example of university faculties seems to support the second interpretation. And in fact it seems possible to identify some of the social mechanisms through which this transmission occurs: for example, imitation, coaching and mentoring, social discipline, and the transmission of narratives of "who we are at University X or College Y". The behaviors that are valorized through existing group members' practices and observations serve as a prescriptive model for the behaviors of more junior people. And of course, these processes of transmission are imperfect and malleable. The culture of a place changes over a period of several decades.

So I am tempted to think that small communities do in fact make their own cultures over an extended period of time, and that these cultures -- values, practices, modes of interpersonal interaction, experiences of commitment -- have some degree of durability. They do in fact succeed in changing the new recruits that come into the community, often enough to allow the mix of values and experiences that characterize the micro-culture to persist across multiple generations.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:21AM (-05:00)

Koestler's twentieth century

Tuesday, March 04, 2008



Arthur Koestler is most celebrated for his historical novel about the Moscow show trials, Darkness at Noon. And the book is indeed a deeply revealing look at the heart of totalitarianism in the twentieth century -- the more so if you do a side-by-side reading of the trial of the fictional Rubashov and the transcripts of the trial of the historical Bukharin (Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites: Heard Before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court). Koestler caught the psychology and history of the period exactly right -- and he did it more or less as a contemporary observer, not an archival historian with leisurely access to the archives after the fact.

But in some ways I find his autobiographical books even more gripping, and none more so than The invisible writing; An autobiography, published in 1954.

The Invisible Writing is an amazing window onto some of the most important events of the twentieth century: the rise of Hitler, the struggles between Communists and Nazis in the streets of Berlin, the gradual decapitation of all forces of the left in Germany in the 1930s, the great famine in the Ukraine, and the cruelty of the Spanish Civil War. Here is a telling description of a moment in time: "With the constant dismissals at Ullstein's [the publisher], and the shadow of Hitler lying across the country like a monster-shaped cloud, our motley little crowd of intellectuals was too scared to be capable of any clear thought. It was easy to win their sympathy for Russia, but almost impossible to make them take a determined stand for their own interests in Germany. The liberals in Germany -- and elsewhere -- have rarely understood that there are situations in which caution amounts to suicide."

Koestler was situated in such a way as to be a participant-eyewitness in these world-historical events. A few snapshots from this period -- street fighting in Berlin in 1932 between Communist workers and Nazi thugs; a train journey through the Ukraine during the worst of the deliberate war of famine that Stalin waged against the peasantry; Koestler's own denunciation of a loved one for a trivial suspicion; and a series of narrow escapes in fascist Spain (including a period of three months in a Franco prison under a sentence of death).

Koestler's political adulthood witnessed his own movement from Communist journalist and activist in Berlin in the 1930s to a committed anti-Communist in the 1950s. And his anti-Communism derived from his own honest willingness to confront the terrible truths of Stalinism -- Comintern's betrayal of the Spanish republicans, the Moscow show trials, the deliberate policy of famine as a tool of social war, and the repression and brutality of the Soviet state against its own citizens.

The book provides absorbing, valuable reading. And it offers deep lessons for us today -- about politics, about personal integrity, about the relationship between individuals and the state, and about the terrible power that ideology has wielded over humanity.

What Koestler learned from his part of the twentieth century, and was able to express so evocatively in his writings, was a series of brutal facts about power: the power of a fascist state to destroy all organizations that might challenge its grip on society, the power of propaganda to conceal and falsify evident social realities, and the power of ideology to blind intellectuals to the meaning of the events unfolding around them. Lies and coercion were the central realities of the state and the party -- both in Germany and in the Soviet Union.

Koestler describes the central paradox of the Moscow show trials in these terms:

To the western mind, unacquainted with the system and the rules, the confessions in the Trials appeared as one of the great enigmas of our time. Why had the Old Bolsheviks, heroes and leaders of the revolution, who had so often braved death that they called themselves 'dead men on furlough', confessed to these absurd and hair-raising lies? If one discounted those who were merely trying to save their necks, like Radek; and those who were mentally broken like Zinoviev; or trying to shield their families like Kameniev, who was said to be particularly devoted to his son--then there still remained a hard core of men like Bukharin, Piatakov, Mrachkovsky, Smirnov, and at least a score of other with a revolutionary past of thirty, forty years behind them, the veterans of Czarist prisons and Siberian exile, whose total and gleeful self-abasement remained inexplicable. It was this 'hard core' that Rubashov was meant to represent.

Here is a final, amazing twentieth century irony. The lead prosecutor in the Moscow show trials (1936-38) -- the person who established the jurisprudence of coercion, intimidation, and the crushing subordination of the individual to the overwhelming power of the state, was Andrei Vyshinsky. It was he who stage-managed the shameful miscarriage of justice that led to the executions of Zinoviev, Bukharin, Kamenev, and other leading Bolsheviks. And it was the very same Andrei Vyshinsky who was the Soviet Union's chief delegate in 1949 in the drafting of ... the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Here, surely, we find a person with a fine understanding of human rights.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:53PM (-05:00)

Concepts and the world

Wednesday, March 05, 2008

What is the relation between concepts and the world? And how do we arrive at a conceptual scheme that provides a perspicuous way of representing reality?

This way of putting the question invokes one of the central polarities that has defined modern philosophy, including the traditions of Locke, Descartes, and Kant. It is the contrast of representation and reality; the polarity between the structures of mentation through which we conceptualize and represent the world, and the world itself, the given, the objective features of reality independent from our schemes of representation. Richard Rorty's title, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, expresses his skepticism about this polarity and about the conception of the relation between knower and the known that it corresponds to. But the intellectual conundrums these questions raise are unavoidable.

One of the views that we can take on the relation between mind and world is "realism": the idea that, for a given range of stuff, the stuff is independent from the ways in which we represent it. So we can be realist about fish or electrons, for example; and what this means is that we think there are real fish and electrons, and that their properties are objective and independent of the ways in which we conceive or represent them. But there is a huge problem with this view -- even as much as I want to defend a form of realism. It is the problem that "properties" are not objective features of the world, but are rather attributes singled out by concepts. And concepts are part of our mental schemes -- not inherent or objective features of the world that we are representing. So properties are not objective features of reality. "Facts" are similarly representation-dependent: we can't express a fact about the world except on the basis of a set of concepts. So we can't say that properties and facts are independent of the scheme of representation. And this seems to lead to the conclusion that naive realism is untenable.

The alternatives to realism include idealism and conceptualism -- the view that the properties of "stuff" are constituted by the mental schemes that we bring to the study of "stuff". But idealism is intellectually unpalatable, in its Berkeleian version anyway: in the idea that there is no objective, material world, but only a set of subjective mental representations conforming to an orderly succession in the mind. A particular version of conceptualism is the Whorf hypothesis, according to which different cultures inhabit different worlds because of the fundamental and incommensurable differences that exist between their conceptual schemes (Benjamin Whorf, Language, Thought, and Reality). And there is the Kantian version of these ideas -- the view that empirical reality cannot be recognized except through an organizing set of concepts or categories; so naive realism is ultimately incoherent. There is nothing we can say about a "noumenal" world -- a world as it really is beyond the categories of empirical experience.

So we might cautiously admit to the correctness of "conceptualism" -- that anything we say about the objective or real features of the world in inevitably couched within a set of concepts or categories, and there is no uniquely best set of concepts on the basis of which to analyze experience. This doesn't take us to idealism, however. It doesn't say that the world is subjective or constituted by consciousness; it doesn't say that the world lacks an independent status from the mind. What it says is that knowledge and representation of the world are inherently conceptual -- and this is an act of mentation rather than simply a reflection of the objective features of the world.

Within this conceptualism, we might say that the best we can do is to acknowledge that the world of stuff interacts with the knower; the knower brings a set of concepts to his/her interactions with stuff; and knowledge and the world are the joint product of this interaction. This view isn't necessarily idealist in the Berkeley sense -- according to which reality is simply an ensemble of mental representations. But it is non-objectivist when it comes to the facts about the world: the facts are dependent upon a scheme of concepts within the context of which we characterize states of affairs. And, at the same time, it permits us to assert that there are objective facts of the matter once we have settled on a conceptual scheme.

This set of issues has special relevance to the philosophy of social science; I'll have to return to the topic in another posting.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:36PM (-05:00)

How does regional economic development work?

Thursday, March 06, 2008

Countries, states, regions, and cities are interested in stimulating economic development in their jurisdictions. Various possible strategies are often mentioned:



- encourage entrepreneurship
- improve the talent base
- enhance the attractiveness of the region to outsiders with creative talents
- create a legal, fiscal, and regulatory environment that encourages new businesses
- create larger pools of venture capital
- attract out-of-region businesses through regional business-attraction centers
- encourage research and development in local universities
- facilitate the movement of inventions from the lab to the business plan

The primary question here is a causal one: what strategies actually work, and how would we use empirical research to evaluate alternative policy interventions by governmental and non-governmental organizations? How would we decide which policies to invest in?

In order to begin to answer this question, we need to get a little more specific about what we mean by "regional economic development." I'll just stipulate an answer to this:

Regional economic development entails the creation of new businesses and expansion of existing businesses, in a way that expands the total number of jobs and results in a rising average wage.

So regional economic development aims at creating more employment and a rising standard of living in the region, and it seeks to do this through causing expansion of profitable business activity in the region. And, in order to create higher-paid jobs, the

businesses created or expanded need to be on the high-value-added end of the spectrum; this often means skill- or knowledge-intensive industries. New jobs in low-productivity manufacturing or service businesses will not increase the average wage.

(The last statement isn't necessarily true in a region with persistent unemployment. A new low-productivity factory with a low average wage will raise the average standard of living if it significantly reduces unemployment. However, it seems perverse to have the goal of stimulating the growth of low-productivity sectors and businesses rather than higher-wage opportunities.)

There are several ideas that arise from these simple statements and questions. One concerns the limits that exist on the ability of state or local governments to actually influence the rate of growth of business activity, jobs, and wages at all. It is an open question whether a state or region that has done an optimal job of aligning its policies and investments will actually have a higher probability of growth in these outcomes than one that has no strategies, bad strategies, or poorly aligned strategies. This is because the decisions made by investors and entrepreneurs are influenced by many other factors besides the policy tools available to the municipal or state governments. And the success or failure of business choices is determined by events outside the policy arena. The best way of capturing this thought is to recognize that the causal influence of good policies may still be small relative to other non-policy factors.

Second, though, we might have strong theoretical reasons for thinking that one policy choice is likely to have larger effects on the desired outcome than another. If we can demonstrate a theoretical basis in economics or organizational theory, for example, for concluding that factors X, Y, and Z are favorable for producing the outcomes we want, even if they are not decisive, then it is logical that we should try to identify the most influential of these factors; design a coherent package of policies that enhance these factors (i.e. avoid combinations that are self-defeating), and make the effort possible to implement this package of policies. That is, there may be a basis in social science theory for judging that policy X should have a positive effect on the probability of desired outcome Y. The reasoning may be economic (businesses will have an incentive to locate in regions where they can have a high confidence of recruiting a qualified workforce) or perhaps logistical (businesses will choose locations where transport is convenient) or fiscal (firms will take careful account of the total cost of doing business in Michigan versus California or North Carolina). But if we can demonstrate on theoretical grounds that X should positively influence Y, then we have reason to implement X even if we don’t have direct empirical evidence of X’s effectiveness.

This is the role of theory in justifying the choice of a policy package: a set of antecedent theoretical reasons for believing that this set of policies will work to increase the outcomes we are interested in achieving. There is another more empirical basis for assessing alternative policies, based on comparison of cases: look at a number of cases in which X is present or not present, and measure the status of Y. From a social science point of view, this inquiry is feasible but difficult. If we select six cities for comparison and find that the cities with a high percentage of college grads have high growth while those with low college grad percentages have low growth -- does that demonstrate that "talent causes economic growth"? Not exactly; the observed correlation could be spurious, accidental, collateral, or reversed. And likewise with the large-N version of the study. Suppose we find either that Y is positively correlated with X or that Y is not correlated with X, based on the values of X and Y over a large number of cases. Does the first finding demonstrate that “X causes Y”, and does the second case demonstrate that “X

does not cause Y"? Neither conclusion is justified on the basis of just these facts. The non-correlation finding may be the result of a genuine causal influence masked by a number of disturbing influences; and the positive correlation may be the result of a common cause that is influencing both X and Y. So, as econometricians and epidemiologists know very well, the design of empirical studies that sort out the causal impact of various treatments is challenging.

In addition to these issues having to do with our ability to assess the causal weight of various policy treatments, we also have to consider the ratio of costs and benefits associated with various bundles of policies. Policy makers are forced to arrive at some estimate of the relative costs and benefits of the available policy options in order to make sensible choices among them. But here too there are the same problems of estimation: it is difficult to estimate either the probability of success of a given policy or the net value of the success of the policy.

The upshot of this short reflection, if there is one, is that it is very difficult to arrive at solid, precise, and rigorous estimates of either the economic impact of various policy choices or of their likelihood of success. And yet the policymaker does not have the luxury of indecision; economic development is a crucially important component of the wellbeing of a region's population. So it seems unavoidable that the best we can do is to assess policies on the basis of their likely contribution to economic growth, based on available economic and social theories, and be ready to finetune our choices as experience indicates.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:17PM (-05:00)

Prejudice and social framing

Saturday, March 08, 2008



People bring highly contingent assumptions, beliefs, and frames to their reading of their social worlds. These framing assumptions are presumably the effect of prior life experiences and learning -- this is what we can refer to as the social psychology of social perception.

(It is possible there is some degree of biology here as well; we can't exclude the possibility that there is a natural-selection basis to a neurophysiology of social perception, as argued by the sociobiologists. The case is not resolved at present. Are there any social impulses that are hard-wired through our evolutionary history?)

Another thing we know about social cognition is that human beings are great storytellers. We can take a small detail and weave it into an orderly narrative. And we are likely to tell stories that play out our expectations, fears, or hopes. We interpret the events and behavior around us in ways that go vastly beyond the slender facts that we observe.

(There is probably a developed area of research on this particular feature of social cognition, analogous to the study of reading or pattern recognition, though I am unaware

of such research. But it would go something like this: assemble a set of video clips of people acting and interacting without much explicit context, and ask the subjects to briefly describe what is going on. Insert various social cues and see how that changes the stories subjects construct -- for example, change the actor's clothing or adornments slightly.)

Now let's see what the point is. I suggest that these features of human social cognition make prejudice and discriminiation a very common feature of social cognition. Take a small dimension of mistrust of strangers; add to this a slight propensity for being uncomfortable with difference; add the usual fact of the information sparsity available in most social interactions; and fold in the degree of fictionalizing and narrative construction that social cognition normally involves -- and what are you likely to get? It seems credible that the resulting stories will often enough represent the other in terms that support prejudice, discrimination and fear. And it seems credible that these internalized stories, and the actions and consequences they produce, will reinforce and proliferate the prejudicial stories and behaviors.

This suggests a basis for expecting mechanisms of social cognition that are xenophobic, racist, homophobic, and sexist. It is an unpleasant possibility.

It also suggests that when we advocate for a society based on assumptions of trust, equality, and mutual respect -- that we need to be considering as well how to create a learning environment that creates these cognitive habits. We shouldn't assume that trust and equality are "natural" states of mind, but rather a set of cognitive habits that need to be specifically cultivated.

If this has some credibility, it probably gives some indications of what a non-xenophobic pedagogy ought to look like. It ought to work to provide more background knowledge about human differences -- to fill in part of the data gap. It ought to work specifically to defuse the
origins of "stranger anxiety" -- to work against the background of fear that structures many human interactions. And it ought to affirmatively make the case for equality among persons -- to counteract a tendency for the group superiority stories to emerge.

In other words, a just and equalitarian society needs to be created. It isn't an accident.
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:57PM (-05:00)

Chaos and coordination in social life

Sunday, March 09, 2008

Much social behavior is chaotic, in that it simply emerges from the independent choices of numerous agents during a period of time. It is analogous to Brownian motion -- particles in a liquid moving in random motions as a result of innumerable bumps and pushes at the molecular level.

However, there are also many patterns that become visible in social behavior -- examples of what I would like to call "coordinated social action": stock market panic selling, holiday travel, rumors, style, riots, pickpockets in train stations. And we can identify many causes of coordination of individual behavior into larger patterns: commands, regulations, institutions, customs, conventions, collective plans, shared beliefs about social behavior, common sources of information, and common changes in the environment of choice, for

example.



What I mean by "coordination" here is the opposite of chaos -- something analogous to the coherence of photons associated with the laser effect. In a laser a set of photons are stimulated to fire coherently with each other, resulting in a beam of light that possesses focus and parallel propagation that is different in kind from the scattered diffusion of photons from an incandescent bulb. "Coordinated" social action is a set of actions that possess synchronicity or regularity in their occurrence, resulting in an observable regularity of behavior over time and space. A crucial problem for social inquiry is to provide an explanation of the mechanisms that underlie the instances of coordinated social action that we can identify.

Examples of coordinated social action can easily be offered, and specific mechanisms can be identified that produce these forms of social coordination. An army moves in concert across a landscape (command). People drive on the right in North America (regulation). People send their children to school (institution). People greet each other with a polite "good morning" (custom). Villagers come together to fish as a group in the morning (convention). People discuss a spontaneous demonstration in front of the mayor's office on Wednesday, and many appear (collective plans). Drivers choose Route 3 rather than Route 1 because they expect a lot of traffic on Route 1 (shared beliefs). People buy a large number of batteries and chocolate, anticipating an approaching hurricane (common environmental change).

These are all mechanisms that create a degree of coordination or synchronization of behavior among independent agents. There seem to be several large categories of mechanisms here: hierarchical coordination (command, regulation); common response coordination (each individually responds to the same signal); communications and network coordination (individuals exchange messages to secure coordination); and strategic coordination (each intends to behave in a way that will be desirable given his/her expectation of actions by others). Might we try out the thought that all forms of regularities of social behavior derive from one or another of these forms of coordination? This thought is probably somewhat too strong a claim. For example, there are probably social regularities that derive from our biology and evolutionary histories -- limitations of memory, bonds of intra-group loyalty, kin altruism. But the impulse is a sound one: when we are able to observe patterns of social behavior, there must be a cause of those regularities that works its way through influence on the individual actors who constitute the domain of action. And there are only so many mechanisms that might serve.

These sorts of regularities and mechanisms constitute part of the regularity of social life, but perhaps only part. It may be that they don't capture other kinds of more "structural" regularities -- for example, "racial discrimination increases health disparities," "feudal political systems are slow to respond to external aggression", "capitalist market systems are more innovaative than planned economies". But there is an important aspect of social explanation that centers exactly on this question: what are the social mechanisms that bring a degree of coherence and coordination among the actions of a population of independent actors?
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:15PM (-04:00)

Technological inevitability?

Monday, March 10, 2008



Some historians imagine that new technologies force other kinds of social changes, or even that a given technology creates a more or less inevitable process of development in society. Marx is sometimes thought to offer such a theory: "the forces of production create changes in the relations of production." This view is referred to as technological determinism.

The logic underlying this interpretation of history goes something like this: a new technology creates a set of reasonably accessible new possibilities for achieving new forms of value: new products, more productive farming techniques, or new ways of satisfying common human needs. Once the technology exists, agents or organizations in society will recognize those new opportunities and will attempt to take advantage of them by investing in the technology and developing it more fully. Some of these attempts will fail, but others will succeed. So over time, the inherent potential of the technology will be realized; the technology will be fully exploited and utilized. And, often enough, the technology will both require and force a new set of social institutions to permit its full utilization; here again, agents will recognize opportunities for gain in the creation of social innovations, and will work towards implementing these social changes.

This view of history doesn't stand up to scrutiny, however. There are many examples of technologies that failed to come to full development (the water mill in the ancient world and the Betamax in the contemporary world). There is nothing inevitable about the way in which a technology will develop -- imposed, perhaps, by the underlying scientific realities of the technology; and there are numerous illustrations of a more complex back-and-forth between social conditions and the development of a technology. So technological determinism is not a credible historical theory.

For more credible interpretations of the relationships that exist between technology and historical change, we can consider the work of some very gifted historians.

An example of such a study of social-technological development is offered in William Cronon's fascinating history of Chicago, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West. Cronon tracks the effects that the extension of the rail network had on the city of Chicago and the region surrounding it into Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Michigan. Cheap, reliable rail transport between Chicago and New York created large markets for grain and beef. This gave incentives to farmers and traders to organize their activities in such a way as to take advantage of the profits newly available in these markets. But Cronon points out that transportation by railroad of large volumes of grain required a reorganization of the market institutions that were used: the establishment of grain elevators along the rail lines, the establishment of a gradiing system for qualities of grain being sold by farmers to elevator operators, and the establishment of a futures market for grain and beef. And he observes that entrepreneurs recognized the gains that could be achieved by developing these institutions and carried them forward. So the technology "needed" a reorganization of the market for grain; entrepreneurs recognized an

opportunity for profits in achieving this reorganization; and the necessary social innovations occurred.

This makes the business and ecological transformation of Chicago's region sound inevitable, given the extension of the rail system into Chicago. However, contingency comes into this story from numerous angles. The build-out of the American rail network was itself a highly contingent matter; the major east-west lines could have been placed in numerous alternative routes, including a network that would have made St. Louis the major rail nexus in the center of the country. Second, the policy environment within which the American rail network developed represented another major form of contingency. As Frank Dobbin demonstrates, England, France, and the United States possessed very different "policy cultures", and these differences created substantial differences in the way in which the basic technology of the railroad was exploited in the three national settings (Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain, and France in the Railway Age). And third, there are multiple social solutions that would work roughly as well as the institutions of the grain elevator and the futures market for solving the business challenges of mass transport and marketing of grain. The solutions that emerged in Chicago were therefore contingent as well.

Cronon and Dobbin illustrate several different aspects of technological causes and technological contingency in their accounts of the railroad. But for an author who takes the contingency of technology change even more seriously, see Thomas Hughes' history of electric power in Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930. Hughes demonstrates that the basic scientific discoveries associated with the technology of electric power had multiple possible realizations in machines and devices, and that the social constraints that existed in different national scientific-technical-political cultures led to substantial and fundamental differences in the development of the technology. The celebrated contest between alternating and direct current as the foundation of power transmission is one such example, but there are hundreds of other examples of choice that can be uncovered in the history of this fundamental modern technology. And, most pointedly, Hughes illustrates the way in which different municipal political requirements in England, France, and the United States led to substantially different implementations of the power stations and transmission networks in the three national contexts.

These examples illustrate several fundamental points about the role of technology in historical change. A new technology creates new opportunities for power, wealth, efficiency, or productivity; so a new technology can be a powerful force for social and economic change. Governments, farmers, entrepreneurs, and corporations have a complicated set of incentives that lead them to consider developing the new technology. So new technologies certainly function as effective historical causes. The development of a technology, however, introduces deeply significant elements of contingency. The term "path-dependency" is an accurate description of the process of the development of a major technology. Third, a technology is both influenced by social factors in the society in which it is developed, and also influences the future direction of social factors in the society. Thus technology is both cause and effect of social change. And, finally, it is evident that the study of the history of technology is inevitably a study of social processes and institutions as much as it is a study of machines and inventions. Technology is a social product, shaped by the needs and powers that exist in society as much as it is shaped by scientific imagination and discovery.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:27PM (-04:00)

Social change and natural selection?

Wednesday, March 12, 2008



Are there any valid analogies between the evolution of species and various kinds of social change?

Here's the basic argument for the evolution of species in Darwinian theory: individual organisms transmit traits to offspring; there is a low but positive rate of mutation of traits; there is no inheritance of acquired characteristics; traits influence the overall reproductive success of the organism (phenotype); organisms with a higher level of reproductive fitness proliferate their traits more frequently; and, in time, the novel trait prevails within the population. Over long periods of time, the species becomes more adapted to the particular features of its environment through the accumulation of fitness-enhancing traits. An important conceptual issue that needed resolution in the development of modern evolutionary theory is the unit of selection: is it the individual, the gene, the kinship group, the extended group, or the species as a whole? For the mechanism of natural selection to work, we need to identify the individual as the unit of selection, not the extended group, because the mechanism depends on changing the frequency of a given gene within the population as a whole. Group selection is not a valid Darwinian mechanism of evolution. (This topic gained greater clarity through debates over altruism in animal behavior; G. C. Williams, Adaptation and Natural Selection.)



In general, I don't find that the analogy of natural selection has proven very useful as a basis for explaining social change. "Social evolution" appears to be a misnomer. In order for the analogy to work as a possible explanation of any kind of social change, we would need to be able to identify several specific things: the unit of selection; the features or traits that constitute the "phenotype" of the unit; the substrate in which the coding for traits exists (genotype); the mechanism of transmission by which "parent" transmits the trait to "offspring"; and the connection that is postulated between current traits and future reproductive success. We would also need a theory about the mechanism of mutation at the level of the coding of social traits, and -- if we are to stick with Darwinian evolutionary theory -- we would need to assure ourselves that acquired traits are not transmitted.

Finally, the social situation would need to be one in which there are numerous independent "individual units" whose independent reproductive success over time leads to a change in the frequency of traits over time.

Partly the unsuitability of the analogy for explaining social change derives from the problem of the unit of selection: what are the units over which differential rates of survival are to be measured? The earliest social borrowers from Darwin chose to compare whole societies. The idea was that certain characteristics made one society more viable than another, and over time this advantage would lead to the dominance of the more fit society. But this isn't really a natural selection argument at all; there aren't enough societies, and the concepts of reproduction and fitness are not well defined.

A second sort of effort tried to draw a more exact analogy by singling out a kind of social organization which existed in multiple "phenotypes" in society. For example, evolutionary economics considers models in which the unit of selection is the business firm; the measure of reproductive success is profitability; and "reproduction" is simply survival from one period to the next. Putting the analogy simply: some firms have traits that make them more efficient and effective; these firms will be more profitable as a result; they will grow larger and stronger; and they will drive weaker competitors out of business. The market represents the selection mechanism. Over time, then, the superior business organization will become the standard -- until a next round of innovation occurs.

But this analogy isn't really a good one either, for a host of reasons. A firm is constituted by the ideas and behaviors of the individuals who make it up; there is no underlying genotype; participants actively redesign the traits of the organization (why else would there be consulting firms?); there is no real analogy to the transmission of traits through reproduction; and there would certainly be the possibility of transmission of acquired traits. So "evolution" towards more efficient or profitable forms of business organization seems to be simply a metaphor, not a theory of social change grounded in a mechanism of social reproduction and selection. If anything, the theory that seems to best describe the process identified here is "design, build, redesign" -- create a form of organization, observe its functioning, and modify the organization so as to achieve higher efficiency. In other words -- not natural selection but intelligent design.

A recent effort to use the theoretical machinery of natural selection as a scientific basis for social explanation is a paper by Paul Ehrlich, director of Stanford University's Center for Conservation Biology. Ehrlich uses available data about the timing and places of innovation in Polynesian canoe design to make an argument about cultural evolution. In an interview with Wired he puts his finding this way: "Features of culture that are tested against the environment will evolve at different rates from those not tested against the environment." Only the abstract is available online, so the full text isn't available; but it would appear that the argument goes something like this. The unit of selection is the local canoe-building tradition; the "genotype" is the hypothetical blueprint of the canoe this tradition builds; mutations are local innovations in design; and the winners are those canoe designs that are most seaworthy -- thus permitting their builders to populate more islands and build more canoes.

As a theory of technological change, I'm not convinced that the "selection" mechanism is doing much work here. Natural selection is a blind process; the finch doesn't notice that a longer beak would be a big advantage in digging out bugs from the bark. Rather, the "long beak" mutation occurs, and the long-beak finches out-reproduce the short-beak finches. In the canoe case, on the other hand, it is entirely credible that the skilled canoe

builders are themselves observing and applying the test of nature; they are correcting the design so as to address the seaworthiness problems involved in the current iteration. So, as has turned out to be the case in so many other instances of social evolutionary thinking, the evolutionary metaphor doesn't seem to help much.

This isn't to say that it isn't possible to explain the diffusion of technical innovations over time and place as some kind of feedback process. It is certainly true that certain design traditions out-perform their rivals, and it is likely that these winners will eventually produce all the canoes within a certain domain (or steam engines, or silicon chips). Rather, the point is an explanatory one. We need to look for the concrete social mechanisms through which artifacts and traditions of skill change over time in response to the features of the environment and the society. And these mechanisms are almost certainly more intentional than the blind process of mutation and selection would suggest.

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:41PM (-04:00)

Structures in Marx's thought

Sunday, March 16, 2008



The concept of a social structure has often played a large role in social theorizing. The general idea is that society consists of an ensemble of durable, regulative structures within the context of which individuals live and act. Sometimes structures are interpreted functionally: the ensemble of structures constitute a system, and discrete structures satisfy important social functions. This is a physiological approach to society: what are the chief sub-systems in society and what do they do; how do they fit together to assure the continuing functioning of society?

There is much to fault in this set of ideas about the constituent parts of society -- for example, its tendency to reify a continually shifting social reality and its tacit assumption that the social order is a system in functional equilibrium.

But here I want to ask a smaller question: does Marx offer a social ontology that includes enduring social structures?

It would appear that the answer is a resounding "yes". Marx looks at capitalism as a system. For example, consider this statement from the Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that

determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or — what is but a legal expression for the same thing — with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.

Here and elsewhere Marx picks out the forces of production and relations of production as the fundamental determinants of historical change. He identifies social classes as the chief actors in society. And he offers a conception of the capitalist mode of production as consisting of an economic base -- the economic structure -- and an ensemble of superstructural elements -- law, state, ideology, religion, culture --that stand above the economic structure and serve to preserve its conditions of reproduction. All of this invokes an ontology of social structures, social systems, and functional interdependency (G. A. Cohen, Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence).

The functionalism implicit in this ontology has been deeply challenged (Jon Elster, Making Sense of Marx; Daniel Little, The Scientific Marx). The bottom line of these criticisms seems inescapable: there is no basis whatsoever to expect that social structures will develop that are functionally suited to the needs of the social system. There is no process of natural selection for social arrangements. So if there is alignment across structures, we need to seek out the specific social mechanisms that bring it about.

But what about the structuralism? Is this ontology a credible one if it is separated from the functionalist assumption?

Here we need to be very careful at every step of the argument. Marx is right that Britain and France possessed a set of property relations in capital and labor in the mid-nineteenth century. These relations were distinct from those of French feudalism in the fourteenth century. These social relations are durable and coercive. Those differences created different historical dynamics in nineteenth-century Britain and France. So far so good -- there were durable, coercive social relations embodied on the two societies, and it doesn't seem misleading to call these "structures." Moreover, these structures had historical effects, much as Marx described them to have. Likewise, his definitions of "proletariat" and "capitalist" are rigorous and historically grounded. So Marx succeeds in identifying social structures in particular societies.

But here it is very important to avoid the error of reification: the assumption that the structures of capitalism are substantially the same in every capitalist society, or the same in one capitalist society over time. Rather, there are substantial and causally important differences across the basic economic institutions, and the situations of the great classes, in different capitalist societies. This is one of the central insights of the new

institutionalism (Kathleen Thelen, How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan). These differences over time and across societies in turn imply that the structuralism of the concept of the capitalist mode of production must be abandoned as well. There is no super-category of "capitalism" and its logic that can be used to subsume the historical trajectories of multiple societies.

Finally, it bears repeating that all theories of structures require microfoundations. Structures do not exist free-standing; instead, they must be embodied on the actions and thoughts of socially constituted individuals. (See Levels of the Social for more on this.) I don't think Marx would object to this stricture -- I think he actually provides an agent-centered political economy himself. But the more holistic advocates of French structuralism (Althusser or Poulantzas, for example) would object strenuously.

So this leaves us with a pretty tame version of a Marxian structuralism. Social structures exist. They vary from society and across time. They are not functionally adapted. There are no transcendent structures possessing a unique historical dynamic. And, finally, all these claims about causally active social structures need to be compatible with microfoundations at the level of the social actors.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:31PM (-04:00)

Processes versus structures

Friday, March 21, 2008

Comparative historical sociology seeks to provide an answer to this type of question: what causes certain kinds of large historical outcomes? And it proceeds, often, on the basis of controlled comparison of a small number of cases. Theda Skocpol's classic book, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China, is a good example of the approach. So far so good. But what kinds of causes do CHS researchers typically look for? The method of comparison is often described in terms of Mill's methods of similarity and difference. Find cases with variation in the outcome to be explained and similar/different causal conditions; and then seek out patterns of co-variation that suggest that certain factors are necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the outcome to be explained. These factors are then said to cause the outcome. (Mill's approach to social research is described in Fred Wilson's entry on Mill in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.)

This way of formulating the approach has fairly strong ontological presuppositions. Basically, it assumes that social causes are large, pervasive factors that obtain or fail to obtain in the multiple cases. For example, in explaining revolution the investigator might identify food crisis, population density, weak state institutions, and war as potential causal factors, and then compare the cases with respect to the variance of these factors. The comparative method assumes that large social units (societies, regions, social groups) are the operative units, and their causal properties are largescale, pervasive social conditions.

But what if our view of social causation is focused at a more disaggregated level -- not at the level of gross social conditions and structures, but at the level of lower-level processes and mechanisms? What if we thought that the action is really taking place at the level of the contingent unfolding of social processes at more local levels? This ontology wouldn't imply that the large social factors just mentioned are not part of the true

causal story. But it would cast serious doubt on the expectation that there will be neat patterns of covariance across cases identified solely at this level. And yet this is exactly what Mill's methods require.

The turn to concrete social mechanisms as the unit of social analysis suggests that it is most fruitful to seek out explanations of outcomes as the "concatenation" of a set of common social mechanisms (Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory). And this implies that the traditional comparative method is not likely to succeed; there won't be a neat pattern of co-variation at the level of macro-characteristics and structures. So what is the alternative?

We might say that a credible alternative, still falling within a broad definition of "comparative historical sociology", is this: select a number of cases for detailed study. Uncover in some detail the processes and factors that appear to have led to the outcome (process-tracing). And arrive at generalizations by discovering that certain mechanisms or processes recur across multiple cases, and that large structural factors interact with these processes in recurring ways.

This is the approach that McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly take in Dynamics of Contention. And it would appear to me that this approach permits an appropriate marriage between social ontology and social science methodology. The methodology is suited to the ontological insight that social phenomena are composed of lower-level social mechanisms and processes, and the outcomes are the contingent and path-dependent result of the concatenation of these mechanisms. There are no "laws of revolution" (or war, or civil strife); rather, there are a large number of social mechanisms that can be observed in many instances of these large social outcomes. These mechanisms can be rigorously analyzed, and we can explain outcomes (for example, the success of the Bolshevik revolutionary strategy) as the result of a concatenation of various of these mechanisms. Posted by Daniel Little at 07:10AM (-04:00)

Explaining technology failure

Wednesday, March 26, 2008

Technology failure is often spectacular and devastating -- witness Bhopal, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, the Challenger disaster, and the DC10 failures of the 1970s. But in addition to being a particularly important cause of human suffering, technology failures are often very complicated social outcomes that involve a number of different kinds of factors. And this makes them interesting topics for social science study.

It is fairly common to attribute spectacular failures to a small number of causes -- for example, faulty design, operator error, or a conjunction of unfortunate but singly non-fatal accidents. What sociologists who have studied technology failures have been able to add is the fact that the root causes of disastrous failures can often be traced back to deficiencies of the social organizations in which they are designed, used, or controlled (Charles Perrow, Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies). Technology failures are commonly the result of specific social organizational defects; so technology failure is often or usually a social outcome, not simply a technical or mechanical misadventure. (Dietrich Dorner's The Logic of Failure: Recognizing and Avoiding Error in Complex Situations is a fascinating treatment of a number of cases of failure; Eliot Cohen's Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War provides an equally interesting treatment of military failures; for example, the American failure to suppress

submarine attacks on merchant shipping off the US coast in the early part of World War II.)

First, a few examples. The Challenger space shuttle was destroyed as a result of O-rings in the rocket booster units that became brittle because of the low launch temperature -- evidently an example of faulty design. But various observers have asked the more fundamental question: what features of the science-engineering-launch command process that was in place within NASA and between NASA and its aerospace suppliers led it to break down so profoundly (Diane Vaughan, The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA)? What organizational defects made it possible for this extended group of talented scientists and engineers to come to the decision to launch over the specific warnings that were brought forward by the rocket provider's team about the danger of a cold-temperature launch? Edward Tufte attributes the failure to poor scientific communication (Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative); Morton Thiokol engineer Roger Boisjoly attributes it to an excessively hierarchical and deferential relation between the engineers and the launch decision-makers. Either way, features of the NASA decision-making process -- social-organizational features -- played a critical role.

Bhopal represents another important case. Catastrophic failure of a Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India in 1984 led to a release of a highly toxic gas. The toxic cloud passed into the densely populated city of Bhopal. Half a million people were affected, and between 16 and 30 thousand people died as a result. A chemical plant is a complex physical system. But even more, it is operated and maintained by a complex social organization, involving training, supervision, and operational assessment and oversight. In his careful case study of Bhopal, Paul Shrivastava maintains that this disaster was caused by a set of persistent and recurring organizational failures, especially in the areas of training and supervision of operators (Bhopal: Anatomy of Crisis).

Close studies of the nuclear disasters at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island have been equally fruitful in terms of shedding light on the characteristics of social, political, and business organization that have played a role in causing these great disasters. The stories are different in the two cases; but in each case, it turns out that social factors, including both organizational features internal to the nuclear plants and political features in the surrounding environment, played a role in the occurrence and eventual degree of destruction associated with the disasters.

These cases illustrate several important points. First, technology failures and disasters almost always involve a crucial social dimension -- in the form of the organizations and systems through which the technology is developed, deployed, and maintained and the larger social environment within which the technology is situated. Technology systems are social systems. Second, technology failures therefore constitute an important subject matter for sociological and organizational research. Sociologists can shed light on the ways in which a complex technology might fail. And third, and most importantly, the design of safe systems -- particularly systems that have the potential for creating great harms -- needs to be an interdisciplinary effort. The perspectives of sociologists and organizational theorists need to be incorporated as deeply as those of industrial and systems engineers into the design of systems that will preserve a high degree of safety. This is an important realization for the high profile risky industries -- aviation, chemicals, nuclear power. But it is also fundamental for other important social institutions, including especially hospitals and health systems. Safe technologies will only exist when they are

embedded in safe, fault-tolerant organizations and institutions. And all of this means, in turn, that there is an urgent need for a sociology of safety.

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:55PM (-04:00)

New forms of collective behavior?

Sunday, March 30, 2008



Personal electronic communication and the Internet -- have these new technologies changed the game for collective action? Here I am thinking of email and instant messaging, but also cell phones and other personal communications devices, as well as the powerful capacity for dissemination of ideas over the web -- has this dense new network of communication and coordination fundamentally changed the ability of groups to pursue their political or social goals?

There is no doubt that these technologies are relevant to collective action. Communication, coordination, and assurance are crucial features of successful collective action -- and these are precisely the qualities that current technologies offer. Moreover, the ability for a party or movement to disseminate its programs, ideas, and promises to potential followers is crucial for its ability to gather support; and this is what the Web offers better than any prior form of communications technology.

A couple of data points are relevant.

- The City of New York has recently subpoenaed the software and records of TXTmob from an MIT graduate student (story). TXTmob is a software tool created more or less on the fly before the party conventions in 2004 to permit demonstrators to use text messages to assemble and disperse quickly and effectively.
- Will.i.am's music video of Barak Obama's "Yes We Can" speeches has been viewed by eight million people since posting on YouTube -- generating funds, votes, and passion for the candidate.
- Cell phone photos and videos have made their way out of Tibet and Burma documenting the crackdowns that have occurred in those places -- allowing passionate groups of people outside the area to bring their protests to bear.

So what is genuinely new in this list? Covert cameras and travelers have existed for a long time. Cell phones were available in Gdansk and Teheran during street protests there in the 1970s. And newspapers, magazines, and television and radio have disseminated ideas widely. So, again, is there any reason to think that current communications technologies have changed anything fundamental -- either the nature of popular mobilization or the balance of power between the powerful and the numerous?

Two factors are important enough to significantly change the nature of struggles between the powerful and the popular. First is the capacity for coordination among a large group

that is created by cell phones and IM devices. A "flash mob" can form and dissolve in minutes. This can make their actions and demonstrations more effective and more difficult to repress. And there is a secondary benefit for the organization -- rapid multi-sided communication can help to maintain solidarity and commitment within the group.

Second, the low cost and broad distribution of web-based communication gives a new advantage to the numerous but poor. Swift Boaters required hundreds of thousands of dollars to disseminate their attack ads against candidate Kerry -- whereas a six-minute video can reach millions of people on YouTube for free. This tips the balance of power away from the deep pockets towards the creative activist group.

So it seems reasonable to judge that these communications technologies are indeed a significant new element in the field of play of collective action. Groups can self-organize more effectively; they can coordinate their actions; and they can share and reinforce the urgency of their commitments through the use of cell phones, text messages, web pages, and dissemination points such as YouTube.

All this has implications for popular politics within a law-governed democracy. It is less clear that these technologies offer as much leverage for the powerless within an authoritarian state. Combine a powerful authoritarian state's ability to monitor communications with a perfect readiness to repress activists and dissidents and to control the technology -- and you get a situation in which these tools of communication are much less useful for an opposition.

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:26PM (-04:00)

Marc Bloch's history

Wednesday, April 02, 2008



One of the historians whom I most admire is Marc Bloch. He was one of France's most important medieval historians in the first half of the twentieth century, and he died at the hands of the Gestapo while serving in the Resistance in Paris in 1944. (Carole Fink's biography is an outstanding treatment of his thought and life; Marc Bloch: A Life in History; also important is Marc Bloch, l'historien et la cite.)

Here I am primarily interested in the substantive contributions Bloch brought to the writing of history. Bloch was one of the founders of the Annales school of history, along with Lucien Febvre, and he left a deep impression on subsequent historical imagination later in the twentieth century. In particular, he gave a strong impetus to social and sociological history, and he brought a non-Marxist materialism into the writing of history that represented a very important angle of view. The largest impact of the Annales school -- Febvre, Bloch, Ladurie, Braudel, Le Goff -- is the set of perspectives it forged for the understanding of social and cultural history -- looking at the structures and experiences of ordinary people as one foundation for the formation of history. This required the invention of new historical vocabulary and new sources of data. And Bloch was central in each area.

A couple of Bloch's books are most significant. Feudal Society is a very important contribution to our understanding of the institutions and social relations of feudalism -- the manorial system, vassalage, and kingship. And his writings about French agricultural history are of special interest (French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics). These books document quite a few important aspects of French rural social life -- both high and low. But even more importantly, Bloch brought several distinctive ideas into historical writing that continue to serve as illuminating models about how to understand the past. One is a version of materialist historical investigation -- Bloch provides great insight into the forces and relations of production in rural medieval France and the material culture of the middle ages. A second is an adept ability to single out and scrutinize some of the forms of political structure and power that defined French feudal society. And a third is a subtle way of characterizing the social whole of medieval society and mentality that owed much to Durkheim. In a curious way, then, Bloch's work picked up some of the themes that constituted modern social theory in Marx, Weber, and Durkheim.

Bloch's materialism is most evident in French Rural History. Here Bloch gives a detailed and scholarly treatment of the social and community consequences of the diffusion of the heavy wheeled plough. He provides a careful technical analysis of the advantages and exigencies of the heavy plough, which was most suited to the heavy soil of northern France. And he works out the social prerequisites of this technology -- basically, a degree of community organization that could successfully coordinate land use consistent with ownership and the turning radius of the heavy implement and its team of horses. The technical requirements of the plough required certain social arrangements. And the social structure of the northern French village satisfied these conditions -- in striking contrast to the looser coordination found in southern French villages. "Only a society of great compactness, composed of men who thought instinctively in terms of the community, could have created such a regime. The land itself was the fruit of collective labour" (French Rural History, 45).

This is materialism; but it is not especially Marxist materialism. It doesn't give primacy to class relations. And it doesn't support any kind of teleology in historical development. But the central point was clear. Bloch sought to demonstrate that a major technology -- for example, cultivation with the heavy plough -- incorporates and implicates a whole complex social and cultural system. And a major part of social history is to discover the sequence of adjustments through which the technology system is incorporated.

The Durkheim part of the story is also an important one. Durkheim was a major influence on French social thought in the teens and twenties, and the vector to Bloch was particularly direct. The journal *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale* was created by Bloch and Febvre as a vehicle for inviting a more sociological approach to economic history and to encourage interdisciplinary research in this field, and Bloch and Febvre were deeply influenced by the debate that surrounded history and Durkheimian sociology in the period 1890-1910. R. Colbert Rhodes has written a good essay on Durkheim's influence on Bloch. Rhodes writes: "Bloch's essentially sociological approach to historical writing is responsible for some of the most distinctive and useful features of his work. Bloch reflects the Durkheimian social realist metaphysic by reaching behind individuals to the social group considered in its broadest aspect, the collective mentality. Bloch acknowledges in the Historian's Craft his dominant interest in the study of man integrated into the social group. In the Craft, Bloch borrows a citation from Lucien Febvre to state his own interest as 'not man, again, never man.' We are interested in "human societies,

organized groups" (47).

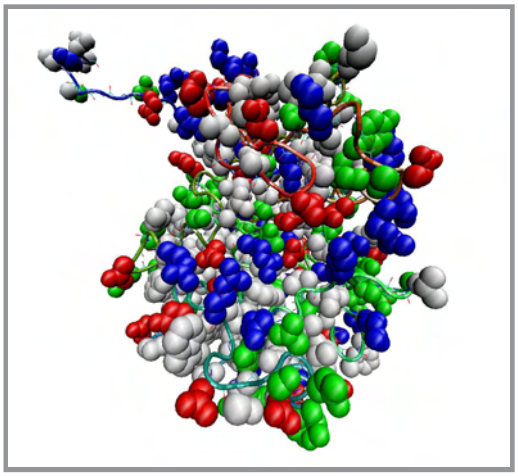
The final feature of Bloch's thought I want to highlight is his vocabulary of structure and power in his treatment of French feudalism. There is a parallel with Weber in this body of thinking. Bloch spent a year studying in Germany and was presumably aware of Weber's thought, but there is no clear evidence of direct influence. But there are several ways in which some of Bloch's thought parallels Weber's. One is in his use of ideas about historical concepts that are similar to Weber's concept of ideal types. And the other is his careful analysis of the historical realities of relations of power and social structures that embody power.

Bloch's writings repay a careful reading -- both for their importance as first-rate historical scholarship and for the light they shed on the problem of historical knowledge and conceptualization. And it is highly relevant to find that all the strands of classical sociological theory find a counterpart in his thought.

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:50PM (-04:00)

Are there discrete social mechanisms?

Friday, April 04, 2008



McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly direct our attention to the level of the concrete social mechanisms that recur in many instances of social contention (Dynamics of Contention). They specifically refer to escalation, radicalization, brokerage, and repression as examples of social mechanisms that produce the same effects in the same circumstances, and that concatenate into historical processes and events. To this list I would add my own examples -- free-rider problems, norm diffusion, and communications networks.

I wholeheartedly endorse the idea that social explanations need to proceed on the basis of an analysis of underlying social mechanisms. But can this program be carried out in a Mendeleev sort of way -- try to discover a "table of elements" of causal mechanisms that aggregate into "molecules" of social contention?

The closer I look at the argument, the more concerned I become about the discreteness and elementality of the items MTT offer as examples. Take brokerage -- isn't this really an umbrella term that encompasses a number of different kinds of negotiation and alliance-formation? So brokerage isn't analogous to "expansion of ice during freezing" -- a clear example of a physical causal mechanism that is homogeneous across physical settings. Brokerage is rather a "family-resemblance" term that captures a number of different instances of collective behavior and agency.

If we find this line of thought somewhat persuasive, it suggests that we need to locate the causal connectedness among social settings at an even deeper micro-level. It is the situation of "agents with interests, identities, networks, allies, and repertoires" that constitutes the causal nexus of social causation on contention -- not a set of frozen mid-level groups of behaviors such as brokerage or radicalization. Instead, these mid-level concepts are descriptive terms that allow us to single out some broadly similar components of social contention.

Or in another vocabulary: the level at which we find real causal connections in the social world is the level of the socially situated and socially constituted individual in interaction with other individuals -- the perspective of methodological localism (Levels of the Social). This doesn't undermine causal realism -- but it does undermine the idea that there are meso-level "causal mechanisms" such as brokerage that really recur across instances.

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:30PM (-04:00)

Agency, action, and norms

Saturday, April 05, 2008

How do norms influence behavior? More fundamentally, what is a norm?

The question arises for two separate reasons. First, we are interested in knowing why people behave as they do (agency). And second, we are interested in knowing how large social factors (moral and cognitive frameworks, for example) exert influence over individuals (social causation).

The agency question is the more fundamental. Philosophers typically want to answer the question in terms of a model of practical rationality and deliberation. One philosophical answer derives from Aristotle and represents action as the result of rational deliberation. Individuals have a set of goals and values; they have a set of beliefs about the world; and they deliberate about the choices they confront with the aim of achieving their goals consistent with their values, given their beliefs about the world. But philosophers and thinkers as diverse as Nietzsche, Skinner, or Adorno would take issue with this reason-centered theory of action. Other sources of behavior might include unconscious habits or prejudices, instincts, impulses, emotions, and role-playing. A model that incorporates these diverse possible influences on action is unavoidably complex -- but human behavior is likewise complex.

Now let's try to locate the role of norms within a theory of agency. Norms have to do with the reasons and motives that people have for their actions. A norm is a particular kind of influence on action: it is a rule of behavior that leads someone to do something that is otherwise contrary to immediate impulse or interest. Norms get us to do things we don't want to do.

We might say, then, that a norm is a rule of behavior -- for example, "Don't wear shorts to a business meeting," "Don't take coins from the blind man's cup," "Give up your seat on the bus to a disabled person." And a rule can either be internally or externally represented; this means that the the rule may be internalized into the agent's process of decision-making, or it may influence the agent's behavior through punishments and rewards.

Even this simple discussion raises questions, however. Do norms have to be consciously accessible to the agent? Is a moral principle such as "Always keep your promises" a norm, or do ethical principles fall in a different category? Do norms have rational justification, or are they simply an accidental social product like tastes or styles?

As for the ways in which norms influence behavior --

It would seem that there are only a few mechanisms through which norms could possibly influence individual and collective behavior, largely distinguished by being external and internal.

First, it may be that there is an effective mechanism of social education through which each individual develops or activates an internally regulative system of norms or rules. This process can be described as "moral education." The most superficial observation of social behavior indicates that this is so, and social psychologists and sociologists have some ideas about how these systems work. But the bottom line appears fairly clear: individuals who are reared in normal human settings eventually possess action-behavior systems that embody a set of personal norms that influence their conduct. We might draw the analogy to the example of language learning: a normal human child is exposed to the linguistic behavior of others, and arrives at a psychologically realized grammar that guides his/her own language production.

Second, a norm might be embodied in the attitudes, judgment, and behavior of others in such a way that their actions and reactions create incentives and disincentives for the actor. For example, others may possess a set of norms concerning civility in public discourse, and they may punish or reward others according to whether their words are consistent with these norms. In this case the agent conforms to the requirements of the norm out of a calculation of costs and benefits of performance. (It would appear that there is a possibility of circularity here: the externally imposed norm depends upon the internally embodied norm of enforcement of the content of the rule on the part of others.)

Third, it might be the case that there are some norms of inter-personal behavior that are hard-wired. Some norms might have a biological, evolutionary basis. This is the line of thought that sociobiologists have explored with varying levels of success. The emotional responses that adults have to infants and children probably fall in this category -- though it is a conceptually interesting question to consider whether these emotional responses are "norms" or simply features of the affective system. This is relevant to the work that Allan Gibbard does in Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment. Gibbard's fundamental insight seems to be that there must be an evolutionary basis for the "norm-acquisition system" -- the features of human psychology that permit them to acquire certain kinds of moral motives (altruism, friendship, fairness).

So -- what can we say about norms? Human beings act on the basis of deliberation, norm, impulse, and emotion. So our theory of practical rationality and action must make a place for the workings of norms. Second, norms are transmitted to individuals through concrete social processes -- family experiences, schooling, religious institutions, etc. Our theories of social life must incorporate an account of the processes of normative education through which individuals come to possess a particular normative structure. These experiences are the counterpart to the exposure to language on the part of the infant. And third, norms are socially enforced through the actions of others. So norms are socially embodied -- in the institutions of enforcement, the institutions and practices of

moral education, and in the practical cognition of the individuals who make up the society.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:52PM (-04:00)

China's cultural revolution

Sunday, April 06, 2008



What is involved in understanding China's Cultural Revolution?

The question comes to mind for several reasons -- but most vividly because of a recent interview in France in the le nouvel Observateur with Song Yongyi. Song's personal itinerary is historic -- he was a "rebel Red Guard" in 1967, a political prisoner in China from 1970 to 1976, a librarian at Dickinson College in 1998, and a prisoner in China again in 1999 for six months for the "crime" of collecting documents about the Cultural Revolution. (See his website at California State University at Los Angeles.) Song is in the middle of creating a large database on the events of the Cultural Revolution, including especially an effort to document the killings and massacres that occurred during this period. Song estimates, for example, that more than 50,000 people were killed during the purge of the Mongolian Communist Party alone, and he attributes to an internal party document a figure of 1.72 million deaths during the period of the Cultural Revolution.

The question is interesting for UnderstandingSociety because it has to do with historical knowledge and understanding. A vast amount has been written about the Cultural Revolution -- by western scholars and by Chinese people who participated in the CR or were victims of its violence. We have both first-hand stories and careful academic scholarship that document many aspects of this period of China's recent history. So in one sense, we are in a position to know a lot about this period of China's history. And China scholars have asked the "why" question as well -- why did it take place? For example, Roderick MacFarquhar's multivolume history of the period, culminating in Mao's Last Revolution, goes into great detail about the politics that surrounded the CR. Also of great interest is Joseph Esherick, Paul Pickowicz, and Andrew Walder's recent edited volume, China's Cultural Revolution As History.

We might want to say, then, that the history of the Cultural Revolution has been written.

But as Song Yongyi demonstrates, this would be incorrect, in two ways. First, the scope of the violence and the ways in which it was perpetrated -- the military and political institutions that were involved deeply in the transmission of the violence across China -- these factual aspects of the period of 1966-76 are still only partially known. And there is reason to believe that the remaining areas of ignorance are likely to substantially change our interpretation of the events. In brief, it seems likely that the scope of violence and killings is substantially greater than what historians currently believe, and the degree of deliberate political control of the instruments of disorder is greater as well. So the simple factual question, what happened?, is still to be answered in many important areas. More would be known if the authorities were to make the official archives available to scholars;

but this has been a highly sensitive and secretive subject since 1989.

Even more important than the factual story, though, is the explanatory story. We don't yet have a good understanding of why this period of upheaval took place; what the social and political causes were, what the institutions were that facilitated or hindered the spread of disorder, and how these events aided or impeded the political agendas of powerful figures and factions in China. (When you visit the summer palace and Buddhist temples in Chengdu, for example, the guides tell you that these structures survived the destruction of the Red Guards because Deng Xiaopeng maintained control of the military in this region and gave orders to protect these historical structures.)

So the history of the Cultural Revolution still remains to be written. And this fact presents us with a very real question of historical epistemology: how much can we ultimately know about a vast and important event, for which there are voluminous archival sources and surviving witnesses? Can we hope to come to a "final" and approximately true interpretation of these events? And can we learn something important about social movements and political institutions from this history?
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:00PM (-04:00)

What people know

Monday, April 07, 2008



It is interesting to consider what kinds of social knowledge people need in their everyday lives.

This is clearly a question of scale. At the proximate and local level, people need to know how to interact with local social practices and institutions. We need to know how to behave in the doctor's office, police station, and grocery store. We need to know whether the bus requires exact change. We need some way of understanding the provocative behavior of people we encounter -- panhandlers, teenagers, people asking for directions or a match, strangers in a cafe striking up a conversation. (Think about how challenging each of these situations can be in a foreign city -- and potentially how consequential.) And, of course, there is a wide range of organizational knowledge that we need in the workplace in order to function well within the organization.

So there are innumerable scripts we need to have in mind in order to navigate everyday life. Some of this knowledge has to do with the protocols of mundane institutions, and some of it involves an ability to interpret the intentions of other people as they seek to interact with us.

Now push back a level and consider another zone of important social knowledge -- knowledge of larger institutional practices that we need to take into account as we plan for the more distant future. What choices can I make today that will benefit me tomorrow, or shelter me from risks the day after? For example -- How does my retirement account work? What will the interest rate be on this variable rate mortgage in three years? How can my friends in the clubhouse or the statehouse help build my new consulting business? How secure is my job with this employer -- should I be looking for work in a

more predictable industry? (This might be a question a mechanical engineer asks herself in the auto industry today.)

Now push the zoom-slide another notch and consider the knowledge of the larger social environment that the citizen needs to arrive at political judgments. What is the reality of public schools? How many high school students graduate from high school each year? What is happening in the labor market -- how much unemployment, how many new jobs are being created, what sectors and skills are in demand? How much hunger, poverty, and inequality is there in my region or state? What are the facts about the availability of health insurance within the general population? How much corruption and abuse of power is there within our government?

At roughly this level of abstraction are topics having to do with science and technology. How risky is nuclear power? How urgent a problem is global warming? What percentage of greenhouse gases stem from autos and what share from coal-fired electricity?

These last areas of knowledge are the most problematic. As we move up the scale from the face-to-face environment to knowledge of more distant social and environmental factors, it is almost certain that most people's beliefs become hazier, less accurate, and less comprehensive. Our stereotyped representations of things like poverty, opportunity, schooling, and employment levels are notoriously incomplete and inaccurate. And maybe this is entirely predictable from a cognitive "cost-benefit" point of view. It may be that the personal cost of being ignorant of the extent of global climate change, poverty, or urban health deficits is low. But from a collective point of view, this widespread ignorance is disastrous. It is hard to see how an electoral consensus can emerge in support of policies that are intelligently designed to solve major problems if the great majority of voters lack an understanding of those problems.

And here is a large and important question: to what extent is it realistic to expect that the general public can become knowledgeable, at some level of approximation, about how their society works? Is it inevitable that most citizens will have a clear knowledge of their neighborhoods but a very limited and often erroneous knowledge of the broader society? Or is there some hope that universities, news media, and the internet can do a better job of providing a reasonably accurate representation of some of the most pressing social realities and problems, in such a way that the broad population will come to be better informed about the workings of contemporary society?

(See "Folk Sociology" for more on this theme.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:31PM (-04:00)

Knowing poverty

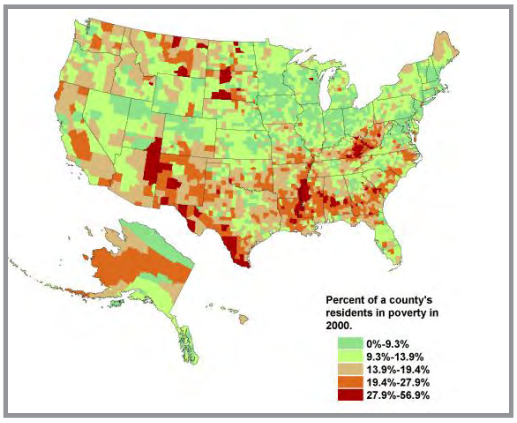
Wednesday, April 09, 2008

Poverty is an important social fact in virtually every society. What is involved in knowing about poverty -- for the citizen, for the poor person, for the social scientist, the historian, and the novelist?



To start, there is a set of descriptive and analytical features of poverty. How do we define the concept of being poor: is it a specific income level in a specific country or region; is it a specific level of deprivation in terms of access to a defined set of basic goods; is it a threshold level of resources necessary to actualize one's capabilities?

And then we want to know the facts about the disribution of poor people, geographically and demographically. What is the percentage of poor people in urban locations? How much rural poverty is there? How do poverty rates compare across major social groups (race, age, marital status)? And how have these statistics changed over time? We could imagine presenting this body of knowledge as a compact set of dynamic maps and graphs, representing the large body of data in terms of a series of displays over time and space -- for example, CensusScope. (Edward Tufte's work comes to mind here -- visit his website and an early, direction-setting book, The Visual Display of Quantitative Information, 2nd edition.)



Parallel to this factual and statistical knowledge about the distribution of poverty over a population is the sociological question, what are the social mechanisms that give rise to these patterns and trends? What kinds of factors cause some populations to have a persistent and high rate of poverty, while other populations experience much lower rates?

Another and distinct aspect of "knowing poverty" has to do with getting to the experience of being poor. This is partly a question for ethnography -- how do poor people struggle and cope?How do they experience their daily lives? And how do they express their experiences? But it is also an attempt to gain a clearer grasp of the situation of being poor -- what it means for everyday nutrition, how it affects options when illness or accident arises. Sociologists with an ear for qualitative investigation and conversation have bee able to capture a lot of this (Sennett and Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class; Richard Sennett, The Craftsman.) So making an effort to gain an understanding of the situation and experience of being poor is an important aspect of knowing poverty.

And how are non-poor people able to gain some knowledge of the situation and experience of being poor? This is where the knowledge of literature comes in; through the ability of the poet or fiction writer to vividly and accurately capture something of the

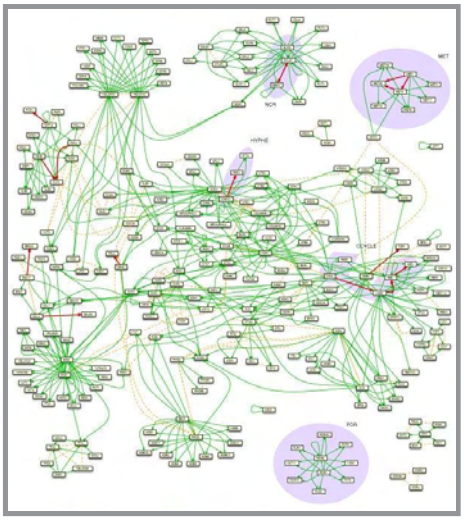
lives and thoughts of people in very different circumstances than one's own. This is an important aspect of a multicultural pedagogy: finding materials that permit students to immerse themselves in the texture of other people's experiences of the world.

Now, finally, citizens. Poverty, it seems, is largely invisible to middle class people in the United States. Their knowledge of the basic facts and insights mentioned above is extremely limited. Here the problem isn't research or pedagogy. It is clear enough how the Detroit Free Press or the Atlanta Constitution could present the basic facts about national or regional poverty on a clear and understandable form. Instead, the problem seems to be a cognitive version of myopia. The social circumstances that confront us up close, and that are likely to influence our basic interests, get our focused attention. But all too often, more distant social problems don't get a second look. And this seems all too often to be the case for poverty.

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:52AM (-04:00)

The reality of society

Friday, April 11, 2008



We sometimes speak of "global society", we refer to "French society"; and we also think of face-to-face organizations and neighborhoods as small societies or social groups. There is an important conceptual point in the background in these common ways of speaking: what are the features of interaction or relationship that must obtain in order for a group of people to constitute a "society" or a "social group"?

There are a couple of points that are fairly obvious. These ensembles of individuals are not social groups:

- all the people in the state whose last name begins with "J"
- all the people in the world who enjoy spicy food
- all the people in the world
- the set of people who live within 100 miles of their state or provincial capital city

We would probably say that these aren't social groups or societies for several reasons:

- these ensembles bring together very heterogeneous and disassociated individuals
- these individuals don't interact significantly and persistently with each other
- the individuals in each case lack a common identity
- the individuals in these groups do not share a single set of values or mores
- the populations described here do not possess a dense set of social networks that link almost all members of the group together
- there is not a set of social structures that serve to coordinate and orient the behavior of all or most of the members of these ensembles

The fundamental point is that it would seem that the members of a society, as opposed to a random assembly of individuals, must have some strands of connection with each

other.

So we might try this out: a society is a set of individuals --

- who share a broad identity with each other, in at least the minimal sense that they regard themselves as members of the same society.
- who share some set of values and ideas -- perhaps non-uniform but overlapping
- who are related to each other through economic, political, or social interactions and networks of connections
- who are subject to a common set of social institutions.

But these criteria are debatable. Does the first criterion above threaten to rule out Canada and Spain, because there are Quebecois and Basque separatist groups within these countries? Are the people who choose to live in the isolated compound of the Yearning for Zion ranch a part of United States society, given their extreme efforts to avoid any relationships with the larger society? Is a Facebook group of "friends" a society, given that the members are generally geographically and socially dispersed?

Most fundamentally, the criteria for defining an assembly of people as a "society" can't be too restrictive because a "society" is a looser assembly than some other kinds of social groupings -- religious organizations, social movements, or labor unions, for example. In each of these latter instances there is a high degree of coherence, solidarity, and shared identity and values across members of the group. Societies, on the other hand, embody diversity and difference across persons: multiple values, multiple social networks, multiple group identities. So somehow our definition of society needs to fall intermediate between the random assemblages of persons listed first, and the intentional communities mentioned above.

We might say, then, that a society is knit together by only an overlapping but non-comprehensive set of relationships, values, and identities. Individuals share values and identities with some other individuals; this defines one aspect of the "social-connectedness" graph of a society. And individuals interact with other individuals through economic, political, or cultural transactions; this defines another aspect of a social-connectedness graph. Everyone in a society is related through a set of network relationships to many other people in society; but there is no set of network relationships that encompasses everyone. And I suppose that it is possible that, when we have drawn out a massively complex graph of networks and relationships within the population, that there may be some groups that exist in "islands" within the larger social map, with relationships with each other but not with outsiders.

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:47PM (-04:00)

The world food system

Tuesday, April 15, 2008

Here is one very concrete way in which we live in a global world: the most basic need that we have -- food -- is satisfied on the basis of a system with global reach and global price and production interconnections. The planet's 6+ billion people need a daily diet of grains, oils, and protein, and the most important of these foods are produced within the context of a global trading system. Current estimates of malnutrition indicate that a significant percentage of the world's population live in hunger (Facts about Hunger, PRB). And, after a decade or so of relative stability in this system, changes in the world market



are threatening major disruptions of food supplies. (See an earlier posting on the recent sharp rise in rice and wheat prices.)

Consider grain production and consumption. Here are a few websites with useful information about the world grain trade in the past decade: USDA, providing a lot of data on grain production and consumption; UC-Davis, a simple introduction to the global and US rice markets; UNCTAD, a thumbnail of the basics of the global rice trade over the past two decades; FAO, a compendium of data on food production; and IRRI, a compendium of data about rice production. One thing that becomes clear in reviewing some of this data is that the current crisis in grain prices should not have been a surprise. The forecast provided in the USDA report is based on 2006-07 data -- and it gives a clear indication of the supply and price crisis that the world is facing today.

This system is interesting for UnderstandingSociety because it provides a nice example of a complex and causally interlinked social system that invites careful analysis. And it is a system that has the potential for stimulating explosive social upheaval -- given the political volatility that food prices and hunger have had historically.

We ought to ask a whole series of questions about how the food system works:

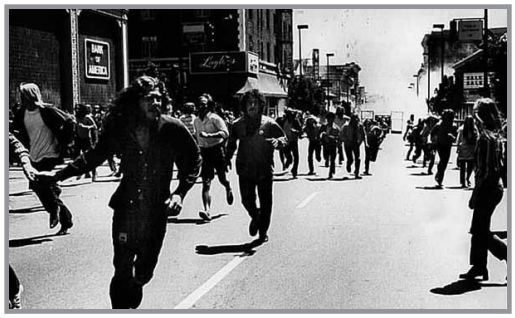
- Technology -- how extensive and widespread are the forms of technology innovation that are changing the food system? Is there a Green Revolution 2.0 underway?
- Productivity -- what are the trends in productivity in agriculture? Output per hectare, output per unit of input, output per labor-day
- International trading institutions -- corporations, commodity and futures markets, flow of incomes to stakeholders. What effect have free-trade agreements had on grain production and prices -- WTO, NAFTA?
- Social institutions of farming. What are the various institutions through which grain is produced -- peasant farming, family farming, large-scale corporate farming
- Social effects of agrarian change -- how do rural conditions and quality of life change as a result of technology change in agriculture?
- Macro-stability -- does growth in food supply match growth in population?

If we want to know how the global world works as a system, then we need to understand agriculture and agricultural trade better than we currently realize.

(Here is another New York Times story on the subject, highlighting the tension between food production and greenhouse gas emission reduction. See my earlier post on sustainable agriculture as well.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:36PM (-04:00)

Agency and deliberation

Thursday, April 17, 2008



People act as a result of a great variety of mental influences: instincts, emotions, impulses, loyalties, norms, as well as reasons, intentions, and plans. A subset of this cacaphony is "rational-intentional action": actions that are the result of deliberation about ends and means, and choice among the set of available options for action. How does this sub-system of action fit into the larger swirl of psychological causes within the actor's mental system? The photo to the right is relevant; it is an image of a demonstration at Berkeley in the 1960s, in which the motives of the participants were surely a mix of rational, ethical, emotional, and collective impulses.

One picture that philosophers of action have used is the idea of "higher" and "lower" faculties of motivation and choice. This is an Aristotelian model of practical reason. The higher system is the rational process of deliberation; the lower system is the range of emotions and impulses; and the point of the picture is that the rational component should govern the workings of the lower faculties.

How does this construction work as an empirical theory of human behavior (even if an idealized and simplified one)? It could prove faulty in several different ways: The emotions could turn out to be the more important cause, with rational deliberation a weak and tardy late arrival. Or it could turn out that the system of action is a more integrated process in which "emotion" and "deliberation" play a more equal and interactive role. Or it could turn out that these two realms really can't be separated at all, and reason and emotion are comingled. We might find that it is possible to deliberate and reason about emotions, and it is possible for some emotions to push the deliberative process one way rather than another. And, most radically, it could be argued that these categories of introspection and folk psychology don't explain behavior at all; instead, we need a more scientific and non-mentalistic foundation for explanation of behavior.

There are a few basic facts about action that constrain any proposed theory:

(a) actions are influenced by the goals that people have, so deliberation must be a part of the story. Whatever else we observe, it is certainly true that people are sometimes goal-directed and calculating.

(b) We can provide clear and important examples of actions provoked by emotion or passion, so means-end rationality isn't the whole story.

(c) People often give reasons for actions that do serve to motivate their actions, but that are not framed as "means-end" reasoning. (For example, acting out of fairness.) So there are instances of action that are reasoned but not utility-maximizing.

What these points seem to demonstrate is that the mental system underlying behavior and choice is complex. No simple theory -- Markov mechanisms, operant conditioning, maximization, or rule-following--captures the full range of behavior.

These questions are important for several reasons. First, we need some indication of an answer to the question if we are to have confidence in rational choice theory at any level. Second, our ability to explain a wide range of human behavior depends on our having better ideas about how reasons, emotions, and norms play out to create behaviors such as extreme altruism, hate crimes, suicide attacks, or indifference to the suffering of others. So social science needs to have a credible theory of human agency and choice.

Who has the right kind of expertise to attempt to theorize in this area? Philosophers, to start; this discipline has devoted a lot of rigorous effort towards creating a framework for talking about the mind, intentionality, and action. Second, psychologists have some powerful theoretical tools for conceptualizing and investigating behavior. Here I think of the example of cognitive psychology and its paradigm of trying to devise theories that would represent a psychological process that possesses a given set of cognitive capacities (memory, pattern recognition, speech). And, conceivably, it might be that the discipline and methods of neurophysiology and brain science can shed light on action and mentation as well.

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:13PM (-04:00)

Is sociology analogous to epidemiology?

Saturday, April 19, 2008

Quantitative sociology attempts, among other things, to establish causal connections between large social factors (race, socio-economic status, residential status) and social outcomes of interest (rates of delinquency). Is this type of inquiry analogous in any way to the use of large disease databases to attempt to identify risk factors? In other words, is there a useful analogy between sociology and epidemiology?

Suppose that the divorce rate for all American men is 30%. Suppose the rate for New York City males with income greater than $200K is 60%. We might want to draw the inference that something about being a high-income male resident of New York causes a higher risk of divorce for these persons. And we might want to justify this inference by noticing that it is similar to a parallel statistical finding relating smoking to lung cancer. So sociology is similar to epidemiology. Certain factors can be demonstrated to cause an elevated risk of a certain kind of outcome. There are "risk factors" for social outcomes such as divorce, delinquency, or drug use.

Is this a valid analogy? I think it is not. Epidemiological reasoning depends upon one additional step -- a background set of assumptions about the ontology and etiology of disease. A given disease is a specific physiological condition within a complex system of cells and biochemical processes. We may assume that each of these physiological abnormalities is caused by some specific combination of external and internal factors through specific causal mechanisms. So the causal pathways of normal functioning are discrete and well-defined, and so are the mechanisms that cause disruption of these normal causal pathways. Within the framework of these guiding assumptions, the task of the statistics of epidemiology is to help sort out which factors are causally associated with the disease. The key, though, is that we can be confident that there is a small number of discrete causal mechanisms that link the factor to the disease.

The case is quite different in the social world. Social processes are not similar to physiological processes, and social outcomes are not similar to diseases. In each case the failure of parallel derives from the fact that there are not unique and physiologically specific causal systems at work. Cellular reproduction has a specific biochemistry. Cancerous reproduction is a specific deviation from these cellular processes. And specific physical circumstances cause these deviations.

Now think about the social world. A process like "urbanization" is not a homogeneous social process. Rather, it is a heterogeneous mix of social developments and events; and these components are different in different times and places. And outcomes that might be considered the social equivalent of disease -- a rising murder rate, for example -- is a also composite of many distinct social happenings and processes. So social systems and outcomes lack the simple, discrete causal uniformity that is a crucial part of epidemiological reasoning.

This is not to say that there are not underlying causal mechanisms whose workings bring about a sharp increase in, say, the population's murder rate. Rather, it is to say that there are numerous, heterogeneous and cross-cutting such mechanisms. So the resultant social outcome is simply the contingent residue of the multiple middle-level processes that were in play in the relevant time period. And the discovery that "X, Y, Z factors are correlated with a rise in the incidence of O" isn't causally irrelevant. But the effects of these factors must be understood as working through their influence on the many mid-level causal mechanisms.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:56AM (-04:00)

The Perestroika debate in political science

Saturday, April 19, 2008



A debate has been raging in the discipline of political science for at least a decade, over the nature of the scientific status and methods of the discipline. Fundamentally, the "dissidents" argue that a narrow and "scientistic" conception of what good political science research ought to look like has reigned and has repressed other, more pluralistic approaches to political science research. The formal methods of rational choice theory, game theory, and statistical analysis prevail, and the more narrative approaches associated with comparative research, area studies, and qualitiative research have been marginalized. And, the critics maintain, the flagship journals of the discipline and the tenure committees of the leading departments converge in maintaining this orthodoxy within the discipline. (Kristen Renwick Monroe has edited a valuable collection that gives the reader a pretty good understanding of the origins and faultlines of the debate; Perestroika!: The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science).

One of the central issues is this: what should a science of politics involve? What form of knowledge should political science produce? What is the role of universal laws or regularities in political science? How important are predictions?

Another key issue, related to the first, is the issue of the methodology of research that ought to be favored. Should quantitative methods be preferred? Should stylized assumptions be offered as the basis for formal rational-choice models of various forms of political behavior? What role should ethnographic research or case-study research play in the discovery of social-science knowledge?

Sanford Schram identifies some of the strands of the Perestroika critique in these terms: "Some focus on the overly abstract nature of much of the research done today, some on the lack of nuance in decontextualized, large-sample empirical studies, others on the inhumaneness of thinking about social relations in causal terms, and still others on the ways in which contemporary social science all too often fails to produce the kind of knowledge that can meaningfully inform social life" (Monroe : 103).

One of the most useful contributions to the Monroe book mentioned above is an essay by David Laitin. He takes issue with Bent Flyvbjerg's book, Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again, and his advocacy of "phronesis". Laitin characterizes the method of phronesis as one that is sensitive to context and that pays close attention to the singular and specific features of a particular social process -- for example, the positioning that occurs as a city decides on its economic development strategy. So the method of phronesis is intentionally not aiming to discover regularities across a set of instances, but rather to uncover some specific features of a particular ongoing process.

Laitin argues that this approach is too narrow a foundation for social-science knowledge. He assimilates the phronesis method to what he calls a "narrative" approach; and he argues that good social science needs to use a three-fold methodology. Investigators should make use of the tools of narrative analysis; but they also need to use statistical methods (quantitative analysis across cases) and formal modeling (models of complex social situations based on assumptions along the lines of rational choice theory). Laitin refers to this approach as a "tripartite" method of comparative research.

Where does the philosophy of social science fit into this debate? I suppose that the philosophy of social science I have advocated has quite a bit in common with the criticisms raised by the Perestroikans. My views emphasize the contingency of social processes, lack of social regularities, multiple conjunctural causes at work, plasticity of social institutions, the value of ethnographic work, and the need for a plurality of methods of inquiry and explanation in the social sciences. And these views are at odds with the natural-science assumptions about how social phenomena ought to be investigated that the Perestroika group is criticizing. And some of the researchers whom I admire most deeply -- James Scott, Charles Tilly, Benedict Anderson, Theda Skocpol, or Susanne Rudolph -- are cited in the original Perestroika manifesto! At the same time, I am committed to the idea of empirical rigor, causal explanation, and making a connection between social science knowledge and practical social problems -- a set of views that are post-positivist but still in the tradition of enlightened empiricism, and opposed to the currents of post-modern jargon that are sometimes mixed into the debate.

So the task is clear: to formulate a conception of social-science research and knowledge that preserves the values of empirical rigor and theoretial clarity, while embracing a pluralism that will permit the formulation of social-science knowledge adequate to the social world and social problems we find around ourselves. The Perestroika debate is an important one, and can help us better in the task of understanding society.

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:25PM (-04:00)

Social change in rural China

Tuesday, April 22, 2008



Contemporary China is a vivid demonstration of the fact that sociology is not a "finished" science. The processes of change that are underway in both rural and urban settings are novel and contingent. Existing sociological theory does not provide a basis for conceptualizing these processes according to a few simple templates -- modernization, urbanization, structural transformation, demographic transition. Instead, a sociology for China needs to engage in sustained descriptive inquiry, to untangle the many processes that are occurring simultaneously; and innovative theory formation, in order to find some explanatory order in the many empirical realities that China represents. The social reality of China is complex -- many separate processes are simultaneously unfolding and interacting; and it is diverse -- very different conditions and processes are occurring in different regions and sectors of Chinese society.

Consider one complex example, the wide and heterogeneous range of processes involved in the transformations of rural society: the explosive growth of a periurban sector that is neither city nor village; the rapid expansion of businesses and factories; the creation of an entrepreneurial social segment; the migration of tens of millions of people from rural areas to cities and from poor areas to more affluent areas; the emergence of new social groups in local society; the push-pull relationships between central government and regional and local government; the shifting policy positions of the central government towards rural conditions; the occurrence of social disturbances -- rural and urban -- over issues of property, labor, environment, and corruption; the rise of ethnicity as a political factor; various permutations of clientelism as a mechanism of political control; and the social consequences of family planning policies (e.g. skewed sex ratios). These are all social processes involving policy makers, local officials, entrepreneurs, farmers, workers, business owners, activists, and other agents; they are processes that have their own dynamics and tempos; they are processes that interact with each other; and they aggregate to outcomes that are difficult or impossible to calculate on the basis of analysis of the processes themselves.

In other words: we can't understand the current and future development of rural society in China based on existing theories of social change. Instead, we must analyze the current social realities, recognize their novelties, and perhaps discover some of the common causal processes that recur in other times and places. And we should expect novelty; we should expect that China's future rural transformations will be significantly different from other great global examples (United States in the 1880s, Russia in the 1930s, France in the 1830s, etc.).

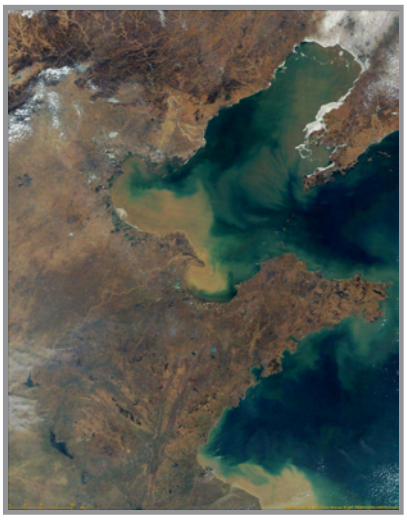
I began by saying that China demonstrates that sociology is not a finished science. But we can say something stronger than that: it demonstrates that the very notion of a

comprehensive social science that lays the basis for systematizing and predicting social change is radically ill-conceived. This hope for a comprehensive theory of social change is chimerical; it doesn't correspond to the nature of the social world. It doesn't reflect several crucial features of social phenomena: heterogeneity, causal complexity, contingency, path-dependency, and plasticity. Instead of looking for a few general and comprehensive theories of social change, we should be looking for a much larger set of quasi-empirical theories of concrete social mechanisms. And the generalizations that we will be able to reach will be modest ones having to do with the discovery of some similar processes that recur in a variety of circumstances and historical settings.

There are some excellent current examples of research on contemporary China that conform to this approach. Kevin O'Brien attempts to discover a mechanism of social protest in his theory of "rightful resistance"(Rightful Resistance in Rural China); C. K. Lee identifies a set of mechanisms of mobilization in her treatment of "rustbelt" and "sunbelt" industries (Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt); and Anita Chan identifies some common mechanisms of the exploitation of immigrant labor in China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy. Each of these books is a positive example of the kind of sociological research that will shed the most light on China's present and future: empirically rich, theoretically eclectic, and mindful of contingency and multiple pathways as state, society, environment, and other social processes interact.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:28PM (-04:00)

Retreat of the Elephants

Wednesday, April 23, 2008



Mark Elvin's title, The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China, is brilliantly chosen to epitomize his subject: the human causes of longterm environmental change in China over a four-thousand year period of history. How many of us would have guessed that elephants once ranged across almost all of China, as far to the northeast as what is now Beijing? And what was the cause of this great retreat? It was the relentless spread of agriculture and human settlement.

In other words, human activity changed the physical environment of China in such a profound way as to refigure the range and habitat of the elephant. "Chinese farmers and elephants do not mix." This story provides an expressive metaphor for the larger interpretation of environmental history that Elvin offers: that environmental history is as much a subject of social history as it is a chronology of physical and natural changes. Human beings transform their environments -- often profoundly and at great cost.

This is now a familiar story, when we consider the anthropogenic influences on global warming in the past fifty years. What Elvin's book demonstrates is that human activity is an integral part of the story in the long sweep of history as well. Nowhere is this fact more evident than in Elvin's treatment of the perennial problem of water management in China. Seawalls, canals, dikes, drainage, irrigation, desalinization, and reservoirs were all a part

of China's centuries-long efforts at water control. And each of these measures had effects that refigured the next period in the water system -- the course of a river, the degree of silting of a harbor, the diminishment of a lake as a result of encroachment. (Peter Perdue'sExhausting the Earth: State and Peasant in Hunan tells a similar story about the fortunes of Hunan's Dongting Lake.) The waterscape of late Imperial China was very much a moving picture as human activity, deliberate policy interventions, technology innovations, and hydrology and climate interacted. There is a particular drama in seeing a centuries-long history of magistrates attempting to control the hydrology of the great rivers and deltas of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers, to counteract silting and flooding and the massive problems that these processes entailed. Here the local officials made their best efforts to absorb the history of past interventions and their effects in order to design new systems that would obviate silting and flooding. This required planning and scientific-technical reasoning (137); it required large financial resources; and, most importantly, it required the mobilization of vast amounts of human labor to build dikes and polders. But always, in the end, the water prevailed.

Elvin's history is fascinating in a number of ways. He is an innovative writer of history, bringing new materials and new topics into Chinese historical research. His interweaving of agriculture, population growth, technology, and environmental change is masterful. He combines economic history, cultural history, and natural history in ways that bring continual new flashes of insight. He makes innovative use of literature and poetry to try to get some inklings into the attitudes and values that Chinese people brought to the environment. And he returns frequently to the dialectic of population growth and resource use -- a rising tempo of change that imposes more and more pressure on the natural environment.

(See The High-Level Equilibrium Trap for a discussion of one of Elvin's earlier and highly influential ideas -- the idea that Chinese agriculture had reached a stage of development by the late imperial period in which technique had been refined to the maximum possible within traditional technologies, and population had increased to the point where the agricultural system was only marginally able to feed the population. This is what he refers to as a "high-level equilibrium trap." He returns to something rather similar to this idea in Retreat of the Elephants by offering a theory of environmental exhaustion ("Concluding Remarks"): a measure of the degree to which population increase and economic growth have placed greater and greater pressure on non-renewable resources.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:12PM (-04:00)

Are there patterns of economic development?

Thursday, April 24, 2008



There is an old-fashioned and discredited theory that holds that there are only a small number of development trajectories. Crudely, Western Europe's experience -- agricultural modernization, handicraft manufacture, population growth, urbanization, and large-scale mass manufacturing -- is the paradigm and "normal" case, and different processes in other countries are deviations or abnormalities. This is the approach economic historians once took towards Asian economic development; it is substantially refuted by Bin Wong

(China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience) and Ken Pomeranz (The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy.).

A somewhat better approach postulates that there are alternative pathways of development, and that English, Italian, Indian, Chinese, and Brazilian historical experiences of development all illustrate different trajectories. Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin explore this idea (World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization). This approach emphasizes path dependence and the salience of institutions in economic development. Thus Robert Brenner maintains that it was differences in the particulars of the social-property relations governing farming that explained English transformation and French stagnation (The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe; see also a short descriptive essay, The Brenner Debate).

But other historians have pushed contingency and variation even deeper. So Pomeranz argues against a nation-based model of development. He argues that China's processes of development were very different in different regions, north and south, east and west. So instead of analyzing "China," he picks out one large macro-region, the lower Yangzi region, as the unit possessing enough integration to possess a distinctive pattern of development. Essentially, this is to say that the complex of institutions, crops, population dynamics, and urban patterns are unified but distinct in north China and southeast China, and that each constitutes a system of production with its own dynamics. So this serves to disaggregate China into several important and different regions.

So, with all this disaggregation and differentiation of economic development, let's ask the question again: are there patterns of economic development? Or is every region, city, or state sui generis?

Here is what seems plausible to me. The best hope we have for generalizations about economic development is not at the level of wholes -- regions or nations. Rather, what we can hope to do is to discover a number of recurring processes and mechanisms -- political, demographic, technology, institutional, and economic -- that can be identified and studied in multiple historical cases. In this category of recurring processes and mechanisms, I would include "proto-industrialization," "scissors crisis," "high level equilibrium trap," "state fiscal crisis," and "rapid urban growth" -- along with dozens of other comparable social and economic processes. These are mid-level social processes and mechanisms that correspond to specific opportunities or situations of persons and groups in a developing society, and they can arguably occur in historically separate cases. And actors will adjust their behavior in relation to these processes in their particular settings, to pursue their goals. Finally, some of these processes will aggregate in particular historical settings -- often in novel ways -- to give rise to a particular historical trajectory. (Notice that this is methodologically very similar to the picture that McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly paint about the possibility of generalizations about contentious politics; Dynamics of Contention.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:21PM (-04:00)

Philosophy and society

Friday, April 25, 2008



How does philosophy intersect with the social world? How does philosophical thinking contribute to better understanding of society? (At the right we see Jurgen Habermas teaching philosophy in 1960.)

It is possible that philosophy is not a well-defined discipline. But philosophers regard themselves as having something of a method, and something of a subject matter. The method, for analytically trained philosophers, anyway, is based on careful, critical analysis of ideas, concepts, and statements, and an effort to arrive at developed philosophical theories of important subjects: justice, rationality, equality, relativism, social construction, ... The subject matter is a little harder to specify. But there is an open-ended set of subjects that have drawn philosophers' attention for the past several hundred years: empirical knowledge, foundations of mathematics, the nature of the mind, moral truth, political justice, and the foundations of religious belief, for example.

So let's take this cluster of methods and topics to serve as one possible definition of philosophical thought; the question here is, how can philosophical reasoning be focused on understanding the nature of society?

One clear area of intersection is the philosophy of "knowledge of society" -- the philosophy of social science. Here the questions are epistemological -- how secure is the knowledge offered by the social sciences; methodological -- what methods of inquiry are well suited to the study of society; explanatory -- what is required for a good social explanation; and ontological -- what assumptions do we need to make about the nature of the social world in order to pursue social science research? It is fairly clear how philosophers can contribute to the development of theories and perspectives about these questions.

Another area where philosophy is relevant to society is normative social philosophy -- the theory of justice, human well-being, or communitarianism/liberalism, for example. Here the philosopher brings some organized thinking about values, ethical theory, and the messy facts of human social arrangements into the discussion. Here again, it is fairly clear how rigorous philosophical thinking can illuminate these questions; philosophy can help our understanding of these issues to progress.

But in addition to these fairly clear examples of philosophy about society, there seems to be another domain of intersection between philosophy and society that isn't as well charted. This is "empirically and historically informed study of social metaphysics". Many of the postings on this blog fall roughly into this category. Here the philosopher begins with some bits of knowledge about an aspect of the social world -- economic development, the world food system, or social contention; but then asks fairly foundational questions about how we ought to think about the components of these areas of phenomena.

A recurring subject in this blog, for example, is reflection on the question, "Social

mechanisms or social regularities?". And the contributions here aren't purely conceptual, purely empirical, or purely inductive; instead, they are "theory informed by concrete examples of real social processes." And this approach to a problem seems different from all of the following -- pure methodology, pure epistemology, ethical theory, empirical investigation, or traditional social scientific theory formation. Instead, this level of philosophizing seems to deliberately call upon a synthesis of some empirical knowledge, some conceptual reflection, and some ontological reasoning. (Might we say that it looks something like a combination of Kant in his synthetic metaphysics, with Newton and Kepler in their theoretical and empirical research?)

(This approach, by the way, is exactly similar to what I want to advocate for the philosophy of history as well: philosophical reflection upon real examples of historical change and historical reasoning; and analysis of genuinely important and difficult problems that arise in both the course of history and the course of historical writing. So my view of the philosophy of history too is one that is neither purely a priori nor an exercise in direct historical scholarship.)

So the question today is -- what is the rational or intellectual standing of the assertions that are made in this synthetic form of philosophy?
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:00AM (-04:00)

New angles on French history

Monday, April 28, 2008



In teaching an undergraduate seminar on the philosophy of history, I tried to come up with some readings that would stimulate some genuinely new thinking on this subject. Several things worked well, including simply reading some talented contemporary historians carefully. But the most truly innovative and stimulating twist was a week spent reading and discussing Robert Darnton's numerous reviews of books on the period of the French Revolution in the New York Review of Books. (Darnton's own book, The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History, was also a great addition to the seminar -- but that's another posting.)

Written over roughly a twenty-year period, Darnton's smart reviews provide a great perspective on how the historiography of the French Revolution has changed. From the structural, class-centered approach of Albert Soboul, through Richard Cobb's insistence on mentalités, or Simon Schama's person-centered telling of the story, it is possible to see a shifting scene of historians' judgments about causes, structures, ideas, movements, and scale. All by itself this is an important insight into historical understanding. And it illustrates an important fact about historical knowledge: no event is ever known with finality. (This parallels the point made in my recent posting on China's Cultural Revolution.)

But in our discussions we also found that it is possible to look at Darnton's reviews

themselves as an extended and implicit historiographical essay. In his commentary on the writings of others Darnton also reveals many of his own historical intuitions. And of course Darnton's own ethnographic turn in The Great Cat Massacre -- evidently worked out while Darnton was teaching an interdisciplinary seminar with Clifford Geertz -- is itself an important step on the historiography of French social change. And so the project of trying to discover whether there is a coherent and innovative philosophy of history nested within these reviews proved to be a fruitful one -- there is. And this provides an interesting new avenue of approach to the problem of formulating a philosophy of history, a different wrinkle on the insight that we can learn a lot from observing the practice of great historians.

Several points come out of this set of reviews quite vividly: for example, the deep contingency of historical change, the importance of the particular, the importance of experience and mentalités, the dialectic of events and agents, and the difficulty of framing a large historical event.

(If you have a subscription to the New York Review of Books, all the reviews are available electronically in the archive.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:05PM (-04:00)

Chuck Tilly

Wednesday, April 30, 2008







Along with many others, I was saddened today to learn that Chuck Tilly has died after a long fight with cancer. His passing is a very sad loss for his family and for the many scholars and friends who were so influenced by his ongoing thinking and writing. And there are hundreds or thousands of younger scholars who received encouragement and stimulation from Chuck throughout his teaching and writing career. They will feel his loss keenly.

Chuck was a deeply innovative thinker who kept coming up with new ideas and perspectives throughout his career -- from his earliest days as a Harvard graduate student, all the way through his difficult illness. I particularly admire the flexibility of his mind as he grappled with the challenge of explaining contentious action. So many of his ideas will continue to shape the way scholars think about these aspects of social life into the twenty-first century.

He was also a tremendously generous man as an intellectual, scholar, and mentor. People who worked with him at Michigan, the New School, and Columbia as graduate students always speak fondly of his warmth

and good humor. The courage he demonstrated in facing his final illness is inspiring.

And, of course, many will think with regret of the many books Chuck still intended to write.

Readers who would like to get a sense of the range of Chuck Tilly's thinking and the fertility of his mind may want to visit an interview I conducted with Chuck in December, 2007. A YouTube version can be found here, and a higher resolution downloadable version is here.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:54AM (-04:00)

Realism for the social sciences?

Thursday, May 01, 2008



Scientific realism is the idea that scientific theories provide descriptions of the world that are approximately true. This view implies a correspondence theory of truth -- the idea that the world is separate from the concepts that we use to describe it. And it implies some sort of theory of scientific rationality -- a theory of the grounds that we have for believing or accepting the findings of a given area of science. (See a brief article on the basics of scientific realism including some useful references here.) Realism, objectivity, and facts go together. We can interpret a theory realistically just in case we believe that there is a fact of the matter concerning the assertions contained in the theory. (See earlier postings relevant to this topic, Concepts and the World and Social Construction.)

Realism raises all kinds of interesting questions when we consider applying it to the social sciences. For one thing, it requires a useable distinction between the world and the knower. This raises the question: is there an objective social world independent from the perceptions and concepts of observers? And this also is a complicated question, because the persons who make up social processes at the micro-level are themselves "knowers" of the social world. So there is a question about the objectivity of the social world and a corresponding question about social construction of social reality. If all social phenomena are socially constructed, then how can it be the case that some statements about social phenomena are objective and independent from the conceptual schemes of the observer?

Scientific realism got its impetus from the fact that physical theories invoke theoretical concepts that are not themselves directly observational -- muon, gravity wave, gene (at an early stage of biology). So the question arose, what is the status of the reference and truth of scientific sentences that include non-observational concepts -- for example, "muons have a negative electric charge and a spin of -1/2"? Since we can't directly inspect muons and measure their charge and spin, sentences like this depend for their empirical confirmation on their logical relationships to larger bits of physical theory -- and ultimately upon a measure of the overall degree to which this physical theory issues true experimental and observational predictions. And the empirical confirmation of the theory as a whole, the story goes, provides a rational basis for assigning a reference and truth value to its constituent sentences. So the fact that "muon" is embedded within a mathematical theory of subatomic reality and the theory is well confirmed by experimental

means, gives us reason to believe that muons exist and possess approximately the characteristics attributed to them by muon theory.

But all of this has to do with esoteric physical theory. Is there any relevant application of realism in the social sciences? Here's one important difference: the social sciences are barely "theoretical" at all in the sense associated with the natural sciences. The concepts that play central roles in social theories -- charisma, bureaucratic state, class, power -- aren't exactly "theoretical" in the sense of being non-observational. And social concepts aren't defined implicitly, in terms of the role that they play in an extended formal theoretical structure. Rather, we can give a pretty good definition of social concepts in terms of behavior and common-sense attributes of social entities. In the social sciences we don't find the conceptual holism that Duhem and Quine attributed to the natural sciences (Pierre Duhem, The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory; W. V. O. Quine, Word and Object). Instead, both meaning and confirmation can proceed piecemeal. So if realism were primarily a doctrine about the interpretation of theoretical terms, there wouldn't be much need for it in the social sciences.

But here are several specific ways in which scientific realism is useful in the social sciences, I think. And they all have to do with the kinds of statements in the social sciences that we think can be interpreted as expressing facts about the world, independent of our theories and concepts.

Causal realism. We can be realist about the meaning of assertions about causation and causal mechanisms. We can take the position that there is a fact of the matter as to whether X caused Y in the circumstances, and we can assert the objective reality of social causal mechanisms. On the realist interpretation, social causal mechanisms exist in the social world -- they are not simply constructs of the observer's conceptual scheme. And the statement that "Q is the process through which X causes Y" makes a purportedly objective and observer-independent claim about Q; it is an objective social process, and it conveys causation from X to Y. Q is the causal mechanism underlying the causal relationship between X and Y.

Structure realism. We can be realist about the existence of extended social entities and structures -- for example, "the working class," "the American Congress," "the movement for racial equality." These social entities and structures have some curious ontological characteristics -- it is difficult to draw boundaries between members of the working class and the artisan class, so the distinctness of the respective classes is at risk; institutions like the Congress change over time; a social movement may be characterized in multiple and sometimes incompatible ways; and social entities don't fall into "kinds" that are uniform across settings. But surely it is compelling to judge that the Civil Rights movement was an objective fact in the 1960s or that the Congress exists and is a partisan environment. And this is a version of social realism.

Social-relations realism. If we say that "Pierre is actively involved in a network of retired French military officers", we refer to a set of social relations encapsulated under the concept of a social network and composed of many pair-wise social relations. Here too we can take the perspective of social realism. It seems unproblematic to postulate the objective reality of both the pair-wise social relations and the aggregate network that these constitute. Each level of social relationship can be investigated empirically (we can discover that Pierre has regular interactions with Jean but not with Claude), and it seems unproblematic to judge that there is a fact of the matter about the existence and properties of the network -- independent of the assumptions and concepts of the

observer.

Meaning realism. Now, how about the hardest case: meanings and the objectivity of interpretation. Can we say that there is ever a fact of the matter about the interpretation of an action or thought? When Thaksin offends Charat by exposing the bottoms of his feet to him -- can we say that "Charat's angry reaction is the result of the meaning of this insulting gesture in Thai culture"? Even here, it is credible to me that there is a basis for saying that this judgment expresses an objective fact (even if it is a fact about subjective experience); and therefore, we can interpret this sentence along realist lines: "Thaksin's gesture was objectively offensive to Charat in the setting of Thai culture." It is evident that many of our interpretations of behavior and action are substantially underdetermined by context and evidence; so it may be that much interpretation of meaning does not constitute a "fact of the matter." But this seems to be a fact about particular judgments rather than a universal feature of the interpretation of meanings.

So it seems that it is feasible and useful to take a social realist perspective on many of the assertions and theories of the social sciences; and what this says, is that we can interpret social science statements as being approximately true of a domain of social phenomena that have objective properties (i.e. properties that are independent from our conceptualization of them).
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:53PM (-04:00)

Logistics as a historical force

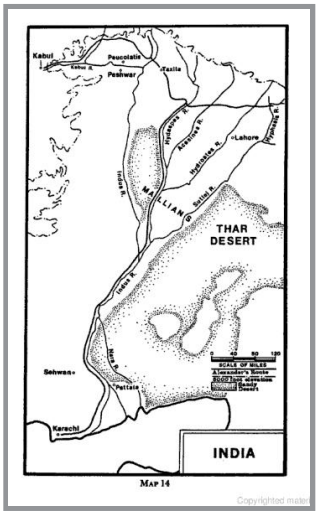
Sunday, May 04, 2008



The constraint of what people can do often plays a large role in what they actually do. The study of logistics is the study of constraints. Logistics has to do with the intersection of resource, activity, space, and time. A plan is an orchestrated sequence of activities over space and time, provisioned by appropriate resources as needed. Historical actors orchestrate their actions in terms of extended plans -- which means that they pay extensive and detailed attention to logistics. And historians need to do so as well.



One common species of historical question is, "Why did the agent do such-and-so?" Why did Napoleon's invasion of Russia fail so formidably? Why did Charles Martel infeudate his central power? Why did Napoleon III fail to respond with effective military action to the Prussian invasion of France in 1870? Why did Alexander the Great avoid the direct route through the Thar Desert? Analysis of constraints is often critical to being able to answer these questions.



Map 14

In each case logistics comes into the explanation at a more or less evident level. The historian's first impulse is to ask the question of purpose and plan: what was the agent intending to accomplish? How was the observed course of action an intelligent solution? When there is no apparent rational explanation, the historian may then retreat to "miscalculation" or error. But choice always involves an assessment of constraints, and this is where logistics come in. What looks like error may actually be a rational adjustment to constraint. The point here is that logistical obstacles or difficulties are often a hidden factor on the agent's choice -- and these factors may ultimately dictate a strategy or plan that looks otherwise irrational. And historians sometimes give these constraints too little attention.

Logistics is relevant to a wide range of complex social action. Take, for example, the difficult chess match involving two NBA coaches during a forty-eight minute basketball game. Each coach makes a series of substitutions throughout the game. Some are dictated by "match-up" -- getting the right defensive players on the floor given the current offensive set of the opponent. But some of the choices may appear dumb in the eyes of the duffer fan -- "why did he take Iverson out now exactly when he's on a run?" And often, I think, the answer is logistics. Each player has a finite amount of energy and spring in his legs. And each has a finite allotment of personal fouls to give. So the coach's task, in part, is to manage substitutions in such a way as to make maximum use of his star players over the full forty-eight minutes. It doesn't help much to have built up a 10 point lead with four minutes to go if the top scorer and rebounder are out of gas. And this is a logistics problem.

A more serious example -- what about Alexander the Great in his celebrated and brilliant conquest of the world? Why did Alexander make the sometimes puzzling strategic and tactical decisions he made through his campaigns? The answer, according to Donald Engels, is logistics (Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army). As Engels puts the point, "When the climate, human geography, physical geography, available methods of transport, and agricultural calendar of a given region are known, one can often determine what Alexander’s next move will be." Engels provides careful calculations of fodder, the number of horses needed to provision and feed the Macedonian army, and the rate of speed attainable by such an army -- and finds that Alexander's choices were generally well suited to the logistical constraints and his larger strategic goals.

The study of transportation technology as a historical factor certainly falls within the general topic of "logistics as a historical cause." (See Transportation for more extensive treatment of this topic.) Transport systems like rail networks provide specific opportunities and constraints on choice, and intelligent strategists make every effort to understand these well. So, correspondingly, the historian needs to do so as well if he/she is to explain the choices taken. (If you want to invade Burgundy from Frankfurt in 1860, don't plan to move your army by train. And if you plan to invade Russia by rail in 1910, be prepared for the change of gauge at the frontier.)

Military historians generally pay careful attention to logistical factors as they attempt to understand military choices and strategies. But analysis of resource-time-space-activity

factors probably receive less attention in other parts of historical and social research than they should.

Where does the concept of logistics fit into the concepts we use to analyze historical processes and actions? Some historians might say that it is a minor and peripheral analytical tool. But seen properly, I would say that the notion of logistics is actually a key concept that ties together the complex and extended historical actions that we want to be able to explain. It is thus a central concept within an adequate historical ontology.

This point is relevant to historical research at two levels. First, it emphasizes the importance of incorporating a careful analysis of the agent's beliefs about the constraints he/she faces into the analysis of the eventual plans and choices. And second, at a more systemic level, it suggests that study of major logistical systems --transport, water management, urban infrastructure, the food system -- may have substantial value as a source of hypotheses about large historical causes. These systems structure the opportunities and constraints that face rulers and ordinary people alike, and they have the capacity of pushing development in one direction or another in a particular historical conjuncture. They therefore function as historical causes.

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:20PM (-04:00)

Cities

Tuesday, May 06, 2008



Cities are fascinating -- individually and in the aggregate. Are there distinct types of cities? Are there specific social processes that are associated with the development of cities in different countries or civilizations? Are there regularities across cities in different settings?

Two authors I've particularly admired in their analysis of cities -- at very different historical and spatial scales -- are G. William Skinner and Saskia Sassen. Skinner's historical treatment of Chinese cities is innovative and original (The City in Late Imperial China and The Chinese City Between Two Worlds; both edited books, the first including two major essays by Skinner). And Sassen's treatment of the global city in the twenty-first century sets the standard for bold new thinking about the social processes that are transforming the contemporary world (The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo and Global Networks, Linked Cities).

Skinner is fascinated with the spatial arrangement of cities across historical China, and the hierarchies of economic, political, and social relationships that exist among them. And he is interested in the extended historical processes through which great and small cities took their shape. A crucial discovery -- regions rather than nations are the appropriate unit of analysis. "Fairly early in my research on Chinese cities it became clear that in late imperial times they formed not a single integrated urban system but several regional systems, each only tenuously connected with its neighbors" (CLIC 211). Transport

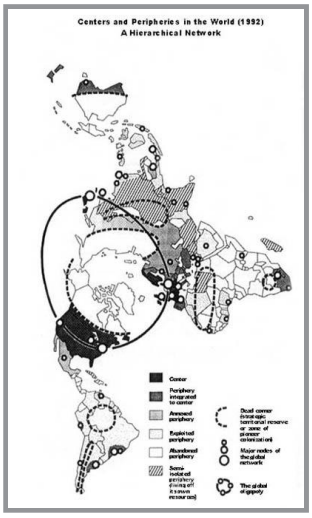
systems were the primary integrative mechanism that Skinner identifies, and in China, transport was largely defined by navigable river systems.

In "Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth-Century China" Skinner is interested in explaining regional differences in urbanization rates across macroregions, and he isolates a handful of causal factors: population density of the region, division of labor, application of technology, commercialization/interregional trade, extraregional trade, administration. He finds that these variables do a pretty good job of explaining the urbanization rates for the eight macroregions he identifies (CLIC 235). A second interesting finding has to do with rank-size relationships of cities by region for late imperial China. Referring to a statistical regularity postulated by G. K. Zipf, according to which the rank-size distribution for a country or region is expected to be approximately linear when plotted with double-log scales, Skinner examines the rank-size distribution for the eight macroregions. And in a panel of graphs for the eight regions (CLIC 238-39) he demonstrates that the distributions conform remarkably well to this prediction, with a few interesting outliers (Canton, Kweiyang, Middle and Upper Yangtze regions).

Skinner's other essay in the volume is just as interesting, "Cities and the Hierarchy of Local Systems." In this paper Skinner focuses on the hierarchies within which Chinese cities fall -- one having to do with imperial administration and the other having to do with economic interaction. These hierarchies are both determined by the nature of the social interactions (and social functions) that are focused on various cities. And they are distinct. For the economic hierarchy of cities and towns Skinner's starting point is central place theory; according to this approach, cities and towns are ranked according to the volume of products and services that they provide and the nature of trade that exists between the city and other places in the hinterlands. The central analytical ideas here are "the demand threshold of the supplier and the range of a good" (277). These concepts work out, with appropriate simplifying assumptions, into a hexagonal array of places, containing nested hexagons of lesser places in a descending sequence. Skinner analyzes the location (spatial and hierarchy) of cities and towns in the Upper Yangzi region and finds that the analytical assumptions are born out.

The administrative hierarchy of cities is defined by different criteria -- location within the imperial system and a characteristic set of administrative functions. Skinner lays out this hierarchical system and then classifies cities and towns accordingly; and he finds, once again, a set of highly interesting regularities. In this case he finds that the distribution of administrative functions across cities and towns reflects intelligent administrative design. "These findings effectively dispose of the notion that cities in imperial China were but microcosms of empire, more or less uniform creations of an omnipotent state. Rather, they give evidence of skilled husbanding and deployment of the limited bureaucratic power that a premodern court could effectively control" (345).

Now let's swing forward a century and look quickly at Saskia Sassen's analysis of global cities New York, London, and Tokyo). Sassen takes a different cut on the dynamics and structure of modern cities. She places the great cities of the late twentieth century into networks that are global rather than national or regional. She looks at networks of exchange that include financial transactions, information flows, and movements of expertise and knowledge-based services. And global cities are those cities that serve as dense hubs of these kinds of exchanges on a global basis. (The map at right doesn't come from Sassen, but it appeals to me in the context because it uses the connectedness of cities to rewrite the geography of the globe. See a ContinentalDrift posting for some discussion.)



Sassen singles out seven hypotheses (quoting from the preface to Global Cities):

1. the geographic dispersal of economic activities that marks globalization ... is a key factor feeding the growth and importance of central corporate functions
2. these central functions become so complex that increasingly the headquarters of large global firms outsource them
3. those specialized service firms engaged in the most complex and globalized markets are subject to agglomeration economies
4. the more headquarters outsource their most complex, unstandardized functions ... the freer they are to opt for any location
5. these specialized service firms need to provide a global service which has meant a global network of affiliates
6. the growing numbers of high level professionals and high-profit making specialized firms have the effect of raising the degree of spatial and socioeeconomic inequality evident in these cities
7. the dynamics described in hypothesis six lead to the growing informalization of a range of economic activities which find their effective demand in these cities yet have profit rates that do not allow them to compete

And, in a single sentence, her conclusion is:

Economic globalization and telecommunications have contributed to produce a spatiality for the urban which pivots both on cross-border networks and on territorial locations with massive concentrations of resources (xxii).

The book attempts to document and explore these points through a huge range of evidence about flows: flows of investment, flows of telephone calls, flows of scientists and specialists. And global cities are the places where these flows concentrate and originate; they are nodes in the global system of exchange that constitutes the modern knowledge-intensive economy. Like Skinner, she is very interested in networks and hierarchies; unlike Skinner, she doesn't seem particularly interested in spatial patterns (and their graphical expression, maps).

These points just scratch the surface of the insights that these two social scientists have provided as we try to understand cities in relation to larger social networks. But perhaps it's enough to illustrate the crucial point: there is ample room in social science and history

for innovative perspectives on old questions.

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:55PM (-04:00)

More on knowing poverty

Wednesday, May 07, 2008

Mike Poole has picked up on the question of "knowing poverty", an earlier topic in UnderstandingSociety, in a very interesting post on his blog, greetingsearthlings. He adds a really valuable international perspective on the topic of how we understand poverty if we don't experience it directly -- he's Australian, trained in Southeast Asian Studies at ANU, living in Hong Kong, and very involved in the conditions of Filipino people living and working in Hong Kong.

This is a really great example of how the internationalism of the web can really make it possible for people to gain a better understanding of the human issues that most people face -- if they want to! Wouldn't it be great if a serious international discussion of the rice crisis and interruptions of food security in many countries got going in thoughtful postings like Mike's.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:45AM (-04:00)

Piecemeal empirical assessment of social theories

Wednesday, May 07, 2008

The philosophy of science devotes a large fraction of its wattage to this question: what is the logic of empirical confirmation for scientific beliefs? (A good short introduction is Samir Okasha, Philosophy of Science: A Very Short Introduction.) In the natural sciences this question became entangled with the parochial fact about the natural sciences, that scientific theories postulated unobservable entities and processes and that the individual statements or axioms of a theory could not be separately confirmed or tested. So a logic of confirmation was developed according to which theories are empirically evaluated as wholes; we need to draw out a set of deductive or probabilistic consequences of the theory; observe the truth or falsity of these consequences based on experiment or observation; and then assign a degree of empirical credibility to the theory based on the success of the observational consequences. This could be put as a slogan: "No piecemeal confirmation of scientific beliefs!"

This is the familiar hypothetico-deductive model of confirmation (H-D), articulated most rigorously by Carl Hempel and criticized and amended by philosophers such as Karl Popper, Nelson Goodman, Norwood Hanson, and Imre Lakatos. These debates constituted most of the content of the evolution of positivist philosophy of science into post-positivist philosophy of science throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

I don't want to dive into this set of debates, because I am interested in knowledge in the social sciences; and I don't think that the theory-holism that this train of thought depends upon actually has much relevance for the social sciences. The H-D model of confirmation is approximately well suited -- but only to a certain range of scientific areas of knowledge (mathematical physics, mostly). But the social sciences are not theoretical in the relevant

sense. Social science "theories" are mid-level formulations about social mechanisms and structures; they are "theories of the middle range" (Robert Merton, On Theoretical Sociology). They often depend on formulations of ideal types of social entities or organizations of interest -- and then concrete empirical investigation of specific organizations to determine the degree to which they conform or diverge from the ideal-typical features specified by the theory. And these mid-level theories and hypotheses can usually be empirically investigated fairly directly through chains of observations and inferences.

This is not a trivial task, of course, and there are all sorts of challenging methodological and conceptual issues that must be addressed as the researcher undertakes to consider whether the world actually conforms to the statements he/she makes about it. But it is logically very different from the holistic empirical evaluation that is required of the special theory of relativity or the string theory of fundamental physics. The language of hypothesis-testing is not quite right for most of the social sciences. Instead, the slogan for social science epistemology ought to be, "Hurrah, piecemeal empirical evaluation!"

I want to argue, further, that this epistemological feature of social knowledge is a derivative of some basic facts about social ontology: social processes, entities, and structures lack the rigidity and law-governedness that is characteristic of natural processes, entities, and structures. So general, universal theories of social entities that cover all instances are unlikely. But second, it is a feature of the accessibility of social things: we interact with social entities in a fairly direct manner, and these interactions permit us to engage in scientific observation of these entities in a way that permits the piecemeal empirical investigation that is highlighted here. And we can construct chains of observations and inferences from primary observations (entries in an archival source) to empirical estimates of a more abstract fact (the level of crop productivity in the Lower Yangzi in 1800).

Let's say that we were considering a theory that social unrest was gradually rising in a region of China in the nineteenth century because of a gradual shift in the sex ratios found in rural society. The connection between sex ratios and social unrest isn't directly visible; but we can observe features of both ends of the equation. So we can gather population and family data from registries and family histories; we can gather information about social unrest from gazettes and other local sources; and we can formulate subsidiary theories about the social mechanisms that might connect a rising male-female ratio to the incidence of social unrest. In other words -- we can directly investigate each aspect of the hypothesis (cause, effect, mechanism), and we can put forward an empirical argument in favor of the hypothesis (or critical of the hypothesis).

This is an example of what I mean by "piecemeal empirical investigation". And the specific methodologies of the various social and historical sciences are largely devoted to the concrete tasks of formulating and gathering empirical data in the particular domain. Every discipline is concerned to develop methods of empirical inquiry and evaluation; but, I hold, the basic logic of inquiry and evaluation is similar across all disciplines. The common logic is piecemeal inquiry and evaluation.

(I find Tom Kelly's article on "Evidence" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy to be a better approach to justification in the social sciences than does the hypothetico-deductive model of confirmation, and one that is consistent with this piecemeal approach to justification. Kelly also reviews the essentials of H-D confirmation theory.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:17AM (-04:00)

Microfoundations of social practices

Tuesday, May 13, 2008



By a practice I mean such things as agricultural techniques, craft technologies, and customs of ordinary life -- how to greet a neighbor, how to discipline one's children, how to decorate the home for a holiday. A practice is a combination of concrete knowledge, a string of practical techniques, and a set of attitudes and judgments. (It would be interesting to look at practices as being "coded", along the lines of a gene or a sentence.)

How about the other half of the question? A "microfoundation" is a set of local-level pathways and mechanisms through which a social process is caused or mediated. It is a particular set of individual circumstances that create the patterns of behavior that aggregate to the observed social outcome. For example, the microfoundation for an observed failure to carry off a successful tiger hunt is the set of circumstances of recruitment through which eligible participants are enabled to "free-ride" on the participation of others.

So -- do social practices have "microfoundations"?

First, consider the social reality of a practice like wine-making. Pre-modern artisanal wine makers possess an ensemble of techniques through which they grow grapes and transform them into wine. These ensembles are complex and developed; different wine "traditions" handle the tasks of cultivation and fermentation differently, and the results are different as well (fine and ordinary burgundies, the sweet gewurztraminers of Alsace versus Germany). The novice artisan doesn't reinvent the art of winemaking; instead, he/she learns the techniques and traditions of the elders. But at the same time, the artisan wine maker may also introduce innovations into his/her practice -- a wrinkle in the cultivation techniques, a different timing in the fermentation process, the introduction of a novel ingredient into the mix.

So the practice of Alsatian winemaking in the seventeenth century has a complex social reality. There are elements of knowledge and practice common among many wine growers in the region; there are differentiating changes over space and time; and the whole tradition has a history that extends backward in time and space. We might imagine that the geo-history of the winemaking traditions of Alsace would track the continuity, change, and transformation of the complex of practices across time and space -- perhaps in the form of a set of dynamic maps illustrating the diffusion of the tradition, and the diffusion of variants and modifications, over space and time.

Now we are ready to come back to the question of microfoundations. There are at least two aspects of this story that require microfoundations, corresponding to persistence and change: the social mechanisms of reproduction of the practice from generation to generation (persistence) and the social mechanisms of transmission of innovation across space and time (change). (There is an interesting analogy here with the reproduction of a genotype over time, with faithful reproduction and mutations.) If we committed the

intellectual sin of reification and imagined that there is one unique and extended social practice that is "Alsatian winemaking wherever it occurs," we would have missed a crucial part of the story just told; there is no essential social practice of winemaking (or greeting a neighbor or decorating the house for Passover). Rather, there are bundles of bits of knowledge, assumptions, judgments, and behaviors that are embodied in the thoughts and actions of individuals at a certain time; and there are social mechanisms through which these bundles of knowledge are transmitted across generations and across space and time.

Seen from this point of view, the study of the persistence, change, and brachiation of a social practice or traditional technology is a genuinely fascinating window into patterns of human activity over time. If it were possible to trace the travel of an innovation in the fermentation process from its origin in a given village, along the circuits of the periodic markets, across a jump to a more distant place (by long-distance ship, for example) we would have a "marker" of the routes of social interaction and travel that were characteristic of seventeenth-century rural Alsace. The logic of this investigation would be similar to that pursued by historical linguistics, observing the gradual transformation of the syntax, phonology, or vocabulary of a language over several centuries and an extended region.

And the topic of microfoundations is an important theoretical question in this story. It invites us to ask several foundational questions:

"What are the social processes within which the complex social practice is embodied in human behavior and knowledge at a certain time?"
"What are the social processes through which this body of knowledge is transmitted relatively intact from one generation to the next?"
"What are the social mechanisms of transmission through which these clusters of human knowledge and their variations are conveyed across space and across social groups (from village to village)?"

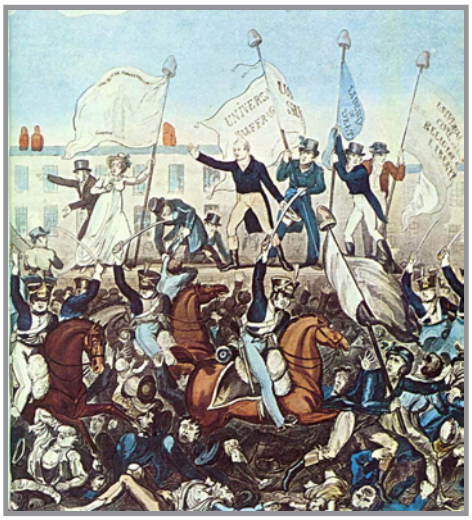
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:03PM (-04:00)

Social science history and historical social science

Friday, May 16, 2008

Social science methods and historical explanation seem to come together in several different ways; what can we say about the differences of approach between “history using the tools of the social sciences” and “social science research that pays close attention to history”?

E. P. Thompson treats the making of the English working class. His work is multi-faceted. He gives treatment of workingmen’s organizations and publications; churches and pastors; riots and chants; petitions to parliament; and much else. The story is historical in several respects: it provides an account of change over time and it engages in detailed and fine-grained description of specific circumstances in the past. Is Thompson attempting to explain something? Perhaps it is more accurate to say that his aim is to describe this extended, multi-location, multi-group process of “making”, along with some



sense of the circumstances and features of agency that brought this “class” into being. And he goes out of his way to emphasize the contingency of the story that he tells: this “class” could have taken a very different shape, depending on altered circumstances and agency along the way. His is as much like the work of a biographer, detailing the development of personality, the contingencies of personal history, the formation of character, and the actions of the mature person.

Charles Tilly treats the development of contentious politics in France over three centuries. His account too is “historical”: it describes the development and diversity of contentious politics in France through revolution and periods of quiet. His account too is attentive to difference; he emphasizes the many ways in which French contentious “underclass” politics varied across time and across region. The politics of workers in Paris were quite different from those of the winemakers of the Vendée. But Tilly’s account is deliberately sociological and theoretical. The goal of his study is to discover causes; to test a few theoretical hypotheses about mobilization; and to use the “data” of French working class history as a basis for testing and evaluating sociological theory.

Each of these examples is a major intellectual contribution; each contributes to our historical understanding; each focuses on a historically situated working class. But the two oeuvres have substantial differences of orientation and feel. One is explicitly theoretical in its goals; the other is nuanced and descriptive. One aims at arriving at explanations; the other is interested in providing a qualitative understanding of the experience of ordinary men and women of the 18th and 19th centuries in rural England. One is historical social science, while the other is social science history.

So it is an important question within the philosophy of history, to articulate the difference between these two configurations of “social science” and “history.” How are the two genres distinguished? Are they differences of style, each embodying a complex of narrative and explanatory values? Are they at opposing ends of some sort of spectrum, ranging from descriptive to explanatory or concrete to abstract? Or are they actually logically different in some way—perhaps along the lines of the distinction between three conceptions of time described by William Sewell?

Perhaps most extremely, would we be right to consider excluding Tilly’s work from the domain of the “historical” and place it instead within the domain of social science, distinguished from other varieties of social science primarily by the fact that the data upon which it depends are facts about the past? In other words, is it possible to suggest that “historical social science” is not a variety of historical writing at all?

How might we characterize some of the differences between these two bodies of writing about the past? Do they constitute different paradigms, research frameworks, or forms of historical practice? Do they embody different complexes of assumptions about what to emphasize, what the standards of rigor are, what is required by way of description, detail, and fact; what is intended by way of explanation and understanding; the role that interpretation of the lived experience of agents plays; and so on?

Comparative historical social science is a particular instance of historical social science. There is a well-developed contemporary literature on the conceptual and methodological issues raised by comparative historical social science. And the participants in this literature generally seem to come down on the side of the "social science" conclusions rather than the "historical explanations" side of the debate. The goal of comparative social science is to assess causation, and to use knowledge of concrete historical cases as a source of evidence for evaluating causal theories. Examples include the explanation of social revolution (Theda Skocpol), the explanation of social contention (Charles Tilly), the explanation of economic development (R. Bin Wong, Philip Huang), the explanation of labor union politics (Howard Kimmeldorf).

Now let us turn the lens in the other direction and ask, in what ways do the contents of social science knowledge aid in the construction of historical knowledge? What is the role of theory and causal hypothesis in paradigm examples of historical knowledge? Virtually all historians would first insist: "Historical research cannot take the form of application of social science theory to the data. Rather, the historian's task is to discover the particular and the grain of the materials in front of him. History is not the unfolding of theoretical premises and good historical knowledge does not result from deducing consequences from general social science theories." That being conceded: are there forms of historical inquiry and knowledge that are importantly and rationally assisted by social science theory?

One variant of historical writing where social science theory is apparently pertinent is in the "causal narrative". Historians are well served by appealing to social science theories of causal mechanisms in order to explain the transitions that they identify in their causal narratives. This is a logical point. And yet, it is strikingly difficult to find examples of leading historians who make use of social science theory in this way. Philip Huang is an example of a professional historian who makes substantial use of social science theory and concepts; Simon Schama is an example of a historian who is averse to this use. More commonly, the authors who provide causal narratives informed by social science theory are themselves sociologists or other social scientists (Skocpol, Tilly, Wolf, Paige).

It seems from some of these scattered observations, that there is indeed a significant difference between social science history and historical social science. The explanatory goals appear to be different, and the methods of reasoning and standards of rigor and adequacy seem to be distinct as well. So the question of how the disciplinary differences fit together is one that demands continued scrutiny.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:33PM (-04:00)

Agendas for Chinese sociology

Saturday, May 17, 2008

The challenge for Chinese sociology is the challenge of Chinese society. Chinese social sciences are presently in a period of deep uncertainty. Marxist ideas about method and theory are no longer governing, and new paradigms have not yet taken full form. This transition is especially important because of the magnitude and novelty of the social changes that China is experiencing today. Now is an important time for engagement between innovative Chinese and Western sociologists and philosophers in an effort to arrive at models of social research and explanation that work well for contemporary China.





Here is a brief inventory of some of the many social processes and challenges that are underway in China today, and that constitute an agenda of research for a distinctive China-centered sociology of the future.

Most visible among China's current social changes is the economic transformation associated with market reforms in the past two decades. The reform of agriculture in the 1980s had massive effects that continue to reverberate in Chinese rural society. The reforms in the 1990s of the institutional setting of manufacture and international trade have created large currents and pressures in Chinese society: smashing of the brass rice bowl, stimulus to massive internal migration, creation of new ensembles of powerful players, creating of wealth, immiseration of some workers, …

Seen from a narrowly economic point of view, the question is this: How can China sustain 10% rates of economic growth? What further policy changes and institutional reforms will be necessary in order to both support and accommodate rapid economic growth?

Seen from the broader point of view, the question is: What are the social implications of this massive economic transformation? What changes have occurred within factories? How do workers reason about the choices they are faced with when privatization occurs? What is happening to displaced workers? What implications are emerging for public health, for the care of the elderly, or for access to education? What are the conditions of social well-being across China? How much inequality is resulting from these reforms, and how is it distributed across region and sector? How are these circumstances changing over time?

Something like 70% of China's population is rural, with a sizeable percentage swinging back and forth between rural residence and low-paid urban work. The transformations that are underway in the countryside are very important. There is a profound readjustment of property rights underway, with a corresponding struggle between farmers and power-holders over ownership and control of land. The inequalities that have commonly existed between city and countryside are evidently more extreme than ever since 1949; incomes are rising rapidly in the urban manufacturing and service economy, and farmers' incomes are stagnant. Western provinces such as Shaanxi continue to witness rural incomes in the range of $300 per year—the World Bank's standard of extreme poverty. And farmers' access to social services is very limited, including access to education; so opportunities for inter-generational improvement are much more limited than those presented to urban people.

Corresponding to some of these points about rural property ownership and inequalities, is a dramatic increase in the volume of rural protest and collective action. Tens of thousands of instances of collective protest and unrest occur every year in the countryside—and the incidence is rising. The state is concerned about conditions in the countryside; but its response is muted and confused. At some points the rhetoric of the

state has been pro-farmer in the past few years; but there is also a “law and order” thread that offers the stick rather than social reform. Complicating the issue is the disconnect between the central government’s policies and the actions of local and provincial governments. The interests of the local and provincial governments are often tilted towards “development” and modernization – with corresponding lack of support for farmers’ rights. The central state appears to lack the ability to control the use of coercion by local authorities in putting down peasant collective action and protest.

A common cause of rural unrest is the fact of local corruption and abuse of the powers of local authorities. The study of corruption, and the institutions of state and market that might help to control corrupt practices, is an important subject for Chinese social scientists. Parallel to corruption is the question of the extension of the system of law. To what extent are players able to appeal to their rights and to gain access to processes of law enforcement? Are there emerging non-governmental organizations and other independent organizations that support workers’ and farmers’ rights? How can this institutional framework be extended and made more effective?

Internal migration and the status of ethnic minorities are other important subjects for study by Chinese social scientists. Once again, these are processes that are changing rapidly; it will be important for Chinese demographers, social policy analysts, and ethnographers to put together effective research programmes that will track and explore these processes.

The social behaviors that affect the environment and energy use, including changes in the volume of transportation and motor vehicles, present evident challenges for the future of Chinese society. Social scientists need to provide insight into the drivers of these behaviors, and social scientists can help to design social policies and institutions that might steer Chinese consumption patterns in directions that are more compatible with China’s longterm environmental sustainability.

Many Chinese intellectuals are posing questions about the role of values in Chinese society. Are there traditional Chinese values that might help secure a stable and harmonious future for Chinese society? Are there strategies or policies that might help to stabilize a social consensus about the legitimacy of governmental institutions and the distributive justice of China’s economic development? Social scientists can probe these questions at a variety of levels, asking the empirical question of the current distribution and variation of social values and the institutional question of the forces that influence future developments in social values.

Finally, the social challenges that will be posed by an aging Chinese population, in the context of a dramatically smaller cohort of younger workers as a result of the one-child policy, will be increasingly important in the coming two decades. Health care, income support, housing, and mental health services will all be important challenges for Chinese society, and once again, there is very little precedence for the magnitude of these challenges in other parts of the world.

Plainly, there is an urgent need for a new surge of effective social-science research in China. But equally, it is clear that these many areas of change represent a mix of different kinds of social processes and mechanisms, operating according to a variety of temporal frameworks, with different manifestations in different regions and sectors of Chinese society. So we should not expect that a single sociological framework, a unified sociological theory, or a unique sociological research methodology will suffice. Instead,

Chinese sociological research needs to embrace a plurality of methods and theories in order to arrive at results that shed genuine light on China's social development.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:06AM (-04:00)

How much of social life can be explained?

Saturday, May 17, 2008



How much of social life can be explained?

It may sound like a strange question -- surely everything can be explained! And it's true that nothing that occurs is "inexplicable". But consider this homely example: if I spill my coffee on the desk, is there a scientific explanation of the particular shape that the splash of liquid takes? The final configuration of liquid on the desk is fully governed by physical laws and existing conditions; but chance and contingency play a critical role in the flow and splash of liquid as it moves into equilibrium. Some facts about the final equilibrium can be explained and predicted -- the flat surface and shallow depth, for example. But the particular configuration of the radiating arms of the spill is highly contingent. So we might say that the depth of the pool has a scientific explanation but the shape does not.

Now bring the focus back to the social. The social universe contains a great deal of stuff that is random, chaotic, and conjunctural. Social outcomes are path-dependent: later events often depend critically on circumstances that occurred earlier in time. And this means that outcomes may be decisively shaped by accidental and ideographic events that occurred in the past.

Take collective behavior. In analogy to the coffee spill, we might be in a position to explain the behavior of each person in a crowd -- and it may still be true that there is no explanation of the behavior of the group as a whole. (Maybe that is suggested by the beach crowd scene above.) Sometimes there is a salient explanation of group behavior, and sometimes there is not. And we might want to say that any social outcome that is random or depends primarily on a random concatenation of causes, cannot be explained but merely retraced. We can provide a narrative but not an explanation.

In fact, for a wide range of social phenomena, the outcome is simply the resultant of many small influences, and there is no salient reason for this particular outcome. There had to be some result, and the observed result is no more distinguished than any of the other possible outcomes. If the best causal story we can provide depends on unvarnished coincidence, then it seems reasonable to say that there is no explanation of this particular fact.

The most interesting social explanations arise when:

There is a large social trend or event that surprises us (change or unexpected persistence) and there is a previously unobserved factor that can be demonstrated to have caused the trend. Crudely, we might say that an outcome or pattern has an

explanation just in case we have reason to believe there is a major causal factor that produces the pattern or outcome.

There appear to be a couple of pragmatic features to this question about whether something is amenable to scientific explanation. (This raises the question of the pragmatics of explanation in contrast to the logic of explanation.) First, it appears that there an implicature, in asking for an explanation of X, that X is unexpected. If so, there is an implication of contrast: contrary to the usual situations where X does not occur, X occurred on this instance. What caused X to occur? What factor in the situation led to the surprising outcome now? And second, there is the pragmatic preference for large and general factors rather than local and particular factors to serve as explanations.

So we might test out this idea: the proportion of social events that permit substantive scientific explanations is very low. Most social events are routine and expected, and they are the resultant of a large number of unimportant influences. And if either condition is present, then we might say that the event lacks an explanation.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:59PM (-04:00)

Thinking as a structured process

Thursday, May 22, 2008



For some reason I was reminded of a classic and challenging article by Karl Lashley, "The Problem of Serial Order in Behavior" (1951). As I recall, the article was a pivotal contribution to new and productive thinking in what became "cognitive psychology." And it was one of the central components on Noam Chomsky's earliest attacks on radical behaviorism as a paradigm for psychology. Chomsky took the article to provide scientific evidence for the view that there is more to mental processes than a simple concatenation of stimulus-response mechanisms. Most basically, the article laid a basis for attributing substantial degrees of mental structure to ordinary human performances. (See this link for a nice reflection by George Houghton and Tom Hartley on Lashley's arguments on this subject.)

I'm sure there is more to the article than this, but what I remember most clearly is Lashley's study of "serial" behaviors such as typing, where there is some antecedent credibility in the idea that each discrete step is a probabilistic result of the previous step. This would assume that the performance is a Markov process -- one in which each step depends only on the prior one.

Lashley analyzes typing behavior and asks, what can we learn from analysis of errors? And simply, he argues that there are patterns of errors that demonstrate that the typist has a representation of the full series of actions as he/she proceeds through the performance. An example would be the incidence of transposition errors between characters in different parts of the word. If we find that there are numerous examples like this: "PRAZOC" instead of "PROZAC" --then this seems to imply that the typist has the whole sequence of finger movements in mind in the early stage of the performance. And this is inconsistent with the idea that the performance is a Markov chain of linked pairs.

Noam Chomsky soon linked that concept to the idea of a sentence being the manifestation of a syntactic structure as a real, underlying mental representation. (He presented this idea in a famous review of Skinner's book, Verbal Behavior; here is a snippet from Kenneth MacCorquodale describing Chomsky's argument.) Here the idea is that a language-user's comprehension and production of a sentence like "Fairbanks is the desolate capital of Montana" (a sentence, by the way, that has probably never been previously written or uttered) involves a cognitive representation of a number of abstract structures that are not serial or linear. Rather, the competent user arrives at an abstract representation of the whole sentence including its syntax, semantics, and phonology. And the point can be expanded: we might imagine that many kinds of complex performance -- dance, fencing, piano or cello performance -- involve higher-level planning, representations of abstract structures or grammars, and execution of the performance based on the abstract plans and representations.

The other alternative is that the full complex performance is generated by an initial setting and a set of rules deriving the next move based on the current move.

Now let's apply this perspective to thinking. The Markovian perspective would hold that an apparently complexly structured piece of reasoning or creating is actually a serial process in which one step entails its successor. And the more extreme forms of behaviorism evidently entailed that thinking is "nothing but" a series of learned responses to a current set of stimuli -- so the Markov-process interpretation seems to be entailed by the behaviorist premise.

There are pieces of human cognitive performance that probably do have something like this structure -- a meandering conversation or a stream-of-consciousness monologue, for example. But in general, we seem to be confronted with numerous instances of reasoning and creating that do not have this property. Instead, many instances seem to reflect an underlying strategic structure, in which elements that are introduced early in the production are crucial for later turns in the argument or creation. Why does Rawls introduce the idea of reflective equilibrium early in the book? Because he envisions a stage in the argument where this construct will be a vital part of the argument. Why does Monet sketch out the dark shadows around the windows of the Cathedral early in his painting work? Because he has a vision of the eventual gestalt of the finished painting. And, critically, we can speculate that these conceptions are cognitive realities in the mind of the philosopher or artist.

In each instance we seem to have a clear example of a thinker whose complex reasoning and creation is not solely serial. Instead, each is an example of an abstract representation of the whole guiding the particular steps of execution. And this suggests something very much like the Chomsky vision of syntactic representation of the whole guiding the building of the composition.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:57PM (-04:00)

Mentalité?

Sunday, May 25, 2008

Is there such a thing as a "mentalité" of a people, group, or nation? Take these young people at an Iowa potluck supper, or the traders pictured below at the Chicago Board of Trade -- is there a midwestern mentalité that they can be said to share? What factors



might be comprised by such a concept? What forms of variation must we expect within a group sharing a mentalité? And what are the social mechanisms through which these hypothesized forms of shared experience and thought are conveyed?

First, what does the concept mean? Most basically, a mentalité is thought to be a shared way of looking at the world and reacting to happenings and actions by others, distinctive from other groups and reasonably similar across a specific group.



This characterization folds together a number of things: cognitive frames for understanding the world, values and norms around which one organizes one's actions, and a repertoire of reactions and responses to scenarios in the world. And all of this comes together in the form of a signature form of consciousness and behavior. A mentalité shapes the individual's experience of the world, and it provides a specific foundation for one's choices and actions as events in one's world unfold. And a mentalité is thought to be shared across a social group, so it is not simply a set of individual and idiosyncratic mental attitudes.

Historians of the Annales school (see an earlier posting) gave special attention to the task of reconstructing the mentalité of people and groups of the past. Durkheim's ideas about the social world seem to be in the background in the focus offered by Marc Bloch or Jacques Le Goff on this aspect of history's tapestry -- though the Annales approach seems to be more psychological than Durkheim would have preferred. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, for example, sought to capture the mentalité of the peasants of Montaillou in his book of that title, offering substantial commentary on their attitudes towards death, sex, and religion. Lawrence Stone writes of Le Roy Ladurie's "sheer brilliance in the use of a unique document to reconstruct in fascinating detail a previously totally unknown world, the mental, emotional, sexual, and religious life of late thirteenth-century peasants in a remote Pyrennean village" (review in the New York Review of Books by Lawrence Stone of Le territoire de l'historien, The Territory of the Historian, and Carnival in Romans). And the sorts of features of "worldview" that are often invoked in describing a mentalité include superstition and magical beliefs. A fundamental clash of mentalités arises in the conjunction of traditional, magical thinking and modern, scientific thinking in the nineteenth century. (Relevant snippets from The Annales School: Critical Assessments can be found here.)

Several questions are pressing when we consider this concept. First, is the governing idea of underlying variation of worldviews across cultures and times valid in any non-superficial sense? Trivially, of course, we recognize that tastes and morés vary across places and cultures. This was one of Montesquieu's insights. But is there a more fundamental way in which Scots experience the world differently from Basques or Yoruba? Or are the differences associated with tastes and manners simply an overlay

that sits on top of a more fundamental human similarity? This question pushes us towards the debate between advocates of "human nature" against the "historicists," according to whom the most basic features of human cognition and action are contingent and historically shaped.

Let's go out on a limb here for the moment and postulate that even fairly deep aspects of cognition and behavior are historically and culturally variable. Deep aspects of "human nature" are plastic and subject to historical construction. This leaves it open that there may be elements of common human experience while postulating a deep-running plasticity as well. And this leaves it open, in turn, that there is a useful place in historical analysis for the idea of a mentalité.

Second, we need to reflect upon the ways in which adherence to a mentalité should be expected to vary across individuals, places, and cohorts. And, of course, we should expect variation, since every human attribute comes in a range across a population -- and even more so for learned traits. So if we think that a mentalité comprises a cognitive framework, a value system, and a set of expectations about behavior -- we should also expect that there will be a range of ways in which these items are instantiated in different people within the same group.

Third, we need to attempt to trace out some of the mechanisms through which a mentalité is reproduced and maintained across generations and places. We need an account of the microfoundations of mentalité, along the lines of an earlier posting on social practices. We've already sketched some of these mechanisms in prior postings. But the fundamental idea is that there is a range of institutions through which children and young people acquire mental skills and content, both formal and informal -- schooling, religious education, family practices, and local traditions, for example. So for there to be a persistent mentalité for a population, there must be a reasonably consistent delivery system across the population that transmits this ensemble of items. And sociologists and historians need to be able to uncover some of the specifics of these institutions.

And, fundamentally, how would we confirm the notion that a population possesses a mentalité? How would we support a claim like this: "medieval villagers of the Vosges possessed a mentalité that distinguished them from their modern counterparts and their contemporaries in other regions"? There are several answers we might give: Robert Darnton used some of the tools of ethnography to get at the thoughts of the agents of the great cat massacre in 1740. Or we might imagine a contemporary sociologist using some of the many-country surveys of values (World Values Survey) as a basis for judging that French and Italian people in 1960 possessed significantly different moral frameworks with respect to certain subjects. Or we might rely on our own acquaintance with multicultural friends --- perhaps certain Danish people and certain Nigerians -- and simply remark internally, "How differently they seem to perceive and react to the world."

Finally, we might at least consider the idea that the globalization of communication, transportation, and education has substantially reduced the variability of worldviews and cognitive frameworks, so that modern consciousness is much more uniform than medieval consciousness and thought.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:24PM (-04:00)

More on what can be explained

Sunday, June 01, 2008



A previous posting argued that most social facts don't admit of social explanation because they are too fundamentally conjunctural or too boringly ordinary. Let's extend this thought by considering what sorts of social facts do admit of explanation.

One obvious category is the example of a perplexing mid-range social regularity. Why do used cars usually sell for less than their "real" value? Because of the asymmetry of information between buyer and seller (the market for lemons). Why does ethnic conflict turn violent more commonly in circumstances where the institutions of civil society are weak? Because weak civil institutions undermine trust between distinct intermixed groups. (Here is a posting summarizing some recent thinking on this connection between civil society and ethnic violence.) Why do collectivized farms usually witness lower labor productivity than privately owned farms? Because of some common features of labor management and supervision that are usually a part of collective farm practices but not of private farm practices, that are likely to result in individual effort that is of lower quality or intensity than the private alternative. (This is sometimes referred to as the "easy-rider" problem.)

This category encompasses cases of non-trivial regularity. These are all examples of what I call "phenomenal" social regularities. They are not manifestations of some underlying set of social laws, but rather the common results of a set of mechanisms or processes in a range of cases (article). In each case the explanation proceeds by identfying a common but non-obvious mechanism or structural feature that produces the observed outcome.

Another important category of social phenomena demanding explanation is the large, complex social occurrence. (William Sewell calls these "events" -- historical occurrences that are "irreversible, contingent, uneven, discontinuous and transformational" (link).) Here I have in mind things such as the great Pullman strike of 1894, the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, the civil war in Lebanon in the 1980s, the Rwandan genocide, or the selection of alternating over direct current electricity transmission systems. In each case we want to know why the event occurred -- the event is important and obscure -- and it is credible that there may be a small number of social mechanisms and circumstances that can be discovered and that brought about the event.

So explanation of these singular but extended events takes the form of a causal narrative that turns on a small number of important causal factors or mechanisms. The burden of explanation is to discover the mid-level social processes and mechanisms that caused the outcome to occur. And a feature of generalization comes into this account as well, but at a different point in the story: to say that P caused O in the circumstances is also to imply that P would have similar effects in similar circumstances in other settings.

So the idea of a social regularity comes into this discussion twice. First, we are often led to ask for an explanation when we observe a curious regularity -- instances of similar

behaviors or outcomes in separate cases. "Why does this weak regularity obtain across independent cases?" And second, the type of explanation highlighted here is a causal explanation, which implies assertions about counterfactual regularities. "The outcome occurs because of the regular causal powers of such-and-so a causal mechanism." A factor that possesses the causal power to help bring about a certain kind of effect plainly plays a role in statements like this: "whenever P occurs in circumstances substantially similar to C, O is likely to occur." And this is a statement of an idealized regularity. This in turn lends some support for the idea that explanation and the discovery of a level of social generalization are linked -- but not in the way that the nomological-deductive model of explanation would imply.

(See Varieties of Social Explanation for other perspectives on these questions.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:26AM (-04:00)

Institutions, functions, purposes

Thursday, June 05, 2008



An institution is a specific ensemble of interlocked organizations and rules that serve to coordinate and constrain the behavior of a number of individuals; and the specific features of the organization have often been refined to bring about specific effects: enforcement of laws, maximization of tax collections, minimization of corrupt behavior, efficient delivery of services, ... The reformers, in this case, are not usually master designers or architects standing at the top of the institution; instead, they are an army of players and stakeholders who have the capacity to proliferate or modify various aspects of the institution. So an institution is generally a collective product, created, sustained, and modified by an army of participants, from CEOs to supervisors and directors to front-line workers.



The ideas of "purpose" or "function" are hard to disassociate from the idea of an institution. Purposes have to do with the intentions of the creators or reformers of a thing; and functions have to do with the relationship between the thing's effects and the broader needs of the system within which it sits. We are often led to ask questions like these: What is the mission or purpose of the institution? What social functions does it fulfill? What are the intentions of the actors that are expressed in the various sub-components of the institution?

Here, however, we have to be very cautious. Social institutions and organizations do not have "essences" or "natures", and they do not have inherent functions. This functionalist interpretation may once have been appealing but is no longer credible. There is no basis

for imagining that social institutions are optimized for bringing about important social effects. And there is no mechanism of "social selection" that serves as a general equivalent to "natural selection" and that would lead to a process of improvement of fitness for social institutions. (This isn't to say that any variant is equally good; smart social engineers will plainly avoid institutional arrangements that are påatently unworkable. But there is usually a range of alternative arrangements that would be "good enough", so that the existing arrangement is only one out of several that could have been implemented.) So the concept of an institution's function isn't a particularly useful one. (See an earlier post on questionable analogies between social science and evolutionary biology.)

It is fair enough to say that purposes come into the design of an institution. After all, institutions are semi-deliberate social artifacts, and their creators have purposes. But generally these are the local and parochial purposes of participants at a variety of levels, not the purposes of some grand designer for the institution as a whole. The conventions of double-entry accounting express the purpose of an enterprise owner to assure the honest performance of money-handlers in the organization; featherbedding work rules on nineteenth-century railroads expressed the purpose of resistant workers within the railroad business organization. Each of these features reflects the interests of one or another group of participants within the organization.

Universities provide a good illustration of an organization embodying multiple purposes. We might say that the purposes of a university are to educate young people and to conduct useful research. But immediately we need to ask: whose purposes are these? The university president? The board of trustees? The alumni? The employees? The tax payers and private donors? Society at large? The answer appears to be, all and none of the above. Instead of a single overarching purpose to the university, it seems more accurate to say that multiple stakeholders have multiple goals and expectations of the university, and use their various powers to shape its characteristics in ways favorable to the various stakeholders' interests.

Moreover, even if we grant that universities have the function of disseminating and extending knowledge, the subsidiary organizations of the university have only a loose relationship to this macro-function. The processes of tenure and promotion, purchasing, selection of department chairs, governance rules, or student disciplinary procedures -- that is, the academic and business functions of the university -- are themselves the expression of past struggles between agents advocating for their interests. So we shouldn't expect that these subordinate arrangements somehow fit together in a way that is optimal for delivering the primary function of the university. Rather, we might say that a university is a complex of procedures and activities that bear some relationship to education, but that reflect differing and sometimes antagonistic histories of composition.

This discussion underlines several important ideas about social entities: plasticity (institutions are adjusted and shaped by stakeholders), contingency and path-dependence (the particular features of the institution today are the result of choices made in a prior generation), heterogeneity (institutions should be expected to proliferate and differentiate over time; different universities are likely to have significantly different internal procedures); and agent-centered explanations (institutions take shape through the deliberate actions of the agents who populate them).
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:41PM (-04:00)

Is publicity an important source of power?

Friday, June 06, 2008



What is publicity in the sense intended here? It is shared public knowledge of a given state of affairs. It stands in contrast to secrecy and deception, and it is cognate to transparency. Public knowledge is shared knowledge. And philosophers such as Rawls and Habermas have given great moral importance to this circumstance of publicity within their conceptions of a good democratic society. The Internet, with its ubiquitous voices and constant growth, is a particularly salient embodiment of the idea of publicity. But is publicity a resource of power and influence for ordinary people?

I begin with a simple observation: Powerful agencies in global society pursue their interests using the many forms of power available to them. Corporations, states, and powerful individuals exercise various kinds of power over ordinary people and groups. Coercion, deception, concealment, and intimidation rest in the portfolio of the powerful. What forms of self-defense are available to ordinary people against the misuse of power through coercion, intimidation, or the corruption of other wielders of power?

Amartya Sen's answer to a part of this question is a famous one. He poses the question, why did major famine occur in post-Revolution China but not in post-Independence India? And his answer is, the existence of electoral institutions and a free press in India but not in China. The publicity of an emerging famine gave the Congress Party in India a major incentive to take steps that would prevent full-blown famine conditions. By contrast, the opacity of China and the non-accountable power of the Communist Party permitted the famine of the Great Leap Forward to continue through two harvest seasons and to accumulate to 20 to 30 million excess deaths. Publicity and public accountability of government played a decisive role in the different experiences, according to Sen and his co-author, Jean Drèze (Hunger and Public Action).

So, in suitable political circumstances, a free press involving independent investigative journalists can be a check on power, both in the hands of the state and for non-state actors. (Several earlier posts comment on the limits of this mechanism in authoritarian states; see entries under the label repression.)

What about the web and the blogosphere? Can these decentralized and non-official forms of publicity serve as an effective check on the abuse of power by the powerful?

There are several reasons for thinking they can, but there are also several countervailing factors. On the positive side, the web provides a broad and diffuse platform through which people with concerns or grievances can express their ideas and observations. Web pages and blogs provide everyone with a platform from which to make a case and present evidence. We can all be investigative journalists; we can all speak truth to power. And thanks to the power of search engines, these voices aren't doomed to the oblivion of cacaphony. People concerned about a particular issue can find each other and pool information. And they can coordinate their actions into organized collective action.

Whistle-blowers can publish their knowledge on the web -- often behind a screen of anonymity that protects them from retaliation.

But we have to ask this question: to what extent does public knowledge of an abuse lead to effective actions or processes that remedy the abuse? What social mechanisms transform public knowledge into power? Sen's argument about famine identifies one such mechanism: voters care about famine, and parties or candidates who are known to be ineffective in response to famine will be unsuccessful at the polls. So public opinion, energized by knowledge of disturbing facts, can lead to action by elected officials. But this mechanism isn't available in all social settings or for all forms of bad behavior by powerful agencies, for several reasons. First, some forms of bad behavior by the powerful are largely outside the control of democratic processes -- for example, business practices. Second, there are recognized strategies of "spin control" that allow bad actors to obscure their actions from public view. Finally, it is all too often that it is difficult to capture enough public attention to an abuse to gather a significant political force. (Think about how relatively ineffective public knowledge and revulsion about the violence in Darfur has been; and think about how little effect public knowledge of ineptitude and racial bias in governmental responses to Hurricane Katrina had on the actual policies and remedies that have been offered. The public knows quite a bit about both situations; but this knowledge hasn't actually changed very much.)

Consider a hypothetical example. Suppose the XYZ mining company is developing a major gold mine in an underdeveloped part of the Amazon. And suppose that its practices of land acquisition, environmental effects, and labor relations are in fact highly abusive, coercive, and destructive. (Here's a summary of a report documenting just this sort of behavior in Guyana.) For example, suppose the company has hired a private security company to evict local farmers, and evictions have taken place through the use of a significant amount of coercion; and suppose that the operations of the mine are creating significant and permanent environmental destruction. Now suppose, finally, that travelers and reporters have unearthed some of the details of these bad behaviors. How can that information be used to compel the company to improve its practices, or to lead to some form of punishment for the company that might deter similar practices in the future?

It would appear that there are only a few avenues of influence that exist. First, reporting the behavior to the national government that has jurisdiction might result in enforcement of national regulations about labor and environmental practices. Second, widespread global exposure of the practices might prove to be sufficiently embarrassing for the XYZ company that it has an incentive to reform its practices. And third, widespread exposure of the practices to potential customers of the XYZ company might lead these customers to purchase their gold from a competitor.

It is apparent that all of these remedies are very weak. National governments often lack either the will or the capacity to enforce regulations -- even when they exist. Multinational corporations have thick skins, and public embarrassment may be a relatively small price to pay for profitable practices. And they have deep pockets when it comes to communicating their side to the story. And influencing consumers using this kind of information is possible but limited. The effort to discourage consumers from buying "conflict diamonds" falls in this category, and in the case of diamonds it may be moderately effective. But it is not likely to affect the purchasing behavior of anonymous companies buying raw materials whose business interests are defined by price, reliability, and quality.

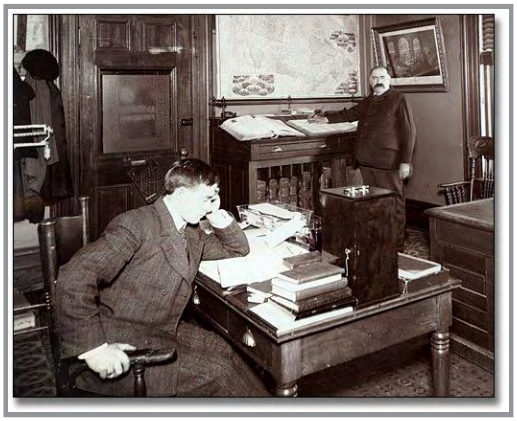
So it seems that two things are true: first, that the internet has created a channel for the gathering and sharing of information that greatly increases the likelihood that bad behavior by powerful actors will be noted in some detail; and second, that this degree of publicity is only weakly to moderately effective in discouraging or punishing bad behavior by powerful actors. So publicity is a resource for the powerless; but it is a resource with fairly limited effects.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:25PM (-04:00)

The professions as an object of study

Sunday, June 08, 2008



Several gifted sociologists over the past thirty years have made innovative contributions to the study of the "sociology of professions." Most recent among these is Andrew Abbott, whose book, The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor, is a superlative contribution to sociological theory formation. Abbott has also given attention to one profession in particular, university faculty, in two other interesting books, Chaos of Disciplines and Department and Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred. Earlier contributions to the study of professions include books by Mayer Zald, including Occupations and organizations in American society: The organization-dominated man?, The correctional institution for juvenile offenders: An analysis of organizational "character", and his first book, YMCA in Atlanta: Environment and adaptation. (As the titles indicate, Zald's interests cross over between professions and organizations; but the two are plainly linked.)



Examples of professions that are considered by Abbott and Zald include psychiatrists, social workers, accountants, physicians, professors, and pharmacists. And I suppose we might extend the list quite a bit, to include journalists, lawyers, real estate agents, university presidents, property assessors, architects, clergy, and engineers. But what about more borderline examples: skilled auto mechanics, sculptors, acupuncturists, necromancers, landscapers, and tarot card readers? And how about corporate executives, bankers, skilled pickpockets, and pirates? We know what a professional opera singer is: it is a person who can earn her living in this career. But is an opera singer a "professional" in the relevant sense? What is a "professional", anyway? What are the relationships among profession, occupation, skill, expertise, income, work, prestige, and credential? And how is this a sociological question?

As the examples suggest, there are several dimensions of qualification that we might intuitively consider to define the concept of "professional". Is it a person who earns

his/her living by exercising a skill or talent? Is it a person who has had formal training in a high-prestige type of work? Is it a person who is credentialed by a recognized credentialing agency? Is it a person who is tagged with the social label "professional" by other people in his/her society? Or is it a person who is a member of an organization of people doing the same kind of work?

We might suppose that the concept of "professional" is an overlap concept that involves the intersection of skill, knowledge, credential, association, and prestige -- with the implication that there are members of society who have several of these features but not others, and are therefore not regarded as "professionals".

Notice that these are all conceptual questions; they have to do with how we choose to define a certain category of social action and actor. Here we have quite a bit of choice -- though we want our definition of "professional" to have some relationship to ordinary usage. This brings the idea of the social construction of social categories into play; for example, does it make sense to imagine that "bare-foot doctors" constituted a profession in revolutionary China, given the strong ideology of egalitarianism that was present? Presumably bare-foot doctors were regarded as "workers", not professionals.

Once we have clarified the concept -- that is, once we have delineated the domain of social behavior and action that falls under the concept of "the professions" -- we can then do specific empirical work. The empirical work falls in many areas, and much of it depends on detailed studies of historical cases. We can examine the training and schooling that is customarily associated with the profession of pharmacy or accounting at a particular point in time; we can trace out the multiple professional organizations and associations that existed for pharmacists or accountants in the 1920s; we can examine in detail the processes involved in accreditation and credentialing for the profession at a certain time; and we can observe the rising and falling fortunes of the professions over time, as they compete for space in the ecology of an existing social system. (Abbott gives a lot of attention, for example, to the struggle between social workers and psychiatrists over the right to treat mentally ill patients.)

The topic of training regimes and professional associations is particularly accessible to empirical study; the sociologist can dig into archives and discover quite a bit of concrete detail about the ways in which accountants or physicians were trained in 1920 and the ways in which they were credentialed by the relevant professional organizations. They can consider the processes by which a segment of the skilled work force becomes "professionalized." And they can consider in detail the lobbying campaigns and public relations efforts conducted by professional organizations to retain certain skilled performances exclusively for their members. (This is the jurisdictional question that is central in many studies of the professions.)

Abbott's conceptual approach is signaled by the subtitle of his book: "the division of expert labor." He highlights abstract knowledge as the prime criterion of an area of skilled work constituting a profession: "For abstraction is the quality that sets interprofessional competition apart from competition among occupations in general. Any occupation can obtain licensure (e.g., beauticians) or develop ethics code (e.g., real estate). But only a knowledge system governed by abstractions can redefine its problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems--as medicine has recently seized alcoholism, mental illness, hyperactivity in children, obesity, and numerous other things. Abstraction enables survival in the competitive system of professions" (8-9). Expertise is an expression of abstract knowledge; and the possession of knowledge-based expertise

is the result of formal training and the foundation of licensure.

For Abbott, then, the sociology of the professions needs to focus on the systems through which the relevant forms of abstract knowledge are created; the educational systems through which pre-professionals acquire this knowledge; and the professional associations that oversee both education and current practice through their power of licensure. These associations turn out to be potent social actors: through their leadership at a given point in time, they take actions designed to improve the profession and improve the social and economic environment for the profession in the future. (This is the competitive part of the story mentioned above.)

The other central sociological question that comes up in Abbott's treatment is the organizational one: how are the organizations of society arranged in such a way as to incorporate the specialized knowledge of the professions? This takes us into consideration of hospitals, law firms, banks, and universities, and the intricate pathways of development through which each of these organizational forms have developed in the past century. (This is also a point of contact with Zald's careful work on organizations such as the YMCA and social-service organizations.)

I've dwelled on this precinct of sociology because it is one of the areas of sociological research that involves a fascinating mix of objective, case-based research and somewhat ephemeral social entities -- the profession of accountancy, the profession of medicine. These are social "things" in some sense -- but they are highly abstract entities involving a constant change of personnel, standards, curricula, bodies of knowledge and expertise, and zones of jurisdiction. As such, the study of professions seems to well illustrate a point that seems fundamental to me: that we need to understand the social world as a plastic, heterogeneous, and shifting range of activities, rather than as an ensemble of fixed social structures or entities. The beauty of Abbott's work is his ability to give some definition to a reality that he fully recognizes to be in flux.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:24PM (-04:00)

Trust and corruption

Monday, June 09, 2008



The recent collapse of a major skyscraper crane in New York City last month led to a surprising result: the arrest of the city's chief crane inspector on charges of bribery. (See the New York Times story here.) (The story indicates that the facts surrounding the charges are unrelated to this particular crane collapse.) Several weeks earlier, a Congressional committee heard testimony from three F.A.A. inspectors to the effect that the agency had permitted Southwest Airlines to fly uninspected planes (story), and some attributed this lapse to too cozy a relationship between the F.A.A. and the airline industry:

The F.A.A.'s watchdog role, to many Democrats in Congress who now oversee airline regulators, grew toothless. "We had drifted a little bit too much toward the over-closeness and coziness between regulator and regulated," said H. Clayton Foushee Jr., a former F.A.A. official

who led a recent inquiry by Mr. Oberstar's committee. (story)

The basic systems of a complex society depend upon the good-faith commitment of providers to give top priority to safety, health, and quality, but they also depend upon regulation, inspection, and certification. Caveat emptor doesn't work when it comes to airline travel or working in a skyscraper; we simply have to trust that the airliner or the building is built and maintained to a high level of safety standards. The food we eat, the restaurants we patronize, the airlines and railroads we travel on, and the buildings we live and work in (and send our children to) provide complex products for our use that we can't independently evaluate. Instead, we are obliged to trust the providers -- the builders, the airline companies and their pilots and mechanics, the restaurant operators -- and the regulatory and inspection regimes that are intended to provide an assurance of quality, safety, and health.

And yet there are two imperatives that work against public health and safety in most modern societies: the private incentive that the provider has to cut corners, and the perennial temptation of corruption that is inherent within a regulatory process. On the providers' side, there is a constant business incentive to lower costs by substituting inferior ingredients or materials, to tolerate less-than-sanitary conditions in the back-of-restaurant areas, or to skimp on necessary maintenance of inherently dangerous systems. And on the regulatory side, there is the omnipresent possibility of collusion between inspectors and providers. Inspectors have it in their power to impose costs or savings on providers; so the provider has an economic interest in making payments to inspectors to save themselves these costs. (See Robert Klitgaard's fascinating book, Controlling Corruption, for a political scientist's analysis of this problem.)

In a purely laissez-faire environment we would expect there to be recurring instances of health and safety disasters in food production, building construction, transportation, and the healthcare system; this seems to be the logical result of a purely cost- and profit-driven system of production. (This seems to be what lies at the heart of the Chinese pet food and toy product scandals of several months ago, and it was at the heart of the food industries chronicled by Upton Sinclair a century ago in this country.)

But an inadequate system of regulation and enforcement seems equally likely to lead to health and safety crises for society, if inspection regimes are inadequate or if inspectors are corrupt. The two stories about inspection mentioned above point to different ways in which a regulatory system can go wrong: individual inspectors can be corrupted, or honest inspectors can be improperly managed by their regulatory organization. And, of course, there is a third possibility as well: the regulatory system may be fully honest and well-managed but wholly insufficient to the task presented to it in terms of the resources and personnel devoted to the regulatory task.

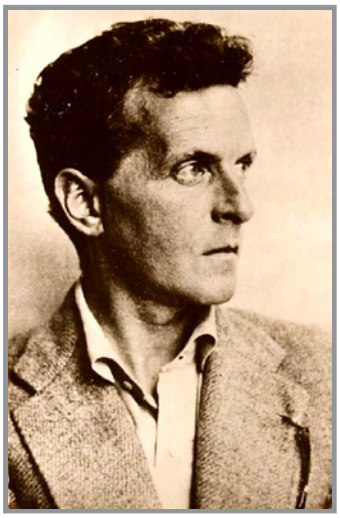
These two tendencies appear to be resulting in major social problems in China today. There is little confidence in the Chinese public in building standards in even the major civil engineering projects that the country has undertaken in the past ten years (CNN story, BBC story), there is widespread concern about corruption in many aspects of ordinary life, and there is growing concern among consumers about the safety of the system of food production, public water sources, and pharmaceuticals (story). (The anger and anguish expressed by parents whose children were lost in collapsed schools in Sichuan appear to derive from these kinds of mistrust.) So one of China's major challenges for the coming years is to create credible, effective, and trusted regulatory regimes for the areas of public life that most directly affect health and safety.

But the stories mentioned above don't have to do with China, or India, or Brazil; they have to do with the United States. We have lived through a period of determined deregulation since 1980, and have been subjected to a political ideology that minimized and demeaned the role of government in protecting the health and safety of the public -- in banking no less than air safety. It seems very pressing for us now to ask ourselves: how effective are the systems of regulation and inspection that we have in our key industries -- food, pharmaceuticals, hospitals, transportation, and construction? How much confidence can we have in the basis health and safety features of these fundamental social goods? And what sorts of institutional reforms do we need to undertake?

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:50PM (-04:00)

Wittgenstein and "understanding society"

Tuesday, June 10, 2008



Does Wittgenstein's philosophy in the Philosophical Investigations have anything distinctive to add to better ways of understanding society? And is there anything in Wittgenstein's philosophy that contributes to the philosophy of social science? (These are different questions, even though they seem to be closely related; the first question is conceptual or ontological, whereas the second is epistemological and methodological.)

There are some reasons for expecting that Wittgenstein's later writings are in fact relevant to non-routinized thinking about the social world -- perhaps in ways that have not been highlighted in existing discussions of his thought. For example -- his understanding of language as a deeply social product; his criticism of naive ideas about "meaning" in language; his idea of language games; his critical discussions of "following a rule"; his thoughts about the interpretation of behavior; his idea of a set of social practices setting a context for action and meaning; his notion that learning a language is learning a way of life; ... -- all these threads have some suggestive implications for how to think about social behavior and the social world.

These questions have been raised before, of course; most famously, by Peter Winch in The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy. Winch's main line is to insist on an anti-positivist grounding for social "science", and to offer a determined critique of the idea that the social sciences should resemble the natural sciences. Instead, Winch argues that the social sciences should model themselves on philosophy. He pays a great deal of attention to the question of defining action and rationality, and in "Understanding a Primitive Society" (American Philosophical Quarterly 1964), he brings in the anthropological descriptions of Evans-Pritchard and other anthropologists who emphasize the radical differences that apparently exist across conceptual systems (magic, rationality, ...). This is probably the most celebrated effort to link Wittgenstein's thought to the social sciences, but I'm not sure it adds much to the conversation today.

But another very interesting effort that takes off from Wittgenstein's philosophy and tries to draw out some implications for social philosophy is Hanna Pitkin's Wittgenstein and

Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought. This is a truly valuable and original book, and well worth working through. Pitkin's central goal is to make a contribution to the foundations of political theory by thinking carefully about Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and behavior. (A lot of her work here is inspired by Stanley Cavell's readings of the Investigations.) Here is how she begins:

It is by no means obvious that someone interested in politics and society needs to concern himself with philosophy; nor that, in particular, he has anything to learn from an obscure, misanthropic, enigmatic philosopher like Ludwig Wittgenstein, who never wrote about such topics at all. Wittgenstein's interests were philosophy itself, language, and the relationship between the two. Yet his investigations can yield insights of the most fundamental significance for social science or political theory.... What he has to offer is something like a new perspective, a new way of seeing what has always been visible, what has gone unnoticed precisely because of its familiarity. (1)

This book is genuinely original, and Pitkin makes a whole series of connections between Wittgenstein's thought and some difficult problems in the definition of political theory.

So there are some existing efforts to connect Wittgenstein's thought to the challenge of understanding society. But let's ask the question anew: is there anything in Wittgenstein's philosophy that is a fertile source of ideas for analyzing, conceptualizing, imagining, and explaining society?

I don't think that Wittgenstein has much to offer on the subject of the methodology or epistemology of social knowledge -- how we acquire and justify beliefs about society. Wittgenstein wasn't much interested in the question of empirical justification of belief, and I don't think he was especially receptive to the effort to create a rigorous philosophy of science that was the primary task of Vienna Circle philosophy. If anything, this task lines up better with Wittgenstein's thinking in Tractatus Logico Philosophicus, but it doesn't resonate with the Investigations.

But I'm more intrigued by the notion that there may be pervasive metaphors and mental frameworks in Wittgenstein's writings that offer a different way of thinking about social behavior and social interaction. That is, there may be a fragmentary social ontology in Wittgenstein's thought that pushes new thinking. So a question worth posing is this: does Wittgenstein provide any new insights about how to characterize or understand social world? And I'm inclined to think that he does -- for example, in the form of his ideas about rule-following, social practices, family-resemblance concepts, and understanding other minds.

Perhaps most immediate contribution is Wittgenstein's emphasis on social practices and his umbrella concept of "forms of life" as a totality of practices, regularities, bodily circumstances, and rules within which we behave. Pitkin describes the concept of "forms of life" this way:

That notion is never explicitly defined, and we should not try to force more precision from it than its rich suggestiveness will bear. but its general significance is clear enough: human life as we live and observe it is not just a random, continuous flow, but displays recurrent patterns, regularities, characteristic ways of doing and being, of feeling and acting, of speaking and interacting. Because they are patterns, regularities, configurations, Wittgenstein calls them forms; and because they are patterns in the fabric of human existence and activity on earth, he calls them forms of life. The idea is clearly

related to the idea of a language game, and more generally to Wittgenstein's action-oriented view of language. "The speaking of language, he says, "is part of an activity, or of a form of life." (132)

To me, anyway, this is an important idea; it provides a different way of locating individuals and their subjectivity within a broader social, inter-subjective context. Neither individual nor collectivity is privileged; instead, we have a conception of a mutual "society-making" through the intentional and oriented actions and thoughts of multiple social beings. We can ask whether this concept bears any relation to the idea of a mentalité (discussed in a previous posting). And we can ask -- does Wittgenstein imagine one form of life or many, corresponding to the circumstances of different historical and cultural settings. Answering this question goes a way towards deciding whether we need a single social science or multiple ethnographies.

Another line of thought is also helpful: Wittgenstein's deep critique of the search for philosophically simple theories (of meanings, concepts, or theories); and in place of logically simple analysis, his suggestion of social life as an overlapping set of practices and uses with no underlying essence. This is the most obvious contrast between the Tractatus and the Investigations; the former tries to give a single, logically austere definition of language and meaning; whereas the latter understands language more along the lines of an old, medieval city, with criss-crossing layers and paths -- a messy, complex, and somewhat contradictory reality. (Pitkin suggests this in highlighting the contrast between Roman-law and common-law systems; the former proceed on the basis of logically articulated principles, and the latter on the basis of overlapping and sometimes contradictory precedents; 50.)

There are probably another half-dozen threads and metaphors that could be highlighted as well.

So there probably are new insights to be gained from Wittgenstein about society. It is worthwhile to do a careful re-reading of the Investigations with a fresh set of eyes: what is the framework of thought in terms of which Wittgenstein thinks about social relations, social interpretation, and social action? How can some of these ideas give us some new insights into the task of framing an adequate social science? And how would some central tenets of current philosophy of social science look when treated from the point of view of the Investigations?

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:52PM (-04:00)

Chuck Tilly and China

Thursday, June 12, 2008

Chuck Tilly's influence extended to many areas of world history. Visit this posting on TheChinaBeat for some reflections on Chuck's influence on the China field.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:22AM (-04:00)



Components of positivism

Thursday, June 12, 2008

Many of us agree that "positivist" social science isn't a good idea. But what is encompassed by "positivism" in this setting?

First, the favorable part of the story: positivism puts forward two ideas about conceptual clarity and empirical rigor that surely need to be a part of any intellectually sound effort to understand society, or to contribute to social science. Our concepts need to make sense (by some criterion of sense-making), and our assertions need to be supportable by some combination of empirical evidence and logical inference. These amount simply to the requirement that science should be rationally articulated and rationally justified. These are aspects of the epistemology of science advanced by the progenitors of positivism -- for example, Mill, Comte, the Vienna Circle, Schlick, Carnap, Hempel -- that I, for one, do accept. And if this were the full extent of positivism, then it would be hard to be anti-positivist.

But positivist social science makes several additional assumptions about social knowledge that are untenable, in my view.

First is naturalism -- the idea that the social and behavioral sciences should have the same structure and logical characteristics as the natural sciences. Chemistry and physics -- especially the classical versions of these sciences -- have a unified hypothetico-deductive structure; they discover laws of nature; and they derive the observable features of the domains of phenomena they encompass. Naturalism postulates, therefore, that sociology, economics, or psychology should have the same logical structure, because that is what "science" requires. John Stuart Mill clearly presupposed this assumption in his discussion of the "moral sciences."

Second, relatedly, is the unity of science -- the idea that ultimately all scientific theories should be subsumable under one "most fundamental" master theory. This assumption brings with it the idea of reductionism; higher-level sciences (psychology) should be reducible to lower-level sciences (neurophysiology). And "reducible" means "derivable from given suitable bridge definitions and laws". (This topic was central for the Vienna Circle logical positivists.)

Third is an assumption about methodology, to the effect that measurement and quantification are essential aspects of scientific knowledge. So quantitative statements

and theories are preferable to qualitative or descriptive statements; and the goal of a social science should be to discover a set of variables within the domain of investigation that can be observed, measured, and counted. This is a different aspect of the unity-of-science doctrine: the idea that there should be one privileged method of discovery and presentation for the social sciences. Where does this assumption come from? In part, it seems to derive from the physics-envy associated with naturalism; but perhaps there is also a Platonic dimension as well -- a preference for mathematics over descriptive or interpretive language.

Fourth is an assumption about explanation, regularities, and laws. The assumption here is that explanation requires the discovery of law-like generalizations about the domain of phenomena encompassed by the scientific field. This assumption has two components: the idea that a well-defined domain of investigation must somehow embody a set of regularities, perhaps disguised by the noise; and second, that explanations within the domain of individual events or patterns of events must take the form of a derivation of the explanandum from the general laws mentioned in the explanans. Carl Hempel and J.S. Mill agree about this premise.

Fifth is an assumption about causation -- that causation is a feature of statistical relationships among variables rather than a feature involving causal necessity or causal mechanisms. This is a Humean approach to causation, and it leads positivist social scientists to restrict their attention to causal regularities rather than looking for real causal mechanisms.

Finally, there is a sixth premise that has also created debate but seems less intrusive to the practice of innovative social science -- the insistence on the fact-value distinction. "Positive" science has to do with the discovery of facts, whereas ethics or policy stidies have to do with values.

Do these assumptions necessarily travel together? Not necessarily, though there are some internal logical connections among them that make it more difficult to imagine them standing completely independently. But it appears to be a characteristic of the observed sociology of science for an important stream of twentieth-century social science research, that these features are clustered together. And many critics argue that these assumptions have created blinders for social-science researchers, limiting their originality in theories, concepts, and explanations of the social world.

Critics of positivist social science ask us to consider a broader space of possibilities for research and theory formation in the social sciences. Taking the premise of scientific rationality as a given, what would a philosophy of social science look like that questioned the other premises on this list? What is a "post-positivist realism" for the social sciences?

- It is realist about causation; it affirms the scientific validity of seeking for real social mechanisms.
- It advocates for a conception of scientific explanation that hinges on the discovery of real causal connections among features of the social world.
- It is pluralistic about method; it acknowledges that there are multiple rationally supportable methods of inquiry in the social sciences, and multiple forms that social-science knowledge can take.
- It is even-handed among quantitative, qualitative, comparative, and narrative approaches to social inquiry and social explanation.
- It is anti-reductionist and anti-naturalistic: it does not presuppose that various areas of the social sciences should be reducible to some other, more fundamental scientific

theory; and it does not presuppose that the social sciences should resemble the natural sciences.

- And, finally, it is fully committed to the positive features of rationality that were mentioned above: the scientific virtues of conceptual clarity and empirical-rational justification for scientific beliefs.

This set of alternatives opens up the space of the social sciences quite dramatically; it permits a wide and pluralistic range of inquiries to proceed, without the requirement of theoretical or methodological unity. And this frees researchers to arrive at accounts of their domains of research that are well suited to the particulars of these domains.

In a later posting I will come back to an important contribution to this debate, George Steinmetz's The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:26PM (-04:00)

Cognizing society

Monday, June 16, 2008



"Society" is a large abstract whole -- more abstract, really, than "nature". We as social beings perceive very little of this whole directly, though we do perceive fairly directly many local social facts, social interactions, and social relations. We are often astute readers of the social situations around us -- what our students may be expressing with their ironic looks during a lecture, what the car mechanic may be thinking about the clueless car owner with bad brakes, or what is likely to happen when it is announced that 15 percent of employees will be laid off in our company. So we have lots of social knowledge. But our knowledge and experience of "society" are highly partial and local. Many aspects of the social world are invisible to me as a specific, situated person -- because they are remote from me spatially (I don't know how farmers behave with each other in the Oklahoma Panhandle), because they are outside my realm culturally or socially (I don't know how homeless people cope with illness), and possibly because they do not fit easily into the categories of understanding that I bring to my perceptions. (If I have not been exposed to abusive behavior by police in impoverished neighborhoods, I may not perceive the threatening body language of a group of police officers as they move through a crowded neighborhood.)

This is for me a large part of the fascination of the topics raised in this blog, UnderstandingSociety. Most postings here are concerned with how we perceive social affairs; how we organize these perceptions into representations of larger social constructs; and how we attempt to make sense of what we perceive and organize -- that is, how we understand the social world that we inhabit. And these are problems for observers at every level -- social science experts, social policy designers, and ordinary people.

Much of this description has as much to do with ordinary people making sense of their

social world as with social scientists constructing complex theories and explanations of the social world. But this is appropriate, because I don't think there is a difference in kind between the two kinds of social cognition. Or rather, there is a difference between ordinary perception of society and social science; but it is a difference of degree of rigor about evidence and hypothesis rather than a difference in the nature of the representations and inferences that either ordinary people or scientists arrive at.

(Whereas one might make a case for holding that everyday "physics" is different in principle from mathematical and theoretical physics. Folk social knowledge is closer to official social science than folk knowledge of nature is to physics.)

So what are some of the aspects of social life that people observe directly? Take some of the fundamentals: family relations, race relations, or economic relations. Marie, a maid in a luxury hotel, has a perspective of several of these social categories. She has a very direct perspective on the employment relation -- she is poorly paid, her supervisors are rough and disrespectful, and maybe she is subjected to a degree of sexual harassment on the job as well. (The nature of experience at this level of society is one of the interesting things we can learn from Barbara Ehrenreich's book, Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America). Marie also has an interesting perspective on class relations in our society -- the comings and goings of the affluent, some of their values, how they dress, and the ways that they treat people outside their circles. Further, since the imagined Marie is Haitian, she also has a perspective on race, culture, and ethnicity in America. And, if she is a thoughtful observer, she may well have organized these observations into some "theories" or mental frameworks about how capitalism works, how racial discrimination works, how class and status serve to structure interpersonal relations in places like restaurants or hotels, and what America is like. In other words, this maid is an active observer and interpreter of social structures, social behaviors, and social relations.

What is the epistemic status of Marie's theories? We've already noticed two important features: first, her theories are derived from her own experience and observations; and second, they are partial and perspective-bound. The first point provides a basis for thinking that these theories are empirically grounded and worthy of attention. And the second point pretty much assures that they aren't completely "true". What looks like racial discrimination or condescension in the behavior of some of the guests may be something more complicated. Race relations in a factory may have a different feel and structure than race relations in a hotel. And it may be that Marie's theories about what is happening are pretty accurate concerning her local workplace, but her theories about how and why this is happening may be wildly wrong.

In other words, Marie's representations, based on observation and experience, are an important input into a somewhat more comprehensive sociology of work, race and class. The more comprehensive treatment ought to consider the experiences and cognitions on these subjects of a wide range of people -- architects, taxi drivers, engineers, transit workers, and public school teachers, for example. And it ought to consider some of the mechanisms and structures through which these lived experiences are generated and inter-connected -- the mechanisms of race, the structures of urban poverty, or the dynamics of discrimination in the professional workplace, for example.

One way of taking these observations in the direction of constructing a more complete effort at "cognizing" society is perhaps not quite right, but it is intriguing. It is the idea that one component of a "sociology of the present" might be an enormous "wiki" of lived

experience, in which participants throughout society and at every level offer their perspectives on the nature of the social relations in which they operate and their hypotheses about how these connect to more distant social institutions. (The realist novels of Emile Zola -- The Fortune of the Rougons and dozens of other novels in a chronological series about this hypothetical family -- sound a bit like this in their nuanced depiction of the experiences of people of all classes in 19th century France.) What this comprehensive wiki of social life would not provide, is an organized set of ideas about social causation and structure -- about why and how the patterns that are revealed come about.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:17PM (-04:00)

Education choices and personal futures

Tuesday, June 17, 2008



Why do people pursue education -- whether through secondary school or through post-secondary school?

It seems like a very simple question with an obvious answer: education adds to one's skills and productivity; these enhanced skills make one more attractive in the employment market; and therefore, pursuing education is a rational investment in future lifetime earnings. (The economic impact of post-secondary education has been estimated to be at least one million dollars in additional earnings for the baccalaureate graduate over the high school graduate in the United States.) In other words, the simple answer appears to be that people make rational decisions about their investments in training and education, and they see the financial advantage that can be expected by having completed a degree program. More education is a valuable investment in future income, security, and status.

Caption: % of high school graduates aged 25-29 who have received bachelor's degree
Source: National Center for Educational Statistics (link)

However, this answer stimulates quite a few difficult questions. Most fundamentally -- how are we to make sense of the behavior of the people who do not make this choice? The chart posted above indicates that in the United States, less than 30% of 25-29 year-olds have completed a four-year college or university degree -- and this percentage has only risen from 22% to 26% from 1971 to 1995. Moreover, this statistic does not include high school dropouts. So if more education is so plainly a rational investment, why is there such a low participation rate in the United States? Why do so many teenagers drop out of high school? (A recent study estimates that the drop-out rate in the Detroit public schools exceeds 50%, with some estimates going as high as 78%.) Why do many high school graduates choose not to apply to colleges or universities? (Only 36% of adults between 18-24 in the United States are enrolled in college or graduate school; Institute for Higher Education Policy report.) And why do under-educated but qualified young adults choose not to return to colleges or universities to complete their degrees? (In southeast Michigan, for example, there are more than 150,000 young adults between 25-34 who have completed some college courses but have not earned a degree.) So what

are we to make of this evidence of dropping out, non-attending, and non-continuing?

Here are a few answers that have been proposed: some people lack the ability (or believe so) to complete their educations; some people lack the discipline to work hard today for a benefit that will only materialize in the distant future; some people lack the confidence that the normal opportunities that await university graduates will be available for them (because of racial discrimination or recession, for example); some people simply don't think clearly about their current choices -- they don't plan well for the future; and, perhaps, some people are not strongly motivated by material incentives (income, career advancement).

Most of these explanations make sense of the behavior by re-describing the terms of the choice -- thereby making the observed behavior "rational in the circumstances"; or they explain the behavior by referring to "failures of rationality" -- weakness of the will, miscalculation, indifference to future benefits. (Jon Elster's work has often focused on these sorts of failures; Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality.) But these explanations don't seem sufficient; they appear to dissolve the problem rather than explain it.

A second type of explanation of these social behaviors is one based on analysis of structural barriers to educational completion: poor schooling at earlier levels, racial or ethnic discrimination in the provision of educational opportunities, or economic obstacles to continuing education (tuition and the need to work fulltime), for example. To these structural barriers some social psychologists have added the factor of discouragement created in young people by ethnic, racial, or gendered stereotypes about performance. An important example here is found in Claude Steele's important work on "stereotype threat" and the major effects on performance that can be documented as deriving from stereotyped expectations. (Steele describes some of his hypotheses and findings in this Frontline interview.)

To these rational and structural factors, though, it seems relevant to ask whether there are also cultural expectations and community values that underlie the choices made by young people in various communities concerning education. There is the idea, for example, that midwestern manufacturing regions had developed a culture of complacency about education created by the availability of well-paid manufacturing jobs in the 1950s-70s. The easy availability of manufacturing work that required only a high school education led families to believe that their children didn't need good educations in order to succeed in the world of work they would be entering. This set of expectations, it is argued, led to a familial attitude that guided young people towards choices that gave little importance to advanced education -- and, for that matter, little attention to the importance of strong performance in K-12 schooling -- a kind of "Beach Boys" mentality (cars, parties, fun). It would be interesting to know what attitudes towards higher education are found in Appalachian mining communities -- is a college education valued by most families as a key ingredient of a good future, or is college education regarded as something foreign and unnecessary? And it seems that there is an opportunity for some good anthropological research on the Latino communities of the United States to help explain why high school completion rates and college attendance are lower than in other struggling communities in the United States.

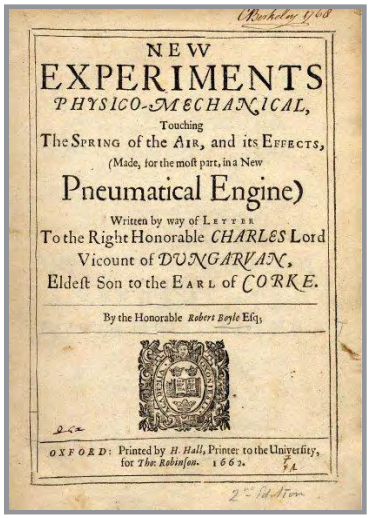
So the question here is an important one: are there cultural values that work against placing a high value on educational attainment? What steps can be taken to mitigate these forces? And how do cultural, structural, and familial factors interact to give rise to

low educational aspirations for a sizable percentage of the American youth cohort?

(I would like to see comparable statistics for Germany, France, and Australia. Any good sources out there?)
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:00PM (-04:00)

Quasi-experimental data?

Thursday, June 19, 2008


NEW
EXPERIMENTS
PHYSICO-MECHANICAL,
Touching
The SPRING of the AIR, and its EFFECTS,
(Made, for the most part, in a New
Pneumatical Engine)
Written by way of LETTER
To the Right Honorable CHARLES Lord
Vicount of DUNGARVAN,
Eldest Son to the EARL of CORKE.
By the Honorable Robert Boyle Esq;
OXFORD: Printed by H. Hall, Printer to the University,
for Tho. Robinson. 1662.

Stan Lieberson is one of a group of sociologists for whom I have great respect when it comes to intelligent thinking about social science methodology. His 1985 book, Making It Count: The Improvement of Social Research and Theory, is a good example of some of this thinking about the foundations of social science knowledge, and I also admire A Matter of Taste: How Names, Fashions, and Culture Change in the way it offers a genuinely novel topic and method of approach.

Lieberson urges us to consider "a different way of thinking about the rigorous study of society implied by the phrase 'science of society'" instead of simply assuming that social science should resemble natural science (3-4). His particular object of criticism in this book is the tendency of quantitative social scientists to use the logic of experiments to characterize the data they study.

An experiment is an attempt to measure the causal effects of one factor X on another factor Z by isolating a domain of phenomena -- holding constant all other causal factors -- and systematically varying one causal factor to observe the effect this factor has on an outcome of interest. The basic assumption is that an outcome is the joint effect of a set of (as yet unknown) causal conditions:

C1 & C2 & ... & Cn cause Z,

where we do not yet know the contents of the list Ci. We consider the hypothesis that Cm is one of the causes of Z. We design an experimental environment in which we are able to hold constant all the potentially relevant causal conditions we can think of (thereby holding fixed Ci), and we systematically vary the presence or absence of Cm and observe the state of the outcome Z. If Z varies appropriately with the presence or absence of Cm, we tentatively conclude that Cm is one of the causes of Z.

In cases where individual differences among samples or subjects may affect the outcome, or where the causal processes in question are probabilistic rather than deterministic, experimentation requires treating populations rather than individuals and assuring randomization of subjects across "treatment" and "no-treatment" groups. This involves selecting a number of subjects, randomly assigning them to controlled conditions in which all other potential causal factors are held constant, exposing one set of subjects to the treatment X while withholding the treatment from the other group, and measuring the outcome variable in the two groups. If there is a significant difference in the mean value of the outcome variable between the treatment group and the control group, then

we can tentatively conclude that X causes Z and perhaps estimate the magnitude of the effect. Take tomato yields per square meter (Z) as affected by fertilizer X: plants in the control group are subjected to a standard set of growing conditions, while the treatment group receives these conditions plus the measured dose of X. We then measure the quantity produced by the two plots and estimate the effect of X. The key ideas here are causal powers, random assignment, control, and single-factor treatment.

However, Lieberson insists that most social data are not collected under experimental conditions. It is normally not possible to randomly assign individuals to groups and then observe the effects of interventions. Likewise, it is not possible to systematically control the factors that are present or absent for different groups of subjects. If we want to know whether "presence of hate speech on radio broadcasts" causes "situations of ethnic conflict" to progress to "situations of ethnic violence" -- we don't have the option of identifying a treatment group and a control group of current situations of ethnic conflict, and then examine whether the treatment with "hate speech on radio broadcasts" increases the incidence of ethnic violence in the treatment group relative to the control group. And it is fallacious to reason about non-experimental data using the assumptions developed for analysis of experiments. This fallacy involves making "assumptions that appear to be matters of convenience but in reality generate analyses that are completely off the mark" (6).

Suppose we want to investigate whether being a student athlete affects academic performance in college. In order to treat this topic experimentally we would need to select a random group of newly admitted students; randomly assign one group of individuals to athletic programs and the other group to a non-athletic regime; and measure the academic performance of each individual after a period of time. Let's say that GPA is the performance measure and that we find that the athlete group has a mean GPA of 3.1 while the non-athlete group has an average of 2.8. This would be an experimental confirmation of the hypothesis that "participation in athletics improves academic performance."

However, this thought experiment demonstrates the common problem about social data: it is not possible to perform this experiment. Rather, students decide for themselves whether they want to compete in athletics, and their individual characteristics will determine whether they will succeed. Instead, we have to work with the social realities that exist; and this means identifying a group of students who have chosen to participate in athletics; comparing them with a "comparable" group of students who have chosen not to participate in athletics; and measuring the academic performance of the two groups. But here we have to confront two crucial problems: selectivity and the logic of "controlling" for extraneous factors.

Selectivity comes in when we consider that the same factors that lead a college student to participate in athletics may also influence his/her academic performance; so measuring the difference between the two groups may only measure the effects of this selective difference between membership in the groups -- not the effect of the experience of participating in athletics on academic performance. In order to correct for selectivity, the researcher may attempt to control for potentially influential differences between the two groups; so he/she may attempt to control for family factors, socio-economic status, performance in secondary school, and a set of psycho-social variables. "Controlling" in this context means selecting sub-groups within the two populations that are statistically similar with respect to the variables to be controlled for. Group A and Group B have approximately the same distribution of family characteristics, parental income, and high

school GPA; the individuals in the two groups are "substantially similar". We have "controlled" for these potentially relevant causal factors -- so any observed differences between academic performance across the two groups can be attributed to the treatment, "participation in athletics."

But Lieberson makes a critical point about this approach: there is commonly unmeasured selectivity within the control variables themselves -- crudely, students with the same family characteristics, parental income, and high school GPA who have selected athletics may nonetheless be different from those who have not selected athletics, in ways that influence academic performance. As Lieberson puts the point, "quasi-experimental research almost inevitably runs into a profound selectivity issue" (41).

There is lots more careful, rigorous analysis of social-science reasoning in the book. Lieberson crosses over between statistical methodology and philosophy of social science in a very useful way, and what is most fundamental is his insistence that we need to substantially rethink the assumptions we make in assigning causal influence on the basis of social variation.

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:59PM (-04:00)

Tributaries of the philosophy of the social sciences

Saturday, June 21, 2008



The philosophy of the social sciences is largely focused on questions about the nature of our knowledge, representation, and explanation of social phenomena. There is an ontological side to some of the questions in this field -- for example, what is the nature of social phenomena? But many of the questions are epistemological, having to do with the conditions of knowledge and representation that obtain when it comes to social facts. I think it is useful to sketch out a map that indicates the topography of some of the fundamental questions and approaches that have contributed to a better understanding of social science. And this effort will demonstrate that there is no single, coherent field that is the "philosophy of social science"; instead, there are overlapping and intertwined efforts by several traditions to arrive at better and more justified representations of social knowledge.

The fruitful ideas in this field derive from several separate tributaries, it seems to me. One important source is the group of "founders" of the social sciences who themselves thought very hard about the question of the conditions of establishing a social "science". Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, William Thomas, and George Herbert Mead all had original and insightful ideas about what a scientific study of social reality might consist in. And, in most instances, these ideas were driven by their acquaintance with the richness of social life rather than by philosophical presuppositions. So these founders

forged a philosophy of social research along the way as they constructed their models of what theory and research ought to look like in the study of the social world.

Another important source for current philosophy of social science is the tradition of empiricism that led to twentieth-century analytic philosophy of science. Here we can highlight John Stuart Mill, Moritz Schlick, Carl Hempel, and Ernest Nagel as philosophers who brought the machinery of positivist epistemology to a conception of what the social sciences ought to look like. As suggested in an earlier posting, there are profound problems with some of these ideas; but there is no doubt that they have been influential. And this influence shows up very explicitly in social science writings concerned with the logic of quantitative social research.

There is another source for contemporary philosophy of social science that has something in common with both these but is nonetheless distinct. This is the impulse that comes from rational choice theory and the idea that social patterns are the expression of individual rational choices. Mill's writings suggest this idea, and it is a very strong component of the classics defining microeconomic theory as well (Walras, Pareto, the Austrian school). The effort to bring decision theory and game theory into play in explaining concrete social developments is a manifestation of this approach -- for example, Samuel Popkin's work on peasant rebellions (The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam). What makes this framework philosophical is the implicit idea of reductionism that it offers as a strategy of explanation: high-level social facts need to be decomposed into logical compounds of lower-level facts at the level of individuals. (This is the doctrine of methodological individualism.)

The intellectual framework of "scientific realism" is also an important tributary to contemporary philosophy of social science. Against the instrumentalism associated with positivism, this approach maintains that the social or natural worlds possess an objective set of characteristics, and it is possible to know the approximate outlines of these characteristics. When brought into contact with the social sciences, realism leads us to expect that there are real social structures, conditions, and causes, and that it is one of the functions of social science to describe those real circumstances and their relationships with each other. The recent emphasis on "social-causal mechanisms" is a version of scientific realism in application to the social world -- for example, Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory.

There are two other tributaries that are important contributions but that have been less influential for analytic philosophers of social science, one deriving from Marx and the other from thinkers like Dilthey and Gadamer. The first is materialism and an emphasis on social structures, and the other is the hermeneutic tradition. The materialist tradition attempts to organize social reality around a set of structures with causal properties (modes of production, property relations, forms of technology). The hermeneutic tradition takes "social action" as the fundamental social fact, and looks at the challenge of interpreting social action as the fundamental problem in social research. Yvonne Sherratt's Continental Philosophy of Social Science is a very useful study of the influence of these traditions, and I will return to her discussion in a later posting.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:21PM (-04:00)

What causes college success?

Sunday, June 22, 2008



This sounds like a simple question. It sounds as if it is asking for us to discover a set of factors that influence the level of performance of individuals within a population when they get to colleges and universities. And we might speculate that there is a small group of potentially relevant factors: antecedent cognitive ability, attitudes, and values; location within a set of social relations that enhance or impede successful educational performance; quality of educational resources provided in K-12. We might reason that a given individual's performance is affected by his/her ability and motivation; enhancing or inhibiting circumstances; quality of educational "treatment"; and chance events or circumstances (a lucky break, an inspiring grandfather). And by examining antecedent conditions and outcomes across a large population of people, we might expect to be able to assess the degree to which various hypothesized factors in fact lead to differences in the performance of sub-populations defined by these factors. This analysis should shed light on the question, "What factors cause differences in university success?".

Sorting this out sounds like a straightforward empirical question. Consider this hypothetical study. First, identify a cohort of high school seniors -- let's say, all the seniors in 2000 in metropolitan Boston. Suppose this is 5,000 people. (1) Measure a set of features of their situation during high school: high school performance, family situation, features of the school attended, socioeconomic status, family status, racial-ethnic status. (2) Measure a set of psychological characteristics for each individual: motivation, determination, aptitude for mathematics, ... And, (3), measure college success five years following high school graduation (GPA, credit hours completed, degree attained).

Let's say that each individual is coded for ABILITY (1, 2, 3); MOTIVATION (1, 2, 3); SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (1, 2, 3); RACE (A, B, C); FAMILY STATUS (A, B); HIGH SCHOOL QUALITY (1, 2, 3); HIGH SCHOOL PERFORMANCE (1, 2, 3); and a factor representing one particular educational or curricular theory -- let's say, PEER COUNSELING (T,F). And let's say that outcomes are coded as DEGREE (NONE, ASSOCIATES, BACHELORS, MASTERS, PROFESSIONAL) and GPA (1, 2, 3).

Now follow these individuals for 10 years: What further education do they pursue? Do they complete post-secondary education? What is their performance in post-secondary education? What occupations and jobs do they get? What income do they achieve by age 30? How much unemployment have they experienced?

Finally, we will do some basic statistics on this data set: compute the incomes and schooling for various sub-categories; test for correlations between outcomes and antecedent conditions; etc. Are there differences in outcomes when we cross-tabulate by ABILITY or MOTIVATION? What about if we cross-tabulate by RACE or SES? This analysis may produce statements like these hypothetical findings:

- People who completed high school with high performance were 2.5 times as likely to complete a college degree as those with a low performance.
- People whose family income was in the top quintile were 5 times as likely to complete a college degree as those from families in the bottom quintile.
- The college completion rate for white students, Hispanic students, and African-American students were X, Y, and Z respectively.
- High school graduates from high schools with peer counseling programs were X percent more likely to complete a bachelor's degree.
- People living in single-parent households during high school had completion rates of X compared to Y for dual-parent households.

A study along these lines provides a first indication of how some of these social characteristics may be related to performance in college. If a factor is not causally related to the outcome, then the population possessing this factor should have the same performances as the population lacking this factor (the null hypothesis). So if we find that differences in family structure or performance in high school are associated with differences in college performance, then we can infer that these factors play some causal or structural role in the outcome.

However, these findings do not establish specific causal linkages among the factors. Take the hypothetical finding about family income: is this statistical discovery the result of this mechanism (greater family income provides more support for tutoring and academic support) or this mechanism (greater family income is associated with familial values that put strong emphasis on successful completion of university degree) or this mechanism (greater family income confers social advantages that make completion easier for affluent students)? In other words, the statistical discovery does not determine the nature of the causal relation between the antecedent condition and the outcome; it simply points the researcher towards investigating the concrete social mechanisms that might be at work here.

The example demonstrates an important lesson about social inquiry. Statistical study of a population can in fact point us towards some preliminary hypotheses about social causation. But these statistical discoveries are only the first step. In order to confidently assert causal relationships between things like income and race, to educational outcomes, we need to arrive at a nuanced analysis of the social relations and institutions through which these gross factors play into individual outcomes. We need to have an account of the mechanisms and processes through which the effects of concrete social settings characterized by differences in family structure, SES, race, or schools play out in the social psychology and educational opportunities that determine the ultimate outcomes of the young people who pass through them.

(A similar line of thought can be found in this posting on the problem of sorting out the data establishing correlations between race and asthma.)

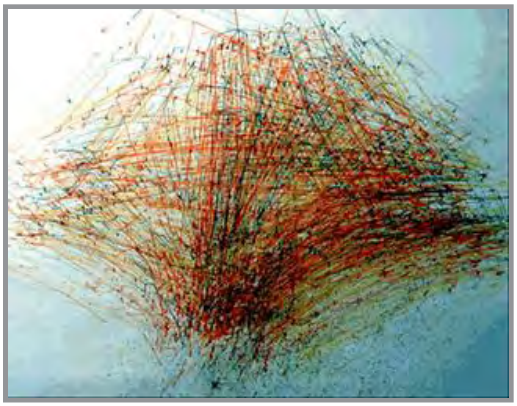
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:00PM (-04:00)

Methodological individualism

Sunday, June 22, 2008

Methodological individualism (MI) is a doctrine in the philosophy of the social sciences about the relationship between "society" and individuals. The idea can be formulated in several related but somewhat different ways: social facts are constituted by facts about

individuals; social entities are composed of individuals and their properties and relations; social structures and entities are "nothing but" ensembles of individuals and their behaviors; social explanations must be derivable from facts about individuals; scientific statements about "society" must be reducible to statements about individuals and their properties and relations; social laws or generalizations must be derivable from general facts about individuals. And there are probably other possible formulations as well.



So the doctrine of methodological individualism often represents a form of reductionism from one area of scientific theory to another: theories about social entities and properties must be reducible to theories and statements about individuals and their properties. This line of thought is parallel to materialism in the philosophy of mind or anti-vitalism in the philosophy of biology. Mental states must be reducible to a set of facts about neurophysiology; statements about living organisms must be reducible to a set of facts about the molecular chemistry and physiology of cells. (See Ingo Brigandt and Alan Love's article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on reduction in biology.)

A somewhat less restrictive view than reductionism is the theory of "supervenience" between levels of scientific description. According to the theory of supervenience, facts at one level of description are fixed or determined by facts at a lower level of description. To say that X supervenes upon Y is to say that there is no difference between states of affairs concerning X for which there is not also a difference in states of affairs concerning Y. This is a less restrictive doctrine because it doesn't require that we provide derivations of the facts of X from facts of Y. (Jaegwon Kim is the primary innovator here; see Physicalism, or Something Near Enough for a recent formulation of the theory.)

Methodological individualism is the limit version of a family of perspectives on social explanation that we might refer to as "agent-centered" approaches to social explanation. Here the general idea is that we explain social outcomes as an aggregate result of the actions, choices, and mentalities of individuals. Individuals' behavior and choice constitute the causal dynamics of social outcomes. The idea of "microfoundations" has played an important role in recent thinking about the relationship between social facts and individual facts. (See Microfoundations, Methods, and Causation for more on the idea of microfoundations for social explanations.)

But agent-centered approaches can give more "social-ness" to the individual than the founding statements of MI would permit. For example, the position of "methodological localism" identifies socially constituted and socially situated individuals as the foundation of social explanation; but this position explicitly denies the idea that all social facts are reducible to bare psychological facts about individuals. Rather, individuals are themselves constituted and constrained by previously established social conditions. (See "Levels of the Social" for more about methodological localism.)

The idea of methodological individualism is one that has appealed to philosophers and social thinkers for almost as long as there has been systematic thinking about social science. Modern philosophy of social science began in the nineteenth century, and John

Stuart Mill's theories of social knowledge contained the assumption of methodological individualism (The Logic of the Moral Sciences). Max Weber also put forward the doctrine in The Methodology Of The Social Sciences. A classic statement was presented by J. W. N. Watkins (1968), "Methodological Individualism and Social Tendencies" in May Brodbeck, Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences.

The logical contrary of MI is the idea of social holism, most explicitly advocated by Emile Durkheim in Rules of Sociological Method. Holism is a form of anti-reductionism; it maintains that there are facts about the social world that do not reduce to facts about individuals. Society is autonomous with respect to the individuals who "make it up". There are social forces (e.g. systems of norms) that exercise causal power over individuals, instead of norms being constituted by the psychological states of individuals. Other varieties of social holism are possible as well. Structuralism is the view that social structures exercise autonomous causal properties, as expressed in such authors as Levi Strauss, Althusser, and Foucault.

Arguments in favor of methodological individualism derive from several insights. First, there is the point that social facts are evidently constituted by the thoughts and behaviors of groups of individuals. Social movements are composed of individuals with specific psychologies and beliefs; organizations are composed of individuals; and, arguably, moralities and cultures are made up of individuals with specific beliefs and values. Second, there is the point that social "laws" are rare, exception-laden, and conditional; so there is a methodological reason to look for the more basic laws that may regulate social behavior -- at the level of individuals and their psychology. Third, there is a preference for ontological sparsity: if we can explain social facts in terms of facts about individuals, then we don't need to attribute ontological status to social facts and entities. Fourth, there is a "materialist" or anti-occultist preference that is appealing to many philosophers; the idea that social facts might be autonomous with respect to individuals gives an impression of occult causal powers or action at a distance. So there is a range of reasons to think that social outcomes are made up of or determined by the aggregate results of individuals and their interactions.

MI has been particularly appealing in certain disciplines of the social sciences -- especially economics and political science. In each case the perspective of "rational actor theory" has appeared to be a very promising line of explanation: explain the behavior of groups (consumers, voters) as the aggregate outcome of individuals making choices with a specific set of beliefs and preferences, within a specific set of constraints.

Other areas of the social sciences are less amenable to the theory of methodological individualism. Anthropology and sociology are disciplines that set the focus on the higher-level social conditions or causes that influence behavior -- a perspective that seems to be more comfortable with some form of holism. However, there is a range of opinion among practitioners of these disciplines as well, and there are anthropologists and sociologists who are more sympathetic to the impulses of methodological individualism.

It is important to highlight some points that MI does not entail. MI does not entail that individuals are egoists or purely self-regarding. It does not entail that individuals are not social. It does not entail that social facts do not have causal consequences -- for other social facts and for individual behavior. It is indeed possible to reframe almost all substantive sociological theory in terms that are consistent with the reasonable conditions implied by MI. Even Durkheim's central theories can be formulated in a way that is innocent with respect to the charge of "action at a distance". And, from the other

direction, even a theorist with as clear a commitment to MI as Max Weber, is still able to make "macro" or "holistic" claims about the causal importance of factors such as religion or morality.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:00PM (-04:00)

Explaining rodeos

Monday, June 23, 2008



Suppose we have visited quite a few rodeos in Arizona and Texas and have observed a couple of things: there are more injuries in rodeos than in stock car racing or football, the stakes for the winners are lower than in golf, the rodeo riders score higher than average on the "introverted" component of the Myers-Briggs personality profile, some rodeos are almost silent places, and the parking lots are filled with a higher percentage of beat-up F150s than a typical baseball park. What would count as "giving an explanation" of these features of this particular type of social activity? And what kinds of mechanisms might serve as a basis for explanations?

Rodeos are an instance of a broader category of social activity that we migh describe along these lines: "mass entertainment events featuring professional athletes/performers and drawing extensive numbers of paying customers." The comparative judments expressed above take the form of contrasts across several different sub-categories of this broad set -- e.g., baseball, stock car racing, football, golf, soccer, circuses. We might further analyze this group of events in terms of several structural features: the character of the audience, the character and recruitment processes of the performers, the rules of the event, the culture of the activity, the meaning of the activity within the broader society, and the business fundamentals of the event (sources and quantity of revenue).

Let's pull apart a few of the patterns noted above, and consider some social mechanisms that might explain them.

Personality profile of rodeo riders. Rodeo riders seem to have a different social psychology than baseball or soccer players; they are more solitary, introverted, and self-sufficient. This feature of rodeos presumably derives from the social selection processes through which an individual becomes a highly skilled rider; the personality features that are best suited to superior performance; and the cultural expectations of behavior within the activity and within the broader society. So an adequate explanation of this distinguishing feature of rodeos will probably invoke the processes of selection through which the performers are recruited, and the feedback and training they receive in the "minor leagues" of rodeo. Here the mechanisms are selection / filtering and training / inculturation.

Size of winnings. The size of the winner's purse depends primarily on the revenue structure of the sport, which depends in turn upon the popularity of the sport, the affluence of the audience, and the size of the national or worldwide audience for the sport

on television. The purse serves as a primary incentive for the most talented performers; rodeo operators compete with each other for the top performers; and competition among operators pushes the purse to a level commensurate with the total revenues generated by the sport. The audience for stock car racing is much larger than that for rodeo, both regionally and nationally; and the purses are correspondingly higher. Here the mechanism is business competition.

Incidence of injuries. Riding a bull is a generally hazardous activity. So we would expect that riders will be injured. But so is driving a car at 180 miles per hour -- and yet the incidence of injuries in NASCAR racing is substantially lower than that in the rodeo circuit. So paying attention simply to the inherent danger of the activity probably doesn't explain the difference. Instead, it seems reasonable to ask whether there are institutional differences across these sports -- the structure of the safety systems that each embodies -- that account for different rates of injury in different types of performance. Industries that have developed genuine institutional commitments and rules governing safety generally demonstrate better safety records. So we might hypothesize that the culture of safety is less strenuous in the rodeo circuit than in professional football or stockcar racing. Here the mechanism is the institutional setting in which the activity takes place, including the presence or absence of penalties for operators with bad safety records.

The parking lot. We notice that the distributions of cars and trucks in the parking lots are quite different at rodeos compared to soccer matches. The vehicles come with their owners; so these differences must derive from differences in the audiences of the two sports. Here we have another example of selection: the composition of the parking lot corresponds to the selection of people who are interested in attending rodeos; this group has a set of tastes and preferences that favor F150s over other vehicles; and the result is -- a preponderance of pickup trucks in the rodeo parking lot. (And the trucks are in bad shape for several reasons -- the generally lower income level of the rodeo fan and the likelihood that he/she does a lot of back-country driving.) The mechanism here is -- social selection.

The silent audience. We observe once in a while that the audience at a small rodeo is plainly enjoying itself -- but there is almost no clapping or shouting. There is no roar of the crowd. Why so? Here we may find a cultural explanation in the background -- this rodeo is drawing an audience of Navajo people, and applauding and shouting are not the means by which Navajo fans express their appreciation and enjoyment. Here the mechanism is -- cultural practices.

What seems interesting to me about this example, is the fact that there are a number of quite different social mechanisms at work that lead to the particular characteristics of such a mundane activity as the rodeo. There is no single process we should point to as the explanatory foundation of rodeo phenomena; instead, there are selection mechanisms, business incentives, cultural practices, media promotions, and socialization processes for both participants and audiences that influence the activity as a whole. And, interestingly enough, these mechanisms can lead to some common characteristics across the set of what appear to be a fairly arbitrary set of activities -- public arenas where daring men and women ride large, dangerous animals for pay. The social characteristics of the audiences, the performers, and the local institutions defining the activity impress a unique stamp on these performances that distinguish them from other public entertainment activities such as circuses or NASCAR races.

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:42AM (-04:00)

Higher education and social mobility

Thursday, June 26, 2008



There is an appalling level of inequality in American society; and even more troubling, the multiple dimensions of inequality seem to reinforce each other, with the result that disadvantaged groups remain disadvantaged across multiple generations. We can ask two different kinds of sociological questions about these facts: What factors cause the reproduction of disadvantage over multiple generations? And what policy interventions have some effect on enhancing upward social mobility within disadvantaged groups? How can we change this cycle of disadvantage?

Several earlier postings have addressed some aspects of the causal question (post, post). Here I'd like to consider the policy question -- and the question of how we can use empirical evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of large policy initiatives on social outcomes such as mobility.

One social policy in particular seems to have a lot of antecedent plausibility: a policy aimed at increasing the accessibility of higher education to the disadvantaged group. The theory is that individuals within the group will benefit from higher education by enhancing their skills and knowledge; this will give them new economic opportunities and access to higher-wage jobs; the individuals will do better economically, and their children will begin life with more economic support and a set of values that encourage education. So access to higher education ought to prove to be a virtuous circle or a positive feedback loop, leading to substantial social mobility in currently disadvantaged groups.

It is a plausible theory; but are there empirical methods through which we can evaluate whether it actually works this way?

Paul Attewell and David Lavin undertake to do exactly that in Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay Off Across the Generations?, published in 2007. Their research consists of a survey study of a cohort of poor women who were admitted to the City University of New York between 1970 and 1972 under an open-admissions policy. Thirty years later Attewell and Lavin surveyed a sample of the women in this group (about 2,000 women), gathering data about their eventual educational attainment, their income, and the educational successes of their children. Analysis of their data permitted them to demonstrate that attenders were likely to enjoy higher income than non-attenders and to have children who valued education at levels that were higher than the children of non-attenders.

The benefits of higher education in increasing personal income were significant; they find that in the population surveyed in 2000, the high school graduate earned $30,000, women with some college earned $35,000, women with the associate's degree earned $40,783, women with the bachelor's degree earned $42,063, and women with a

postgraduate degree earned $54,545. In other words, there was a fairly regular progression in income associated with each further step in the higher education credential achieved. And they found -- contrary to conservative critics of open-access programs in higher education -- that these women demonstrated eventual completion rates that were substantially higher than 4-6 year graduation rates would indicate -- over 70% earned some kind of degree (table 2.2). "Our long-range perspective shows that disadvantaged women ultimately complete college degrees in far greater numbers than scholars realize" (4).

So access to higher education works, according to the evidence uncovered in this study: increasing access to post-secondary education is the causal factor, and improved economic and educational outcomes are the effect.

This is an important empirical study that sets out some of the facts that pertain to poverty and higher education. The study provides empirical confirmation for the idea that affordable and accessible mass education works: when programs are available that permit poor people to gain access to higher education, their future earnings and the future educational success of their children are both enhanced. It's a logical conclusion -- but one that has been challenged by conservative critics such as Bill Bennett. And given the increasing financial stress that public universities are currently experiencing due to declining state support for higher education, it is very important for policy makers to have a clear understanding of the return that is likely on the investment in affordable access to higher education.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:05AM (-04:00)

Continental philosophy of social science

Saturday, June 28, 2008



Making sense of the human world has always been a part of the continental tradition in philosophy. History, justice, and meaning are subjects that have played central roles in continental writings relevant to "understanding society" for three centuries, and dozens of philosophers have focused on these and related topics in deeply fertile ways -- Kant, Rousseau, Hegel, Montesquieu, Vico, Herder, Schleiermacher, Fichte, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Dilthey, to name an important dozen. I don't think it is wrong to say that history and society have been foundational questions in this tradition in ways they have not been in the Anglo-American tradition. So continental philosophy of social science (CPS) has much to draw upon.

Several strands of thinking have been particularly important.

First is the idea that the human world is a world of meanings and relationships. Human action is meaningful for the agent, and it is meaningful for the other humans who are affected or observe it. So an important part of understanding the social world is interpretation of the created meanings of actions, expressions, and artifacts. This line of thought brings us into the hermeneutic tradition, from Dilthey to Ricoeur, and the range of

efforts in philosophy, theology, criticism, and psychology to provide a basis for interpretation. (See an earlier posting on this subject.)

A second important idea is the notion that the social world is constituted by relationships, not monads. Hegel's Phenomenology provides one clear instance of this perspective -- think of the logic of defining the subject through interaction with the object, or of the Master-Slave narrative. Marx's theories of alienation and class likewise place "human beings in relationships" at the ontological center. Nietzsche too places the relational at the center of many of his philosophical theories.

A third pillar of thinking in this tradition is the crucial role of history in human affairs. History matters; it is through history that humanity makes itself, and central social creations are the product of long historical evolution -- the state, language, religion. Vico and Herder offer good examples of this approach, and Hegel offers another. The philosophy of history is core to Hegel's thinking -- not only in his lecture notes on the philosophy of history but the Philosophy of Right and the Phenomenology of Spirit as well.

A fourth important theme in CPS is the idea of knowledge through criticism. Feuerbach's transformative criticism is a case in point; likewise Marx's method of critique as an intellectual method and a conception of rigor. The phrase "a critique of political economy" recurs in numerous of Marx's subtitles; Marx's thought often proceeds through critical rethinking of the works of others. Dialectical thinking is one version of this approach, but there are other species of criticism as well.

A fifth defining characteristic of CPS is the orientation it takes towards causation in the social world. In a nutshell, CPS doesn't attach much importance to causal relationships in the social world. Causation is a feature of the natural world, but CPS draws a sharp distinction between the natural and human worlds. The "human sciences" have to do with understanding rather than explanation, meanings rather than causes.

So, CPS calls out a number of characteristics of the social -- history, meaning, hermeneutics, relationships, criticism, and dialogical thinking, to name several. What this picture does not emphasize is the set of ideas defining scientific rigor for the analytic tradition: an organized conception of theory, a theory of observation and evidence, the idea of the neutrality of scientific knowledge. This is systemic, because CPS is explicitly and implicitly anti-positivist. The implicit part is the more interesting. The continental tradition has a very different philosophical framework for epistemology and knowledge than the empiricist tradition, and a different conception about what constitutes rigorous knowledge. It is more inclined towards philosophical reasoning as a source of knowledge and generally less devoted to empirical inquiry.

We might ask, though, how these themes in the philosophy of society and history help us today in the problem of articulating better and more rationally justified theories or representations of the social world. Does CPS provide any clues about how to configure a better sociology for China or a better theory of social relationships in the Internet age? Does it improve our epistemology of social knowledge? Does it broaden the scope of our historical or sociological imaginations? Does it provide the basis for some salutary critique? Does it deepen needed critiques of positivism and naturalism? (See accursedshare for a current blog that takes this tradition and these questions seriously.)

What seems likely is that both traditions are needed as a foundation for understanding

society. They emphasize different but important perspectives on the social world. And further, there are very few flat contradictions between the two traditions. So a fertile collaboration is entirely feasible.

Yvonne Sherratt's Continental Philosophy of Social Science asks us to initiate this reflection -- and she is right. Other titles I have appreciated for their treatment of Hegel's philosophy of society and history include Shlomo Avineri, Hegel's Theory of the Modern State; Joshua Dienstag, Dancing in Chains: Narrative and Memory in Political Theory, and Alexandre Kojeve, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit. These books illustrate how continental philosophy makes a substantial contribution to understanding society and history.

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:04PM (-04:00)

Arguments for social holism

Monday, June 30, 2008



The topic of methodological individualism (MI) came up in a recent posting, and I underlined the connection between MI and some version of reductionism. Here I'd like to take a different approach and ask the question, what considerations can be offered in support of some version of social holism?

Here are a couple of arguments that avoid the accusation of "spooky holism". (By spooky I mean "disembodied.")

First is a very reasonable point deriving from pragmatic objections to reductionism. If we know on ontological grounds that the behavior of the whole depends upon the features and behavior of the constituent parts and nothing else -- the heart of the theory of supervenience -- but also know that it is entirely hopeless to attempt to calculate the one based on facts about the other -- then perhaps it is justified to consider the whole as if it embodied causal processes at the macro-level. So there is a pragmatic argument available that recommends the autonomy of social facts based on the infeasibility of derivability.

Second is the plausibility of the idea that there are large historical or social forces that are for all intents and purposes beyond the control of any of the individuals whom they influence. The fact that a given population exists as a language community of German speakers or Yoruba speakers has an effect on every child born into that population. The child's brain is shaped by this social reality, quite independently from facts about the child's agency or individuality. The grammar of the local language is an autonomous social fact in this context -- even though it is a fact that is embodied in the particular brains and behaviors of the countless individuals who constitute this community. But this is probably similarly true when we turn to systems of attitudes, norms, or cognitive systems of thinking. (See a posting on social practices on this subject.)

It is obvious but perhaps trivial to observe that the vector of influence flows through

individuals who possess the grammar, norms, or folk beliefs -- this is the ontological reality captured by the microfoundations thesis. But perhaps a point in favor of a modest holism is this: the fact of the commonality of Yoruba grammar can be viewed as if it were an autonomous fact -- even though we know it depends on the existence of Yoruba speakers. But the point of the holism thesis here remains: that the social fact of the current grammar is coercive with respect to current Nigerian children in specific communities. And, perhaps, likewise with respect to other aspects of social cognition and norms. And this takes us some distance towards Durkheim's central view -- the autonomy of social facts.

Now what about social structures? Can some instances of social structures be treated as if they were autonomous with respect to the individuals whom they affect? Here is how the home mortgage system works -- we can specify a collection of rules and practices X, Y, Z that regulate the transactions that occur within this system. The individual who wants to borrow from a bank or other financial institution is simply subject to these rules and practices. He/she doesn't have the option of rewriting the rules in a more rational or fair or socially progressive way; at a given point in time the rules and practices are fixed independently from the wishes or intentions of the people involved in the institution. Once again it is trivially true that these rules are embodied; but they function as if they were autonomous. And this is true for institutions at the full range of scope, from the local to the global.

The advocate for a modest social holism might maintain two plausible positions: first, that all social facts are embodied in the states of mind and behavior of individuals; but second, that some social facts (institutions, social practices, systems of rules) have explanatory autonomy independent from any knowledge we might be able to provide about the particular ways in which these facts are embodied in individuals. The first is an ontological point and the second is a point about explanation.

These points in favor of a modest holism are compatible with other important points about social entities -- the points about heterogeneity, plasticity, and opportunistic transformation that have been made elsewhere in this blog. In other words, we aren't forced to choose between "agent" and "structure"; rather, agents influence structures and structures influence agents.

These arguments suggest two things. First, holism and individualism are not so sharply opposed as perhaps they appear.

But more important, two styles of social explanation are validated and compatible: the compositional or aggregative model of explanation -- explain the outcome as the aggregative consequence of the behavior of large numbers of individuals -- and constraining or filtering explanations -- the structuring of individual behavior that is created by the workings of social institutions. The first model of explanation corresponds well to the assumptions of methodological individualism, while the second corresponds to the idea that structures and large social factors cause patterns of individual behavior. And neither has antecedent priority over the other. (Some of this variety of explanatory strategies is highlighted in an earlier posting on explanation.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:35AM (-04:00)

More on continental philosophy of social science

Monday, June 30, 2008

I encourage interested readers to take a look at the very thoughtful and extensive comment provided by Nick from accursedshare on my earlier posting on continental philosophy of social science. Nick highlights a number of very important lines of thought that are making progress in contemporary discussions of these issues within continental philosophy of science. I am particularly intrigued at his description of "assemblages" -- quoting Nick, "assemblages look at the play of micro-level tools, intentions, habits, techniques, etc. They take these and look at how they spread throughout society (using Gabriel Tarde's work on imitation, for example)." This is a very interesting approach, and one that emphasizes the themes of contingency and heterogeneity in social processes that I find particularly compelling. Nick's comment makes it evident that there is a lot of fertile and imaginative work going on in this tradition. (He particularly mentions Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, William Connolly, Manuel DeLanda, Jane Bennett and Saskia Sassen.)

Nick is well into an extensive critical discussion of François Laruelle's philosophy in his postings on accursedshare. Thanks, Nick!
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:57AM (-04:00)

What is materialism?

Wednesday, July 02, 2008



Karl Marx was a materialist thinker. But what does this amount to? What is materialism as a way of thinking about historical and social reality? Is materialism an empirical theory, a philosophical theory, or perhaps part of a social-science paradigm?

Here is a statement of Marx's materialism from the German Ideology, written in 1845-46:

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself – geological, hydrographical, climatic and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.

This production only makes its appearance with the increase of population. In its turn this presupposes the intercourse [Verkehr] of individuals with one another. The form of this intercourse is again determined by production.

To start, Marx's words here are directed against "philosophy", and the Young Hegelians in particular. So Marx is advocating for a different form of reasoning -- not speculative philosophical reflection, but concrete analysis grounded in knowledge of the circumstances of human life. Marx is saying that we can understand certain important things -- for example, the development of ideas or religion -- by examining the "material" circumstances of life in which they emerge. And what are those circumstances? They are circumstances of material need and human labor: the fact that human beings satisfy their material needs on the basis of the transformation of nature through labor. So what is "material" in this setting is two characteristics: the material needs that human beings have (food, shelter, warmth) and the material-physical properties of the world in which human beings find themselves. Human beings as "producers" -- intelligent transformers of nature through individual and social labor -- this is the fundamental material fact in this passage.

History comes into this account through Marx's reference to the "nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence", because this is the social history of technology. Human beings create new tools and techniques over time. So materialism, when applied to human beings, has an inherently historical character; men and women transform the tools and knowledge they use in order to transform nature and satisfy needs. And, as the following paragraphs make clear, the social relations through which production takes place are themselves historical products, in a regular process of change and development. Social relationships are "material" insofar as they are the forms of cooperation through which labor and production take place; central among these material social relationships are the property relations of a given level of society.

These comments focus primarily on the conditions of production as a foundation for materialism. A related line of thought in Marx's writings is the idea of the social relations of production as the material foundation of society. Here is a famous passage from Marx's Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859):

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation,

on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.

In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production. No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.

Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.

In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society. The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.

Here the emphasis is on the social relations of production, not just the forces of production (tools, materials, technical knowledge). And on this approach, study of the class relations of a given society is a "materialist" study -- even though class relations are abstract and intangible. And we provide a materialist analysis of a circumstance when we show how that circumstance corresponds to or emerges from certain features of the social relations of production.

So far, then, we seem to have two things going on: first, an approach to the history of ideas ("place systems of ideas into the roles they play in the social arrangements through which human populations satisfy material needs"), and an approach to the unfolding of history more generally ("attempt to understand historical developments in terms of the role they play in production and the satisfaction of needs"). So materialism is a theory about historical causation: what kinds of circumstances cause what other kinds of circumstances. And, perhaps, it is a theory about knowledge: that knowledge proceeds

from analysis of material facts, not pure philosophical speculation or imagination.

There seem to be several hazards built into this approach. One is the temptation of reductionism that the approach seems to invite: the impulse to reduce thought, theory, and philosophy to some compound of the "needs of the social system of production". But is it really compelling to imagine that the Young Hegelians were simply working out some of the contradictions of the system of property and factory manufacturing? No; Marx's rhetoric seems to be getting away from him here -- in ways in which later thinkers such as Mannheim perhaps allowed the sociology of knowledge to spin out of control as well. And the hazard of reductionism also raises the worry of a blindspot when it comes to the relative autonomy of politics or culture: human beings seem to be better at imagining and extending political or cultural inventions than a crude materialism would permit.

So a defensible contemporary materialism can't be as simple as this: "Material conditions determine the content of culture, politics, and thought." Rather, we might hold more modestly: "Material conditions constrain, influence, and stimulate the content of culture, politics, and thought." We can understand Aristotle's philosophy better when we understand something of its material and historical setting; but the fact remains that Aristotle was a creative and imaginative philosopher who transcended his time in a variety of ways.

So, once again, what sort of theory is materialism? Perhaps we could say this: it is a "meta" - framework, a philosophical premise about how the world works. In this respect it functions as a substantive metaphysical theory. And it is a premise about how a style of thinking, a recommendation about how we should reason about the world and what factors to subject to careful analysis. Here materialism serves as something like an applied epistemology -- a theory about how and what to investigate in order to arrive at valuable, justified knowledge. It falls in the general category of ideas such as idealism, monism, atomism, physicalism, or dualism: organizing ideas about the nature of reality, within the context of which more specific theorizing and investigating can take place.

There are many questions that remain. Do these two aspects of materialism hang together? Could one accept the metaphysics but reject the epistemology, or vice versa? Once we have rejected the reductionism associated with vulgar materialism, how much remains of the theory? And is there a continuing role for materialist thinking in the twenty-first century world?

(Courbet's Stonebreakers is a suitable companion to this topic. Painted in 1849-50, the painting illustrates several aspects of a materialist perspective on the world: an interest in conditions of life and work, an interest in the situation of ordinary working people, and, of course, the depiction of concrete labor -- all of these aspects of the painting complement the mentality of Marx's materialism. T. J. Clark's brilliant book on Courbet and his social context is well worth reading (Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution).)

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:53AM (-04:00)

Global cities -- Saskia Sassen

Thursday, July 03, 2008

I have mentioned Saskia Sassen in previous postings, as one of the world's leading theorists of the global city. Here is an interesting lecture that she presented at the UrbanAge India conference in Mumbai in 2007. The lecture is very interesting, and it is also "self-illustrating," in that its availability on YouTube illustrates the remarkable globalization of ideas and discourse that has been created by internet communications tools available everywhere in the world. She talks about cities as centers of "urban knowledge capital", and refers to the mechanisms of communication through which these centers are linked, including especially the channels of internet-based communication and interaction. And the availability of the real-time thinking of leading scholars such as Sassen through YouTube, Google, and other tools -- presented in Mumbai, equally and almost immediately available in Mexico City, Lagos, and London -- is a dramatic illustration of the potential for diffusion and infusion of knowledge that the internet presents to the global world.

Urban Age India: Saskia Sassen Cities in Global Context Pt 1

Urban Age India: Saskia Sassen Cities in Global Context Pt 2

Urban Age India: Saskia Sassen Cities in Global Context Pt 3

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:09AM (-04:00)

Engels' sociology of the city

Thursday, July 03, 2008



Friedrich Engels' book, The Condition of the Working Class in England, was one of the earliest "sociological" descriptions of the emerging working class in industrial Europe. Engels is a good subject for this blog, because this book is a very interesting effort to "understand society" at a time when the changes that Britain was undergoing were perplexing and rapid. Like other nineteenth century thinkers -- such as Thomas Carlyle, Alexis de Tocqueville, or Alexander Herzen -- Engels was trying to find language, concepts, theories, and metaphors in terms of which to comprehend the rapid processes of urbanization and industrialization that he observed. This is a place where the "sociological imagination" is most critical -- the ability

of talented observers to begin to make sense of the complex social reality surrounding them, and to find language and theory adequate to expressing that reality.

Published in German in 1845, Conditions represents Engels' attempt to offer a detailed and systematic description of the emerging industrial system in England, largely based on his experience as a young man in the textile firm of Ermen and Engels in Manchester. (Steven Marcus's book, Engels, Manchester & the Working Class, provides a good description.) The book is one of the classics of radical thought in the nineteenth century, and substantiates Engels' stature as a thinker whose perceptions and critiques developed independently from Marx's, in his early years anyway.

My question here is, what are some of the characteristics of this book as a work of social science? To what extent does the book serve to provide one of the founding sources of modern sociology? And, of course, we need to avoid anachronism when we ask this question; the book was published only two years later than John Stuart Mill's System of Logic (1843) -- one of the earliest efforts to frame an answer to the question of "social science", and the question of how best to understand the emerging world of industrial capitalism was a profoundly challenging one.

The book has several key features. First, Engels gives a great deal of effort to the task of observing and describing the facts of urban industrial life in the 1840s in Manchester and Birmingham. He is interested in recording the conditions of life that workers experienced; the nature and cost of their daily subsistence; the conditions of health and safety that they experienced; and the nature and size of the population of the towns, neighborhoods, and cities that he describes. Engels relies upon his own observations, but he also makes extensive use of the growing body of official reports that were being produced by English governmental agencies as well as travelers' reports, coroners' reports, and newspapers. He refers especially to investigations by the health authorities following the cholera epidemic of 1831-32.

Second, Engels does not attempt to assume the posture of a disinterested observer. He is plainly on the side of the worker and a radical critic of the bourgeois owner; he is making a case about exploitation and indifference against the emerging class of owners whose factories he describes.

Third, he is interested in resistance and mobilization, and he devotes chapters to strikes and other forms of organized efforts by workers and their families to improve their conditions. This is especially true in Chapter IX (Working-Class Movements), but these topics recur in many places in the book.

Fourth, quite a bit of the book might be classified as "ethnography" today: detailed, first-person description of conditions of life of a particular group of people, based on direct interaction with them by the observer.

Fifth, the book certainly falls in the category of descriptive urban sociology. Engels is very interested in describing living conditions, including crowding, squalor, and deprivation. He offers detailed description of the state of the environment -- rivers, waterways, roads, and buildings -- in the cities he describes, including the famous River Irk in Manchester. And there are numerous drawings of the layout of streets and neighborhoods, so that Engels can document his points about crowding and squalor. Here is a quick description of a neighborhood in Manchester:

Some four thousand people, mostly Irish, inhabit this slum. The cottages are very small, old and dirty, while the streets are uneven, partly unpaved, not properly drained and full of ruts. Heaps of refuse, offal and sickening filth are everywhere interspersed with pools of stagnant liquid. The atmosphere is polluted by the stench and is darkened by the thick smoke of a dozen factory chimneys. ... The creatures who inhabit these dwellings and even their dark, wet cellars, and who live confined amidst all this filth and foul air -- which cannot be dissipated because of the surrounding lofty buildings -- must surely have sunk to the lowest leel of humanity. (71)

The organization of the book reveals an effort by Engels to engage in sociological classification. For example, he distinguishes among several groups of proletarians: industrial workers, miners, farm laborers, and the Irish workers (chapter II). Within industrial workers he further distinguishes workers by sector and division of labor. And he believes that the classification is explanatory: "the closer the wage earners are associated with industry the more advanced they are".

There are several large sociological processes that Engels articulates. The book puts forward an account of the dynamics of class formation through the development of the industrial system -- the process of centralization and increase of scale of production leading to the consolidation of a class of owners and a large class of proletarians. But the book also advances an analysis of urbanization and the growth of towns and cities, based on the dynamics of factory production and the need for larger volumes of labor. "Industry and commerce attain their highest stage of development in the big towns, so that it is here that the effects of industrialisation on the wage earners can be most clearly seen" (28). Consider his description of the slums of London:

It is only when [the observer] has visited the slums of this great city that it dawns upon him that the inhabitants of modern London have had to sacrifice so much that is best in human nature in order to create those wonders of civilisation with which their city teems. The vast majority of Londoners have had to let so many of their potential creative faculties lie dormant, stunted and unused in order that a small, closely-knit group of their fellow citizens could develop to the full the qualities with which nature has endowed them. (30)

And consider his commentary on the effects that slum life has:

In the circumstances it is to be expected that it is in this region that the inevitable consequences of industrialisation in so far as they affect the working classes are most strikingly evident. Nowhere else can the life and conditions of the industrial proletariat be studied in all their aspects as in South Lanacashire. Here can be seen most clearly the degradation into which the worker sinks owing to the introduction of steam power, machinery and the division of labour. Here, too, can be seen most the strenuous efforts of the proletariat to raise themselves from their degraded situation. (50)

And Engels makes some astute observations about the design of industrial towns:

Owing to the curious lay-out of the town it is quite possible for someone to live for years in Manchester and to travel daily to and from his work without ever seeing a working-class quarter r coming into contact with an artisan. He who visits Manchester simply on business or for pleasure need never see the slums, mainly because the working-class districts and the middle-class districts are quite distinct. (54)

These descriptions offer two things: a hypothesis about urban growth and the creation of slums, and an ethnographic interpretation of the lived experience of people who find themselves trapped in modern cities. (Notice how similar this description of the slum dweller's life is to the description that Marx offers in his elaboration of the theory of alienation in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts.)

Finally, there is plainly an effort to provide an explanation of the phenomena Engels describes, based on an analysis of an underlying causal process: the rapid development of a capitalist system of property ownership and factory production. Engels brings almost every aspect of the degrading social circumstances that he chronicles back to exploitation and the insatiable appetite of capital for profits at the expense of workers. This is a single-factor explanation of a process that was surely multi-dimensional. But it illustrates an important aspect of sociological explanation: the need to discover some of the underlying processes that give rise to the phenomena that have been discovered.



So -- is it sociology or is it radical propaganda? It's a mix of both. The sociology is of course only partially formed; the next century still had a lot of work to do in conceptualizing how a scientific perspective might be brought to the analysis of society. (And of course that work isn't finished yet.) But Engels' efforts here are noteworthy. And of course it is also a document of political advocacy, in line with writings of liberal and radical reformers elsewhere in Britain and Europe. It is also very interesting to me that the book is written by Engels largely prior to his substantial collaboration with Marx. And this goes some ways towards validating the idea that Engels himself was an important thinker and theorist of society.

(The documentary photography of the slums of New York by Jacob Riis (How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York) seems to have much of the same motivation as Engels' in Condition of the Working Class in England when it comes to a morally inspired desire to reveal the social reality of slums. See Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom's Rediscovering Jacob Riis: The Reformer, His Journalism, and His Photographs for a book that is getting some justified attention.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:45PM (-04:00)

Heterogeneity of the social

Friday, July 04, 2008

I think heterogeneity is a very basic characteristic of the domain of the social. And I think this makes a big difference for how we should attempt to study the social world "scientifically". What sorts of things am I thinking about here?

Let's start with some semantics. A heterogeneous group of things is the contrary of a homogeneous group, and we can define homogeneity as "a group of fundamentally similar units or samples". A homogeneous body may consist of a group of units with

identical properties, or it may be a smooth mixture of different things, consisting of a similar composition at many levels of scale. A fruitcake is non-homogeneous, in that distinct volumes may include just cake or a mix of cake and dried cherries, or cake and the occasional walnut. The properties of fruitcake depend on which sample we encounter. A well mixed volume of oil and vinegar, by contrast, is homogeneous in a specific sense: the properties of each





sample volume are the same as any other. The basic claim about the heterogeneity of the social comes down to this: at many levels of scale we continue to find a diversity of social things and processes at work. Society is more similar to fruitcake than cheesecake.

Heterogeneity makes a difference because one of the central goals of positivist science is to discover strong regularities among classes of phenomena, and regularities appear to presuppose homogeneity of the things over which the regularities are thought to obtain. So to observe that social phenomena are deeply heterogeneous at many levels of scale, is to cast fundamental doubt on the goal of discovering strong social regularities.

Let's consider some of the forms of heterogeneity that the social world illustrates.

First is the heterogeneity of social causes and influences. Social events are commonly the result of a variety of different kinds of causes that come together in highly contingent conjunctions. A revolution may be caused by a protracted drought, a harsh system of land tenure, a new ideology of peasant solidarity, a communications system that conveys messages to the rural poor, and an unexpected spar within the rulers -- all coming together at a moment in time. And this range of causal factors, in turn, shows up in the background of a very heterogeneous set of effects. (A transportation network, for example, may play a causal role in the occurrence of an epidemic, the spread of radical ideas, and a long, slow process of urban settlement.) The causes of an event are a mixed group of dissimilar influences with different dynamics and temporalities, and the effects of a given causal factor are also a mixed and dissimilar group.

Second is the heterogeneity that can be discovered within social categories of things -- cities, religions, electoral democracies, social movements. Think of the diversity within Islam documented so well by Clifford Geertz (Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia); the diversity at multiple levels that exists among great cities like Beijing, New York, Geneva, and Rio (institutions, demography, ethnic groups, economic characteristics, administrative roles, ...); the institutional variety that exists in the electoral democracies of India, France, and Argentina; or the wild diversity across the social movements of the right.

Third is the heterogeneity that can be discovered across and within social groups. It is not

the case that all Kansans think alike -- and this is true for whatever descriptors we might choose in order to achieve greater homogeneity (evangelical Kansans, urban evangelical Kansans, ...). There are always interesting gradients within any social group. Likewise, there is great variation in the nature of ordinary, lived experience -- for middle-class French families celebrating quatorze Juillet, for Californians celebrating July 4, and for Brazilians enjoying Dia da Independência on September 7.

A fourth form of heterogeneity takes us within the agent herself, when we note the variety of motives, moral frameworks, emotions, and modes of agency on the basis of which people act. This is one of the weaknesses of doctrinaire rational choice theory or dogmatic Marxism, the analytical assumption of a single dimension of motivation and reasoning. Instead, it is visible that one person acts for a variety of motives at a given time, persons shift their motives over time, and members of groups differ in terms of their motivational structure as well. So there is heterogeneity of motives and agency within the agent.

These dimensions of heterogeneity make the point: the social world is an ensemble, a dynamic mixture, and an ongoing interaction of forces, agents, structures, and mentalities. Social outcomes emerge from this heterogeneous and dynamic mixture, and the quest for general laws is deeply quixotic.

Where does the heterogeneity principle take us? It suggests an explanatory strategy: instead of looking for laws of whole categories of events and things, rather than searching for simple answers to questions like "why do revolutions occur?", we might instead look to a "concatenation" strategy. That is, we might simply acknowledge the fact of molar heterogeneity and look instead for some of the different processes and things in play in a given item of interest, and the build up a theory of the whole as a concatenation of the particulars of the parts.

Significantly, this strategy takes us to several fruitful ideas that already have some currency.

First is the idea of looking for microfoundations for observed social processes; (Microfoundations, Methods, and Causation: On the Philosophy of the Social Sciences). Here the idea is that higher-level social processes, causes, and events, need to be placed within the context of an account of the agent-level institutions and circumstances that convey those processes.

Second is the method of causal mechanisms advocated by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, and discussed frequently here (Dynamics of Contention (Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics)). Put simply, the approach recommends that we explain an outcome as the contingent result of the concatenation of a set of independent causal mechanisms (escalation, intra-group competition, repression, ...).

And third is the theory of "assemblages", recommended by Nick from accursedshare and derived from some of the theories of Gilles Deleuze. (Manuel Delanda describes this theory in A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory And Social Complexity.)

Each of these ideas gives expression to the important truth of the heterogeneity principle: that social outcomes are the aggregate result of a number of lower-level processes and institutions that give rise to them, and that social outcomes are contingent results of interaction and concatenation of these lower-level processes.

Posted by Daniel Little at 03:31PM (-04:00)

"Moral economy" as a historical social concept

Monday, July 07, 2008



The concept of a "moral economy" has proved useful in attempting to describe and explain the contentious behavior of peasants in response to onerous social relations. Essentially, it is the idea that peasant communities share a set of normative attitudes concerning the social relations and social behaviors that surround the local economy: the availability of food, the prices of subsistence commodities, the proper administration of taxation, and the operation of charity, for example. This is sometimes referred to a "subsistence ethic": the idea that local social arrangements should be structured in such a way as to respect the subsistence needs of the rural poor. The associated theory of political behavior holds something like this: peasant communities are aroused to protest and rebellion when the terms of the local subsistence ethic are breached by local elites, state authorities, or market forces.

Here I want to highlight this concept by asking a few foundational questions. Fundamentally, what kind of concept is it? How does it function in social interpretation, description, or explanation? And how does it function as a component of empirical investigation?

The concept of moral economy was extensively developed by E. P. Thompson in The Making of the English Working Class (1961) and an important essay, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," originally published in Past and Present in 1971 and included in Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture. The concept derives from Thompson's treatment of bread riots in eighteenth century Britain. In MEWC Thompson writes:

In 18th-century Britain riotous actions assumed two different forms: that of more or less spontaneous popular direct action; and that of the deliberate use of the crowd as an instrument of pressure, by persons "above" or apart from he crowd. The first form has not received the attention which it merits. It rested upon more articulate popular sanctions and was validated by more sophisticated traditions than the word "riot" suggests. The most common example is the bread or food riot, repeated cases of which can be found in almost every town and county until the 1840s. This was rarely a mere uproar which culminated in the breaking open of barns or the looting of shops. It was legitimised by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people. (MTWEC, 62-63)

After describing a number of bread riots in some detail, Thompson writes, "Actions on such a scale ... indicate an extraordinarily deep-rooted pattern of behaviour and belief .... These popular actions were legitimised by the old paternalist moral economy" (66). And

he closes this interesting discussion with these words: "In considering only this one form of 'mob' action we have come upon unsuspected complexities, for behind every such form of popular direct action some legitimising notion of right is to be found" (68). And Thompson often describes these values as "traditional" or "paternalist" -- working in opposition to the values and ideas of an unfettered market; he contrasts "moral economy" with the modern "political economy" associated with liberalism and the ideology of the free market.

In "The Moral Economy of the Crowd" Thompson puts his theory this way:

It is possible to detect in almost ever eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimising notion. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community. On occasion this popular consensus was endorsed by some measure of licence afforded by the authorities. More commonly, the consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference. ("Moral Economy," CIC 188)

It is plain from these passages that Thompson believes that the "moral economy" is a real historical factor, consisting of the complex set of attitudes and norms of justice that are in play within this historically presented social group. As he puts the point late in the essay, "We have been examining a pattern of social protest which derives from a consensus as to the moral economy of the commonweal in times of dearth" (247).

So the logic of Thompson's ideas here seems fairly clear: there were instances of public disorder ("riots") surrounding the availability and price of food, and there is a hypothesized "notion of right" or justice that influenced and motivated participants. This conception of justice is a socially embodied historical factor, and it partially explains the behavior of the rural people who mobilized themselves to participate in the disturbances. He recapitulates his goal in the essay, "Moral Economy Reviewed" (also included in Customs in Common) in these terms: "My object of analysis was the mentalité, or, as I would prefer, the political culture, the expectations, traditions, and indeed, superstitions of the working population most frequently involved in actions in the market" (260). These shared values and norms play a key role in Thompson's reading of the political behavior of the individuals in these groups. So these hypotheses about the moral economy of the crowd serve both to help interpret the actions of a set of actors involved in food riots, and to explain the timing and nature of food riots. We might say, then, that the concept of "moral economy" contributes both to a hermeneutics of peasant behavior and a causal theory of peasant contention.

Now move forward two centuries. Another key use of the concept of moral economy occurs in treatments of modern peasant rebellions in Asia. Most influential is James Scott's important book, The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia. Scholars of the Chinese Revolution borrowed from Scott in offering a range of interpretations of peasant behavior in the context of CCP mobilization; for example, James Polachek ("The Moral Economy of the Kiangsi Soviet" (1928-34). Journal of Asian Studies 1983 XLII (4):805-830). And most recently, Kevin O'Brien has made use of the idea of a moral economy in his treatment of "righteous protest" in contemporary China (Rightful Resistance in Rural China). So scholars interested in the politics of Asian rural societies have found the moral economy concept to be a useful one. Scott puts his central perspective in these terms:

We can learn a great deal from rebels who were defeated nearly a half-century ago. If we understand the indignation and rage which prompted them to risk everything, we can grasp what I have chosen to call their moral economy: their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation--their view of which claims on their product were tolerable and which intolerable. Insofar as their moral economy is representative of peasants elsewhere, and I believe I can show that it is, we may move toward a fuller appreciation of the normative roots of peasant politics. If we understand, further, how the central economic and political transformations of the colonial era served to systematically violate the peasantry's vision of social equity, we may realize how a class "of low classness" came to provide, far more often than the proletariat, the shock troops of rebellion and revolution. (MEP, 3-4)

Scott's book represents his effort to understand the dynamic material circumstances of peasant life in colonial Southeast Asia (Vietnam and Burma); to postulate some central normative assumptions of the "subsistence ethic" that he believes characterizes these peasant societies; and then to explain the variations in political behavior of peasants in these societies based on the moments of inconsistency between material conditions and aspects of the subsistence ethic. And he postulates that the political choices for action these peasant rebels make are powerfully influenced by the content of the subsistence ethic. Essentially, we are invited to conceive of the "agency" of the peasant as being a complicated affair, including prudential reasoning, moral assessment based on shared standards of justice, and perhaps other factors as well. So, most fundamentally, Scott's theory offers an account of the social psychology and agency of peasants.

There are several distinctive features of Scott's programme. One is his critique of narrow agent-centered theories of political motivation, including particularly rational choice theory. (Samuel Popkin's The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam is the prime example.) Against the idea that peasants are economically rational agents who decide about political participation based on a narrowly defined cost-benefit analysis, Scott argues for a more complex political psychology incorporating socially shared norms and values. But a second important feature is Scott's goal of providing a somewhat general basis for explanation of peasant behavior. He wants to argue that the subsistence ethic is a widely shared set of moral values in traditional rural societies -- with the consequence that it provides a basis for explanation that goes beyond the particulars of Vietnam or Burma. And he has a putative explanation of this commonality as well -- the common existential circumstances of traditional family-based agriculture.

One could pull several of these features apart in Scott's treatment. For example, we could accept the political psychology -- "People are motivated by a locally embodied sense of justice" -- but could reject the generalizability of the subsistence ethic -- "Burmese peasants had the XYZ set of local values, while Vietnamese peasants possessed the UVW set of local values."

This programme suggests several problems for theory and for empirical research. Are there social-science research methods that would permit us to "observe" or empirically discern the particular contents of a normative worldview in a range of different societies, in order to assess whether the subsistence ethic that Scott describes is widespread? Are peasants in Burma and Vietnam as similar as Scott's theory postulates? How would we validate the implicit theory of political motivation that Scott advances (calculation within the context of normative judgment)? Are there other important motivational factors that are perhaps as salient to political behavior as the factors invoked by the subsistence

ethic? Where does Scott's "thicker" description of peasant consciousness sit with respect to fully ethnographic investigation?

So to answer my original question -- what kind of concept is the "moral economy"? -- we can say several things. It is a proto-theory of the theory of justice that certain groups possess (18th-century English farmers and townspeople, 20th-century Vietnamese peasants). It implicitly postulates a theory of political motivation and political agency. It asserts a degree of generality across peasant societies. It is offered as a basis for both interpreting and explaining events -- answering the question "What is going on here?" and "Why did this event take place?" In these respects the concept is both an empirical construct and a framework for thinking about agency; so it can be considered both in terms of its specific empirical adequacy and, more broadly, the degree of insight it offers for thinking about collective action.

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:36PM (-04:00)

Discipline, method, hegemony in sociology

Tuesday, July 08, 2008



An earlier post referred to the "Perestroika" debate within political science. There are similar foundational debates within other social science disciplines, including especially sociology. What is particularly striking is not that there are deep disagreements about the methodology and epistemology of sociology -- this has often been true within sociology, going back to the methodenstreiten that divided the German-speaking social sciences around the turn of the twentieth century, but rather the degree to which these disagreements have been so divisive and polarizing within the discipline in the U.S. in the past forty years.

Several interesting books that focus on some of these debates within sociology include George Steinmetz, The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others; Immanuel Wallerstein, The End of the World As We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-First Century; Craig Calhoun, Sociology in America: A History; and Alvin Gouldner, The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology. Andrew Abbott's Chaos of Disciplines is also a very interesting treatment of the sociology of the social science disciplines and the mechanisms through which a discipline defines its boundaries and maintains "discipline".

In sociology it is possible to map the main fault lines within the discipline in several ways. First, we can distinguish quantitative-statistical research from both qualitative-ethnographic approaches and comparative-historical approaches. (It's worth observing that this results in a tripartite division of methods rather than the simpler bipolar "quantitative-qualitative" divide. Historical and comparative studies are distinct from statistical studies, but they are also distinguishable from ethnographic interpretations.) Or we can characterize this space in terms of "large-N, small-N, single-N" studies. And we can distinguish broadly among positivist and anti-positivist perspectives; causal and

interpretive perspectives; realist and anti-realist perspectives; critical and orthodox perspectives; and there are probably other important dimensions of disagreement as well. In addition to these large divisions among methodological approaches, there are also a large number of frameworks of thought that involve a combination of method and theory -- for example, feminist sociology, post-structuralist sociology, critical theory, and post-colonial sociology.

The disputes between these methodological frameworks seem to continue to create large, fractious divides within graduate sociology departments, with advocates for one method or the other claiming virtually exclusive legitimacy. And this struggle for methodological primacy appears to extend to the editorial policies of major sociology journals, association programs, and tenure deliberations. Until fairly recently -- the 1990s, let us say -- the quantitative-statistical faction held sway as the hegemonic methodological doctrine. Inspired by positivism and the example of the natural sciences and perhaps guided by governmental and foundation funding priorities, quantitative studies were considered most scientific, most rigorous, most objective, and most explanatory. Historical and interpretive studies were treated as "ideographic" or anecdotal -- not well suited to discovering important social regularities. And yet it seems apparent that many problems of sociological interest are not amenable to quantitative or statistical research.

Let's consider for a moment how these issues ought to work -- how method, theory, and the world ought to be related. In any area of science there is a range of phenomena that we want to understand. So we need to have tools for investigating the real, empirical characteristics of this stuff, and we aim to arrive at theories that explain the more interesting features of this domain of real phenomena. Finally, we need some intellectual resources on the basis of which to arrive at the desired knowledge -- we need some methods of inquiry, some models of theory, and some ideas about the underlying ontology of the phenomena we are studying. So the world exists; we want to gain knowledge and understanding of this world; and we need some tools for investigating and theorizing this world.

But here is the key point: the central focus here is knowledge, not method. Method is a tool for helping us to arrive at knowledge. For any given empirical question there will be a variety of methods on the basis of which to investigate this problem. And ideally, we should select a set of tools that are well suited to the particular characteristics of the problem at hand.

In other words, analysis of the situation of knowledge producers would suggest methodological pluralism. We should be open to a variety of tools and methods, and should design research in a way that is closely tailored to the nature of the empirical problem. And therefore young sociologists -- graduate students -- should be encouraged to be eclectic in their reading and thinking; they should be exposed to many of the approaches, perspectives, and methods through which imaginative sociologists have addressed their problems of research and explanation.

This general recommendation in favor of pluralism in sociology is strengthened when we consider the fact of the inherent heterogeneity of the social world. (See an earlier posting on this subject.) There is not one single kind of social process, for which there might conceivably be a uniquely best kind of method of inquiry. Rather, the social world consists of a deeply heterogeneous mix of processes, some of which are better suited to an ethnographic or comparative approach, just as other processes may be best studied

quantitatively. If one is interested in the topic of corruption, for example -- he/she will need to be informed about institutions, culture, principal-agent problems, social psychology, and many other potentially relevant sociological factors. And these researches may well require a combination of statistical analysis, comparison across a select group of cases, and ethnographic investigation in a small number of specific cases and individuals.

In other words, there are very deep arguments supporting the value and epistemic suitability of methodological pluralism. And this in turn suggests that sociology departments are well advised to incorporate a variety of methods and frameworks into their doctoral programs.

Fortunately, it appears that this rethinking is now taking place in a number of top sociology departments in the U.S., and the formerly hegemonic position of quantitative methods is now being challenged by a more pluralistic treatment of methods and frameworks. And this is all to the good: the result will be a better sociology and a better understanding of the heterogeneous, novel, and rapidly changing world in which we find ourselves.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:45PM (-04:00)

Public versus hidden faces of organizations

Friday, July 11, 2008





Think of a range of complex organizations and institutions -- police departments, zoning boards, corporations, security agencies, and so on indefinitely. These organizations all have missions, personnel, constituencies, and policies and practices. They all do various things -- they affect individuals in society and they bring about significant social effects. And, in each case there are at least three aspects of their realities -- the ways they publicly present themselves, the ways their behaviors and effects are perceived by the public, and the usually unobservable reality of how they actually behave. Usually the public persona of the institution is benign, fair, and public- spirited. But how close is this public persona to the truth? In many of our basic institutions, the answer seems to be, not very. We are daily confronted with cases of official corruption, corporations that abuse their power, legislators who take advantage of insider status, and the like. So how can we conceptualize the task of getting a reasonably accurate perception of the hidden workings of our major institutions and organizations?

First, let's consider whether it is possible to specify a minimum charter of good organizational behavior in a democratic society. This would be a partial answer to a part of our question: what defines the conditions of a socially acceptable and publicly defensible organization? Consider these aspirations --

- The organization should have goals that are compatible with enhancing the public good.
- The organization should have appropriate policies about behavior towards employees and the public.
- The organization should genuinely incorporate a commitment of compliance to law and regulation.
- The corporation should embody a faithful commitment to exerting its efforts on behalf of its stated mission and stakeholders.
- The organization should be committed to transparency and accountability.

Bad business practices and corruption can often be traced to a violation of one or more of these principles. The most offensive practices by powerful organizations -- predatory behavior, asset stripping, the use of coercion and threat to achieve organizational goals, fraud, deception, illegal behavior, toxic waste dumping, evasion of regulations, and bribery -- all fall within the categories identified here.

So how are we to determine whether our existing organizations and institutions satisfy these minimal conditions? We might imagine a routine "scan" of major institutions and organizations that asks a small set of questions along these lines:

- What are the real operational goals and priorities of the organization?
- What are the operational policies that govern corporate action?
- How do agents of the organization actually treat members of the public in carrying out their tasks?
- To what extent are there discrepancies between policy and practice?
- To what extent do powerful leaders and managers use their positions to favor their own private interests? (conflict of interest)
- To what extent do business crimes occur -- accounting fraud, investor deception, evasion of regulations for health and safety?
- And, most generally, to what extent is there a discrepancy between the official story about the organization and its actual practices?

It is very easy to think of examples of bad organizational behavior illustrating each of these questions -- waste management companies fronting for organized crime groups, pharmaceutical companies producing defective generic drugs, police officers accepting bribes from speeding drivers, mining companies hiring "security workers" to evict "squatters." And it would be a very interesting exercise to try to provide brief but accurate answers to each of these questions for a number of organizations. Based on the answers to questions like these that we are able to establish, we could then make an effort to answer the question of how great a discrepancy there is between the benign public persona of major institutions and their actual workings.

In theory we might say that answering these questions is no more difficult than putting a man on the moon -- costly but straightforward. However, as was said twenty years ago in the context of anti-ballistic missile technology, the difference is that the moon doesn't fight back. Organizations -- particularly large governmental and corporate organizations -- are very adept at covering their tracks, concealing bad behavior, and re-telling the story in their own interests. So the investigative challenge is a huge one -- we might speculate that corruption multiplies geometrically, while investigative capacity multiplies arithmetically (a sort of Malthusian theory of misbehavior). Any given abuse can be uncovered in the New Yorker or on the 6 o'clock news -- but bad behavior outstrips investigative resources.

So the task of understanding this aspect of modern society amounts to finding effective

ways of shining a light on the real practices and priorities of important organizations and institutions. And the practical interest we have in controlling bad organizations -- controlling corruption, ensuring good environmental and labor practices, eliminating coercion and violence -- comes down to the challenge of enhancing the ability of democracies to investigate, regulate, and publicize the standards and outcomes of behavior that are required.

(Earlier posts have addressed aspects of this issue, including comments on corruption and publicity.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:51PM (-04:00)

Texts, ideas, and "about"

Sunday, July 13, 2008



Harvard philosopher Nelson Goodman wrote a series of articles in the 1970s on the subject of "about" (PROBLEMS AND PROJECTS). It was an interesting effort by a deeply gifted philosopher to get a handle on what a text is "about", without simply restating the content that the article or text includes. In hindsight Goodman's interest was prescient, and it points forward to current interest in the "semantic" web and search technology.

There is an interesting tool provided by Wordle that provides an intriguing way of extracting a sense of what a blog or other text is "about" by generating a word cloud based on the frequencies of words used. Included below are the results for a number of interesting blogs; I think they give a surprisingly nuanced picture of the main preoccupations of the bloggers.

understandingsociety

duckofminerva
themonkeycage
rustbeltintellectual
changingsociety
accursedshare

Any ideas about what this one might be "about"?

It is Martha Stewart's blog!

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:34PM (-04:00)

Safety as a social effect

Tuesday, July 15, 2008



Some organizations pose large safety issues for the public because of the technologies and processes they encompass. Industrial factories, chemical and nuclear plants, farms, mines, and aviation all represent sectors where safety issues are critically important because of the inherent risks of the processes they involve. However, "safety" is not primarily a technological characteristic; instead, it is an aggregate outcome that depends as much on the social organization and management of the processes involved as it does on the technologies they employ. (See an earlier posting on technology failure.)

We can define safety by relating it to the concept of "harmful incident". A harmful incident is an occurrence that leads to injury or death of one or more persons. Safety is a relative concept, in that it involves analysis and comparison of the frequencies of harmful incidents relative to some measure of the volume of activity. If the claim is made that interstate highways are safer than county roads, this amounts to the assertion that there are fewer accidents per vehicle-mile on the former than the latter. If it is held that commercial aviation is safer than automobile transportation, this amounts to the claim that there are fewer harms per passenger-mile in air travel than auto travel. And if it is observed that the computer assembly industry is safer than the mining industry, this can be understood to mean that there are fewer harms per person-day in the one sector than the other. (We might give a parallel analysis of the concept of a healthy workplace.)

This analysis highlights two dimensions of industrial safety: the inherent capacity for creating harms associated with the technology and processes in use (heavy machinery, blasting, and uncertain tunnel stability in mining, in contrast to a computer and a red pencil on the editorial offices of a newspaper), and the processes and systems that are in place to guard against harm. The first set of factors is roughly "technological," while the second set is social and organizational.

Variations in safety records across industries and across sites within a given industry provide an excellent tool for analyzing the effects of various institutional arrangements. It is often possible to pinpoint a crucial difference in organization -- supervision, training, internal procedures, inspection protocols, etc. -- that can account for a high accident rate in one factory and a low rate in an otherwise similar factory in a different state.

One of the most important findings of safety engineering is that organization and culture play critical roles in enhancing the safety characteristics of a given activity -- that is to say, safety is strongly influenced by social factors that define and organize the behaviors of workers, users, or managers. (See Charles Perrow, Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies and Nancy Leveson, Safeware: System Safety and Computers, for a couple of excellent treatments of the sociological dimensions of safety.)

This isn't to say that only social factors can influence safety performance within an activity or industry. In fact, a central effort by safety engineers involves modifying the technology

or process so as to remove the source of harm completely -- what we might call "passive" safety. So, for example, if it is possible to design a nuclear reactor in such a way that a loss of coolant leads automatically to shutdown of the fission reaction, then we have designed out of the system the possibility of catastrophic meltdown and escape of radioactive material. This might be called "design for soft landings".

However, most safety experts agree that the social and organizational characteristics of the dangerous activity are the most common causes of bad safety performance. Poor supervision and inspection of maintenance operations leads to mechanical failures, potentially harming workers or the public. A workplace culture that discourages disclosure of unsafe conditions makes the likelihood of accidental harm much greater. A communications system that permits ambiguous or unclear messages to occur can lead to air crashes and wrong-site surgeries.

This brings us at last to the point of this posting: the observation that safety data in a variety of industries and locations permit us to probe organizational features and their effects with quite a bit of precision. This is a place where institutions and organizations make a big difference in observable outcomes; safety is a consequence of a specific combination of technology, behaviors, and organizational practices. This is a good opportunity for combining comparative and statistical research methods in support of causal inquiry, and it invites us to probe for the social mechanisms that underlie the patterns of high or low safety performance that we discover.

Consider one example. Suppose we are interested in discovering some of the determinants of safety records in deep mining operations. We might approach the question from several points of view.

- We might select five mines with "best in class" safety records and compare them in detail with five "worst in class" mines. Are there organizational or techology features that distinguish the cases?
- We might do the large-N version of this study: examine a sample of mines from "best in class" and "worst in class" and test whether there are observed features that explain the differences in safety records. (For example, we may find that 75% of the former group but only 10% of the latter group are subject to frequent unannounced safety inspection. This supports the notion that inspections enhance safety.)
- We might compare national records for mine safety--say, Poland and Britain. We might then attempt to identify the general characteristics that describe mines in the two countries and attempt to explain observed differences in safety records on the basis of these characteristics. Possible candidates might include degree of regulatory authority, capital investment per mine, workers per mine, ...
- We might form a hypothesis about a factor that should be expected to enhance safety -- a company-endorsed safety education program, let's say -- and then randomly assign a group of mines to "treated" and "untreated" groups and compare safety records. (This is a quasi-experiment; see an earlier posting for a discussion of this mode of reasoning.) If we find that the treated group differs significantly in average safety performance, this supports the claim that the treatment is causally relevant to the safety outcome.

Investigations along these lines can establish an empirical basis for judging that one or more organizational features A, B, C have consequences for safety performance. In order to be confident in these judgments, however, we need to supplement the empirical analysis with a theory of the mechanisms through which features like A, B, C influence behavior in such a way as to make accidents more or less likely.

Safety, then, seems to be a good area of investigation for researchers within the general framework of the new institutionalism, because the effects of institutional and organizational differences emerge as observable differences in the rates of accidents in comparable industrial settings. (See Mary Brinton and Victor Nee, The New Institutionalism in Sociology, for a collection of essays on this approach.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 03:34PM (-04:00)

Intellectual leaders

Friday, July 18, 2008

In 2005 the Nouvel Observateur published a special issue devoted to "25 grands penseurs du monde entier" -- 25 great global thinkers. (The issue was published separately as **Le monde selon les grands penseurs actuels.**) The selection of thinkers was excellent: Stanley Cavell, Souleymane Diagne, Nestor Garcia Canclini, Sudhir Kakar, Vladimir Kantor, José Gil, Ian Hacking, Candido Mendes, Slavoj Zizek, Jon Elster, Kwame Appiah, Giorgio Agamben, Axel Honneth, Martha Nussbaum, Carlos Maria Vilas, Simon Blackburn, Toni Negri, Charles Taylor, Peter Sloterdijk, Richard Rorty, Philip Petitt, Daniel Innerarity, Jaakko Hintikka, Amartya Sen, and Michael Walzer. The volume consists of smart articles about each thinker offering a brief but meaningful précis of the thinker's main contributions, followed usually by a short impromptu interview with the subject. (Here is a brief description available online.)

The volume begins with these words:

A l'heure oú l'on parle d'une communauté intellectuelle mondiale virtuelle, on pourrait croire que ce que la planète compte de penseurs originaux est connu de tous ou, à tout le moins, accessible et disponsible à tous. Et pourtant, le provincialisme intellectuel sévit un peu partout, ainsi qu'en témoigne chez nous le germanopratisme de la classe intello-médiatique. On continue d'écrire et de réfléxir ici dans l'ignorance la plus totale de ce que d'éminents penseurs étrangers ont produit là.
A very strong impression of polyglot global intellect emerges from a reading of the whole issue. The collection as a whole is a great antidote to the various forms of parochialism to which the intellectual world is prone -- national assumptions, disciplinary assumptions, north-south assumptions. These thinkers are original, innovative, and usually boundary-crossing. And they are most frequently concerned with issues that are front and center in the task of understanding and improving the global world we collectively inhabit.

There are quite a few cross-cutting themes that recur across various groups of these thinkers. (It would be a very interesting exercise to "tag" each of these thinkers with a handful of topics and then map the relationships among them.) And certainly this is true: we will collectively do a better job of understanding and improving our global world, if we find ways of engaging with the thinking, issues, and frameworks of observers throughout the world. Sociology and philosophy both require new ideas -- and a deep and sustained international conversation can be a source of ideas and corrections to old ideas.

It is very interesting to take stock of the ways that the Internet can now facilitate these international conversations. YouTube is a good example; mixed among the millions of videos of pets and birthday parties are invaluable snippets of insight from the world's most innovative thinkers. Certainly it would be possible to conduct a transformative advanced seminar in social theory -- perhaps online! -- based on materials and videos

available on YouTube. But it is interesting as well what we can't yet find on YouTube: selections from intellectuals and theorists from the developing world. It is substantially more difficult to locate web-based resources documenting the thinking of intellectuals from Africa, Latin America, or China.

Here are some YouTube resources on several of the thinkers included in the Nouvel Obs list. Roughly half of the people on the list are featured with snippets of lectures or interviews on YouTube. Think of this posting as a "mash-up" of great ideas and critical thinking.

Amartya Sen, March, 2005

Martha Nussbaum, 2006

Slavoj Zizek - Rules, Race, and Mel Gibson 2006 1/8, European Graduate School

Anthony Appiah, commencement speech at Dickinson College, 2008

Tony Negri, 2008

Stanley Cavell, 2002

Candido Mendes

Giorgio Agamben

Peter Sloterdijk

Richard Rorty

Daniel Innerarity

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:18AM (-04:00)

Literary tradition and social identity

Sunday, July 20, 2008

Literary traditions are sometimes thought to have an underlying interconnectedness and coherence that makes them more than simply a group of works sharing geography or group. Irish poetry and drama, for example, extend over several centuries, involving writers with a range of voices and preoccupations; and yet it is often thought that they are distinctively "Irish." How should we conceptualize this notion? And how does it relate to the concept of a social identity?

One might speculate that the continuity of a literary tradition derives from two social factors: first, that authors directly and indirectly respond to the writings of other authors in their tradition; and second, that writers express themes in their work that derive from a cultural tradition that they hold in common with other writers in this literary tradition. If, for example, there is a long oral tradition of popular songs and poetry that would have been a formative part of most Irish writers' experience as children, then it would be understandable if the cadences and phrases of this oral tradition infused their literary

writings. If there are historical moments in the history of the Irish people -- Easter 1916, perhaps -- that are focal points for cultural meanings and historical turning points for ordinary Irish people -- then, once again, we might expect that themes surrounding these historical moments will recur in the production of Irish literature. And, of course, once a Goldsmith, Joyce, Yeats, or Heaney has created his poetry -- this constitutes an exemplar within the literary tradition itself that influences other Irish writers.



So there are a couple of social mechanisms that we can cite as providing "microfoundations" for the production of a national literary tradition. However, there are dimensions of variation and dissent that make the idea of a coherent and guiding literary tradition more difficult to sustain. It is recognized within most literary traditions that there are different streams of influence, with diverging literary styles and presentations. It is also recognized at a point in time that some great writers offer a literature that is strikingly at odds with the tradition from which they emerge. And it must also be recognized that large literary traditions -- the literature of India, American literature, Caribbean literature -- represent the confluence of different voices and different cultural experiences. And often these voices are deeply at odds with each other and with the dominant social order -- Jack London's novels represent a very different perspective on the United States than those of Henry James.

Within the literature of the United States -- what is often called "American literature" in US college English courses -- we can find a diversity of influences at almost every level of scale: the New England novel, African-American songs and stories, women's novels and journals, ... And within each we can discern important variations with cross-cutting influences -- the African-American voice of the deep south is evidently different from that of Chicago or Harlem or Los Angeles.

So we would certainly want to recognize that great writers are more than simply an expression of their literary or social tradition; rather, they find their voice and perspective through a dense interaction with culture, history, daily experience, race, gender, poetry, song, and dozens of other influences. And their products are often both innovative and "traditional". The novels of James Baldwin capture and embody many aspects of African-American experience and literature; they in turn contribute to the meaning of African-American literature post-Baldwin; but in the end they transcend the framework of a fixed formula. Baldwin's novels are original and particular -- not simply an expression of "the African-American tradition."

So from this point of view it seems that the idea of a literary tradition recedes from the metaphor of a compact, tightly bunched set of texts, to a meandering confluence of many cultural traditions and voices. This suggests that we need a metaphor that captures the diversity of voice and influence better than the idea of a river or stream.

This set of questions is relevant to the idea of a social identity as well. First is the obvious connection: if there is such a thing as "Irish social identity," it is plausible that this identity plays into the production of Irish literature. But the points raised here about diversity of experience and the non-reducibility of one writer's literature to a formula are also valid

when we consider ascriptions of social identities. Rather than imagining that a person embodies the social identity of her own group, we should recognize that each person's social identity is a complicated mix of influences and commitments. Rather than "Sally is catholic", we might be better to observe that: "Sally is a mid-western Catholic with a feminist bent and a taste for punk music."

This suggests to me that we encounter in both traditions and identities, a kind of social construct that in a sense disappears as we increase the resolution of study; through closer study we come to see the variations as much as the commonalities within a group of people or a group of texts. Does this imply that identities and traditions do not exist? It does not. Both function as real social causes and influences. But both need to be understood as fluid, heterogeneous compounds rather than as essential, abiding realities. Posted by Daniel Little at 05:02PM (-04:00)

Action and its causes

Wednesday, July 23, 2008



What is an action? And, eventually, what role does action play in history?

There is a large philosophical arena that focuses on the first part of this question. And basically, it comes down to "persons intervening intentionally". Persons commit actions. Persons have beliefs, desires, intentions, plans, and goals; they have reasons for what they do; they have emotions and aversions; they have habits. Persons also have freedom: they have the ability to choose to act or not to act, in typical circumstances.

These components all support the idea of the agent as a conscious, intentional intervener: the agent intervenes in the world in some way, in order to bring about an outcome that he/she desires or intends, based on her beliefs about the causal relationships that exist between the intervention and the outcome. Purpose, beliefs, freedom to choose, and selected intervention fit together as an integrated ideal type of "action".

This construction fits together into the Aristotelian idea of purposive action, or rational-intentional action. But consider a few variations of individual behavior that seem to cut in a different direction: behavior following a script, reflexive or instinctive behavior, impulsive behavior, self-destructive behavior, self-deceptive behavior, possessed behavior, coerced behavior. In each instance we lose an element that plays a key role in the purposive/intentional description of action above: self-direction, intentionality, self-control, rational goals and purposes, and freedom. We might take these instances to describe cases of behavior that fall short of "action"; or we might hold that there is a range of degrees of intentionality associated with action, from fully free and deliberative choice to programmed or impulsive behaviors.

So the traditional rational-intentional theory of action remains a partial view. In addition to rational-intentional action and its variants, we can think of a range of other varieties that have little in common with this goal-directed model: expressive action, role-driven action, dramaturgical action, emotional action, ... (I believe that Bourdieu's conception of habitus

falls in this general domain.) Here we have a number of paradigms of action that we can observe in everyday life, that provide an intelligible understanding of "what is she doing, and why?", and that appear to have a fundamentally different structure from the rational-intentional model. These actions express or enact rather than aim; or if they have an aim, it is to create a certain effect in the viewer.

We thus need to broaden the definition of action. We might say more generally that "action" is a particular construction of "behavior" -- it is an event of individual behavior that derives from a person's mentality (as opposed to a conditioned response, a reflex, or a Manchurian candidate device). But the facts about mentality that can underlie an action are diverse: purposes, goals, allegiances, passions, features of identity, a sense of history, and aspects of role self-ascription, for example.

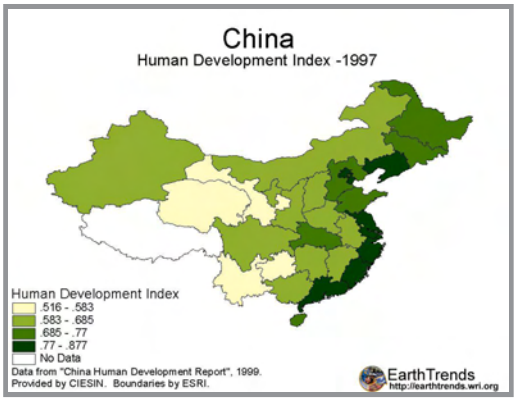
Now turn to the question of interpretation. The wide range of possible mental contexts of behavior means that the task of interpretation is a challenging one. The intellectual task of interpretation is to arrive at an understanding of the agent's behavior as action. This means arriving at a theory or construction attributing mental states to the actor that come together in such a way as to produce the action that was performed. Perhaps we might interpret Richard Nixon's final year in office as the resultant of several distinct mental activities and states: self-deception, rational calculation, an emotional unwillingness to be defeated, and a degree of weakness of the will. Or consider Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's interpretation of the actions of dozens of people in a massacre in Romans in 1580 in Le Carnaval De Romans De La Chandeleur. The actions seem prima facie incomprehensible; so the historian's task is to arrive at an interpretation of the beliefs, impulses, group dynamics, and practices that existed at the time in the context of which the actions "make sense." (See Paul Ricoeur and John Thompson's Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation.)

If we take the view that social outcomes are ultimately the result of the actions of individuals, then we plainly need to have a more nuanced and satisfactory framework of analysis within which to understand "action". Rational-choice theory is one such framework; Aristotelian theory of deliberation is a somewhat broader framework. But it is plain that the origins, motives, dynamics, and meanings of individual actions are broader and more heterogeneous than these rational-intentional theories would suggest. Purposive action is an important part of the story of social action -- but it is only a part.

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:42PM (-04:00)

Rising income inequality in China

Friday, July 25, 2008



Allan Wheatley writes an important article in Reuters this week about the situation of rising income inequalities in China as part and parcel of the booming economic growth the country has witness for the past two decades. Several key facts emerge from the piece: While spectacular affluence is emerging at the top end of China's economic hierarchy, 204 million people lived on less than $1.25 per day in 2005. China's Gini coefficient of income inequality

rose from 40.7 in 1993 to 47.4 in 2004, according to an Asian Development Bank report -- a remarkably steep and rapid rise. (This compares to a Gini coefficient of income inequality in India of only 36.2.) And inequalities of income between urban and rural people continue to rise. Wheatley indicates that some experts believe that this phenomenon is the result of both rapid economic growth and a set of policies by the Chinese government that favor efficiency over equity. And some experts believe that these rising inequalities are a significant source of risk for social stability in future decades.

Wheatley bases most of his article on the recent work of the World Bank's chief economist, Justin Yifu Lin, formerly a leading professor at Peking University. Lin and colleagues have published a collection of papers titled China's Dilemma, which attempts to identify the economic policies that have resulted in this sustained rise in income inequality. (The volume was co-published by Australian National University and Asian Pacific Press and the table of contents is available online.) As Wheatley summarizes the findings, the Chinese government's policies concerning economic growth have favored "efficiency" and corporations over "equity" and workers. And Lin argues that state policies actually protect and subsidize corporations, resulting in a massive transfer of wealth and income to the most affluent.

All of this suggests to me the importance of returning to some of the important discussions of poverty and growth that were so dynamic in the 1970s. Development theorists such as Hollis Chenery (Redistribution with Growth) and Irma Adelman (Economic growth and social equity in developing countries) gave careful analysis to the institutional context of economic growth, and put forward a strong argument for the idea that poverty alleviation needs to be built into the growth strategy from the beginning. Both focused their attention on the institutions through which income is generated -- largely property holdings in land for peasants -- and argued that redistribution of property entitlements needed to be a structural feature of equitable economic growth.

It was neglect, not factual or policy weakness, that led to the eclipsing of this line of thought in development circles and World Bank thinking. The Washington Consensus essentially put aside the idea that there are alternative pathways of economic growth, some of which are more favorable to equity than others.

China's current theory of economic development seems closer to neo-liberal orthodoxy than it does to a progressive "poor-first" policy mix that would have the most sustained impact on China's poor.

(There is more discussion of the poverty-first approach to development thinking in an unpublished paper on my research site, Putting the Poor First.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:27PM (-04:00)

China's many revolutions

Monday, July 28, 2008

It is worth reflecting a bit on how absolutely tumultuous China's history has been since the Communist Revolution in 1949. The Great Leap Forward and consequent famine -- 1958-60, in excess of 20 million famine deaths. The Cultural Revolution -- 1966-1976, in excess of 1.5 million deaths by violence, many times that number of maimed and ruined lives. The Democracy movement and Tiananmen Square and its dramatic suppression -- 1989, unknown thousands of victims. And since the early 1980s, economic reforms, rapid growth, and a substantial degree of social transformation.

If you consider these events in terms of age cohorts, the historical experience of almost



every generation has been a traumatic one. Chinese men and women born in 1930 were teenagers during the Revolution and experienced famine, chaos, civil violence, and economic reform in the remainder of their lives. The generation born in 1950 experienced the GLF famine as children, they were the teen-aged militants in middle school who formed the Red Guards, they experienced years of rustication in the countryside in the 1970s, they returned to universities after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, they participated in or observed the tumult of Tiananmen Square as they approached their forties, and they participated in China's economic reforms in their forties and fifties. This is my own age cohort in the United States, and I am just amazed to consider the rapidity and depth of history this generation has lived through.

The children of the 1950 generation were born in 1970. These children largely escaped the violence of the Cultural Revolution. Tiananmen Square was a reality for them in their teens. Their generation has been at the center of the dynamism of entrepreneurial China, with broadened opportunities in education and business. They have some of the expertise and comfort with the Internet that allows them to bridge to the China if the twenty-first century. And their standard of living -- for urban people anyway -- is dramatically improved over that of the previous generation.

And of course the generation of 1990 is the youth generation of today. This is the generation that will set China's course for the next half century, and it appears to be quite different from previous cohorts. In a conversation with four graduate students at Tsinghua University I gained a very vivid sense of the generational change that is occurring today. Three were born in 1980 and one was born five years later. I asked them about some of the values and cultural expectations of young Chinese people. The three older students laughed and said, "we don't understand him at all! Even the music he likes makes no sense to us."

These generations surely created vastly different mentalities for themselves -- different ideas about politics, equality, morality, and social stability. The ideologies of each generation were shaped and burned by the super-heated political struggles through which they passed. And surely their thoughts about what China should become, what standards of fairness should be respected, and how they should live their lives, are very deeply affected by their generational experiences.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:15AM (-04:00)

Bad behavior

Monday, August 04, 2008



How do we explain the occurrence of anti-social behavior that we witness in everyday life? For that matter, how do we explain the more common occurrence of good behavior?

There are numerous extreme examples of anti-social behavior. But more prosaic examples are more interesting.

- A passenger on a jet airliner becomes enraged at being denied additional alcohol; screams at and punches flight attendants; attempts to open the hatch at 20,000 feet.
- A couple continue to talk loudly on their cellphones -- during a blacktie dinner, interfering with the keynote speaker's presentation. When asked to be quiet, they say indignantly, "this is important."
- A business traveler marches to the front of the security line and squeezes in front, saying, "I'm in a rush."
- A parent enters a crowded elevator with a three-year-old child and stands by as the child presses all 15 buttons.

Most people are "polite". Most people treat others with consideration and respect. Most recognize the limits imposed on their behavior by the needs, wants and rights of others. But some do not -- they behave badly.

I'm mostly interested here in the minor forms of bad behavior -- disturbing or endangering others, confronting others with aggressively rude behavior, taking more than a reasonable amount of "space" in public settings. Behaving boorishly is what I'm talking about -- noisy, intrusive, rude, and self-centered actions that impose on others or that greatly privilege one's own immediate wants. This is the kind of behavior that once was attributed to American tourists, though today it seems to be the monopoly of no particular nationality. (I've just been on vacation, so I've been exposed to a lot of it.)

So now to hypotheses. Perhaps people behave badly because --

- They don't see how their behavior affects other people.
- They haven't internalized the norms defining appropriate behavior in public.
- They reason that the norms don't apply to them in these circumstances.
- They overvalue their own importance in a social setting. "My needs are more important than yours."
- They think "I deserve this -- I've worked for it and these other people can take it or leave it."

What these hypotheses amount to is either a failure to recognize the nature of one's behavior in the circumstances, a failure to have adequately internalized the relevant

social norms of behavior, an inability to recognize the legitimate and normal wants of others, or combinations of all these.

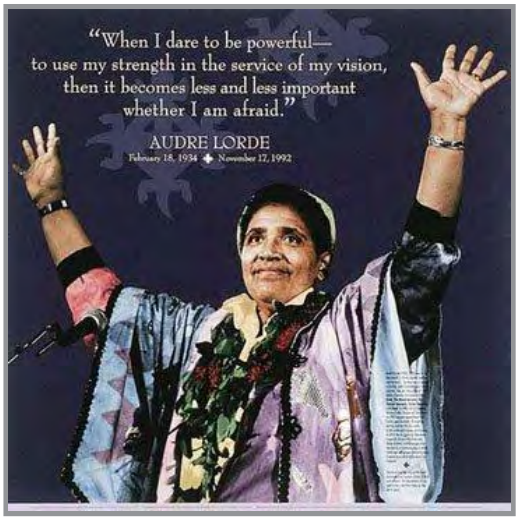
This subject is relevant to "understandingsociety" because it fundamentally has to do with social behavior, norms, and the cognitive-practical frameworks through which people generate their actions. In order to understand this behavior we need to know how people understand their own presence within a social setting. We need to know how they construct an ongoing representation along these lines "What's going on here? What's my role in this social encounter? What's expected of me? How much entitlement do I have to shape the encounter, versus the others present?" And we need to know how important conformance to local norms is to them. The oilman talking too loudly in the dining room at the Paris Ritz-Carlton may not know that local standards call for more decorous conversation, he may be thinking he's in his own private club back in Houston -- or he may just not care about the standards and the peace and quiet of the other guests.

Seen properly, then, this is an occasion for verstehen -- interpretation of the puzzling actions of others in terms of an extended hypothesis about the states of mind and motive from which the action emanated and "makes sense". And there is a lot of social cognition -- or failures of cognition -- that goes into bad behavior.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:03AM (-04:00)

Components of one's "social identity"

Monday, August 04, 2008



A social identity is a complex thing. It involves the ways in which one characterizes oneself, the affinities one has with other people, the ways one has learned to behave in stereotyped social settings, the things one values in oneself and in the world, and the norms that one recognizes or accepts governing everyday behavior. And it profoundly affects the ways we behave and respond to the world.

So a social identity invokes a number of different areas of psychological competence: knowledge, motivation, perception, memory, personality, and emotion, to name a few. And yet one's social identity seems to stand a bit apart from any of these psychological concepts singly. Cognitive psychology focuses on some aspects of this mix; social psychology and personality psychology focuses on other aspects; but there is no area of psychology that attempts to capture all of "social identity" as a psychological real process or structure.

Moreover, a social identity is embodied in an individual; and yet it is produced by the experiences we have in relations to other individuals and groups. A social identity can be said to be a feature of a group or a community as much as it is a feature of particular individuals within a given community. And this fact is causally important: we can't explain the individual's identity without reference to the sustained and fairly consistent features of

the group with respect to its social identity. So a social identity has an aspect of "social-ness" that cautions us against a narrowly psychological interpretation of the concept.

We might single out a number of aspects of a social identity as a psychologically real construct, embodied in a particular person through a particular body of experience and a specific location within a community:

- an epistemic frame in terms of which I understand the social world
- an element of my psycho-cognitive-emotional apparatus
- a model of how to behave in certain common social settings
- a self-ascription defining the features of action and comportment that are most defining of "me" in the world
- a self-valorization of the things that are most worthwhile to me
- an account of who I'm related to and similar to; who my affinity groups are
- a map expressing my location within a particular extended community

In addition, it is important to recognize the feature of "intersectionality" that characterizes social identities: the ways in which one's identity involves a crossing of different grounds of identity and affinity. (University of Michigan social psychologist Elizabeth Cole has published a useful recent article called "Coalitions as a Model for Intersectionality: From Practice to Theory" in Sex Roles; here is a link. I also found the Wikipedia article on intersectionality to be valuable.)

Identities aren't "pure" expressions of one particular feature of one's location in the social world; instead, features of sexual identity, geographical identity, class identity, racial and ethnic identity, professional identity, and cohort identity all play a role in constituting one's overall identity. This means that it is important to give concrete attention to the multiple forms of social influence and immersion through which a given individual comes to embody a complex social identity; we need to look to the microfoundations of identity formation. (See more on this approach here.)

And this point about intersectionality also raises the likelihood of internal conflict. One's identity as an Asian American may be in some conflict with features of identity derived from one's location within the hip-hop generation or one's professional status as a junior member of an accounting firm. And the modes of behavior implicated by one strand may be at odds with those created by the other strands.

Innovative efforts to provide fresh approaches to the study of social identities are emerging in several fields. Paula Moya and Michael Hames-Garcia's Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism is an introduction to a genuinely innovative approach to the study of identities that attempts to bring literary criticism, race and gender studies, and social theory into one extended discussion.

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:57AM (-04:00)

Rawls's schematic sociology

Wednesday, August 06, 2008

John Rawls offers an interesting thought along the way in his development of the theory of justice, on the question of the stability of a well-ordered society. Basically, the idea is that a set of principles of justice need to satisfy a condition of publicity and social stability: the principles need to be such that, when everyone knows that these are the principles that regulate their social interactions and know that all others have the same knowledge,

the society remains stable.

Rawls puts the point this way:
Now a well-ordered society is also regulated by its public conception of justice. This fact implies that its members have a strong and normally effective desire to act as the principles of justice require. Since a well-ordered society endures over time, its conception of justice is presumably stable: that is, when institutions are just (as defined by this conception), those taking part in these arrangements acquire the corresponding sense of justice and desire to do their part in maintaining them. One conception of justice is more stable than another if the sense of justice that it tends to generate is stronger and more likely to override disruptive inclinations and if the institutions it allows foster weaker impulses and temptations to act unjustly. The stability of a conception depends upon a balance of motives: the sense of justice that it cultivates and the aims that it encourages must normally win out against propensities toward injustice. (A Theory of Justice, pp. 454-455)

What is interesting here is that Rawls is engaging in a bit of sociological theorizing in this passage -- not simply apriori moral philosophy. He is offering an analysis of the social psychology and motivations of people living within various frameworks of justice -- the principles governing the basic institutions and laws of a society -- and he hypothesizes that the social psychology of citizens is influenced by the features of justice that are embodied in their society. The resulting social psychology in turn produces behavior that is more or less compatible with the continued stability of the institutions and laws. A given set of institutions, generated by a certain theory of justice, gives rise to motivations on the part of citizens in ordinary life; and these motivations can be either stabilizing or destabilizing to the postulated institutions and framework of justice. There is a feedback loop from institutions to social psychology to behavior to basic institutions.

This raises an interesting question: how much of a role does a shared sense of justice play in sustaining a peaceful and stable society?

One piece of the answer is straightforward: injustice is a common cause of societal conflict and violence. Basic social relations that are perceived to involve unfair exploitation of one group by another are an obvious source of motivation towards resistance and group violence. Contrastively, institutions that are publicly recognized to treat all citizens fairly may promote a social psychology and a set of behaviors that are affirming of the institutions -- leading to harmonious social life and stable institutions.

So Rawls's argument here does suggest an interesting conjunction of sociological reality and normative reasoning about justice. Rawls returns to this topic in Political Liberalism, where he questions the strong assumptions associated with the idea of a well-ordered society. He offers instead the somewhat less demanding idea of an "overlapping consensus" as sufficient for a stable democracy.
But a sense of being treated unfairly is only one out of numerous causes of social conflict. Conflict can arise over numerous other types of issues as well: ethnic or religious identities, racism, neighborhood boundaries, and state policy, to name several. And these areas of potential conflict are not addressed by Rawls's sketch of the sociology of a just society.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:12PM (-04:00)

Leaders within complex organizations

Thursday, August 07, 2008



Complex organizations depend on an extended group of leaders who have the responsibility of articulating and carrying out the missions of the organization. Leadership groups within complex organizations should be expected to be a factor that influences the performance of the organization, for better or worse. Here I am thinking of medium-sized organizations -- 500-2500 employees -- with some degree of functional specialization -- for example, a manufacturing company with divisions of manufacturing, marketing and sales, product design, finance and accounting, human resources, and government relations or a university with divisions of academic affairs, student recruitment, business and finance, student affairs, and external relations.

The complexity of an organization stems from the fact that a number of different kinds of activities are being carried out simultaneously by different groups of people, and there is no authoritative single "master bureaucrat" who sets tasks and oversees results for all agents of the organization. Inevitably there is some degree of decentralization of activity, with decision-makers at a variety of levels who are empowered to set the agendas of their units in such a way as to best achieve the overall goals of the organization. And higher-level leaders have a responsibility for attempting to achieve a suitable degree of collaboration and communication among lower-level leaders to make it likely that the activities of the units will contribute to a coherent and effective effort to achieve the organization's goals. And complex organizations that fail to achieve a sufficient degree of coordination of effort internally wind up being pretty unsuccessful; their product is often one that reflects the specific needs of each of the units, but fails to satisfy the overall goals of the organization. (This is the point of the joke that a camel is a horse designed by committee.)

Here are some of the central tasks of an organization's leaders. Leaders help set the strategic direction for the organization; they implement actions and processes at unit-levels within the organization; they collaborate with each other in efforts to achieve higher effectiveness within and across units; they seek out opportunities for new activities or initiatives that will further one or more priorities for the organization. And, as anyone knows who has worked within a variety of organizations -- both organizations and leadership groups function at a very wide range of effectiveness, from the dysfunctional to the superb.

Why are leaders important to the effectiveness of the organization? Because they serve to articulate the goals of the organization and the sub-units; they work with others to articulate strategies and activities for achieving these goals; they motivate staff within their units to carry out strategies; and they have the organizational resources needed to arrive at collaborative efforts across units. Persons who are good at these various activities will make the organization more effective; and persons who are less good at them will pull the organization down. The leader who tends to demoralize his/her staff is

unlikely to be able to stimulate high-quality work within the unit; persons who defend their turf rather than looking for opportunities for cross-unit collaboration will interfere with the organization's ability to achieve coherence of effort and synergies of collaboration.

So what are some of the features of good leadership skills and a good leadership team? Here is the list I would offer as an observer of several organizations. Good leaders are cognitively and emotionally ready for collaboration; they are ready to see the gains that can come from honest and sustained efforts at solving problems that cut across the scope of several units. Second, good leaders are attuned to the shared mission and values that the organization has adopted. They don't excessively favor the particular interests of their unit over the larger priorities of the organization; instead, they attempt to align the activities of the unit with the priorities of the organization. Third, good leaders are committed to effective management of their own areas. They attempt to bring best practices into all the activities for which they are responsible. Fourth, they have the ability to motivate the members of their teams, building trust among team members and a degree of unity about the goals to which the unit is oriented. Fifth, they possess a willingness to innovate. They are problem-solvers who are actively seeking out new solutions to the problems their units face and the problems faced by the organization more generally. Finally, they have a fundamental willingness to think broadly about the organization's needs and priorities beyond their own specific areas of responsibility.

The defects that a leader or team can demonstrate are also fairly obvious. Lack of communication is a common fault within organizations, leading to circumstances in which other leaders and team members are in the dark about current plans and strategies. When Larry Bird stole the inbounds pass from Isiah Thomas in Game Six of the NBA Eastern finals in 1987, it was crucial that Dennis Johnson was already streaking to the basket. Second, bad leaders engage in gamesmanship and bureaucratic rivalries, aiming to achieve their ends in opposition to their peers. This obviously undermines trust, and it makes collaboration all but impossible. Third, bad leaders are largely driven by narrow unit-based interests, or even their own personal interests, rather than the organizations priorities and goals. And finally, bad leaders may display poor skills in motivating and managing the staff of the unit.

These are a few speculative hypotheses about what makes one leadership group more effective than another. But the hard question is this: what empirical methods exist for evaluating these hypotheses about effective leadership and management? Are there credible methods of investigation that would permit organizational researchers to evaluate the causal importance of some of these features of leadership? Or is "leadership" just one of those topics that has to be left to the "management theory" books that one finds in airport bookshops?

This topic is relevant for understanding society, because much of the action in contemporary society is carried out by the complex organizations described here. So having a better idea of how priorities and goals are linked up with concrete activities within an organization is a very important part of understanding the large social processes that jointly determine social change in the twenty-first century: economic development, social movements, educational progress, health care systems, and the like.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:46AM (-04:00)

History, memory, and narrative

Tuesday, August 12, 2008



What is the relation between "history", "memory", and "narrative"? We might put these concepts into a crude map by saying that "history" is an organized and evidence-based presentation of of the processes and events that have occurred for a people over an extended period of time; "memory" is the personal recollections and representations of individuals who lived through a series of events and processes; and "narratives" are the stories that historians and ordinary people weave together to make sense of the events and happenings through which a people and a person have lived. We use narratives to connect the dots of things that have happened; to identify causes and meanings within this series of events; and to select the "important" events and processes out from the ordinary and inconsequential.

If we think that "history" should be informed by the ways in which historical events were experienced by individuals, then we must also address the question of how to use the evidence of memory as a prism for attributing subjective, lived experience to the people who lived this history. If we are interested in the Great Leap Forward famine years, for example, we need to know more than the timeline of harvest failure or the map of grain distress across China; we need to know how various groups experienced this time of hardship. And for this we need to have access to documents and interviews reporting the experience of individuals in their own words; we need to have access to memory.

A particularly valuable body of work on China's recent history is currently underway, in the form of careful use of oral histories, memoirs, and other expressions of personal memories of some of China's most dramatic chapters of national history. C. K. Lee and Guobin Yang have presented some excellent examples of this work in Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memory in Reform China. The book contains chapters that draw out important new insights into the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, the changing conditions of women, cinema, the experience of ethnic minorities, and the occurrence of violence and disorder in the past sixty years in China's history. Every chapter sheds new light on something of interest; the book is an absorbing read. Especially interesting are chapters by Paul Pickowicz and Guobin Yang.

In "Rural Protest Letters: Local Perspectives on the State's War on Tillers" Paul Pickowicz describes an extensive collection of interviews and private writings of a single Hebei peasant leader, Geng Xiufeng, written between the 1950s and the 1990s. Geng's writings often take the form of protest letters, addressed to leaders extending from local party officials to Chairman Mao himself. Geng also maintained a journal in which he recorded his observations of the effects of various state-directed reforms of agriculture -- and the inimical effects these reforms had on peasant standard of living. Geng was a peasant activist and leader in the 1940s in support of rural cooperatives, as a practical mechanism for improving agriculture and improving local peasants' standard of living. And he turns out to be an astute and honest observer of the twists and turns of policy disaster (rapid collectivization of agriculture), corruption, and disregard of peasants' welfare by the CCP. (This latter is the meaning of Pickowicz's phrase, "the state's war on

tillers.") Pickowicz had conducted a number of interviews with Geng in the 1970s and 1980s, and was greatly surprised to learn that Geng had written dozens of protest letters and had accumulated a multi-volume memoir that chronicled many of these social observations about change in North China. The content of these writings is fascinating; but even more important is the evidence they offer of the astute abilities possessed by ordinary Chinese people in observing and criticizing the processes of change that enmeshed them. These manuscripts offer Pickowicz -- and us -- a window into the consciousness of some ordinary rural people as China's history enveloped them; and they make evident the fact that Chinese peasants were not mere passive instruments, but rather practical, observant, and sometimes wise thinkers about revolution and reform.

Guobin Yang's article, "'A Portrait of Martyr Jiang Qing': The Chinese Cultural Revolution on the Internet" touches the other end of the information spectrum -- not handwritten letters and reflections penned in the 1950s, but over 100 contemporary websites devoted to archiving and chronicling the Cultural Revolution. There are widely divergent stories that can be told in defining the Cultural Revolution as an episode of history: an excess of leftism, a deliberate use of power by China's leaders against each other and against society, a period of social hysteria, or even "still a good idea." (The latter is the theme taken by the website incorporated into Yang's title -- "A Portrait of Martyr Jiang Qing." This is one of the few publicly available websites that Yang unearthed that continues to glorify Madame Mao and her fellow radicals.) Yang demonstrates that we can learn a lot about how the current generation views the Cultural Revolution -- and the strands of disagreement that continue to divide opinion about its causes and meanings -- by examining in detail the editorial judgments and online commentaries that accompany these online "exhibition halls".

The use of photography and cinema to represent memory -- both individual and collective -- is an important theme in the volume. The photograph above, representing a "struggle" session against "class enemies," captures a particular moment in time -- two particular men, exposed to a particular crowd. It also emblemizes scenes that were common throughout China during the Cultural Revolution. And, presumably, it triggers very specific personal memories for individual Chinese people who lived through the Cultural Revolution, whether as victims, Red Guards, or bystanders. As David Davies notes in "Visible Zhiqing: The Visual Culture of Nostalgia among China's Zhiqing Generation", no photograph stands wholly by itself. But some photos have the directness and honesty needed to stand for a whole dimension of historical experience -- in this case, the violence and humiliation perpetrated against teachers, scholars, and officials by zealous mobs of Red Guards and their followers. In this way the photo can faithfully capture one important strand of the history of this period.

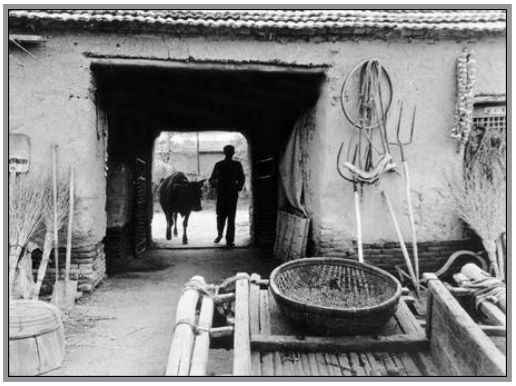
One thing I particularly appreciate in the volume is the innovative thinking it provides about the nexus of experience, identity, and history. The editors and contributors are very sensitive to the fact that there is no single "Hebei experience" or "Chinese women's experience"; instead, the oral history materials permit the contributors to discern both variation and some degree of thematicization of memory and identity.

Another important contribution of the volume is the emphasis it offers to the idea of the agency involved in memory. Memories must be created; agents must find frameworks within which to understand their moments of historical experience. "As people grope for moral and cognitive frameworks to understand, assess, and sometimes resist these momentous changes in their lives, memories of the revolution thrive" (1).

A third and equally important thrust of the volume is the persuasive idea that memories become part of the political mobilization possibilities that exist for a group. Groups find their collective identities through shared understandings of the past; and these shared understandings provide a basis for future collective action. So memory, identity, and mobilization hang together.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:48PM (-04:00)

What is a peasant?

Thursday, August 14, 2008



Quite a bit of China's history has been framed in terms of the role of the "peasant" in Chinese society. Historians consider the features of the peasant economy; they examine the occurrence and dynamics of peasant rebellions and peasant mobilization; they ask about peasant culture and consciousness. What is a peasant? Is it a sociologically useful concept?

To start, we might consider a simple definition. A peasant is a smallholding farmer, producing crops for family consumption and for market exchange, using family labor throughout the farming cycle. Peasants live in villages; they engage in face-to-face relations with neighboring farmers; they possess a diverse range of cultural and religious beliefs and practices; they fall within a diverse range of social networks and local organizations (kinship organizations, temples, labor-sharing networks). (Robert Netting's Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture provides a particularly astute analysis of peasant life.)

So peasants are farmers. But even within a society that is largely rural with a high percentage of smallholding farmers, there is still substantial social diversity within local society. Small traders, necromancers, martial arts instructors, bandits, minor officials, priests, moneylenders, elites, scholars, and large land owners all play roles within a peasant society -- but they are not peasants. Their incomes derive ultimately from the farm economy, but their lifestyles, standards of living, values, and social status are all distinct from those of peasant farmers. So there is occupational diversity within rural society in almost every part of China, and a "peasant society" consists of many people who are not themselves "peasants".

The definition of the peasant just offered focuses on the occupational or material situation of the individual. It is not surprising, then, that materialist social theory has given particular emphasis to the category of "peasant society" as a potentially explanatory social category. Marxist analysis gives substantial importance to the situation of peasants and workers, and other non-Marxist materialist thinkers have done so as well.

But we can reasonably ask whether this set of "existential" facts have very much to do with a person's mentality and political behavior. Recall the very great range of social environments in which farming takes place in China -- from the rice paddies and deltas of the lower Yangzi, to the wheat farms of Hebei and Shandong in the north, to the mountainous plots of Yunnan in the southwest. Recall as well the cultural diversity that

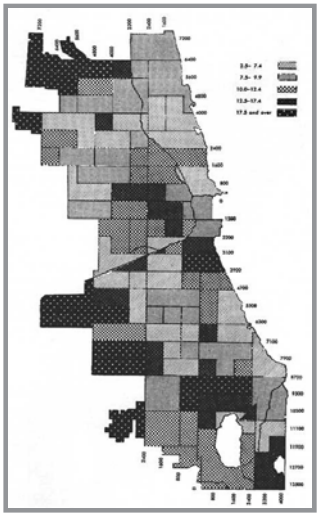
occurs across this range -- different ethnic groups, different local traditions, different religious and lineage practices. So it is worth asking the question, to what extent do members of village society share a peasant consciousness, simply in virtue of their social position as farmers? Is there any reason to believe that the material factors that define one's status as "peasant" are more fundamental to consciousness than the cultural or ethnic factors having to do with one's immediate social milieu? Does the peasantry constitute a distinct social group?

There are some shared features of peasant experience that would provide a partial answer to this question. First is the common experience of insecurity. Farmers are more vulnerable than most economic groups to the vagaries of weather, water, and soil. Second is the fact of surplus extraction. Because they are the most numerous group in most traditional societies, the state and other powerful agents in society have an interest in extracting part of the peasant's surplus from him/her. This occurs through rent, interest, and taxation. And it is a commonplace that the peasant's life is often held hostage to predatory surplus extraction. Peasants are close to be bottom of the ladder when it comes to power, status, and influence -- so they are vulnerable to exploitation.

These considerations suggest that there is in fact an important basis of group mobilization that is associated with one's status as "peasant". Farmers share an interest in famine relief, drought assistance, and collective action against predatory taxation or rent increases; so their status as peasants may contribute to deliberate efforts aimed at the development of class consciousness and group identity formation. Peasant organizations may emerge that deliberately cultivate political action and consciousness around peasant issues. And this in turn suggests a more complicated answer to the primary question here: one's status as a peasant may not determine one's outlook on the social world or one's mentality; but the struggles associated with making a life within the context of rents, taxation, drought, and famine may lead to the forging of a peasant consciousness that does in fact influence political behavior and solidarity.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:28AM (-04:00)

Composition of the social

Friday, August 15, 2008



Our social ontology needs to reflect the insight that complex social happenings are almost invariably composed of multiple causal processes rather than existing as unitary systems. The phenomena of a great social whole -- a city over a fifty-year span, a period of sustained social upheaval or revolution (Iran in the 1970s-1980s), an international trading system -- should be conceptualized as the sum of a large number of separate processes with intertwining linkages and often highly dissimilar tempos. We can provide analysis and theory for some of the component processes, and we can attempt to model the results of aggregating these processes. And we can attempt to explain the patterns and exceptions that arise as the consequence of one or more of these processes. Some of the subordinate processes will be significantly amenable to theorizing and projection, and some will not. And the totality of behavior will be more than the "sum" of the relatively limited number of processes that are amenable to theoretical analysis. This

means that the behavior of the whole will demonstrate contingency and unpredictability modulo the conditions and predictable workings of the known processes.

Consider the example of the development of a large city over time. The sorts of subordinate processes that I'm thinking of here might include --

- The habitation dynamics created by the nodes of a transportation system
- The dynamics of electoral competition governing the offices of mayor and city council
- The politics of land use policy and zoning permits
- The dynamics and outcomes of public education on the talent level of the population
- Economic development policies and tax incentives emanating from state government
- Dynamics of real estate system with respect to race
- Employment and poverty characteristics of surrounding region

Each of these processes can be investigated by specialists -- public policy experts, sociologists of race and segregation, urban politics experts. Each contributes to features of the evolving urban environment. And it is credible that there are consistent patterns of behavior and development within these various types of processes. This justifies a specialist's approach to specific types of causes of urban change, and rigorous social science can result.

But it must also be recognized that, there are system interdependencies among these groups of factors. More in-migration of extremely poor families may put more stress on the public schools. Enhancement of quality or accessibility of public schools may increase in-migration (the Kalamazoo promise, for example). Political incentives within the city council system may favor land-use policies that encourage the creation of racial or ethnic enclaves. So it isn't enough to understand the separate processes individually; we need to make an effort to discover these endogenous relations among them.

But over and above this complication of the causal interdependency of recognized factors, there is another and more pervasive complication as well. For any given complex social whole, it is almost always the case that there are likely to be additional causal processes that have not been separately analyzed or theorized. Some may be highly contingent and singular -- for example, the many effects that September 11 had on NYC. Others may be systemic and important, but novel and previously untheorized -- for example, the global information networks that Saskia Sassen emphasizes for the twenty-first century global city.

The upshot is that a complex social whole exceeds the particular theories we have created for this kind of phenomenon at any given point in time. The social whole is composed of lower-level processes; but it isn't exhausted by any specific list of underlying processes. Therefore we shouldn't imagine that the ideal result of investigation of urban phenomena is a comprehensive theory of the city -- the goal is chimerical. Social science is always "incomplete", in the sense that there are always social processes relevant to social outcomes that have not been theorized.

Is there any type of social phenomenon that is substantially more homogeneous than this description would suggest -- with the result that we might be able to arrive a neat, comprehensive theories of this kind of social entity? Consider these potential candidates: inner city elementary schools, labor unions, wars of national liberation, civil service bureaus, or multi-national corporations. One might make the case that these terms capture a group of phenomena that are fairly homogeneous and would support simple, unified theories. But I think that this would be mistaken. Rather, much the same kind of causal complexity that is presented by the city of Chicago or London is also presented by

elementary schools and labor unions. There are multiple social, cultural, economic, interpersonal, and historical factors that converge on a particular school in a particular place, or a particular union involving specific individuals and issues; and the characteristics of the school or the union are influenced by this complex convergence of factors. (On the union example, consider Howard Kimeldorf's fascinating study, Battling for American Labor: Wobblies, Craft Workers, and the Making of the Union Movement. Kimeldorf demonstrates the historical contingency and the plurality of social and business factors that led to the significant differences among dock workers' unions in the United States.)

What analytical frameworks available for capturing this understanding of the compositional nature of society? I have liked the framework of causal mechanisms, suggesting as it does the idea of there being separable causal processes underlying particular social facts that are diverse and amenable to investigation. The ontology of "assemblages" captures the idea as well, in its ontology of separable sub-processes. (Nick Srnicek provides an excellent introduction to assemblage theory in his master's thesis.) And the language of microfoundations, methodological localism, and the agent-structure nexus convey much the same idea as well. In each case, we have the idea that the social entity is composed of underlying processes that take us back in the direction of agents acting within the context of social and environmental constraints. And we have a premise of causal openness: the behavior of the whole is not fully determined by a particular set of subordinate mechanisms or assemblages.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:26AM (-04:00)

Trust

Thursday, August 21, 2008



What is the role of trust in ordinary social workings? I would say that a fairly high level of trust is simply mandatory in any social group, from a family to a workplace to a full society. Lacking trust, each agent is forced into a kind of Hobbesian calculation about the behavior of those around him or her, watching for covert strategies in which the other is trying to take advantage of oneself. The cost of self-protection is impossibly high in a zero-trust society. Gated communities don't help. We would need to have gated and solitary lives. Even our brothers and sisters, spouses, and offspring would have to be watched suspiciously. We would live like Howard Hughes at the end of his life.

To begin, what is trust? It is a condition of reliance on the statements, assurances, and basic good behavior of others. The status of commitments over time is essential to trust. We need to consider whether we can trust a neighbor who has promised to return a lawn mower -- will he keep his promise? Can we trust the car park attendant not to take the iPod from the glove compartment? Can we trust the phone company to not add hidden fees to our bill in a corporate decision that they won't be noticed by most consumers?



It is sort of a commonplace in moral philosophy that you can't trust a pure egoist or an act utilitarian. The reason is simple: trust means reliance on the correct behavior of other agents even when there is an opportunity for gain in incorrect behavior and the probability of detection and sanctions is low. The egoist will reason on the basis of the advantage he/she anticipates and will discount the low likelihood of sanction. But likewise, the act utilitarian will add up all the utilities created by "correct action" and "incorrect action", and will be bound to choose the action with the greater utility. The fact of an existing promise or other obligation will not change the calculation. So the act utilitarian cannot be trusted to honor his promises and obligations, no matter what.

Standards of "correct behavior" are difficult to articulate precisely, but here's a start: telling the truth, keeping promises and assurances when they come into play, acting according to generally shared rules of professional and social ethics, and respecting the rights of others. We sometimes describe people and organizations whose behavior conforms to these sorts of characteristics as possessing "integrity".

In general, agents whose behavior is governed solely by calculation of consequences cannot be trusted, since occasions requiring trust are precisely those in which we need to rely on others to do the right thing in spite of consequences that would favor doing the wrong thing. (For example, taking the iPod in circumstances where there are dozens of attendants and the theft cannot be attributed to one person; keeping the lawnmower if the owner is in a state of rapid-onset dementia; adding the phony charges in a business environment where it can be predicted with confidence that only 5% of customers will notice and the penalties are trivial.)

So there are two basic models of action that people can choose: consequentialist and "constrained by obligations" (deontological). The first approach is opportunistic and myopic; the other reflects integrity and the validity of long-term obligations.

But here we have a problem. The most ordinary social transactions become almost impossible in a no-trust environment. If I can't trust my bank to hold my savings honestly, or my employer to keep its commitments about my retirement accounts, or the passenger on the seat next to me on a long airplane flight to not go through my briefcase if I drift off to sleep -- then I am forced into a condition of exhausting, sleepless vigilance. And, of course, we do generally trust in these circumstances.

But it is an interesting problem for research to consider whether different societies and groups elicit and sustain different levels of trust in ordinary life, and what the institutional factors are that affect this outcome. Is there a higher level of trust in Bloomington, Illinois than Chicago or Houston? Is trust a feature of the learning environment through which people gain their social psychologies? Are there institutional features that encourage or discourage dispositions towards trust? And what are the compensating mechanisms through which social interactions proceed in a low-trust environment? Is that where "trust but verify" comes in?
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:11PM (-04:00)

Power and social class

Sunday, August 24, 2008



What does social class have to do with power? The two concepts represent theories about how a modern society works, and there are some fundamental relationships between them. But at bottom they are separate social factors that allow for independent forms of social causation. The first is fundamentally concerned with the economic structure of a society, the systems through which wealth is created and distributed, and the second is concerned with the expressions of politics within a society.

Both class and power can be placed into the dichotomies of structure and agency. The class system sets some of the parameters of "structure" within which individuals act, but it also creates some of the motivations and features of consciousness that constitute the agency of class actors. The forms of power present in a given society define some of the features of agency on the basis of which individuals and groups pursue their goals; but it is also fair to say that the institutions and social relations that define social power are also a part of the structured environment of action that is present in the social world. So both power and class are simultaneously features of structure and agency within a complex society; and the configurations created by class and power are causally inter-related without being isomorphic.

A class system can be defined as a system for producing social wealth in which productive resources and the results of production are unevenly divided across different groups. The producing class is "exploited" by the ascendant class: wealth is transferred from producers to owners. Serfs and lords, slaves and masters, workers and owners represent the primary classes of feudalism, ancient slavery, and nineteenth century capitalism. Within any society there are groups that fall outside the primary classes -- small traders, artisans, small farmers, intellectuals. But it is central to Marx's theory of class, that there is a primary cleavage between owners of the means of production and the direct producers, and that this cleavage embodies a fundamental conflict of interest between the two groups.

"Power" is a compound social characteristic in virtue of which an individual or group is able to compel the actions or inactions of other individuals or groups against their will or contrary to their interests, needs, and desires. Power derives from the ability to impose coercion -- truncheons, prisons, and punishment; and it derives from the ability of some agents within society to set the agenda for future action. Power is needed to get 1.5 million people to leave their homes in Beijing to make way for Olympics developments. Power is needed to prevent striking miners from shutting down La Paz. Power is needed to protect the glittering shop windows of Johannesburg from disaffected young people. Power is exercised by states -- through military and police, through agencies and bureaucracies, through legislation; it is exercised by corporations and other large private organizations; and it is exercised by social movements and other groups within society.

The two social factors are intertwined in at least three ways.

First, a class system constitutes a set of social inequalities within which there are deep conflicts of interest. So a class system sets the stage for the exercise of power; various groups have an interest in wielding power over others within a class system. Ascendant groups have an interest in sustaining the productive economic activities of subordinates whom they exploit, and they have an interest in squelching acts of resistance. But likewise, subordinate groups have an interest in using instruments of power to reduce or overturn the exploitative social relations within which they function.

Second, a class system assigns resources and positions to different groups and individuals that greatly influence the nature and weight of the instruments and tactics of power available to them. Owners have economic assets, alliances, and the state in their column. Producers have their numbers and their key locations in the economic process. A strike of rail workers is a substantial exercise of power, given the centrality of transport in a complex economy. So the particulars of a class system provide key determinants of the distribution of power within society.

Third, a class system also creates a subjectivity of power, powerlessness, and resistance that may iterate into new forms of the exercise of power. It may be an effective instrument of social control to cultivate a subjectivity of powerlessness in subordinate groups. And likewise, it may be materially empowering to subordinate groups to cultivate a culture of resistance -- by making collective action and solidarity more attainable, for example.

These are several ways in which facts about class and power intertwine. But power is wielded for non-economic purposes as well -- effecting the will of the state, achieving ethnic domination, and influencing culture, for example. So it would be incorrect to imagine that power is simply the cutting edge of class conflict.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:25PM (-04:00)

The difference ontology makes

Wednesday, August 27, 2008

Quite a few posts here over the past few months have been on the subject of social ontology: what can we say about the nature of the social world? I've focused on characteristics like heterogeneity, plasticity, and contingency, and have also given thought to some of the processes through which social phenomena are "composed" of lower-level processes and mechanisms. (The topics of methodological individualism, localism, and holism fall in this category.) Why are these questions important to the philosophy of social science? And how could they possibly contribute to better research and theory in the social sciences?

One answer is that it isn't really possible to investigate any domain without having some idea of what sorts of things the domain consists of. So attempting to arrive at perspicuous models of what the social world is made up of is a necessary step on the way to more specific forms of empirical and causal research.

A second answer derives from recognition of the harm that has been done to the cause

of knowledge by misconceived ontologies in the history of science. This has been especially true in areas of knowledge adjoining human life and activity -- radical behaviorism in psychology, naturalism and positivism in sociology, and what Andrew Abbott calls the "variables paradigm" in quantitative social science. Better science will result from more propititious ontology, because we won't be in the situation of trying to force the social world onto the wrong sorts of boxes.

Third, there are good reasons for thinking that reasoning about social ontology is possible. If ontological thinking were purely apriori, then we might be reasonably skeptical about our capacity to move from philosophy to the world. But we have a form of access to social reality that we lack for the realities of nature and mathematics: we are participants in social reality and our thoughts and actions are constitutive of that reality. So theorizing about social reality of ontology isn't wholly apriori; rather, it is more akin to a form of intelligent observation of real social processes around us. Ontological thinking is really a form of empirically informed theorizing, at a fairly abstract level.

Let's turn now to the question of how concretely better social ontological thinking can help create better social research.

Researchers will be encouraged to explore multiple methodologies and theories when a more satisfactory social ontology guides them. Pluralism finds strong support in the ontology explored here, given the emphasis offered to social heterogeneity and contingency.

Some specific research strategies and questions are likely to arise as a result of more adequate social ontologies. Questions about causal mechanisms and processes of composition will receive special attention.

Fields of research like comparative historical sociology and case study methods will receive theoretical support and encouragement, since these approaches are particularly well suited to the ontological ideas revolving around heterogeneity, plasticity, and composition.

So, to return to the original question: it is in fact very appropriate and potentially helpful for philosophy of social science to give more attention to social ontology than it has traditionally done. The social world of the twenty-first century is chaotic and rapidly changing, and we need better mental frameworks within which to attempt to make sense of this complexity and change.

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:37AM (-04:00)

Cooperatives within markets

Friday, August 29, 2008

In a recent post on ChangingSociety I considered the question whether households in a rural community might be able to achieve energy self-sufficiency based on the cultivation of crops such as cattails and community production of ethanol. One question raised there is whether it is possible to estimate the land and labor that would be required for household self-sufficiency, and the other is whether we might describe an economically feasible distillery cooperative system that would permit a hundred families to distill their



product. Based on assumptions that are drawn from a number of sources out of a very complicated domain of knowledge about the economics of ethanol, I put together several scenarios to see what the lifestyle consequences would be for "fuel farmers". A scenario based on moderate assumptions yielded these results: in order to produce a household stock of fuel of 2,400 gallons of ethanol, a household would need to cultivate 10 acres of cattails and would need to expend 4 hours per day year round on cultivation, harvesting, and distillery coop duties.

What I'd like to focus on in this posting is the feasibility and characteristics of cooperatives as a way for small- and medium-sized communities to handle some of the key material activities they need to accomplish. In a modern society we are so accustomed to market mechanisms and individual decision-making that it is somewhat difficult to imagine how coops might work in modern circumstances. So, for the example under consideration here, the market scenario is straightforward: farmers grow cattails to serve as a raw material for a privately owned distillery; the price of the cattails is eventually determined as a function of the quantity and value of the final products of distillation (ethanol and feed); and cattail farming is simply another crop within the private farmer's portfolio. And if the business case for a privately developed distillery is favorable -- that is, the raw materials will be available in sufficient quantity and low price and the value of the product will be sufficient to provide a profit -- then entrepreneurs will emerge to fill this economic niche. Everyone's interests are satisfied: farmers earn more income, private owners earn a profit, and society is presented with a growing volume of renewable fuels.

But consider the downside of this market-based story from the fuel farmers' point of view. They have no control over the price that their cattail crop will bring; they are subject to the vagaries of commodity prices and the semi-monopoly position held by the local distillery; and they are likely to believe that the "middle man" is taking too much of their crop and labor in the form of profits. And, after all, the farmers' interest is in achieving a sustainable energy supply -- not simply a level of income consistent with the budget necessities of everyday life. They're growing the cattails because they are a source of energy that can be produced and consumed separately from the market. So passing through the market twice -- selling the raw materials and purchasing ethanol -- seems like an unnecessary and risky detour; why not simply turn the crop into ethanol directly without passing through the marketplace?

So the fuel farmer has an interest in directly capturing the energy content of the crop, not simply growing another kind of cash crop. This could be done by establishing a farm still and processing the crop directly; but there are significant economies of scale in distillation, so this is not an ideal solution. An inefficient distillation process simply means that the farmer must farm a larger area and expend more labor in order to arrive at the net quantity of fuel required. A better solution would result from sharing the distillation process among an extended group of households and maintaining a small to medium-sized distillery for the use of the community. So we might imagine leaders coming forward who propose the establishment of a cooperative distillery. Coop members would share costs, labor time, and ethanol based on the volume of feedstock that they provide

to the process. If all households were farming roughly the same amount of land at the same level of intensity, then all households would contribute cash and labor equally and would "earn" the same quantity of ethanol from the process.

So now let's do a little bit of scenario building. Suppose there is a turnkey distillery operation that can be purchased for $2 million, with a well-documented set of technical efficiency characteristics. (That way prospective coop members know what they're getting into.) The distillery processes 60,000 pounds of biomass a day and produces about 2,000 gallons of ethanol. The distillation process requires 30 hours of labor per day. And this scale of production is about right for the needs of a cooperative involving 100 households. Members are required to accept joint financial responsibility for debt and operations of the coop, and they are required to provide their full share of coop labor at the distillery based on a schedule of work times. And, given the technical characteristics of farming and distilling, they can be confident that their fuel farming labor will result in a quantity of biomass that will entitle them to 2,400 gallons of ethanol annually. On a plausible set of assumptions, this means that each household will have coop dues of $2,200 and a monthly labor obligation of 6 hours.

So far, so good; this sounds like a good deal for each of the households. Each household satisfies its annual energy needs with an investment of $2,200 in cash and about 1,000 hours of labor expended on cultivation, harvesting, transporting, and distilling; whereas the cost of purchasing this volume of ethanol would be about $10,000. So what obstacles might arise in implementing this cooperative solution to the problem of energy self-sufficiency?

There are several predictable challenges that this scenario is likely to raise, including especially in the areas of governance, technical management, work management, accounting, trust, taxation, and sustainability over time.

- Governance. The cooperative needs to make decisions about management, maintenance, and improvement of the facility. How should this be done? Are all decisions to be taken on the basis of a vote by the membership? Should there be an executive committee with some powers of decision-making? Is there an executive manager? How will conflicts among coop members be managed and resolved?
- Technical management. The distillery is technically complex. Maintenance requires skilled technicians or millwrights. Can the coop count on these kinds of expertise among its membership? Will it need to hire outside experts and engineers to maintain the facility? Who will take responsibility for maintaining safety processes and standards within the facility?
- Work management. Who will supervise the work of coop members while they are performing their tasks during coop labor? Is there a likelihood of "easy riding" -- coop members who bring their blackberries to work and keep checking their email rather than cleaning the boiler? What kinds of discipline processes are feasible within a coop -- for example, fines imposed on "no-show" workers? Will the coop need to reward internal experts with a somewhat larger share of the product?
- Accounting. There is a very substantial amount of accounting of inputs and outputs that needs to be accomplished. As coop members pull up with a load of biofuel the quantity and quality needs to be measured and recorded. Clear formulas governing the pay-out of ethanol need to be codified. There is a time lag between depositing the feedstock and withdrawing the ethanol; rules need to be established that govern the household's entitlement to a given quantity of ethanol on a regular basis (weekly, monthly, quarterly?).
- Trust. Members need to have a substantial level of trust in each other and in the

non-professional managers of the process. Theft of assets is always a possibility by managers. Fraud on the part of coop members is also possible -- for example, mixing non-feedstock materials into a load of feedstock and taking credit for 6,000 pounds rather than 5,500 pounds of stock. More careful inspection procedures have a cost -- more labor time from the membership. Members need to be confident that other members will continue to pay their dues -- otherwise the debt obligations of the coop fall on a smaller and smaller circle of dues-payers.

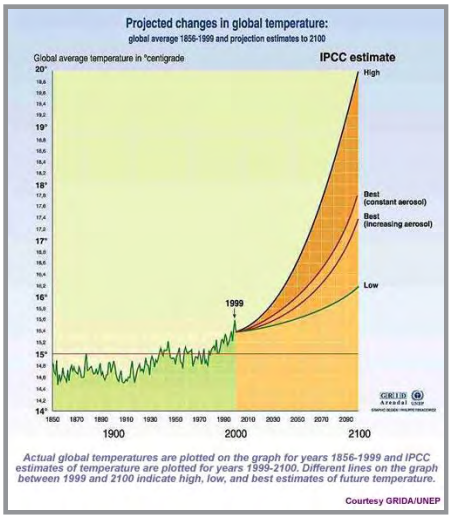
- Taxation. The cooperative is likely to face expanding demand for improvements of the facility, the technology, or the use of labor. This means raising the obligations imposed on coop members, in the form of coop dues, a percentage of their ethanol share, or an increase in labor time required by coop members. How will these increases in assessment be decided?
- Sustainability over time. The economics of the cooperative distillery depend on a certain size of membership -- say 100 households. Like any human organization, there will be exits from the cooperative -- retirements, relocation, discouragement. Will the cooperative be able to continually recruit new members in sufficient numbers to keep the process in the black? Is there the risk of the "dying seminar" that Thomas Schelling writes about -- decline leading to rising costs for the remaining members, leading to further decline in membership (Micromotives and Macrobehavior)?

So -- there are significant challenges of governance, management, and trust that stand in the way of a successful cooperative. This doesn't mean that cooperatives are impossible to create or sustain, or that they don't have significant economic advantages for their members. But perhaps it does explain why this is not a common solution so far in modern social settings as a way of securing coordination and shared economic benefits among a mid-sized group of persons or households. At the same time, it seems very worthwhile to expend effort on trying to resolve these issues in ways that make cooperative arrangements more feasible and sustainable than they currently are in modern society.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:07PM (-04:00)

Change?

Tuesday, September 02, 2008



The word of the day is "change" -- the political conventions are blaring it out, and apparently the voting public is ready for it.

It's worth thinking about what "change" amounts to. Things change in many ways -- by accident, by the inevitable workings of natural processes, or as a result of the actions of people and groups. The eruption of Mt. Krakatoa in 1883 changed many things in the world, for better or worse. But this isn't what "change" means in this context.

When people talk about "change" in a political or social context, they are referring to outcomes that can be influenced by human agency and choice. We want to change the pace of global warming -- that is, we want to take deliberate steps that will result in a slowing of the buildup of greenhouse gases globally. We want to change the "pay to play" mentality that

many city governments have permitted to develop between contractors and politicians -- that is, we want to create a new set of regulations and laws that do a better job of controlling corrupt practices in city government. We want to change the level of threat of terrorist attack that the United States faces -- that is, we want our leaders to design a set of strategies for diplomatic, military, and intelligence agency actions that will reduce the motivation of potential attackers or interfere with the execution of their plans. We want to change the degree of disparities of income and quality of life that is found among Americans in this century -- that is, we want a set of government and economic policies that have the effect of increasing income and quality of life for the least-well-off.

So the relevant meaning of "change" has to do with actions, goals, and strategies. Calls for change in this sense generally mean one of three things: we need to change direction -- the things we're aiming at aren't quite the right mix. We need to change strategies -- our plans for intervening in the world on the basis of which we are pursuing our goals aren't working well enough. Or we need to change the way we operate -- to embody greater transparency, greater allegiance to human rights, greater honesty. Change is about agency in the world -- the things we aim at, the means we use, and the principles we adopt.

Government -- its policies, its strategies, its priorities -- is at the center of what people are concerned about when they call for change. This is true primarily because governments have the greatest ability to influence the outcomes that we care about the most; but it is also true because governments have badly disappointed us at various junctures in our history, by pursuing the wrong goals or bungling their efforts to achieve the right goals. So it's not a bit surprising that a debate about the need for change would crop up around the moment of this critical election in the United States.

People are calling for change today because they are dissatisfied with the outcomes, trends, strategies, and manner that current public actors are achieving. They see outcomes that are the result of deliberate policies -- but that are highly undesirable. They see policies that are intelligently related to the achievement of certain goals -- but the goals are the wrong ones. They see policies and initiatives that are ill-conceived and bungled. And, often enough, they see public actions that are morally defective in a variety of ways -- dishonest, devious, illegal, anti-democratic, self-interested, or hateful.

So when people call for change, it would appear that they're asking for one of several possible kinds of change: a change of goals, a change of strategies, a change in the manner in which a government or corporation behaves, and perhaps a change in the personnel carrying out these actions. They want to see public action to be aimed at goals that the majority in society can support when honestly conveyed. They want to see policies and strategies that are well suited to achieving these goals, and supported by facts and analysis. They want to see coordinated efforts by their governments that will lead to better outcomes and will put the trends onto a more acceptable course. And they want to see a manner of action that respects the law and the requirements of a civil democracy.

Let's hope that the next several months of political debate can really focus on these core questions: what problems do we most urgently need to solve in the next ten years in this society and this world? What strategies and initiatives do the candidates propose to address these problems? What evidence can we marshall to assess the likelihood that they will follow through with their stated intentions? These are exactly the right debates; and once we think clearly about the goals and priorities we have as a nation, perhaps the

choice we make among candidates will be less about personality and more about confidence in the program and the team that will implement it.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:24AM (-04:00)

What is social scientific knowledge?

Wednesday, September 10, 2008

The social and behavioral sciences endeavor to describe, explain, and interpret the range of the social and behavioral facts that surround us. To refer to this body of findings as "science" is to claim a set of epistemic values about the nature of the methods of inquiry and evaluation that are used to arrive at and assess the conclusions offered about this domain. The label "science" brings with it a set of presuppositions about rigor, evidence, generalizability, logical analysis, objectivity, cumulativeness, and the likelihood that the assertions that are made are true.

Consider a few assumptions that are often made about scientific knowledge—some valid and some not. Science is based on a set of rationally justified methods of inquiry and testing. Scientific knowledge progresses, in scope, in detail of understanding, and in reliability. Science is performed by specialists, working within equally exacting communities of peers and competitors and subject to a demanding set of standards of evaluation—peer-reviewed journals, university review processes, national laboratories, and international associations and conferences. The result of these processes of testing and evaluation, we expect, is an expanding body of hypotheses, experimental findings, observations, theories, and explanations that have substantial credibility—and substantially higher credibility than the writings of casual observers of a given range of phenomena. We come to know the nature of the world better through the institutions and methods of science.

In addition to these reasonably valid assumptions about scientific knowledge, there is another group of more questionable ideas that derive from assumptions drawn from the natural sciences. Science permits generalizations; it permits us to systematize otherwise apparently separate domains of phenomena (planetary motion, the tides; rational choice theory, behavior of the family) and to demonstrate that apparently heterogeneous sets of phenomena are in fact governed by the same general laws. Science permits predictions; if the fundamentals are thus-and-so, then the compounds will behave thusly. Science aims at unification: the discovery of unitary systems of forces and entities whose aggregate properties represent the whole of nature.

Notice that these latter expectations are derived from the successes and specific characteristics of certain of the natural sciences. And this marks the first of many opportunities for error in the philosophy of social science. There is no reason to expect that the social domain possesses the underlying nature and orderliness that would make it possible to achieve some of these characteristics (in particular, uniformity, generalizability, unification, simplicity). Consider some other areas of possible empirical research—for example, animal behavior. We should not expect there to be comprehensive theories of animal behavior. Instead, we should expect many threads of research, corresponding to many dimensions of animal behavior: cognition, memory, instinct, social behaviors, migratory behavior. And these many strands of research would reach out to different kinds of causal backgrounds: evolutionary biology, neurophysiology, intra-group learning. Likewise with the domain of social behavior. There is no single unified "theory of human motivation"—whether rational choice theory, social psychology,

or any other unified theory. And this is so, because there is no unified reality of motivation and action; rather, there is a heterogeneous range of motives, errors, impulses, commitments, and habits that together constitute "dispositions to behave."

What underwrites the claim of truthfulness for scientific knowledge? What gives us a rational basis for believing that the results of the socially constructed activities of science lead to true hypotheses about the nature and workings of the phenomena that scientific inquiry considers? There is, first, the basic argument of empiricism: we can observe some features of the world and establish certain statements as being probable. And we can use a collection of tools of inference to establish credibility of other non-observational statements (deductive and inductive logic, statistics, the experimental method, causal modeling).

This simple empiricist epistemology underwrites the strongest claims for veridicality and justification for the social sciences. The discovery of empirical facts about the social world is possible but challenging; this is what much of social science methodology attempts to under-gird. And hypotheses about the causal relationships that exist among social entities and processes can be tested using a variety of methods of inference that themselves possess strong epistemic justification. We have learned from the writings of philosophers of science since the 1960s to emphasize corrigibility and anti-foundationalism in our interpretation of scientific knowledge; but a coherentist epistemology and a perspective of causal realism provides a philosophically powerful grounding for social science knowledge. (See articles in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on coherence epistemology and scientific realism by Kvanvig and Boyd).

In addition, in some areas of the natural sciences, there is the fact that cumulative scientific research leads to the invention of technologies that work as they were designed to do: new materials are invented in the electronics industry, new designs are created for large structures (buildings, aircraft, electron microscopes), and these materials and artifacts perform as expected on the basis of the underlying theories. So scientific theories of materials, structures, and natural systems are supported by the effectiveness of the technologies that they give rise to. If the theories and hypotheses were fundamentally untrue about the parts of the natural world that they describe, then we would expect the technologies to fail; the technologies do not fail; so we have some additional reason to believe the scientific theories that underlay these technologies. (This is a version of Richard Boyd's argument of methodological realism.)

Is there anything analogous to the relationship between the natural sciences and technology, for the social and behavioral sciences? On the whole, there is not. Social predictions are notoriously unreliable; public policies based on social-science theory commonly give rise to unanticipated consequences; and the twists and turns of deliberate social processes (war, alliance, efforts to address global warming) continue to surprise us. This unpredictability in the social world derives from the nature of social action. Human behavior and social processes are plainly subject to an open-ended range of causes, motives, and influences. The construction of various areas of science with the goal of understanding and explaining this multiplicity is therefore a profoundly challenging task.

Here, then, is a very elliptical description of a plausible interpretation of social science epistemology: There are empirical foundations for knowledge in the form of social observation (empiricism); there are social causes that influence social behavior, processes, and outcomes (causal realism); there is no a priori reason to expect strong

generalizations across social phenomena, “regulating” the social world; and there is no reason to expect unified master theories of social phenomena, suggesting instead a preference for theories of the middle range.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:05PM (-04:00)

Innovation in social research

Saturday, September 13, 2008

The social sciences are charged to arrive at a good empirical understanding of the social world around us. They are charged to provide hypotheses and theories on the basis of which to explain the outcomes and patterns they discover. And they are charged to help design policies and interventions that will contribute to durable solutions to important social problems.

This is a big agenda, and it will only be achieved, I believe, if the next several decades witness a substantial burst of creative new thinking in all the social sciences. The disciplines, the inter-disciplines, and the social science institutions need to stimulate a lot of innovative thinking, if we are to arrive at a better understanding of the social world and a better ability to solve social problems.

Why should we think this is true? What makes us think that the current theories and research methodologies are not sufficient? And what kinds of innovation should we be aiming at?

The need for innovation results from several points. First is the tendency of the social science disciplines to give excessive primacy to a few methodologies and theories as the preferred wisdom. Quantitative methods, survey methodology, rational choice theory, and formal modeling techniques have defined "cutting-edge" social science research for several decades in several disciplines. When we take full measure of their specific limitations, these are perfectly useful components of social science research. But we should never imagine that they suffice for every research problem. The problems confronting the social sciences need a broader palette, a larger tool box.

Second, social phenomena almost always involve a mix of processes and behaviors that fall within the boundaries of distinct disciplines. This means that the hypotheses and theories of a single discipline will not capture the dynamics of the given body of phenomena. This in turn means that it is essential for social scientists to approach research problems with an interdisciplinary spirit; they need to welcome a somewhat eclectic mix of approaches.

Third, there is a need for some new thinking about causal processes and the reasoning we use to investigate causation in the social realm. The turn to causal mechanisms is an important step in this direction, but more new thinking is needed as well.

Fourth, it is important to find better ways of incorporating the study of agency and concrete individual behavior into social science theories. The cultural turn and the willingness to attempt to make use of some of the tools of ethnography and social psychology within structural and quantitative approaches is a good start, and we need to go further.

Fifth, we need some new ideas about how separate social processes aggregate and

interact. The basic idea of a social agglomeration as a composition of lesser processes seems very compelling; so a better set of tools for modeling and analyzing these compositional processes is needed.

Much of this has to do with a particular kind of innovation: finding ways of borrowing across disciplines to permit the construction of analyses that are more sufficient. But there is also a need for a more fundamental form of innovation as well, at the level of the concepts and theories we use to characterize the social world. Could we arrive at a new concept of social identity that captures more of the fluidity and variability of the ways social identities actually work in a complex social world? Could our concept of social class be replaced by a different construct that was more friendly to the many strands that are involved in the phenomena of social class? Could we arrive at a better conceptual scheme for analyzing the institutions of government power and the exercise of state power?

Here is a short list of innovative social theorists whom I would recognize in the past several decades: Albert Hirschman, Ben Anderson, James Scott, Charles Sabel, Seyla Ben-Habib, Martha Nussbaum, Thomas Schelling, Edward Said, Charles Tilly, Pierre Bourdieu, G. William Skinner, Elizabeth Perry, Robert Bates, Stephen Greenblatt, Robert Brenner, Mark Elvin. Each brought forward some genuinely novel ideas that shed new light on some aspect of the social world. And in many instances those ideas have demonstrated their staying-power. And, with almost no exceptions, none of these thinkers is narrowly defined by a single discipline.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:54PM (-04:00)

Non-coercive power?

Monday, September 15, 2008



The most visible exercise of power involves the direct use of force or the threat of violence. Demonstrators are cleared from the streets by police with truncheons and water cannons. Storekeepers are compelled to pay protection money by the example of a few mysterious fires. But are there also instruments and tactics of power that do not ultimately depend on force?

Recall a familiar definition of power. A wields power over B if A can bring it about that B behaves in such-and-so a way against B's will, desire, or choice. There are several mechanisms we might consider that involve the imposition of another's will without recourse to the threat of violence.

Consider beach-front property owners who prefer that the public should not stroll on their bits of beach. If the property owners have the political clout needed to install "residents-only" gates on all the points of access, then they have succeeded in controlling the behavior of the strolling public -- without having to hire a private security company to threaten the public with violence if they trespass. They have used power and influence to block certain kinds of behavior. But of course the enforcement of law brings with it the threat of force -- so the private power identified here is actually effective only because it

can leverage the coercive power of the state.

So here's another strategy the private group might consider: deception. They might suborn the publishers of the local maps, disguising the points of access to the beach. Public picnic-seekers set off for an afternoon at the beach, only to fall into confusion because of the misleading maps. The private property owners have used their power to alter behavior -- without the trouble of threat of force. (And it is in fact difficult to find some if the exclusive resort communities that have cropped up in the American west!)

And how about this: a well-financed program of disinformation designed to bring the public to believe that the beaches are unsafe, unhealthy, or uncool. The public loses its taste for beaches -- and the property owners once again get their way. No random strollers on the beach. They've exercised power non-violently, by shifting the beliefs and wants of the public. Here the media can be an instrument of power.

And we might imagine, finally, that the property owners exercise their will by "log-rolling" with the community groups who are interested in gaining access to the beachfront -- "our support for your issues X, Y, Z is contingent upon your dropping this issue. You may prevail on this issue, but then you'll lose on X, Y, and Z." The tradeoff is severe, and the property holders prevail.

We might refer to these strategies of power generically as "manipulating institutional outcomes," "manipulating knowledge and belief," and "manipulating preferences and desires."

Where does Marx's quip that "religion is the opiate of the people" come into this analysis? It's relevant in several ways. First, it has to do with preferences. If a religious system leads a group to favor its spiritual redemption over its material improvement, its behavior will change. But it is also relevant to something not yet mentioned: the strength of motivation an individual or groups have to bring about the changes they favor. Strategies that blunt the effective motivation of a group to carry out its purposes are themselves an important avenue of power. And this is suggested by the "opiate" part of the statement, suggesting as it does the image of torpor. So when religion functions as an opiate, it serves to reduce the motivation for action by the group; it is demobilizing.

These examples suggest that elites can effect their will through a variety of means that do not depend upon threat of violence, but that nonetheless work effectively to constrain the actions of other groups.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:55PM (-04:00)

Power as influence

Wednesday, September 17, 2008



We've looked at power as the socially embodied ability of some people to compel the behavior of other people. But this isn't the whole of what we would want to include within the scope of the uses of power. Other important aspects of power are more impersonal, having to do with influencing

outcomes rather than controlling behavior. Powerful agents have the ability to set the agenda; to influence the rules of the game (whatever game one is involved in, including the state); to influence the flow of resources; and to make decisions that will have important consequences for other people.

Consider a few examples.

- A large employer is concerned about rising health care costs. The compensation team lays out several choices: eliminate higher-cost insurance plans; eliminate subsidy for dependents; or shift more costs to employees through a higher premium copay formula. The CEO has the ability to choose one option over others; he/she exercises this authority in favor of option 3. This is an exercise of power.
- The vice president of the United States wants to see a reduction in the rate of the capital gains tax. He quietly lobbies with legislators to incorporate this provision into upcoming tax legislation. He prevails. This too is an exercise of power -- an ability to bend outcomes to the VP's will. And it proceeds through the ability to influence other decision-makers.
- The mayor of a small city is in a position to influence which development projects will be permitted. He/she exercises this power to give the nod to A and to deny B. A receives a substantial business benefit and B is left out.
- A faculty reappointment committee considers the case of Assistant Professor X. It considers his/her dossier of research and teaching in relation to the standards. The case is not clear-cut. The committee has the power to end X's career at the university. It chooses not to support reappointment. It thereby exercises its power with respect to X's continuing employment. It emerges that one member had an animus against X and spoke persuasively against X. This member used a private form of power and influence against X and in furtherance of his own wishes.

These examples illustrate much of what C. Wright Mills hoped to capture in his theory of the "power elite" -- a relatively compact group of people who are in a position to shape social outcomes to their liking by influencing the agenda, the rules, or the decisions (The Power Elite).

And it goes with this social empowerment of small groups, that the possibilities of self-serving and self-interest arise. When individuals are in a position to determine the way social outcomes will occur, we have to consider the likelihood that they will have favored outcomes that serve their own interests best. So power in this circumstance has a lot to do with distributive outcomes -- who wins and who loses. And it had a lot to do with setting the rules of the game in ways that favor some people and disfavor others.

These aspects of power are tremendously important in a complex society. People in positions to influence important decisions -- private, corporate, or governmental -- have a greatly amplified ability to shape outcomes to their own will. And this in turn permits elites to shape the social environment in ways that best serve their private interests. (Stephen Lukes's book, Power: A Radical View, is particularly useful.)

And this in turn makes the strongest possible case for democratic transparency. We want the decisions that affect us to be made fairly, with full consideration of the impact they have on everyone affected by them. The decisions that influence everyone's well-being need to be made within a culture of openness and transparency. But all too often, this expectation is frustrated.

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:30PM (-04:00)

Social surprises

Sunday, September 21, 2008



The near meltdown of the US financial system this week came as a surprise to most of us -- experts, legislators, and citizens alike. That isn't to say that the components of the disaster were unknown -- the subprime crisis, the earlier financial undoings of Fannie Mae and Bear Stearns this summer, and the sudden collapse of Lehman Brothers last week. But what has come as a surprise is the severity of the warnings by the Federal Reserve and Treasury that the entire financial system is only a few steps from seizure and collapse. This is a catastrophic system failure -- and no one would have anticipated its possibility six months ago.

Think of a few other surprises in the past thirty years -- the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Iranian Revolution, or the emergence of China as a roaring engine of market-based growth. In each case the event was a discontinuous break from the trajectory of the past, and it surprised experts and citizens alike. (The photo above depicts the surprising Yeltsin standing on a tank in 1991.)

So what is a surprise? It is an event that shouldn't have happened, given our best understanding of how things work. It is an event that deviates widely from our most informed expectations, given our best beliefs about the causal environment in which it takes place. A surprise is a deviation between our expectations about the world's behavior, and the events that actually take place. Many of our expectations are based on the idea of continuity: tomorrow will be pretty similar to today; a delta change in the background will create at most an epsilon change in the outcome. A surprise is a circumstance that appears to represent a discontinuity in a historical series.

It would be a major surprise if the sun suddenly stopped shining, because we understand the physics of fusion that sustains the sun's energy production. It would be a major surprise to discover a population of animals in which acquired traits are passed across generations, given our understanding of the mechanisms of evolution. And it would be a major surprise if a presidential election were decided by a unanimous vote for one candidate, given our understanding of how the voting process works. The natural world doesn't present us with a large number of surprises; but history and social life are full of them.

The occurrence of major surprises in history and social life is an important reminder that our understanding of the complex processes that are underway in the social world is radically incomplete and inexact. We cannot fully anticipate the behavior of the subsystems that we study -- financial systems, political regimes, ensembles of collective behavior -- and we especially cannot fully anticipate the interactions that arise when processes and systems intersect. Often we cannot even offer reliable approximations of what the effects are likely to be of a given intervention. This has a major implication: we need to be very modest in the predictions we make about the social world, and we need to be cautious about the efforts at social engineering that we engage in. The likelihood of unforeseen and uncalculated consequences is great.

And in fact commentators are now raising exactly these concerns about the 700 billion dollar rescue plan currently being designed by the Bush administration to save the financial system. "Will it work?" is the headline; "What unforeseen consequences will it produce?" is the subtext; and "Who will benefit?" is the natural followup question.

It is difficult to reconcile this caution about the limits of our rational expectations about the future based on social science knowledge, with the need for action and policy change in times of crisis. If we cannot rely on our expectations about what effects an intervention is likely to have, then we can't have confidence in the actions and policies that we choose. And yet we must act; if war is looming, if famine is breaking out, if the banking system is teetering, a government needs to adopt policies that are well designed to minimize the bad consequences. It is necessary to make decisions about action that are based on incomplete information and insufficient theory. So it is a major challenge for the theory of public policy, to attempt to incorporate the limits of knowledge about consequences into the design of a policy process. One approach that might be taken is the model of designing for "soft landings" -- designing strategies that are likely to do the least harm if they function differently than expected. Another is to emulate a strategy that safety engineers employ when designing complex, dangerous systems: to attempt to de-link the subsystems to the extent possible, in order to minimize the likelihood of unforeseeable interactions. (Nancy Leveson describes some of these strategies in Safeware: System Safety and Computers.) And there are probably other heuristics that could be imagined as well.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:34AM (-04:00)

What social science can do

Monday, September 22, 2008

Quite a few postings here emphasize the limits of social science knowledge. Prediction of the behavior of large social wholes is difficult to impossible. There are few strong regularities among social phenomena. Social entities and processes are heterogeneous, plastic, and path-dependent. So the question arises: what can the social sciences do that takes them beyond the realm of description and reportage of the blooming, buzzing confusion of social comings and goings, to something that is more explanatory and generalizable?

I think there is an answer to this, and it has to do with identifying mid-level mechanisms and processes that recur in roughly similar ways in a range of different social settings. The social sciences can identify a fairly large number of these sorts of recurring mechanisms. For example --

- public goods problems
- political entrepreneurship
- principal-agent problems
- features of ethnic or religious group mobilization
- market mechanisms and failures
- rent-seeking behavior
- the social psychology associated with small groups
- the moral emotions of family and kinship
- the dynamics of a transport network
- the communications characteristics of medium-size social networks
- the psychology and circumstances of solidarity

Further, the social sciences can attempt to discover the circumstances at the level of individual agents that make these mechanisms robust across social settings. They can model the dynamics and features of aggregation that they possess. And they can attempt to discover the workings of such mechanisms in particular social and historical settings, and work towards explanations of particular features of these events based on their theories of the properties of the mechanisms. Finally, they can attempt to find rigorous ways of attempting to model the effects of aggregating multiple mechanisms in a particular setting.

What this comes down to is the view that the main theoretical and generalizing contribution that the social sciences can make is the discovery and analysis of a wise range of recurring social mechanisms grounded in features of human agency and common institutional and material settings. They can help to constitute a rich tool box for social explanation. And, in a weak and fallible way, they can lay the basis for some limited social generalizations -- for example, "In circumstances where a group of independent individuals make private decisions about their actions, the public goods shared by the group will be under-provided."

This approach affords a degree of explanatory capacity and generalization to the social sciences. What it does not underwrite is the ability to offer general, comprehensive theories about any complex kind of phenomenon -- cities, schools, revolutions. And it does not provide a foundation for confidence about large predictions about the future behavior of complex social wholes.

Posted by Daniel Little at 03:47PM (-04:00)

Turning points

Sunday, September 28, 2008



Are there turning points in history? How would we know if we're in the midst of one? Does the current financial crisis represent a turning point in the development of the US economy? Did the election of Ronald Reagan represent a turning point in American politics and government?

Often what is announced as a turning point eventually seems like a change without a difference -- an example of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, of changing drivers but not direction. Nguyen van Thieu takes office in Vietnam in 1967 and a new era is announced; but then the same old policies persist and Vietnam slides ever further towards Communist victory.

A turning point might be defined as an event, action, or choice, that profoundly alters the direction of a whole series of subsequent events. The New Deal is perhaps a candidate in the development of the political-social culture of the United States -- a new set of policies, laws, and strategies that set the United States on a new direction and that substantially constrained later choices by government. The notion of a turning point conveys the situation of contingency -- up until T things might have continued within the existing pattern P, but after T things shifted to P'. And it conveys the idea of path

dependency as well -- now that the turning point has occurred and P' is embodied, it is much more difficult to return to P. So a turning point results from some contingent event that occurs within a system at a particular time and substantially inflects the future dynamics of development of the system. The idea turns on the background assumption that there are mechanisms or forces that sustain the development of the system, and that contingent events can "push" the system onto a different course for a while.

What sorts of things can have turning points? Can an individual have one? What about a family or a marriage? How about a business or a university? And how about a nation or a civilization? We might say that anything that has a recognizable and somewhat stable pattern of development can display a turning point. So each of these orders of human affairs can do so. An individual may be influenced by a traumatic event or a charismatic person and may change his ways; from that point forward he may behave differently -- more honestly, more cautiously, more compassionately. The event was a turning point on his development. A "velvet revolution" may be on a course that gives great importance to non-violent tactics. Then something happens -- a violent repression by the state, the emergence of a new clique of leaders more open to violence. The velvet revolution undergoes a turning point and becomes more violent in its strategies.

Schematically, the idea of a turning point involves an ontology something like this: system properties in a state of persistence > singular event > new system properties in a state of persistence.

So how could we know that we're at a turning point? The answer seems to be: we can't. Only the larger course of history can indicate whether contemporary changes will be large and persistent, or cosmetic and evanescent.

The idea of a "turning point" is perhaps one of the analytical categories that we use to characterize and analyze the sweep of history. It is a narrative device that highlights persistence, contingency, and direction. And, it would appear, we've got to wait until the Owl of Minerva spreads its wings before we can say with confidence when they occur.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:23PM (-04:00)

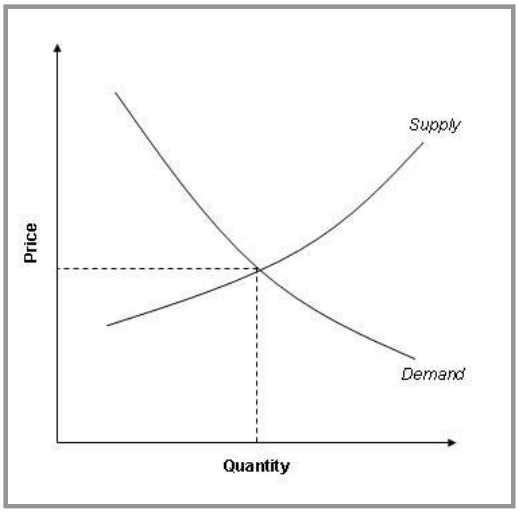
Equilibrium reasoning

Monday, September 29, 2008



A system is in equilibrium with respect to a given characteristic when there is a system of forces in play that push the system back to the equilibrium state when it is subjected to small disturbances or changes. This is referred to as a homeostatic system.

The temperature in a goldfish bowl is in equilibrium if the bowl is provided with a thermostatically controlled heater and cooler; when the external temperature falls and the water temperature begins to fall as well, the thermostat registers the change of temperature and turns on the heater, and when the external temperature rises, the thermostat turns on the cooler. A population of





squirrels in a bounded forest may reach an equilibrium size that is balanced by excess reproductive capacity (pushing the population upwards when it falls below the feeding capacity of the environment) and by excess mortality from poor nutrition (pushing the population downwards when it rises above the feeding capacity of the environment).

These examples embody very different causal mechanisms; but each represents a case in which the variable in question (temperature or population size) oscillates around the equilibrium value determined by the features of the environment and the features of the adjustment mechanisms.

There are other physical systems where the concept of equilibrium has no role. The trajectory of a fly ball is not an equilibrium outcome, but rather the direct causal consequence of the collision between bat and ball. And if the course of the baseball is disturbed -- by impact with a passing bird or an updraft of wind -- then the terminus of the ball's flight will be different. The number of telephone calls between Phoenix and Albany is not an equilibrium outcome, even if it is fairly stable over time, but simply the aggregate consequence of the contingent telephone behavior of large numbers of people in the two cities. So systems that reach and maintain equilibrium are somewhat special.

It is also interesting to observe that there are other circumstances that produce a stable steady state in a system besides equilibrium processes. We may observe that elevators in a busy office building most frequently have 10 passengers. And the explanation for this may go along these lines: 10 is the maximum number of adults who can be squeezed into the elevator car; there are always many people waiting for an elevator; so virtually every car is at full capacity of 10 persons. This is an example of a pattern that derives from a population of events that demands full utilization, and a limit condition in the location where activity takes place. In this example, 10 passengers is not an equilibrium outcome but rather a forced outcome deriving from excess demand and a logistical constraint on the volume of activity. A large city may show a population history that indicates a trend of population increase from 4 million to 6 million to 10 million -- and then it stops growing. And the explanation of the eventual stable population size of 10 million may depend on the fact that the water supplies available to the city cannot support a population significantly larger than 10 million.

To what extent are social ensembles and processes involved in equilibrium conditions? The paradigm example of equilibrium reasoning in the social sciences arises in microeconomic theory. Supply and demand curves are postulated as being fixed, and the

price of a good is the equilibrium position where the quantity produced at this price is equal to the quantity consumed at this price. If the price rises, demand for the good falls and the price falls; if the price falls below the equilibrium position, producers manufacture less of the good and consumers demand more of it, which induces a price rise.

Another important example of equilibrium analysis in social behavior is the application of central place theory to economic geography. The theory is that places (cities, towns, villages) will be positioned across the countryside in a way that embodies a set of urban hierarchies and a set of commercial pathways. The topology of the system and the size of the nodes are postulated to be controlled by social variables such as transport cost and demand density. And individuals' habitation decisions are influenced in a way that reinforces the topology and size hierarchy of the central place system.

However, even in these simple examples there are circumstances that can make the equilibrium condition difficult to attain. If the supply and demand curves shift periodically, then the equilibrium price itself moves around. If the price and production response characteristics are too large in their effects, then the system may keep bouncing around the equilibrium price, from "too high" to "too low" without the capacity of finetuning production and consumption. The resulting behavior would look like a graph of the stock market rather than a stable, regular system returning to its "equilibrium" value. And, in the case of habitation patterns, some places may gain a reputation for fun that offsets their disadvantages from the point of view of transport and demand density -- thereby disrupting the expected equilibrium outcomes.

So if the conditions defining the terms of an equilibrium change too quickly, or if the feedback mechanisms that work to adjust the system value to current equilibrium conditions are too coarse, then we should not expect the system to arrive at an equilibrium state. (The marble rolling on a rotating dinner plate will continue to roll across all parts of the plate rather than arriving at the lowest point on the plate and staying there.)

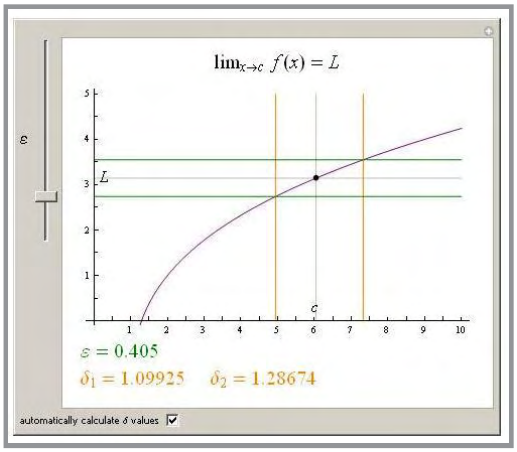
I'm inclined to think that equilibria are relatively rare in the social world. The reasons for this are several: it is uncommon to be able to discover homeostatic mechanisms that adjust social variables; when quasi-homeostatic mechanisms exist, they are often too coarse to lead to equilibrium; and, most fundamentally, the constraints that constitute the boundary conditions for idealized equilibria among social variables are often themselves changing too rapidly to permit an equilibrium to emerge. Instead, social outcomes more often look like constrained random walks, in which social actions occur in a fairly uncoordinated way at the individual level and aggregate to singular social outcomes that are highly path-dependent and contingent. Social outcomes are more often stochastic than being guided by homeostatic mechanisms.
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:22PM (-04:00)

Continuity

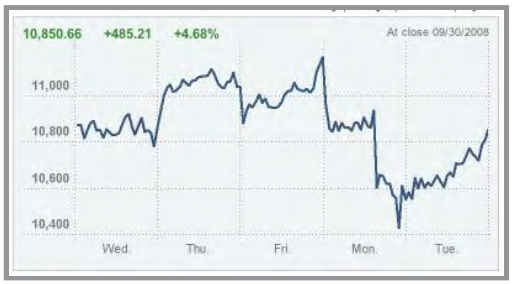
Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Throughout much of our social experience we expect continuity: tomorrow will be pretty similar to today, and when changes occur they will be small and gradual. We expect our basic institutions -- economic, social, and political -- to maintain their core characteristics over long periods of time. We expect social attitudes and values to change only slowly, through gradual evolution rather than abrupt transformation. And we expect the same of

a range of social conditions -- for example, highway safety, crime rates, teen pregnancy rates, and similar social features.



It is evident that this expectation of gradual, continuous change is not always a valid guide to events. Abrupt, unexpected events occur -- revolutions, mass cultural changes like the 1960s, sweeping political and legislative changes along the lines of the Reagan revolution. And of course we have the current example of abrupt declines in financial markets -- see the graph of the Dow Jones Industrial Average for the week of September 23-30, 2008 below. So the expectation of continuity sometimes leads us astray. But continuity is probably among our most basic heuristic assumptions about the future when it comes to our expectations about the social world and our plans for the future.



The deeper question is an ontological one: what features of social causation and processes would either support or undermine the expectation of continuity? We can say quite a bit about the features of continuity and discontinuity in physical systems; famously, "non-linearities" occur in some physical systems that lead to singularities and discontinuities, but many physical systems are safely linear and continuous all the way down. And these mathematical features follow from the fundamental physical mechanisms that underlie physical systems. But what about the social world?

Take first the stability of large social and political institutions. Is there a reason to expect that major social and political institutions will retain their core features in face of disturbing influences? Consider for example the SEC as a financial regulatory institution; the European Union as a multinational legislative body; or a large health maintenance organization. Here institutional sociologists have provided a number of important insights. First, institutions often change through the accumulation of a myriad of small adaptations in different locations within the institution. This is a process that is likely to give rise to slow, continuous, gradual change for the institution as a whole; and this is continuous behavior. Second, though, institutional sociologists have identified important internal forces that work actively to preserve the workings of the institution: the stakeholders who benefit from the current arrangements. Stakeholders are given incentives to actively reinforce and preserve the current institutional arrangements -- the status quo. Both of these factors suggest that institutional change will often be slow, gradual, and continuous.

Consider next the ways in which attitudes and values change in a population. Here it is plausible to observe that individuals change their attitudes and values slowly, through exposure to other individuals and behaviors. And the attitudes and values of a new generation are usually transmitted through processes that are highly decentralized -- again suggesting a slow and gradual process of change. So this suggests that changes

in attitudes and values might behave analogously to the spread of a pathogen through a population -- with a slow and continuous spread of "contagion" resulting in a gradual change in population attitudes.

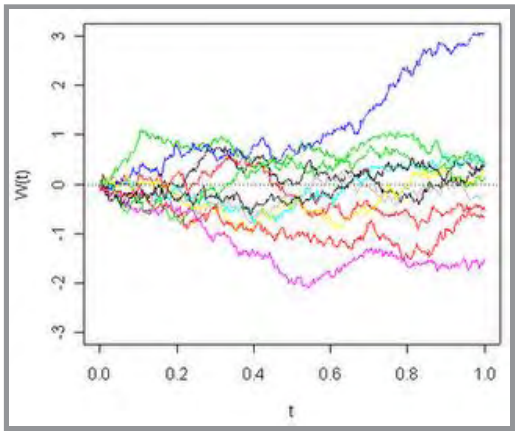
Consider last the example of social measures such as crime rates or teen pregnancy rates. If we take it as a premise that crime and teen pregnancy are influenced by social factors that in turn influence the behavior of individuals, and if we take it that these background social factors change slowly and continuously -- then it is credible to reason that the aggregate measures of the associated behaviors will change slowly and continuously as well. The reasoning here is probabilistic: when large numbers of people with a specified set of background social psychologies are exposed to common environmental circumstances, then it is plausible to predict that the average rate of teen pregnancy will remain fairly steady if the background circumstances remain steady.

These are all reasons for expecting a degree of stability and continuity in social arrangements and social behavior. But before we conclude that the social world is a continuous place, consider this: We also have some pretty clear models of how social phenomena might occur in a dis-continuous fashion. Critical mass phenomena, tipping points, and catastrophic failures are examples of groups of social phenomena where we should expect discontinuities. The behavior of a disease in a population may change dramatically once a certain percentage of the population is infected (critical mass); a new slang expression ("yada yada yada") may abruptly change its frequency of useage once a certain number of celebrities have adopted it (tipping point); a civic organization may be stretched to the breaking point by the addition of new unruly members and may suddenly collapse or mutate. (The hypothesis of punctuated equilibrium brings this sort of discontinuity into Darwinian theory of evolution.)

So there are some good foundational reasons for expecting a degree of continuity in the social environment; but there are also convincing models of social behavior that lead to important instances of discontinuous outcomes. This all seems to lead to the slightly worrisome piece of advice: don't bet on the future when the stakes are high. Stock markets collapse; unexpected wars occur; and previously harmonious social groups fall into fratricidal violence. And there is no fool-proof way of determining whether a singularity is just around the corner.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:55PM (-04:00)

System tendencies?

Thursday, October 02, 2008



A central theme of many of the posts here is the contingency, heterogeneity, and path dependency of social processes. I used the metaphor of a "constrained random walk" in an earlier posting to characterize many social processes. This figure is intended to stand in contrast to the idea of an inevitable development towards an optimum or equilibrium point, on the one hand, or the idea of an inevitable system failure, on the other.

The idea here is this: from starting point A, there are numerous possible states of affairs Oi that might be reached over an extended period of time. There is no sense in which the course from A to the actual historical outcome Om is inevitable or unique. (From the starting point of Europe in 1910, including the social, political, and economic realities of the nations of Europe, multiple outcomes were accessible by the time of 1920: exhausting war, emergence of new and effective international organizations that sustained the peace, inspired just-in-time diplomacy bringing hostilities to an early termination, ...). Each of the pathways leading from A to Oi might be individually explicable, in terms of the situations of structure and agency that were present during the period of development. Virtually every point in the "space" of outcomes would be accessible, although some outcomes might be substantially less likely than others. Along the way there are likely to be cul-de-sacs; but in the aggregate, the space of possible outcomes from many historical starting points covers the full sphere of possibilities. Putting the point crudely, you can get anywhere from anywhere.

This conception emphasizes deep contingency in social change. But what about the symmetrical facts of "constraint" and "imperative" -- the limitations imposed by existing institutions and organizations at any specific stage and the positive impulses to change that are often embodied in the incentive structures of existing institutions? Is the contingency of social events to some extent reduced by the relative durability of existing core social institutions? Is there such a thing as a "logic of institutions" that is embodied in a particular configuration of core social institutions, with the result that societies embodying these institutions will be most likely to develop in one way rather than another?

This description lies at the heart of Marx's analysis of social systems as modes of production. Marx believed that the core institutions that defined the property system, the system of labor control, and the distribution of wealth have deep effects on individual agency, leading and constraining agents to behave in ways that lead in the aggregate to certain kinds of social outcomes. Modes of production have system tendencies that can be inferred from their basic institutional features. A particularly clear example is his analysis of the "law" of the falling rate of profit within capitalism: firms are required to maximize profits; they have the opportunity of introducing capital-intensive technologies that lower costs, thereby increasing profits in the short run; competition with other profit-maximizing firms pushes prices down to the new cost of production; the rising capital-labor ratio in industry creates a falling rate of profit. So capitalism embodies a system tendency towards a falling rate of profit over time. Similar reasoning underlies Marx's prediction of financial crises within capitalism. (See an earlier posting on Marx's conception of capitalism.)

And in fact, if we could make two assumptions, then Marx's reasoning about the tendencies of capitalism would be very compelling: the assumption that the core economic institutions are fixed and unchanging, and the assumption that there are no other social-political-economic institutions in play that might serve as resources for policies and actions that would offset the predicted tendencies of capitalism. However, neither of these assumptions is correct. The institutions of any major social order -- feudalism, the Chinese agrarian economy, capitalism, state socialism -- are always the composite of a vast number of lower-level institutions; and these lower-level institutions are usually in a state of flux. So the core institutions are not fixed and unchanging. The traditional Chinese agrarian economy was remarkably resilient in face of a range of deep challenges over centuries; adjustment of basic social institutions permitted Chinese society to cope better with environmental and international circumstances than a

modeled Chinese economy would have predicted.

Second, even more fundamentally, a society is not simply a "mode of production," constituted by an economic structure. Rather, there are a range of other, equally fundamental institutions and practices -- cultural, political, legal, community-based and national -- through which resourceful agents attempt to solve personal or social problems at various points in time. So the "logic" of the economic institutions is only one part of the overall social trajectory; instead, we have the strategic interaction and aggregation of political, cultural, social, demographic, and legal institutions that complement and offset the workings of the economic structure. And further, we can correctly say that each of these aspects of social organization has its own "system tendencies." Elected legislatures have a logic that derives from the calculations of political self-interest of the legislators, community-based organizations have their own logic, various demographic regimes have their own tendencies (for example, the favoring of boy children produces skewed sex ratios that have negative political effects), and so forth.

So the tentative conclusion that I draw from these various considerations is, once again, to give the nod to contingency while recognizing the partial imperatives created by the various sets of core institutions that are embodied in a society at a given time. Structures do of course constrain agents. But structures interact with each other, leading to surprising results. And structures change in response to a variety of causes, including the strategic efforts of agents to modify them. So the upshot is, once again, that we should expect a high degree of contingency in outcomes over extended periods of historical time. Historical experience may well support the discovery that "capitalism creates a tendency towards X" or "fascist politics create a tendency towards Y". To that extent, there are "system tendencies". But it is rare for one particular sub-system (property relations, electoral system, demographic regime) to dominate the overall historical trajectory. And so the system tendencies of one partial set of core institutions rarely become the system tendencies of the overall social whole.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:11AM (-04:00)

Strange parallels

Sunday, October 05, 2008



Victor Lieberman uses the phrase, "strange parallels," as the title for his two-volume study of Southeast Asian history (Strange Parallels: Volume 1, Integration on the Mainland: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830). Besides offering a highly expert history of Burma and its many kingdoms between 800 and 1830, Lieberman poses a fascinating and novel question: how can we explain the substantial historical parallels that existed between Burma and various parts of Europe, including especially France and Russia? He writes:

In fact, in mainland Southeast Asia as well as in France, the late 18th and early 19th centuries ended the third and inaugurated the last of four roughly synchronized cycles of political consolidation that together spanned the better part of a millenium. (2)



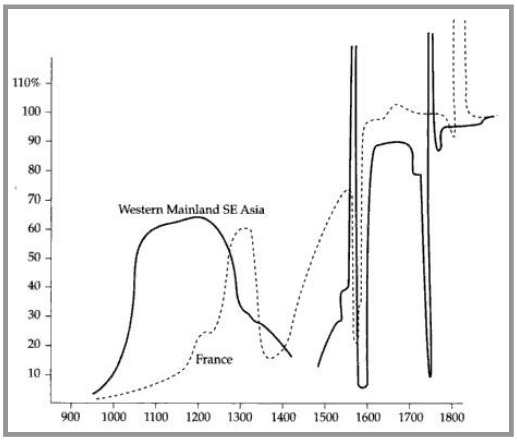


fig. 1.2. Territorial consolidation (p. 4)

The figure illustrates the kind of synchrony that Lieberman is highlighting -- over a sweep of some thousand years, there is a rough-and-ready correspondence in the patterns of territorial consolidation that existed in Burma and France.

Lieberman poses the crucial historical question in these terms: "Why should distant regions, with no obvious religious or material links, have experienced more or less coordinated cycles? If we discount coincidence, what hitherto invisible ties could have spanned the continents?" (2)

Apriori there appear to be only a small number of logically distinct possibilities that could explain the fact that patterns of variation are synchronized between A and B. (1) It may be that there is a causal linkage from A to B such that A's variations stimulate subsequent variations in B. (2) It may be that there is a common cause C whose variation simultaneously causes variation in both A and B. Global climate variation might be such an example. (3) It may be that both A and B are running through their variations according to the same internal clock, with the result that their variations are synchronized without causal interaction -- like two clocks ringing out the hours in tandem or two adolescent children going through roughly the same developmental stages at roughly the same time. (4) It may be that the observed synchrony is simple coincidence, with no causal explanation whatsoever.

So far as I can see, this exhausts the logical possibilities; there is no fifth possibility.

To further complicate the picture, Lieberman points out that there were other regions of the world where these patterns of consolidation did not occur, or did so on a very different timeline. So we can exclude the idea that there was some common global cause leading to simultaneous pulses of consolidation; rather, Southeast Asia and Western Europe were synchronized, but India was not.

Lieberman's explanation of this observed historical synchrony goes along these lines. He believes that both internalist and externalist approaches have a role to play. The internal historical dynamics of the state systems in Burma and Western Europe were governed by

particular local factors. But they each created a tendency towards consolidation of land and power. And external factors provided periodic "pulses" that served to synchronize these internal patterns of development. So the effects of an external factor -- maritime trade -- pushed both Western Europe and Burma into extended periods of state formation and consolidation. This story combines (3) and (2) above: local processes that are developing according to their own imperatives, and occasional system-wide pulses that bring these local processes into synchrony. And the explanation allows Lieberman to place the intellectual frameworks of both Tilly and Wallerstein into the story.

Lieberman's approach is important for the philosophy of history because it leads us to ask different questions about historical causation and historical time. And it provides important new thinking about how to approach the nexus between regional history and global history.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:31PM (-04:00)

What to do?

Tuesday, October 07, 2008



Decision makers at every level are perplexed by the turbulence created by the current financial crisis. Everyone is acting under great uncertainty -- business owners, state governors, the Department of the Treasury, the presidential candidates, and university officials. And yet today's actions may have enormous effects on the business, the non-profit organization, the family, or the state tomorrow. Liquidity drought, variations in cash flow, the availability of credit for major capital projects, the possibility of bankruptcy of major and essential business partners such as contractors, the possibility of further major job losses in various regions, abrupt decline in demand for houses and cars, and a plummeting stock market make for an environment of choice in which every action can have seriously bad consequences.

I'm thinking here particularly of decision makers who are responsible for large, complex organizations -- organizations that deliver services or products, that depend on staff and facilities to fulfill their mission, that need to make medium-term plans about investments of resources for future use, and that depend on assumptions about revenues in the future to satisfy the cash-flow needs of the enterprise to stay financially viable. What is noteworthy about this situation of choice is that it necessarily involves plans and projections about the future. And it involves the temporally extended coordination of activities of people and expenditures of resources over a prolonged period of time. This means that it isn't possible to achieve success through a purely opportunistic and moment-by-moment response to events. You can't fly a complex organization by the seat of your pants.

So how do we plan for the best outcomes in the current circumstances of turbulence and uncertainty? The normal assumption of continuity -- assume that most circumstances won't change much between today and tomorrow -- is distinctly inappropriate. Today's

economic and financial environment has many moving parts -- and they interact in surprising ways. And unfortunately, it appears that there is no reliable science to guide us here. Experts disagree about the mechanisms and the potential remedies of the current crisis. Navigating this environment is akin to trying to catch a pingpong ball in a crowded wind tunnel.

So what is to be done? I mean to pose this question in the most pragmatic way possible. Given deep uncertainty about the changes that may occur tomorrow, and given a fairly deep ignorance of the fundamental mechanisms that are affecting this storm, how can prudent stewards of institutions and businesses do the best job possible to preserve the fundamental interests of their stakeholders and carry out the missions of their organizations?

There are a couple of rational-choice answers to this question, falling generally under the topic of "decision making under risk and uncertainty." One prescription is the expected utility rule: identify the possible actions and their various outcomes; assign a probability and utility to each outcome; and choose the action with the greatest expected utility (sum of the products of probability and utility for the outcomes). Or we might consider the more risk-averse rule, the minimax principle: choose that action with the least bad worst possible outcome.

Unfortunately, neither of these decision procedures is of much help in current circumstances. We don't know what the range of possible outcomes is for a given action or policy (because we don't understand the mechanisms); we can't assign likelihoods to outcomes; and it's not feasible to measure the utility of a given outcome, all things considered. So expected utility decision-making doesn't seem very helpful in current circumstances.

Another approach depends on what we might call "locally rational decision-making" or heuristic decision-making. We don't know what the consequences of an extended liquidity crisis are, but we may reason that more reserves are always useful; so we may choose to curtail spending today to increase reserves. Or we may observe that an additional debt burden for the business is likely to be a handicap in the future, so we may postpone important capital projects. Or we may defer hiring additional staff in order to preserve more budget flexibility in the future. But notice that there are rules of thumb that point in the opposite direction: "A business should take bold moves in times of crisis, to leave it in a stronger position when recovery begins." This advice would encourage investment rather than curtailing it. So the problem with rules of thumb is that they often come into conflict with each other -- leaving the decision maker in a quandary.

In fact, if the range of uncertainty is great enough, it is impossible to be prudent. Prudence involves taking steps today that are most likely to leave you in a satisfactory position tomorrow. But if we are uncertain about even the most basic truisms -- if we are in a position where the most basic assumptions of continuity are defeated -- then we can't begin to weigh possible outcomes or design prudent strategies. It's hard to see how a pilot could fly "prudently" in the dark and without instruments.

It would seem that today's financial crisis doesn't create quite this degree of radical uncertainty, however. It is a fair bet that the world economy and financial system will survive and will recover within a few years. It is likely enough that cash reserves will be very useful for organizations and businesses in the next few years. It is likely that risky decisions have a greater potential for enterprise ruin than in normal times -- "high risk,

high reward" is probably a bad rule to follow in current circumstances. And these assumptions add up to a counsel of conservation of resources, flexibility of activities, cost discipline, and preservation of accessible reserves.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:22PM (-04:00)

Policy, treatment, and mechanism

Saturday, October 11, 2008

Policies are selected in order to bring about some desired social outcome or to prevent an undesired one. Medical treatments are applied in order to cure a disease or to ameliorate its effects. In each case an intervention is performed in the belief that this intervention will causally interact with a larger system in such a way as to bring about the desired state. On the basis of a body of beliefs and theories, we judge that T in circumstances C will bring about O with some degree of likelihood. If we did not have such a belief, then there would be no rational basis for choosing to apply the treatment. "Try something, try anything" isn't exactly a rational basis for policy choice.

In other words, policies and treatments depend on the availability of bodies of knowledge about the causal structure of the domain we're interested in -- what sorts of factors cause or inhibit what sorts of outcomes. This means we need to have some knowledge of the mechanisms that are at work in this domain. And it also means that we need to have some degree of ability to predict some future states -- "If you give the patient an aspirin her fever will come down" or "If we inject $700 billion into the financial system the stock market will recover."

Predictions of this sort could be grounded in two different sorts of reasoning. They might be purely inductive: "Clinical studies demonstrate that administration of an aspirin has a 90% probability of reducing fever." Or they could be based on hypotheses about the mechanisms that are operative: "Fever is caused by C; aspirin reduces C in the bloodstream; therefore we should expect that aspirin reduces fever by reducing C." And ideally we would hope that both forms of reasoning are available -- causal expectations are born out by clinical evidence.

Implicitly this story assumes that the relevant causal systems are pretty simple -- that there are only a few causal pathways and that it is possible to isolate them through experimental studies. We can then insert our proposed interventions into the causal diagram and have reasonable confidence that we can anticipate their effects. The logic of clinical trials as a way of establishing efficacy depends on this assumption of causal simplicity and isolation.

But what if the domain we're concerned with isn't like that? Suppose instead that there are many causal factors and a high degree of causal interdependence among the factors. And suppose that we have only limited knowledge of the strength and form of these interdependencies. Is it possible to make rationally justified interventions within such a system?

This description comes pretty close to what are referred to as complex systems. And the most basic finding in the study of complex systems is the extreme difficulty of anticipating future system states. Small interventions or variations in boundary conditions produce massive variations in later system states. But this is bad news for policy makers who are hoping to "steer" a complex system towards a more desirable state. There are good

analytical reasons for thinking that they will not be able to anticipate the nature or magnitude or even direction of the effects of the intervention.

The study of complex systems is a collection of areas of research in mathematics, economics, and biology that attempt to arrive at better ways of modeling and projecting the behavior of systems with these complex causal interdependencies. This is an exciting field of research at places like the Santa Fe Institute and the University of Michigan. One important tool that had been extensively developed is the theory of agent-based modeling -- essentially, the effort to derive system properties as the aggregate result of the activities of independent agents at the micro-level. And a fairly durable result has emerged: run a model of a complex system a thousand times and you will get a wide distribution of outcomes. This means that we need to think of complex systems as being highly contingent and path-dependent in their behavior. The effect of an intervention may be a wide distribution of future states.

So far the argument is located at a pretty high level of abstraction. Simple causal systems admit of intelligent policy intervention, whereas complex, chaotic systems may not. But the important question is more concrete: which kind of system are we facing when we consider social policy or disease? Are social systems and diseases examples of complex systems? Can social systems be sufficiently disaggregated into fairly durable subsystems that admit of discrete causal analysis and intelligent intervention? What about diseases such as solid tumors? Can we have confidence in interventions such as chemotherapy? And, in both realms, can the findings of complexity theory be helpful by providing mathematical means for working out the system effects of various possible interventions? Posted by Daniel Little at 10:34AM (-04:00)

What holds a country together?

Monday, October 13, 2008



When you consider the enormous differences that exist across regions and traditions in the United States, it raises an interesting question: what factors serve to knit this population together into a single polity? We don't share a single set of cultural values, a single religion, or a single political tradition. So what helps this population of some 300 million achieve some degree of civic or national identity?

One possible answer is a skeptical one: there is no such common strand of civic identity in the United States. Instead, we are a nation of overlapping identities and traditions, with the remarkable good fortune that these differences have only rarely developed into serious inter-group conflict. On this approach, the general history of harmony among groups and regions is only a happy accident.

Another possible approach goes a bit further than this one, in noticing that in fact there is quite a bit of social dis-harmony in the history of the United States. Racism and the violent oppression of African-Americans and Latinos during various periods, the hostile reception offered to internal migrants during the Great Depression, the violence and

hostility offered to gay and lesbian Americans at various junctures, and the harsh words Sarah Palin directs against Easterners all point in that direction. We might say that it is the generally effective reach of the state rather than a shared civic or national identity that usually maintains a large degree of inter-group peace in the United States.

There is also, of course, the identity that derives from patriotism and the flag. This is a political psychology of nationalism, and it doesn't have much to do with reflective values. It is a constructed identity, aimed at making an identity group out of a mixed population. And if this is the best we can do, then the performances of patriotic songs and speeches are obvious mechanisms through which leaders attempt to instill the appropriate emotions. And the act of dissent may seem deeply disruptive, if this is all that holds us together.

It may be that there are other mechanisms of political identity formation that work in the direction of forging a national identity. Film and television are candidates here, and large events of shared history may play a role too. I particularly admire Lincoln's phrase, "the mystic chords of memory." But shared memories don't always create a shared identity -- for example, we can validly ask whether the remembered experience of the Vietnam War contributes more to identity or division.

But here is another and more positive possibility. We might hope that the United States has painfully and haltingly created a shared civic culture that stands above the more visceral strands of religious, ethnic, or nationalistic identity. It is a moral value system that stands deliberately above more specific value commitments that derive from our particular philosophies or traditions. This culture is the value system of liberal democracy. It valorizes the idea of the equal worth of all persons; the moral importance of mutual respect; the idea that everyone has the same rights to freedom of action and legal protection; the recognition that disagreements about values and policies are normal parts of a democracy; and the conviction that this system of equal citizenship and dignity is a morally worthwhile achievement in American history and politics.

This approach says that we do have the makings of a civic identity. But how does this approach avoid amounting to an amalgam of bromides from high school civics courses or the political theories of Locke and Rousseau?

It avoids this unhappy fate by being so hard. This political identity of equality, respect, and liberty has to be constructed rather than assumed. This requires the best efforts of leaders and citizens. And it runs into conflict with some very powerful currents in American culture -- xenophobia, racism, mistrust, and the politics of division, for example. Some of our national leaders have been articulate in nurturing these values -- Johnson amd Clinton, for example. Others have chosen a language of division -- Richard Nixon comes to mind ("the silent majority") along with Spiro Agnew and his "nattering nabobs of negativism". Unity around the values of justice, equality, and democracy is more difficult to achieve than division across group identities and interests. But it is a much more admirable basis for a human polity, and a better guide for a pluralistic America.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:22PM (-04:00)

Marx's historical thinking

Tuesday, October 14, 2008

Marx's theories are deeply historical, in that he wants to explain the dynamics of change of large historical formations such as capitalism or feudalism, and he insists on putting social events into historical context. And, of course, Marx is most celebrated for developing a general approach to historical explanation, the theory of historical materialism. But how does Marx do when he treats concrete historical events? How is Marx as an historian?

There are surprisingly few extended examples of detailed historical analysis in Marx's writings. There is Marx's account of "primitive accumulation" in English agrarian history in the 17th and 18th centuries in Capital. There are occasional references to the Roman Empire and classical slavery throughout his work. And there are his important writings about the French urban uprisings during 1848 and its aftermath (The Eighteenth Brumaire and The Civil War in France). These essays include quite a bit of historical detail -- personalities, events, parties, speeches. But they are closer to political journalism than to careful historical analysis. They are based primarily upon Marx's personal contemporary observations -- not on the usual historian's studies in archives and secondary sources. They come closer to personal recollections and observations than to a typical historical research product.

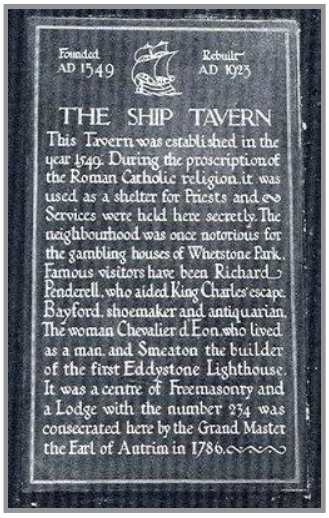
If there is a unifying theme of interpretation in these articles, it is the idea that the parties and factions pursue programs that are based on class interests. The party of order defends property and privilege, and the party of progress expresses and defends the interests of the underclasses -- urban workers and artisans. Theorists such as Nicos Poulantzas have used these texts as a basis for propounding theories of political consciousness and action and the "relative autonomy" of politics. The essays illustrate Marxist theories of politics. But considered solely from the point of view of historiography and historical knowledge, the articles aren't particularly distinguished.

Let's make an unfair but informative contrast: a comparison between Marx's writings and those of some of the great twentieth-century historians whom his ideas inspired. I'm thinking of scholars like Albert Soboul, Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, Maurice Dobb, or Gene Genovese. Each of these scholars borrowed deeply from Marx's social theories -- class, power, consciousness, resistance, economic structure, property systems, labor. But each of these historians does something else as well: he digs deeply into the gnarly, special, and resistant reality of historical events and groups -- peasant movements, churches and manifestoes, parties and conspiracies, slave quarters. These historians try to discover the particular and peculiar graininess of history; they allow theory to rest lightly on their narratives.

So what does Marx have to teach us about the craft of historical writing and reasoning? I'm inclined to say that Marx uses history but doesn't really write history. His writings are historically oriented, but they are almost never works of primary historical discovery and explanation. Marx is a theorist of historical processes; but he is not really a working historian, and his writings don't really offer much by way of innovative historical reasoning. It remained for Marxist historians of the twentieth century to bring together Marx's theoretical insights with rigorous methods of historical research and discovery.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:03PM (-04:00)

Greenblatt in the world

Sunday, October 19, 2008



I recently read Stephen Greenblatt's brilliant biographical book on Shakespeare, Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare, and I was once again struck by what a large contribution Greenblatt might make to the social sciences. His innovations in literary theory are well known, particularly in his pioneering work on forging "the new historicism" (for example, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare). (Here is a link to a nice website on the new historicism.) Greenblatt's interpretive imagination, his ability to think clearly and innovatively about identities and meanings, and his remarkable ability to link a series of observations into a startling inference and insight -- these abilities would be most beneficial to the problems associated with "understanding society." We need some new ways of framing the tasks of understanding social and historical reality -- and Greenblatt's incisive mind provides many new perspectives on these sorts of issues.

And, in fact, the idea isn't as far-fetched as it might seem. Greenblatt's contribution to Sherry Ortner's The Fate of "Culture": Geertz and Beyond shows his ability to turn ethnographic, as does his book on the writings of the colonial navigators who brought Europe to the new world (Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World). In each case he demonstrates how fertile the connections are between literary, ethnographic, and historical interpretation. He is particularly profound when it comes to thinking about social identities -- they ways they are formed and expressed, and the ways they vary across time and place.

But let's focus here on what makes Will in the World such an interesting book. Greenblatt does a simply stunning job of constructing an interpretation of Shakespeare's mentality and his creative mind, linking the grainy historical context in which Shakespeare was writing to the brilliance and startling novelties expressed in his plays. Greenblatt is pursuing a bold ambition here because there is so remarkably little evidence about Shakespeare's life that would serve as the basis for a traditional biography. Moreover, Greenblatt's goal is somewhat different from that of the traditional biographer. He is interested in getting a better understanding of the author's mental and experiential world, based on his personal chronology, many very specific details about England's history during this half century, and a profound knowledge of Shakespeare's writings.

Greenblatt freely admits that much of his interpretation exceeds the historical facts. There are few documents that would directly establish Shakespeare's feelings about his marriage or his family; the situation of the persecution of England's Catholics; or his attitudes towards Marlowe, Greene, and the other brilliant bohemian playwrights of the London scene. And yet he makes a case for his interpretation that is deeply compelling and evidence-based -- though the evidence is largely internal to Shakespeare's body of writing. (Even the lack of diaries or personal notes is taken as a kind of evidence -- evidence of the very great danger that the persecutions by the Crown created for anyone suspected of involvement in Catholic conspiracies. Greenblatt writes vividly of the rows of heads on spikes that would have greeted him as he entered London for the first time --

often the heads of Catholic conspirators.)

Another kind of evidence in Greenblatt's case is the collation of knowledge of historical conditions in the mid-sixteenth century in England that we do know quite a bit about -- the availability (or non-availability) of books, the character and content of schooling, the history of the expulsion of the English Jews -- with the series of developmental experiences that Shakespeare certainly went through. Even if we know next to nothing about Shakespeare's youth, the fact that he is likely to have attended the Stratford grammar school under the tutelage of a Simon Hunt, tells Greenblatt quite a bit about the kinds of drama and history to which he would have been exposed.

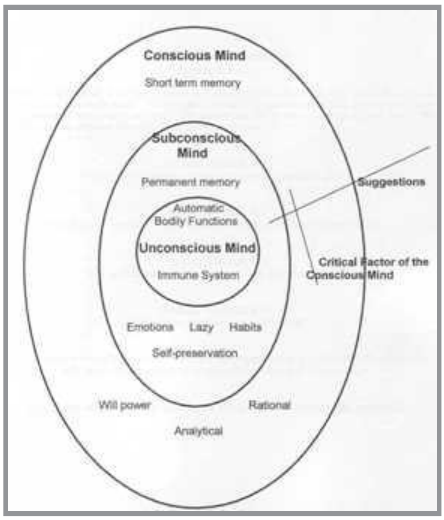
The Crown's fierce oppression of the Catholics in the early to mid-sixteenth century is a particularly important element of Greenblatt's interpretation of Shakespeare's mentality. Greenblatt hypothesizes that this period of terror touched Shakespeare and his family fairly closely. The smashing of Catholic images in churches, the dismissal of the local priests, and the occasional hunt for persistent Catholic practices in private homes all touched Stratford directly. And John Shakespeare himself had evidently signed a Catholic "spiritual testament", discovered in the eighteenth century hidden away between the rafters and ceiling of the Stratford home. In this setting, Greenblatt considers a scenario for the missing year of Shakespeare's life at the age of 16: he considers that the young man may have served as a private teacher in the household of John Cottam, a prominent secret Catholic in Lancashire. And there he would have had vivid exposure to the drama surrounding the illicit activist Jesuit priest, Edmund Campion. (Campion was apprehended, tortured, and executed in 1581.) Greenblatt finds many traces of this personal history of covert Catholicism in Shakespeare's plots, language, and life.

What I find most thought-provoking in Greenblatt's work here, is his ability to bring history, literature, and life story together into one extended interpretation. The book sheds light on ordinary life in sixteenth-century England -- rural and town. In this respect it serves as vivid social history. And it sheds light on the literature as well -- the many ways in which themes and turns of language can be related to Shakespeare's own itinerary, as well as the astonishing ability the writer had to transform the ordinary into something transcendent.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:55AM (-04:00)

Mental life

Monday, October 20, 2008

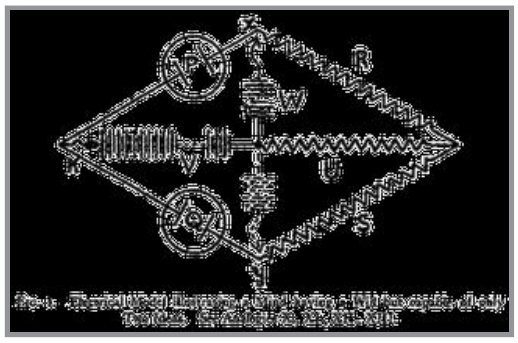
We are all persons with thoughts, desires, emotions, memories, and awareness. In some sense we have first-hand knowledge of all this -- we are the ones who experience the situation of going through a difficult job interview, of feeling angry at an aggressive driver, of trying to decide what to do in a moment of important choice, of remembering an incident that occurred months or years earlier. We're not in the position that Thomas Nagel assumed when he tried to reason about what it feels like to be a bat ("What is it Like to Be a Bat?" in Ned Block, ed. Readings in Philosophy of Psychology v.1). And yet we have a surprisingly thin set of theories of what is involved in this active experiencing of the world as a thinking, acting person -- and some of our theories are obviously wrong. So why is it so hard to formulate a clear, simple philosophy of the mind -- an overarching sketch of how various mental states and processes relate to each other within the functioning person?



One sign of the confusion this subject engenders is the great variety of terms we use to capture what we're talking about: the mind, the agent, the self, the person, the subject, the knower, the actor, the ego, the conscious being, the soul. Each of these terms might be said to refer to the same thing -- the experiencing, wanting, acting human individual. And yet each highlights a different aspect of the topic: the act of perception, the gathering of knowledge, the experience of wants and desires, the fact of subjectivity, the problematic unity of the self, the process of decision making and action, the causality of the emotions, the situation of awareness. And, sure enough, there is a separate strand of philosophical thinking about each of these perspectives.



So here is my question: is it possible to sketch a basic theory of the conscious human being that allows us to assign a place to each of the mental activities and processes that we think are taking place; and can the various parts of psychology and neuroscience give us greater understanding of how this system works and greater confidence in the theories we advance? Can we arrive at a schematic but phenomenologically and behaviorally adequate sketch of how these bits of mental activity and process fit together? The diagrams above are pulled from the web with the search term "models of mind." They illustrate some very different ways of representing these different aspects or features of the person's mental experience, and they are, in some sense, the sorts of theories I'm looking for in this posting. But none is close to being satisfactory. So the question is, can we arrive at a sketch that can be defended on the basis of the evidence of logic, phenomenology, and behavior?



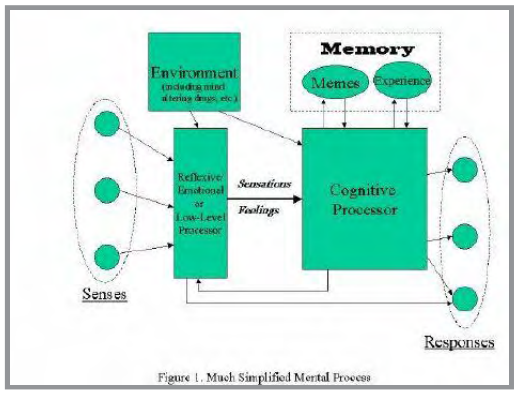
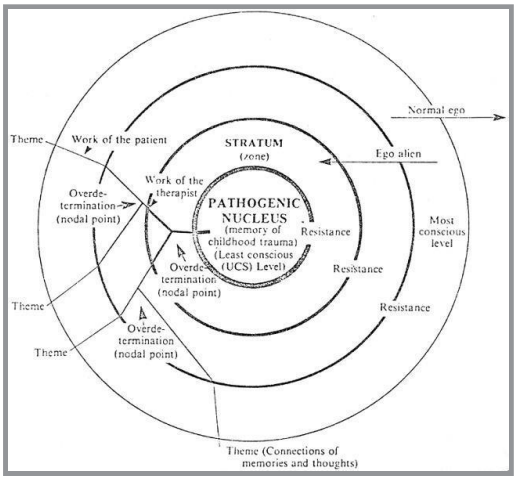


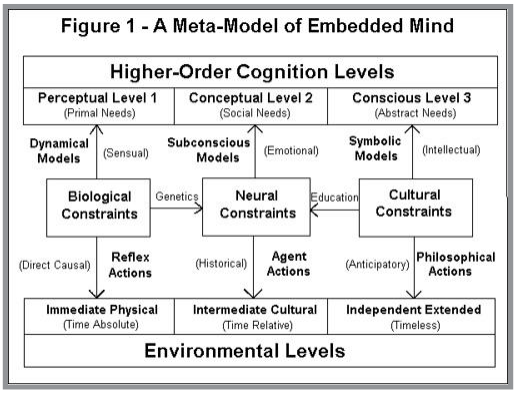
Figure 1. Much Simplified Mental Process

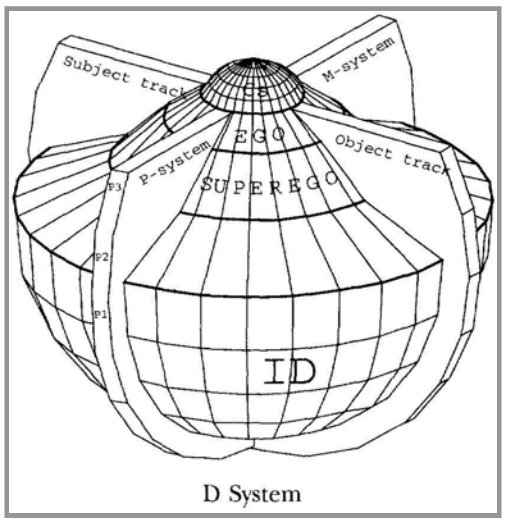
I think this was a large part of William James's goal in writing The Principles of Psychology. James wanted to explore the complexities of human mental life as presented through introspection; and he wanted to do this in a scientific fashion. (See a very good article from SEP on James here.) James describes his scientific goals in these terms in the first few sentences of the work:

Psychology is the Science of Mental Life, both of its phenomena and their conditions. The phenomena are such things as we call feelings, desires, cognitions, reasonings,



decisions, and the like; and, superficially considered, their variety and complexity is such as to leave a chaotic impression of the observer.





Scientific psychology left this program behind almost a century ago, although parts of the effort are reflected in current cognitive psychology and social psychology. But it isn't sufficient to simply legislate the problem away; it is impossible to deny that memories, impulses, intuitions, aversions, feelings, desires, emotions, daydreams, and calculations all play roles in human mental life and action. So we need to have at least a sketchy idea of how we think the mental world we experience is organized and how this soup of mental life is related to action and behavior.

The effort to find concepts and frameworks in terms of which to analyze human mental life has been a continuing part of philosophy, in the fields of the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of psychology, and cognitive philosophy. One place to start on this large field is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, with articles on folk psychology, mental representation, the computational theory of mind, memory, and Merleau-Ponty. Philosophers have continued to take seriously the questions of consciousness, subjectivity, representation, and thinking.

But another place where one can turn in attempting to get a handle on the nature and organization of mental experience is literature. Great novels often capture a lot of the complexity of ordinary human mental experience in their narrations of individuals as they navigate life: Stavrogin in Dostoevsky's The Possessed, Julien Sorel in Red and Black, Rufus Scott in Baldwin's Another Country. These are "interior" novels -- novels where the author is making a sustained effort to get inside the head of the character, giving the

reader a view of the nature of the subjective experience and thoughts that the character undergoes. And it seems to me that the intellectual work that the author is doing is very similar to the work of a philosopher in grappling with the nature of consciousness: he/she is attempting to arrive at a language that allows for description of these fleeting interior moments, and a framework of observation about how they may fit together -- how passion or jealousy affects action, how calculation interferes with love, how the experience of discrimination colors one's relationships. These theories aren't necessarily true -- in fact, one of the things we can do as critical readers is to see how well the novelist's framework of mental life holds together from the points of view of consistency and phenomenology -- but they represent significant intellectual efforts at understanding mental life nonetheless.

I think the subject is important for understanding the social world, because the subjective, active human individual is the "molecule" of social life. The ways in which individuals reason, act, form beliefs, create affinities, and emote are deeply important to social processes. And we won't understand many features of social life unless we can make some degree of progress on the problem of formulating an abstract model of the human person.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:27PM (-04:00)

Mapping social data

Thursday, October 23, 2008

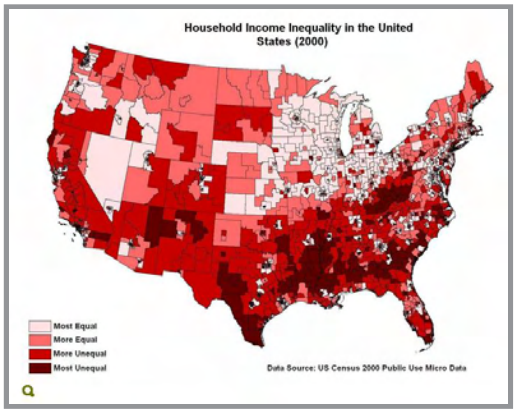


Fig. 1. Household income inequality (US Census 2000 link)

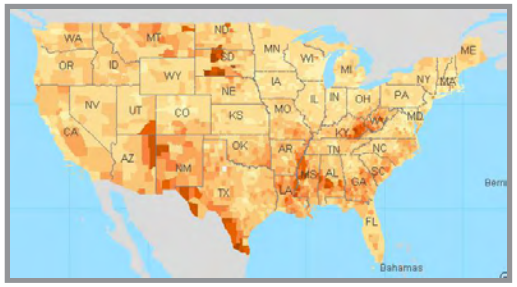
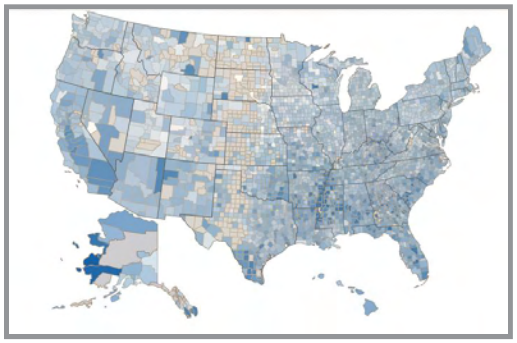


Fig. 2. Poverty rates (US Census Data 2000 link)

Fig. 3. 60 day bank card delinquency -- Q1 2008 (Federal Reserve Bank link)

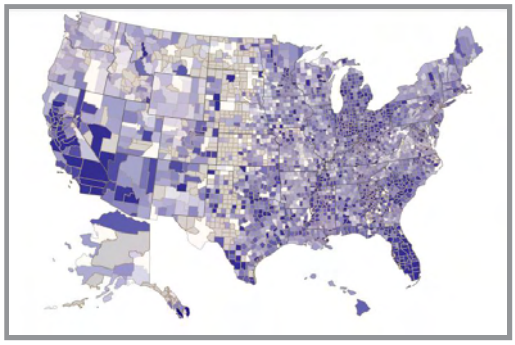
Fig. 4. 90 day mortgage delinquency -- Q1 2008 (Federal Reserve Bank link)

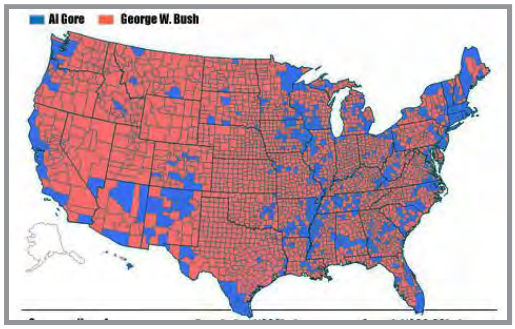
It's interesting to look at each of these data maps in detail. The comparisons of patterns are very revealing. Figure 4 is the most familiar to us -- it shows the geographical distribution of the mortgage crisis across the country. California and Florida aren't a surprise; but there are other hot spots across the country. For example, the "rust belt" of Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana shows a pretty dense set of high mortgage delinquency counties. But then consider the next crisis that may be coming -- consumer credit default. Here again the spatial patterns are interesting. Mississippi and Louisiana jump off the map on the poverty and inequality maps, and on the bank card default map as well. And then you can compare these state-by-state patterns with the top two figures, mapping poverty and inequality across the counties of the United States. And, finally, it's interesting to compare all these patterns of



economic distress -- with the pattern of blue and red counties in the 2000 Presidential election.

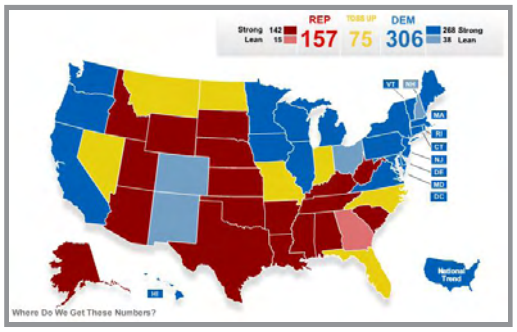
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:56PM (-04:00)





What do polls tell us?

Friday, October 24, 2008



We're all interested in the opinions of vast numbers of strangers -- potential voters, investors, consumers, college students, or home owners. Our interest is often a practical one -- we would like to know how the election is likely to go, whether the stock market will rebound, whether an influenza season will develop into a pandemic, or whether the shops in our cities and malls will have higher or lower demand in the holiday season. And so we turn to polls and surveys of attitudes and preferences -- consumer confidence surveys, voter preference polls, surveys of public health behaviors, surveys of investor confidence. And tools such as pollster.com aggregate and disaggregate the data to allow us to make more refined judgments about what the public's mood really is. But how valid is the knowledge that is provided by surveys and polls? To what extent do they accurately reflect an underlying social reality of public opinion? And to what extent does this knowledge provide a basis for projecting future collective behavior (including voting)?

There are several important factors to consider.

First is the heterogeneity of social characteristics across a population at virtually every level of scale -- including especially attitudes and beliefs. No matter what slice of the social demographic we select -- selecting for specific age, race, religion, and income, for example -- there will be a range of opinions across the resulting group. Groups don't suddenly become homogeneous when we find the right way of partitioning the population.

Second is an analogous point about plasticity over time. The attitudes and preferences of individuals and groups change over time -- often rapidly. In polling I suppose this is referred to as "voter volatility" -- the susceptibility of a group to changing its preferences in response to changing information and other stimulation. And the fact appears to be that opinions and beliefs change rapidly during periods of decision-making. So knowing that 65% of Hispanic voters preferred X over Y on October 10 doesn't imply much about the preferences of this group two weeks later. This is precisely what the campaigns are trying to accomplish -- a new message or commercial that shifts preferences for an extended group.

Third are questions having to do with the honesty of the responses that a survey or poll elicits. Do subjects honestly record their answers; do they conceal responses they may be ashamed of (the Bradley effect); do they exaggerate their income or personal happiness or expected grade in a course? There are survey techniques intended to address these possibilities (obscuring the point of a question, coming back to a question in a different way); but the possibility of untruthful responses raises an important problem for us when we try to assess the realism of a poll or survey.

Fourth are the standard technical issues having to do with sampling and population estimation: how large a set of observations are required to arrive at an estimate of a population value with 95% confidence? And what measures need to be taken to assure a random sample and avoid sample bias? For example, if polling is done based solely on landline phone numbers, does this introduce either an age bias or an income bias if it is true that affluent young people are more likely to have only cell phones?

So, then, what is the status of opinion surveys and polls as a source of knowledge about social reality? Do public opinion surveys tell us something about objective underlying facts about a population? What does a finding like "65% of Iowans favor subsidies for corn ethanol" based on a telephone poll of 1000 citizens tell us about the opinions of the full population of the state of Iowa?

Points made above lead to several important cautions. First, the reality of public opinion and preference itself is fluid and heterogeneous. The properties we're trying to measure vary substantially across any subgroup we might define -- pro/con assessments about a candidate's judgment, for example. So the measurement of a particular question is simply an average value for the group as a whole, with the possibility of a substantial variance within the group. And second, the opinions themselves may change rapidly over time at the individual level -- with the result that an observation today may be very different from a measurement next week. Third, it is a credible hypothesis that demographic factors such as race, income, or gender may affect attitudes and opinions; so there is a basis for thinking that data disaggregated by these variables may demonstrate more uniformity and consistency. Finally, the usual cautions about sample size and sample bias are always relevant; a poorly designed study tells us almost nothing about the underlying reality.

But what about the acid test: to what extent can a series of polls and surveys performed over many subgroups over an extended period of time, help to forecast the collective behavior of the group as a whole? Can we use this kind of information to arrive at credible estimates of an election in two weeks, or the likely demand for automobiles in 2009, or the willingness of a whole population to accept public health guidelines in a time of pandemic flu?

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:21AM (-04:00)

Labor mobilization

Saturday, October 25, 2008



Workers are a group who ought to be readily prone to mobilization. They are brought together into proximity with each other in large numbers in factories, rail stations, ports, and other workplaces. The circumstances of production usually give them causes around which to gather -- health and safety issues in the workplace, bullying or disrespectful treatment by supervisors, petty or demeaning work rules. And the business incentives created for owners and managers assure an environment in which workers are likely to have economic grievances, ranging from low pay to withheld wages to pension fund corruption and default. So the conditions for mobilization of workers in protest and advocacy seem propitious almost everywhere. And yet passive acceptance seems about as common as spontaneous or organized protest and resistance. So what other factors come into play? What explains historical patterns of worker passivity and protest? And going a bit further, what factors influence the form that protest takes when it occurs?

Marx's answers to these questions are well known. The development of industrial capitalism brought about the objective conditions for a militant working class identity. Capitalism increasingly erased differences among artisans and other producers. It conducted a process of commodification of labor that increasingly place all producers in the condition of wage labor. And the imperatives of profits pushed the industrial system towards worse working conditions, lower wages, and a degraded social position. The emergence of a unified class identity and a readiness for protest was inevitable. "Workers of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains."

Marx's story here isn't a fantasy. There are real institutional processes embedded in this story that correspond pretty well to the historical experience of labor and capital in many countries and times. But neither is it an iron law of social development. Each country's experience of development is somewhat different -- sometimes in major ways. And crucially, the result Marx expected -- a steadily rising tide of radical worker mobilization -- has certainly not occurred. So, once again, what are the more specific and local factors that influence the occurrence and form of worker mobilization?

One of Charles Tilly's central ideas about the occurrence of protest is its historical character. Protest movements have histories that form their present. Tilly emphasizes the central role that traditions and repertoires of protest play in virtually every instance. Protest is not simply the automatic response to exploitation and bad conditions. Rather, protest is an act of collective agency. And this means that outrage and protest must be conceptualized and placed into a practical context. So traditions of protest and grievance play a key role in determining the occurrence and form of mobilization. Parades, strikes, boycotts, road blockages, and petitions all represent forms of the "art of resistance" that have developed differently in different traditions of popular politics. (See The Contentious

French for more on this.)

E. P. Thompson's focus on the particulars of the group identity that has formed represents another crucial factor that helps explain differences across historical settings. Classes make themselves -- and they make themselves in different ways. William Sewell's treatment of the guild consciousness of nineteenth century workers in Marseilles illustrates the point (Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848). Historians and sociologists can observe these processes of identity in formation through a variety of ways -- both historically and in the present. And these differences in consciousness formation have consequences for mobilization and action. For example, C. K. Lee argues that China's workers today, in both "rustbelt" and "sunbelt" settings, have absorbed a set of attitudes towards the moral importance of their legal protections within existing Chinese law, that profoundly influences the form that protests take Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt.

Resource mobilization theory highlights another crucial factor that helps explain differences in mobilization across similar material settings. For a group to successfully constitute itself as an effective collectivity, it needs to have access to a range of resources. Communication requires resources; organization requires fulltime activists; propaganda requires access to printing assets; and so forth. So we can get a better picture of the status of labor mobilization in a particular setting, by examining the resources and opportunities for collective action that exist for potential activists.

Organization is a factor that also makes a large difference in the occurrence and form of mobilization. The presence of the IWW plays a key role in Howard Kimeldorf's account of Philadelphia dock workers (Battling for American Labor: Wobblies, Craft Workers, and the Making of the Union Movement). The CCP is key in Lucien Bianco's trarment of peasant mobilization in China (Peasants Without the Party: Grass-Root Movements in Twentieth-Century China). Organizations permit a movement to acquire the coordination of effort required by successful mobilization. And it permits "escalation" -- extension of mobilization to a broader territory or a broader set of alliances.

It is also important to recognize the role that agency and strategic interaction play in the unfolding of mobilization. Struggle involved multiple parties responding to each other's actions. And the outcome may be entirely unforeseen; state actions can both ameliorate the causes of worker grievance (through more vigilant regulation, for example) and deepen worker grievance (through a legal system that systematically disregards worker claims) -- and may even do so at the same time.

A final factor that needs mention is the state. Actions and policies by the state can have a large effect on mobilization at several levels. Through regulation it can reduce grievances -- pension fund abuse, health and safety issues, intimidation in the workplace. And by providing a substantial social security system -- unemployment benefits, access to healthcare, decent treatment of the elderly -- it can blunt some of the aggressively harmful tendencies of the unbridled private system that would otherwise lead to explosive protest. Finally, the state can use its coercive and legal power to channel protest in one direction rather than another.

So where does this take us with respect to the original question -- what explains patterns of worker mobilization? We've noticed some general circumstances that are conducive to worker activism and mobilization. But this account also highlights a wide suite of independent factors that influence mobilization, both up and down. This treatment

reinforces the view that social change is highly contingent. And it shows the irreplaceable role to be played by good, specific works of historical sociology. No comprehensive theory suffices for any particular case. Instead, we need to discover the particular ways in which general processes and more contingent factors come together to forge a particular historical juncture. (An influential recent book that tries to work out where workers' movements might be going in the twenty-first century is Beverly Silver's Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:44AM (-04:00)

"Influence" concepts

Monday, October 27, 2008



Power is an elusive social concept, because it is fundamentally relational and composite. The power that a person or group possesses can only be defined in relation to the domain of persons over whom this power can be wielded and the set of social resources that constitute the levers of this power. Power must be characterized in terms of domain and mechanisms. The question here is whether there are other social concepts that have a similar conceptual geography. If so, this may give us a better basis for explaining the concept of power.

Consider these possible sibling concepts: status, affluence, charisma, eloquence, funny ... Each of these is what we might call an "influence" concept. It stipulates a capacity to bring about a particular kind of effect in other persons. It follows that these concepts are inherently relational; we cannot define "charisma" or "eloquence" without explicitly or implicitly specifying the group of people who respond to these qualities. Second, conveying influence requires a mechanism of influence; and in fact each of these examples depends upon some set of qualities or assets through which the individual with the property is able to exert this influence (admiration, laughter, persuasion, willingness to follow, willingness to obey).

Further, each of these characteristics is social in one way or another. "Status" depends on an audience that is prepared to "read" a person with certain attributes as possessing a certain status, and it depends on the individual being socially situated on such a way as to acquire those tags (the Mercedes, the $600 haircut, ...). "Affluence" depends on having resources adequate to support consumption noticeably superior to that of most other people in this social setting -- in fact, it is doubly social, in that it depends upon comparison with other consumers and on the affluent person's having access to socially defined resources, which implies a particular situation within a particular set of social relations (corporation, pirate gang, government bureau).

Power differs from these other influence terms in several ways. Most crucially, power is less dependent on the social psychology of others and more dependent upon material resources. Status and eloquence are pretty much in the eye of the beholder, whereas the power of a criminal boss depends largely on his ability to marshall force. Affluence is similar in this respect, while "funny" is more similar to status.

So an important distinguishing feature within this conceptual space of "social influence" concepts is whether the attributes needed to wield influence are personal psychological traits or external, socially defined assets. David Letterman is funny because he has a set of capabilities -- quick verbal wit, droll timing, sarcastic imagination, extreme facial motility -- that we are culturally prepared to find amusing. These traits are not inherently funny -- presenting the same skit to a group of Navajo ranchers might elicit only puzzled looks. But in our comedy culture, the person who has Letterman's qualities but at a less adept level will not succeed in being funny. Al Capone was powerful because he had violent men available to do his bidding. This wasn't a feature primarily of his psychological characteristics but rather his particular social location and the material resources of violence he could call upon.

We might consider how charisma fits in this analysis, especially since this concept has almost as common appeal in political analysis as power. We might say that a charismatic person is one who has the ability to influence other people to want to act in the ways he/she asks of them. This influence is often described as sub-rational and sub-conscious: followers act out the exhortations of their charismatic leader out of emotional allegiance rather than rational judgment. So the capacities required of the charismatic leader are features of personality and performance -- the charismatic person needs the qualities that permit him/her to inspire followers. In this way charisma is similar to being funny. But these capabilities also give the leader the ability to influence followers beyond their rational will -- which makes charisma more similar to power.

So we might summarize this analysis in application to the concept of power along these lines:

X has power =df {X has access to social resources Ri that permits him/her to compel the behavior of persons Pj}

X is funny =df {X has skills and personality traits Ci such that X's performance typically elicits laughter from persons Pj}

X has charisma =df {X has skills and personality traits Ci such that X's performance typically elicits admiration and loyalty from persons Pj}
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:52PM (-04:00)

Causal mechanisms

Tuesday, October 28, 2008

The central tenet of causal realism is a thesis about causal mechanisms or causal powers. We can only assert that there is a causal relationship between X and Y if we can offer a credible hypothesis of the sort of underlying mechanism that might connect X to the occurrence of Y. The sociologist Mats Ekström puts the view this way: “the essence of causal analysis is ... the elucidation of the processes that generate the objects, events, and actions we seek to explain” (Ekstrom 1992, p. 115). Authors who have urged the centrality of causal mechanisms for both explanatory and purposes include Nancy Cartwright (Nature's Capacities and Their Measurements), Jon Elster (Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences), Rom Harré (Causal Powers), and Wesley Salmon (Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World). (Hedstrom and Swedberg's collection, Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory, is a useful source. An important advocate for a realist interpretation of

science is Roy Bhaskar's A Realist Theory of Science.)

Nancy Cartwright is one of the most original voices within contemporary philosophy of science. Cartwright places real causal mechanisms at the center of her account of scientific knowledge. As she and John Dupré put the point, “things and events have causal capacities: in virtue of the properties they possess, they have the power to bring about other events or states” (Dupré and Cartwright 1988). Cartwright argues, for the natural sciences, that the concept of a real causal connection among a set of events is more fundamental than the concept of a law of nature. And most fundamentally, she argues that identifying causal relations requires substantive theories of the causal powers (capacities, in her language) that govern the entities in question. Causal relations cannot be directly inferred from facts about association among variables. As she puts the point, “No reduction of generic causation to regularities is possible” (Nature's Capacities and Their Measurements, p. 90). The importance of this idea for sociological research is profound; it confirms the notion shared by many researchers that attribution of social causation depends inherently on the formulation of good, middle-level theories about the real causal properties of various social forces and entities.

What is a causal mechanism? Consider this formulation: a causal mechanism is a sequence of events, conditions, and processes leading from the explanans to the explanandum (Varieties Of Social Explanation, p. 15). A causal relation exists between X and Y if and only if there is a set of causal mechanisms that connect X to Y. This is an ontological premise, asserting that causal mechanisms are real and are the legitimate object of scientific investigation.

Aage Sørensen summarizes a causal realist position for sociology in these words: “Sociological ideas are best reintroduced into quantitative sociological research by focusing on specifying the mechanisms by which change is brought about in social processes” (Sørensen 1998, p. 264). He argues that sociology requires better integration of theory and evidence. Central to an adequate explanatory theory, however, is the specification of the mechanism that is hypothesized to underlie a given set of observations. “Developing theoretical ideas about social processes is to specify some concept of what brings about a certain outcome—a change in political regimes, a new job, an increase in corporate performance, … The development of the conceptualization of change amounts to proposing a mechanism for a social process” (239-240). Sørensen makes the critical point that one cannot select a statistical model for analysis of a set of data without first asking the question, what in the nature of the mechanisms we wish to postulate to link the influences of some variables with others? Rather, it is necessary to have a hypothesis of the mechanisms that link the variables before we can arrive at a justified estimate of the relative importance of the causal variables in bringing about the outcome.

The general nature of the mechanisms that underlie sociological causation has been very much the subject of debate. Two broad approaches may be identified: agent-based models and social influence models. The former follow the strategy of aggregating the results of individual-level choices into macro-level outcomes; the latter attempt to identify the factors that work behind the backs of agents to influence their choices. (Sørensen refers to these as “pull” and “push” models; Sørensen, 1998.) Thomas Schelling’s apt title Micromotives and Macrobehavior captures the logic of the former approach, and his work profoundly illustrates the sometimes highly unpredictable results of the interactions of locally rational behavior. Jon Elster has also shed light on the ways in which the tools of rational choice theory support the construction of largescale sociological explanations

(The Cement of Society: A Survey of Social Order). The second approach (the “push” approach) attempts to identify socially salient influences such as race, gender, educational status, and to provide detailed accounts of how these factors influence or constrain individual trajectories—thereby affecting sociological outcomes.

Emphasis on causal mechanisms for adequate social explanation has several salutary effects on sociological method. It takes us away from uncritical reliance on uncritical statistical models. But it also may take us away from excessive emphasis on large-scale classification of events into revolutions, democracies, or religions, and toward more specific analysis of the processes and features that serve to discriminate among instances of large social categories. Charles Tilly emphasizes this point in his arguments for causal narratives in comparative sociology (Tilly 1995). He writes, “I am arguing that regularities in political life are very broad, indeed transhistorical, but do not operate in the form of recurrent structures and processes at a large scale. They consist of recurrent causes which in different circumstances and sequences compound into highly variable but nonetheless explicable effects” (Tilly 1995, p. 1601).

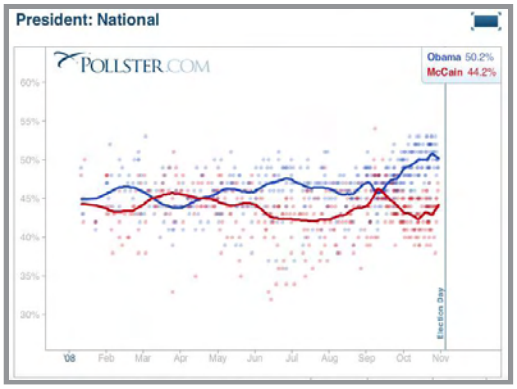
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Posted by Daniel Little at 09:38PM (-04:00)

Polling and social knowledge

Wednesday, October 29, 2008



Here's a pretty interesting graphic from Pollster.com:

As you can see, the graph summarizes a large number of individual polls measuring support for the two major party candidates from January 1 to October 26. The site indicates that it includes all publicly available polls during the time period. Each poll result is represented with two markers -- blue for Obama and red for McCain. The red and blue trend lines are "trend estimates" based on local regressions for the values of the corresponding measurements for a relatively short interval of time (the site doesn't explicitly say what the time interval is). So, for example, the trend estimate for August 1 appears to be approximately 47%:42% for the two candidates. As the site explains, 47% is not the average of poll results for Obama on August 1; instead, it is a regression result based on the trend of all of Obama's polling

results for the previous several days.

There are a couple of things to observe about this graph and the underlying methodology. First, it's a version of the "wisdom of the crowd" idea, in that it arrives at an estimate based on a large number of less-reliable individual observations (the dozen or so polling results for the previous several days). Each of the individual poll results has an estimate-of-error which may be in the range of 3-5 percentage points; the hope is that the aggregate result has a higher degree of precision (a narrower error bar).

Second, the methodology attempts to incorporate an estimate of the direction and rate of movement of public opinion, by incorporating trend information based on the prior several days' polling results.

Third, it is evident that there is likely to be a range of degrees of credibility assigned to the various component polls; but the methodology doesn't assign greater weight to "more credible" polls. Ordinary readers might be inclined to assign greater weight to a Gallup poll or a CBS poll than a Research2000 or a DailyKos poll; but the methodology treats all results equally. Likewise, the critical reader might assign more credibility to a live phone-based poll than an internet-based or automated phone poll; but this version of the graph includes all polls. (On the website it is possible to filter out internet-generated or automated phone polling results; this doesn't seem to change the shape of the results noticeably.)

There is also a fundamental question of validity and reliability that the critical reader needs to ask: how valid and reliable are these estimates for a particular point in time? That is, how likely is it that the trend estimate of support for either candidate on a particular day is within a small range of error of the actual value? I assume there is some statistical method for estimating probable error for this methodology, though it doesn't appear to be explained on the website. But fundamentally, the question is whether we have a rational basis for drawing any of the inferences that the graph suggests -- for example, that Obama's lead over McCain is narrowing in the final 14 days of the race.

Finally, there is the narrative that we can extract from the graph, and it tells an interesting story. From January through March candidate Obama has a lead over candidate McCain; but of course both candidates are deeply engaged in their own primary campaigns. At the beginning of April the candidates are roughly tied at 45%. From April through September Obama rises slowly and maintains support at about 48%, while McCain falls in support until he reaches a low point of 43% in the beginning of August. Then the conventions take place in August and early September -- and McCain's numbers bump up to the point where Obama and McCain cross in the first week of September. McCain takes a brief lead in the trend estimates. His ticket seems to derive more benefit from his "convention bump" than Obama does. But in the early part of September the national financial crisis leaps to center stage and the two candidates fare very differently. Obama's support rises steeply and McCain's support falls at about the same rate, opening up a 7 percentage point gap in the trend estimates by the middle of October. From the middle of October the race begins to tighten; McCain's support picks up and Obama's begins to dip slightly at the end of October. But the election looms -- the trend estimates tell a story that's hard to read in any way but "too late, too little" for the McCain campaign.

And, of course, it will be fascinating to see where things stand a week from today.

Here is the explanation that the website offers of its methodology:

[quoting from Pollster.com:]
"Where do the numbers come from?

When you hold the mouse pointer over a state, you see a display of the latest "trend estimate" numbers from our charts of all available public polls for that race. The numbers for each candidate correspond to the most recent trend estimate -- that is the end point of the trend line that we draw for each candidate. If you click the state on the map, you will be taken to the page on Pollster.com that displays the chart and table of polls results for that race.

In most cases, the numbers are not an "average" but rather regression based trendlines. The specific methodology depends on the number of polls available.

- If we have at least 8 public polls, we fit a trend line to the dots represented by each poll using a "Loess" iterative locally weighted least squares regression.
- If we have between 4 and 7 polls, we fit a linear regression trend line (a straight line) to best fit the points.
- If we have 3 polls or fewer, we calculate a simple average of the available surveys.

How do regression trend lines differ from simple averages?

Charles Franklin, who created the statistical routines that plot our trend lines, provided the following explanation last year:

Our trend estimate is just that, an estimate of the trends and where the race stands as of the latest data available. It is NOT a simple average of recent polling but a "local regression" estimate of support as of the most recent poll. So if you are trying to [calculate] our trend estimates from just averaging the recent polls, you won't succeed.

Here is a way to think about this: suppose the last 5 polls in a race are 25, 27, 29, 31 and 33. Which is a better estimate of where the race stands today? 29 (the mean) or 33 (the local trend)? Since support has risen by 2 points in each successive poll, our estimator will say the trend is currently 33%, not the 29% the polls averaged over the past 2 or 3 weeks during which the last 5 polls were taken. Of course real data are more noisy than my example, so we have to fit the trend in a more complicated way than the example, but the logic is the same. Our trend estimates are local regression predictions, not simple averaging. If the data have been flat for a while, the trend and the mean will be quite close to each other. But if the polls are moving consistently either up or down, the trend estimate will be a better estimate of opinion as of today while the simple average will be an estimate of where the race was some 3 polls ago (for a 5 poll average-- longer ago as more polls are included in the average.) And that's why we estimate the trends the way we do."

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:46AM (-04:00)

Is there such a thing as human nature?

Thursday, October 30, 2008

People often make claims about "human nature." For example -- "It is a part of human nature to be egoistic." "Human beings are naturally acquisitive." "Cooperation is a natural human instinct." "Human nature defines the way we learn language." "Violence is natural."



What would human nature look like? To start with a preliminary definition, we might say that human nature is a relatively fixed set of characteristics of psychology, motivation, and cognition that are not the product of learning. Or, at a slightly greater remove from behavior, we might include innate capacities that can be triggered by appropriate experiences, but may also remain latent if those experiences are not encountered. (This is roughly the way that Noam Chomsky thinks about language competence in Aspects of the Theory of Syntax.)

When people have identified some psychological characteristics as being part of human nature, they usually have had one of three things in mind. First, thinkers have sometimes held that there are "innate ideas" -- beliefs and concepts that are hard-wired and are not learned through experience. For example, Kant holds that the ideas of space, time, and causality are a necessary part of any intelligent being's mental equipment. Second, thinkers have sometimes postulated that there are certain visceral emotions that come with the normal human equipment -- for example, fear of loud noises, love of infants, or empathy. And third, people sometimes assert that there are some fundamental dispositions to behavior that are a part of "human nature" -- for example, being self-interested, being amenable to the appeal of fairness, being monogomous or its opposites.

The logical contrary to the idea that there is a human nature, is the idea that human beings are simply general-purpose "learning machines," equipped with a pretty impressive inference engine and neurophysiological computer; so all our beliefs, emotions, and dispositions to behavior are learned through experience. (Even on this approach there is something "fixed" in the human apparatus -- the set of computational processes through which learning occurs. But everything else is variable and dependent upon the environment in which learning takes place.)

This is the "tabula rasa" theory -- the idea that the mind is a blank slate upon which experience inscribes specific knowledge and dispositions to behavior. On this approach, the mind consists of an extended inductive logic engine (permitting the acquisition of beliefs about the world); a "culture-acquisition device" (permitting the absorption of linguistic and normative practices from the surrounding community); and a "scenarios and actions" guidebook assembly kit (permitting the construction of a growing list of commands along the lines of "when such-and-so happens, do thus-and-so"). Altogether this being has the ability to gather empirical and causal beliefs, gain language and values, and acquire a set of guidelines about how to behave. And, according to the tabula rasa theory, the content of each of these attainments is governed only by the feedback of experience. Supply a different environment, and you get different knowledge, values, and behavior.

It is evident that much of an adult's mental makeup is the result of his/her history and the enveloping culture within which the individual has developed. Learning is a fundamental aspect of human life, and it occurs at virtually every level; modes of reasoning, self-control, willingness to cooperate with others, and definition of the appropriate distance of separation between two people in a conversation are all human performances that are culturally and individually variable. They are the outcome of social learning. Further, human culture fundamentally influences human behavior -- and culture is only transmitted through lived experience.

The question of human nature is whether there are any dispositions or behavioral

outcomes that are largely independent from these learning and developmental processes. Are there any social behaviors, emotions, or impulses that are an innate part of the human mental system? The sociobiologists have offered one line of analysis on this question. They note that the human mental system -- cognition, emotions, and the control of behavior -- is embodied in an organ that is itself subject to natural selection and evolution, the central nervous system. So it seems logical to expect that this system will have acquired some socially specific characteristics through the evolution of hominids and modern human beings. Edward O. Wilson took a controversial stab at the question in On Human Nature. And Richard Dawkins tried to get a handle on the evolutionary biology of cooperation in The Selfish Gene. Each book has proven controversial over the decades since publication -- largely on grounds of the complaint that they are somewhat reductionist in their disregard of the causal importance of culture in the behaviors they describe. (See, for example, Marshall Sahlins, The Use and Abuse of Biology: An Anthropological Critique of Sociobiology.)

But surely the foundation of the approach is a valid one: the human brain has been shaped through natural selection; skill in social relationships is relevant to reproductive success; so it is logical to expect that there has been specialized brain development around the challenges of social interaction. Allan Gibbard's Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment explores these ideas in some detail and in a way that is exempt from the accusation of reductionism.

The strongest case for mental features that might be part of human nature concerns what might be referred to as the social emotions and the foundations of social cognition. The social emotions might include a disposition towards reciprocity, an innate responsiveness towards infants, and a deep grounding of empathy for the suffering of other human beings. It is not difficult to put together an analysis that would show that these psychological traits might have differential reproductive advantage for the individuals who carry these traits. And the foundations of social cognition also seem to qualify as candidates for features of human nature as well: the ability to recognize and remember faces, the ability to "read" emotions and mental states in the speech and behavior of others, and the ability to quickly apprehend a social setting, for example. Here too there seem to be the makings of a selection-based explanation of the proliferation of these traits through a population; these cognitive abilities surely confer some reproductive benefits on the individuals who possess them. Another example of a mental trait that might be an enduring component of human nature is the ability to plan future actions, considering alternatives and choosing a series of actions that brings about the future outcome that the individual has selected. The cognitive abilities that underlie planning would appear to confer substantial evolutionary advantage.

What seems not to be justified is any form of simplistic "social Darwinism", leading to the assumptions of narrow self-interest as a component of permanent human nature. Here the error is an over-quick inference from the proposition that "evolution favors organisms that out-reproduce their fellows at a given time" to the conclusion that "organisms that maximize local self-interest will out-reproduce their fellows." This inference is unjustified, since we can readily describe models of populations in which reciprocity and altruism out-reproduce egoism and narrow self-interest.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:06PM (-04:00)

Unequal polities

Friday, October 31, 2008



Most nations are at least nominally based on the idea of the legal equality of all citizens. This commitment provides a salient pathway through which even the most disadvantaged groups can pursue their goal of achieving greater equality for themselves and their communities, consistent with the defining values of the nation. Some countries, however, have embodied legal differences among groups of their citizens based on the religion or ethnicity of the person. And in these circumstances, pariah groups have no pathway -- legal or moral -- through which to attempt to create a non-violent pathway towards greater social justice for themselves.

Malaysia is a striking example of the latter circumstance. Its constitution and legal system give fundamental privileges to members of the Malay majority, referred to as "Bumiputra" privilege, and accord more limited rights and opportunities to non-Malay groups (Indian, Chinese, Christian, other). It is a polity based on differential rights for different ethnic and religious groups. Many of the most desirable opportunities in Malaysian society -- in employment, government office, contracting, and education -- are reserved or prioritized for Malays, defined as a racial group. It is hard to see how such a political system, defined on the premise of significant legal and economic inequality across different groups, could be justified to members of the subordinate groups. And, in fact, large street demonstrations in 2007 by the Indian community marked an exceptional indication of the discontent these policies create, and the lack of legitimacy these policies create in the whole population.

The question here is a fairly specific one: how can a polity founded on these sorts of invidious and permanent distinctions among groups of its citizens remain stable? Is it possible to generate any variety of "political legitimacy" across the whole population that contributes to political stability in these circumstances of extreme constitutional inequality among ethnic groups? How can the government maintain its power and ability to govern?

In the case of Malaysia the answer to the question about governing seems to be a combination of institution-rigging, force, and intimidation of the large ethnic populations. The constitution sets the stage with its stipulation of Bumiputra privilege. And electoral and parliamentary rules pretty much guarantee a permanent and large Malay majority in the parliament for parties such as the UMNO. So the political rules entrench the political hegemony of the Malay majority. This means that minority ethnic groups and parties have no hope of gaining progress towards legal equality of rights of citizenship through the legal process.

And this is where force and intimidation come in. It would seem that the strategy of mass demonstration and protest would be a natural recourse for large ethnic groups in Malaysia. But the state has made it clear that it will quickly suppress demonstrations with force -- in fact, the 2007 demonstrations were striking by their rarity in Malaysian public life.

But there is a deeper and more sinister kind of force in the air as well. This is the threat of largescale "race riots" directed against Malaysia's Indian and Chinese communities. The riots of 1969 were vicious and destructive, and they are remembered. The threat of pogrom and ethnic cleansing by Malays against Indian and Chinese Malaysians is not far from the surface and it is taken seriously. Rhetoric by UNMO politicians in speeches before parliament reinforce this sense of threat.

The theoretical questions at issue here can be posed from two angles -- the state and the group. From the state's point of view, the question is whether it is possible to navigate the fundamental conflict of interest that is created between Malays and the rest of Malaysian society through some combination of minor accommodation and the threat of repression. Can a consensus politics, backed by the perennial threat of force, emerge from this kind of fundamental inequality across groups? From the point of view of the large Indian or Chinese Malaysian populations, the question is whether there are tactics of collective action and popular mobilization that might allow them to pursue their demands of social and political equality effectively. Can they turn the tables on the Malay government? Can they gradually create the conditions in which the Malaysian state is compelled to accept the fundamental premises of a just civil society -- equality of all citizens and free rights of political participation for all?

Here is a link to an independent Malaysian news source that many Malaysians have confidence in.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:39PM (-04:00)

How the calendar matters

Sunday, November 02, 2008



It is interesting to consider how the timing of a routine social event can have a major effect on outcomes. Malcolm Gladwell observes that the most talented Canadian hockey players in the NHL are disproportionately likely to have birthdays in the months of January or February in his recent book, Outliers: The Story of Success. Observers of the current US presidential election may speculate that, if the financial crisis of September had occurred in May, the outcome of the election might have been different. The generation of Americans born around 1915 are much like those born around 1945 -- except for the searing experience their generation had of the great depression.

The lesson to be drawn here might seem to be the obvious and trivial one -- context matters in human affairs. Because youth hockey leagues define the age of a player based on his age on December 31, the January children have a major advantage in size and physical development over the November children. And this advantage creates a small headstart that amplifies over time. The fact that the financial crisis of 2008 created a major disadvantage for the McCain ticket less than 60 days ahead of the election made it very difficult for the candidate to recover in the polls. The cohort experience of poverty and insecurity made the 1920 generation much more risk averse than the 1950

generation. So context and the timing of contextual events matters.

But perhaps the importance of the calendar goes deeper than this. In an earlier posting I discussed Victor Lieberman's discovery of an unexpected synchronicity of political change at the far ends of Eurasia, over the course of a millenium. We tried to understand this pattern in terms of hypothetical social mechanisms that might have produced these parallels. But what is striking about the example is not simply the fact that there must have been underlying causal mechanisms; it is that the result is a weakly synchronized system of events -- that is, a system of events with a regular temporal association -- that might never have been noticed.

What this suggests to me is that the social sciences can profitably give more attention to the temporal features of social phenomena -- the simultaneous experiences a group of people would have had in virtue of being part of the same age cohort, the temporal parallels that might exist between the rise of a mass ideology and the sales of particular books, the accidents of simultaneity that have major repercussions decades later. Causal analysis implicitly imposes a temporal structure on events (causes precede effects). But often the research goal is to strip away the particular timing and temporal context, and to treat causal structures purely abstractly. And this means deliberately taking causal pairs out of their particular temporal contexts and comparing them with temporally disconnected alternative examples.

Andrew Abbott takes up some aspects of these issues in "Conceptions of Time and Events in Social Science Methods" in Time Matters: On Theory and Method. And William Sewell's critique of some forms of causal reasoning in comparative historical sociology in "Three Temporalities" in Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation is highly relevant as well.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:47AM (-05:00)

What is "methodological localism"?

Sunday, November 02, 2008

Quite a few of the posts in the blog are grounded in a theory of social ontology that I refer to as methodological localism. This theory of social entities affirms that there are large social structures and facts that influence social outcomes. But it insists that these structures are only possible insofar as they are embodied in the actions and states of socially constructed individuals. The “molecule” of all social life is the socially constructed and socially situated individual, who lives, acts, and develops within a set of local social relationships, institutions, norms, and rules.

With methodological individualism, this position embraces the point that individuals are the bearers of social structures and causes. There is no such thing as an autonomous social force; rather, all social properties and effects are conveyed through the individuals who constitute a population at a time. Against individualism, however, methodological localism affirms the “social-ness” of social actors. Methodological localism denies the possibility or desirability of characterizing the individual extra-socially. Instead, the individual is understood as a socially constituted actor, affected by large current social facts such as value systems, social structures, extended social networks, and the like. In other words, ML denies the possibility of reductionism from the level of the social to the level of a population of non-social individuals. Rather, the individual is formed by locally embodied social facts, and the social facts are in turn constituted by the current

characteristics of the persons who make them up.

This account begins with the socially constituted person. Human beings are subjective, intentional, and relational agents. They interact with other persons in ways that involve competition and cooperation. They form relationships, enmities, alliances, and networks; they compose institutions and organizations. They create material embodiments that reflect and affect human intentionality. They acquire beliefs, norms, practices, and worldviews, and they socialize their children, their friends, and others with whom they interact. Some of the products of human social interaction are short-lived and local (indigenous fishing practices); others are long-duration but local (oral traditions, stories, and jokes); and yet others are built up into social organizations of great geographical scope and extended duration (states, trade routes, knowledge systems). But always we have individual agents interacting with other agents, making use of resources (material and social), and pursuing their goals, desires, and impulses.

Social action takes place within spaces that are themselves socially structured by the actions and purposes of others—by property, by prejudice, by law and custom, and by systems of knowledge. So our account needs to identify the local social environments through which action is structured and projected: the inter-personal networks, the systems of rules, the social institutions. The social thus has to do with the behaviorally, cognitively, and materially embodied reality of social institutions.

An institution, we might say, is an embodied set of rules, incentives, and opportunities that have the potential of influencing agents' choices and behavior. An institution is a complex of socially embodied powers, limitations, and opportunities within which individuals pursue their lives and goals. A property system, a legal system, and a professional baseball league all represent examples of institutions. Institutions have effects that are in varying degrees independent from the individual or "larger" than the individual. Each of these social entities is embodied in the social states of a number of actors—their beliefs, intentions, reasoning, dispositions, and histories. Actors perform their actions within the context of social frameworks represented as rules, institutions, and organizations, and their actions and dispositions embody the causal effectiveness of those frameworks. And institutions influence individuals by offering incentives and constraints on their actions, by framing the knowledge and information on the basis of which they choose, and by conveying sets of normative commitments (ethical, religious, interpersonal) that influence individual action.

It is important to emphasize that ML affirms the existence of social constructs beyond the purview of the individual actor or group. Political institutions exist—and they are embodied in the actions and states of officials, citizens, criminals, and opportunistic others. These institutions have real effects on individual behavior and on social processes and outcomes—but always mediated through the structured circumstances of agency of the myriad participants in these institutions and the affected society. This perspective emphasizes the contingency of social processes, the mutability of social structures over space and time, and the variability of human social systems (norms, urban arrangements, social practices, and so on).
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:21PM (-05:00)

Are there "social kinds"?

Sunday, November 02, 2008

Philosophers of science sometimes define the idea of a natural kind as "a group of things that share a fundamental set of causal properties." Examples might be "gold," "metal," and "protein molecule." And some philosophers assume that scientific realism means being realist about natural kinds. Do the typical concepts used in the social sciences succeed in identifying a social analog to natural kinds, which might be referred to as "social kinds"? And if not, is it possible to be realist about the social world but anti-realist with respect to "social kinds"?

First, what is involved in being “realist” in connection with the historical and human sciences? It is to assert several independent things: first, that there is the possibility of (fallibly) objective knowledge of social facts; second, that there are “social facts” to be known – that is, there are some mind- or interpretation-independent things that happen and can be the subject of knowledge; and third (questionably), that there are categories of higher-level social entities that “really” exist in the way that some philosophers say that natural kinds exist. It is entirely defensible to be a scientific realist in the social sciences, and I want to support the first two ideas but to argue against the third.

Concepts are of course essential to social knowledge. The heart of social inquiry has to do with coming up with concepts that allow us to better understand social reality: for example, racism, patterns of behavior, free market, class consciousness, ethnic identities. Theory formation in the social sciences largely consists of the task of constructing concepts and categories that capture groups of social phenomena for the purpose of analysis. But even the most successful social concepts do not identify groups of phenomena that could be called a "social kind." High-level social concepts that serve to pick out groups of social phenomena—states, riots, property systems—generally do not refer to causally homogeneous bodies of social phenomena; instead, each of these is composed of individual social formations with their own history and circumstances. There is no uniform causal constitution that underlies all states or riots. The philosophical notions of “family resemblance” and “cluster concepts” serve better to characterize these high-level social concepts than does “natural kind”.

Examples of what might have been thought to be social kinds might include concepts such as these: proletariat, underclass resentment, revolutionary situation, racism; liberal representative states; fascism; feudalism; bureaucratic state. But I hold that these are not kinds in the strong sense that philosophers of the natural sciences have in mind. Rather, they are plastic, variable, opportunistic, individually specific instantiations across a variety of human contexts. We need to be able to identify some topics of interest, so we need language and concepts; but we must avoid reifying the concepts and thinking they refer to some underlying discoverable essence. (Think of how Chuck Tilly conceptualizes riot, rebellion, and resistance in terms of “contentious politics.” Rightly, he avoids the idea that there is one common thing going on in these instances across time, history, and place; his goal is to identify a medium-sized body of causal mechanisms that bundle together in various contexts to give rise to one signature of contention or another.)

The discovery of causal processes is essential to social explanation -- not the discovery of high-level uniform categories of social events or structures. We explain social outcomes best when we can uncover the causal mechanisms that gave rise to them. However, most social ensembles are the result of multiple causal mechanisms, and their

natures are not common, simple, or invariant. “States” embody mechanisms of social control. But as Tolstoy said about unhappy families, every state manages its contention in somewhat different ways. So we can’t and shouldn’t expect common causal properties across the class of “states”. And this is directly relevant to the central point here: the "state" is not a social kind, and there is no simple theory that encapsulates its causal properties.

This approach has specific implications for the conduct of the social sciences. For example, political science and the study of different types of states: we can identify common mechanisms, sub-institutions, building blocks, etc., that recur in different political systems. And we can offer causal explanations of specific states in particular historical circumstances -- for example, the Brazilian state in the 1990s. But we cannot produce strong generalizations about “states” or even particular kinds of states -- for example, “developing states”. Or at least, the generalizations we find are weak and exception-laden. Rather, we must build up our explanations from the component mechanisms and institutions found in the particular cases.

So here is a moderate form of scientific realism that is well suited to the nature of the social world: be realist about social mechanisms but not about social kinds. Be realist and empiricist in epistemology: we can arrive at rationally justified beliefs about social mechanisms. And be a skeptic or nominalist about social kinds. There are no macro or molar-level social kinds.
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:07PM (-05:00)

Causing public opinion

Friday, November 07, 2008



It is interesting to consider what sorts of things cause shifts in public opinion about specific issues. This week's national election is one important example. But what about more focused issues -- for example, the many ballot initiatives that were considered in many states? To what extent can we discover whether there is a measurable effect on public opinion by the organized efforts of advocacy groups through advertising and other strategies for reaching the minds of voters?

In these cases we might imagine that voters have a prior set of attitudes towards the issue -- perhaps including a large number of "don't know/don't care" people. Then a set of advocates form to lobby the public pro and con. They mount campaigns to influence voters' opinions towards the option they prefer. And on the day of the election voters will indicate their approval -- often in ratios quite different from those that were measured in pre-campaign surveys. So something happened to change the composition of public opinion on the issue. The question here is whether it is possible to estimate the effects of various possible influencers.

This seems like potentially a very simple area of causal reasoning about social processes. The outcome variable is fairly observable through polling and the final

election, and the interventions are also usually observable as well, both in timing and magnitude. So the world may present us with a series of interventions and outcomes that support fairly strong causal conclusions -- for example, "each time ad campaign X hits the airwaves in a given market, there is an observed uptick in support for the proposition." It is unlikely that the correlation occurred as a result of random variations in both terms; we have a theory of how advertising influences voters; and we conclude that "ad campaign X was a causal factor in shaping voter opinion in this time period." (It is even possible that X played a role in both segments of opinion, resulting in an up-tick in both yes and no responses. Then we might also judge that X was effective at polarizing voters -- not the effect the strategist would have aimed at.)

This is an example of singular causal reasoning, in that it has to do with one population, one issue, and a specific series of interventions. What would be needed in order to arrive at a conclusion with generic scope -- for example, "advertising along the lines of X is generally effective in increasing support for its issue"? The most straightforward argument to the generic conclusion would be a study of an extended set of cases with a variety of strategies in play. If we discover something like this -- "In 80% of cases where X is included in the mix it is observed to have a positive effect on opinion" -- then we would have inductive reason for accepting the generic causal claim as well. This is basic experimental reasoning.

Take a hypothetical issue -- a referendum on a proposal for changing the system the state uses for assessing business taxes. Suppose that a polling firm has done weekly polling on the question and has recorded "yes/no/no opinion" since October 2007. Suppose that two organizations emerged in December to advocate for and against the proposal; that each raised about $5 million; and that each included an advertising campaign in its strategy. Suppose further that the "no" campaign also included a well-organized effort at the parish level to persuade church members to vote against the measure on religious grounds and the "yes" campaign included a grassroots effort to get university students and staff to be supportive of the measure on pro-science and pro-economy grounds. And suppose each organization mounted a "new media" campaign using email lists and web comminication to make its case. Finally, suppose we have good timeline data about the occurrence and volume of media spots throughout the period of June through November.

This scenario involves three types of causes, a timeline representing the application of the interventions, and a timeline representing the effects. From this body of data can we arrive at estimates of the relative efficacy of the three treatments? And does this set if conclusions provide credible guidance for other campaigns over other issues in other places?

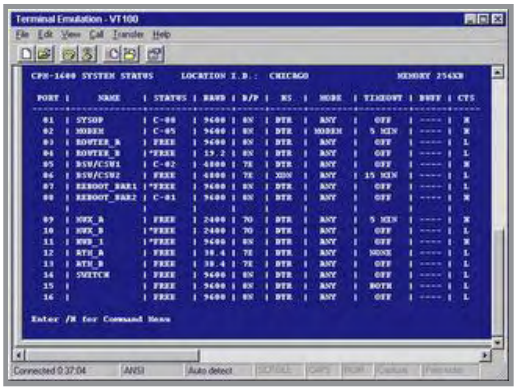
There is also the question of the efficacy of the implementation of the strategies. Take the ad campaigns. Whether a specific campaign succeeds in changing viewers' opinions depends on the content, message, and production quality. Does the message resonate with a target segment of voters? Does the production design stimulate emotions that will lead to the desired vote? So evaluating efficacy needs to be done across instances of media as well as across varieties of media. (This is the function of focus groups and snap polls -- to evaluate the effects of specific messages and production choices on real voters.)

(Here is a link to some information about the process leading up to a positive vote on the Michigan Stem Cell initiative this month. A good general introduction to the social

psychological theories about the formation of attitudes and opinions is Stuart Oskamp and P. Wesley Schultz, Attitudes and Opinions.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:21AM (-05:00)

How do new ideas get used?

Wednesday, November 12, 2008



Economic development and growth depend chiefly on innovation -- new products, processes, materials, and modes of organization that can create new opportunities in the marketplace. Business creation and economic growth depend upon innovation. This means creating new products that consumers want or need, improving the performance or safety of the product, or improving the cost and efficiency of the process of production and distribution. So a critical element in economic development is the discovery and development of new ideas -- often technical and scientific ideas. Google, Apple, and Pfizer are examples of industries that created brand new markets for products based on innovations in science and engineering (search technologies, user-friendly computing devices, cholesterol regulating drugs).

Universities are places where highly specialized and talented people are in the business of making discoveries and further developing or refining existing ideas. So we might expect that universities would also be potent sources of economic growth. New ideas surface in engineering, science, or medical research facilities; they are quickly recognized for their potential applications in the marketplace; and entrepreneurs or existing businesses capitalize on them and move them quickly to the marketplace. The basis for this expectation is a familiar one within an Adam Smith sort of framework: new ideas are a potential source of new wealth, and rational maximizers will quickly identify these new wealth opportunities and will quickly and efficiently develop them.

We might expect that this is the case. But surprisingly enough, this picture seems not to be born out in experience. What seems much more true as a description of the process of research and discovery, is that most ideas do not move into the process of commercialization and business development. In fact, it seems like a fairly believable guess that there exist today in the stock of university research discoveries, the makings of dozens of billion-dollar industries and hundreds or thousands of million-dollar industries -- and that these ideas are likely enough to remain dormant for a very long time. Most ideas are not fully developed as business ventures, not because they are not viable, but because the activity of recognizing the market potential of an idea and developing it commercially is itself an extended effort that requires imagination and creativity, and this is not usually either the strength or the priority of the working research scientist.

So what is the obstacle to the full and efficient development of potentially profitable new innovations? Part of the problem is the separation that exists between the research community and the business community. The person who understands the new technology or scientific innovation does not usually understand the commercial potential

of the idea, and usually does not have much of a practical idea of what is involved in commercializing an innovation. The research scientist in a university is largely motivated by the rewards of academic progress: publication, the gaining of grants to support future research, and the rewards of prestige that go with academic success. The gap between the technical characteristics of the innovation and the steps that would need to be taken in order to transform this innovation into a business venture is also a very wide one. A research scientist may have developed a technique for coating metals that permits the metal to preserve an electrical charge. But it is not self-evident how this innovation might be developed into new products or processes that have the potential for creating substantial new markets or profits. The researcher who conducts the basic research leading to the innovation usually has little knowledge or interest in the applications that might be possible. And the challenge of bridging the gap between the innovation and some of its potential commercial applications may demand an equally creative and time-consuming period of intellectual and practical work as did the original discovery -- and this is likely to be a form of effort that is foreign to the research scientist.

It might be thought that innovation-oriented investors are among the important mechanisms that help to identify potentially valuable ideas and innovations and move them to successful businesses. "Angel" investors and venture capital firms are certainly filling part of the role of "innovation spotters" in the modern economy. But even this mechanism seems incomplete, in the sense that potentially valuable engineering and scientific research activity generally remains invisible to the investor community until an entrepreneurial researcher brings it forward along with a business plan. So there is a wide information gap between the researcher, the investor, and the business entrepreneur.

These observations suggest two things. First, our economy could be strengthened if we had a substantially more efficient system of identifying innovations as they occur in laboratories throughout the country, and moving these innovations into productive applications. And second, the story seems to suggest that there is a niche available in our economy that would provide profitable opportunities for businesses that are specifically designed to seek out these innovations and innovators and facilitate the transition from idea to product.

Thomas Hughes' detailed history of electric power is a very important illustration of several aspects of this complex story (Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930). Hughes demonstrates how long the chain of development is between basic science and useable technology; he also highlights the many contingencies that occur along the way, as electric power generation technology is developed into a mass industry using alternating current. One of the most frequently discussed examples of technology innovation and business development is the story of how the innovations in computer interfaces (the mouse, WYSIWYG editing, Windows-style interface) that were created by Xerox PARC found their way into the multi-billion dollar industry of personal computing. Douglas Smith and Robert Alexander emphasize the business mistakes that many people attribute to Xerox in this story in Fumbling the Future: How Xerox Invented, Then Ignored, the First Personal Computer, while Michael Hiltzik's Dealers of Lightning: Xerox PARC and the Dawn of the Computer Age provides a more favorable version of the story.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:13PM (-05:00)

Why does unrest spread?

Monday, November 17, 2008



Why does social unrest occur and spread?

This is a little bit of a trick question. It really implies three questions: What are the circumstances that make unrest in a population possible or likely? What circumstances need to occur in order to precipitate expressions of unrest in particular places? And what circumstances are conducive to spreading (or damping out) these local expressions?

First, how might we define the concept of "unrest"? To my ear the concept involves grievance and activism. Grievance involves the situation where individuals and groups feel that they have been badly treated by someone. Activism implies a disposition to act visibly and politically to protest or alleviate this mistreatment. Grievance can exist without activism, and there are instances of activism that stem from emotions other than grievance. But when these emotional and behavioral states come together we can refer to the resulting stew of behavior as "unrest".

So let's start with the causes of grievance. Power relations create the emotions of grievance: excessive conscription or taxation, insufficient attention to the interests of an ethnic minority, abusive and disrespectful treatment by the police. When individuals and groups believe they are being treated in ways that unfairly harm their interests or reduce their dignity, they are likely to feel aggrieved.

Grievance is a propositional emotion; it involves a subject, a harm, and a perpetrator. And this means that grievance is not simply a reaponse to suffering. Take a population that is experiencing dearth in the early stages of famine. Individuals and sub-groups may differ in their experience of grievance; they may hold different social actors responsible for their suffering (landlords, lenders, city people, the military, or the state, for example). And these differences have implications for how and when these groups may be aroused to protest and action.

What about "activism"? What kind of psycho-political state is this? It is a propensity to make the transition from political emotion to action -- to go from resentment of the state's behavior to the choice of joining a street demonstration; to go from anger about conscription to joining an anti-draft organization; to go from frustration about the landlord's unwillingness to restore the heat to joining with others in a rent strike. "Activism" appears to be a complex characteristic of individuals and groups. For one thing, it seems to have a substantial component of culture and tradition baked into it. Cultures seem to differ in their responses to mistreatment; some communities seem to have resources for activist mobilization that others lack. Second, there appears to be a substantial degree of social learning through imitation involved in becoming "activist." So it is likely that there is a degree of positive feedback involved in the spread of activist psychology.

So back to the original question: what causes the spread of unrest? There needs to be an

issue that creates a grievance in a significant number of people. Something needs to happen to make this issue salient relative to other concerns. There needs to be a critical mass of people who share the grievance and possess the components of the social emotions of activism. And there needs to be a "spark" that allows activists to mobilize others.

Consider a hypothetical example -- a company with dozens of factories in different parts of the country that is imposing a unilateral change in its contributions to worker retirement accounts. Suppose each factory has several thousand workers; and suppose that there is a range of responses to the retirement changes in the various factories along these lines:

- Quiescence and grudging acceptance
- Widespread grousing but no organized action
- Wildcat strikes

What factors might account for these different responses to essentially the same event?

Several possible explanations might be considered:

- The presence/absence of effective rank-and-file leaders
- The presence/absence of effective local managers' countermeasures (persuasion, cooptation, threats)
- Strong/weak traditions of activism in different locations
- Alternative narratives about what the changes mean ("inevitable in this business climate", "better this than a lot of layoffs", "higher management is taking this opportunity to stiff us", ...)
- High/low impact of the management changes on the interests of workers in each location
- Strong/weak channels of communication among workers in different factories

It is, of course, a matter for empirical investigation to determine whether some or all of these factors played a causal role. But we can give good theoretical reasons for thinking that these are socially possible mechanisms that may underlie the observed differences in behavior.

We might speculate, then, that unrest is most likely to occur and spread when there is an abuse that affects a large number of people; there is a generally shared understanding of the nature of the abuse; there are effective local activists capable of arousing the indignation of the rank-and-file; there are accessible communication vehicles permitting the spreading of messages of dissent; the population has a tradition of activism; and the state's managers are ineffectual in damping down the occurrences of protest. These conditions appear most favorable for the dissemination of unrest.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:16PM (-05:00)

G. William Skinner

Monday, November 17, 2008

G. William Skinner, a distinguished China scholar who brought profound innovations to many aspects of the study of Chinese history, passed away on October 25, 2008. See a remembrance of his many contributions to the social scientific study of China at TheChinaBeat.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:42PM (-05:00)



Narrative history

Monday, November 24, 2008



People sometimes imagine that history is narrative, full stop. This is not the case; there certainly are important forms of historical writing that do not take the form of narrative. But let's consider some of the logical features of narrative, since there is no disputing that this is one important variety of historical knowledge.

What is a narrative? Most generally, it is an account of how and why a situation or event came to be. A narrative is intended to provide an account of how a complex historical event unfolded and why. We want to understand the event in time. What were the contextual features that were relevant to the outcome -- the settings at one or more points in time that played a role? What were the actions and choices that agents performed, and why did they take these actions rather than other possible choices? What causal processes -- either social or natural -- may have played a role in bringing the world to the outcome of interest? (For example, the Little Ice Age pushed Europe's population into different patterns of cultivation and fishing, with major consequences for subsequent developments; Brian Fagan, The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History, 1300-1850.)

So a narrative seeks to provide hermeneutic understanding of the outcome -- why did actors behave as they did in bringing about the outcome? -- and causal explanation -- what social and natural processes were acting behind the backs of the actors in bringing about the outcome? And different narratives represent different mixes of hermeneutic and causal factors. Bob Woodward's narrative of the Bush administration's decision to go to war against Saddam Hussein is primarily actor-centered and interpretive -- who said what, who influenced the decisions, the reasons and motives that ultimately prevailed with the president and top national security officials (Plan of Attack). Juan Cole's treatment of the same historical moment, on the other hand, gives more emphasis to

hidden motives -- what the "real" objectives were (see his blog, InformedComment). But both authors aim to clarify the reasoning, motives, and dynamics among decision-makers that led to the outcome.

Narratives about the decision to go to war against Hussein's Iraq have an important feature on common: they single out a fairly brief historical moment and focus on the proximate actions and causes that created the outcome. This is an instance of "micro-history" -- an effort to explain and understand an important but bounded event. Is it possible to construct narratives of more extended historical processes?

Certainly it is. Consider histories of World War II, the Holy Roman Empire, or the Qing Dynasty. These are each large complexes including thousands of events and conditions over an extended period of time. Histories of these topics often take the form of chronologically organized presentations of occurrences and conditions, with a narrative storyline that attempts to hold these events together in a single story. There may also be an effort to break down the history topically or regionally -- "War in the Pacific; North Africa; Western Europe" or "Technology; Intelligence; Supply and Industry; Command; Genocide". But for the history to take the form of a narrative, there needs to be an organized effort to weave the account into a somewhat coherent story; a series of intertwined events and conditions leading eventually to an outcome.

A crucial and unavoidable feature of narrative history is the fact of selectivity. The narrative historian is forced to make choices and selections at every stage: between "significant" and "insignificant", between "sideshow" and "main event", and between levels of description. (Is World War II better described at the level of generals and policy-makers or infantrymen and factory workers?)

Another crucial feature of the genre of narrative history is the tension between structure and agency. Historians differ about where to set the balance between constraining structures and choosing agents. Partially this is a difference of opinion about the relative weight of various kinds of historical factors; but it is also a disagreement about what is interesting -- choices or background conditions.

What are the criteria of success for a historical narrative? To start, there is the issue of the factual claims included in the account. A narrative of Abraham Lincoln's presidency that gets the names of the members of his cabinet wrong will not do well in the New York Times Book Review. Second, there is the overall persuasiveness and foundation in evidence of the interpretations of actions that are offered. Third, the causal claims that the account advances will be tested for their empirical and logical foundations. If the claim is made that some aspect of Andrew Jackson's presidency was influenced by the fragility of current banking institutions, we will want to assess whether this financial feature could be judged to have this result in the circumstances.

These are criteria that relate directly to the epistemic status of the many claims that the narrative advances. In addition, it is plausible that we evaluate narratives according to non-evidentiary criteria: the coherence of the story that is told, the degree of fit between "our" interest in the historical moment and the content of the narrative, and the degree of "lean" comprehensiveness the author provides. Does the author provide enough of the right sorts of details to make the story comprehensible, without overwhelming the reader with a thicket of extraneous facts?

Some of these criteria are clearly epistemic, having to do with evidence and credibility.

But others are more aesthetic and interest-based, having to do with how well the account fits our expectations and interests. And this fact seems to set a bound on the degree to which one account is objectively superior to another.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:24PM (-05:00)

Segregation in France

Friday, November 28, 2008



The mix of race, poverty, and urban space has created intractable social issues in many American cities in the past sixty years. Residential segregation creates a terrible fabric of self-reproducing inequalities between the segregated group and the larger society -- inequalities of education, health, employment, and culture. As intractable as this social system of segregation appears to be in the cities of the United States, it may be that the situation in France is even worse. Sociologist Didier Lapeyronnie is interviewed in a recent issue of the Nouvel Obs on the key findings of his recent book, Ghetto urbain: Segregation, violence, pauvrete en France aujourd'hui. The interview makes for absorbing reading.

Lapeyronnie is an expert on urban sociology, poverty, and immigration in France and a frequent observer of the rising urban crisis in France. (I'm deliberately evoking here the title of Tom Sugrue's book, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit.) Lapeyronnie's view is grim: the isolation and despair characteristic of French ghetto and banlieue communities are worsening year after year, and the French state's promises after the disturbances of 2005 have not been fulfilled. Unemployment, limited educational opportunities, and poverty create an environment in which young people have neither the resources nor the opportunities to improve their social position, and they are largely excluded from the larger French society.

Lapeyronnie offers several important observations. These ghettos are largely populated by immigrant communities -- first, second, or third-generation immigrants from North Africa and former French colonies. Racism is a crucial element in the development and evolution of these segregated spaces. As he puts it:

The ghetto is the product of two mechanisms: social and racial segregation and poverty, which enclose people in their neighborhoods, leading to the formation of a veritable counter-society with its own norms, its economy (what one calls the black economy), and even its own political system. ... Poor and segregated, feeling ostracized by the Republic and plunged into a veritable political vacuum, they have organized a counter-society which protects them even as they are disadvantaged in relation to the exterior world.

Lapeyronnie makes the point that the development of segregated ghettos is more advanced and more harmful in the smaller cities of France. He describes the situation in these smaller cities as creating an almost total barrier between the ghetto and the surrounding city -- an environment where the possibility of economic or social interaction has all but disappeared.

Lapeyronnie notes the role that gender plays in the segregation system. Women of the ghetto can move back and forth -- if they accept the "dominant norms" of dress and behavior. And this means the head scarf, in particular. In order to pass across the boundary of ghetto and city, women must adopt the dress of non-Muslim French society. But, as Lapeyronnie points out, this creates a deeply ambiguous position for women, because modest dress and head scarf are all but mandatory within the space of the ghetto. "The veil is interpreted as a sexual symbol, affirmation of a sexual solidarity with Muslim men. It often engenders hostility outside the ghetto while providing protection within the ghetto." "Here one finds one of the central explanations of the formation of the ghetto ... which is organized around the articulation of the race of the men and the sex of the women."

Another interesting sociological observation concerns the nature of the social networks within and without the ghetto. Lapeyronnie distinguishes between "strong network ties" (liens forts) and weak network ties (liens faibles), and he asserts that social relationships in the ghetto fall in the first category: everyone knows everyone. As a network diagram, this would result in a dense network in which every node is connected to every other node. But Lapeyronnie makes the point that weak networks are a source of strength and innovation in the larger society that is lacking in the ghetto; people can "network" to strangers through a series of connections. So opportunities are widely available -- finding a job by passing one's CV through a series of people, for example. "Strong networks protect people, they are like a cocoon ... But they are also a handicap and a weight on each person. Not only is the individual deprived of resources, but many people don't know a single person outside the neighborhood." Moreover, this strong network characteristic is very effective at enforcing a group morality (along the lines of Durkheim): "There is a morality and set of norms in the strong network: don't betray, be faithful to one's friends, stay together."

Lapeyronnie concludes the interview with these words:

When a population is placed in a situation of poverty and lives within racial segregation, it returns to very traditional definitions of social roles, notably the roles of family, and on a rigid and often bigoted morality. This is what permits building the strong network.

This is a pretty powerful analysis of the social transformations that are created by segregation, racism, isolation, and poverty -- and it doesn't bode well for social peace in France. Lapeyronnie is describing the development of an extensive "counter-society" that may be more and more important in coming years. The social networks and social relationships that Lapeyronnie describes are a potent basis for social mobilization and new social movements, and there don't seem to be many pathways towards social progress to which such movements might be directed.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:31PM (-05:00)

Tempo of change

Friday, November 28, 2008

Think of some of the gradual processes of change that have important effects on human society: soil erosion, water pollution, loss of jobs, inflation, diffusion of innovation, a firm's decline in market share, and a nation's decline of naval power, to name a heterogeneous list. And think about the very different time scales associated with large processes of change, from days to months to years to decades and centuries. Think finally of the



ability and readiness of human communities and leaders to recognize and address these processes of change through policy and change of behavior.

We like to imagine that organizations and states have at least an imperfect ability to perceive threats to important interests and to design appropriate actions that may reduce threats or ameliorate consequences. (Likewise, of course, for opportunities.) "Nimble" organizations are able to perceive threats or opportunities and take corrective actions to avoid harms or achieve gains, while other organizations simply lumber on towards ever-deeper problems. Does the scale over which a change unfolds make a difference in the ability of an organization to respond? It does, at both ends of the spectrum.

Changes that take place extremely slowly present special challenges for human societies. Examples include soil exhaustion, water pollution, and silting of waterways. First, there is the problem of visibility -- it may be difficult for individuals to recognize the small differences that accrue over a period of several years. Individual policy makers and office holders may simply not see enough of the process of change during their time of service to allow them to perceive the change and its likely consequences. Second is the problem of the perceived lack of urgency -- since the process is so slow, there may be an inclination to disregard it as unimportant. And third is the chronic problem of inter-generational planning -- the fact that longterm consequences will primarily only affect other people, not the current generation. Global climate change appears to fall in this category. The signs of harmful change were masked to some degree within the noise of random variation in climate and weather; the consequences are several generations in the future; and many states, including especially the United States, have found it difficult to come to grips with the scientific realities and design policies that ameliorate the negative consequences. (An interesting example of long, slow processes and social response is that of water control, silting, and flooding in Imperial China. This situation is discussed in an earlier posting.) So long, slow processes are difficult for a society, firm, or government to address effectively and prudently.

But almost as disabling to effective policy reaction are changes that occur very rapidly. Some processes of change move more quickly than the "reaction time" of the state or other policy-making bodies -- with the result that policy responses are designed for the situation at time T but are already out of date when time T+1 comes along. (This may be the case with the current financial crisis.) The familiar metaphor of "guiding an aircraft carrier through a narrow twisting strait" works pretty well here; the reaction time of the ship is longer than the interval between bends in the waterway, so it is all but impossible to steer the ship successfully. The fiscal crisis of Louis XIV may fall in this category; financial and social institutions were unraveling in 1787-89 more rapidly than state officials and political advisers could successfully react. So here again, the time scale of a process of change makes an important historical difference; very long and very short scales make it substantially more difficult for human and social agents to ameliorate harmful processes.

There is one other complication created by the tempo and scale of historical processes: the possibility of a damaging "harmonious vibration" of social processes. If there is a business cycle of eight years and a grain production cycle of five years, then every forty

years the troughs of the two cycles will coincide -- with more harmful consequences than created by either cycle separately. (It was this kind of unanticipated harmonious vibration that brought down the Tacoma Narrows Bridge in 1940.) In this case it is the intersection of two tempos of change that creates the possibility of more severe social crisis and important historical consequences.

Paul Pierson's Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis raises some of the challenging research questions that are raised by the time scale of an historical process. He provides a very useful taxonomy of events in terms of "time horizon of cause" and "time horizon of outcome". This creates four categories of events around "long" and "short"; illustrations of each category include tornado (short-short), earthquake (long-short), meteorite (short-long), and global warming (long-long). And he points out that much research in the social sciences focuses on examples from the "short-short" category -- events with discrete causes and time-limited effects. The issue of time scale is also invoked in the history of the longue durée, including particularly writings by Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, where the historians of the Annales school paid particular attention to the long, slow changes in structures that influenced European history.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:03PM (-05:00)

Education and careers

Saturday, November 29, 2008



Secondary and post-secondary education plays a crucial role in the economic activity of any complex society. Kathleen Thelen provides a very fine description of the different talent regimes of Germany, Britain, Japan, and the United States in How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan. She highlights the very significant differences that exist across countries with respect to the internal and external structure of educational and training institutions and their relations to industry. Young people acquire the knowledge and skills they will need in order to play a productive role in the economy in these institutions -- which is to say that these institutions perform the function of preparing young people for jobs. This implies, in turn, that schools ought to be well informed about the skill and talent needs of the economy within which they exist -- what basic and advanced skills young employees need to possess in order to fulfill expectations within the workplace and contribute value to the organizations they join.

However, this expectation of linkage between schools and firms seems to be somewhat over-optimistic in the United States. Educators and policy-makers appear to rely primarily on their own judgments about what a high school or college education ought to convey -- or what knowledge and skills a graduate ought to have achieved -- rather than gathering more systematic intelligence about what employers want and need in prospective workers. Sociologist James Rosenbaum argues in Beyond College For All: Career Paths

For The Forgotten Half that this is an important weakness in the American system of secondary and post-secondary education -- in contrast to countries such as Germany or Japan, where such linkages are well established and effective. Better linkages in both directions -- from employers in designing curriculum, and towards employers, in recommending graduates for employment -- would result in a substantially more effective system of education and work in the United States, according to Rosenbaum.

In fact, some academic leaders take the view that "career preparation" is secondary to "development of the mind" as a priority in a college education. The educational philosophy in selective universities (in arts and sciences, anyway) is premised on the cultivation of the intellectual breadth and maturity of the student and the nourishing of fundamental skills such as reasoning, communicating, quantitative ability, cultural sensibility, and moral awareness. The underlying idea of this philosophy of liberal education is that these foundational skills, cultivated through a broad liberal education, will provide the intellectual resources necessary for the young person to succeed in a variety of careers and professions. Martha Nussbaum expresses this philosophy very eloquently in Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education. And, in fact, this is a good educational philosophy -- for a part of the total task of preparing all young people for work. University graduates in history, sociology, biology, chemistry, philosophy, or literature can make immediate productive contributions in many organizations -- so the educational system that prepared them is plainly working well for this segment of the population and the job market. This educational experience is best suited for preparing young people for additional study in graduate and professional programs, and for beginning jobs in professions where good analytical, reasoning, and communications skills are most important (e.g., consulting, banking, public relations, journalism, social justice organizations, non-governmental organizations, government agencies). The work associated with these careers usually involves research, writing, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and leadership; and graduates with the general intellectual and personal skills associated with a liberal arts education are usually well prepared in most or all of these areas.

But it is perhaps a fallacy to imagine that this educational philosophy is suited to every individual. There are important differences across individuals -- personality, curiosity, determination, ambition, and intellectual capacity -- that imply that individuals will differ in the degree to which this educational philosophy will further their talents. Ideally, we would like to see an educational system that provides substantial realization of the talents and traits of each individual -- recognizing that there are substantial differences across individuals. And it is likely that the "liberal education" philosophy is poorly suited to some individuals.

Second, it is equally fallacious to imagine that the educational philosophy of liberal education is the best foundation for every possible career -- from professor to physician to welder to fire warden to real estate agent. And, in fact, this seems to be the central argument of Rosenbaum's book -- conveyed in his title, "Beyond College for All." This idea is unpacked in two related ways: first, that secondary schooling needs to improve substantially in order to achieve the outcomes it promises -- literacy, numeracy, and basic social skills of the workplace for all graduates. Here the point appears to be that there are still a large number of jobs in the modern economy that require only the skills of a well-educated high school graduate. And he believes that American secondary schools ought to have substantially tighter linkages with industry and employers. And second, the logic of Rosenbaum's argument leads to the idea that post-secondary education ought to be more differentiated, with opportunities for a wider range of personalities and talents. Here the theory of the "applied baccalaureate" is perhaps a natural extension of Rosenbaum's argument (see this report from the Higher Learning Commission). The applied baccalaureate is a four-year degree offered by a community college in a practitioner

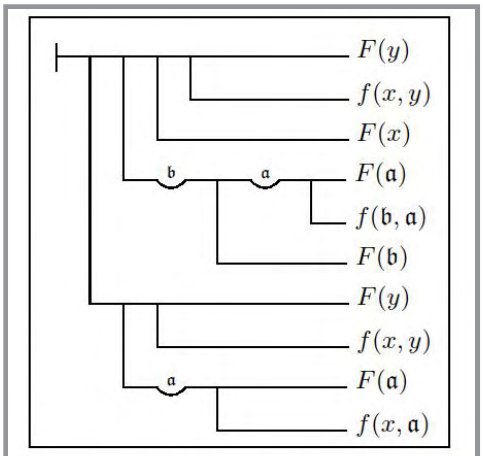
discipline (e.g., occupational therapy, nursing, computer-aided design, numerically controlled manufacturing). And the background theory is that the program of study is designed in order to achieve the degree of specialization needed for immediate inclusion in a technically demanding job, with the degree of background scientific and technical knowledge that will permit the worker to grow in the job.

This idea is likely to encounter criticism from thinkers such as Samuel Bowles and Herb Gintis (Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life), who argued quite a few years ago that the American system of education was stratified by class, with "elite" education going to young people destined for professional (high-paying) jobs, and vocational education going to young people destined for working-class jobs. They argued, further, that the social psychology promoted by the two educational environments was itself class-specific: independence and creativity are encouraged in elite colleges, whereas docility and obedience are encouraged in vocational schools. But I suppose that the best remedy to this critique is to aggressively pursue real equality of opportunity for all young people, so that individuals find their way to the various sectors of education according to their own talents and characters rather than the markers of class origin that they bear. (Charles Sabel provides a different take on the relationship between class, education, and work in Work and Politics: The Division of Labour in Industry. Among other things, Sabel challenges the "elite/non-elite" distinction when applied to different kinds of work.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:34PM (-05:00)

Kinds of knowledge claims in the social sciences

Tuesday, December 02, 2008



Theorem 71 from *Begriffsschrift*

The philosophy of social science concerns itself with foundational questions about social science knowledge. In line with this goal, it may be useful to consider a range of the types of knowledge claims that are advanced in various areas of the social sciences. This allows us to look a little more closely at the logic of social science assertions, which in turn leads to better epistemology (how do we support or test assertions like these), and better ontology (what sorts of things do these sentences refer to). Consider this cross-section of claims:

- Navajo language embodies a specific set of spatial concepts.
- Hindu culture places a high value on all forms of life.
- Major league baseball permits base stealing.
- MLB places a salary cap on every team.
- The nineteenth century British state incorporated a strong prime minister.
- Urban Latina women have a higher rate of X disease than the general population.
- Richard Nixon was lying when he said, "I am not a crook."
- Winston Churchill advocated for the assault on the Dardanelles in 1915 in order to help resupply the Russian Army.
- Democracies do not wage war against democracies.

- South Indian villages embody a very high degree of social and gender inequality.
- Racial health disparities are caused by numerous factors, among which is the fact of the personal stress of living in a racially hostile environment.
- Public goods are generally under-provided in market societies.
- Socialist enterprises are generally inefficient because of a soft budget constraint.
- Official corruption is more frequent in legal-institutional settings with properties X, Y, Z.
- Properties U, V, W cause lower levels of official corruption in systems that embody them.
- Working class identity in the United States is fractured.
- Deferred stock options are offered because they help solve principal-agent problems in high-tech firms.
- Major cities have mass transit systems to facilitate integrated labor markets.
- Fishing resources are generally over-utilized because of freerider behavior.

There are a variety of grammatical forms and subjects involved in these examples. We might consider whether it is possible to analyze these varied examples into a small number of propositional forms:

- Assertions of fact -- x has property P, y has relation R to z.
- Assertions of regularities and probabilistic properties of individuals within a population -- x's are usually P, the probability of E in circumstances C is p.
- Assertions of unobservable processes and mechanisms.
- Singular assertions of causation -- x caused y in circumstances C.
- General assertions of causation -- X's generally cause Y's in circumstances like C.
- Interpretive assertions -- the meaning of P's behavior is X.
- Intensional assertions -- P performed X in order to bring about Y.
- Ontological assertions -- X's consist of Y's.
- Compositional assertions -- X is part of Y.
- Functional assertions -- the function of X is F (within system S).

This list can be further broken down into a small number of ontological categories: logical individuals, properties and relations, probability as frequency, causal relation, social identity, meaning and intention, social compound, function, system, structure. We might also need to specify the metaphysical concepts of change, time, space, continuity, uniformity, heterogeneity, and network. And we might want to specify a few epistemic concepts -- observable, hypothetical, testable, refutable, warranted.

Are there any assertions in the social sciences that do not fit into one or another of these logical forms -- statements of fact, generalizations and estimates of conditional probabilities, causal hypotheses, theoretical statements, interpretations of meanings of actions and symbols? It is difficult to come up with examples of assertions that cannot be reframed in these terms; certainly all the examples provided above can be paraphrased in terms of the logic of these varieties of assertion. So we might provisionally consider this list of types of assertions as being reasonably comprehensive.

Does this analysis permit us to make use of a standard logical system of representation in terms of which to formulate all social science claims? This question is analogous to the task faced by symbolic logic at the time of Frege (The Foundations of Arithmetic: A Logico-Mathematical Enquiry into the Concept of Number): is it possible to create a minimal symbolic syntax that permits the formulation of all truth claims within mathematics. The first-order predicate calculus is the primary effort that logicians have offered as a solution to this problem. And it is worth noticing that there are certain ideas that cannot be expressed within the resources of first-order logic -- the idea of necessity, for example. Modal logic introduces a new primitive operator representing the assertion

that a sentence is necessarily true. Likewise, counterfactual conditionals cannot be expressed within the resources of the first-order predicate calculus. (Possible world semantics is an effort to address this lacuna.) So we might consider, for the social sciences, what needs to be added to the resources of first-order logic to permit us to express all these kinds of assertions. For example, do we need a special causal operator xCy, or is "x causes y" simply another kind of empirical relationship between x and y, analogous to "x is longer than y"? Do we need an additional apparatus for representing conditional probability statements -- P(E|C) = r? Do we need one or more propositional operators to represent intensional states: x believes that P, x intends that R, etc.?

Formulating the concepts we use for analyzing social phenomena also raises major intellectual issues -- and we have to confront these conceptual problems in order to be able to formulate simple factual assertions. What do we mean by corruption? What is a democracy? Further, it seems likely that many assertions can only be understood within a framework of other theoretical concepts and ideas, developed within the monograph or within the larger research community and literature. "What is a 'Hindu community'?" is a question that will be explicated differently in different research traditions -- ethnographic, linguistic, religious studies, comparative politics, women's studies.

We can also ask what sort of logical order exists among concepts in the language of the social sciences -- is there a minimal set of concepts capable of expressing all possible ideas about the social world? Essentially, this amounts to the question of whether it is possible to define all possible social concepts in terms of a set of primitive concepts and logical compounds of primitive concepts. For example, suppose we are interested in analyzing the concept of a "social identity". We have the choice of regarding "social identity" as a new primitive concept; or we can attempt to define this concept in terms of other concepts -- perhaps the individual-level concepts associated with individual belief and representation.

Now return to the validation of assertions in the social sciences. Consider a singular factual claim -- x has property P. What are the epistemological issues in evaluating such a claim? There are several, pertaining to the elements of the proposition. First, what is the nature of the individual x? Can we reidentify x across time and place? Does x have a suitable degree of stability over time? Does x have reasonably clear boundaries? Bill Gates, Chicago, NASA, and the Congress Party can all function as logical individuals; but the problems associated with definitions, boundaries, and identity through change are very different for each of them. (P. F. Strawson's book Individuals is a stimulating analysis of the metaphysics of individuals.)

Second, how do we define the property P? Are there reasonably clear criteria of application to individuals, so it is credible to assert there is a fact of the matter as to whether y had P or not? Is P applicable on the basis of observable characteristics? Does P implicate additional hypotheses about causation or unobservable characteristics? The concepts of a confessional religion, a market economy, narcissism, or a liberal democratic state all involve complex efforts at theory formation, involving the identification of a set of more basic characteristics and the formulation of a small theory about how these characteristics hang together in concrete historical instances.

Finally, we can ask the ultimate question: what is the body of evidence and inference that allows us to conclude that x has property P? What are the vulnerabilities of this chain of inference? How credible is the attribution?
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:28PM (-05:00)

Labor protest in China

Thursday, December 04, 2008



C.K. Lee's book, Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt, is a very important contribution to the sociology of contemporary China. The field needs this kind of innovative and theoretically adept work. And one of the great strengths of the research is the fact that it takes the Chinese context seriously in a profound way; it is "China-centered" sociology. This stands in opposition to work that brings a theoretical perspective (often inspired by European experiences and theorists) and then attempts to "apply" the theory to the data of Chinese experience. C.K. does not make this mistake. The book is a major empirical and theoretical contribution to the effort to better understand current social realities in China. But it is also an important and innovative example of how to use sociological theories more generally to arrive at a sociology of urban 21st-century society and social change.

The book looks at the rising incidence of labor protests in post-reform China. Abrupt and profound social changes are occurring that have had a great impact on the condition of working people: privatization, dissolution of state safety net, new export factory system with labor supplied by rural immigrants. C.K. looks at two regions and two "situations": Rustbelt (Liaoning in the northeast, where protests are stimulated by the loss of employment, unemployment benefits, medical care, unpaid pensions) and Sunbelt (Guangdong in the south, where protests are stimulated by discrimination, exploitation, and horrendous working conditions). These are conditions that Anita Chan documents in China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy. Towards the end of the book C.K. summarizes the two locales as representing "The death of socialism and the birth of capitalism" or words to that effect. The title is important: "Against the Law" captures both the central theme of protest – workers appealing to agencies and the central state for their legal rights – but also to the insurgent and often repressed status of their protests.

C.K. is interested in exploring the sociology of these labor worlds in an appropriately "local" way: what are the specific features of the Chinese economy, Chinese production, Chinese policy and law, and Chinese culture that produce two rather different patterns of protest and contention in two segments of the Chinese manufacturing economy?

Lee emphasizes the contingency of these developments and their dependency on rather proximate causal / social factors. She believes that the nature of the mobilizations and protests is affected by the way in which they are framed. Writing about Rustbelt protest: "My main concern … is to analyze how the characteristics and limits of worker protests are linked to the mode of state regulation of labor and the social reproduction of labor power" (71). Elsewhere she makes the point that Sunbelt protests have less mobilizational "staying power" because of the living situation of migrant workers: they return to their villages in times of distress, and their movement collapses. She distinguishes sub-types of Rustbelt protests by their underlying issue: nonpayment protests, neighborhood protests, bankruptcy protests. In other words, rather specific circumstances that set the context for life and work in the two regions and sectors have

substantial effects on the nature of dissent and protest that results.

She also highlights the nuance and heterogeneity of the social realities she studies. “What strikes an outside observer as a homogeneous group confronting common economic predicaments growing out of structural reform is experienced from within the group as fragmented interests, unequal treatment, and mutual suspicion” (84). So she doesn’t make the mistake of assuming homogeneity of “workers” or other social categories.

So a particular strength of her approach is that it emphasizes the contingency, variation, and internal heterogeneity in social processes that we should expect. “Theory” is a help but not a blueprint.

A substantive and important point that C.K. arrives at is the “cellular” nature of labor protest in China today. She refers almost all of these protests as “cellular” – meaning they lack a larger regional base of organization. Also they are fairly spontaneous; not much local organization or planning is needed or provided. This cellularity derives from specific features of the social environments in which labor protests emerge in China today. “A confluence of institutional factors produce the prevailing pattern of cellular activism. State work units provide the physical sites of communication and coordination, organize workers’ interests, and define the boundary of the aggrieved community” (112). But state surveillance and repression prevents the incubation of organizations – such as independent labor unions – that might convey local activism to a broader regional level.

A second substantive point – perhaps her most fundamental point, and the inspiration for the title of the book – is the unusually central role that appeals to legal rights play in current examples of labor protest. Kevin O’Brien refers to this strategy as “rightful resistance” (Rightful Resistance in Rural China). C. K. makes the point clearly at the end of the book: “The centrality of the law and legalism is salient, and is perhaps a unique Chinese way of popular contention, triggered by the regime’s decentralized legal authoritarianism. Even without formal or conscious cross-class alliance against the state, the common and ferocious charge of ‘against the law’ is a powerful and haunting chorus to the Chinese regime” (261).

A third important characteristic of C. K.’s analysis is her insistence on the agency and subjectivity of the workers whose actions she considers. She pays attention to their consciousness and ideas and their need for self-respect and dignity – these all play important roles in the movements and activism she describes. She insists on seeing workers as agents, not victims: “Like the making of class, we cannot predict the outcome but can explain the trajectory of when and which ideological interpellation underlies what collective action” (122). And she emphasizes the “moral indignation” aspect of many protests. “I seek to understand the indigenous meanings, relations, and institutional context that come packaged with these terms when they are invoked in the rustbelt, often simultaneously” (114). This means that it is a sociologically important area of research, to attempt to provide a deeper understanding of the consciousness of the men and women who make up this history.

I am also appreciative of the methods of investigation and research that Lee uses. She makes skillful use of her sophisticated understanding of various relevant pieces of sociological theory and analysis; her deep and expert knowledge of the chronology of legal reforms and policy shifts that have affected industry and labor in China since 1980; and an expert command of the macro-level economic and political data that are available

about industrial change and labor unrest. But these forms of theoretical and empirical knowledge constitute a foundation for a more qualitative kind of research: careful case studies of particular factories and disturbances based on her own fieldwork, along with interviews of participants that bring the book into the range of a kind of industrial ethnography. In other words, the arguments of the book are situated within a strong theoretical and empirical understanding, and are moved forward through synthesis of many of her own observations and interviews with participants. This combination gives the book a particularly acute flexibility when it comes to understanding the complexities of the social situations in Guangdong and Liaoning. Her analysis of the two situations is not merely an expression of her underlying theories; rather, it is a sensitive "portrait" of the nuanced series of developments that are found in the two regions.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:57PM (-05:00)

A range of causal questions

Thursday, December 04, 2008

In considering important issues in the philosophy of the special sciences, I think it is always helpful to consider a variety of the kinds of intellectual challenges that arise in the area. This gives the philosopher something to work with -- not simply an apriori specification of an issue, but a nuanced set of examples.

So if we are interested in causal reasoning in the social sciences, we ought to pay attention to the kinds of causal questions that social scientists actually want to answer. Let's consider a range of causal questions that have arisen within historical and comparative sociology. In considering these examples, we should reflect on the types of analysis that would provide a satisfactory response to the question, and also the modes of research that would support an empirical response to the question.

- What causes ethnic violence (Horowitz 1985)?
- What caused ethnic violence in Rwanda?
- What caused twentieth-century revolutions (Wolf 1969)?
- What caused the Nicaraguan revolution?
- Why did revolution unfold as it did in the Canton Delta in 1911 (Hsieh 1974)?
- What factors enhance the likelihood of successful democratization (Przeworski 1991; Przeworski et al. 1996)?
- What causes urban residential segregation (Schelling 1978)?
- What causes political corruption (Klitgaard 1988)?
- What factors explain the success or failure of anti-corruption reforms (Klitgaard 1988)?
- What factors explain the East Asian economic miracle (Vogel 1991)?
- Why are there more violent crimes per 1000 in the US than Western Europe?
- Why was the political party of labor more successful in the UK than the US (Przeworski 1985)?
- Why is infant mortality significantly lower in Sri Lanka than Brazil or Egypt (Drèze and Sen 1989, 1995)?
- Why do millenarian cults occur in the post-colonial world (Adas 1979)?
- Why was agricultural technology stagnant in late imperial China (Elvin 1973)?
- Why are rural people more politically conservative than urban people?
- Why do social tastes and styles change as they do (Lieberson 2000)?
- Why did the name "Joshua" lose frequency in the United States in the 1990s (Lieberson 2000)?
- Why did the New England Patriots win the 2003 Super Bowl (Lieberson 1997)?

- Why did the political culture of corporations remain powerful among French workers in the 19th century (Sewell 1980)?
- Why did the heavy wheeled plough diffuse in the geographical pattern that it did in medieval France (Bloch 1966)?
- How did the socialist and republican parties of Spain mobilize the lower working class in support of their programs?
- How did the Solidarity Movement in Poland preserve its organization in face of state repression in the 1980s?
- Was the fact of skewed sex ratios in rural China a necessary condition for the occurrence of banditry and rebellion? Was this fact a contributing condition?
- Why was there no broad-based militant movement of the poor in the United States during the Great Depression?
- Why do restaurants commonly add a gratuity of 18% for parties of 6 or more?

We can learn a great deal about causal inquiry by reflecting briefly on a number of these examples. There is a common thread among these examples, in that each topic directs inquiry towards the question, “What are the causal conditions that give rise to a given social or historical outcome?” But there are a number of important differences among these examples as well. Some are about a category of outcome (“twentieth-century revolution” or “ethnic violence”), whereas others are about a historically specific outcome (the Nicaraguan revolution, the Rwandan genocide, the 2003 Super Bowl). Some are about large and publicly salient events, structures, and mentalities (states, revolutions, political cultures); others are about small-scale and unnoticed social characteristics (the frequency of first names). And there are numerous other nuances that emerge from consideration of these examples.

In each case it is a promising research strategy to attempt to discover the underlying social mechanisms that give rise to the outcome -- none of these examples suggests a purely statistical approach to the problem. So inquiry into the "microfoundations" of the causal relations that are uncovered is needed. And second, many of these examples suggest research approaches that make use of the methods of comparative historical sociology and case-study methodology. The techniques of "process-tracing" and small-N comparison of cases should help to arrive at empirically supportable theories of the causal relations that underlie these groups of phenomena.

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Posted by Daniel Little at 05:53PM (-05:00)

Historical populations

Sunday, December 07, 2008



Historical demography concerns itself with two families of questions -- factual description of population behavior and explanation of the patterns that are observed. On the descriptive side, historical demographers are concerned with estimating the absolute population size of a group or region -- Tuscany in 1400, New England in 1700, the Anasazi in 1000. And they are interested in measuring the underlying demographic rates -- for example, natality, mortality, age of marriage, nutritional and health status, or sex ratios.

And, to make useful comparisons, these measurements need to be linked to the same variables over time and comparable populations over the same time period. This set of observations permits the discovery of trends and patterns -- steady population growth in group A simultaneous with flat population size in group B; high rate of growth for C during 1700-1750 followed by slow growth in the next 50 years; high population density in agricultural region D compared with low density in agricultural region E.

The descriptive task is a difficult one. But it immediately raises a host of explanatory questions. What are the social mechanisms that conjoin to bring about the complex observed demographic outcomes? Population outcomes are the result of myriad choices by anonymous individuals; and yet the outcomes are highly patterned. The task of explanation arises when we try to make sense of the demographic behavior and outcomes that are discovered. What are the material and social circumstances that explain the trends we observe and the differences that emerge across populations?

Thomas Malthus offered an explanation of large population trends based on both material

and social factors: the food-production capacity of the land inhabited and the norms and institutions regulating family formation and child-bearing. Malthus's theories suggest relating population size and growth rates to measures of economic prosperity -- for example, measures of the real wage for farm laborers over time, measures of the fluctuations in availability of jobs, or measures of available land per unit of population. The classic Malthusian argument predicts that population growth will lag economic fluctuation: rising wages encourage higher fertility and falling wages discourage fertility. And if population continues to rise in declining economic circumstances, then eventually mortality will rise -- again suppressing population growth.

Source: Massimo Livi Bacci, A Concise History of World Population, P. 70.

The simple Malthusian theory, then, postulates that population expands to the limit created by available sources of food. So increases in farm productivity and increases in arable land should give rise to an increase in population, whereas a rising population density on a given territory will eventually lead to the "negative" checks of famine and nutrition-based mortality if not pre-empted by the preventive checks of reduced natality.

The question of scale, both temporal and regional, makes a large difference in the explanatory quest. We can frame the question of group demographic behavior from the micro- to the macro-levels -- from a handful of Alpine villages in the 16th century (population 5000) to the Yangzi delta in the 18th century (population 300 million). Micro-trends may have a different explanations than macro-trends.

It might be maintained that the Malthusian theory is only well-suited to the largest scale: large territory and long timeframe. In the longterm it is almost tautological to observe that a population will expand to the limits created by environmental resources. But long before those limits are approached, there is ample space for the workings of social arrangements to modulate population behavior. Alternative economic and demographic institutions create different demographic profiles. Birth spacing (reflecting family choices and cultural values) can dramatically influence total fertility. Technologies of birth control -- both traditional and modern -- can move a population from high-fertility to medium- or low-fertility. So historical demography requires social explanation based on discovery of concrete and specific institutions in local circumstances, not simply broad-brush hypotheses about resource limits.

Recent studies of population behavior across the expanse of Eurasia confirm this point. The Eurasian Demography Project finds that there is a wide range of demograhic patterns across the locales of Eurasia, from Finland to Italy to China to Japan. And the Malthusian picture works only at the coarsest level; in particular, it turns out that the Chinese population did not teeter on the edge of Malthusian crisis.

(See Eurasian Historical Comparisons for more on the Eurasian Demography Project.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:56AM (-05:00)

Why "philosophy of social science"?

Monday, December 08, 2008

Source: The Frankfurt School

The subject of the philosophy of social science is important but poorly understood. The



field considers the most foundational questions about the possibility of scientific knowledge about the social world. What are the scope and limits of scientific knowledge of society? What is involved in arriving at a scientific understanding of society? What are the most appropriate standards for judging proffered social explanations? A philosophy can guide us as we construct a field of knowledge, and it can serve as a set of regulative standards as we conduct and extend that field of knowledge. Philosophy has served both intellectual functions in the past century or two.

The importance of the philosophy of social science derives from two things: first, the urgency and complexity of the challenges posed by the poorly understood social processes that surround us in twenty-first century society, and second, the unsettled status of our understanding of the logic of social science knowledge and explanation. It is as if we were passengers on a technologically complex spacecraft whose propulsion and life support systems we do not fully understand; and further, we have only a limited understanding of the systems of science and engineering on the basis of which these technologies were designed and maintained. We would have a very lively interest in learning the science that explains the workings of the technologies, and in learning the limitations and areas of uncertainty that the relevant sciences include. Likewise, it is important for us to come to a better and more well-grounded understanding of the social, political, and behavioral phenomena that constitute the modern social world. And there are large and unresolved philosophical questions about the logic of social science knowledge and theory on the basis of which to arrive at that understanding.

Contemporary philosophies of social science have focused primarily on contemporary, “mature” social science research and theory. However, philosophies of social science were also relevant in the emergence of the social sciences in the nineteenth century, as idealized schemata for setting the scientific goals that the founders set for themselves. Philosophical ideas about the nature of knowledge and the nature of the social world guided or influenced the founding efforts by such early social researchers as Weber, Durkheim, or Spencer in the formulation of their highest-level assumptions about social processes and their most general assumptions about what a scientific treatment of society ought to look like. So there has been an important back-and-forth between philosophy and the social sciences from the start.

It is useful to attempt to reconstruct the guiding assumptions about the "scientific study of society" that were in the minds of the founders of the social science disciplines and the several generations of philosophers who shaped so much of our current understanding of social science; to expose some of the chief contemporary problems in social science inquiry and explanation today; and to show how this line of intellectual development also suggests some new ways of thinking about social science research and theorizing. The goal is to treat the philosophy of social science, not simply as a sub-discipline of philosophy, but as an active and guiding area of intellectual work intimately bound up in the development of the social sciences.

Philosophy, then, played an active role in the intellectual work done by the creators of sociology as they attempted to frame a "science of society" in the nineteenth and early

twentieth century (Durkheim, Weber, Marx, the Chicago school of sociology, and the first generation of ethnographers). And I believe we can learn a great deal about how better to understand the contemporary world by attempting to identify the leading assumptions about social scientific knowledge held by the founders of the social sciences. What assumptions about social science knowledge were held by the philosophers who initiated the field, including Comte, Mill, Spencer, and others? How did the development of theories of the "human sciences" within the continental tradition of hermeneutics relate to positivist theories of the social sciences from the Vienna Circle through Popper, Hempel, and Nagel? How did the praxis philosophy of the Frankfurt School change some of the ways we think about the social sciences?

The leading philosophical ideas that have been applied to the social sciences emerged out of these early efforts to make sense of the social world: for example, positivism, naturalism, realism, hermeneutics, individualism, holism, reductionism, falsifiability, materialism, verstehen methodology, feminist epistemology, and causal explanation. Reflection on the leading ideas about the "what and how" of social scientific knowledge will also give us an idea of some of the rethinking that needs to occur in the way that we think about the social sciences in the modern world.

A better understanding of the nature and logic of the social sciences has great practical importance. Just think of the complexity and magnitude of the processes that have been underway in the past fifty years: rapid change in youth culture, ethnic hatred and conflict, full incorporation of most countries into the global economy, terrorism, the emergence of East Asia as a manufacturing super power, population movements, the re-emergence of significant social inequalities within and across countries, new social networks created by the internet, and so on. And these processes are not well understood. We do not have comprehensive theories for which these contemporary processes are a special case—whether “modernization theory,” “world systems theory,” “rational choice theory,” or “theory of exploitation.”

In fact, it is a radical misunderstanding of the nature of the social, to imagine that there might be such theories. Rather, social change is a contingent, multi-threaded social congeries of behavior, institutions, and contingent events, and no single set of comprehensive theories can be expected to explain all these phenomena. These changes are as deep, rapid, and perplexing as those associated with the process of industrialization in nineteenth-century England—and consider how profoundly the experience of Manchester and Birmingham stimulated new sociological thinking in the hands of Engels, Tocqueville, Marx, and the other founders of modern western sociology. So the complexity and opacity of the contemporary social world demands a better understanding of the logic and methods of the social sciences.
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:17PM (-05:00)

Objectivity in the social sciences

Tuesday, December 09, 2008

What is objectivity in social science? What might be meant by the claim that a given theory represents an objective scientific analysis of a range of social phenomena? Debate over the objectivity of social science has often combined a variety of separate theses:

1. There are social facts that are independent of the concepts and theories of the scientist which the theory is intended to uncover--that is, that there is an objective

social world. (ontological objectivity)
2. It is possible for a theory of a given range of social facts to be well-grounded on the basis of the right sorts of reasons (empirical and theoretical adequacy). (epistemic objectivity)
3. Social facts are independent of the states of consciousness of participants.
4. Scientific inquiry can be value-free and interest-neutral.
5. Scientific inquiry tends to converge around a consensus among all researchers over the properties of the world as a result of further empirical and theoretical research.

Thesis (1) contradicts conceptual relativism. Thesis (2) contradicts a family of underdetermination arguments within the philosophy of science. Thesis (3) divides materialist social science from interpretation theory and verstehen sociology. Thesis (4) upholds the position that it is possible to exclude value commitments from the conduct of science. And thesis (5) asserts that science progresses towards a higher degree of agreement among researchers.

We may dispense quickly with (4). It is unquestionably true that scientific research is interest-relative: what particular features of the social system, what aspects of action, and what causal processes, are selected for scrutiny and explanation, are dependent on the interests--both intellectual and moral--of the investigator. Further, it is plain that scientific reasoning presupposes a set of normative commitments--for example, to the primacy of empirical evidence over religious authority. But Weber's treatment of this issue is convincing; these points do not diminish the objectivity of science in "'Objectivity' in Social Science" (The Methodology Of The Social Sciences). Once having defined the program of research, it is still possible to arrive at an objective analysis of the subject matter.

Thesis (1) represents a general metaphysical view of the social world, in that it asserts the mind-independence of various kinds of social processes, structures, etc. Scientific researc attempts to identify underlying processes, structures, mechanisms, and the like, whose properties explain the observable data. This goal presupposes that social phenomena are the result of a set of causally ordered, objective social processes which the social scientist can discover and map out. (Call this the realism component.) (It might be noted that (1) does not commit one to methodological holism. The objective social facts referred to may well supervene upon facts about individual actions.)

Thesis (2) represents the view that scientific theories are put forward as being justified on the basis of a "scientific method" and not simply personal advocacy, political bias, or one's value perspective. There need to be objective procedures in terms of which to compare competing theories and to provide empirical and logical arguments favoring one such theory over its competitors. (Call this the justification component.)

Thesis (5) represents the view that scientific inquiry progresses towards consensus among members of a given research community, and that this consensus is best explained on the hypothesis that the consensus theory is true, and has been arrived at through reliable procedures of scientific inquiry. (Bernard Williams describes this view briefly in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, chapter 8.)

Various combinations of these components of objectivity in social science are possible. For example, Weber appears to affirm (1) and hold that there are social facts; he denies (3), asserting that these facts are "subjective" in the sense that they depend essentially on the states of mind of the persons whose meaningful behavior constitutes them; and he accepts (2), holding that it is possible to offer theoretically and empirically well-grounded descriptions of these facts (Weber, Methodology, chapter 2). Nelson Goodman appears

to contradict (1), maintaining that there are as many social worlds as there are schemes of concepts in terms of which to organize and describe experience (Ways of Worldmaking). Such a view is forced to reject (2) as well, since it maintains that there is no uniquely best theory of the world. It would be possible to reject (1) while maintaining (2)--that is, to hold that there is a best social scientific theory of a given range of social phenomena, but deny that such a theory describes an independently existing set of social facts. (For example, Hilary Putnam's anti-realist arguments might illustrate this combination.)

The form of objectivity of social science that I want to defend affirms (1) and (2). Concerning thesis (3), I hold that there is no need to choose between "material" and "subjective" features of the social world. Some social facts may be constituted by the meanings attributed to them by participants, while others may be meaning-independent. And finally, I maintain that the procedures internal to various social science disciplines are sufficient to produce the sort of convergence of theoretical beliefs described in thesis (5) in most concrete historical and social science debates.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:35AM (-05:00)

Contingent historical development

Tuesday, December 09, 2008

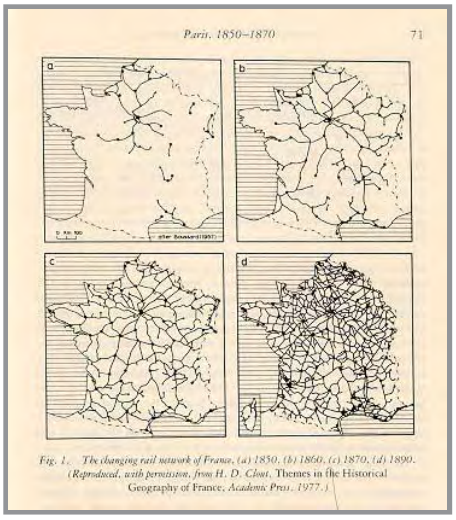
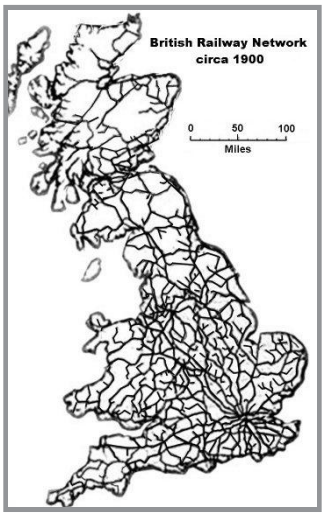


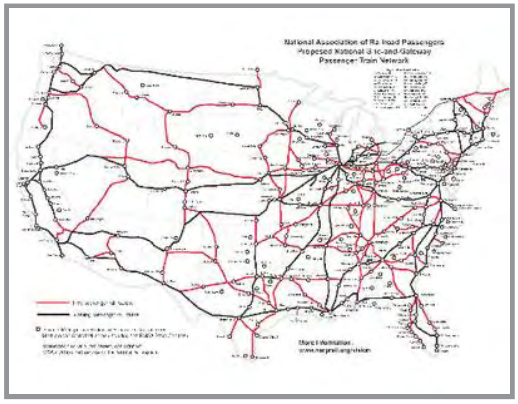
Fig. 1. The changing rail network of France, (a) 1850, (b) 1860, (c) 1870, (d) 1890. (Reproduced, with permission, from H. D. Clout, Themes in the Historical Geography of France, Academic Press, 1977.)

Here's a relatively limited historical puzzle to solve. A powerful new technology -- the railroad -- was developed in the first part of the nineteenth century. The nature and characteristics of the technology were essentially homogeneous across the national settings in which it appeared in Europe and North America. However, it was introduced and built out in three countries -- the United States, Britain, and France -- in markedly different ways. The ways in which the railroads and their technologies were regulated and encouraged were very different in the three countries, and the eventual rail networks had very different properties in the three countries. The question for explanation is this: can we explain the differences in these three national experiences on the basis of some small set of structural or cultural differences that existed among the three countries and that causally explain the resulting differences in build-out, structure, and technical frameworks? Or, possibly, are the three historical experiences different simply because of the occurrence of a large but cumulative number of unimportant and non-systemic events?
These are the questions that historical sociologist Frank Dobbin poses in his book, Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain, and France in the Railway Age. He argues that there were significantly different cultures of political and industrial policy in the three countries that led to substantial differences in the ways in which government and business interacted in the development of the railroads. "Each Western nation-state developed a distinct strategy for governing industry" (1). The laissez-faire culture of the United States permitted a few large railroad magnates and corporations to make the crucial decisions about technology, standards, and routes that would govern the development of the rail system. The regulated market culture of Great Britain favored



smaller companies and strove to prevent the emergence of a small number of oligopolistic rail companies. And the technocratic civil-service culture of France gave a great deal of power to the engineers and civil servants who were charged to make decisions about technology choice, routes, and standards.

These differences led to systemic differences in the historical implementation of the railroads, the rail networks that were developed, and the regulatory regimes that surrounded them. The U.S. rail network developed as the result of competition among a small number of rail magnates for the most profitable routes. This turned out to favor a few east-west trunk lines connecting urban centers, including New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco.



The British rail network gave more influence to municipalities who demanded service; as a result, the network that developed was a more distributed one across a larger number of cities. And the French rail network was rationally designed to conform to the economic and military needs of the French state, with a system of rail routes that largely centered on Paris. These differences are evident in the maps at the top of the posting.

This example illustrates the insights that can be distilled from comparative historical sociology. Dobbin takes a single technology and documents a range of outcomes in the way in which the technology is built out into a national system. And he attempts to isolate the differences in structures and cultures in the three settings that would account for the differences in outcomes. He offers a causal analysis of the development of the technology in the three settings, demonstrating how the mechanism of policy culture imposes effects on the development of the technology. The inherent possibilities represented by the technology intersect with the economic circumstances and the policy cultures of the three national settings, and the result is a set of differentiated organizations and outcomes in the three countries. The analysis is rich in its documentation of the social mechanisms through which policy culture influenced technology development; the logic of his analysis is more akin to process tracing than to the methods of difference and similarity in Mill's methods.



The research establishes several important things. First, it refutes any sort of technological determinism, according to which the technical characteristics of the technology determine the way it will be implemented. To the contrary, Dobbin's work demonstrates the very great degree of contingency that existed in the social implementation of the railroad. Second, it makes a strong case for the idea that an

element of culture -- the framework of assumptions, precedents, and institutions defining the "policy culture" of a country -- can have a very strong effect on the development of large social institutions. Dobbin emphasizes the role that things like traditions, customs, and legacies play in the unfolding of important historical developments. And finally, the work makes it clear that these highly contingent pathways of development nonetheless admit of explanation. We can identify the mechanisms and local circumstances that led, in one instance, to a large number of firms and hubs and in the other, a small number of firms and trunk lines.

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:47PM (-05:00)

Comparative life satisfaction

Wednesday, December 10, 2008



We tend to think of the past century as being a time of great progress when it comes to the quality of life -- for ordinary people as well as the privileged. Advances in science, technology, and medicine have made life more secure, predictable, productive, educated, and healthy. But in what specific ways is ordinary life happier or more satisfying for ordinary people in 2000 compared to their counterparts in 1900 or 1800 -- or 200, for that matter?

There are a couple of things that are pretty obvious. Nutrition is one place to start: the mass population of France, Canada, or the United States is not subject to periodic hunger, malnutrition, or famine. This is painfully not true for many poor parts of the world -- Sudan, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh, for example. But for the countries of the affluent world, the OECD countries, hunger has been largely conquered for most citizens.

Second, major advances in health preservation and the treatment of illness have taken place. We know how to prevent cholera, and we know how to treat staph infections with antibiotics. Terrible diseases such as polio have been eradicated, and we have effective treatments for some kinds of previously incurable cancers. So the basic health status of people in the affluent 21st-century world is substantially better than that of previous centuries -- with obvious consequences for our ability to find satisfaction in life activities.

These advances in food security and public health provision have resulted in a major enhancement to quality of life -- life expectancy in France, Germany, or Costa Rica has increased sharply. And many of the factors underlying much of this improvement is not high-tech, but rather takes the form of things like improvement of urban sanitation and relatively low-cost treatment (antibiotics for children's ear infections, for example).

So living longer and more healthily is certainly an advantage in our quality of life relative to conditions one or two centuries ago.

Improvements in labor productivity in agriculture and manufacturing have resulted in

another kind of enhancement of modern quality of life. It is no longer necessary for a large percentage of humanity to perform endless and exhausting labor in order to feed the rest of us. And because of new technologies and high labor productivity, almost everyone has access to goods that extend the enjoyment of life and our creative talents. Personal computing and communications, access to the world's knowledge and culture through the Internet, and ability to travel widely all represent opportunities that even the most privileged could not match one or two centuries ago.

But the question of life satisfaction doesn't reduce to an inventory of the gadgets we can use. Beyond the minimum required for sustaining a healthy human body, the question of satisfaction comes down to the issue of what we do with the tools and resources available to us and the quality of our human relationships. How do we organize our lives in such a way as to succeed in achieving goals that really matter?

Amartya Sen's economic theory of "capabilities and realizations" supports a pretty good answer to these questions about life satisfaction (Development as Freedom). Each person has a bundle of talents and capabilities. These talents can be marshalled into a meaningful life plan. And the satisfying life is one where the person has singled out some important values and goals and has used his/her talents to achieve these goals. (This general idea underlies J. S. Mill's theory of happiness as well in Utilitarianism.)

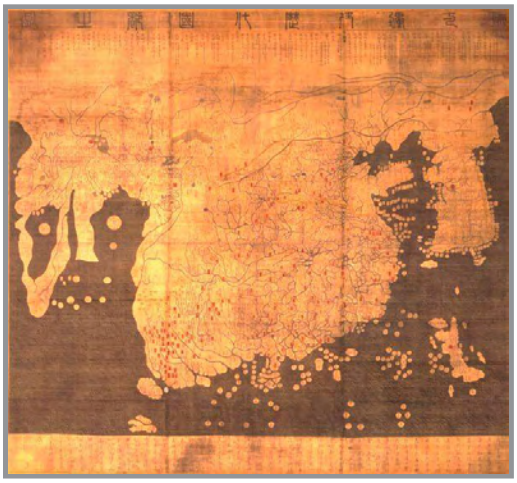
By this standard, it's not so clear that life in the twenty-first century is inherently more satisfying than that in the eighteenth or the second centuries. When basic needs were satisfied -- nutrition, shelter, health -- the opportunities for realizing one's talents in meaningful effort were no less extensive than they are today. This is true for the creative classes -- obviously. The creative product of Mill's or Hugo's generation was no less substantial or satisfying than our own. But perhaps it is true across the board. The farmer-gardener who shapes his/her land over the course of a lifetime has created something of great personal value and satisfaction. The mason or smith may have taken more pride and satisfaction in his life's work than does the programmer or airline flight attendant. The parent who succeeded in nurturing a family in 1800 County Cork may have found the satisfactions as great or greater than parents in Boston or Seattle today.

So we might say that the only unmistakeable improvement in quality of life in the past century is in the basics -- secure nutrition, decent education, and improved health during the course of a human life. And the challenge of the present is to make something meaningful and sustaining of the resources we are given.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:07PM (-05:00)

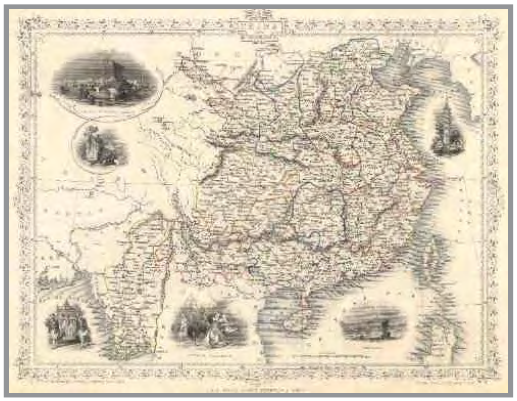
Maps, narratives, and abstraction

Friday, December 12, 2008

It is obvious that maps are selective representations of the world. They represent an abstraction: a representation of a complex, dense reality that signifies some characteristics while deliberately ignoring other aspects. The principles of selection used by the cartographer are highly dependent on the expected interests of the user. Topography will be relevant to the hiker but not the motorist. Location of points of interest will be important to the tourist but not the long-distance trucker. Location of railroad hubs will be valued by the military planner but not the birdwatcher. So there is no such thing as a comprehensive map -- one that represents all geographical details; and there is also no such thing as a truly "all-purpose" map -- one that includes all the details that any user







could want.

We also know that there are different schemes of representation of geography -- different projections, different conventions for representing items and relationships, etc. So there is no objectively best map of a given terrain. Rather, comparing maps for adequacy, accuracy, and usefulness requires semantic and pragmatic comparison. (Here the word "semantic" is used in a specialized sense: "having to do with the reference relationship between a sign and the signified.") Semantically, we are interested in the correspondence between the map and the world. The conventions of a given cartography imply a specific set of statements about the spatial relations that actually exist among places, as well as denoting a variety of characteristics of places. So there is a perfectly natural question to ask of a given map: is it representationally accurate? This sort of assessment leads to judgments like these: This map does a more accurate job of representing driving distances than that one, given the rules of representation that each presupposes. This map errs in representing the relative population sizes of Cleveland and Peoria. These are features that have to do with the accuracy of the correspondence between the map and the world.

The pragmatic considerations have to do with how well the representation or its underlying conventions conform to how various people want to use it. Maps are particularly dependent on pragmatic considerations. We need to assess the value of a map with respect to a set of practical interests. How well does the map convey the information about places and spatial relationships that the user will want to consult? How have the judgments about what to include and what to exclude worked out from the point of view of the user? Pragmatic considerations lead to judgments like these: this mapping convention corresponds better to the needs of the military planner or the public health official than that one. The pragmatic questions about a map have to do with a different kind of fit -- fit between the features and design of the map and the practical interests of a particular set of users. Do the conventions of the given cartography correspond well to the interests that specific sets of users have in the map?

Here is the point of this discussion: are there useful analogies between the epistemology of maps and the cognitive situation of other representational constructs -- for example,



historical narratives and scientific theories? Several points of parallel seem particularly evident. First, narratives and theories are selective too. It is impossible to incorporate every element of a historical event or natural process into a theory or narrative; rather, it is necessary to select a storyline that permits us to provide a partial account of what happened. This is true for the French Revolution; but it is also true for the trajectory of a hockey puck.

Second, there is a parallel point about veridicality that applies to narratives and theories as much as to maps. No map stands as an isolated representation; rather, it is embedded within a set of conventions of representation. We must apply the conventions in order to discover what "assertions" are contained in the representation. So maps are in an important sense "conventional." However, given the conventions of the map, we can undertake to evaluate its accuracy. And this is true for narratives and theories as well; we can attempt to assess the degree of approximate truth possessed by the construction. Are the statements about the nature of the events and their sequence approximately true? (Given that an account of the French Revolution singles out class interests of parties within the narrative, has the historian correctly described the economic interests of the Jacobins?)

And third, the point about the relevance of users' interests to assessment of the construction seems pertinent to narratives and theories as well. The civil engineer who is investigating the collapse of a building will probably find a truthful analysis of the thermodynamics of the HVAC system unhelpful, even though it is true. The detective investigating a robbery of a party store will probably become impatient at a narrative that highlights the sequence of street noises that were audible during the heist, rather than the descriptions and actions of the visitors during the relevant time.

When it comes to narratives and theories, there is another value dimension that we want to impose on the construction: the idea of explanatory adequacy. A narrative ought to provide a basis for explaining the "how and why" of historical events; it ought to single out the circumstances and reasoning that help to explain the actions of participants, and it ought to highlight some of the environmental circumstances that influenced the outcome. A scientific theory is intended to identify some of the fundamental causal factors that explain a puzzling phenomenon -- the turbulence that occurs in a pot of water as it approaches the boiling point, for example. So when we say that a narrative or a theory is an abstraction, part of what we're getting at is the idea that the historian or natural scientist has deliberately excluded factors that don't make a difference, in order to highlight a set of factors that do make a difference.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:05AM (-05:00)

Power and class in the 21st century

Friday, December 12, 2008



We could say that power and class are the two most important determinants of everyday life in the 21st century. Class relations – determined by the property system and the basic economic institutions within which we live – determine our opportunities, health, quality of life, and sometimes our basic freedoms. Power relations influence our careers, our opportunities, our freedoms, and very basic aspects of our behavior and choice. It is reasonable to think that the system of power and class within which we live constitutes the basic framework within which our lives and purposes unfold.

Further, the two schemata of post-modern life are interrelated. The property system within which we live is like a medieval cathedral – it cannot stand without the buttresses of power that retain its structure in the face of countervailing pressures. And the relations of power that exist in a society often derive much of their voltage from the structure of property that exists. Property holders need, want, and gain power; holders of power gain property.

But post-modern life is not so simple. There are multiple cross-cutting identities and positions that influence personal outcomes, not simply class or power. Race, ethnic group, gender – these are social systems that have quite a bit in common with class, and they have relationships to power as well. Race, ethnicity, and gender are also “social processing systems” – one’s status within the system of race or gender immediately influences one’s opportunities, status, prestige, and – yes, power. And one’s position within these ascriptive systems also has implications for the class system; thus black workers faced a different working environment than white workers in the Detroit auto industry in the 1950s and 1960s, and female workers earn less than male workers in many businesses.

We might define power in these terms: "access to social and material resources that permit an individual or group to control or influence social outcomes, including the behavior of other individuals and groups, the distribution of things, and the configuration of social institutions." And we can give a simple schematic description of the chief mechanisms and tactics through which control and influence are exercised in contemporary society: coercion, threat, manipulation of the agenda, manipulation of information and thought, and positional advantage. These are almost all relational characteristics -- they have to do with the relationships of influence that exist among individuals and groups.

We can also provide a simple definition of social class: “position within a system of property relations, defining one’s location with a structure of domination, control, and exploitation.” The group of people who share a similar position within the property relations of a society constitute a class. Their circumstances, resources, and opportunities are similar to those of others in the class, and they have common interests

that are in opposition to members of some other classes. So class works as a social sorting process: individuals are tracked into one class or another through specific sociological mechanisms (schooling, parental attitudes, neighborhood). And it works to assign very different ranges of material outcomes to members of the various groups; working class families wind up more poorly educated, less healthy, and more vulnerable to economic fluctuations than their counterparts in the landlord class, the financial elite class, or the capitalist class. Part of the challenge of developing a sociology of class involved identifying some of the concrete pathways of difference created by class with respect to specific opportunities – education, health, adequate nutrition, access to creative work, ….

Status and consciousness are also part of the sociology of class. Individuals develop specific features of mentality out of the experience they have in the class environments of their parents, their schools, and their workplaces. And these differences in turn give rise to differences in behavior -- consumer behavior, political behavior, and inter-group behavior. And members of a class may acquire a common perspective on their situation -- they may come to diagnose the social relations around them in a similar way, they may come to a common "class consciousness" that leads them to engage in collective action together.

Further, the system of class relations also creates specific features in the social networks that exist in a society. A highly democratic and egalitarian society would be expected to have a social network graph that is widely and evenly distributed across the population. But in our society, it is likely that a social network map of Chicago would be highly differentiated along class lines: business people tend to know business people, manufacturing workers tend to know other manufacturing workers, and so forth. (I am sure there is some good research on this topic, though I can't put my hands on it.) This in turn implies that there will be significant differences across classes with respect to social capital -- the ability of people to call upon their social relationships and associations in pursuit of their goals and interests. (See Nan Lin, Social Capital: Theory and Research.) (This point comes up in a different context in the earlier posting about segregation in France.)

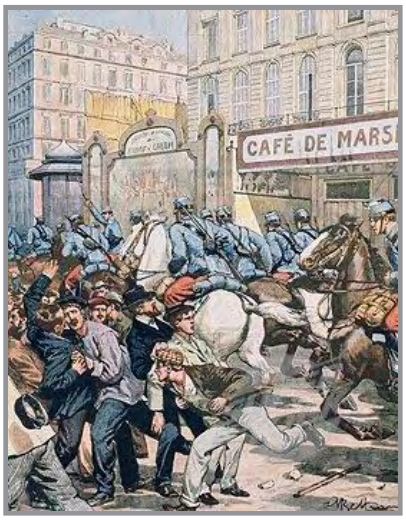
The concepts of power and class are often linked. However, it strikes me that the two concepts or theories are not parallel; they do different work within our analysis of the society in which we live, and they require different kinds of ontologies in order for us to explicate them. “Class” is a situational feature for individuals; it defines a set of circumstances and opportunities that fundamentally influence the shape of their lives. In this respect the theory of class evokes structures first and agency and consciousness second. “Power” is a fluid characteristic of individuals within social relationships. As such, it evokes social relationships and social resources wielded by individuals and groups against other individuals and groups. “Power” is a feature of the individual's position within a set of social networks and relationships, not a social structure. Class is more akin to "the mass of the earth", whereas power is akin to "the ability to fly". The mass of the earth determines the most basic feature of life on earth -- gravity. The ability to fly is a complex and variable capacity that permits specific organisms and artifacts to accomplish flight within the general influence of gravity. What is complicated about this analogy is the fact that there are several sources of social "gravity" -- including the structures of race, gender, and religion that pull, push, and constrain us in multiple directions.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:40AM (-05:00)

The sociology of class

Thursday, December 18, 2008



According to the traditional definition, a class is defined in relation to the broad structure of the property system. A group of people belong to the same class when they occupy the same position within the property system governing labor, physical assets, and perhaps intangible assets such as knowledge or money. This is a structural definition of the concept of class. In nineteenth-century France we might have classified the population into land owners, capital owners, wage laborers, artisans, professionals (accountants, architects), intellectuals, government officials, civil service workers, small merchants, smallholding farmers, tenant farmers, landless workers, and lumpenproletariat. And these groups can be roughly triangulated according to their ownership of three major elements: labor power, valuable skills and knowledge, and economic assets (land, property, wealth).



Another way of putting the point is to ask: where does the individual gain his/her income -- from the sale of labor time, from the sale or rent of physical assets, or from the sale or rent of expertise? Workers derive their income from the sale of their labor time; capitalists, financiers, and landlords derive their income from their ownership of physical and financial resources, and professionals, experts, and intellectuals derive their income from their possession of scarce expert knowledge and skills. (That's Pierre-Joseph Proudhon pictured above by Courbet, an intellectual in artisanal garb.)

	labor power	skills and knowledge	Economic assets
capitalist	NO	NO	YES
land owner	NO	NO	YES
financier	NO	NO	YES
wage laborer	YES	NO	NO
professional	YES	YES	NO
artisan	YES	YES	NO
govt official	YES	YES	NO
civil service	YES	YES	NO
intellectual	NO	YES	NO
merchant	YES	NO	YES
smallholder	YES	NO	YES
tenant	YES	NO	NO
lumpen	NO	NO	NO

So we might capture nineteenth-century French social reality from this point of view along these lines:

Of course, things can be classified according to any principle we might offer. So the value of a particular classification must be justified in terms of the explanatory or causal work that it does. The explanatory thrust of the theory of class goes along the lines of a sociological hypothesis: people who have a similar location within a system of property relations will also develop other important similarities: similarities of thought, values, style, behavior, and politics, for example. And so Marx believed that structurally-defined classes of people were likely to further develop a similar class consciousness -- a similar framework of thought in terms of which they understand the social forces around them;

and he expected that classes of people would come to share a signature framework of political motivation -- a set of ideas, interpretations, and values that would motivate them to engage in collective action together.

This is where the substantive sociology of class comes in; in order to provide credibility for this set of expectations about class consciousness and political motivation, we need to have some ideas about the concrete sociological mechanisms that might plausibly lead from "common position in the property relations" to "common forms of consciousness and political motivation." And here there are quite a few things that can be said -- both by Marx in the 1850s and contemporary observers in the 2000s. First, a common position in the property relations often implies a number of concrete similarities of experience across individuals -- common features of the workplace, common neighborhoods in cities, common experiences in the system of schooling that is in place. These kinds of shared social positions suggest two things: first, a common process of shaping through which perceptions and motivations develop in each individual; and second, a common reality that individuals who experience these environments are likely to be able to perceive. It is highly plausible that a group of men and women who have spent their lives in a nineteenth century textile factory while living in a concentrated workers' slum, will have developed a similar consciousness and social style from the discipline and work processes of the factory and their shared social associations in their neighborhoods.

So miners in Wales or northern Michigan are exposed to similar work environments; similar firms and styles of management; and similar life outcomes that might be expected to create a "miner's consciousness" and a miner's political mentality. Smallholding wine growers across the landscape of nineteenth century France are exposed to similar natural, social, and economic circumstances that are likely to shape the development of their personalities and worldviews, that are in turn likely to create an ideal-typical "wine grower" who fairly accurately represents the worldview and behavior of wine growers.

Second, there is a fact that is more apparent today than it was to nineteenth-century sociological observers, that has to do with what we now understand about social networks and social capital. Common locations of work and residence make it highly likely that occupational groups (miners, architects, professors) will fall within sharply distinguished sets of social networks, and they will have access to different combinations of social capital (civic organizations, religious groups, secret societies). And the consciousness and political behavior of an individual is surely influenced in very profound ways by each of these social categories -- networks and social capital. So the fact of similarities in these respects is likely to give rise to similarities in consciousness and action as well.

And, of course, there is the fact of the social reality of exploitation in each of these circumstances: miners and wine growers are subject to coercive social relations that succeed in separating them from a substantial portion of the fruits of their labors. Coal miners will identify the profit-driven mine owners as the source of their exploitation and wine growers may identify the wine jobbers who buy their product cheaply and sell it dearly in the cities as the source of their exploitation. But each group comes to recognize the social reality of the property relations through which their productive labor is "expropriated" by other powerful forces. Recognition of the fact of exploitation is a key component of the process of the formation of class consciousness.

So it seems plausible to suppose that there are identifiable social mechanisms through which occupational groups come to have shared worldviews and similar political

behaviors. But the theory of class asserts more than this; it asserts that wage laborers in many occupations will come to recognize themselves as fundamentally similar to workers in other occupations. The theory of class postulates a sociology of "escalation" of class identity, from the particular occupation, work group, and neighborhood to the larger (and more abstract) class that encompasses many occupations and work groups in widely separated locations. So, it is postulated, fast food workers, auto workers, and air traffic controllers will come to identify together, not simply as a set of occupational groups, but as an extended group of "persons who are forced to sell their labor to capital in order to satisfy life needs." And, further, the theory postulates that it will be possible for a strong form of group solidarity to emerge across this fairly heterogeneous and physically separated set of occupational groups.

It isn't entirely clear what the sociological mechanisms are supposed to be that facilitate this escalation of class identity, however. Classical Marxism depends heavily on the idea of a party and a group of activists who do the "class education" that leads workers from a narrowly parochial view of their situation to one that encompasses the common situation of wage labor. But this depends on a fairly sizable historical coincidence -- the emergence of a militant and disciplined class-based party. And it is very hard to see how non-planned forms of sociological change might lead to this escalation -- hard to see, that is, how air traffic controllers, McDonalds workers, and steel workers might spontaneously come to regard each other as belonging to a single class subject to exploitation by another abstractly defined class.

Moreover, it is very apparent today that there are multiple axes around which collective identities can form. Kinship relations in southern China cut across structural class relations, and it is certainly possible that the Li clan will have a stronger sense of identity than the landless workers -- even though the Li clan contains both landlords, peasant farmers, and landless workers. Religious affinities may be mobilized as a source of collective identity -- again, with the likelihood of creating groups that cut across class lines.

So this line of thought suggests that there is a fairly large gap in the theory of class in even its application to the nineteenth-century case: the problem of how to explain the postulated escalation of consciousness from the particular work group and occupation to the more general category, "working class."

This leaves for another posting the most important question: to what extent is the theory of class relevant to 21st-century society? To what extent can American political conflicts, perceptions, parties, and movements be explained on the basis of occupational and class identities? To what extent do the most important fissures in our society derive from economic conflicts that can be assimilated to the theory of class?
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:07PM (-05:00)

Causal difference

Friday, December 19, 2008

Source: Federica Russo, Causality and Causal Modelling in the Social Sciences, p. 164

I've recently read a very interesting recent book by Federica Russo, Causality and Causal Modelling in the Social Sciences: Measuring Variations (Methodos Series) on the philosophical issues that arise in causal reasoning about social phenomena. Russo is

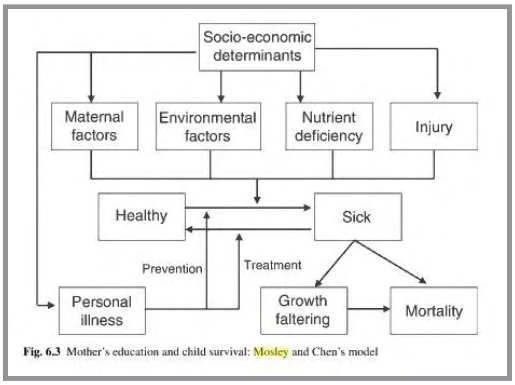


Fig. 6.3 Mother's education and child survival: Mosley and Chen's model

obviously a talented and dedicated philosopher, and the book is a highly interesting contribution.

Explanation is at the center of scientific research, and explanation almost always involves the discovery of causal relations among factors, conditions, or events. This is true in the social sciences no less than in the natural sciences. But social causes look quite a bit different from causes of natural phenomena. They result from the choices and actions of numerous individuals rather than fixed natural laws, and the causal pathways that link antecedents to consequents are less exact than those linking gas leaks to explosions. Here as elsewhere, the foundational issues are different in the social sciences; so a central challenge for the philosophy of social science is to give a good, compelling account of causal reasoning about social phenomena that does justice to the research problems faced by social scientists. Federica Russo has done so in this book. The book focuses on probabilistic causation and causal modeling, and Russo offers a rigorous and accessible treatment of the full range of current debates. Her central goal is to shed more light on the methods of causal modeling, and she succeeds admirably in this ambition. Causality and Causal Modelling in the Social Sciences makes an important and original contribution.

Her approach to problems in the methodology and philosophy of social science is what she calls the "bottom-up" approach. She works from careful analysis of specific examples of social science reasoning about causation, and works upward to more general analytical findings about causal reasoning as it actually works in the hands of skilled social scientists. She uses five concrete case studies as a vehicle for teasing out the logic of causal inference that is at work: smoking and lung cancer, mother's education and child survival, health and wealth in a population, farmers' migration patterns, and factors causing job satisfaction. She looks at the causal arguments advanced in studies in each of these areas as a way of discovering some of the fundamental logical features of causal inference. The examples are drawn from a wider range of the social and behavioral sciences than is usually the case -- demography, public health, and migration, for example. Her insight is that we can learn a great deal about social science research by looking at good examples of empirical and theoretical reasoning about social changes. I think this is exactly right: it is much better to discover the problems that percolate out of the practice of social inquiry rather than imposing a framework of philosophical expectations onto social science practice.

Russo focuses her attention on the problem of explaining variation: what causes the variation of a certain characteristic over a population of individuals or events. This focus on "variation" rather than "regularity" is very convincing; it provides an appropriate and insightful alternative approach to framing problems for social science research and explanation. She offers a very adept discussion and interpretation of the meaning of causal statements and causal reasoning in the social sciences. The book provides a rigorous contribution to the large literature on the logic of quantitative reasoning about causes of population characteristics. Her case studies are well selected and well done. The book is founded on a deep and rigorous understanding of the most recent philosophical and methodological work on causal modeling.

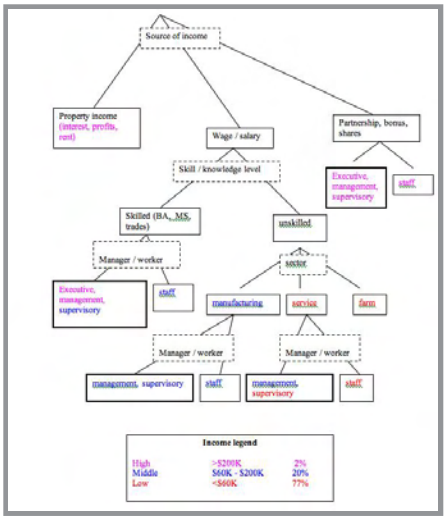
The author does a very good job of positioning her understanding of the meaning of

causal modeling and causal judgments in the social sciences. She honestly addresses the position of “causal realism” and the view that good explanations depend on discovering or hypothesizing causal mechanisms underlying the phenomena. Her chapter on causal mechanisms is a significant contribution to this growing debate within the philosophy of social science; she correctly observes that we need to have greater precision in our discussion of what a causal mechanism is supposed to be.

The book will be of substantial interest to the social scientists, psychologists, demographers, and philosophers who are interested in current debates about the mathematics and philosophy of causal inference. Social scientists and philosophers such as Skyrms, Cartwright, Woodward, Pearl, and Lieberson have developed a very deep set of controversies and debates about the proper interpretation of causal inference. Russo’s book is a substantial contribution to these debates and will engage much the same audiences.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:22PM (-05:00)

A diagram of class structure

Saturday, December 20, 2008



Consider this schematic representation of several variables defined by circumstances of work, income, and occupation. The diagram proposes a classification of income earners according to a series of distinctions about their economic situation.

The diagram captures a handful of separate dimensions of a person's economic location -- one's class. These include:

- source of income (profits, wages, partner's shares)
- level of skill and education
- function as manager or staff
- income level (high, medium, low)
- sector of economy (manufacturing, service, agriculture)

These are important economic characteristics that serve to define a person's status, quality of life, and opportunities in American society. (All but income are designated in the dashed boxes on the diagram.)

We might hypothesize that the large groups that are defined by this diagram have the makings of a class: unskilled farm laborers; unskilled industrial workers; skilled salaried industrial professionals; skilled salaried professors, teachers, and librarians; professionals in firms with partner status and income; and owners of property. Moreover, we are led to ask whether there are likely to be linkages across sectors: are unskilled farm workers and factory workers likely to see themselves as members of a large class? Are salaried professionals in the industrial sector and the service sector likely to have

affinity with each other? What about salaried accountants and their counterparts in partner-governed firms? What about salaried professors and temporary instructors?

Each of these categories of classification makes a difference in one's life circumstances. The source of income defines a basic set of interests for the members of each group; for example, owners of industrial firms have an economic interest in reducing labor costs, whereas wage and salaried workers have an interest in increasing salaries and benefits. The criterion of skill and education influences one's productivity and value to the employer; and it highlights an abstract social resource that one owns (specialized knowledge). The category of "manager/staff" defines the individual's power and influence within the workplace -- whether he/she is a "boss" or a "worker". The sector one works in makes a difference because it establishes a set of distinctive characteristics of the workplace (a factory is different from a factory farm), and it locates the individual's fortunes within a part of the economy that itself has specific interests and advantages. (More free trade is good for farmers because it boosts grain exports, but bad for industrial workers because it creates more competition around labor costs.)

It is also worth pointing out that the diagram provides a crude theory of income distribution: incomes are higher for more skilled workers, for executives, managers, and supervisors, and in more productive industries.

What the diagram leaves out are social characteristics like race, ethnicity, or gender, that substantially influence where one will end up within this structure. And it is intriguing to consider whether there might be a similar diagram that plots out the workings of race, immigration status, gender, or ethnicity in life outcomes.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:27PM (-05:00)

Class in America

Sunday, December 21, 2008



Are there social classes in America?

In order to answer the question in the affirmative, we would need to determine whether there are major social groups that are defined by their position within the economy, who share --





- some degree of a common perspective on the world
- some degree of a common culture
- a set of distinctive economic interests
- the potential of engaging in collective political action in support of their interests.

Does American society possess groups with these characteristics? Or, in the negative, is the American population so homogeneous (or possibly, so heterogeneous) in values, interests, culture, and politics, that the concept of class has no bearing today?

There are certainly occupational groupings in the American workforce. The United States Department of Labor makes use of a hierarchical classification of jobs in the U.S., with 23 major groups. These include management occupations, business and financial operations, computer and mathematical operations, architecture and engineering operations, food preparation and serving occupations, community and social service occupations, legal occupations, education, training, and library occupations, healthcare support occupations, and, eventually, production occupations. Within production occupations there is a further differentiation of jobs among supervisors, production workers, assemblers, fabricators, food processing workers, and so on for dozens of other sub-categories. So there is certainly a very clear occupational structure to the American economy, and the sociological pathways that convey an individual into a particular location within this structure are well-defined and impactful on the future quality of life of the individual.

So we might consider classifying these occupations according to some higher-level categories and then constructing a theory of social classes around them: management, unskilled labor, skilled labor, professional labor, white collar, blue collar, pink collar, manufacturing, service, agriculture. (See a prior posting for an effort along these lines.) And we might consider whether some of these groupings have the cohesion and sociological interconnectedness to constitute a "class". Are unionized, blue-collar, industrial workers a "class"? Are non-unionized service workers a class? Are accountants, architects, and engineers a social class? Are nurses and other healthcare workers a class? Are mid-sized family farmers a social class? And for that matter, are the owners and top managers of banks, investment companies, and financial firms a class? These are fruitful questions, and they begin in a recognition of the complex occupational structure of the U.S. economy. Occupations have large impact on worldview, values, quality of life, and political behavior.

Second, there is certainly a great deal of persistent social stratification in the U.S. The probability of a child's remaining in the quintile of the income distribution where his parents found themselves is high; so the position of a family within the distributive system is fairly stable over time. And position within the income distribution has major consequences for a family's level of consumption and quality of life. Being persistently "near-poor" is a situation of deprivation and insecurity that is sharply different from the life situation of the moderately affluent. So we might consider several large social groups based on income -- the extremely poor, the working poor, the middle-income, the rich, and the super-rich. Within each of these categories of society defined by income we are likely to find some characteristic features of lifestyle, values, and existential dilemmas. So the basic structure of stratification of social goods such as income, health status, and education might serve to define large social "classes."

Third, it would appear that there are clusters of values, styles, and mental frameworks that correspond to different economic segments of American society. This is the cultural dimension of the social reality of class. Patterns of use of leisure time, attitudes towards

education, membership in different kinds of civic organizations, and attitudes towards other nations seem to distinguish social groups in America. So we might attempt to delineate social classes on the basis of clusters of values and mental frameworks. And this approach can certainly be approached empirically, through administration of instruments such as the World Values Survey and domestic equivalents. To what extent do studies like these demonstrate significant inter-group differences within the United States?

Fourth, it seems likely that there are differentiating patterns among various social groups based on the patterns of social relationships that exist within the group, that would be revealed by maps of social networks. And it seems probable that the distinct groups that emerge will have important economic relationships in common. (Here is an interesting slide presentation by Valdis Krebs that illustrates some suggestive applications of social network analysis.) Here is a hypothetical study that couldn't really be performed but may be interesting as a thought experiment. Suppose we ask everyone in an urban population for the names of 5 non-family members upon whom they could call in an emergency to perform an important favor. Now draw the network map that results from this survey. Are there "islands" of separate sub-populations that can be discovered, where the great majority of links fall within the island and only a small number extend across to another island? And are these islands related in some important way to economic situation and status of the individuals who are included? Would this study map out groups that could be identified as "social classes"? It seems likely that the answers to these questions are affirmative.

Each of these is a different starting-place for a sociological analysis of social class in America. And if the theory of class is correct, we would expect that these different starting places would begin to converge around the same large social formations: occupations, incomes, cultures, and social networks may all call out the same large social groups.

Ultimately, the theory of class has to do with collective interests. We might say that the fundamental interests of a group involve income, job security, healthcare, opportunities, and pensions. A more intangible set of interests have to do with a demand for fair treatment in economic decision-making and a need for a sense of self-determination. And it is plain that there are business decisions and public policy decisions that are being made today that affect these interests very differently for different groups. This suggests that there are in fact large groups in American society whose members have shared interests with each other and who can be mobilized in political action in support of these interests. And this begins to suggest that class remains a social reality in America -- and one that may become more politically salient rather than less in the coming decade or so.

What cannot be forgotten, though, is the fact that economic structures are only one aspect of the social mechanisms of distribution and control through which individuals' status is determined. The mechanisms of race, ethnicity, migration, and gender all affect individuals' core interests in ways that are somewhat independent from the structures of property and class we've been highlighting. And this has important consequences for political mobilization as well; it means that political affinities and action may be organized around race and ethnicity as readily as they are around wage labor and capital -- witness the massive immigration rallies that took place in 2007, pictured above in the third image.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:00AM (-05:00)

Correspondence, abstraction, and realism

Monday, December 29, 2008

Science is generally concerned with two central semantic features of theories: truth of theoretical hypotheses and reliability of observational predictions. (Philosophers understand the concept of semantics as encompassing the relations between a sentence and the world: truth and reference. This understanding connects with the ordinary notion of semantics as meaning, in that the truth conditions of a sentence are thought to constitute the meaning of the sentence.) Truth involves a correspondence between hypothesis and the world; while predictions involve statements about the observable future behavior of a real system. Science is also concerned with epistemic values: warrant and justification. The warrant of a hypothesis is a measure of the degree to which available evidence permits us to conclude that the hypothesis is approximately true. A hypothesis may be true but unwarranted (that is, we may not have adequate evidence available to permit confidence in the truth of the hypothesis). Likewise, however, a hypothesis may be false but warranted (that is, available evidence may make the hypothesis highly credible, while it is in fact false). And every science possesses a set of standards of hypothesis evaluation on the basis of which practitioners assess the credibility of their theories--for example, testability, success in prediction, inter-theoretical support, simplicity, and the like.

The preceding suggests that there are several questions that arise in the assessment of scientific theories. First, we can ask whether a given hypothesis is a good approximation of the underlying social reality--that is, the approximate truth of the hypothesis. Likewise, we can ask whether the hypothesis gives rise to true predictions about the future behavior of the underlying social reality. Each of these questions falls on the side of the truth value of the hypothesis. Another set of questions concerns the warrant of the hypothesis: the strength of the evidence and theoretical grounds available to us on the basis of which we assign a degree of credibility to the hypothesis. Does available evidence give us reason to believe that the hypothesis is approximately true, and does available evidence give us reason to expect that the hypothesis's predictions are likely to be true? These questions are centrally epistemic; answers to them constitute the basis of our scientific confidence in the truth of the hypothesis and its predictions.

It is important to note that the question of the approximate truth of the hypothesis is separate from that of the approximate truth of its predictions. It is possible that the hypothesis is approximately true but its predictions are not. This might be the case because the ceteris paribus conditions are not satisfied, or because low precision of estimates for exogenous variables and parameters leads to indeterminate predictive consequences. Therefore it is possible that the warrant attaching to the approximate truth of the hypothesis and the reliability of its predictions may be different. It may be that we have good reason to believe that the hypothesis is a good approximation of the underlying economic reality, while at the same time we have little reason to rely on its predictions about the future behavior of the system. The warrant of the hypothesis is high on this account, while the warrant of its predictions is low.

Whatever position we arrive at concerning the possible truth or falsity of a given economic hypothesis, it is plain that this cannot be understood as literal descriptive truth. Economic hypotheses are not offered as full and detailed representations of the underlying economic reality. For a hypothesis unavoidably involves abstraction, in at least two ways. First, the hypothesis deliberately ignores some empirical characteristics and

causal processes of the underlying economic reality. Just as a Newtonian hypothesis of the ballistics of projectiles ignores air resistance in order to focus on gravitational forces and the initial momentum of the projectile, so an economic hypothesis ignores differences in consumption behavior among members of functional defined income groups. Likewise, a hypothesis may abstract from regional or sectional differences in prices or wage rates within a national economy. Daniel Hausman provides an excellent discussion of the scope and limits of economic theories in The Inexact and Separate Science of Economics.

Another epistemically significant feature of social hypotheses is the difficulty of isolating causal factors in real social or economic systems. Hypotheses are generally subject to ceteris paribus conditions. Predictions and counterfactual assertions are advanced conditioned by the assumption that no other exogenous causal factors intervene; that is, the assertive content of the hypothesis is that the economic processes under analysis will unfold in the described manner absent intervening causal factors. But if there are intervening causal factors, then the overall behavior of the system may be indeterminate. In some cases it is possible to specify particularly salient interfering causal factors (e.g. political instability). But it is often necessary to incorporate open-ended ceteris paribus conditions as well.

Finally, social theories and hypotheses unavoidably make simplifying or idealizing assumptions about the populations, properties, and processes that they describe. Consumers are represented as possessing consistent and complete preference rankings; firms are represented as making optimizing choices of products and technologies; product markets are assumed to function perfectly; and so on.

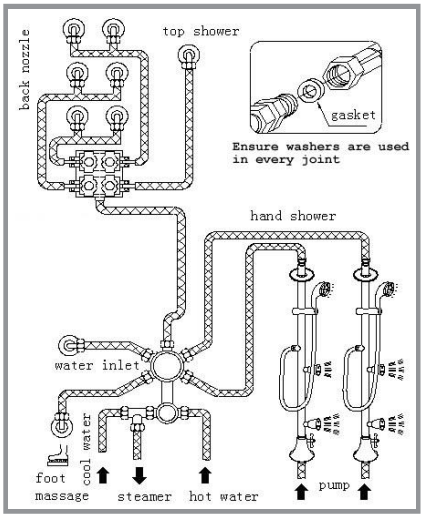
Given, then, that hypotheses abstract from reality, in what sense does it make sense to ask whether a hypothesis is true? We must distinguish between truth and completeness, to start with. To say that a description of a system is true is not to say that it is a complete description. (A complete description provides a specification of the value of all state variables for the system--that is, all variables that have a causal role in the functioning of the system.) The fact that hypotheses are abstractive demonstrates only that they are incomplete, not that they are false. A description of a hockey puck's trajectory on the ice that assumes a frictionless surface is a true account of some of the causal factors at work: the Newtonian mechanics of the system. The assumption that the surface of the ice is frictionless is false; but in this particular system the overall behavior of the system (with friction) is sufficiently close to the abstract hypothesis (because frictional forces are small relative to other forces affecting the puck). In this case, then, we can say two things: first, the Newtonian hypothesis is exactly true as a description of the forces it directly represents, and second, it is approximately true as a description of the system as a whole (because the forces it ignores are small).

This account takes a strongly realist position on social theory, in that it characterizes truth in terms of correspondence to unobservable entities, processes, or properties. The presumption here is that social systems generally--and economic systems in particular--have objective unobservable characteristics which it is the task of social science theory to identify. The realist position is commonly challenged by some economists, however. Milton Friedman's famous argument for an instrumentalist interpretation of economic theory (Essays in Positive Economics) is highly unconvincing in this context. The instrumentalist position maintains that it is a mistake to understand theories as referring to real unobservable entities. Instead, theories are simply ways of systematizing observable characteristics of the phenomena under study; the only purpose of scientific

theory is to serve as an instrument for prediction. Along these lines, Friedman argues that the realism of economic premises is irrelevant to the warrant of an economic theory; all that matters is the overall predictive success of the theory. The instrumentalist approach to the interpretation of economic theory, then, is highly unpersuasive as an interpretation of the epistemic standing of economic hypotheses. Instead, the realist position appears to be inescapable: we are forced to treat general equilibrium theory as a substantive empirical hypothesis about the real workings of competitive market systems, and our confidence in general equilibrium hypotheses is limited by our confidence in the approximate truth of the general equilibrium theory.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:09PM (-05:00)

Philosophy of X?

Wednesday, December 31, 2008



When philosophers do their thinking within a field called "the philosophy of X", there is always a natural question that arises: how will philosophical reflection about X be helpful or constructive for the practitioners of X? For example, how might the philosophy of science be helpful for working scientists? How can the philosophy of biology or economics be helpful to biologists or economists? And, for that matter -- why isn't there a philosophy of plumbing or long-distance bus driving?

As for the last question, there seem to be two separate reasons for this gap in the spectrum -- a dearth of difficult conceptual problems and a lack of potentially useful consequences. First, philosophy finds traction when it deals with subject matter that raises difficult conceptual or inferential issues. Philosophers are particularly good at untangling unclear concepts; they are experienced at the task of formulating problems clearly and logically; they are ready to unmask the hidden presuppositions underlying a particular formulation. This is the kind of work Wittgenstein describes as "letting the fly out of the fly bottle"; it is what J. L. Austin does so well in "Three ways of spilling ink" (link). Drawing distinctions and formulating ideas clearly -- these are core intellectual tools, and they lie at the root of philosophy.

Another core intellectual tool is the commitment to providing justification for the things we believe, and raising reflective questions about the nature of rational justification. What is the evidence that supports a given belief? What degree of warrant does this evidence create? Why do statements like these make it more likely that P is true? Questions like these too are foundational for philosophy -- from Plato to Locke to Quine. And philosophers have a developed and nuanced set of frameworks and vocabularies in terms of which to interrogate them.

Both these types of intellectual work are doubly cognitive. They represent cognitive effort directed at examples of cognitive effort -- efforts to explain the workings of nature, the behavior of other people, or the workings of social institutions. Putting the point very simply -- philosophers are good at helping us think clearly about thinking. And, at their best, they can help us think more clearly and coherently.

So now we have part of an answer for why there is no philosophy of plumbing: plumbing is a routine activity with few conceptual puzzles and a secure base of practical knowledge. There just isn't any room for philosophical analysis in this realm. And, second, there is the pragmatic point: it is very hard to see how the plumbers might benefit from philosophical analysis. If Deleuze were to write a treatise on plumbing, how could that possibly enhance the practical discipline of plumbing? The plumbers' effective ability to control the water and waste systems of our buildings would not be enhanced by conceptual or epistemic analysis. Their conceptual and theoretical problems are well-mapped; all that remains is to discover the source of the leak. And this does not require philosophy.

Why, then, do we need other philosophies of X's? What is it about economics, evolution, or the mind that makes it intellectually and practically valuable to have a philosophy of economics, biology, or psychology? The answer proceeds along the lines sketched here. All these disciplines confront huge problems of concept formation, theory construction, and inference and justification. The most basic questions remain unsettled: does capitalism exist? How are theories and models related to the empirical world? Is there such a thing as group selection? How do emotions intersect with reasoning? What is consciousness? And in all these fields, there is the problem of inference and method -- again, unresolved. So there is ample room for philosophical thinking in these fields.

But more importantly, philosophy can help to improve the intellectual practices of the cognitive-empirical disciplines. By working productively in tandem with creative scientific researchers, with a focus on the conceptual and methodological problems that matter the most, philosophers can help contribute to real progress in the disciplines. This requires the philosopher to engage with the discipline in depth. But the fruits of this sort of synergy can be highly productive. It is sometimes complained that philosophy brings only "logic chopping" and dry conceptual analysis. But this is a caricature; the conceptual issues faced by the special sciences are deeply challenging, and sustained dialogue with philosophers can potentially lead to meaningful progress in the science. And reciprocally, quite a few traditional concerns of philosophy --in ontology, epistemology, and the theory of the mind, for example -- can be significantly deepened through close engagement with current scientific work. There need not be a sharp line of demarcation between philosophy and empirical research.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:01PM (-05:00)

Applied philosophy of history

Friday, January 02, 2009

The philosophy of history is difficult to classify. Should we think of it in analogy with the philosophy of physics or economics -- essentially a careful analysis of the modes of research and inference used within an empirical discipline? Or should we think of it in analogy with the philosophy of nature or the philosophy of technology -- essentially an effort to use constructive philosophical methods to attempt to discover important features of the object of study (nature or technology)? The former approach makes the philosophical study a sort of high-level methodology critique, while the latter makes it more of an effort at old-fashioned metaphysics. Hegel's philosophy of history falls in the latter category, while twentieth-century analytic treatments of historical explanation fall in the former category (Hempel, Danto).

In the case of history the distinction also parallels the ambiguity between two meanings of



"history": an organized body of knowledge about the past versus the totality of events and processes that have unfolded over time -- history as knowledge versus history as substantive happenings.

So we might say that there are two divergent starting points for a philosophy of history: How do we know and explain the past? And what are the nature and dynamics of historical reality? And philosophers interested in one of these questions are unlikely to be interested in the other. The analytic philosopher who pursues the epistemological questions is likely to believe that philosophy simply and categorically lacks a basis for discovering apriori truths about the external world; substantive metaphysics is not possible. And the philosopher like Hegel or Ricoeur who believes the important questions about history are the substantive ones, is likely to be impatient with a purely analytic and epistemic approach.

It is time for philosophers to take a fresh look at the issues raised by history in all its facets. We need some new approaches to the philosophy of history. And this suggests that we need to get beyond the dichotomy between analytic and substantive approaches to the problems. Fortunately, there seems to be ample intellectual space for us to do so. And many of the challenging "new" questions for the philosophy of history cross over the distinction between epistemology and metaphysics.

Take for example the problem of providing a more adequate treatment of concepts that are often taken for granted in historical discourse: e.g. structure, mentality, class, event, or revolution. Each of these concepts raises problems that philosophers can help to address. The twin problems of disaggregation and reification arise in each instance. What is a historical structure such as "the fiscal system of the ancien regime" composed of? What errors are we led to by asserting things like "the Revolution in the west was less about economic interests and more about local political competition"? What do we need to provide as foundation if we want to refer to the "artisanal mentality of Parisian workers"? In each instance there is a productive space in which the philosopher and the working historian can arrive at a deeper and more adequate conceptual scheme in terms of which to analyze the historical reality under consideration. And it is worth noticing that this work is not purely analytical; it is also substantive, in the sense that it is shedding new light on real historical phenomena. We might describe this work as falling in the domain of substantive historical ontology.

Or think about the potential value of a philosopher's reflections on the range of ways in which talented historians frame their results: Albert Soboul's methodical exposition of the meso-level class identities and interests of the groups contending in 1789 (A Short History of the French Revolution, 1789-1799), Simon Schama's discontinuous exposition of elements of European history around the theme of landscapes (Landscape And Memory), Philip Kuhn's exposition of the cultural-emotional climate of late Imperial China through the lens of a witchcraft scare (Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768). To what extent do these choices about exposition and framework inflect upon the substantive historical findings? How does Peter Perdue's shift of focus from Ming-Qing

China to the shifting power relationships in central Asia between Russia, China, and the Mongol empire change our perspective on Chinese diplomacy and warcraft (China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia)? The philosophical work to be done here is analytical; but it is also illuminating and progressive, in the sense that it lays the basis for a better understanding of the relationship between the historian and the historical domain under scrutiny.

These examples suggest a third possible starting point for the new philosophy of history: what are some of the core historical concepts that enter into good examples of historical writing and thinking, and what kinds of puzzles and presuppositions do these concepts bring with them? And what can we discover about historical explanation and knowledge by carefully observing the work of talented, innovative historians?

One thing seems clear from this last formulation: the philosopher needs to formulate topics and problems in close proximity to the historical research of talented historians. In this respect it seems right to regard the philosophy of history as an "applied" field. In this way the philosopher avoids the hazard of a uselessly apriori approach to the philosophical study of history. And it suggests yet another way of bridging the divide between analytic and substantive knowledge-building in the philosophy of history: by establishing close and mutually insightful partnerships between philosophers and historians.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:03PM (-05:00)

Technology and culture

Monday, January 05, 2009

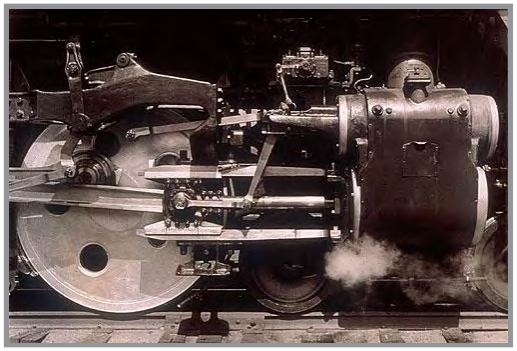


Photo: Charles Sheeler, "Power, wheels", 1939; MFA, Boston

Technology is sometimes thought of as a domain with a logic of its own -- an inevitable trend towards the development of the most efficient artifacts, given the potential represented by a novel scientific or technical insight. The most important shift that has occurred in the ways in which historians conceptualize the history of technology in the past thirty years is the clear recognition that technology is a social product, all the way down. And, as a corollary, historians of technology have increasingly come to recognize the deep contingency that characterizes the development of specific instances or families of technologies.

Thomas Hughes is one of the most important and prolific historians of technology of his generation. His most recent book, Human-Built World: How to Think about Technology and Culture, is well worth reading. It looks at "technology" from a very broad perspective and asks how this dimension of civilization has affected our cultures in the past two centuries. The twentieth-century city, for example, could not have existed without the inventions of electricity, steel buildings, elevators, railroads, and modern waste-treatment technologies. So technology "created" the modern city. But it is also clear that life in the twentieth-century city was transformative for the several generations of rural people who migrated to them. And the literature, art, values, and social consciousness of people in the twentieth century have surely been affected by these new technology systems.

This level of analysis stands at the most generic perspective: how does technology influence culture? (And perhaps, how does culture influence technology?) What Hughes has demonstrated in so much of his work, though, is the fact that the most interesting questions about the "technology-society" interface can be framed at a much more disaggregated level. Consider some of the connections he suggests in his earlier book on the history of electric power (Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930):

- Invention (by individuals with a very specific educational and cultural background)
- Concrete development of the artifacts within a laboratory (involving specific social relationships among various experts and workers)
- "Selling" the innovation to municipal authorities (for lighting and traction) and to industrial capitalists (for power)
- Finding investors and sources of finance for large capital investments in electricity
- Building out the infrastructure for delivery of electric power
- Government regulation of industry practices
- Development of an extended research capability addressing technology problems

Each part of this complex story involves processes that are highly contingent and highly intertwined with social, economic, and political relationships. And the ultimate shape of the technology is the result of decisions and pressures exerted throughout the web of relationships through which the technology took shape. But here is an important point: there is no moment in this story where it is possible to put "technology" on one side and "social context" on the other. Instead, the technology and the society develop together.

Hughes also explores some of the ways in which the culture of the machine has influenced architecture, art, and literature. He discusses photography by Charles Sheeler (whose famous series on the Rouge plant defined an industrial aesthetic), artists Carl Grossberg and Marcel Duchamp, and architects such as Peter Behren. The central theme here is the idea that industrial-technological developments caused significant cultural change in Europe and America. Hughes's examples are mostly drawn from "high" culture; but historians of popular culture too have focused on the impact of technologies such as the railroad, the automobile, or the cigarette on American popular culture. See Deborah Clarke's Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America for a discussion of the effect of automotive culture. And Pam Pennock's examination of the effects of alcohol and tobacco advertising on American culture in Advertising Sin And Sickness: The Politics of Alcohol And Tobacco Marketing, 1950-1990 is also relevant.

Hughes doesn't consider here the other line of influence that is possible between culture and technology: how prevailing aesthetic and cultural preferences influence the development of a technology. This has been an important theme in the line of interpretation referred to as the "social construction of technology" (SCOT). Wiebe Bijker makes the case for the social construction of mundane technologies such as bicycles in Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change. And automobile historian Gijs Moms argues in The Electric Vehicle: Technology and Expectations in the Automobile Age that the choice between electric and internal combustion vehicles in the early twentieth century turned on aesthetic and lifestyle preferences rather than technical or economic efficiency. (Here is a nice short discussion of SCOT.) This too is a more disaggregated approach to the question. It proceeds on the idea that we can learn a great deal by examining the "micro" processes in culture and society that influence the development of a technology.

It seems to me that the conceptual framework of "assemblages theory" would be useful in discussing the history of technology. (See Manuel DeLanda's A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory And Social Complexity for a review of the theory, and Nick Srnicek's blog at accursedshare, which makes frequent use of the framework.) The framework is useful here because technology is a social phenomenon that extends from one's own kitchen and household to the cities of Chicago or Berlin, to the global internet and the international system of manufacturing and design. And similar processes of shaping and conditioning occur at the micro, meso, and macro levels. In other words -- perhaps we can understand "technology" at the molar level, as a complex composition of activities and processes at many levels closer to the socially constructed individual. And the value-added provided by the sociology and history of technology is precisely this: to shed light on the mechanisms at work at all levels that have an influence on the aggregate direction and shape of the resulting technology.

Since we're thinking about "technology and culture" -- it's worth noting that Technology and Culture is the world's leading journal for the history of technology, emanating from the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT, established in 1958). The journal has played a significant role in the definition of the discipline over the past thirty years or so and is an outstanding source for anyone interested in the questions posed here.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:38AM (-05:00)

Economic history analyzed

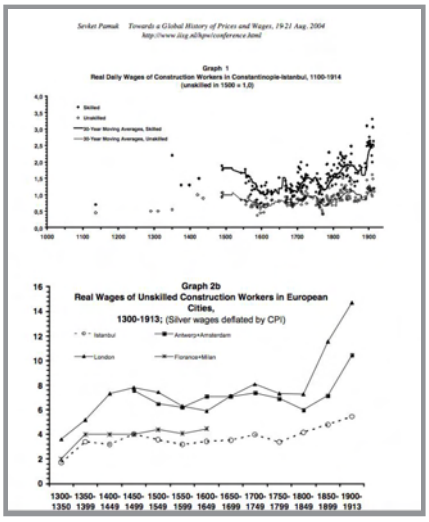
Thursday, January 08, 2009



The history of a region or people encompasses a multitude of aspects of social life: culture, religion, political institutions, social movements, environmental change, technology, population—and the circumstances and processes of economic change that the region undergoes. One does not need to be a reductionist in order to observe that the economic circumstances a society experiences, and the processes of change that these circumstances undergo, have a profound influence on other aspects of social and cultural change. Improved agricultural productivity can support population growth; it can enhance the coercive power of state institutions; and it can make possible the flourishing of intricate institutions of religion and education. Likewise, the constraints created by slow or negative economic productivity growth in a region can stifle the development of other important social processes. So economic history, as a discipline within history more broadly, is a crucially important field of historical inquiry.

Yet the foundations of the discipline of economic history are controversial. Economic historians do not yet agree on the role of mathematical economic theory within their discipline, or the relationships that should obtain between quantitative and qualitative data, or the role of social theories of causal factors in explaining economic change, or the connections that should be established between economic historical research and other fields of social or cultural history.

What is the intellectual task of an “economic history” of a region or country? To start, we



might say that it is to provide an evidence-based description of the main economic characteristics of the country or region over a defined period of time: the kinds and levels of agricultural and manufacturing products that are produced, the technologies and institutions through which production and distribution occurs, the size of the population, and the level of material well-being that is experienced by the population. And, second, the task of economic history is to arrive at causal hypotheses that may serve as explanations of some of the patterns of economic change that are discovered.

Consider the variety of questions that need to be addressed by an economic history of a region or country:

- Demography. What was the absolute population size and distribution at various time points during the period? What were the trends of population growth during the peri¬od? How much urbanization occurred during the period?
- Inputs and technology. How much land was under cultivation? What crops and products were in production? What fertilizer technologies were in use? How much irrigation was available, and what was the trend of extension of land and irrigation?
- Property relations and control of labor. What forms of tenancy and land ownership were in place? How were these arrangements changing during the time period? What forms of labor control were in use? Was there a tendency of change in the conditions and extent of wage labor?
- Productivity. What was the absolute size of the production of central commodities—rice, wheat, cotton? What were the factor productivities for land, labor, capital, or animal power? What trends existed in these quantities?
- Prices and market conditions. How much agricultural activity took place within functioning markets for crops, grain, textiles, and handicraft goods? What were the prices of these goods over time? How sensitive were farmers to changing market conditions?
- Human welfare. What were the income levels and food security of various groups: landless workers, smallholding peasants, tenants and other groups? How extensive were income inequalities within the economy? Where were economic surpluses going? What was the trend of real welfare and inequalities?
- Causal factors. What are the causal relationships that obtain between various large factors: technology, social relations, property systems, state, demographic regimes, and international relations?

Explanation requires a theory of underlying causal mechanisms. What theoretical resources are available to the economic historian to explain patterns and singularities of economic change? It is evident that economic outcomes are the result of human behavior within the context of environmental circumstances and institutional settings. Human behavior, however, is not rigidly segregated into “economic,” “cultural,” and “social” behavior; rather, behavioral outcomes are influenced by all these kinds of factors. So economic history cannot be restricted to the theories associated with neoclassical economics. Rather, the economic historian needs to examine the economic phenomena under study within the broader social and environmental context in which this behavior takes place. And that means that the economic historian must be as much a social

historian, a sociologist, or an ethnographer as he is an economist; he needs to pay as much attention to the social and political context of economic trends as he does to the mathematics of equilibrium or the idealized workings of a market.

Marc Bloch's history of medieval French agriculture (1931) offers a good illustration of the value of a broadly contextualized approach to a region's economic history (French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics). Bloch surveys the main social institutions and technologies that were in use, and attempts to explain some of the large patterns that became evident (for example, field shape and the geographical diffusion of the wheeled plough). Bloch's explanation invokes such varied factors as the nature of the soils across France, the availability and timing of technical innovations in the design of the plough, and the nature of village communities in different parts of France. And he makes ingenious use of a wide range of historical sources to permit him to come to assessments of various economic and institutional facts.

Well-developed social theories give us a basis for demonstrating how various factors could be causally relevant. It is then the task of empirical, historical, and theoretical research to arrive at justified conclusions about causation. But theories don't provide scripts for "necessary" processes of economic development. In fact, it is entirely possible that different combinations of causal factors are of primary importance in different historical settings. Historical change is conjunctural and contingent. The general point is that institutions and circumstances matter, and that institutional arrangements in different times and places may impose limits or opportunities that discourage or favor some pathways of development over others. Instead of expecting one grand course of development, we ought to expect a shifting fabric of contingent, fluctuating path-dependent processes.

Two current economic historians whose work I particularly admire are Bozhong Li, whose careful and deep empirical studies of the economic history of the lower Yangzi delta provide a foundation for a much more finegrained economic history of China (Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850, link); and Robert Allen, whose careful studies of the English farm economy and the standard of living in the early modern period are a paradigm of excellent empirical and analytical work in economic history (link, link).

(There is more on this topic on my research webpage, including Epistemological Issues in Economic History and Eurasian Historical Comparisons.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:40PM (-05:00)

Social agency and rational choice

Saturday, January 10, 2009

One of the reasons that rational choice theory (RC) is appealing is that it is an agent-centered approach to social explanation: explain the social outcome on the basis of an analysis of the beliefs, intentions, and circumstances of the individual agents who make up the social setting. What rational choice theory adds to this description is a specification of the decision-making processes that are attributed to the individual agent -- typically, that the agent has a consistent set of preferences among accessible alternatives and that he/she chooses in such a way as to maximize the satisfaction of this set of preferences. This can be paraphrased as a "utility-maximizing" model of decision-making.



Many objections have been offered against rational-choice theory as a basis for social explanation -- for example, that it overlooks social motivations, that it presupposes egoism, that it over-simplifies the logic of practical reasoning, or that it fails to correspond to typical human behavior. (See Green and Shapiro, Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science, for a developed set of critiques.)

Two points are worth underlining here. First, rational-choice theory has a major theoretical advantage precisely because it is an agent-centered framework. RC theory is one possible way of articulating a set of hypotheses about how individuals reason and act. This is a major advantage in comparison to explanatory frameworks that essentially assume programmed behavior on the part of participants in a social event. Moreover, the assumption of preference-satisfaction lines up pretty well with a somewhat broader conception of human action in terms of goal-directedness and purposiveness. If we believe that individuals have goals and purposes that underlie their choices and actions, then it is an appealing simplification to represent their actions as the outcome of deliberation about goals, strategies, and circumstances. In other words, RC theory can be seen as a specification of a philosophical idea of human action that is at least as old as Aristotle: the idea of individuals as deliberative, purposive agents. And this is in fact a credible and empirically defensible theory of action.

But a second point is equally important: RC theory and its model of utility maximization is only one out of a range of possible specifications of the idea of deliberation and purposiveness. There are important alternative specifications that can be offered. For example, we might say, along with Kant, that individuals possess a set of moral rules as well as a set of specific goals, and that they deliberate among possible choices of action on the basis of both considerations. How do the various possible actions conform to the moral rules? And how do they do from the point of view of accomplishing my goals? This process of reasoning is "deontological" -- that is, it cannot be subsumed under a simple model of maximizing rationality. It is, nonetheless, an intelligible interpretation of what rational human decision-making involves. (Mark Johnson's Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics is interesting in its effort to bring cognitive science into dialogue with ethical theory.)

Another possible interpretation of the basic idea of deliberativeness that diverges from RC theory is one that illustrates some themes that Amartya Sen (On Ethics and Economics), James Scott (The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia), and Doug McAdam (Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930 -1970) have emphasized: that real human social behavior is a complex mix of commitments, loyalties, emotions, solidarities -- as well as purposes and goals. So a theory of action that isolates "goal-directedness" and its associated framework of utility maximizing, is one that already overlooks a set of motivational factors that are crucial to explaining real social behavior. It is as if we imagined modeling wine-tasting judgments by experts but "erased" their sense of smell. Given that smell is a crucial ingredient of the experience of tasting wine, our reduced theory won't do a very good job of explaining discrimination across samples by the experts.

Instead, when we undertake to explain an individual's action in the context of a spontaneous rent strike, we need to ask a series of questions: what does he/she expect to get out of the action? What loyalties does he/she have to the organization or other participants? What principles does he/she endorse that are relevant to the context of proposed action? What forms of social identity does he/she embody, and how are these strands relevant to the decision to participate or not? How do the emotions created by the words and actions of others influence one's behavior?

What makes RC theory useful in spite of these complexities of actual motivation is the fact that there are many important situations of choice where other sources and structures of motivation are of minimal importance. When a person chooses a new toaster, it is likely enough that solidarity, emotion, principle, and identity drop away, and the choice is based on perceived value and price. So the market in toasters behaves pretty much as neoclassical economics predicts. But the market for shoes is probably more complicated: emotion, status, style, identity, and a preference for "fair-trade" products may influence one person to buy the more expensive and less functional pair of shoes, while another person will go for the good buy. Likewise, the decision to join AARP is likely to be a fairly simple calculation -- what are the side benefits of membership, how much importance do I attribute to being part of an organization that represents the public good of people over 50, and how much can I gain from there being a successful AARP? This is simple in comparison to the situation of a rent strike or a street demonstration, where one's face-to-face relations with other potential participants may have a very large impact on the decision to participate or not.

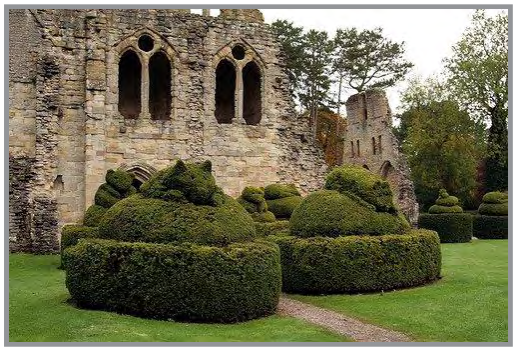
So we might say that RC theory represents a special case of the more general category of deliberative action, which is itself a sub-category of intentional action. And RC theory will be most successful in generating explanations in social circumstances where the other sources of social motivation are largely silent -- for example, anonymous market transactions, isolated decisions about participation or non-participation in collective action, and decisions about portfolio investments.

What we really need is a more developed and adequate theory of social agency -- a better account of how the various factors mentioned above fit together into one scheme of deliberation and decision-making. This might be called a full theory of practical rationality. And it would be a more general specification of the situation of agent-based social action than RC is able to provide.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:58AM (-05:00)

A better social ontology

Sunday, January 11, 2009

I believe that the social sciences need to be framed out of consideration of a better understanding of the nature of the social—a better social ontology. The social world is not a system of law-governed processes; it is instead a mix of different sorts of institutions, forms of human behavior, natural and environmental constraints, and contingent events. The entities that make up the social world at a given time and place have no particular ontological stability; they do not fall into “natural kinds”; and there is no reason to expect deep similarity across a number of ostensibly similar institutions – states, for example, or labor unions. (W. V. O. Quine’s metaphor of the bushes shaped to look like elephants comes to mind here; Word and Object.)



So the rule for the social world is – heterogeneity, contingency, and plasticity. And the metaphysics associated with classical thinking about the natural world – laws of nature, common, unchanging structures, and predictable processes of change – do not provide appropriate metaphors for our understandings and expectations of the social world. Nor do they suggest the right kinds of social science theories and constructs.

Instead of naturalism, I suggest an approach to social science theorizing that emphasizes agency, contingency, and plasticity in the makeup of social facts. It recognizes that there is a degree of pattern in social life – but emphasizes that these patterns fall far short of the regularities associated with laws of nature. It emphasizes contingency of social processes and outcomes. It insists upon the importance and legitimacy of eclectic use of social theories: the processes are heterogeneous, and therefore it is appropriate to appeal to different types of social theories as we explain social processes. It emphasizes the importance of path-dependence in social outcomes. It suggests that the most valid scientific statements in the social sciences have to do with the discovery of concrete social-causal mechanisms, through which some types of social outcomes come about.

And finally, this approach highlights what I call “methodological localism”: the view that the foundation of social action and outcome is the local, socially-located and socially constructed individual person. The individual is socially constructed, in that her modes of behavior, thought, and reasoning are created through a specific set of prior social interactions. And her actions are socially situated, in the sense that they are responsive to the institutional setting in which she chooses to act. Purposive individuals, embodied with powers and constraints, pursue their goals in specific institutional settings; and regularities of social outcome often result.

How does this perspective fit with current work in the social sciences? There are several current fields of social research that are particularly well suited to this approach. One is the field of comparative historical sociology, in its use of fairly detailed studies of similar cases in order to identify common causal mechanisms. Kathleen Thelen’s astute studies of different institutions of skill formation in Germany, UK, US, and Japan are an excellent case in point; she asks the twin questions, what causal processes give stability to a set of institutions? And what causal processes lead to a process of transformation in those institutions? The research methods of comparative historical sociology, then, are particularly well suited to the ontology of contingency, plasticity, and causal mechanisms (How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan).

Ethnography gives us a different angle on this same ontology. Ethnographers can give us insight into culturally specific mentalities—the “socially constructed individuals”. And they can give concrete analysis of the institutions that both shape individuals and are in turn shaped by them. More generally, qualitative research methods can offer a basis for discovery of some of the features of agency, mentality, and culture within the context of which important social processes take place. A good current example is Leslie Salzinger's Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories, a study of the social construction of femininity in the factories of the maquiladoras. C. K. Lee's

sociology of Chinese factory protests is also a model of a study that combines qualitative and quantitative methods; Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt.

The new institutionalism is a third theoretical perspective on social analysis and explanation. This approach postulates the causal reality of institutions; it highlights the point that differences across institutions lead to substantial differences in behavior; and it provides a basis for explanations of various social outcomes. The rules of liability governing the predations of cattle in East Africa or Shasta County, California, create very different patterns of behavior in cattle owners and other land owners in the various settings. (Mary Brinton and Victor Nee, The New Institutionalism in Sociology; Jean Ensminger, Making a Market: The Institutional Transformation of an African Society.) It is characteristic of the new institutionalism that researchers in this tradition generally avoid reifying large social institutions and look instead at the more proximate and variable institutions within which people live and act.

What kind of social science research and theory corresponds to these assumptions about social ontology? Here are some chief features--

- They make use of eclectic multiple theories and don't expect a unified social theory that explains everything
- They are modest in their expectations about social generalizations
- They look for causal mechanisms as a basis for social explanation
- They anticipate heterogeneity and plasticity of social entities
- They are prepared to use eclectic methodologies -- quantitative, comparative, case-study, ethnographic -- to discover the mechanisms and mentalities that underlie social change

We need a better sociology for the twenty-first century. If social scientists continue to be captivated by the scientific prestige of positivism and quantitative social science to the exclusion of other perspectives, they will be led to social science research that looks quite different from what would result from a view that emphasizes contingency and causal mechanisms. And if there are strong, engaging, and empirically rigorous examples of other ways of conducting social research that can come into broad exposure in the social sciences—then there is a greater probability of emergence of a genuinely innovative and imaginative approach to the problem of social knowledge.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:50PM (-05:00)

Predictions

Thursday, January 15, 2009



Image: Artillery, 1911. Roger de La Fresnaye. Metropolitan Museum, New York

In general I'm skeptical about the ability of the social sciences to offer predictions about future social developments. (In this respect I follow some of the instincts of Oskar Morgenstern in On the Accuracy of Economic Observations.) We have a hard time answering questions like these:

- How much will the first installment of TARP improve the availability of credit within three months?
- Will the introduction of UN peacekeeping units reduce ethnic killings in the Congo?
- Will the introduction of small high schools improve student performance in Chicago?
- Will China develop towards more democratic political institutions in the next twenty years?
- Will American cities witness another round of race riots in the next twenty years?

However, the situation isn't entirely negative, and there certainly are some social situations for which we can offer predictions in at least a probabilistic form. Here are some examples:

- The unemployment rate in Michigan will exceed 10% sometime in the next six months.
- Coalition casualties in the Afghanistan war will be greater in 2009 than in 2008.
- Illinois Governor Blogojevich will leave office within six months.
- Germany will be the world leader in solar energy research by 2020 (link).
- The Chinese government will act strategically to prevent emergence of regional independent labor organizations.

It is worth exploring the logic and function of prediction for a few lines. Fundamentally, it seems that prediction is related to the effort to forecast the effects of interventions, the trajectory of existing trends, and the likely strategies of powerful social actors. We often want to know what will be the net effect of introducing X into the social environment. (For example, what effect on economic development would result from a region's succeeding in increasing the high school graduation rate from 50% to 75%?) We may find it useful to project into the future some social trends that can be observed in the present. (Demographers' prediction that the United States will be a "majority-minority" population by 2042 falls in this category (link).) And we can often do quite a bit of rigorous reasoning about the likely actions of leaders, policy makers, and other powerful actors given what we know about their objectives and their beliefs. (We can try to forecast the outcome of the current impasse between Russia and Ukraine over natural gas by analyzing the strategic interests of both sets of decision-makers and the constraints to which they must respond.)

So the question is, what kinds of predictions can we make in the social realm? And what circumstances limit our ability to predict?

Predictions about social phenomena are based on a couple of basic modes of reasoning:

- extrapolation of current trends
- modeling of causal hypotheses about social mechanisms and structures
- reasoning about strategic actions likely to be taken by actors
- derivation of future states of a system from a set of laws

And predictions can be presented in a range of levels of precision, specificity, and confidence:

- prediction of a single event or outcome: the selected social system will be in state X at time T.
- prediction of the range within which a variable will fall: the selected social variable will fall within a range Q ±20%.
- prediction of the range of outcome scenarios that are most likely: "Given current level of unrest, rebellion 60%, everyday resistance 30%, resolution 10%"
- prediction of the direction of change: the variable of interest will increase/decrease over the specified time period
- prediction of the distribution of properties over a group of events/outcomes. X percent of interventions will show improvement of variable Y.

Here are some particular obstacles to reliable predictions in the social realm:

- unquantifiable causal hypotheses -- "small schools improve student performance". How large is the effect? How does it weigh in relation to other possible causal factors?
- indeterminate interaction effects -- how will school policy changes interact with rising unemployment to jointly influence school attendance and performance?
- open causal fields. What other currently unrecognized causal factors are in play?
- the occurrence of unpredictable exogenous events or processes (outbreak of disease)
- ceteris paribus conditions. These are frequently unsatisfied.

So where does all this leave us with respect to social predictions? A few points seem relatively clear.

Specific prediction of singular events and outcomes seems particularly difficult: the collapse of the Soviet Union, China's decision to cross the Yalu River in the Korean War, or the onset of the Great Depression were all surprises to the experts.

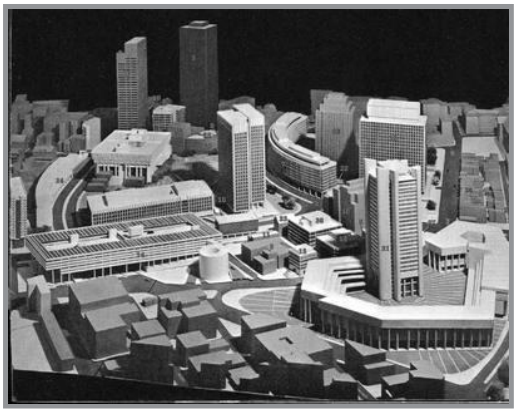
Projection of stable trends into the near future seems most defensible -- though of course we can give many examples of discontinuities in previously stable trends. Projection of trends over medium- and long-term is more uncertain -- given the likelihood of intervening changes of structure, behavior, and environment that will alter the trends over the extended time.

Predictions of limited social outcomes, couched in terms of a range of possibilities attached to estimates of probabilities and based on analysis of known causal and strategic processes, also appear defensible. The degree of confidence we can have in such predictions is limited by the possibility of unrecognized intervening causes and processes.

The idea of forecasting the total state of a social system given information about the current state of the system and a set of laws of change is entirely indefensible. This is unattainable; societies are not systems of variables linked by precise laws of transition.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:09PM (-05:00)

Unintended consequences

Friday, January 16, 2009



International relations studies offer plentiful examples of the phenomenon of unintended consequences -- for example, wars that break out unexpectedly because of actions taken by states to achieve their security, or financial crises that erupt because of steps taken to avert them. (The recent military escalations in Pakistan and India raise the specter of unintended consequences in the form of military conflict between the two states.) But technology development, city planning, and economic development policy all offer examples of the occurrence of unintended consequences deriving from complex plans as well.



Putting the concept schematically -- an actor foresees an objective to be gained or an outcome to be avoided. The actor creates a plan of action designed to achieve the objective or avert the undesired outcome. The plan is based on a theory of the causal and social processes that govern the domain in question and the actions that other parties may take. The plan of action, however, also creates an unforeseen or unintended series of developments that lead to a result that is contrary to the actor's original intentions.

It's worth thinking about this concept a bit. An unintended consequence is different than simply an undesired outcome; a train wreck or a volcano is not an unintended consequence, but rather simply an unfortunate event. Rather, the concept fits into the framework of intention and purposive action. An unintended consequence is a result that came about because of deliberate actions and policies that were set in train at an earlier time -- so an unintended consequence is the result of deliberate action. But the outcome is not one of the goals to which the plan or action was directed; it is "unintended". In other words, analysis of the concept of unintended consequences fits into what we might call the "philosophy of complex action and planning." (Unlikely as this sub-specialty of philosophy might sound, here's a good example of a work in this field by Michael Bratman, Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason. Robert Merton wrote about the phenomenon of unintended consequences quite a bit, based on his analysis of the relationships between policy and social science knowledge, in Social Theory and Social Structure.)

But there is also an element of paradox in our normal uses of the concept of an unintended consequence -- the suggestion that plans of action often contain elements that work out to defeat them. The very effort to bring about X creates a dynamic that frustrates the achievement of X. This is suggested by the phrase, the "law of unintended consequences." (I think this is what Hegel refers to as the cunning of reason.)

There is an important parallel between unintended and unforeseen consequences, but they are not the same. A harmful outcome may have occurred precisely because because it was unforeseen -- it might have been easily averted if the planner had been aware of it as a possible consequence. An example might be the results of the inadvertent distribution of a contaminant in the packaging of a food product. But it is also possible that an undesired outcome is both unintended but also fully foreseen. An example of this possibility is the decision of state legislators to raise the speed limit to 70 mph. Good and reliable safety statistics make it readily apparent that the accident rate will rise. Nonetheless the officials may reason that the increase in efficiency and convenience more than offsets the harm of the increase in the accident rate. In this case the harmful result is unintended but foreseen. (This is the kind of situation where cost-benefit analysis is brought to bear.)

Is it essential to the idea of unintended consequences that the outcome in question be harmful or undesirable? Or is the category of "beneficial unintended consequence" a coherent one? There does seem to be an implication that the unintended consequence is one that the actor would have avoided if possible, so a beneficial unintended

consequence violates this implicature. But I suppose we could imagine a situation like this: a city planner sets out to design a park that will give teenagers a place to play safely, increase the "green" footprint of the city, and draw more families to the central city. Suppose the plan is implemented and each goal is achieved. But it is also observed that the rate of rat infestation in surrounding neighborhoods falls dramatically -- because the park creates habitat for voracious rat predators. This is an unintended but beneficial consequence. And full knowledge of this dynamic would not lead the planner to revise the plan to remove this feature.

The category of "unintended but foreseen consequences" is easy to handle from the point of view of rational planning. The planner should design the plan so as to minimize avoidable bad consequences; then do a cost-benefit analysis to assess whether the value of the intended consequences outweighs the harms associated with the unintended consequences.

The category of consequences of a plan that are currently unforeseen is more difficult to handle from the point of view of rational decision-making. Good planning requires that the planner make energetic efforts to canvass the consequences the plan may give rise to. But of course it isn't possible to discover all possible consequences of a line of action; so the possibility always exists that there will be persistent unforeseen negative consequences of the plan. The most we can ask, it would seem, is that the planner should exercise due diligence in exploring the most likely collateral consequences of the plan. And we might also want the planner to incorporate some sort of plan for "soft landings" in cases where unforeseen negative consequences do arise.

Finally, is there a "law of unintended consequences", along the lines of something like this:

"No matter how careful one is in estimating the probable consequences of a line of action, there is a high likelihood that the action will produce harmful unanticipated consequences that negate the purpose of the action."
No; this statement might be called "reverse teleology" or negative functionalism, and certainly goes further than empirical experience or logic would support. The problem with this statement is the inclusion of the modifier "high likelihood". Rather, what we can say is this:

"No matter how careful one is in estimating the probable consequences of a line of action, there is the residual possibility that the action will produce harmful unanticipated consequences that negate the purpose of the action."
And this statement amounts to a simple, prudent observation of theoretical modesty: we can't know all the possible results of an action undertaken. Does the possibility that any plan may have unintended harmful consequences imply that we should not act? Certainly not; rather, it implies that we should be as ingenious as possible in trying to anticipate at least the most likely consequences of the contemplated actions. And it suggests the wisdom of action plans that make allowances for soft landings rather than catastrophic failures.

(Writers about the morality of war make quite a bit about the moral significance of consequences of action that are unintended but foreseen. Some ethicists refer to the principle of double effect, and assert that moral responsibility attaches differently to intended versus unintended but foreseen consequences. The principles of military necessity and proportionality come into the discussion at this point. There is an

interesting back-and-forth about the doctrine of double effect in the theory of just war in relation to Gaza on Crooked Timber and Punditry.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:28PM (-05:00)

Habits, plans, and improvisation

Sunday, January 18, 2009



How does thought figure in our ordinary actions and plans? To what extent are our routine actions the result of deliberation and planning, and to what extent do we function on auto-pilot and habit?

It is clear that much of one's daily activity is habitual: routine actions and social responses that reflect little internal deliberation and choice. Habitual behavior comes into all aspects of life -- daily morning routines (exercise, shower, choose a tie, make a fast breakfast), routine work activities (turn on the computer, check the email account, riffle through the paperwork in the inbox, review the morning's business reports), and routine social contacts (greet the co-worker in the parking lot, gossip about the local news with the admin assistant, laugh about a lopsided weekend football score with a faculty colleague).

Particularly interesting is the last category of behavior -- the fairly specific modes of interaction we've learned in response to typical social situations. What do you do if you bump into a person with your shoulder at a buffet line? How do you respond to a person who greets you familiarly but whom you don't know? How do you interact with your boss, your peer, and your subordinate? How do you queue with other passengers when exiting a crowded airplane? When do you make a joke in a small group, and when is it better to keep quiet? In these and hundreds of other stereotyped social encounters we have learned stylized ways of behaving, so when the occasion arises we slip into habitual gear. And it seems certain that there are highly patterned differences in the repertoires of social habits associated with different cultures and sub-cultures -- how to greet, how to handle minor conflicts, how to comport oneself. These repertoires of habits and stereotyped behavioral scenarios are an important component of the "culture" we wear.

It is interesting to reflect a bit on how habits are socially and psychologically embodied, and to consider whether this is an avenue through which social differences among groups are maintained. (This topic parallels earlier postings on local cultures and practices.)

What is "habitual" about these forms of behavior is the idea that they seem to be learned patterns of response, involving little reflection or deliberation. They become small "programs" of behavior that we have internalized through past experience; and they are invoked by the shuffling of the cards of ordinary experience. It is as if the "action executive" of the mind consults a library of routines and deploys a relevant series of behaviors in the context of a particular social environment.

But of course, not all action is habitual. The opposite end of the spectrum includes both deliberation and improvisation. These categories themselves are different from each other. Deliberation involves explicit consideration of one's goals, the opportunities that are currently available within the environment of choice, and the pro's and con's of the various choices. Deliberation results in deliberate, planned choice. This represents the category of agency that is partially captured by rational choice theory: deliberate analysis of means and ends, and a calculating choice among possible actions. Planning is an extended version of this process, in which the actor attempts to orchestrate a series of actions and responses in such a way as to bring about a longterm goal.

Improvisation differs from both habit and deliberation. Improvisation is a creative response to a current and changing situation. It involves intelligent, fluid adaptation to the current situation, and seems more intuitive than analytical. The skilled basketball player displays improvisational intelligence as he changes his dribble, stutter-steps around a defender, switches hands, and passes to a teammate streaking under the basket for the score. At each moment there are shifting opportunities that appear and disappear as defenders lose their man, teammates slip into view, and the shot clock winds down. This series of actions is unplanned but non-habitual, and it displays an important aspect of situational intelligence. Bourdieu captures a lot of this aspect of intelligent behavior in his concept of habitus in Outline of a Theory of Practice.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:31PM (-05:00)

Everyday social interactions

Tuesday, January 20, 2009



It is apparent that there are patterns in the ordinary social interactions between individuals in various societies. Whether and how to greet an acquaintance or a stranger, how close people stand together, how loudly people speak, what subjects they turn to in idle social conversation, how conflict is handled -- all of these topics and more seem to have specific and nuanced answers in various specific social environments. And it seems likely enough that there are persistent differences at this level of social behavior across cities, gender, race, and class.

So is there room for social science in this domain of social behavior? And what sorts of concepts and theories help us in trying to characterize this type of social behavior?

On the first question, there is no doubt that there are researchers and traditions that have addressed exactly these sorts of questions. Erving Goffman's writings are most directly relevant (for example, Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings), and urban anthropologists and sociologists are often interested in micro-descriptions of social behaviors as well -- for example, William Foote Whyte's Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum or Elliott Liebow's Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men.

Here is one of Goffman's descriptions of his goals:

By and large, the psychiatric study of situational improprieties has led to studying the offender rather than the rules and social circles that are offended. Through such studies, however, psychiatrists have inadvertently made us more aware of an important area of social life -- that of behavior in public and sempublic places. Although this has not been recognized as a special domain for sociological inquiry, it perhaps should be, for rules of conduct in streets, parks, restaurants, theaters, shops, dance floors, meeting halls, and other gathering places of any community tell us a great deal about its most diffuse forms of social organization.

Sociology does not provide a ready framework that can order these data, let alone show comparisons and continuities with behavior in private gathering places such as offices, factory floors, living rooms, and kitchens. To be sure, one part of "collective behavior" -- riots, crowds, panics -- has been established as something to study. But the remaining part of the area, the study of ordinary human traffic and the patterning of ordinary social contacts, has been little considered. ... It is the object of this report to try to develop such a framework. (Behavior in Public Places, 3-4)

The school of ethnomethodology also attempts to provide this kind of detailed observation and description. This approach is illustrated, for example, by Harold Garfinkel's descriptions of the procedures embodied in the practices of professional accountants or lawyers in Studies in Ethnomethodology. A major objective of the method is to arrive at an interpretation of the rules that underlie everyday activity and thus constitute part of the normative basis of a given social order. Research from this perspective generally focuses on mundane forms of social activity--e.g. psychiatrists evaluating patients' files, jurors deliberating on defendants' culpability, or coroners judging cause of death. The investigator then attempts to reconstruct an underlying set of rules and ad hoc procedures that may be taken to have guided the observed activity. The approach emphasizes the contextuality of social practice--the richness of unspoken shared understandings that guide and orient participants' actions in a given practice or activity.

So there is quite a bit of work in anthropology and sociology that chooses to provide careful observation and description of concrete social behavior.

But there is a more fundamental question to ask: in what sense is this research scientific? What would a scientific study of the patterns of face-to-face social behavior need to provide? And why would this subject be of genuine interest from a scientific point of view?

One feature that stands out in the work of Goffman, Whyte, Liebow, or Garfinkel is the commitment of these observers to careful, detailed observation and description of social behavior. They are interested in capturing the nuances of ordinary behavior, and their research reports give a great deal of emphasis to the importance of providing detailed descriptions of ordinary social interactions. And in fact, it seems very reasonable to say that this body of descriptions is itself scientifically valuable and intellectually challenging, perhaps in some of the ways that the careful observations and descriptions produced by Darwin or Wallace in the Galapagos or Malaysia are scientifically important. Here the standard of scientific value is empirical: it is very important for the observer to "get it right" -- to accurately observe and record the fine differences in behavior that are embedded in the social contexts that are observed. (See an earlier posting on the subject of descriptive social science.)

But we can also discern a second scientific objective at work in these kinds of writings, either directly or indirectly -- the goal of arriving at an explanation of the patterns of behavior that are uncovered through this micro-descriptive work. Any body of phenomena that demonstrates consistent patterns over time is potentially of scientific interest, because the observable patterns imply an underlying causal order that ought to be discoverable. And this is the more true if there are stable differences in the patterns across contexts. If there are very specific patterns of behavior in these mundane situations of social encounter, how are we to explain that fact? What sort of structure or fact could count as a cause of these patterns of behavior?

One particularly appealing approach to explanation in these circumstances is to make an inference from behavior to rules that is familiar from Chomsky's view of generative linguistics -- from patterned behavior to the underlying "grammar" or system of rules and mental paradigms that produces it. So we might go a bit beyond Goffman's own description of his work, and say that his detailed descriptions of social behavior invite him to reconstruct the underlying and psychologically real set of rules that "generate" the behavior. Here we are invited to consider the social actor as possessing a "grammar" of ordinary behavior that guides the production of actions in specified circumstances. And in fact this interpretation of the intellectual project of this work seems pretty consistent with Garfinkel's approaches.

There is a third angle that one might take on this work -- that it is a part of "interpretive" social science; that the descriptive work is an effort to provide an interpretation of the meanings of the actions described. This doesn't seem quite right in application to the works mentioned here, however. Goffman's work or Whyte's descriptions aren't exactly hermeneutic; instead, they are guided by an effort to discern and capture the smallest nuances of behavior, with an eye to discovering the underlying rules that appear to generate the behavior. The orientation of the work is not so much directed to underlying meanings as it is to underlying rules.

In short, it seems to me that the careful observation and description of the subtle complexities of ordinary social behavior is in fact a valuable contribution to a scientific understanding of the social world -- even though it is primarily descriptive. The patterns of behavior that Goffman, White, or Liebow document are a genuine and novel contribution to our knowledge of the concrete social world. And these contributions to descriptive sociology can be fitted into next-generation efforts to provide explanatory contexts that would make sense of the patterns that these researchers document.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:47PM (-05:00)

Great structures?

Sunday, January 25, 2009

The scholars of the Annales school of French history characteristically placed their analysis of historical change within the context of the large structures -- economic, social, or demographic -- within which ordinary people live out their lives. They postulate that the broad and enduring social relations that exist in a society -- for example, property relations, administrative and political relations, or the legal system -- constitute a stable structure within which agents act, and they determine the distribution of crucial social resources that become the raw materials on the basis of which agents exercise power over other individuals and groups. So the particular details of a social structure create the conditions that set the stage for historical change in the society. (The recently translated





book by André Burguière provides an excellent discussion of the Annales school; The Annales School: An Intellectual History.)

The Annales school also put forward a concept that applies to the temporal structure of historical change: the idea that some historical changes unfold over very long periods of time and are all but invisible to participants -- the history of the longue durée. So large enduring structures, applying their effects over very long periods of historical time, provided a crucial part of the historical imagination of the Annales school.

Marc Bloch's own treatment of French feudalism illustrates a sustained analysis of a group of great structures enduring centuries over much of the territory of France (Feudal Society: Vol 1: The Growth and Ties of Dependence), as does Le Roy Ladurie's treatment of the causes of change and stasis in Languedoc in The Peasants of Languedoc. Fernand Braudel's Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century, Vol. I: The Structure of Everyday Life represents another clear example of historical research organized around analysis of great structures. And though not a member of the Annales school, I would include M. I. Finley's treatment of the ancient economy as another important example (The Ancient Economy); Finley attempts to trace out the features of property, economy, and political and military power through which ordinary life and historical change proceeded in the ancient world. But there is an important difference among the several works: Bloch, Braudel, and Finley represent an analysis of these structures as a whole, while Le Roy Ladurie's work largely attempts to explain features of life over a very long time that show the imprint of such structures. One is macrohistory, while the other is microhistory.

What are some examples of putative “great structures”? There are several that readily come to mind: a nation's economic system, its system of law, legislation, and enforcement; its system of government, taxation, and policy-making, its educational system, religious organizations and traditions, the composite system of organizations that exist within civil society, and the norms and relations of the family.

The scope of action matters here; the background assumption is that a great structure encompasses a large population and territory. (So we would not call the specific marriage customs that govern a small group of Alpine villages but extend no further a "great structure.") And it is further assumed that the hypothesized structure possesses a high degree of functional continuity and integration; there are assumed to be concrete social processes that assure that the structure works in roughly the same way throughout its scope to regulate behavior.

The idea of a "great structure" thus requires that we attend to the contrast between locally embodied institutions showing significant variation across time and space, and the

supposedly more homogeneous workings of "great structures." We need to be able to provide an account of the extended social mechanisms that establish the effects and stability of the great structure. If we cannot validate these assumptions about scope, continuity, and functional similarity, then the concept of a "great structure" collapses onto a concatenation of vaguely similar institutions in different times and places.

To fit the bill, then, a great structure should have some specific features of scope and breadth. It should be geographically widespread, affecting a large population. It should have roughly similar characteristics and effects on behavior in the full range of its scope. And it should be persistent over an extended period of time -- decades or longer.

The most basic question is this: are there great structures? On the positive side, it is possible to identify social mechanisms that secure the functional stability of certain institutions over a large reach of territory and time. A system of law is enforced by the agents of the state; so it is reasonable to assume that there will be similar legal institutions in Henan and Sichuan when there is an effective imperial government. A system of trading and credit may have centrally enforced and locally reinforcing mechanisms that assure that it works similarly in widely separated places. A normative system regulating marriage may be stabilized by local behaviors over a wide space. The crucial point here is simply this: if we postulate that a given structure has scope over a wide range, we need to have a theory of some of the social mechanisms that convey its power and its reproduction over time.

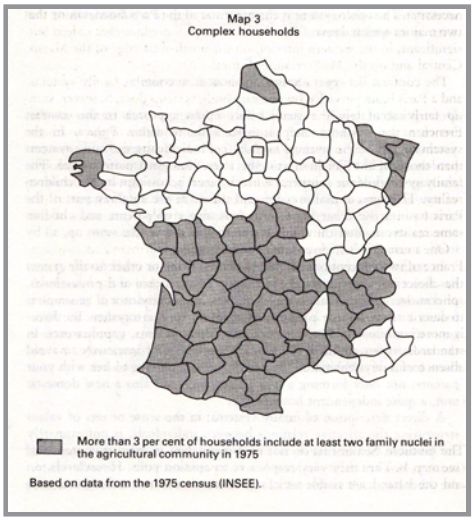
So the existence of great structures is ambiguous. Yes—in that there are effective institutions of politics, economics, and social life that are real and effectual within given historical settings, and we have empirical understanding of some of the mechanisms that reproduce these structures. But no—in that all social structures are historically rooted; so there is no “essential” state or economy which recurs in different settings. Instead, political and economic structures may be expected to evolve in different historical settings. And a central task of historical research is to discover both the unifying dynamics and the differentiating expressions which these abstract processes take in different historical settings.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:03PM (-05:00)

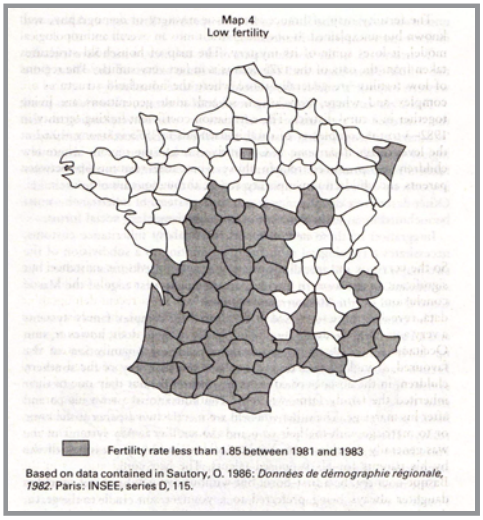
France as a "nation"

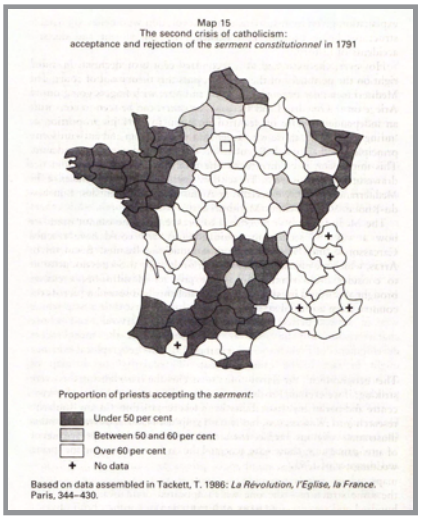
Wednesday, January 28, 2009

source: Emmanuel Todd, The Making of Modern France: Politics, Ideology and Culture (Blackwell, 1991)

Is France one nation? What makes it so? And what are the large socio-cultural factors that led to modern France? These are the questions that Emmanuel Todd raises in The Making of Modern France: Ideology, Politics and Culture. Todd is one of this generation's leading historians in France, and his conception of the challenge of history is worth studying. I would call him a "macro-historian", in that he is interested in large processes of change over extended stretches of space (for example, the extension of industry across the map of France from 1850 to 1970, or the patterns of religious dissent from the twelfth to the twentieth centuries), and he singles out characteristics of family structure, demography, literacy, and religion as a set of causal factors that explain the patterns of historical change that he uncovers.
Todd's starting point seems exactly right to me: the "nation" is not a particularly salient



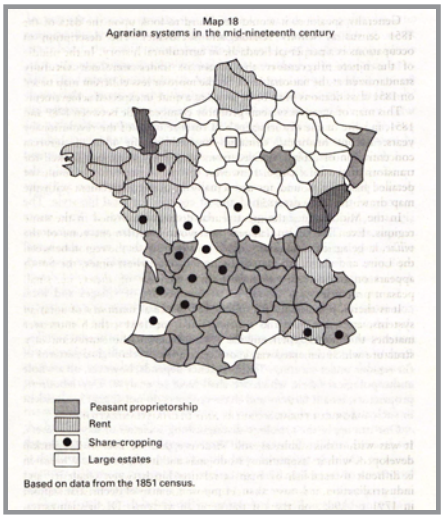




level of analysis for making sense of large historical change. Social, economic, and political developments should not be presumed to unfold at the level of the nation. He puts forward a simple but apt criterion for choosing a level of analysis for historical inquiry: "one has to observe the social and economic behaviour of the human beings in question and discover their scale in order to define closed and homogeneous groups which then can be called society X or economy Y" (7). And in fact, he argues that "France" is better understood as a configuration of regions and zones than as an integrated national system. As he puts the point, "one can represent France as a heterogeneous and open area in which social, economic and political forces emerge, spread and establish themselves quite independently of the central power and of the overall national structure" (8). And: "Notions of 'French society', 'French economy', 'French industry', 'French working class' are to some extent myths" (7). (It is interesting to observe that this is one of G. William Skinner's central insights into Chinese history as well, especially in his analysis of the historical relevance of "macroregions" in China. Here's an earlier post on Skinner's work.)

So what are the patterns and causal factors that have given rise to "modern France" in Todd's reckoning? Crudely, Todd argues that there are large regional patterns of culture, demography, and property that created distinct dynamics of change across eight centuries of French history. The southern half of France is characterized by complex family systems with several generations in the same household and a low rate of reproduction, in contrast to the nuclear families of the north and their higher rate of reproduction. The family values of the southern region gave greater importance to literacy and education than the nuclear (and larger) families of the north. And family structure, patterns of inheritance, and land tenure are in turn highly relevant to the formation of large patterns of ideology. (A similar logic is expressed in another of Todd's books, The Explanation of Ideology: Family Structure and Social Systems (Family, Sexuality and Social Relations in Past Times).)

The central analytical device in Todd's argument is a fascinating series of maps of France coding the 90 départements of France by such variables as the percent of women holding the baccalauréat, the percentage of priests accepting the serment constitutionnel



(revolutionary loyalty oath) in 1791, or the percentage of workers in a given industrial sector. The maps display striking geographical patterns documenting Todd's interpretation of the large historical patterns and their underlying anthropological and geographical causes. At the largest scale, he argues for three axes of historical causation: a north-south axis defined by family structure that creates differentials of literacy and population growth; an east-west axis defined by the diffusion of industry from northern Europe into eastern France and across the map from east to west; and a political pattern different from both of these, extending from Paris at the political center to the periphery in all directions. The following is a great example; Todd is interested in observing the degree of "religiosity" across France around the time of the Revolution, and he uses the percentage of priests who accepted the oath of allegiance demanded by the Revolutionary government as a measure. The resulting map reveals conspicuous patterns; the periphery and the south stand out as non-conformist.

Todd also argues that there is a causal order among the large social factors he singles out. Family structure is causally relevant to literacy and education level; literacy is relevant to religious dissent and the emergence of Cathars, Waldensians, and Protestants; family structure is relevant to reproductive rates which are in turn relevant to the spread of industry; and traditions of inheritance are relevant to a region's receptiveness to the ideology of the Revolution. And the patterns created by these causal processes are very persistent; so the southern belt of high-literacy départements of the twelfth century coincides almost exactly with the pattern of high incidence of baccalauréats and doctors in the late twentieth century.

A particularly interesting part of Todd's analysis for me is his effort to map out the agrarian regimes of pre-revolutionary France (the ancien régime). He observes that this hasn't been done by existing studies of French rural society, and that there is no suitable statistical data on the basis of which to do so for the eighteenth century in any case. However, he makes use of the first census in 1851 to infer back a century in order to arrive at an analysis into four categories: large estates with hired labor, peasant proprietorship, tenant farming, and share-cropping. And using the mid-nineteenth century census data he constructs this map:

Note that the large estates are concentrated in the center of France, including Paris; while peasant proprietorship (sometimes combined with share-cropping) predominates in the southern tier. Note as well how closely these patterns conform to the distribution of family structure and fertility at the top of the posting. And Todd argues that these patterns showed substantial continuity before and after the Revolution (61). In other words, there is a very substantial overlap between agrarian regimes and the anthropological-demographic patterns discussed earlier. Todd then uses these geographical patterns to explain something different: the pattern of de-christianization that took place over the century following the Revolution. Basically, de-christianization is associated with the regions involving a large number of landless workers, whereas this cultural process was least virulent in regions of peasant proprietorship. Todd summarizes this way:

The link between family and agrarian system will help us to understand why dechristianization gained ground, from 1791 onwards, in regions of large farms and

share-cropping, and met with resistance in provinces where tenant farming and peasant proprietorship were predominant. This proposition can, moreover, be reformulated thanks to equivalences between family types and agrarian systems. Dechristianization spread in regions where the family structure was egalitarian nuclear or community, but failed in provinces where the family was stem or absolute nuclear.
In other words -- an explanation of ideology and religion in terms of a set of demographic and social characteristics that are distributed differentially across regions.

I haven't touched on the dynamics of politics at all here, which is an important piece of Todd's work. But these comments suffice to illustrate the pattern of historical thinking represented by Todd's work. It is striking for its effort to cross genres, incorporating geography, anthropology, and sociology into the formation of large interpretations of French history. And it is striking for the scale of the canvas that he attempts to paint.

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:43PM (-05:00)

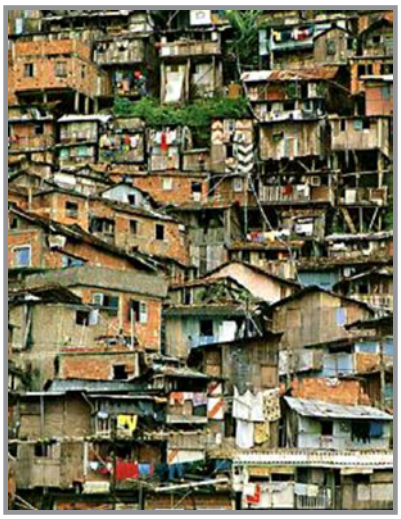
Modernism and social life

Saturday, January 31, 2009



painting: Georges Braque, Woman with a Guitar (1913)

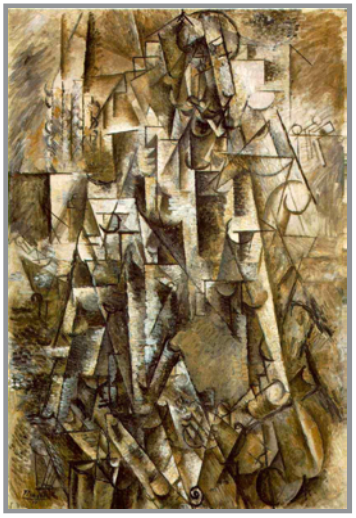
Image: Mexico City slum



Modernity is remarkably hard to define or capture. We might try this ostensive definition: it is the culture, mental framework, and social reality of the world created by the industrial revolution, mass society, urban life, and mass literacy and communication. It is the world of anonymous social relations, the market as a central social reality, the rational-bureaucratic state, and mass public opinion. It is what came after "the world we have lost" (Peter Laslett's evocative phrase in The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age) -- the pre-modern world of direct, face-to-face social relations, powerful religious beliefs, traditional regulation of village society, and very low levels of mobility for the individual. Stability, continuity, locality, and legible social relations capture the pre-modern world. And the modern world overturns each of these.

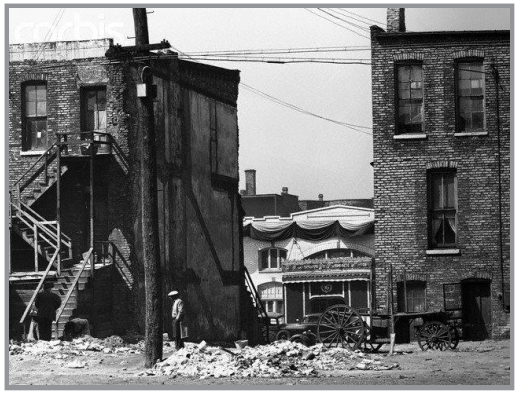
English critic (and blogger before his time) Thomas Carlyle saw it coming -- and he didn't care for it. Here are some of his descriptions of the social reality coming to England in the 1820s in Past and Present:

The condition of England, on which many pamphlets are now in the course of publication, and many thoughts unpublished are going on in every reflective head, is justly regarded as one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest ever seen in this world. England is full of wealth, of multifarious



produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition. With unabated bounty the land of England blooms and grows; waving with yellow harvests; thick-studded with work-shops, industrial implements, with fifteen millions of workers, understood to be the strongest, the cunningest, and the willingest our Earth ever had ... and behold, some baleful fiat as of Enchantment has gone forth, saying, "Touch it not, ye workers, ye master-workers, ye master-idlers; none of you can touch it, no man of you shall be the better for it; this is enchanted fruit!" (Book I, ch. 1)

But, it is said, our religion is gone: we no longer believe in St. Edmund, no longer see the figure of him "on the rim of the sky," minatory or confirmatory? God's absolute Laws,



sanctioned by an eternal Heaven and an eternal Hell, have become Moral Philosophies, sanctioned by able computations of Profit and Loss, by weak considerations of Pleasures of Virtue and the Moral Sublime. (Book III, ch. 1)

And in fact, I think the task of making sense of a rapidly changing social reality was as stunning in the 1840s as it is today -- Karl Marx, Thomas Carlyle, Alexander Herzen, Friedrich Engels, and Mikhail Bakunin all turned their imaginations and their critical abilities to the task of conceptualizing the changes that were sweeping across Europe and the globe in the first part of the nineteenth century. (Steven Marcus does a good job of capturing the cognitive and imaginative challenge faced by reflective observers in the early nineteenth century in Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class.)

So how can sociologists, historians, or artists and poets help us understand the nature of modernity? The cacaphony of the modern city is one powerful metaphor for the nature of the social modern. So the sociology of the city is a good place to start. And the jangled, fractured canvases of modernist painting evoke the conflicting, overlapping mentalities of the modern world; so perhaps we can learn something about the nature of modernity from reflective art historians.

Here is how art historian T. J. Clark reflects on the meaning of "modernity" in his spectacular book, Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism.

"Modernity" means contingency. It points to a social order which has turned from the worship of ancestors and past authorities to the pursuit of a projected future -- of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, or infinities of information. This process goes along with a great emptying and sanitizing of the imagination. Without ancestor-worship, meaning is in short supply -- "meaning" here meaning agreed-on and instituted forms of value and understanding, implicit orders, stories and images in which a culture crystallizes its sense of the struggle with the realm of necessity and the reality of pain and death. The phrase Max Weber borrowed from Schiller, "the disenchantment of the world," still seems to me to sum up this side of modernity best. (7)

"Secularization" is a nice technical word for this blankness. It means specialization and abstraction; social life driven by a calculus of large-scale statistical chances, with everyone accepting (or resenting) a high level of risk; time and space turned into variables in that same calculus, both of them saturated by "information" and played with endlessly, monotonously, on nets and screens; the de-skilling of everyday life (deference to experts and technicians in more of the microstructure of the self); available, invasive, haunting expertise; the chronic revision of everything in the light of "studies." I should say straightaway that this cluster of features seems to be tied to, and propelled by, one central process: the accumulation of capital, and the spread of capitalist markets into more and more of the world and the texture of human dealings. (7)

Is it not the case that the truly new, and disorienting, character of modernity is its seemingly being driven by merely material, statistical, tendential, "economic" considerations? We know we are living a new form of life, in which all previous notions of belief and sociability have been scrambled. And the true terror of this new order has to do with its being ruled -- and obscurely felt to be ruled -- by sheer concatenation of profit and loss, bids and bargains: that is, by a system without any focusing purpose to it, or any compelling image or ritualization of that purpose. It is the blindness of modernity that seems to me fundamental, and to which modernism is a response. (8)

painting: Pablo Picasso, The Poet (1911)

And what about the city? How does the sociology of the city shed light on the cultural reality of the modern world? The modern city represented a coming-together of many of the currents of social change that constituted the heterogeneous mix of "modernity." A large and disconnected population, substantial inequalities, civic anonymity, alienation, bureaucratic administration, modern policing and public services, street cars, and a virtual absence of overarching social solidarity conjoined to create a jangled social configuration with the angular properties of a modernist portrait.

An earlier posting focused on Engels's sociology of the city. But here is how Georg Simmel puts it in "The Metropolis and Modern Life":

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life. This antagonism represents the most modern form of the conflict which primitive man must carry on with nature for his own bodily existence. The eighteenth century may have called for liberation from all the ties which grew up historically in politics, in religion, in morality and in economics in order to permit the original natural virtue of man, which is equal in everyone, to develop without inhibition; the nineteenth century may have sought to promote, in addition to man's freedom, his individuality (which is connected with the division of labour) and his achievements which make him unique and indispensable but which at the same time make him so much the more dependent on the complementary activity of others; Nietzsche may have seen the relentless struggle of the individual as the prerequisite for his full development, while socialism found the same thing in the suppression of all competition -- but in each of these the same fundamental motive was at work, namely the resistance of the individual to being leveled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism.
The Chicago School of sociology is particularly on target when it comes to understanding "modernity", given its strong emphasis on understanding the social reality of Chicago as a

turbulent, jangled social reality.

(See Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens and Ann Shola Orloff, eds., Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology (Politics, History, and Culture), for some very thoughtful discussions of the study of "modernity" by contemporary historical sociologists.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:47PM (-05:00)

Norms and deliberative rationality

Wednesday, February 04, 2009



Why do people cooperate? That is, what motivates individuals to come together to share labor and resources in pursuit of a common good from which they cannot be excluded -- fighting fires, hunting marauding tigers, cleaning up a public beach? Standard rational choice theory, and its application to problems of individual rationality in group settings, implies that cooperation should be unstable in the face of free-riding. This was Mancur Olson's central conclusion in his classic book The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups. Roughly, his conclusion was that cooperation would be possible only if there were excludable side benefits for participants, selective coercion to enforce cooperation, or privatization of the gains of collective action. Otherwise, it is prisoners' dilemmas all the way down. However, we know from many social contexts that individuals do in fact succeed in establishing cooperative relationships without any of these supporting conditions. So what are we missing when we consider social action from the narrow perspective of rational choice theory?

A part of the answer to this puzzle involves the role of norms in action. Here the criticism is that the rational-choice approach, by attending solely to calculations of self-interest, is blind to the workings of normative frameworks; but in fact norms are powerful factors underlying behavior in most traditional contexts. This perspective finds expression in the moral economy literature within peasant studies -- e.g. James Scott's The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia. (This debate is sometimes referred to as one between formalists and substantivists. Karl Polanyi is another good example of the substantivist perspective (The Great Transformation), while Sam Popkin (The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam) and Theodore Schultz (Transforming Traditional Agriculture) fall on the side of the formalists.)

According to the substantivist perspective, traditional societies are communities: tightly cohesive groups of persons sharing a distinctive set of values in stable, continuing relations to one another (Michael Taylor Community, Anarchy and Liberty). The central threats to security and welfare are well-known to such groups--excessive or deficient rainfall, attacks by bandits, predatory tax policies by the central government, etc. And village societies have evolved schemes of shared values and cooperative practices and institutions which are well-adapted to handling these problems of risk and welfare in ways which protect the subsistence needs of all villagers adequately in all but the most

extreme circumstances. The substantivists thus maintain that traditions and norms are fundamental social factors, and that individual behavior is almost always modulated through powerful traditional motivational constraints. One consequence of this modulation is that many societies do not display a sharp distinction between group interest and individual interest that is predicted by collective action theory. (An important theoretical defense of this conclusion can be found in the work of Elinor Ostrom and her fellow researchers in their treatment of "common property resource regimes"; see Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action.)

There are, of course, well-known social and behavioral processes that may tend to undermine the working of a given set of norms. Normative systems are inherently ambiguous and subject to revision over time. Consequently we should expect that opportunistic agents will find ways of adapting given social norms more comfortably to the pursuit of self-interest. Consider the requirement that elites should provide for the subsistence needs of the poor in times of dearth. There are some grounds for supposing that such a requirement is in the longterm interest of elites--for example, by promoting social stability and establishing bonds of reciprocity with other members of an interdependent society. But it seems reasonable to expect that elites--already by their superior economic position able to exercise political and social power as well--will find ways of limiting the effect of such norms on their behavior. So it is insufficient to simply postulate a set of governing norms; we need to identify the mechanisms at the group and individual levels that make them behaviorally relevant and stable. But, significantly, some theorists have tried to show that rational self-interest may actually reinforce certain kinds of norms of fairness and reciprocity; thus Robert Axelrod's analysis of the dynamics of reciprocity demonstrates that cooperation is rational in relation to a variety of circumstances of face-to-face cooperation in The Evolution of Cooperation: Revised Edition.

These points notwithstanding, there remains a credible line of criticism of the rational-choice paradigm based on the role of norms in behavior. For it is clear that individuals pay some attention to normative constraints within the process of rational deliberation. The model of simple maximizing decision-making is overly abstract; instead, we need to have a conception of rational action that permits us to incorporate some consideration of normative requirements as well as purposes and goals. We need a broader conception of practical rationality that incorporates both means-end rationality and normative deliberation; we need a theory that embraces both Mill and Aristotle.

A number of social scientists have taken this point seriously. Particularly profound is the critique of pure rational choice theory offered by Amartya Sen in an essay called "Rational Fools" (jstor link; and here is the introduction to a recent symposium on the article in Economics and Philosophy). Sen criticizes the assumption of pure self-interest which is contained in the standard conception. Against the assumption of self-interested maximizing decision-making, Sen argues for a proposal for a more structured concept of practical reason: one which permits the decision-maker to take account of commitments. This concept covers a variety of non-welfare features of reasoning, but moral principle (fairness and reciprocity) and altruistic concern for the welfare of others are central among these. Sen believes that the role of commitment is centrally important in the analysis of individuals' behavior with regard to public goods, and he draws connections between the role of commitment and work motivation. He argues, therefore, that in order to understand different areas of rational behavior it is necessary to consider both utility-maximizing decision-making and rational conduct influenced by commitment; and it is an empirical question whether one factor or the other is predominant in a particular range of

behavior. Thus Sen holds that an adequate theory of rationality requires more structure than a simple utility-maximizing model would allow; in particular, it needs to take account of moral norms and commitments.

These arguments are telling; the model of narrow economic rationality makes overly restrictive assumptions about the role of norms in rational behavior. Human behavior is the resultant of several different forms of motive--self-interest, fairness, and altruism; and several different types of decision-making processes--maximizing and deliberation. A more adequate model of broadened practical rationality therefore needs to incorporate a decision rule that represents the workings of moral constraints and commitments as well as goal-directed calculation. This rule should reduce to the familiar utility maximizing rule in circumstances in which moral constraints are not prominent -- e.g., in decision-making within a market. But in situations where important norms of behavior are in play, we need to try to reproduce the more complex deliberation processes that real human decision-makers undergo in order to combine their normative commitments and their goals and preferences.

This is not a small problem, however; for one of the chief merits of the paradigm of narrow economic rationality is its parsimony--the fact that it reduces rational choice to a single dimension of deliberation. Once we require that rational choice theory needs to take normative constraints and commitments into account as well as interests, it is much more difficult to provide formal models of rational choice. However, some progress has been made on this problem. For example, Howard Margolis (Selfishness, Altruism, and Rationality) attempts to formalize represent rational deliberation in the presence of public goods as the result of two utility functions, one representing the individual's private interests and the other the individual's appraisal of the public good; the two functions are then aggregated by a higher order decision rule. (John Harsanyi makes similar arguments.)

This broadening of the conception of individual rationality has important implications. For example, consider public goods problems. Once we consider a more complex theory of practical deliberation, formal arguments concerning freeriding problems in real social groups will be indeterminate. On a more complex, and more empirically adequate, account of practical reason, conditional altruism, cooperation, and reciprocity may be deliberatively rational choices; therefore we would expect a social group consisting of rational individuals to show signs of cooperation and conditional altruism. And the challenge for sociology is to identify the mechanisms of individual deliberation and social reinforcement that serve to stabilize the system of norms and the behaviors that conform to them. This is one of the tasks that the field of new institutionalism has taken on (Mary Brinton and Victor Nee, eds., The New Institutionalism in Sociology).
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:19PM (-05:00)

The new institutionalism

Saturday, February 07, 2009

The new institutionalism in sociology is a particularly promising prism through which to understand a lot of social behavior and change. Victor Nee and Paul Ingram define the approach in these terms in "Embeddedness and Beyond" in The New Institutionalism in Sociology:

Specifying the mechanisms through which institutions shape the parameters of choice is



important to an adequate sociological understanding of economic action. These social mechanisms, we argue, involve processes that are built into ongoing social relationships -- the domain of network analysis in sociology. Yet, how institutions and networks combine to determine economic and organizational performance is inadequately theorized in the sociological study of economic life.

An institution is a web of interrelated norms -- formal and informal -- governing social relationships. It is by structuring social interactions that institutions produce group performance, in such primary groups as families and work units as well as in social units as large as organizations and even entire economies. (Nee and Ingram, p. 19)
The new institutional economics is essentially a marriage of the familiar assumptions of rational choice theory with the observation that “institutions matter”—that is, that the behavior of purposive individuals depends critically on the institutional constraints within which they act, and the institutional constraints themselves are under-determined by material and economic circumstances. So institutions evolve in response to the strategic actions of a field of actors. The paragraphs quoted above make it clear that the approach stipulates a very tight relationship between institutions and norms regulating behavior. The approach pays close attention to the importance of transaction costs in economic activity (the costs of supervision of a work force, for example, or the cost of collecting information on compliance with a contract). And it postulates that institutions emerge and persist as a solution to specific problems of social coordination.

Topics of central concern to the practitioners of the new institutionalism include principal-agent problems (the costs of assuring that one’s agents are performing their functions according to the interests of the principal); the design of alternative systems of property rights; collective action problems; and mechanisms of collective decision-making. In each instance the analysis is designed to illuminate the ways in which institutional arrangements have been selected (or have evolved) in such ways as to respond to an important element of transaction costs. It bears pointing out that this approach does not assume that “optimal” institutions emerge, since the actual institutions selected depend on the distribution of political power across groups and their antecedent interests. This point is richly born out in Robert Bates’s important arguments concerning government agricultural policies in other parts of Africa (Markets and States in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Policies) and also in Jack Knight's efforts to frame the conflictual elements of institutions (Institutions and Social Conflict).

Here is a striking example of a new-institutionalist analysis of a concrete sociological phenomenon: Jean Ensminger's account of bridewealth in the cattle-herding culture of Kenya (Making a Market: The Institutional Transformation of an African Society). First, some background. The cattle-herding economic regime of the Orma pastoralists of Kenya underwent substantial changes in the 1970s and 1980s. Commons grazing practices began to give way to restricted pasturage; wage labor among herders came to replace familial and patron-client relations; and a whole series of changes in the property system surrounding the cattle economy transpired as well. This is an excellent example for empirical study from a new-institutionalist perspective. What explained the particular configuration of norms and institutions of the earlier period? And what social pressures led to the transition towards a more impersonal relationship between owners and

herders?

Ensminger examines these questions from the perspective of the new institutionalism. Building on the theoretical frameworks of Douglass North and others, she undertakes to provide an analysis of the workings of traditional Orma cattle-management practices and an explanation of the process of change and dissolution that these practices underwent in the decades following 1960. The book puts forward a combination of close ethnographic detail and sophisticated use of theoretical ideas to explain complex local phenomena.

How does the new institutionalism approach help to explain the features of the traditional Orma cattle regime identified by Ensminger's study? The key institutions in the earlier period are the terms of employment of cattle herders in mobile cattle camps. The traditional employment practice takes the pattern of an embroidered patron-client relation. The cattle owner provides a basic wage contract to the herder (food, clothing, and one head of cattle per year). The good herder is treated paternally, with additional "gifts" at the end of the season (additional clothing, an additional animal, and payment of the herder's bridewealth after years of service). The relation between patron and client is multi-stranded, enduring, and paternal.

Ensminger understands this traditional practice as a solution to an obvious principal-agent problem associated with mobile cattle camps. Supervision costs are very high, since the owner does not travel with the camp. The owner must depend on the herder to use his skill and diligence in a variety of difficult circumstances—rescuing stranded cattle, searching out lost animals, and maintaining control of the herd during harsh conditions. There are obvious short-term incentives and opportunities for the herder to cheat the employer—e.g. allowing stranded animals to perish, giving up on searches for lost animals, or even selling animals during times of distress. The patron-client relation gives the herder a long-term incentive to provide high-quality labor, for the quality of work can be assessed at the end of the season by assessment of the health and size of the herd. The patron has an incentive to cheat the client—e.g. by refusing to pay the herder's bridewealth after years of service. But here the patron's interest in reputation comes into play: a cattle owner with a reputation for cheating his clients will find it difficult to recruit high-quality herders.

This account serves to explain the evolution and persistence of the patron-client relation in cattle-camps on the basis of transaction costs (costs of supervision). Arrangements will be selected that serve to minimize transaction costs. In the circumstances of traditional cattle-rearing among the Orma the transaction costs of a straight wage-labor system are substantially greater than those associated with a patron-client system. Therefore the patron-client system is selected.

This framework would also suggest that if transaction costs change substantially (through improved transportation, for example, or through the creation of fixed grazing areas), that the terms of employment would change as well (in the direction of less costly pure wage-labor contracts). And in fact this is what Ensminger finds among the Orma. When villages begin to establish "restricted grazing areas" in the environs of the village, it is feasible for cattle owners to directly supervise the management of their herds; and in these circumstances Ensminger finds an increase in pure wage labor contracts.

New institutionalism is a particularly appealing sociological framework from the point of view of the philosophy of society involved here because it asks the right sorts of

questions at the right level. The level of analysis is fairly close to the ground -- fairly proximate to the actions of socially embedded agents. And the questions that are posed are key: what social problems is a given set of institutions solving? How do these institutions relate to the purposive actions of individuals? And what are the social mechanisms that stabilize or destabilize a given institutional configuration at a certain point in time?
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:08AM (-05:00)

Institutions, procedures, norms

Monday, February 09, 2009



One of the noteworthy aspects of the framing offered by Victor Nee and Mary Brinton of the assumptions of the new institutionalism is the very close connection they postulate between institutions and norms. (See the prior posting on this subject). So what is the connection between institutions and norms?

The idea that an institution is nothing more than a collections of norms, formal and informal, seems incomplete on its face. Institutions also depend on rules, procedures, protocols, sanctions, and habits and practices. These other social behavioral factors perhaps intersect in various ways with the workings of social norms, but they are not reducible to a set of norms. And this is to say that institutions are not reducible to a collection of norms.
Consider for example the institutions that embody the patient safety regime in a hospital. What are the constituents of the institutions through which hospitals provide for patient safety? Certainly there are norms, both formal and informal, that are deliberately inculcated and reinforced and that influence the behavior of nurses, pharmacists, technicians, and doctors. But there are also procedures -- checklists in operating rooms; training programs -- rehearsals of complex crisis activities; routinized behaviors -- "always confirm the patient's birthday before initiating a procedure"; and rules -- "physicians must disclose financial relationships with suppliers". So the institutions defining the management of patient safety are a heterogeneous mix of social factors and processes.

A key feature of an institution, then, is the set of procedures and protocols that it embodies. In fact, we might consider a short-hand way of specifying an institution in terms of the set of procedures it specifies for behavior in stereotyped circumstances of crisis, conflict, cooperation, and mundane interactions with stakeholders. Organizations have usually created specific ways of handling typical situations: handling an intoxicated customer in a restaurant, making sure that no "wrong site" surgeries occur in an operating room, handling the flow of emergency supplies into a region when a large disaster occurs. The idea here is that the performance of the organization, and the individuals within it, will be more effective at achieving the desired goals of the organization if plans and procedures have been developed to coordinate actions in the most effective way possible. This is the purpose of an airline pilot's checklist before takeoff; it forces the pilot to go through a complete procedure that has been developed for the purpose of avoiding mistakes. Spontaneous, improvised action is sometimes unavoidable; but organizations have learned that they are more effective when they

thoughtfully develop procedures for handling their high-risk activities.

This is the point at which the categories of management oversight and staff training come into play. It is one thing to have designed an effective set of procedures for handling a given complex task; but this achievement is only genuinely effective if agents within the organization in fact follow the procedures and protocols. Training is the umbrella activity that describes the processes through which the organization attempts to achieve a high level of shared knowledge about the organization's procedures. And management oversight is the umbrella activity that describes the processes of supervision and motivation through which the organization attempts to ensure that its agents follow the procedures and protocols.

In fact, one of the central findings in the area of safety research is that the specific content of the procedures of an organization that engages in high-risk activities is crucially important to the overall safety performance of the organization. Apparently small differences in procedure can have an important effect on safety. To take a fairly trivial example, the construction of a stylized vocabulary and syntax for air traffic controllers and pilots increases safety by reducing the possibility of ambiguous communications; so two air traffic systems that were identical except with respect to the issue of standardized communications protocols will be expected to have different safety records. Another key finding falls more on the "norms and culture" side of the equation; it is frequently observed that high-risk organizations need to embody a culture of safety that permeates the whole organization.

We might postulate that norms come into the story when we get to the point of asking what motivates a person to conform to the prescribed procedure or rule -- though there are several other social-behavioral mechanisms that work at this level as well (trained habits, well enforced sanctions, for example). But more fundamentally, the explanatory value of the micro-institutional analysis may come in at the level of the details of the procedures and rules in contrast to other possible embodiments -- rather than at the level of the question, what makes these procedures effective in most participants' conduct?
We might say, then, that an institution can be fully specified when we provide information about:

- the procedures, policies, and protocols it imposes on its participants
- the training and educational processes the institution relies on for instilling appropriate knowledge about its procedures and rules in its participants
- the management, supervision, enforcement, and incentive mechanisms it embodies to assure a sufficient level of compliance among its participants
- the norms of behavior that typical participants have internalized with respect to action within the institution

And the distinctive performance characteristics of the institution may derive from the specific nature of the arrangements that are described at each of these levels.

System safety is a good example to consider from the point of view of the new institutionalism. Two airlines may have significantly different safety records. And the explanation may be at any of these levels: they may have differences in formalized procedures, they may have differences in training regimes, they may have differences in management oversight effectiveness, or they may have different normative cultures at the rank-and-file level. It is a central insight of the new institutionalism that the first level may be the most important for explaining the overall safety records of the two companies, even though mechanisms may fail at any of the other levels as well. Procedural differences generally lead to significant and measurable differences in the quality of

organizational results. (Nancy Leveson's Safeware: System Safety and Computers provides a great discussion of many of these issues.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:18PM (-05:00)

Analyzing peasant consciousness

Tuesday, February 10, 2009



painting: Jean-François Millet, The Gleaners (1857)

painting: Edward H. Corbould, Hetty and Captain Donnithorne in Mrs. Poyser's Dairy



James Scott is a scholar who has shed more light on the mentality and agency of rural people than almost any other since the reinvigoration of peasant studies in the 1970s. Scott's book The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia (1976) tried to understand peasant political behavior in southeast Asia through the lens of the norms of justice that were embodied in traditional village societies. His Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (1987) further advanced his theorizing about the subjective side of class relations—the experience of subordination and the cultural vocabulary in terms of which subordination is lived in particular social circumstances. Here I'd like to reflect on one of his books that is less empirical but no less insightful into the consciousness of the subordinates -- Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (1992). This is a book about the experience of domination and indignity that power relations impose upon the powerless. As such it is an important step forward in James Scott's efforts to provide a language in terms of which to understand underclass politics. Scott takes a big step forward here in helping us find a vocabulary and a more of representation for understanding the mentality of peasants, serfs, and other subalterns. How do they understand their social world? Scott offers a strikingly different interpretation of the social knowledge of the subordinate.

Scott's central innovation in this work is his distinction between public transcripts ("the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate;" p. 2) and hidden transcripts ("discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders;" p. 4). Scott observes that there is a sharp divide between the behavior, language, and customs that dominated groups assume in public, and the language, jokes, and criticisms that structure their lives within the back streets, slave quarters, or rice paddies of their within-group experience.

Both public transcripts and hidden transcripts have effects on the everyday politics of power. The public transcript is a conventional pattern of speech for the dominated, a stylized public performance through which they adopt the forms of deference and respect for the powerful that are needed to avoid conflict with the powerful. But Scott maintains that this performance is only skin-deep. The dominated are by no means taken in by their own affirmations of the justice and good manners of their masters, and behind the scenes we may expect to hear much raucous laughing, merciless lampooning, and bitter criticism.

Offstage, where subordinates may gather outside the intimidating gaze of power, a sharply dissonant political culture is possible. Slaves in the relative safety of their quarters can speak the words of anger, revenge, self- assertion that they must normally choke back when in the presence of the masters and mistresses. (p. 18)
Scott aims to shed light on this hidden transcript, with the idea that an understanding of this level of consciousness of the dominated is much closer to the reality of their lived experience and provides a better basis for understanding their political behavior.

In addition to a varied set of empirical and historical sources, Scott also makes genuinely innovative use of literary works to better understand the hidden transcript. Scott has identified dozens of texts—works by George Eliot, George Orwell, Euripedes, Brer Rabbit, Milan Kundera, Jean Genet, Emile Zola, and many others—in which the divide between the public and hidden transcripts is directly at issue in the novel. These sources have evidentiary value; for example, Scott writes of George Eliot, “Such were Eliot’s powers of observation and insight into her rural society that many of the key issues of domination and resistance can be teased from her story of Mrs. Poyser’s encounter with the squire” (p. 7). But more important is their interpretive value. They permit Scott to communicate to the reader a vivid understanding of the way the hidden transcript works.

Scott’s contention that the hidden transcript is an open-eyed appraisal of existing relations of domination inevitably comes into conflict with theories of ideology and hegemony. Classical Marxist or Gramscian ideas about ideology suggest that dominated groups come to share the values and perceptions of the dominant group. Scott argues that what is taken as hegemony of dominant-group ideas is in fact often only an uncritical observation of the performance of the public transcript. Rather, he suggests that the dominated are perfectly capable of formulat-ing their own criticisms of the social relations in which they find themselves. “A combination of adaptive strategic behavior and the dialogue implicit in most power relations ensures that public action will provide a constant stream of evidence that appears to support an interpretation of ideological hegemony” (p. 70). This interpretation gives a much greater degree of agency and knowledge to the dominated.

Scott is one of the relatively few social scientists of the past forty years who have consistently offered us new concepts and frameworks in terms of which to understand the social reality we confront. "Moral economy," "weapons of the weak," and "hidden transcripts" are all conceptual innovations that have significantly altered the ways we have for understanding and analyzing the social realities associated with domination and resistance. And this is a very important contribution to the intellectual challenge of describing and explaining these complex social realities.

(Scott's most recent book, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (1999), is also a tour-de-force; more on that in a subsequent posting.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:54PM (-05:00)

What is a norm?

Thursday, February 12, 2009



The role of norms in social behavior is a key question for sociology. Is a norm a sociological reality? And do individuals behave in conformance to norms?

We can offer mundane examples of social norms deriving from a wide range of social situations: norms of politeness, norms of fairness, norms of appropriate dress, norms of behavior in business meetings, norms of gendered behavior, and norms of body language and tone of voice in police work. In each case we suppose that (a) there is a publicly recognized norm governing the specified conduct within a specific social group, (b) the norm influences individual behavior in some way, and (c) sanctions and internal motivations come into the explanation of conformant behavior. Norm-breakers may come in for rough treatment by the people around them -- which may induce them to honor the norm in the future. And norm-conformers may do so because they have internalized a set of inhibitions about the proscribed behavior.

Here are a number of key empirical and conceptual questions that are raised by norms.

- What is a norm?
- How are social norms embodied in behavior and structure?
- How do individuals internalize norms?
- How do norms influence behavior?
- Why do individuals conform their behavior to a set of local norms?
- What factors stabilize a norm system over time?
- What social factors influence change in a norm system?

Before we can go much further into this issue, we need to have a fairly clear idea of what we mean by a norm. We might define a norm as --

a socially embodied and individually perceived imperative that such-and-so an action must be performed in such-and-so a fashion.

We can then separate out several other types of questions: First, what induces individuals to conform to the imperative? How do individuals come to have the psychological dispositions to conform to the norm? Second, how is the norm embodied in social relations and behavior? And third, what are the social mechanisms or processes that created the imperative within the given social group? What mechanisms serve to sustain it over time?

To the first question, there seem to be only three possible answers -- and each is in fact socially and psychologically possible. The imperative may be internalized into the motivational space of the individual, so he/she chooses to act according to the imperative (or is habituated to acting in such a way). There may be an effective and well-know system of sanctions that attach to violations of the norms, so the individual has an

incentive to comply. These sanctions may be formal or informal. The sanction may be as benign as being laughed at for wearing a hawaiian shirt to a black tie ball (I'll never do that again!), or as severe as being beaten for seeming gay in a cowboy bar. Or, third, there may be benefits from conformance that make conformance a choice that is in the actor's rational self-interest. (Every time one demonstrates that he/she can choose the right fork for dessert, the likelihood of being invited to another formal dinner increases.) Each of these would make sense of the fact that an individual conforms his/her behavior to the requirements of a norm and helps to answer the question, why do individuals conform to norms?

The questions about the social embodiment of a norm are the most difficult. Does the embodiment of a given norm consist simply in the fact that a certain percentage of people in fact behave in accordance with the rule -- for whatever reason? Does the norm exist in virtue of the fact that people consciously champion the norm and impose sanctions on violators? Might we imagine that human beings are normative animals and absorb normative systems in the way that we absorb grammatical systems -- by observing and inferring about the behavior of others?

As for the third cluster of questions about genesis and persistence, there is a range of possibilities here as well. The system may have been designed by one or more deliberate actors. It may have emerged through a fairly random process that is guided by positive social feedback of some sort. It may be the resultant of multiple groups advocating for one set of norms or another to govern a given situation of conflict and/or cooperation. And, conceivably, it may be the result of something analogous to natural selection across small groups: the groups with a more efficient set of norms may out-perform competing groups.

For example, how should we explain the emergence and persistence of a particular set of norms of marriage and reproduction in a given society? Is it causally relevant to observe that "this set of norms results in a rate of fertility that matches the rate of growth of output"? How would this functionally desirable fact play a causal role in the emergence and persistence of this set of norms? Is there any sort of feedback process that we can hypothesize between "norms at time T", "material results of behavior governed by these norms at T+1", and "persistence/change of norms at time T+2"? The business practices of a company are consciously adjusted over time to bring about better overall performance; but what about spontaneously occurring sets of social norms? How do these change over time? Do individuals or groups have the ability to deliberately modify the norms that govern their everyday activities?

It seems inescapable that norms of behavior exist in a society and that individuals adjust their behavior out of regard for relevant norms. The microfoundations of how this works is obscure, however, in that we don't really have good answers to the parallel questions: how do individuals internalize norms? And how do informal practices of norm enforcement work? And what social-causal factors play a role in the emergence, persistence, and change of a system of norms at a given time?

(The photo of the ice rink at Rockefeller Center is intended to evoke several observations about social norms: the facts that the skaters are largely moving in a counter-clockwise direction, no one is carrying a hockey stick, and there are many children present all reflect one aspect or another of the norms governing skating in public arenas.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:33PM (-05:00)

Marx and the Taipings

Friday, February 13, 2009



It is interesting to observe how Europe's greatest revolutionary, Karl Marx (1818-1883), thought about China's greatest revolution in the nineteenth century, the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). We might imagine that this relentless advocate for underclass interests might have cheered for the poor peasants of the Taiping Heavenly Army. But this was not the case. Marx wrote about the Taiping Rebellion several times in the New York Daily Tribune and other newspapers, and his analysis and his sympathies are fascinating. His articles are as close to blog postings as one could get in the middle of the nineteenth century; they are topical, opinionated, and pretty revealing about his underlying assumptions.

The Taiping rebellion was enormous in every way: perhaps 20 million deaths, armies approaching a million soldiers, sustained Taiping control of large swatches of Chinese territory and cities, and an extended time duration of fighting (about fifteen years). The American civil war took place during roughly the same time period; and the Taiping rebellion was many times more destructive. It is a truly fascinating period of world history, and one that had important consequences in the twentieth century. (Mao and the Chinese Communists largely represented the Taiping rebellion as a proto-communist uprising.) So how did Marx respond to this social catastrophe? In a thumbnail -- his observations show a remarkable blindness to a contemporary historical event that seems tailor-made for the framework of his own theories of history and underclass politics.

In 1853 Marx wrote a piece for the Daily Tribune called "Revolution in China and in Europe" that encapsulates his own understanding of what the Taiping revolution was, and what brought it about. He lays the largest causal role on the effects of the Opium Wars a decade earlier. English cannons smashed the appearance of invincible power and authority of the Imperial Chinese state and imposed humiliating conditions on the Chinese nation. "Before the British arms the authority of the Manchu dynasty fell to pieces." And, simultaneously, trade and financial penetration by the European powers occurred in ways that were almost fatally deleterious to the Chinese economy and polity. Forced opium trade led to a rapid depletion of Chinese silver reserves; and the forced availability of English textiles led to severe dislocation for Chinese textile workers. "In China the spinners and weavers have suffered greatly under this foreign competition, and the community has become unsettled in proportion."

Nine years later Marx published another article on the Taiping rebellion, this time in the German newspaper, Die Presse. The article, "Chinese Affairs," begins with a pretty remarkable bit of Asiatic stereotyping:

Some time before the tables began to dance, China--this living fossil--started revolutionizing. By itself there was nothing extraordinary in this phenomenon, since the Oriental empires always show an unchanging social infra-structure coupled with unceasing change in the persons and tribes who manage to ascribe to themselves the political super-structure. (442)
In this piece he picks up a somewhat different theme from that of the earlier article. Here he offers an interpretation of the Taiping rebellion against the backdrop of Manchu

colonialism: "Why should there not be initiated, after 300 years, a movement to overthrow it?" So the 1853 theory postulates the weakening of the Chinese social order as a chief cause, while the 1862 theory postulates a nationalistic motivation -- a desire of Han people to overthrow Manchu rule. (An irony here is that the Taiping movement emerged with key support from Hakka people, a cultural minority within the Han population.)

The interpretation that Marx offers for the occurrence of a vast rebellion in China, then, is largely an exogenous one: war, trade, and European intrusion led to a total disruption of China's social order; Manchu colonial rule created nationalistic unrest; and rebellion ensued.

Marx then goes on to a description of the nature of the rebellion and the rebels.

What is original in this Chinese revolution are only its bearers. They are not conscious of any task, except the change of dynasty. They have no slogans. They are an even greater scourge to the population than the old rulers. It seems that their vocation is nothing else than to set against the conservative disintegration of China, its destruction, in grotesque horrifying form, without any seeds for a renaissance. (443)

There are no agents in this description, no social program, and no agenda for change. Instead, there is only blind violence and destruction. Marx quotes with evident approval the dispatch of Mr. Bruce, the English Ambassador to Peking, who decries the violence and disorder of the Taiping armies. And Bruce's central observation is the violence and rapaciousness of the Taiping armies, stealing or destroying all property in the regions they controlled.

Notice what Marx's analysis does not do. It does not identify the class nature of the Taiping movement. It does not ask what were the social causes that led Chinese peasants to follow the Taiping armies. And it does not ask what was the social program of the Taiping movement. The Taipings are represented as a cipher -- just an irrational uprising of millions of passive followers.

So whatever happened to the tools of historical analysis that Marx recommended -- the forces and relations of production, the concrete circumstances of class relations, the intimate connection between material conditions of life and political behavior, and the emphasis on exploitation and rebellion? Why was Marx not disposed to ask the basic questions about the Chinese case: who are these people? What are the social relations from which they emerge? And what are they attempting to bring about in their rebellion? Why, in short, didn't we get something more akin to The Civil War in France, with an effort at a detailed social and political analysis of the uprising?

It is hard to escape the answer to this question: it is Eurocentrism in the extreme, and a consequent inability to see the implications of his own categories of analysis for this otherwise intriguing case. This isn't exactly news, of course. But it does underline the importance for today's historians of finding ways of treating world history without imposing the categories of European experience. A China-centered analysis of the Taiping rebellion has a very different look from the sketch we find in Marx's descriptions. (See an earlier posting on historical comparisons for more on this point.)

There is a great deal of very good contemporary historical research on the Taiping rebellion. Here are a handful of good contemporary treatments:

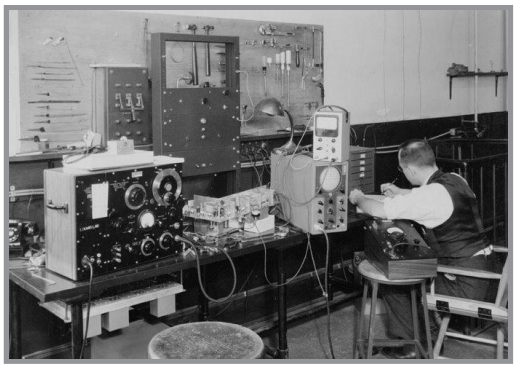
Cole, James H. 1981. The People Versus the Taipings: Bao Lisheng's Righteous Army of Dongan. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.
Kuhn, Philip A. 1970. Rebellion and its enemies in late imperial China, militarization and social structure, 1796-1864, Harvard East Asian series, 49. Cambridge, Mass.,: Harvard University Press.
Kuhn, Philip A. 1977. Origins of the Taiping Vision: Cross-cultural Dimensions of a Chinese Rebellion. Comparative Studies in Society and History 19 (3):350-66.
———. 1978. The Taiping Rebellion. In The Cambridge History of China v. 10, edited by D. Twitchett and J. K. Fairbank.
Spence, Jonathan D. 1996. God's Chinese son: the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan. New York: W.W. Norton.
Wagner, Rudolf G. 1982. Reenacting the Heavenly Vision: The Role of Religion in the Taiping Rebellion. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, Univ. of Calif.

These histories bring out many different aspects of the Taiping story, and they don't all agree. They also bring out an element that is entirely missing in Marx's comments -- the influence of Christian missionaries on the formation of Taiping ideology. But what they all agree on is that the Taiping movement was socially complex, with a strong ideology, a very specific set of demands about property and social institutions, and pretty complex military relations. And they certainly agree that the relationship between Manchu rule, European colonialism, and internal social factors is far more complex than Marx's story allows.

Both articles discussed here (as well as a large number of postings on India) are included in Karl Marx on Colonialism & Modernization: His Despatches And Other Writings on China, India, Mexico, the Middle East and North Africa, a volume edited and introduced by Shlomo Avineri.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:27PM (-05:00)

Scientific misconduct as a principal-agent problem

Sunday, February 15, 2009



How does an organization assure that its agents perform their duties truthfully and faithfully? We have ample evidence of the other kind of performance -- theft, misappropriation, lies, fraud, diversion of assets for personal use, and a variety of deceptive accounting schemes. And we have whole professions devoted to detecting and punishing these various forms of dishonesty -- accountants, investigative reporters, management consultants, insurance experts, prosecutors and their investigators. And yet dishonest behavior is common, in business, finance, government, and even the food industry. (See several earlier postings for discussions of the issues of corruption and trust in society.)

Here I'm especially interested in a particular kind of activity -- scientific and medical research. Consider a short but sobering list of scientific and medical frauds in the past

fifty years: Cyril Burt's intelligence studies, Dr. Hwang Woo-suk's stem cell cloning fraud, the Anjan Kumar Banerjee case in Britain, the MMR vaccine-autism case, a spate of recent cases in China, and numerous other examples. And consider recent reports that a percentage of scientific photos in leading publications had been photoshopped in ways that favored the researcher's findings (link). (Here are some comments by Edward Tufte on the issue of scientific imaging, and here are some journal guidelines from the Council of Science Editors attempting to regulate the issue.) Plainly, fraud and misconduct sometimes occur within the institutions of scientific and medical research. And each case has consequences -- for citizens, for patients, and for the future course of research.

Here is how the editor of Family Practice describes the problem of research misconduct in a review of Fraud and Misconduct in Medical Research (third edition):

Fraud and misconduct are, it seems, endemic in scientific research. Even Galileo, Newton and Mendel appear to have fudged some of their results. From palaeontology to nanotechnology, scientific fraud reappears with alarming regularity. The Office of Research Integrity in the USA investigated 127 serious allegations of scientific fraud last year. The reasons for conducting fraudulent research and misrepresenting research in scientific publications are complex. The pressures to publish and to achieve career progression and promotion and the lure of fame and money may all play a part, but deeper forces often seem to be at work.

How important are fraud and misconduct in primary care research? As far as Family Practice goes, mercifully rare, as I pointed out in a recent editorial. Sadly, however, there are examples, all along the continuum from the beginning of a clinical trial to submission of a final manuscript, of dishonesty and deceit in general practice and primary care research. Patients have been invented to increase numbers (and profits) in clinical trials, ethical guidance on consent and confidentiality have been breached, and ‘salami’ and duplicate publication crop up from time to time.
The problem is particularly acute in the area of scientific and medical research because the public at large has very little ability to independently evaluate the validity of a research finding, let alone validate the integrity of the research. And this extends to science and medicine journalists in large part as well, since they are rarely given access to underlying records and data for a study.

The stakes are high -- dishonest research can cost lives or delay legitimate research, not to speak of the cost of supporting the fraudulent research in the first place. The temptations for researchers are large as well -- funding from drug and device makers, the incentives and pressures of career advancement, and pure vanity, to name several. And we know that instances of fraud and other forms of serious scientific misconduct continue to occur.

So, thinking of this topic as an organizational problem -- what measures can be taken to minimize the incidence of fraud and misconduct in scientific research?

One way of describing the situation is as a gigantic principal-agent problem. (Khalid Abdalla provides a simple explanation of the principal-agent problem here.) It falls within the scope of the more general challenge of motivating, managing, and supervising highly skilled and independent professionals. The "agent" is the individual researcher and research team. And the "principal" may be construed at a range of levels: society at large, the Federal government, the NIH, the research institute, or the department chair. But it seems likely that the problem is most tractable if we focus attention on the more

proximate relationships -- the NIH, the research institute, and the researcher.

So this is a good problem to consider from the point of view of institutional design and complex interactive social behavior. We know what kind of behavior we want; the problem is to create the institutional settings and motivational processes through which the desired behavior is encouraged and the undesired behavior is detected and punished.

One response from the research institutions (research universities, institutes, and medical schools) is to emphasize training programs in scientific professional ethics, to more deeply instill the values of strict scientific integrity in each researcher and each institution. The hope here is that pervasive attention to the importance of scientific integrity will have the effect of reducing the incidence of misconduct. A second approach, from universities, research organizations, and journals, is to increase oversight and internal controls surrounding scientific fraud. One example -- some journals require that the statistical analysis of results be performed by a qualified, independent, academic statistician. Strict requirements governing conflicts of interest are another institutional response. And a third approach from institutions such as the NIH and NSF is to ratchet up the consequences of misconduct. The United States Office of Research Integrity (link) has a number of training and enforcement programs designed to minimize scientific misconduct. The British government has set up a similar organization to combat research fraud, the UK Research Integrity Office (link). Individuals found culpable will be denied access to research funds -- effectively halting their scientific careers, and criminal prosecution is possible as well. So the sanctions for misconduct are significant. (Here's an egregious example leading to criminal prosecution).

And, of course, the first and last line of defense against scientific misconduct is the fundamental requirement of peer review. Scientific journals use expert peers to evaluate the research to be considered for publication, and universities turn to expert peers when they consider scientists for promotion and tenure. Both processes create a strong likelihood of detecting fraud if it exists. Who is better qualified to detect a potentially fraudulent research finding than a researcher in the same field?

But is all of this sufficient? It's unclear. The most favorable interpretation would be the judgment that this combination of motivational factors and local and global institutional constraints will contain the problem to an acceptable level. But is there empirical evidence for this optimism? Or is misconduct becoming more widespread over time? The efforts to deepen researchers' attachment to a code of research integrity are certainly positive -- but what about the small percentage of people who are not motivated by an internal compass? Greater internal controls are certainly a good idea -- but they are surely less effective in the area of research than accounting controls are in the financial arena. Oversight is just more difficult to achieve in the area of scientific research. (And of course we all know how porous those controls are in the financial sector -- witness Enron and other accounting frauds.) And if the likelihood of detection is low, then the threat of punishment is weakened. So the measures mentioned here have serious limitations in likely effectiveness.

Brian Deer is one of Britain's leading journalists covering medical research (website). His work in the Sunday Times of London established the medical fraud underlying the spurious claim that MMR vaccine causes autism mentioned above. Following a recent public lecture to a medical audience he was asked the question, how can we get a handle on frauds like these? And his answer was blunt: with snap inspections,

investigative policing, and serious penalties. In his perception, the stakes are too high to leave the matter to professional ethics.

It perhaps goes without saying that the vast majority of scientific researchers are honest investigators who are guided by the advancement of science and medicine. But it is also apparent that there are a small number of researchers of whom these statements are not true. And the problem confronting the organizations of scientific research is a hard one: how to create the institutional structures where misconduct is unlikely to occur and where misconduct is most likely to be detected when it does.

There is one other connection that strikes me as important, and it is a connection to the philosophy of science. It is an item of faith for philosophers of science that the scientific enterprise is truth-enhancing, in this sense: the community of researchers follows a set of institutionally embodied processes that are well designed to enhancing the comprehensiveness and veridicality of our theories and weeding out the false theories. Our theories get better through the empirical and logical testing that occurs as a result of these socially embodied procedures of science. But if the corrupting influences mentioned above are indeed common, then the confidence we have in the epistemic value of the procedures of science takes a big hit. And this is worrisome news indeed. Posted by Daniel Little at 07:39PM (-05:00)

A crisis in sociology?

Tuesday, February 17, 2009

Alvin Gouldner thought there was a "coming crisis in sociology" -- but that was almost forty years ago, in 1970 (The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology). And in 1996 Immanuel Wallerstein closed out the century by chairing the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences, issuing a report that called for some radical rethinking of the basic assumptions of the social sciences (Open the Social Sciences).

Both Gouldner and Wallerstein are pretty good at theorizing about the social world. So what can we learn from their worries? Does the twenty-first century demand some new thinking in the ways that we construct the social sciences?

I think it does. If we want to have a more adequate basis for understanding the rapid processes of social change that surround us globally and locally, we need to rethink the concepts and methods we bring to social theory. And if we want to have a basis for attempting to influence some of these processes through policy, so as to avoid some of the more awful outcomes that they seem to lead to, then we need to be more eclectic in our thinking about social causes and their interactions.

What are some of the considerations that lead Gouldner, Wallerstein, and other critics to the conclusion that sociology needs some rethinking?

Gouldner's concerns are focused on what he calls the Academic Sociology of the first half of the twentieth century. The first two-thirds of the book takes the form of a critique of the sociological theories that dominated sociology in the 1940s and 1950s -- theories of social order, structural development, the workings of the social system, functionalism, and the pervasive influence of Talcott Parsons in the middle decades of the century. So the crisis to which Gouldner refers is really the crisis of functionalist sociology (though he indicates that he thinks that Marxist sociology is heading towards its own crisis as well). It

is a sociology that attempts to understand society as a system, that expects social phenomena to be lawlike, and that abstracts almost entirely from history as context or process.

Essentially Gouldner's critique is that functionalism implicitly assumes that social systems have reached some kind of optimum in the composition of institutions that govern social life. Social organizations bring about maximum social utility. But Gouldner points out that this theoretical mindset makes it inherently difficult to deal with change. And yet the United States in the 1960s was unmistakeably involved in a process of profound change in its social, economic, and political institutions. So functionalist sociology was ill-equipped to understand and explain the most basic features of American life in the post-Vietnam War era -- mass protest, racial inequality, extension of the welfare state, urban poverty, and maladaptive political structures.

This is roughly the point at which Julia Adams, Elisabeth Stephanie Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff pick up the story in Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology. And their focus group of beacon social scientists is a promising one -- scholars such as Barrington Moore, Theda Skocpol, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, or Jack Goldstone, for example. Adams and her co-editors provide a much more hopeful interpretation of the promise that the methods of historical sociology have for improving our understanding of the society we live in. The sociology of social movements, conflict, and change replaced the sociology of systems and functional adaptations among the basic institutions of a society; change rather than stasis was the central thread. And along with this emphasis on change came a sociological spotlight on history. In fact, one might say that the crisis that Gouldner foresaw was actually resolved by the explosion of research within historical sociology, social mobilization theory, and mid-level studies of historically concrete social institutions and processes.

Now what about Wallerstein's worries about contemporary sociology? Several points are particularly salient. First, there is a critique of the "nomothetic" quest -- the idea that the social sciences should discover social laws. In fact, the commission report observes that this goal is even a bit challenged in the natural sciences when we consider the dynamics of non-linear dynamic systems:

Today many natural scientists would argue that the world should be described quite differently. It is a more unstable world, a much more complex world, a world in which perturbations play a big role, one of whose key questions is how to explain how such complexity arises. (62)

And social phenomena surely demonstrate this sort of complex non-linearity as well. So it is unlikely that we will discover robust "laws of society" that will serve to explain and predict social outcomes.

Second, there is praise for the reunion of social science and history, with social scientists recognizing that the phenomena they study always have a historical context, and with historians recognizing that the social scientists may have uncovered quasi-general processes that can assist them to arrive at explanations of puzzling historical outcomes. This converges a bit with Gouldner's critique of functionalism. Referring to a new generation of social scientists, Wallerstein writes:

Their criticism of "mainstream" social sciences included the assertion that they had neglected the centrality of social change, favoring a mythology of consensus, and that they showed a naive, even arrogant, self-assuredness in applying Western concepts to

the analysis of very different phenomena and cultures. (44)
Third, Wallerstein notes that many of the large concepts of social science research in the 1960s are deeply questionable -- for example, the concept of modernization as a construct around which to understand the development processes of the post-colonial world. Much more satisfactory is research along the lines of that of Arturo Escobar, fundamentally questioning the assumptions of progress, development, and modernization that dominated a lot of development thinking in the sixties (Encountering Development).

And fourth, Wallerstein and the commission raise pointed questions about the adequacy of disciplinary boundaries in the social sciences, and they emphasize the value of stimulating social research across the boundaries of the various disciplines.

So what kind of sociology should we be looking for if we want to understand the big, complex changes that surround us -- big cities, globalization, social networks, terrorism, failing schools, economic transitions, or the transmission of pandemic illness?

Here's a possible vision: We should be eclectic in theory and in method. We should welcome large interdisciplinary collaborations. We should expect heterogeneity and plasticity in the phenomena we study. We should pay a lot of attention to historical process and historical context -- not because the past determines the future, but because it constrains it. We should look carefully for the concrete mechanisms that bring about the social outcomes of interest. We should be ready to disaggregate large social processes into their components. And we should be more than ready to settle our gaze on the middle range of phenomena rather than stretching for heroic generalizations that are intended to hold across time, space, and culture.

We will need the best social science we can create to handle the challenges of the twenty-first century. And the shards that remain of positivism, functionalism, and naturalism won't help us to arrive at the innovative intellectual frameworks that will be required.

(Here and here are posts on some related methodological disputes in sociology and political science.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:24PM (-05:00)

Regional interconnectedness

Saturday, February 21, 2009



Chicago, Milwaukee, and Detroit are part of a large economic region in the upper Midwest of the United States, which is sometimes referred to as the Great Lakes Region. There are hundreds of lesser cities within this regional system -- Erie, Toledo, Rockford, Grand Rapids, ... What are the economic interdependencies that exist among these cities? How important are these relationships in the overall pattern of economic development that each city demonstrates? And of critical practical importance, how much leverage exists for development planners in these major cities to

enhance their city's progress through adroit use of these relationships? Is there a possible gain for Milwaukee in virtue of the net effect of its relationships to Detroit? Or is each metropolitan region mostly autarkic with respect to the other?

There seem to be several theoretical possibilities. One is that there are in fact major point-to-point economic interdependencies among cities within a large economic region and that these are significantly different across different pairs of cities. It might be that the growth or contraction of auto manufacturing in Detroit is tightly enough linked to supplier companies in Milwaukee that what helps Detroit also helps Milwaukee.

Another possibility is that the regional impact is systemic rather than point-to-point. Here the idea is that the great metropolitan regions within a regional economy contribute to the macroeconomic environment for the region -- labor demand, growth, consumer demand, and fiscal shares. The region sets the basic parameters -- transport cost, commodity prices, and the current distribution of population and talent. But the impact of, say, Milwaukee on Toledo is entirely mediated through the macroeconomic environment of the region. And to the extent that there are correlations of advance and decline, this is the result of regional "pulsing" of macroeconomic factors rather than specific city-to-city interactions.

A third possibility is that each metropolitan region is largely independent within the larger region, so that regional economic performance is simply the aggregation of the performance of the component metropolitan regions (cities). And if this is the case, then we would expect a low degree of correlation on economic development across the cities of a region. (But in this case it is more difficult to explain why we refer to the set of cities as an economic "region" at all, since this term implies a degree of economic similarity and interdependence.)

Let's look at the first possibility more closely. Logically, the possibility of this kind of interdependency appears to depend on the existence of directed flows of activities between the places that do not extend to other places. There must be some network reality to the region within which A and B are proximate nodes. What else could provide the mechanism of mutual causal influence upon which the postulated interdependence depends?

So what are the inter-city connections that might support tight point-to-point linkages? The direct industry-to-industry dependencies mentioned above are most obvious. More furniture manufacturing in Grand Rapids might stimulate a surge in business for the plastic mesh producers in Rockford, to complete those great Aeron chairs. The input-output tables measuring exchange activity between the two cities might be extensive or minimal.

Here is another possible connection -- the talent needs in some cities might lead to the growth of universities in cities in other parts of the region. In a hypothetical history of the Midwest, Chicago might extend its current concentration of research universities and become a "knowledge center" for the region, supplying the inventors, architects, accountants, and lawyers for the region. In fact, specialized education and research is more diffused than this; but isn't this essentially the role that Boston played for a century or so for the northeast?

A third possibility -- two cities might be tightly linked through the existence of particularly efficient transportation or communication systems between them. Are Seattle and San

Francisco more tightly linked economically because they are both Pacific Ocean ports with low-cost transport between them? What about Minneapolis, St. Louis, and New Orleans, linked by the barges of the Mississippi River?

Historically there are fairly good measures of economic interconnectedness between places. We can examine the correlation of time series of prices, wages, and profits to measure the degree of economic integration that exists among A, B, and C. Likewise, we can examine the patterns of growth or contraction of employment over time; do Milwaukee, Toledo, and Detroit demonstrate synchronized patterns of growth and contraction in business activity and overall employment over long periods of time? And the transport links mentioned here are a particularly fundamental source of economic integration in 19th-century studies of China, France, or the United States. (It's possible that contemporary data would suggest that all U.S. cities are equally integrated by these measures, since market integration has increased dramatically through transport and communications improvements.)

The most compact basis for studies of regional integration derives from the original insights of central place theory -- William Cronon's analysis of Chicago and its hinterlands, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West, is an outstanding example of this approach. And G. William Skinner's analysis of the urban hierarchies of late imperial China falls in this general approach. What these examples do not permit, though, is analysis of inter-city dependencies across a region. At a very different level, these are the kinds of questions Saskia Sassen is asking about "world" cities. She attempts to identify the linkages that exist among major cities with respect to financial flows, internet traffic, and telephone calls. See earlier posts on each of these approaches (post, post, post).
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:01AM (-05:00)

Sociologie de Paris?

Monday, February 23, 2009



What might be involved in creating a new sociology of Paris? Paris is a particularly good subject for a new urban sociology. It is a gritty, diverse, and dynamic city, and a city displaying unceasing chaotic surges and currents of social life. It is a global city, both in Saskia Sassen's sense (strong networked interconnection with other global cities) and in the sense of being a magnet for immigrants from every part of the world. It is an intellectual city, a conflictual city, a city with continuous poverty and deprivation, as well as conspicuous wealth, and a city with high unemployment and aggressive policing. And it is a city with ubiquitous transit (dozens of lines serving hundreds of stations), implying thorough urban mobility; but also invisible boundaries marking the edges of the social circuits of various social and ethnic groups.

If we were beginning anew, we might start with the racial and ethnic diversity the city contains and the circuits of social life that these many groups traverse. Ride the RER from Chatelet to Charles de Gaulle and you may get an impression of a great salad

spinner of humanity -- everyone all mixed up on one long subway carriage. But this impression is probably mistaken -- Didier Lapeyronnie's analysis of the French ghetto puts stop to that thought (post) and highlights the very sharp separations that exist between immigrant neighborhoods and the rest of French cities. So a sociology of Paris needs to uncover the distinct social worlds it encompasses.

And we would want to map the terrain of poverty and deprivation in Paris. Who are the poor? How is poverty caused and reproduced in Paris? What groups are most likely to be homeless and hungry (SDF -- sans domicile fixe)? And how large a factor does immigration play in this question? Recall the deadly fires several years ago in Paris -- these were temporary housing facilities for homeless immigrants (story). A recent collaboration among sociologists and journalists picks up this thread in La France invisible. The creators of the project have undertaken to give voice to the many categories of poor and disempowered people in France: accidentés au travail, banlieusards, délocalisés, discriminés, disparus, dissimulés, drogués, ... These short pieces provide thumbnail descriptions of the circumstances of life of the people involved in these categories, often incorporating an interview or two. The hope here is to give a visceral glimpse to the reader of the life difficulties involved in these (alphabetically organized) categories.

A related subject for a new descriptive sociology of Paris has to do with the patterns of public health that the city embodies. What sorts of health disparities exist across different social groups? How are these differentials patterned socially across the city itself? Here is a very brief discussion of the issue of health disparities in France, presented at the "Congrès national des Observatoires régionaux de la santé 2008 - Les inégalités de santé" in Marseille, 16-17 octobre 2008. But this report is very brief and is not city- or region-specific. By contrast, a central focus of public health research in the U.S. is on the patterns of health disparities that can be found in cities such as Detroit, Chicago, or New York, often accompanied by detailed social mapping of the results.

And what about employment and education? What are the mechanisms through which education, social position, age, race, and ethnicity play out across social groups to create the specific patterns of employment opportunity that Paris presents? Jobs and education are highly volatile issues everywhere in France today -- witness the current waves of strikes and demonstrations about unemployment and education reform. What are the social mechanisms underlying these systems? (Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron addressed the social class aspects of the French educational system in Les héritiers (1964).) To what extent do the concrete institutions of training, education, and job recruitment work to reproduce significant inequalities across social groups?

Social mapping analysis would help in each of these areas. GIS maps of the city demonstrating the spatial distribution of poverty, crime, bad schools, police brutality, and 2-1-1 calls would tell us a lot about the social geography of the city. It would be enormously interesting to be able to have access to an interactive map of the city, combining many social variables of interest. In fact, that social map would help make sense of the long RER ride mentioned above. As you pass through neighborhoods ranging from affluent to graffiti-inscribed banlieue, you would be able to make the connection to some of the social realities that underlie these glimpses. Surprisingly, though, these sorts of spatial analyses and maps don't seem to exist yet for Paris or other French cities -- or at least, they are not easily located on the web. Is this a specific feature of the French sociological discourse -- with French researchers perhaps more attuned to discursive theory and less to spatial analysis and empirical study?

One might paraphrase the point here as saying that Paris deserves what Chicago received in the 1920s through 1940s in the form of the "Chicago School of Sociology" -- a focused, empirically rigorous, analytically astute series of efforts to come to grips with the complex social realities of the city, and to provide a better diagnosis of the social problems of the city in a way that supports more effective social policy. It's possible that this type of approach already exists within some of the social science research institutes of French universities. If so, I hope that readers will point us in the right direction.

(Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot have a recent book on the sociology of Paris. Here is an interview with Michel Pinçon in LeJournalduNet on the subject of the wealthy class in France and an interview on the "bourgeoisification" of Paris. And Céline Béraud and Baptiste Coulmont offer a very good account of the recent development of French sociology in Les courants contemporains de la sociologie. Baptiste Coulmont maintains an interesting academic website and blog here.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:19AM (-05:00)

Disaffected youth

Friday, February 27, 2009



Every city seems to have its floating population of disaffected youth -- school dropouts, occasional workers, drug users, skateboarders, hooligans, street people. How much of a problem is this? What are its dimensions? What are the social causes that influence the size and nature of this population in Detroit, Manchester, Cologne, or Novosibirsk? And are there social programs that can significantly diminish the number of young people who wind up in this category?

As for the importance of the problem, there are at least two aspects. In some times and places this population becomes a source of violence -- youth gangs, football hooliganism, shop window breakage, and skinhead attacks on racial minorities, gays, or other targets. But second, whether violent or passive, the precipitation of a sub-class of young people with no skills, no jobs, and no futures is a huge social cost for the societies that produce them.

Here I'm mostly interested in the processes of neglect and social-economic disadvantage that play into the mentality of some young people, leading to the formation of an individual social psychology that brings about the low-level anti-social behavior that is observed. Basically -- why do some young people drop out of the process of gaining an education, building a career, forming a family, and looking forward to the future, and instead spend their time hanging out in the streets? The skinhead phenomenon adds another element that is also worth understanding but is not the primary interest here -- a degree of organizational effort by political entrepreneurs who work towards mobilizing disaffected youth around racist and nationalist agendas. This falls under the category of social mobilization studied by people such as Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, or Charles Tilly. But here I'm more interested here in the process of socialization at the individual level that leads to the phenomenon of disaffection. (Several earlier posts have addressed

the mobilization part of the story -- for example, here.)

Here is a very interesting academic study by Robert MacDonald of the making of a "youth underclass" in the UK. Here is how MacDonald frames his problem of research:

Most young people in the UK make relatively ‘successful’, unproblematic transitions from school to work and adulthood. What do we call those that do not? Labels imply explanation, not just description. Terms with academic and policy currency tend to define such young people by something they are not or by their presumed social and economic distance and dislocation from ‘the rest’. How we might best describe, explain and label the experience and problem of so-called ‘socially excluded’, ‘disconnected youth’ is the focus of the paper.
To use the term "disaffected" is to bring a Durkheimian mindset to the table; it is to offer the beginnings of a diagnosis of the problem as well as a description. The phrase "disaffected" (or its cognate, "demoralized") presents the problem as one of disconnection from prevailing social values and alienation from a set of moral ideas about how to behave. The "disaffected" no longer believe in the old chestnuts about working hard, listening to one's parents, showing respect to others, obeying the law, and conforming to society's expectations. So on this line of thought, the anti-social behavior of young people in this category derives from their "demoralization" -- their failure, or society's failure, to absorb a compelling set of normative standards about personal and social conduct.

But here is a slightly different tack we might take here. Perhaps disadvantaged youth disbelieve because they have lost all confidence in the underlying promise: conform to these norms and you will have a decent life. In other words, maybe the psychological cause of these forms of youth behavior is economic rather than moral; they are deeply discouraged about the possibility of a pathway to a better future than the world they seem around themselves at the moment. "Hopeless and angry" is a different state of mind than "disaffected."

And what about the factor of motivation and personal ambition? To what extent is normal youth development propelled by internal factors of motivation and aspiration? And how much of a role does a social context that "demotivates" young people play in this picture?

Another line of thought has emerged out of research on youth gangs -- the idea of the positive forms of solidarity and community that are provided by the gang as a welcoming social group. Young people who have lost the social support of their families and other traditional organizations may find that the street gang is the closest thing to "home" that they are able to locate. These are social groups with their own codes of behavior -- even though their largest effects are profoundly anti-social.

A common recourse when it comes to trying to explain these kinds of outcomes is to refer to various "breakdowns" -- breakdowns of the traditional family, of schools, of religion, of community organizations, or of public values. These are the institutions through which young people form their social psychologies, their identities, and their basic values. But if the young person lacks an emotionally meaningful connection to adults through some of these institutions, where will those positive social values come from?

Finally, it is worth noting that poverty and socio-economic disadvantage are not the only settings where youth disaffection occurs. Many observers in the United States have written about the use of drugs by affluent suburban high school students and other forms

of involvement in anti-social activities. Wayne Wooden's Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws: From Youth Culture to Delinquency documents some of this behavior.

Why is this an important problem for "understanding society"? Because the social processes through which the next generation of citizens -- children, teenagers, and youth -- is shaped are deeply influential on the nature of the society that will develop in twenty to forty years. If "disaffection," "anger," "demoralization," and a propensity for anti-social behavior are inculcated in a large minority of the youth cohort, then society is likely to go through some very hard times in the coming decades.

It's relatively easy to find some dimensions of these issues on the web. Here is an interesting report on "football hooliganism" prepared by Dr. Geoff Pearson of the Football Industry Group. Here is a blog posting from the UK on youth gangs and terrorist organizations. Here is a quick report on skinheads.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:04AM (-05:00)

Social entrepreneurs

Tuesday, March 03, 2009



Social entrepreneurs are people who want to bring about non-routine projects, collaborations, or organizations where they didn't previously exist in order to solve a perceived social problem. This is very different from working within an existing organization and using its official resources to bring about a particular result. An example might be a community activist who conceives of a storefront operation providing financial advice to local homeowners facing foreclosure. In order to bring this about, he or she needs to secure financial commitments from some potential partners, recruit expert volunteers from others, and gain cooperation from community neighbors to trust and use the service. And, finally, the project needs to deliver a reasonable percentage of its promised benefits -- some number of troubled mortgage holders need to be successful in retaining their homes thanks to the service.

There are examples of highly successful social entrepreneurs everywhere -- think of Geoffrey Canada and the creation of the Harlem Children's Zone (link), Matt and Jessica Flannery and the creation of Kiva, a successful peer-to-peer micro-lending program (link), Father William Cunningham and Eleanor Josaitis and the founding of FocusHope in Detroit (link), or Millard and Linda Fuller, founders of Habitat for Humanity (link). And we don't have to turn to the high-profile cases to find great examples of skillful social entrepreneurship -- every city is home to community leaders and innovators who have

created coalitions or organizations that have significantly contributed to solutions for important social problems.

It is interesting to notice that the idea of social entrepreneurship brings in the social in two different ways. Social entrepreneurs are involved in addressing social problems; so the object of the entrepreneurial activity is to enhance some aspect of the public good or to solve a social problem, rather than achieving a private "return on investment". But second, social entrepreneurship depends on putting together voluntary coalitions among a number of independent social actors in a sustained common effort. A purely private and self-financed effort to provide meals for homeless teenagers would be a laudable effort; but I'm not sure I would call it "social entrepreneurship." It doesn't confront the key problem of locating potential partners, engaging them in the project, and sustaining the collaboration over the long term. So a social entrepreneur involves social cooperation at the input side and public goods on the output side.

The question here is a simple one: what are some of the factors that permit some people to be successful in efforts at social entrepreneurship and others strikingly not? There are also other groups of people -- those who would never consider the idea of creating a new social project in any circumstances and those who look at social causes as a moment for personal gain, for example. But just consider the well-intentioned actors who undertake to put together a successful coalition for the public good -- what distinguishes between those who succeed and those who fail?

A couple of related concepts in the social sciences are immediately relevant to this question -- in particular, the concept of social capital and the idea of a social network. Putting the point very intuitively -- success in a project of social entrepreneurship is more likely if the agent has more social relationships of trust and confidence with other influential players to bring to bear in the effort. And likewise, he/she is more likely to succeed in some rough proportion to the depth and weight of the social networks within which the agent is located. (Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community is one place where the idea of social capital is applied to contemporary society.)

Crudely, the individual's capacity to make things happen is multiplied by the strength of the organizations he/she can call upon in support of the effort. This point segues to the point about social networks: if the agent is in a position to call upon the support and collaboration of other resource holders as a result of personal and professional relationships, then he/she is more likely to succeed in putting into place the elements needed for establishment of the project.

Let's apply these points to our community activist. Suppose this individual has developed strong relationships with regional foundations, businesses, semi-governmental organizations, and elected officials. And suppose that these relationships have resulted in a deep reservoir of trust in the activist's perseverance and integrity. Finally, suppose the agent has a well-developed plan for establishing and maintaining the center with high credibility of success. He/she has a good "business plan" for the social project.

It is believable that this actor is much more likely to succeed than his twin with very weak personal and organizational relationships. Our organizer will have a good chance of persuading these potential partners to make the financial commitments and commitments of engagement needed to put the financial counseling center in place. And if the center is successful over several years, it is also likely that the agent's fund of trust and confidence

will deepen -- making the next project even more achievable.

This part of the story concerns the social location of the actor -- the networks and organizations the agent can turn to in seeking support for the project. What are the features of personality and character that support and deepen these elements of social capital?

Here are several. Trust and credibility are essential. This is true because the success of the enterprise requires the continuing cooperation of voluntary partners. The agent needs to inspire trust in the partners. And inspiring trust isn't just a fact about current behavior or a persuasive smile -- the agent needs to have a track record of behavior that validates that trust as well.

Second, credible competence is crucial as well. The agent needs to be able to make the case that the project can succeed and that he/she has the skills needed to carry it out. This too depends heavily on one's history -- the best evidence of future competence is demonstrated past competence.

This also implies a third characteristic -- a need to be able to communicate clearly and credibly. Simply being a good communicator isn't enough, but failing to communicate well certainly weakens the likelihood of success in bringing together a durable partnership.

And we can't overlook the characteristics of originality and imagination. Solving difficult social problems requires new ideas and innovative approaches. So the successful social entrepreneur probably needs to have a focused imagination that permits him/her to conceive of new potential solutions -- or at least recognize them when other people invent them.

One wonders, finally, if there is a dimension of empathy and emotional intelligence that plays an important differentiating role among different social actors in this kind of activity. How important is it for the social entrepreneur to be able to understand and express the human importance of the issue? And how important are these skills in sustaining coalitions once they have begun? It seems believable that this is very important indeed.

It appears that social entrepreneurship is ready for some serious academic study, along the lines of studies of private entrepreneurship over the past several decades. Here is a report of a preliminary study of Ashoka fellows in social entrepreneurship (link). And the Center for Social Innovation at Stanford Graduate School of Business offers some interesting examples as well (link).

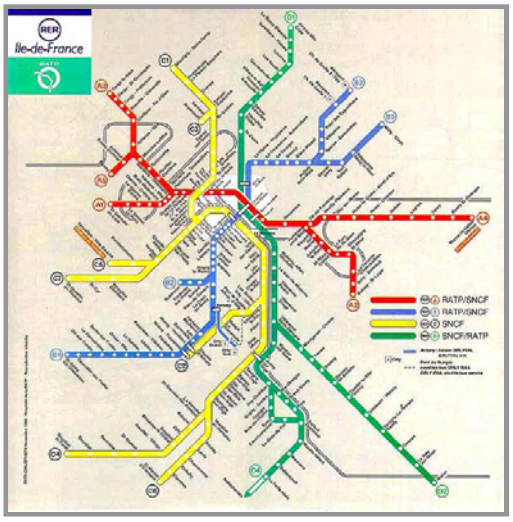
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:52PM (-05:00)

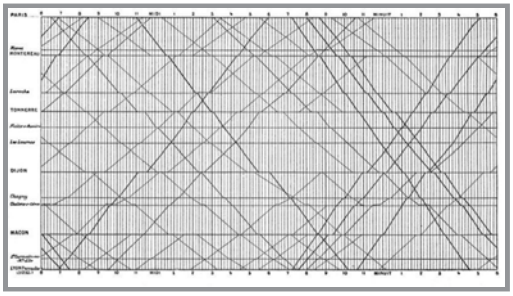
Is a rail network a social structure?

Saturday, March 07, 2009

figures: RER map of Paris; E. J. Marey's graphical representation of Paris-Lyon train schedules, 1885

What role does a rail network play within an adequate ontology of society? Is a rail system primarily a set of physical assets, a set of administrative procedures, or a set of embodied opportunities and constraints for other members of society? The answer is, a





transportation system has elements of all of these.

A rail system provides convenient transportation among a number of places, while providing no service at all between other pairs of locations. You can get from Porchefontaine to Sevran Livry with only a change of trains at St. Michel - N Dame in about 30 minutes -- whereas from Point X to Point Y there is no convenient transportation connection by Metro or RER. This means, among other things, that some parts of Paris are much more tightly integrated than others. It is possible for residents of arrondissement X to shop and work in arrondissement Y very conveniently, whereas this would not be true for arrondissement Z.

So a rail system certainly has direct effects on social behavior; it structures the activities of the two million or more Parisians by making some places of residence, work, shopping, and entertainment substantially more accessible than other places. And there are a number of other social characteristics that are structured by the commuter rail system as a consequence: for example, patterns of class stratification of neighborhoods, patterns of diffusion of infectious disease, patterns of ethnic habitation around the city, patterns of diffusion of social styles and dialect, ... In brief, a rail system has definite social effects. It creates opportunities and constraints that affect the ways in which individuals arrange their lives and plan their daily activities. And other forms of social behavior and activity are conveyed through the conduits established by the transport system.

Moreover, a rail system is a physical network that has an embodied geometry and spatiality on the ground. Through social investments over decades or more, tracks, stations, power lines, people movers, and fuel depots have been created as physical infrastructure for the transportation network. Lines cross at junctions, creating the topology of a network of travel; and the characteristics of travel are themselves elements of the workings of the network -- for example, the rate of speed feasible on various lines determines the volume of throughput of passengers through the system. And neighborhoods and hotels agglomerate around important hubs within the system.

In addition to this physical infrastructure, there is a personnel and management infrastructure associated with a rail system as well: a small army of skilled workers who maintain trains, sell tickets, schedule trains, repair tracks, and myriad other complex tasks that must be accomplished in order for the rail system to carry out its function of efficiently and promptly providing transportation. This human organization is surely a "social structure," with some level of internal corrective mechanisms that maintain the quality of human effort, react to emergencies, and accomplish the business functions of the rail system. This structure exists in the form of training procedures, operating manuals, and processes of supervision that maintain the coordination needed among

ticket agents in stations, repairmen in the field, track inspectors, engineers, and countless other railroad workers. And this structure is fairly resilient in the face of change of personnel; it is a bureaucratized structure that makes provision for the replacement of individuals in all locations within the organization over time.

So a rail network has structural characteristics at multiple levels. The physical network itself has structural characteristics (nodes, rates of travel, volume of flow of passengers and freight). This can be represented statically by the network of tracks and intersections that exist (like the stylized map of the RER above); dynamically, we can imagine a "live" map of the system representing the coordinated surging of multiple trains throughout the system, throughout the course of the day. The railroad organization has a bureaucratic structure -- represented abstractly by the organizational chart of the company, but embodied in the internal processes of training, supervision, and recruitment that manage the activities of thousands of employees. And the social and technical ensemble that these constitute in turn creates an important structure within the social landscape, in that these physical and human structures determine the opportunities and constraints that exist for individuals to pursue their goals and purposes.

A general problem that confronts assertions about "social structures" is the question, what factors give the hypothesized structure a degree of permanence over time? Why should we not expect that social structures will morph quickly in response to changing uses and demands by opportunistic actors within them? A rail system provides a somewhat more definite answer to this question than is possible for most putative social structures: the physicality of the system is itself a barrier to rapid, radical structural change. The locations of the great rail terminus stations in Paris have not changed in the past century. And this is at least in part a consequence of the vast "sunk costs" that are associated with the embodied structure of track, intersection, and station that had developed over the course of the first fifty years of French railroad expansion. So the need for a passenger from Dijon to Strasbourg to convey himself/herself from the Gare de Lyon (1900) to the Gare de l'Est (1849) is exactly the same today as it was in 1900.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:32PM (-05:00)

Metaphors for history

Tuesday, March 10, 2009



What kind of thing is "history"? Think of the history of the Roman Empire, or the history of Tokugawa Japan, or the history of the American banking system. We want to be able to conceptualize these complex stories as possessing some kind of unity over centuries of time, thousands of locations, and millions of lives; we want to be able to identify common threads of development, common themes or topics that continue to recur throughout the history of the period. And yet it is plain that history consists of unmeasured diversity and heterogeneity as well -- individuals, psychologies, local conditions, aberrant princes, external threats, famines, floods, and panics. So historians are led to adopt different kinds of metaphors to attempt to provide a degree of unity to their subject. There are quite a few different metaphors that have been used to

characterize history: a river, a tree, a labyrinth, an ocean, a landscape. Several are particularly worth unpacking, but the metaphor that I prefer is "pathway."

Here is how the river metaphor might work as a way of thinking about the "course" of history. Rivers have tributaries -- rivulets of water flowing down hill into the broader concourse. History has "streams" of contributing events that lead to the larger outcome -- the confluence of developments in the French medieval rural economy, the development of the fiscal crisis of the Ancien regime, and the emergence of a town-based bourgeoisie, for example, coming together to contribute to the unfolding of the French Revolution. There is a seeming unity to a river over time, even though the constituent water simply passes through continuously; analogously, one might view history as a "stream" of events that individual humans pass through, constituting a larger and more stable historical current. (Though of course we won't forget the Heraclitus paradox.) Rivers are to some extent constrained -- by existing topography, but also by human artifacts (dams, levees, flood walls). Historical developments too are constrained by circumstances such as agricultural productivity, population levels, and warfare. Rivers sometimes change their course -- for example, the frequently changing course of the Yellow River over many centuries. But more commonly they become longstanding features of the terrain over centuries or millenia. Analogously, there is at least the semblance of long, steady periods of continuity of human affairs within human history -- interrupted by crises and turning points. (See an earlier posting on the idea of a turning point.) Rivers have a direction of flow -- from north to south, from high ground to lower ground. And some interpreters of history have argued analogously for a direction of change in history as well -- towards "progress," "modernization," greater administrative intensity, higher standards of living for the population, or greater democracy, for example. And rivers have a powerful momentum of their own -- we can be swept away in the currents of the Mississippi River, as John Reed was swept up in the events of the Russian Revolution.

The river metaphor captures some of our intuitive thinking about history -- tributaries, currents, stretches of turbulence. But it also conveys a necessity or inevitability that fails to come to grips with the deep contingency of history. A river has an inexorable course of flow -- from high ground to low ground. And the topography essentially determines the shape and configuration of the river bed. This metaphor suggests that history too has an inevitable course or direction -- which is profoundly untrue.

How about the idea of history as a tree? Here, the idea is that there are "branches" in history -- points where developments could have gone "left" or "right", and the next phases of history are dependent on the specific branches that have been taken before. America could have invested in canals rather than railroads -- and its transportation history and subsequent urbanization would have been significantly different. (Robert Fogel makes an argument along these lines in Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History; here is a nice, short description of his argument.) The analogy isn't exactly between "history" and "tree"; instead, it is between the space of hypothetical historical possibilities and the branches of a tree. Actual history is one specific pathway through this tree of possibilities. Finally, trees have systems of "roots" -- the structures under the ground and out of sight that explain the nutrition and growth of the tree. And how often historians turn to expressions like "the roots of the Cold War extend back to X, Y, and Z."

This metaphor does a better job of capturing the contingency of history, in that it highlights that the actual course of history is simply the aggregate result of the branches or choices taken previously -- with the clear understanding that other routes through the

space of possibilities were possible as well. One of the obvious difficulties with the tree metaphor, though, is the extreme uncertainty that exists about the branches, the hypothetical alternative outcomes that might have put a given society on a different trajectory. For any given major historical event we can speculate with varying degrees of rigor about how things might have come out differently; but we can't really go very far down the route of the "alternative history" that might have ensued. So the idea of a "tree diagram of alternative histories" is only a metaphor, not something that could be accomplished through historical research. (Niall Ferguson has an interesting book on "counterfactual history"; Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals.)

So here is a third possible metaphor for history: history is an accumulation of pathways and contingencies that embed human action over time. I find that this metaphor works well as a way to characterize the course of history. Paths are created by purposive agents, going somewhere with an understanding of the topography. Pathways become roadways, and they become systems of constraint and opportunity. And they sometimes become the elements or segments of larger systems with long historical and human consequences (for example, the Roman road system illustrated at Ambrussum above). Road systems illustrate the meaning of “path-dependence”; once the pathway exists, other routes across the terrain become less likely. And the metaphor illustrates as well the perpetual interaction of agent and structure that good historians almost always emphasize; the plasticity of social entities; the contingency of their specific properties; and their constraining power influencing human choices.

The pathways metaphor incorporates both diachronic and synchronic elements into our conceptualization of history. At a given time, history presents us with a given set of embodied constraints and opportunities that represent the accretion of the past as a context for the present. The system of roads penetrating through a medieval town represent a snapshot of its history over a thousand years -- and a set of frustrating obstacles to the contemporary driver. Marx puts the weight of history's legacy in these terms in the Eighteenth Brumaire:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.
But there is a diachronic aspect of the metaphor as well: the structures that constrain the present today are themselves involved in a temporally extended process of modification and accretion from yesterday to today to tomorrow. The road system continues to evolve in response to contemporary needs and wants, and presents a new set of constraints and opportunities to the generation to come.

On this approach, history doesn't have any ultimate directionality; it is simply the sum of a long series of inventions, actions, interventions, and accidents over decades or centuries. At the same time, it is subject to a degree of explicability, in that earlier moments of historical development set the stage for choices and inventions in the next phase. Outcomes are "path-dependent", in that they depend critically on the circumstances and accidents of the past. But at the same time, there is a degree of "sunk costs," social momentum, and embodied infrastructure that make some historical developments much more likely than others.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:28PM (-04:00)

Inequalities in France

Wednesday, March 11, 2009

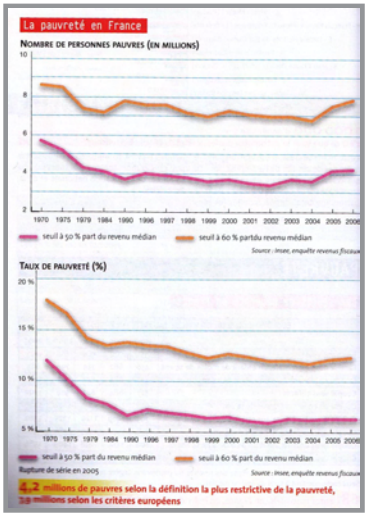


Inequalities in France are particularly volatile these days, with high unemployment, rising income inequality, increasingly evident differences in opportunities for young people from immigrant communities, and rather different levels of schooling available to different communities in France. Social conflict, strikes, and political disagreements are rising in France, and it will take skillful work by community leaders and public policy makers to arrive at a new and sustainable social consensus. There seems to be a new social reality in France -- and to cope with these new realities, there is an urgent need for good social understanding of the causes of social distress, social inequality, and social conflict.



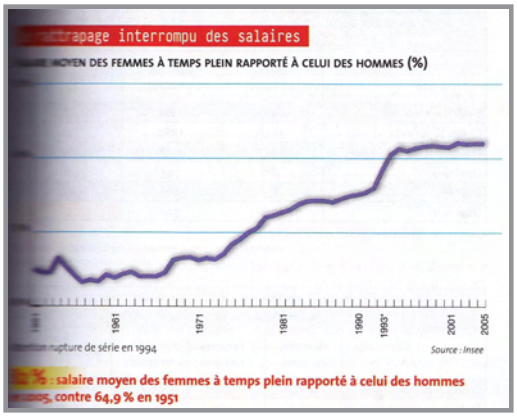
Some recent work in French sociology, economics, and journalism provides some useful contributions towards arriving at that better understanding of contemporary France.

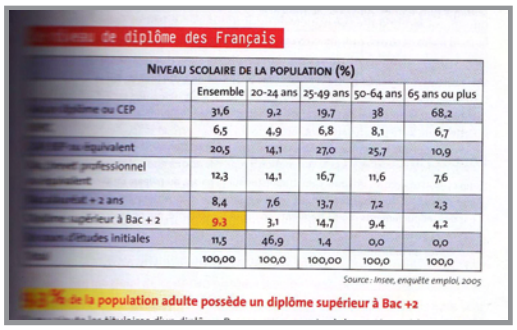
Noteworthy along these lines is an important institute at the Sorbonne that focuses on inequalities in France, L'Observatoire des inégalités. Researchers affiliated with the Observatoire have recently published the institute's second report on inequalities, L'état des inégalités en France 2009 (link). The volume includes extensive statistical information about social and economic inequalities in France, as well as a set of short, thoughtful essays offering analysis of several dimensions of current inequalities. Observatoire Director Louis Maurin and President Patrick Savidan provide the introduction to the volume. The book is a solid and illuminating snapshot of the situation of wealth, income, education, gender, and ethnic status in France today, and it provides a useful empirical baseline for understanding current debates and conflicts in France during this period of severe economic crisis.



The major categories of measurement include income and poverty, employment, education, life style, social origin, gender, age, nationality and immigration, space and territory, health, housing, and comparisons with Europe and the world.

The book brings forward a great range of social data. Several graphs and charts caught





my eye as being particularly interesting. Here's a map of poverty across the face of France:

And here is a graph indicating the rate and volume of poverty over several decades. The second panel indicates a fairly large decline in the percentage of poverty since 1970, with relatively little change in the past ten years.

Women's equality in the workplace appears to have made more progress than in many other countries. Since 1951 median female salary has increased from about 65% of median male salary to about 82% in 2005:

And the percentage of adults with higher education is also an interesting variable. Overall, 17.7% of adults have a two-year or four-year degree beyond the Baccalaureat (roughly, high school diploma). This compares to a U.S. figure of about 27% of the adult population with an bachelor's degree (link), with an additional percentage of adults with a two-year associate's degree. This is especially important because another table documents that 72% of young people with the Bac+2 have regular jobs, compared with only 43% of young people lacking a diploma. Clearly, access to higher education is a critical component in economic opportunity in France, as it is in the United States.

The section on health is interesting, though it would be useful to have more public health variables and more disaggregation across regions and communities. In the fifteen years between 1976 and 1991 life expectancy for both men and women has increased by about three years, and the gap between male and female life expectancy has remained wide at about seven years (76 compared to 83 for the period 1991-1999). In general, this volume indicates that French public opinion and public policy seems to pay more attention to the situation of "handicapped" people than is the case in the United States.

The section on nationalities and immigrants is also eye-opening. 15% of immigrant households fall below the poverty line, compared with 5.6% of non-immigrant households. And households of North African origin show a staggering poverty rate of 22.6%. The report makes it plain that a significant part of this differential derives from overt discrimination; a candidate with a French surname is between 1.5 and 3 times more likely to receive a job interview than a French resident of Moroccan origin.

An excellent companion to this book is La France invisible, prepared by Stéphane Beaud, Joseph Confavreux, and Jade Lindgaard. (See an earlier posting on French sociology for a brief discussion of this book.) This book makes an extensive effort to catalogue the many slices of French society that are often overlooked; this is the sociological reality that underlies many of the forms of inequality described in L'état des inégalités en France 2009. La France invisible is not primarily interested in statistical measurement; there is not a single table or graph in the 650-page volume. Instead, it is an effort at sociological

description and ethnographic insight into the situations of daily life of the various disadvantaged minority groups in France. The editors link their work to an earlier book by Pierre Bourdieu, La Misere du monde, in 1993. Their goal is to give voice to people and groups who have been largely unheard in the larger society in the past thirty years. And they have made a very powerful contribution to this effort.

Combine these books with the careful and intense fieldwork by Didier Lapeyronnie in Ghetto urbain, and you have a great survey of social inequalities in France today. (See an earlier posting on segregation in France that refers to Lapeyronnie's work.) Lapeyronnie's work documents in great sociological detail, some of the social realities that define the situation of inequality, discrimination, and segregation that limit many of France's immigrant communities today. And it is self-evident, that France must address these issues in ways consistent with its highest civic values -- or social conflict is inevitable.

I am sure that every country is developing its own forms of analysis of the new social realities that the twenty-first century confronts us with. And it is an interesting fact that there are persistent differences across national traditions of social inquiry. We certainly need new approaches and new mental frameworks in terms of which to understand the rapidly changing social circumstances of the cities and populations of the world today. Berlin, Oslo, and Milan are probably creating equally interesting new ideas about how to conceptualize emerging social realities. But even in this global world of ideas, the obstacle of language makes transmission of these research traditions difficult. The contemporary French sociological framework is sufficiently distinctive from American and British sociology to serve as a highly interesting point of contrast and innovation for fresh thinking everywhere.

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:07PM (-04:00)

Proto social inquiry

Saturday, March 14, 2009



We sometimes imagine that the current disciplines and methods of the social sciences represent a more or less inevitable set of approaches to the problem of understanding social phenomena. But really, the latter task is much larger than the specific sets of disciplines and methods we have currently developed. It is worth turning back the dial a bit and reflecting on the intellectual currents that led to contemporary programmes for the social sciences.

Reflective people have been curious about the workings of the social world for as long as they have observed and commented upon the world of actions and institutions that they found around themselves. The Greeks were particularly interested in such things as the causes and outcomes of war (Thucydides), the properties of different kinds of states (Plato), the nature of the family (Aristotle), and so on. Often the focus was on the question of “justice”—the features of social arrangements that were justified on moral



grounds. But there are also many examples of philosophers and writers who were interested in the question of the how and why of social life: how does it work, what sorts of causes are at work, and why do certain kinds of outcomes occur (poverty, war, violence)? These reflections often represented systematic thinking and observation, but they did not amount to what we would call “social science” today.

Several important changes occurred in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that created a new impulse towards a different kind of study of the social world. One was eighteenth-century globalization. There was more knowledge available from travelers and colonial administrators about exotic social and familial practices in non-European places. The fact of religious and moral diversity was itself a startling discovery. This set of discoveries demonstrated the unavoidable fact of human social diversity. In the eighteenth century European thinkers raised questions deriving from the observed differences in social orders around the globe; so thinkers such as Rousseau and Montesquieu considered the significance and causes of different patterns of social organization in Europe, the New World, Africa, and Asia. So the questions arose, how do these alternative social orders work, and why are there such wide differences in the first place?

Second was an increasing recognition of the interconnectedness of economic and political life within European societies themselves. The physiocrats and the British political economists began to postulate causal connections between certain kinds of social facts—settlement, trade, extension of agriculture, and law—with certain kinds of outcomes—the creation of the wealth of nations. The physiocrats particularly highlighted the systematic relationships that exist between environment, land, food production, prices, rents, and other forms of economic development. And debates about economic policies in the nineteenth century -- debates over the Corn Laws, for example -- likewise pointed towards the discovery of previously unobserved causal connections among economic facts.

A third major change carried over into the nineteenth century—the advance of modern industrial production, urbanization, bureaucratic states, class formation, migration, and a recognition of major social changes associated with urbanization and industrialization. These changes, associated with the industrial revolution, set urgent new intellectual challenges to thoughtful observers; why were these changes taking place, and where were they going? Even Hegel expressed theoretical interest in the rise of the bureaucratic state -- Shlomo Avineri's Hegel's Theory of the Modern State makes a very clear case for the historical and empirical interests that Hegel had, along with his abstract philosophical theory of Right. What would be the consequences for European (or French and English) civilization of these basic seismic shifts in the order of society? Thus, for example, Engels, Tocqueville, and Carlyle all reflected intensely on the meaning of Manchester for the new society (link, link, link).

Fourth, a raft of novel and urgent social problems—destitution, factory safety, crime, widespread hunger, deracination of the majority population, and the creation of enormous cities—loomed large in the emerging interest in creating “sociology.” How could a modern

society cope with these problems? (Gareth Stedman Jones's book Outcast London is particularly interesting for the insights it shed on how nineteenth-century observers, including Alfred Marshall, attempted to understand the problems and changes associated with London's rapid development.) Parliamentary commissions on conditions of labor, public health, and other important social problems provided an empirical basis for more systematic study by theoretically minded thinkers. The systematic collection of social statistics in turn created an intellectual demand for analysis in the form of the mathematics of probability and statistics. (Ian Hacking's book, The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference, provides a nice account of some of these developments.)

Finally was the rise of full-blown results in the natural sciences in the nineteenth century—chemistry, electromagnetism, mechanics, geology, and biology. So the idea of studying and explaining the patterns of the social world with the same kinds of "science" was a fairly natural next step. The sudden impact of Darwinian ideas about biological evolution and the origin of species at late century was also important for some early sociologists. Founding social scientists as diverse as Marx, Durkheim, Comte, and Spencer were influenced by the models of empirical and logical rigor associated with positive natural science -- sometimes to the detriment of the future development of the social sciences. (See earlier postings on positivism and naturalism for more about these shortcomings.)

The point here is a simple one. The agenda for "understanding society" is an old one, predating the modern social sciences by centuries. And the needs that we have for understanding, explanation, and intervention in the area of complex social processes and problems inherently exceed the scope of the particular efforts we've made to date in constructing empirically rigorous social science. We need to keep our eyes open for new problems and new approaches in the social sciences, if we are to do a satisfactory job of understanding and coping with the social issues of the twenty-first century. (See earlier postings on world sociology , French sociology, and Chinese sociology for more thinking about the need for innovation in the social sciences.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:13PM (-04:00)

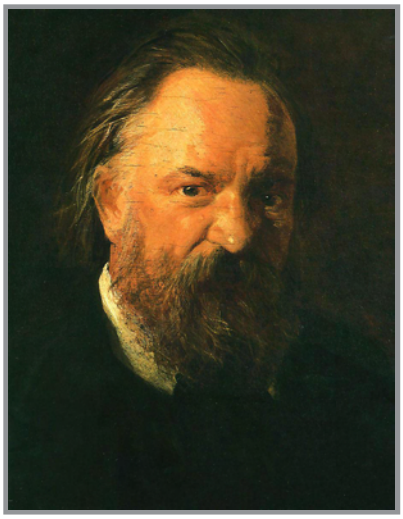
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Wednesday, March 18, 2009

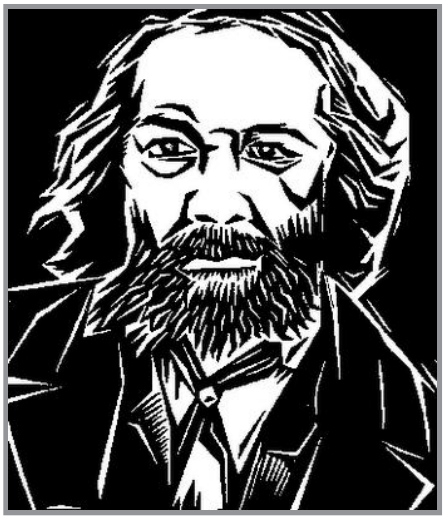


The revolutions of 1848 were the stage upon which the "spectre haunting Europe" danced. Karl Marx, Mikhail Bakunin, Alexandre Herzen, Alexis de Tocqueville, and numerous other critical observers of Europe's trajectory looked at 1848 as a moment of continent-wide social and political revolution. Mike Rapport's 1848: Year of Revolution is a very interesting effort to synthesize the movements and events of the year in a specific attempt to try to assess the degree to which events in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Milan, and dozens of other European cities hang together as a "year of revolution." It's worth reading -- even for those for whom the history is pretty familiar.

One reason that the book is so interesting is that the period itself is fascinating -- the events, the social



movements and causes, the mechanisms through which social contention spread and intensified, and the personalities who were drawn into engagement and commentary. The three men pictured above -- Tocqueville, Herzen, and Bakunin -- are only a sliver of the powerful and enduring personalities who played important roles during the critical weeks and months of unrest in a variety of cities. Another reason for the interest of the book is Rapport's effort to separate out some of the causes and claims that led to mass protest in city after city -- relief of impoverishment, anger at the impersonal economic relations of the time, and the claims of ethnic and national groups for self-determination. Fundamentally, Rapport suggests that mobilization and political demands flowed from two basic issues: the crushing poverty that segments of urban society experienced at mid-century, exacerbated by financial crisis and crop failures (Paris, Berlin), and the demand for political autonomy for national and ethnic groups (Italy, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary). Finally, the book is distinguished by its effort to treat the full canvas of unrest and violence across much of the continent -- not simply focusing on France, as one is sometimes inclined to do in thinking about 1848.



Tocqueville's Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848 is a particularly intimate view of the events in Paris in spring, 1848. Tocqueville was a Deputy of the National Assembly and an aristocrat, and in January 1848 he gave a prescient speech in the Chamber of Deputies:

I believe that right now we are sleeping on a volcano ... can you not sense, by a sort of instinctive intuition ... that the earth is trembling again in Europe? Can you not feel ... the wind of revolution in the air? (quoted in Rapport, 42)

In Recollections he chronicles his own experiences only a few months later, walking the streets of Paris during the street fighting in February 1848. He writes of his experience of February 23, 1848:

I took my leave early and went straight to bed. Though my house was quite near the Foreign Office, I did not hear the firing which so greatly changed our fate, and I went to sleep unaware that I had seen the last day of the July Monarchy. (Recollections, 35)

As I left my bedroom the next day, the 24th February, I met the cook who had been out; the good woman was quite beside herself and poured out a sorrowful rigmarole from which I could understand nothing but that the government was having the poor people massacred. I went down at once, and as soon as I had set foot in the street I could for the first time scent revolution in the air: the middle of the street was empty; the shops were not open; there were no carriages, or people walking; one heard none of the usual street vendors' cries; little frightened groups of neighbours talked by the doors in lowered

voices; anxiety or anger disfigured every face. I met one of the National Guard hurrying along, rifle in hand, with an air of tragedy. I spoke to him but could learn nothing save that the government was massacring the people (to which he added that the National Guard would know how to put that right). (36)

Rapport describes the massacre to which Tocqueville's cook and the National Guardsman apparently refer, as being the instigating event that led to successful insurrection in February. It took place on rue des Capucines:

When the marchers came to a halt, they pressed against the soldiers, and the officer, apparently hoping to nudge them back a little, ordered his men to 'Present bayonets!' As the troops performed the manoeuvre, a mysterious shot burst into the night air. In a knee-jerk response the nervous soldiers let off a volley, the bullets killing or wounding fifty people. (52)

Tocqueville continues with his stroll on the morning of February 24:

The boulevard along which we passed presented a strange sight. There was hardly anyone to be seen, although it was nearly nine o'clock in the morning; no sound of a human voice could be heard; but all the little sentry boxes the whole way along that great street seemed on the move, oscillating on their bases and occasionally falling with a crash, while the great trees along the edge came tumbling into the road as if of their own accord. These acts of destruction were the work of isolated individuals who set about it silently, methodically and fast, preparing materials for the barricades that others were to build. It looked exactly like some industrial undertaking, which is just what it was for most of those taking part. (38)

(I've always thought it would be very interesting to take a group of students on a walking tour of the sites that Tocqueville mentions in Recollections -- though many of the locations must have disappeared in the work of Haussmann in reconfiguring the urban geography of Paris. Timothy Clark has some very interesting analysis of Haussmann's designs in The Painting of Modern Life.)

Marx's writings of the events of February and June in France are more analytical and more political at a nuts-and-bolts level. Marx's face-to-face experience of the events was more fleeting than Tocqueville's -- Rapport recounts Marx's rather unsuccessful efforts as a political speaker, attempting to raise class consciousness (231). (Blanqui and Proudhon both seem to have been more successful in this vein.) But Marx followed the events carefully through available journalism, and he made every effort to interpret the comings and goings in a way that made sense to him from the framework of historical materialism and politics as class conflict. Here is how Marx described the outcome of the bloody June repression of the revolution in Paris:

The Paris workers have been overwhelmed by superior forces; they have not succumbed to them. They have been beaten, but it is their enemies who have been vanquished. The momentary triumph of brutal violence has been purchased with the destruction of all the deceptions and illusions of the February revolution, with the dissolution of the whole of the old republican party, and with the fracturing of the French nation into two nations, the nation of possessors and the nation of the workers. The tricolour republic now bears only one colour, the colour of the defeated, the colour of blood. It has become the red republic. (N.Hr.Z., 29 June 1848)

There remained only one way out: to set one section of the proletariat against the other. For this purpose the Provisional Government formed twenty-four battalions of Mobile Guards, each composed of a thousand young men between fifteen and twenty. For the

most part they belonged to the lumpenproletariat, which in all towns, forms a mass quite distinct from the industrial proletariat. It is a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all sorts, living off the garbage of society, people without a definite trace, vagabonds, gens sans feu et sans aveu, varying according to the cultural level of their particular nation, never able to repudiate their lazzaroni character.... Thus the Paris proletariat was confronted by an army of 24,000 youthful, strong, foolhardy men, drawn from its own midst. The workers cheered the Mobile Guard as it marched through Paris! (Eighteenth Brumaire, 52-53)

For me, one of the most interesting questions about 1848 is also the most basic: were these disturbances "revolutionary," or were they something different and perhaps less historically significant over the long sweep of the century? Were perhaps the "February days" better described as simply a short period of civil unrest and plebeian rioting; and were the "June days" simply a show-down with a state and military increasingly willing to use force to exert its will? And might we think that it is best to look at Berlin, Milan, Vienna, and Paris in 1848 as largely separate social upheavals brought together in a relatively short period of time, but lacking the internal connections that would constitute a large revolution? In other words, was 1848 really a "year of revolution", as Rapport says in his subtitle, or was it less dramatically, a year of unrest, rioting, and eventual political change?

One reason for posing the question in these terms is the fact that the concept of "revolution" is a very imposing one. When we think of "revolutions," we think of the great examples -- France 1789, Russia 1917, China 1949. We think of organized revolutionary parties; mass movements; political contest over control of the state; a program of fundamental social and economic change; and eventual seizure of state power. Against this sweeping set of unifying ideas, one might say that 1848 never reached this threshold of significance and unity.

But perhaps this way of putting the question gets it backwards. Perhaps it is the "great" revolutions that need a second look -- as Rapport suggests somewhere in a single sentence. Perhaps it is the Russian Revolution that has been over-dramatized, and the widespread social and political upheavals of 1848 are more genuinely revolutionary than the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in one corner of Europe. The upheavals across Europe in 1848 are continental in scope; they involve a confluence of related claims (for autonomy for national groups, for poverty relief, for a democratic voice in government); and they did in fact result in "regime change" in Italy, France, Austria, and Germany. And, as Rapport, Tocqueville, and Marx seem to agree -- by June 1848 in France, at least, there was a polarization around class lines and the primacy of the social question.

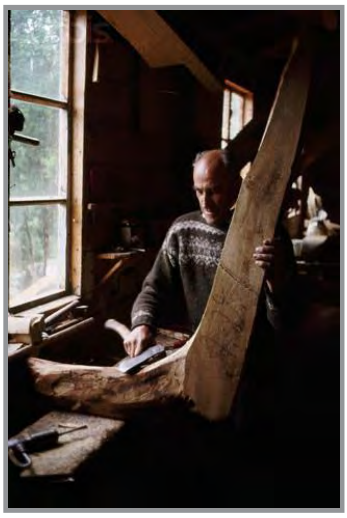
So it's a simple question, really: were there any "revolutions of 1848"?
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:40PM (-04:00)

Technical practices

Friday, March 20, 2009

What is involved in providing a sociology of technical practices? (An earlier posting is also devoted to this question.) Here I am thinking primarily of technical material practices -- building a house or a boat, distilling spirits, weaving a basket, maintaining a biological research lab, or repairing a photocopy machine. There is a degree of continuity in the "tacit knowledge" and embodied skills and methods that are represented in the plans and





actions of practitioners of these different human activities. These bodies of knowledge and skill define the activity in a fairly specific way. And there are indefinitely many other configurations of practices that might have accomplished the same task. So a practice is historically and socially specific; it is the result of prior experimentation and adaptation in the context of needs, materials, and a physical environment within specific communities and locations.

Here is a simple formulation of what I'm calling a technical practice:

A practice is an ensemble of techniques, skills, and stylized responses, embedded in a population at a time, accomplishing a specific range of domestic tasks, and sustained through social mechanisms of transmission. There are a number of fundamental questions that this definition raises. How are practices embodied in individuals or groups? How do they proliferate, from one generation to the next and across social space? How does a given state of practical knowledge change over time, through transmission, mutation, and deliberate refinement? Do practices have a degree of stability over time, or do they morph so flexibly as to defy analysis? Are there "signatures" for given ensembles of practices -- e.g. a set of features of device design in boat building or a set of techniques of water management in farming -- on the basis of which we can observe the proliferation and change of a practice over time and space? Is there a self-referential element in practices—do practitioners deliberately or consciously modify their practices?

The example of traditional boat design and building is a good one to illustrate a technical practice (suggested in the images above). The boat-building traditions of medieval Scandinavia represent a body of skill and technique transmitted from master to apprentice, with variation over time and place. Farming practices in traditional agricultural societies provide another good example. In this case, the practice involves knowledge concerning crops, animals, seeds, irrigation, fertilizer, timing, and response to the unexpected. (This is the kind of local practical knowledge that James Scott describes in Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.) It is embodied in local knowledge, folk beliefs, techniques and tools, and customs of a given population at a particular time. It is transmitted from practitioner to practitioner (perhaps parent to child) through training and imitation. Sometimes organizations play a causal role in transmission (e. g., a guild of boat designers and builders may deliberately control the transmission of relevant knowledge and skills from one individual to another). And it seems likely enough that historians can in fact observe the proliferation of technical practices such as these over centuries of time by observing the spatial distribution of artifacts associated with the practice. (Jon Elster discusses some aspects of the technical practices associated with traditional boat building in Explaining Technical Change: A Case Study in the Philosophy of Science.)

A particularly interesting question is the degree to which technical practices are “plastic” over time and space. How readily do they morph over time and space (akin to the way in which messages morph in the game of “telephone”)? Is there an analogy between a practice and a gene, in which the gene encodes instructions for the phenotype—producing a next-generation genotype? The stability of species through biological evolution depends on the fact that gene transcription is a highly accurate process, so the offspring is highly likely to encode the same bits of information as the parent. Is there the requisite stability within the domain of practices, or are we more likely to find significant differences in ostensibly similar practices across the villages of a region?

The stability question turns on the mechanisms of replication that social practices embody. Traditional social practices are not embodied in standard "handbooks" of best practice; instead, they are transmitted through networks of training and imitation. So changes are likely to occur during the replication of the practice at the local level. Innovation occurs as local illiterate but intelligent farmers or builders discover enhancements. These innovations are imitated and reproduced by neighbors and changes accumulate. Naturally, there is nothing inherently optimal or progressive about such a process. Good ideas and innovations die out; mediocre practices persist; and sometimes genuine advances occur.

Finally, the question about whether a technical practice has a specific signature -- a characteristic set of tools, patterns of land use, and products -- is crucial for our ability to track changes in practices historically. With a signature -- for example, a characteristic form of ceramic glazing -- it is possible to track the spread of a practice across time and space. It is then possible to track changes in practice over time and geography by tracking the dispersion of tools and products. For example, a new technique in ceramics can often be pinpointed in a place at a time; then through archeological research it is often possible to track the diffusion of the innovation over the next century to other places. And once we’ve done that, we can ask productive questions about what the mechanisms of the diffusion of practical knowledge were: migration of farmers and artisans, trade routes, the sale of books and pamphlets, …

It seems that technical practices in pre-modern societies are of particular interest for a couple of reasons. They give us a subject matter where it is possible to study local knowledge and skill in some detail. They represent a domain of human activity where it is possible to track change over time and to form some hypotheses about the social mechanisms that underlie the diffusion of techniques. And they are a fairly visible manifestation of some basic features of social life -- the harnessing of knowledge and skill to solving some of the practical problems of life, and the creation of innovations through which these basic material needs might be satisfied in a marginally better way. And it wouldn't be surprising to discover that the mechanisms that underlie the maintenance and diffusion of traditional techniques are also found in the practical knowledge communities of technicians in the modern world -- photocopy machine repair specialists, airline mechanics, or lab technicians.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:00PM (-04:00)

Acting as a group

Sunday, March 22, 2009



What is involved in acting as a group? What is the difference between a crowd of pedestrians crossing Mass Ave in Cambridge when the light changes and a group of students marching into Harvard Hall in an attempt to initiate a protest? How about the difference between a group of history graduate students pursuing research simultaneously but separately on early New England diseases in Widener Library, and a research group of scientists collaborating to discover the mechanism of HIV transmission at the cellular level?

The intuitive answer to these questions is pretty clear. A group activity requires some level of collective intentions and purposes on the parts of the participants towards each other and towards the group itself. A group is more than an ensemble of individuals performing a similar set of actions (pedestrians, independent researchers). Rather, we want to see some indication that the individuals regard themselves as members of the group; that they embrace some conception of the action that members of the group propose to perform; and that they individually choose their plans of action out of consideration of this group or collective purpose. In a group's actions, the individuals who make up the group are oriented towards the group and its goals and purposes. In other words, groups are constituted by some form of group-oriented intentionality on the part of individual members, and group actions are performed by individuals who have adopted a set of beliefs and attitudes towards other members of the group and its collective purposes.

There are quite a few complications that arise here, however. Here is one: many collective activities involve participants with a wide range of affiliation with the collective purpose. There are core members who explicitly and emphatically declare adherence to the collective goal and plan. There are some who are willing followers without a clear idea of the purpose or plan. There are opportunistic joiners who have their own private reasons for joining the group project. And there may even be a degree of disagreement within the group about goals, strategies, and tactics -- with the result that many committed members nonetheless differ from each other with respect to their collective intentions. And these aren't sharp distinctions in most cases -- so a given collectivity may consist of a deeply mixed group of individuals with respect to their understandings, purposes, and affinities for the collective action.

Several philosophers have focused on this set of problems surrounding "group intentions". Margaret Gilbert thinks there is a sharp distinction between group intentions and individual intentions (On Social Facts). More recently, Raimo Tuomela refers to "we" intentions and "I" intentions in order to explain the defining characteristics of group behavior in The Philosophy of Social Practices: A Collective Acceptance View. Both Gilbert and Tuomela seem to think that groups have intentions that are autonomous from the purposes and intentions of members of the group -- a sort of Durkheimian view of the autonomous reality of the mentality of groups. What these approaches have in common is a desire to postulate a strong distinction in levels between group intentions and

individual intentions.

Gilbert's primary contention is that the notion of a collectivity—individuals constituting a group—is the central feature of social ontology. And she maintains that this concept can best be analyzed by the idea of a "plural subject"—the referent of the first-person plural pronoun, "we". The core of Gilbert's theory of social groups involves the idea of the mutual recognition by a set of persons that they are engaged in some joint actions or beliefs. "A set of people constitute a social group if and only if they constitute a plural subject"; and a plural subject is "a set of people each of whom shares with oneself in some action, belief, attitude, or similar attribute" (p. 204). Gilbert argues that the pronouns "us" and "we" are the linguistic elements through which we refer to plural subjects in English. And she believes that plural subjects exist; they are not fictions or constructions, but agents which have beliefs, perform actions, and succeed or fail in carrying out their intentions. According to Gilbert, "social groups are plural subjects, collective beliefs are the beliefs of plural subjects, and social conventions are the 'fiats' of plural subjects" (p. 408). Gilbert argues against the individualism of Max Weber, by arguing that collectivities are the central subject of the social sciences, and that collectivities cannot be subsumed under individualist concepts. Thus Gilbert suggests that her theory offers support for holism over individualism (p. 3).

I don't find this collectivist approach to "individuals behaving as groups" at all convincing, for several reasons. One is the point mentioned above about the heterogeneity of individual motivations and purposes within a group activity. This seems to imply that there couldn't be a coherent, univalent group intention that stands separate from the individuals who constitute the group. Instead, there are only the somewhat polyglot collective intentions within agents, with some degree of within-group communication and shaping about their shared collective purposes.

Second, there is the general skeptical point about "spooky" social entities -- entities that are thought to have an existence independent from the states of agency and mind of the individuals who make up the social world. How could one possibly imagine that there is a collective intention associated with the Burmese monks in 2007, standing separate and independent from the beliefs, assumptions, loyalties, and adherences of many individual monks and networks of monks?

And here is a third puzzle. We need to have some idea of the concrete social processes through which group-oriented intentions are created at the individual level in particular social circumstances. We need to know something about the microfoundations of group formation. It doesn't help to simply postulate "collective intentions"; we need to have a concrete sociology of the ways in which individuals come to have group-oriented beliefs, values, and motives.

Finally, the "autonomous collectivity" view doesn't work very well when we try to use it to interpret the practice of gifted social scientists who attempt to explain collective action. E. P. Thompson, James Scott, Chuck Tilly, Doug McAdam, and William Sewell all devote a lot of their effort to explaining how specific social collectivities came to define themselves as "groups" and came to act in a collective way. But their approaches are invariably based on understanding the many threads of mobilization, structure, and meaning at the disaggregated level that eventually build up to a movement. Thompson's metal workers, Scott's Southeast Asian peasant rebels, Tilly's Vendeans, McAdam's civil rights activists and followers, and Sewell's Marseillaise craftsmen all reflect the variation and concrete historical construction of individual consciousness within concrete political movements

that confirms the variability and agentic nature of social movements and group identity.

That said, there is still a crucial role for group-oriented thoughts and purposes at the level of at least some of the participants in a group. Without these group intentions at the individual level, we couldn't say that there is a group at all -- only a collection of individually oriented individual actors. Something like this must be true for at least some of the members of a group action:

- X regards a set of other individuals as constituting a group G to which he/she belongs;
- X believes that G has a common interest or need N;
- X is motivated to join in concert with others in G in such a way as to bring about N;
- X believes that some significant number of other members of the group share these collective thoughts, purposes, and motives;
- X believes that some significant number of G will act accordingly;
- and X has a consequent motivation to engage in the collective action.

One additional condition seems to be pragmatically required in order for these conditions to arise: there must be some tangible process of communication and mobilization through which the group-oriented intentional states mentioned here are created in the various individuals.

So there are mandatory group-oriented states of mind that are part of the constitution of a group. But notice this key fact: these features of beliefs, intentions, and motives that I have mentioned are all located at the level of the individual actors. There is no higher-level collectivity that possesses an independent "group intention". So a group is constituted by the states of intentionality and belief of its members, and the concrete processes of communication and mobilization through which a degree of group-orientedness and coherence emerges within the states of mind of the participants. Weber was right after all! Fundamentally, there are only three social-intentional states postulated here: affiliation, mutual recognition, and solidarity. And there is a postulate about the micro-social processes through which these are cultivated: mobilization, communication, and embodied social networks.

And this analysis in turn is entirely compatible with the perspective of methodological localism that I've mentioned several times here.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:20PM (-04:00)

Social control of crowds

Tuesday, March 24, 2009



There is a pretty high level of social protest taking place in France today. Strikes and demonstrations are taking place in many cities, involving students, faculty, workers, and other ordinary people. (Here is a recent news roundup dated March 19, 2009, on strikes, demonstrations, and manifs in the past month or so, and here is a BBC report on a round of large strikes in January.) The demands largely have to do with the current economic crisis, unemployment, changes in the social security system, and proposed

reforms to higher education. French people are demanding specific changes from the government, and the government does not seem to want to compromise.

These collective actions carry out a tradition of public protest in French political culture that goes back at least a century and a half (Charles Tilly, The Contentious French). And few politicians in France will have overlooked the fact that public protests have sometimes developed into even more confrontational forms of collective action and conflict -- in 1968, for example, and in the banlieue in 2005. So the current round of protests and mass demonstrations has a significance in French political history that raises the possibility of even more intense civil conflict in the next twelve months.

What is to prevent the possibility that large organized demonstrations and strikes may develop into more violent conflicts between the population and the state in the future? How can the state ensure that large-scale peaceful protest -- a basic democratic right -- doesn't turn into episodic rioting and civil unrest when political stalemate emerges or when economic and social conditions worsen?

The question is a pressing one, because very large demonstrations and protests are volatile and unpredictable. When there are tens of thousands of participants and a range of leading organizations in a large demonstration, it is possible for the actions of the crowd to develop in ways that were not intended or anticipated. A peaceful march down a central boulevard can proceed from beginning to end with a great deal of internal discipline, with organizations maintaining ranks and preserving order. Many of the photos of manifs in French cities are distinguished by the prominent signs and banners the protesters carry announcing the organizations they represent -- labor unions, student organizations, faculty groups. And these banners themselves are an indication of organization and discipline. So large, peaceful protests can be organized and carried out successfully.

But the same march can also degenerate into skirmishing and street fighting involving small groups of activists and police. A small splinter group of violent protesters may break away from the march to engage in acts of violence against property -- burning cars, smashing shop windows. And these acts may spread by contagion to other parts of the crowd. Or a group of activists may deliberately confront the police with stones or bottles, with the goal of provoking violent reaction and an escalation of conflict. (This appears to have happened repeatedly in Athens a few months ago, and it was an anarchist tactic in the anti-globalization protests that took place in many cities a few years ago.) Or a group of police may engage in a demonstration of power intended to intimidate the crowd, leading to police violence against members of the crowd; again, this violence may spread to other locations. Even an unfortunate accident can lead to an outburst of violence -- a frightened driver losing control of his car and injuring a group of demonstrators, for example, can lead to panic and escalation. And any of these small outbreaks of violence can spread through the larger crowd, leading to an uncontrollable spasm of action and reaction.

So how can the authorities in a democracy develop strategies for ensuring that peaceful protests avoid violent escalation? I suppose the most direct strategy is to consider the demands themselves and evaluate whether they legitimately call for changes of policy that ought to be enacted. Compromise over the central issues leading to mass protest presumably has some effect on the likelihood of violence and disorder. If the people are convinced that the government is acting unjustly, the government ought to at least consider whether there is some legitimacy in these complaints.

A second strategy is more tactical. Recognizing that protest is likely to occur, it makes sense for the authorities to work with the organizers and their organizations to arrive at agreements about the scope and nature of the protest. The route, location, duration, and other conditions of the protest can be negotiated. And the authorities are well advised to attempt to gain the support of the organizers in an agreement to maintain internal discipline within the demonstration -- to win the agreement of the organizations themselves to attempt to suppress possible outbursts of violence by minority elements within the crowd.

A third strategy involves, of course, policing. The authorities have both the ability and the obligation to use police powers to ensure public order. And this means that they need to plan intelligently for the disposition and behavior of police forces to contain possible violent outbursts. But the use of police force is a delicate political art. Heavy-handed, intimidating policing seems to be as likely to provoke violence as to suppress it. Police behavior that depends upon the conspicuous threat of force likewise is likely to be provocative -- a double line of police with truncheons and riot gear, with face shields providing a disturbing anonymity, is likely to provoke fear and aggression in the crowd that it confronts. And, of course, police behavior that crosses the line to overt acts of brutality is almost certain to provoke violent response, as news of police violence spreads through the crowd. But it is also possible to err on the side of insufficient police presence; forces that can be quickly overwhelmed create the situation of a sudden escalation of violence by a crowd that has suddenly realized that there is no barrier to further violent actions.

It would seem that the ideal prescription for a policing strategy is something like this: enough police force in the vicinity to respond quickly and decisively to acts of violence by members of the crowd; positioning of police forces in fairly inconspicuous locations so their presence is not itself a provocation; and well-trained police forces who can be trusted to refrain from unnecessary violence against protesters. (The "police riot" in Chicago in 1968 plainly led to rapid escalation of violence in that situation.)

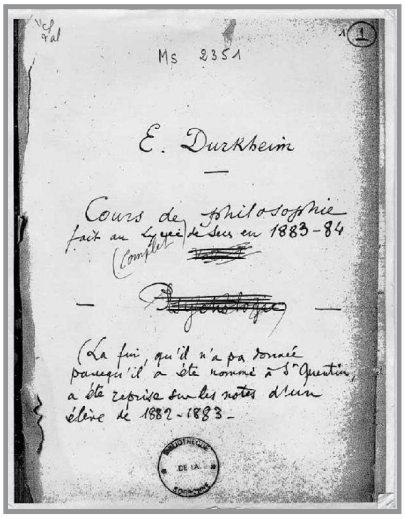
What makes this question so complicated is the fact that it involves social actions, conflicts, and relationships at many levels: the basic conflict between organized groups with explicit demands and the state with its interest in enforcing its policies; the limited degree of control that protest organizers have over the behavior of followers; the fact that smaller groups and organizations within the protest movement may have goals that are more radical than those of the main organizations; the fact that the authorities have only limited control over the forces at their command; and the fact that there may not be acceptable compromises that successfully resolve the conflict between protesters and the state. These factors make the behavior of the crowd somewhat unpredictable, and they introduce major sources of contingency into the way in which a particular day of protest and season of dissent play out.

Bringing the discussion back to France in 2009, there seem to be several large possibilities for the coming year. The government may decide that it needs to adjust some of its policies in order to reduce the level of popular dissent and unrest; it needs to reach a social compromise. The government may hold firm but the dissenting organizations may grow fatigued or discouraged -- so that the current round of protest and strikes subsides. Both sides may hold firm but an equilibrium level of protest and response may be reached, with neither side escalating to a higher level of civil conflict and violence. Or, finally, both the government and the protest movement may hold firm

and protests may spiral upward into greater levels of social conflict, with riots and violent protests ensuing. More and more force may be exerted through police repression, and this may lead to more widespread and more aggressive demonstrations in the following weeks. And, of course, all of these scenarios are likely to have consequences for electoral outcomes in the coming several years.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:45PM (-04:00)

Philosophical frameworks in the social sciences

Wednesday, March 25, 2009



It is fairly evident that there were substantive ontological assumptions about how the social world worked that guided the founders of sociology: individuals create social outcomes (Mill), norms and values have a superordinate role in social action (Durkheim), the problem of social order is the fundamental problem for sociology (Durkheim), crises are common within capitalism (Marx), social events are meaningful and historically particular (Dilthey), modern society is marked by impersonal social institutions (Tönnies) .... Assumptions at this level guided the thinking of specific theorists as they developed conceptual schemes in terms of which to understand the social world and advanced theories about how the social world worked.

We should therefore not imagine that the social sciences developed as an abstract, logical solution to a simple problem, as perhaps naive empiricism might have suggested: identify the domain of social phenomena that constitute the declared subject matter of a given discipline of social science; examine and classify the phenomena so as to discover whatever regularities are to be found among them; formulate theoretical hypotheses about the laws that govern these phenomena; and explain the patterns and events that are discovered as the consequences of these hypothetical laws. Instead, each of the founders of the social sciences came to his or her studies with fairly specific pre-scientific ideas about what the domain of the social world was and how it should be explained. These ideas are both ontological and methodological; and all of them are contestable. Perhaps we might describe this framework as a “folk philosophy of knowledge” that is to some extent unexamined but that guides the pursuit of knowledge, the form that it takes, and the ways in which it is evaluated.

German intellectual historian Fritz Ringer tries to locate Max Weber's intellectual origins within what he calls an "intellectual field" -- as he puts it, "a constellation of positions that are meaningful only in relation to one another, a constellation further characterized by differences of power or authority, by the opposition between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and by the role of the cultural preconscious, of tacit 'doxa' that are transmitted by inherited practices, institutions, and social relations"; Max Weber's Methodology: The Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences, p. 5. I think that Ringer is raising a question quite similar to mine here: what are the substantive reference points and conceptual presuppositions that the theorist brings to his theory and inquiry as he sets out. And this question is particularly crucial at the beginning; later theorists are in turn formed by their readings and reactions to the theories and systems of the prior

generation.

Naturalism and positivism -- the idea that the social sciences ought to resemble the natural sciences, and the idea that the goal of science is the discovery of empirically supported lawlike generalizations -- constituted a powerful folk philosophy of science that was shared by Durkheim, Mill, and Comte. Given the power of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century, naturalism is unsurprising—even though it is profoundly misleading when applied to the social world. (See an earlier posting on non-naturalistic models of social science for more on the shortcomings of naturalism as a framework for social inquiry.)

But naturalism and positivism were not the only substantive philosophical frameworks that influenced the first generation of the social sciences. The hermeneutic tradition was a strikingly different starting point for the rigorous investigation and explanation of social realities. The hermeneutic tradition derived from literary and biblical interpretation; it looked at history and human affairs as a body of meaningful signs that required interpretation. And it emphasized the singular over the general, the historically particular over the law-like generalization. Dilthey's hermeneutic philosophy offered a non-positivist, non-causalist starting point for the "human sciences". The intellectual tradition that Dilthey absorbed and re-deployed as a basis for the human sciences was philosophically rigorous and committed to careful argumentation and interpretation. But it differed profoundly from the epistemology of empiricism and positivism.

The key point here should not be lost. It is that the various efforts to forge a scientific theory of society are partly empirical and theoretical; but they are also partly metaphysical and epistemic, grounded in pre-scientific assumptions about the nature of the social world and the nature of empirical study of society that are only partially expressed and are inherently debatable. Metaphors, pictures, hunches, and the thinker's own experiences play a deeply important role in the development of sociological frameworks. This is why it is appropriate to refer to the "sociological imagination." There are other starting points; and if we had started with different philosophical frameworks and different metaphors, we would have arrived at different sociologies. So engaging with the philosophy of social science is a fruitful way of trying to rethink the presuppositions of existing approaches to a "science of society".

A prior posting on philosophy and the social sciences addresses this issue as well. Here is a posting on the roots of the philosophy of social science and a posting on continental philosophy of social science that are relevant as well.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:56PM (-04:00)

Hobbes an institutionalist?

Friday, March 27, 2009

Here is a surprising idea: of all the modern political philosophers, Thomas Hobbes comes closest to sharing the logic and worldview of modern social science. In Leviathan (1651) he sets out the problem of understanding the social world in terms that resemble a modern institutionalist and rational-choice approach to social explanation. It is a constructive approach, proceeding from reasoning about the constituents of society, to aggregative conclusions about the wholes that are constituted by these individuals. He puts forward a theory of agency -- how individuals reason and what their most basic motives are. Individuals are rational and self-concerned; they are strategic, in that they



anticipate the likely behaviors of other agents; and they are risk-averse, in that they take steps to avoid attack by other agents. And he puts forward a description of two institutional settings within which social action takes place: the state of nature, where no "overawing" political institutions exist; and the sovereign state, where a single sovereign power imposes a set of laws regulating individuals' actions.

In the first institutional setting, he argues that individual competition in the context of the absence of sovereignty leads to perpetual violent competition. In the second institutional setting, he argues that individual self-striving within the context of a system of law leads to the accumulation of property and peaceful coexistence.

Here are some of Hobbes's premises about individual agents from chapter XIII of Leviathan:

From this equality of ability ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only) endeavour to destroy or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass that where an invader hath no more to fear than another man's single power, if one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united to dispossess and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another.

So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory. The first maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.

The passions that incline men to peace are: fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to obtain them. And reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace upon which men may be drawn to agreement. These articles are they which otherwise are called the laws of nature, whereof I shall speak more particularly in the two following chapters.
And these motives and forms of behavior by individuals lead to a predictable outcome for the collectivity in the state of nature: a war of all against all.

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no

letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.
This is an institutionalist argument. It models the behavior that is expected of a certain kind of agent within a certain kind of institutional setting; and it projects the consequences of these "microfoundations" for the aggregate society. In other words, Hobbes is offering a micro- to macro-argument based on analysis of modes of agency and assumptions about a particular institutional context.

Compare this logic with a description of the logic of social explanation offered by contemporary rational-choice social theorist James Coleman in Foundations of Social Theory:

A second mode of explanation of the behavior of social systems entails examining processes internal to the system, involving its component parts, or units at a level below that of the system. The prototypical case is that in which the component parts are individuals who are members of the social system. In other cases the component parts may be institutions within the system or subgroups that are part of the system. In all cases the analysis can be seen as moving to a lower level than that of the system, explaining the behavior of the system by recourse to the behavior of its parts. This mode of explanation is not uniquely quantitative or uniquely qualitative, but may be either. (2)
So the logic of Hobbes's argument is fairly clear; and it is deeply similar to that of institutionalist rational-choice theorists. Thomas Schelling's title, Micromotives and Macrobehavior, captures the idea in three words: derive descriptions of macro-level social arrangements and behavior from premises concerning individual-level motivation and action.

It is not a profound criticism of Hobbes's philosophical analysis to quarrel with Hobbes's specific assumptions about what is possible within the state of nature. And in fact, a number of contemporary political scientists argue that it is possible for men and women to create non-political institutions within the context of what Hobbes calls the state of nature. Coordination and cooperation are indeed possible within a "state of nature"; it is possible to achieve coordination within anarchy. From a sociological point of view, this is really a friendly amendment; it simply adds a further premise about the feasibility of certain kinds of cooperation. So the "cooperation within anarchy" criticism of Hobbes is advanced as a substantive argument about the feasibility of durable social institutions that do not depend upon a central coercive authority. And it depends upon several specific assumptions about the circumstances and mechanisms through which local groups of people can establish self-enforcing forms of cooperation that overcome free-riders and predatorial behavior. It is likely enough that Hobbes would not have been persuaded by this argument; but ultimately it is an empirical question.

Several arguments against Hobbes's conclusions about the state of nature are especially valuable from this point of view. First, I find Michael Taylor's arguments in Community, Anarchy and Liberty particularly convincing -- essentially, that peasant communities have traditionally found ways of creating and sustaining cooperative institutions and relationships that persist without the force of law to stabilize them. "Contracts" backed by legal systems are not the only way of establishing coordination and cooperation among independent agents. Robert Netting provides relevant examples in Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture, around traditional forms of labor-sharing and seasonal cooperation. And Elinor Ostrom and her collaborators make similar arguments in their historical and sociological studies of "common property resource regimes" -- essentially, stable patterns of cooperation

maintained by local voluntary enforcement rather than central legislation (Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action). Ostrom documents dozens of important historical cases where traditional communities have managed fisheries, forests, water resources, and other common properties without having a central state to support these patterns of cooperation and coordination.

But these are empirical and theoretical refinements to a fundamentally coherent model of social explanation that is full-fledged in Hobbes's work in the mid-seventeenth century: explain aggregate (macro) social outcomes as the result of mechanisms and actions at the level of individual actors.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:58PM (-04:00)

Primitive accumulation

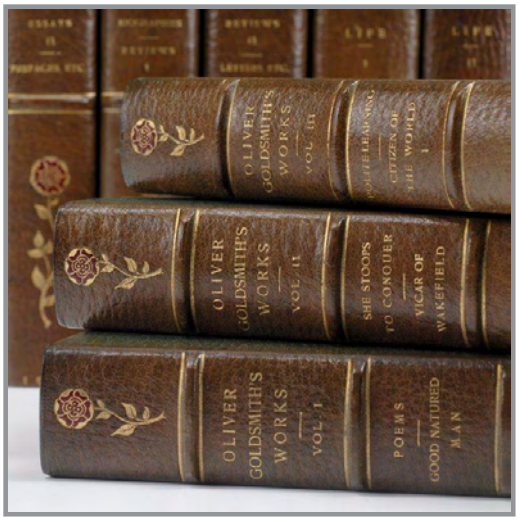
Sunday, March 29, 2009





Marx's treatment of the "so-called 'primitive accumulation'" is one of the most historically detailed sections in Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (Volume 1). And it is one of the most interesting parts of Capital to read as a separate piece. (Here is an electronic text of the section.) It is Marx's account of the historical processes of change in rural life of the fifteenth through eighteenth century in Britain and Ireland, through which peasants were forced off their land and the commons were enclosed. Marx believes that this separation of the peasantry from the land was a necessary condition for the development of capitalism, in that it created the conditions in which there was a pliable and abundant proletariat. This "free" proletariat was needed for the creation of the factory system and the development of manufacturing cities. So the process of primitive accumulation created the changes in social relations, property relations, and the accumulation of wealth that permitted the creation of the capital-labor relation and factory-based capitalism.

Marx sometimes puts this point in a fairly teleological way, looking at primitive accumulation as a necessary step on the road to British capitalism. (For example, he refers to this process as "the revolution that laid the foundation of the capitalist mode of production.") But it is possible, and preferable, to read Marx's analysis here less teleologically, as simply a detailed account of some of the crucial but contingent changes that took place in rural social relations during these centuries, without importing the idea that these changes were functionally related to the later development of capitalism. And read non-teleologically, the section holds up fairly well in relation to modern historical scholarship.



Marx describes the basic social relations of British rural life in the fifteenth century in these terms, as a freeholding peasantry with access to substantial common lands, pasture, and forest:

The immense majority of the population consisted then, and to a still larger extent, in the 15th century, of free peasant proprietors, whatever was the feudal title under which their right of property was hidden. In the larger seignorial domains, the old bailiff, himself a serf, was displaced by the free farmer. The wage-labourers of agriculture consisted partly of peasants, who utilised their leisure time by working on the large estates, partly of an independent special class of wage-labourers, relatively and absolutely few in numbers. The latter also were practically at the same time peasant farmers, since, besides their wages, they had allotted to them arable land to the extent of 4 or more acres, together with their cottages. Besides they, with the rest of the peasants, enjoyed the usufruct of the common land, which gave pasture to their cattle, furnished them with timber, fire-wood, turf, &c.
And he identifies the crucial turn towards expropriation of the free peasant proprietor:

In insolent conflict with king and parliament, the great feudal lords created an incomparably larger proletariat by the forcible driving of the peasantry from the land, to which the latter had the same feudal right as the lord himself, and by the usurpation of the common lands. The rapid rise of the Flemish wool manufactures, and the corresponding rise in the price of wool in England, gave the direct impulse to these evictions. The old nobility had been devoured by the great feudal wars. The new nobility was the child of its time, for which money was the power of all powers. Transformation of arable land into sheep-walks was, therefore, its cry.
(It is interesting to recall that Oliver Goldsmith describes the eighteenth-century version of this process in Ireland in his poem, The Deserted Village (1770):

Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn,
Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms withdrawn;
Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen,
And Desolation saddens all thy green:
One only master grasps the whole domain,
And half a tillage stints thy smiling plain.
No more thy glassy brook reflects the day,
But, choked with sedges, works its weedy way;
Along thy glades, a solitary guest,
The hollow-sounding bittern guards its nest;
Amidst thy desert walks the lapwing flies,
And tires their echoes with unvaried cries:
Sunk are thy bowers in shapeless ruin all,
And the long grass o'ertops the mouldering wall
And, trembling, shrinking from the spoiler's hand,
Far, far away thy children leave the land.

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,

Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.
Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;
A breath can make them, as a breath has made:
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,
When once destroy'd, can never be supplied.)

And Marx emphasizes the coercive nature of this expropriation of the yeoman peasant:

Even in the last decade of the 17th century, the yeomanry, the class of independent peasants, were more numerous than the class of farmers. They had formed the backbone of Cromwell's strength, and, even according to the confession of Macaulay, stood in favourable contrast to the drunken squires and to their servants, the country clergy, who had to marry their masters' cast-off mistresses. About 1750, the yeomanry had disappeared, and so had, in the last decade of the 18th century, the last trace of the common land of the agricultural labourer. We leave on one side here the purely economic causes of the agricultural revolution. We deal only with the forcible means employed.

A crucial component of the "primitive accumulation", in Marx's interpretation, was the abolition of common property, culminating in the enclosure acts in the seventeenth century:

Communal property — always distinct from the State property just dealt with — was an old Teutonic institution which lived on under cover of feudalism. We have seen how the forcible usurpation of this, generally accompanied by the turning of arable into pasture land, begins at the end of the 15th and extends into the 16th century. But, at that time, the process was carried on by means of individual acts of violence against which legislation, for a hundred and fifty years, fought in vain. The advance made by the 18th century shows itself in this, that the law itself becomes now the instrument of the theft of the people's land, although the large farmers make use of their little independent methods as well. The parliamentary form of the robbery is that of Acts for enclosures of Commons, in other words, decrees by which the landlords grant themselves the people's land as private property, decrees of expropriation of the people. Sir F. M. Eden refutes his own crafty special pleading, in which he tries to represent communal property as the private property of the great landlords who have taken the place of the feudal lords, when he, himself, demands a "general Act of Parliament for the enclosure of Commons" (admitting thereby that a parliamentary coup d'état is necessary for its transformation into private property), and moreover calls on the legislature for the indemnification for the expropriated poor.

We even are afforded a glimpse of the economist's view of the rationality of enclosure. According to John Arbuthnot, enclosure and the creation of private farms is a more productive use of land and labor:

Let us hear for a moment a defender of enclosures and an opponent of Dr. Price. "Not is it a consequence that there must be depopulation, because men are not seen wasting their labour in the open field.... If, by converting the little farmers into a body of men who must work for others, more labour is produced, it is an advantage which the nation" (to which, of course, the "converted" ones do not belong) "should wish for ... the produce being greater when their joint labours are employed on one farm, there will be a surplus for manufactures, and by this means manufactures, one of the mines of the nation, will increase, in proportion to the quantity of corn produced."

And here Marx describes the final stages of the "rationalization" of agriculture, in the expropriation of the Scots:

The last process of wholesale expropriation of the agricultural population from the soil is, finally, the so-called clearing of estates, i.e., the sweeping men off them. All the English methods hitherto considered culminated in “clearing.” As we saw in the picture of modern conditions given in a former chapter, where there are no more independent peasants to get rid of, the “clearing” of cottages begins; so that the agricultural labourers do not find on the soil cultivated by them even the spot necessary for their own housing. But what “clearing of estates” really and properly signifies, we learn only in the promised land of modern romance, the Highlands of Scotland. There the process is distinguished by its systematic character, by the magnitude of the scale on which it is carried out at one blow (in Ireland landlords have gone to the length of sweeping away several villages at once; in Scotland areas as large as German principalities are dealt with), finally by the peculiar form of property, under which the embezzled lands were held.

Eventually we come to the point where industrial capitalism is feasible and there is a "free" proletariat available for labor:

It is not enough that the conditions of labour are concentrated in a mass, in the shape of capital, at the one pole of society, while at the other are grouped masses of men, who have nothing to sell but their labour-power. Neither is it enough that they are compelled to sell it voluntarily. The advance of capitalist production develops a working-class, which by education, tradition, habit, looks upon the conditions of that mode of production as self-evident laws of Nature. The organisation of the capitalist process of production, once fully developed, breaks down all resistance.

And, of course, Engels picks up the story from the perspective of nineteenth-century Manchester and Birmingham, and the conditions of squalor and oppressive factory labor that resulted. (See an earlier posting on Engels's sociology of the proletarian city.)

The English Marxist historians have devoted a lot of their attention to this period of British social history. (Harvey Kaye gives a very good account of the work of this generation of Marxist historians in The British Marxist Historians.) Maurice Dobb is one of the English socialist historians who has retraced Marx's steps on this subject in some detail. One of Dobb's important books, Studies In The Development Of Capitalism (1963), treats this process of the decline of the English peasantry and the rise of the proletariat, making use of the historical scholarship of the first part of the twentieth century. Some of Rodney Hilton's research on this period can be found in Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism: Essays in Medieval Social History (Rev). Several generations later, Robert Brenner gave a somewhat different interpretation of the history of agrarian change in England from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries; his views were developed in the splendid journal Past & Present and were separately published along with a round of critical reactions in The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:28PM (-04:00)

Transnational protest movements

Saturday, April 04, 2009

We've seen a fairly large increase in the occurrence of large international protest movements in the past thirty years. The anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s drew a substantial following across Europe and to some extent North America. (Historian E. P. Thompson played a significant leadership role in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; see for example PROTEST AND SURVIVE.) Anti-globalization protests in Seattle, Washington, and Davos drew substantial support from international organizations and







participants. Major anti-war protests occurred in numerous European cities after the onset of the US-led war on Iraq. And now protests in London against the G20 meeting and in Strasbourg against NATO have drawn supporters and groups around Europe (post). (Here is a current account of the Strasbourg protests in the Dernieres nouvelles d'Alsace.)

These movements are riveting in a number of ways, from the point of view of sociology and international politics. We can ask questions at every edge of the phenomena:

Power and influence. How effective are mass demonstrations at achieving their declared goals? Do mass demonstrations influence government and multinational policies in the direction intended by the organizers and followers? For that matter -- how much of an influence can a large demonstration in Rome have on a subsequent effort to mobilize over a similar issue in New York? What is the role of mass media in the timing, pace, and public impact of large demonstrations?

Mobilization. What processes of mobilization and organization are at work in these specific periods of mass mobilization? To what extent do modern transnational protests embody a significant degree of common purpose and political identity? (Here's a recent post on the difficulty of defining a group mentality.) What organizations have the most influence in determining the strategy and tactics of the mass political actions that are called for? What networks of leaders and counter-politicians can be discerned in the period of mobilization leading up to the mass event? What is the nature of the networks that exist within the various communities of interest -- environmentalists, anti-war activists, anti-globalization activists? What sorts of issues have proven most potent in mobilizing significant numbers of adherents and organizations from different countries? What motivates followers to heed the call and bring themselves to London or Strasbourg? What is the combination of commitment, identity, and adventure that results in involvement?

Internal politics. What factors internal to a movement -- whether environmentalist, anti-globalization, anti-war, anti-nuclear -- lead to cohesion and dissension within the movement? What factors lead to the occasional outbreaks of violence between protesters and police? (See an earlier post on this question.) Is violence a deliberate tactic on either side -- militants or forces of order? What role do organizations such as anarchist groups and other radical, rejectionist groups play within the broader movement? Is it possible for

small groups of rejectionists to "hijack" the large demonstration for their own purposes?

These questions overlap several distinct areas of research: resource mobilization theory, social movements, international relations theory, and comparative politics. (This is a point that McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow make in Dynamics of Contention: there is much to be gained by studying these contentious movements across the traditional areas of study.) And the questions are probably further complicated by the availability of internet-based forms of communication and mobilization.

Sidney Tarrow has turned his attention to international protest movements as a particularly interesting form of "contentious politics." His 2005 book, The New Transnational Activism, treats international protests and their movements from the point of view of the Tilly-McAdam-Tarrow framework of theory and analysis of contentious politics. Here are a few framing assumptions from the introduction:

Students of domestic movements long ago determined that collective action cannot be traced to grievances or social cleavages, even vast ones like those connected to globalization. Acting collectively requires activists to marshal resources, become aware of and seize opportunities, frame their demands in ways that enable them to join with others, and identify common targets. If these thresholds constitute barriers in domestic politics, they are even higher when people mobilize across borders. Globalization is not sufficient to explain when people will engage in collective action and when they will not.

Nor does combating globalization automatically give rise to "global social movements." For Charles Tilly, a "social movement" is "a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities" that uses a well-hewn contentious repertoire on the part of people who proclaim themselves to be worthy, unified, numerous, and committed.

For one thing, forming transnational social movements is not easy. Sustaining collective action across borders on the part of people who seldom see one another and who lack embedded relations of trust is difficult. For another, repertoires of contention grow out of and are lodged in local and national contexts. Even more difficult is developing a common collective identity among people from different cultural backgrounds whose governments are not inclined to encourage them to do so.

Tarrow's central hypothesis about transnational protest movements comes back to the core idea of "opportunity structures." International organizations and networks have created a new set of opportunities for transgressive groups who have an interest in challenging the status quo.

Tarrow identifies several important types of sources of evidence and theory for his current work: international political economy, anthropologists and students of public opinion, specific studies of international protest events, studies of transnational networks and institutions, and theorists of the idea of "global civil society." He explicitly locates the book as falling squarely within the research program established in Dynamics of Contention; his goal is to make use of this ontology of social mechanisms and processes to provide a sociology of transnational protest.

What I'm eager to see is some of the concrete empirical work that this approach suggests: specific empirical studies of the networks, organizations, and dynamic processes through which major transnational protests have unfolded in the past decade or so. It would seem that some important new tools helpful for such study are now much

more readily available -- essentially, using the internet to track organizations, announcements, and efforts at mobilization. Tarrow provides some of this research -- for example, in his summary of research on the networks and localism of participants in the "Battle of Seattle". But this level of analysis seems to be where the action needs to be at this point in the study of transnational social movements. But Tarrow is certainly right in thinking that this subject area is important, and it is one that follows very logically from the framework of analysis of social contention developed by himself, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly in the earlier Dynamics of Contention.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:20AM (-04:00)

French sociology as a distinctive tradition

Tuesday, April 07, 2009



One might think that the globalization of intellectual life has led to the result of the "unification" of major scientific disciplines around one shared set of global assumptions about the discipline: what the major unsolved problems are, what the discipline should strive to achieve, what the products of knowledge ought to look like. From the outside, anyway, one imagines that there is just one "world physics," governed by roughly the same assumptions whether practiced in Berne, Chicago, London, Berlin, or Delhi. (I would find it very interesting to be corrected on this assumption, if any readers can support the idea that there are important differences in national traditions when it comes to high-energy physics or molecular biology.)

In the social sciences, though, this assumption of convergence and unification seems to be incorrect. Instead, it seems to be the case that there are durable national traditions in sociology, political science, and anthropology that are distinct in different national settings; and further, it seems that the fairly extensive amount of cross-fertilization that occurs through international conferences and publications hasn't in fact significantly undermined the durability of these distinct traditions.

A fairly obvious version of this observation arises when we contrast the ways that economic theory is pursued in the United States and India. American economists by and large take the methodological position of neoclassical assumptions about individual behavior, general equilibrium assumptions about systemic behavior, and the assumption of "mathematicization" as a model for how knowledge results ought to be formulated. (Examples might include Kenneth Arrow and Gerard Debreu in the 1950s, and currently Greg Mankiw.) Indian economists, by contrast, seem as a group to be more interested in the human and social content of economic behavior and systems -- the effects that economic processes have on quality of life, the ways in which income and nutrition are related, and more generally, the social relations that correspond to the abstract equations of economic theory. (I'm thinking of scholars such as Partha Dasgupta (An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution) or Amartya Sen (Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation) as exemplars of the latter perspective; here is Sen's biographical essay on the occasion of his receipt of the Nobel Prize.)

That's economics; similar observations might be made about political science and

anthropology. Here I'd like to sketch out a fairly specific hypothesis: that French sociology forms a substantially distinct tradition of social thinking in the twentieth century, and that this tradition has remained largely intact in spite of the substantial amount of Franco-American interaction that has occurred in the social sciences and humanities. I don't mean to suggest that there are no important themes of convergence, shared issues, and some cross-fertilization between French and American sociology. But I am suggesting that French sociology has developed through French academic institutions and traditions since the 1920s; that departments and research institutes have maintained a degree of continuity in the topics and methods in use; and that these followed a path of development that was significantly different in timing, topics, and methods from the development of American sociology during the same time period. And in fact, when we look at some important recent works of French sociology, such as Didier Lapeyronnie's Ghetto urbain or Stephane Beaud's La France invisible, we get a distinct impression of researchers who have cultivated significantly different assumptions about the nature of sociology. Can we get more specific about this impression?

Making this sort of comparison requires that we compare the recent histories of the two traditions of sociological resesearch and theory. There are a couple of sources that provide some key signposts for the development of American sociology in the twentieth century. I particularly like two of Andrew Abbott's books: Chaos of Disciplines and Department and Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred, a history of the Chicago school. (Martin Bulmer's The Chicago School of Sociology is another good source on the history of the Chicago school.) Another important and valuable contribution on the history of American sociology is Craig Calhoun's edited book, Sociology in America: A History. I think these books give a pretty good mid-level understanding of the intellectual and institutional steps through which American sociology developed over roughly a 75-year period.

For the French side, there are several recent books that can serve as a mid-level guide to the development of sociology as a social science in France. One is by Céline Béraud and Baptiste Coulmont (Les courants contemporains de la sociologie [Contemporary Currents in Sociology]). The other is by Philippe Masson (Faire de la sociologie: Les grandes enquêtes françaises [Doing sociology: the great French investigations]). Both books appear to be written for a readership that doesn't exist in the United States: advanced undergraduates needing a theoretically sophisticated introduction and guide to the evolution of the discipline of French sociology. And for my eye, both books do an admirable job of presenting the relevant sociological ideas clearly, rigorously, and with nuance. Neither is a research monograph; but neither book descends into over-simplification. So they serve as a good basis for getting an understanding of the geography of the evolution of the intellectual frameworks of sociology in France over the past seventy years.

There are several interesting features of the narrative that the two books offer. Most basic is periodization: they both begin with the post-war period in French sociology. Histories of American sociology generally start with the Chicago school in the 1920s and make the intellectual connections backwards to Tönnies, Simmel, Durkheim, Darwin, and Comte. But these books treat contemporary French sociology as finding its origin in studies of French society following World War II. Béraud and Coulmont write, "In 1945, at the end of the second world war, French sociology no longer existed. It had lost its intellectual force and energy. And the social context didn't really prepare the ground for its revitalization. It was necessary first to reconstruct France from the destruction of war." Masson makes a similar point, writing that "sociology (with its departments, research laboratories, curricula,

reviews, etc.) wasn't constituted until relatively recently, during the end of the 1950s and the decade following." And, Béraud and Coulmont suggest, the pre-war tradition of Durkheim's sociology had exhausted itself; so reviving sociological research was not simply a matter of dusting off the ideas and methods of Durkheim and his followers in the 1920s and 1930s.

The choice of 1945, then, is meaningful; the authors appear to suggest that French sociology took a genuinely new beginning after World War II. Béraud and Coulmont break the story up into several major intellectual periods and meta-themes in roughly chronological order:

- "renewal of French sociology" (Marxism, labor sociology, American influence, empiricism, statistical methods); [Raymond Aron, Michel Crozier, George Gurvitch, and, transitionally, Pierre Bourdieu/Jean-Claude Passeron, Les Héritiers]
- "Thinking inequalities" (inequality, opportunity, domination, masculinity, segregation) [Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Boudon, Eric Maurin];
- "Action and homo sociologicus" (habitus, strategy, situational sociology);[François Dubet, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Boudon, Bernard Lahire]
- "History and sociology" (the role of comparative historical work in sociology); [Jean-Claude Passeron, Edgar Morin, Henri Mendras]
- "Individual and modernity" (individualization and the definition of modernity) [Raymond Boudon, François Dubet, Eric Maurin]

Influences and concepts from American social science come into the account in a few places -- for example, in the discussion of rationality and collective action theory (free riders, methodological individualism) and in the discussion of the influence of Goffman's sociology of interaction. (The sociology of German-born, British-based sociologist Norbert Elias is also credited with being a substantial influence.) But most commonly, the discourses described here, the debates and controversies that are described, are largely self-contained within the precincts of French sociological research.

Philippe Masson offers a different basis for surveying pretty much the same series of developments within French sociology. He picks out a number of important topics and researchers for detailed treatment: Georges Gurvitch, Georges Friedmann, Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe, Louis-Joseph Lebret, Alaine Touraine, Michel Crozier, Edgar Morin, Henri Mendras, Raymonde Moulin, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Passeron, Luc Boltanski, Pierre Bourdieu, François Dubet, Bruno Latour, Steve Wooglar, Jean Peneff. Topics he highlights include urban sociology, sociology of labor, the study of inequality, the study of the professions, the influence of "constructivism", the study of urban youth, and the sociology of science and technology. Masson notes the influence of American sociology at a number of points (82), including the influence of Talcott Parsons. And he also describes a significant French interest in the American Chicago school of sociology and the approaches of "ethnomethodology". Once again, though, at least in my reading, it seems to me that the narrative that Philippe Masson provides is one that captures a fairly autonomous national tradition of sociological thinking -- with occasional but limited influences from developments in sociology in the United States.

This is a start on the question at hand. Both these books seem to document what might be called in the sociology of science a largely independent research tradition constituting French sociology since World War II. (This impression of independence could probably be tested by a citation analysis.) This tradition defined its own problems for research; debated and pursued a variety of methods of investigation; and formulated some fairly specific ideas about what a finished sociological analysis ought to look like. And it seems to have resulted in a current sociological enterprise that differs in significant ways from

current American or British sociology.

What is needed next is a good analytical account of how French sociology differs from American sociology in terms of (a) the topic areas that are identified as most important for investigation, (b) the methods that are regarded as most reliable and scientifically justified (statistical, qualitative, comparative, participant-observer, ...); and (c) the assumptions that exist about what form sociological knowledge should take (deductive theories, narratives of particular social processes, statistical tables, ...).
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:08PM (-04:00)

Darnton's history

Thursday, April 09, 2009



Twenty-five years ago, Robert Darnton offered a highly original perspective on historical understanding in his The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History (1984), and the book still warrants close attention. He proposes to bring an ethnographic perspective to bear on historical research, attempting to arrive at nuanced interpretation of the mentalities and worldviews of ordinary folk in early modern France. (Significantly, Darnton collaborated with Clifford Geertz at Princeton, and the influences seem to have run in both directions.)

Darnton attempts to tease out some of the distinguishing elements of French rural and urban culture—through folklore, through documented collective behavior, or through obscure documents authored by police inspectors and bourgeois observers. He is "realist" about mentalités; and he recognizes as well the plasticity and variability of mentalités over time, space, and group. ("I do not believe there is such a thing as a typical peasant or a representative bourgeois" (Darnton 1984 : 6).) And he is more interested in the singular revealing incident than in the large structural narrative of change; he demonstrates that careful historical interpretation of a single puzzling event can result in greater illumination about a historical period than from more sweeping descriptions and narratives.

Darnton does not accept the notion that "good" social history must be quantitative or highly "objective"—that is, neutral with respect to perspective. Rather, he sees the task of a cultural social historian as one of uncovering the threads of voice and action that permit us to reconstruct some dimensions of "French peasant worldview" and to see how startlingly different that worldview is from the modern view. Our distance from the French peasant is great—conceptually as well as materially. So the challenges of uncovering these features of agency and mentality based on very limited historical data are great.

In the title essay of the volume Darnton goes into a single incident in detail: the autobiographical account of Nicolas Contat, a printer's apprentice (later journeyman), in which Contat describes an episode of cat killing by the apprentices and journeymen in the shop. Darnton relates the incident to its cultural and social context—the symbolic role that cats had in festivals in the countryside, contemporary attitudes towards violence to animals, the sexual innuendo represented by killing the mistress's cat, the changing

material relations between master and worker in the 18th century trades. Darnton offers a "thick description" of this incident, allowing the reader to come to a relatively full interpretation of the significance of the various elements of the story. At the same time, he sheds light on the background mentalité and social practices of workers and masters. So the essay is a paradigm of interpretative cultural history. Darnton describes his work in these terms:

It might simply be called cultural history; for it treats our own civilization in the same way that anthropologists study alien cultures. It is history in the ethnographic grain. … This book investigates ways of thinking in eighteenth-century France. It attempts to show not merely what people thought but how they thought—how they construed the world, invested it with meaning, and infused it with emotion. (Darnton 1984 : 3)

Darnton implicitly considers whether this incident should be considered an instance of class resistance—that is, whether we can see the germs of class struggle in this complex moment. And his general perspective is that such a reading would be reductionist and anachronistic. There is resistance in this incident; there is sharp hostility between shop workers and the master and his family; but the resistance and the resentment are thematized around more specific grievances and patterns than the class struggle story would suggest. (It may be that we could better relate Darnton's reading of the incident to Scott's "everyday forms of peasant resistance," emphasizing as it does the role of humor and undetectable violence; see an earlier post on this subject.) The workers' conduct in this incident is not aimed at overthrowing the master, but at imposing an episode of pain and celebrating a moment of riot.

The notion of reading runs through all the chapters, for Darnton suggests that one can read a ritual or a city just as one can read a folktale or a philosophic text. "The modes of exegisis may vary, but in each case one reads for meaning—the meaning inscribed by contemporaries in whatever survives of their vision of the world" (Darnton 1984 : 5).

The analysis of folk tales is just as rewarding. Darnton offers a content analysis of the folk tales collected by several generations of folklorists. He disputes the psychological interpretations offered by Fromm, Bettelheim, and others—most convincingly on the grounds that they fail to pay close enough attention to the narrative content and known historical context of the stories. Instead, Darnton offers an interpretation of the world and worldview of the peasant storytellers who invented and repeated these tales: the omnipresence of hunger, the hazards of life on the road, the burden of children in poor households, … He shows that there is great consistency in the narratives of these stories over many generations—and also there are national differences across German, French, and English versions of the stories.

Darnton's work in this book is valuable for the philosophy of history in several ways.

- First, it exemplifies a different model of historical knowledge: not a series of events, not a cliometric analysis of society and class, but an interpretation of moments and mentalités in a fashion designed to shed light on the larger historical moment. It is an effort to make historical understanding "ethnographic."
- Second, it possesses its own form of rigor and objectivity. The facts matter to the interpretations that Darnton offers—the facts of the multiple versions of folk stories, the facts of what we know about the changing circumstances in the printing trades, the facts of peasant hunger at several periods in the 17th and 18th centuries.
- Third, it has the potential for shedding deeper light on French popular action than we are likely to gain from a traditional "rational actor" or class-conflict approaches. The motives that Darnton discerns among the printers are sometimes goal-directed; but

sometimes emotional, and sometimes related to the simple recklessness of young men in constraining circumstances.

Finally, Darnton's work here provides some specific insights into questions about the historical study of “mentalités” (post). Darnton shows that it is possible to make significant headway in the project of figuring out how distant and illiterate people thought about the world around them, the social relations in which they found themselves, the natural world, and much else. The documents available to us in the archives have a richness that speaks to these ways of thinking the world; it is therefore a valuable task for the historian to engage in piecing together the details of daily life and experience that the documents reveal and conceal.

(See an earlier post for a different aspect of Darnton's historiography -- an analysis of the reviews he has written over twenty-five years in the New York Review of Books.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:15PM (-04:00)

Thailand's redshirts and civil unrest

Sunday, April 12, 2009

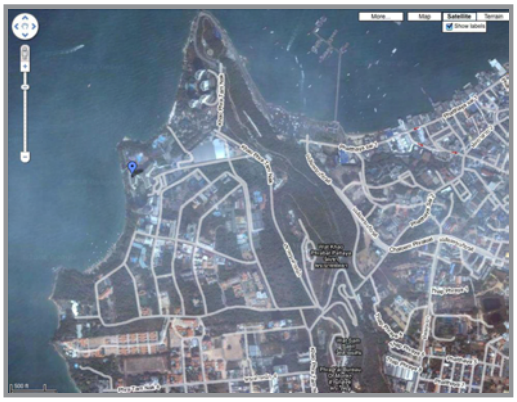






photos: Battaya demonstration 4/11/09 (top 2); Bangkok 4/12/09 (bottom)

Thailand's civil unrest took a new turn Saturday (4/11/09) when "redshirt" demonstrators managed to push through security forces and invade the resort hotel where ministers of ASEAN were preparing to meet. These demonstrations were organized by the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship (DAAD). The ASEAN meeting was scheduled in the Pattaya beach resort, roughly 90 miles from Bangkok. (Here are some very graphic photos of the hotel invasion published in a Thai news publication.) Demonstrators smashed doors and windows in the hotel, raced through the building, and found their way to rooms where several ministers were lunching. The ministers fled through the back of the hotel and were evacuated by helicopter and boat. Reports indicate that the early phase of the demonstrations in Pattaya was opposed by local people ("blueshirts"), who attempted to block the redshirt march to the resort; but they were quickly overwhelmed by a show of force by the redshirts (report). The Thai government immediately canceled the ASEAN meeting and evacuated the ministers from the country. Large demonstrations continue in Bangkok today by redshirt activists, and the situation is unfolding rapidly. (Here is a GoogleMaps image of the environs of the Royal Cliff Beach Resort (A) where the ASEAN







meeting was to occur.)

Some commentators describe the basic struggle as one between former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's followers who want to see a major redistribution of power and resources in Thai society (redshirts; DAAD), against the forces of the status quo and the powerful and privileged, represented by current prime minister Abhisit (yellowshirts; PAD). (Others denounce Thaksin's motives as being corrupt and self-serving, more interested in power than social reform.) Redshirt support tends to draw from poor and unemployed Thais, largely rural, whereas the yellowshirt movement tends to reflect the powerful groups in Thai society, including the military and business elites. The redshirt demonstrators are supporters of Thaksin and are demanding the resignation of Abhisit. Thaksin was forced from office in a military coup in September 2006. Demonstrations by "yellowshirt" groups and the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) against the government by the People's Power Party allied with Thaksin in September and October 2008 led to the closure of Thailand's major airports and had a large economic impact on Thailand by its effects on tourism. Abhisit became prime minister in December 2008. Thaksin is playing a visible role in encouraging the current round of demonstrations against the government and is evidently positioning himself as the only person who can bring the redshirt movement off the streets. (Here is an article by Michael K. Connors that provides much of the recent background. Michael Connors' blog, Sovereign Myth, will be interesting to follow as well.)

In other words, Thailand has been undergoing a period of intense social unrest for several years, with major contentious organizations at work to further their programs and mobilize followers, and with occasional outbursts of major urban demonstrations and riots. And the relations among the most powerful groups in Thai society seem to be up for grabs: the military, the business elites, the middle class, the urban poor, and the rural poor. Each segment wants something; and increasingly it seems that their demands find expression in mass mobilizations in the streets of Bangkok.

These events are interesting from several points of view. One is the simple fact that a relatively small group of demonstrators was able to bypass Thailand's security forces in their security deployment for a major international summit. This seems roughly as shocking as if demonstrators had succeeded in penetrating the meeting rooms of the

G20 in the Excel Centre in London. News reports suggest that the police and army units offered no resistance to the protesters in their assault on the resort hotel. This seems to imply that the government has uncertain control of the police and security forces -- an impression reinforced by demonstrations taking place today in Bangkok in which demonstrators have succeeded in seizing police vehicles and weapons.

It is also interesting to consider what must be occurring beneath the surface in order to support the mobilization and coordinated actions of large groups of redshirt demonstrators in Pattaya and Bangkok. What are the forms of organization, leadership, and communication that support this extensive level of mobilization? What kinds of networks have been established to permit quick and effective mobilization? How are radio and television, cell phones, text messages, and twitter feeds being used to rally supporters? Where does the money come from that both redshirts and yellowshirts have identified as being important inducements to participation by poor people? For that matter -- what sort of organization or mobilization took place in order to bring the blueshirts mentioned above into action in Pattaya? (A story in The Nation suggests that this may have been the result of efforts by a government agent.) In Bangkok "red" radio stations appear to be broadcasting calls to action by supporters of the DAAD. FM 92.75 and FM 107.5 are mentioned in a current story in The Nation.

As for leadership -- one leader of the redshirts in Pattaya is mentioned in several news reports, Arisman Pongruengrong. If you google his name today, you'll find he was arrested within the past twelve hours (post, post). Here's a photo of Arisman in Pattaya on Saturday:

Another dimension of interest is a "new media" point: it is possible to get a fair amount of real-time information about the demonstration and public attitudes by following relevant keywords on Twitter. If you search for #redshirt on Twitter, you'll get a steady stream of comments and events (search.twitter.com). (There are other utilities that permit easy Twitter searches as well -- for example, tweetvisor.) And it seems possible to put together a spatial and temporal picture of the events based on references to specific streets and intersections. With enough patience it would be possible to annotate the Google map clipped above with specific events mentioned in the twitter feeds: taxis blocking this street, APC seized on that street, etc. Here's a start of a map of Bangkok indicating the locations of Government House and a major protest blockade on Din Daeng Road.

Contentious politics is an enormously interesting and productive component of contemporary social science. The evolving situation of contention in Thailand seems tailor-made for a detailed analysis by researchers within this tradition. I'd love to see a research paper that extends McAdam-Tarrow-Tilly's Dynamics of Contention by providing a detailed "tagging" of the development of these protests in terms of the chief social mechanisms of mobilization and contention that these authors highlight -- escalation, brokerage, identity shift, radicalization, convergence, and framing, for example. And unlike the unfolding of the Solidarity Movement in Poland in the 1980s, Thailand's current contention can be investigated pretty deeply just using the tools available on the desktop: Google, Twitter, Blogger, Facebook, and access to virtually every newspaper worldwide.

MTT make an important point throughout their treatments of periods of contention: the deeply contingent nature of social contention. We can explain many of the component processes of an uprising. But we can't discover "laws" of uprisings that would permit confident predictions of outcomes. And this point about contingency seems especially compelling today: even knowing the basic intentions and resources available to the

various parties in Thailand today, it is impossible to predict with confidence what the next few weeks will bring. Will the government decide to use the coercion option? Will this succeed -- will security forces obey orders to use force against civilians? Will the exercise of force provoke even more powerful expressions of unrest? And if the government decides to continue its current policy of restraint -- will the current redshirt movement simply gather more and more steam, will it take over important government buildings and television stations, will it be in a position to forcibly bring about a change of government and the return to power of Thaksin? Or will even more surprising turns of events emerge, outside this range of more-or-less foreseeable contingencies?
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:36PM (-04:00)

American urban unrest

Wednesday, April 15, 2009



photo: Newark, 1967

Several recent posts have focused on periods of civil unrest in other countries -- France and Thailand most recently. The United States has its own history of civil unrest as well; and much of that history involves poverty, race, and cities. So it's worthwhile taking a look at some of the dynamics and causes of the major urban race riots that have occurred in the United States in the past seventy-five years. Detroit, Newark, Chicago, and Watts stand out as particularly dramatic moments in American urban history of the late 1960s, and it is useful to tease out some of the historical contingencies and large social conditions that produced these periods of strife.

At the crudest level, we can tell a pretty compelling story about why these riots occurred. The facts of racial segregation and intense poverty and restricted opportunities for African-Americans created an environment where urban African-American youth had seething grievances and a sense of little to lose; a dilapidated and depressing housing stock reinforced this sense of isolation, anger, and hopelessness; and specific incidents triggered an outburst of urban violence against property (the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; specific acts of police misconduct; etc.). So structural conditions (racism, segregation, economic inequality, poverty, and limited opportunities) led to a political psychology of grievance, anger, and hopelessness in a large part of the urban population; and it was only a matter of time before a spark would fall into this tinder. Riots were predictable given the structural conditions and the resulting psychology.

But this is a commonsense folk theory of unrest; what do the experts think? Janet Abu-Lughod provides a particularly thoughtful and probing history of this subject in Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. Abu-Lughod is a noted urban sociologist (though notably not a student of social contention in the Tilly school), and her approach is comparative and spatial. She wants to identify the similarities and differences that exist across a small number of cases of major race riots. She picks out six riots in three cities (Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles) over a period of about seventy-five years (1919-1992) and employs a method of paired comparisons. Her goal is to achieve three things:

First, I hope to illustrate the changing conditions of urban race relations over time, as

these have been affected by internal and international patterns of migration, wars and wartime production demands for labor, legal changes governing housing segregation, and the civil rights movement.

Second, I hope to explain variations in riots in the three largest metropolitan regions by examining differences in their demographic compositions, the spatial distributions of racial and ethnic groups within each city, and the degree and patterns of racial segregation in their unique physical settings.

Third, I hope to demonstrate differences in the ways relevant city government regimes have responded to sequential outbreaks -- ways that reflect the distinctive power structures of each city and the prior "social learning" relevant to race relations that evolved in each place. (8)

One of the things that is most original in Abu-Lughod's treatment is the primacy she gives to the spatial features of urban geography and the geography of racial segregation in the various cities. She believes that spatial characteristics of Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles explain important aspects of the six riots. But another original contribution is the emphasis she places on sequence and learning: an uprising later in time takes a somewhat different shape because of things that insurgents and authorities have learned from earlier uprisings. Both insurgents and authorities have "repertoires" of tactics that are updated by prior experiences.

Spatial considerations come into Abu-Lughod's analysis in several ways: as a source of conflict (over de facto borders between racially defined areas), and a source of logistical difficulties for the authorities when it comes to the challenge of deploying forces to suppress rioters (in Los Angeles, for example). Urban development plans that intrude into black neighborhoods -- for example, the expansion of the University of Illinois campus in Chicago -- are also identified as a spatial process that provokes racial conflict.

Abu-Lughod draws several general conclusions based on the pairwise comparisons that she has made. One important conclusion concerns policing. She argues that a well-trained, restrained, and disciplined police force is more likely to sustain peace in tumultuous times and less likely to worsen conflicts when they arise (270); whereas undisciplined and violent police forces greatly worsen the degree and duration of conflict. And second, she argues that the cases suggest that cities in which the city administration has taken steps to enhance trust and collaboration with the organizations of disadvantaged populations will be least likely to suffer major race riots. "Where there is ongoing interaction between well-organized protest movements, with leaders capable of articulating specific demands for change, and a responsive local government, the more quickly hostilities can be brought to an end" (270). So there are specific steps that cities can take to attempt to reduce the likelihood of prolonged major race riots.

But these points don't address the most basic causes of race riots: poverty, segregation, and severe inequalities of opportunity across racial lines. As she points out, the Kerner Commission in 1968 urged the nation to address these inequalities; the Johnson administration undertook to do so; and very, very little progress has been made in the intervening forty years towards greater social justice along these lines. So perhaps her most sweeping and penetrating conclusion has to do with the depth and severity of the problems of race, poverty, and segregation we continue to face in American cities, and the likelihood this creates for future major disturbances.

Given the obdurate persistence of racism in American culture, and the widening divides

in the racial/ethnic/class system over the past three decades (attributable to changes in the international division of labor that have reshaped labor demands in the United States, coupled with massive immigration and a generation of neoliberal national policies that have shred the welfare safety net woven in the Great Depression), I am amazed that major urban rebellions have thus far been so constrained. (269)

One thing that this account has not addressed is the element of organizations and leadership. Abu-Lughod presents the riots she treats as if they were simply wholesale reactions of the mass populations of Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles, to a pressing set of structures and grievances. And this appears to make these periods of strife as being non-strategic -- reactive rather than purposive, expressive rather than political. But it is a key insight of the resource mobilization approach that we need to spend particular effort at discovering the organizational resources that were available to insurgents; the background thought is that uprisings require mobilization and coordination, and that this is impossible without some sort of organization. So were there organizational resources that helped to sustain and spread the urban riots of the 1960s?

Abu-Lughod doesn't ignore urban activist organizations altogether; for example, she talks about the role of the NAACP and the Urban League in organizing and negotiating skillfully in support of the economic and political interests of African-Americans in New York during periods between major riots. And she refers to the organizational capacity of the Congress of Racial Equality in New York as a substantial asset in the ability of the black community to organize and sustain protests against police brutality in 1964 in Bedford-Stuyvesant. But the periods of strife themselves seem to be largely disorganized, in her narrative, and CORE organizers exerted themselves to damp down the violence rather than sustain it. Generally the civil rights organizations appear to have played the role of peace makers rather than insurgents.

A good complement to Abu-Lughod's analysis is Tom Sugrue's recent book, Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North. This is a very careful and detailed treatment of the sustained activism and achievements of major civil rights organizations in the North that were aimed at achieving greater equality for African-Americans. And it gives a very nuanced appreciation of the degree of political sophistication and activism that existed in the urban African-American communities of the north throughout the 1960s. Sugrue documents in great detail the strategies and commitment of organizations such as CORE, NAACP, and the Urban League. But I think Sugrue agrees with the basic view that the rioting itself was not the result of insurgent organization: "There is little evidence that the urban rebellions of the 1960s were planned, coordinated, and controlled. What was most striking about the long hot summers was not their coordination or coherence. Their very spontaneity convinced many leftists that they were manifestations of a popular -- if still undeveloped -- revolutionary consciousness" (334-35).

If this interpretation is correct (spontaneous rioting without organization through such vehicles as street gangs, underground groups, etc.), then the spatial considerations that Abu-Lughod focuses on really are crucial; our explanations of the spread and persistence of violence in these cities depend on neighborhood-level mobilization alone. And it suggests that American urban riots were somewhat different from insurgency movements in other countries; they are more spontaneous and less organized than the campaigns of the aggrieved mentioned in prior postings (1848 Paris workers, Thai red shirts, student protests in France).

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:19PM (-04:00)

The Franco-Prussian War

Friday, April 17, 2009



The rapid, bloody, and total defeat of the French army by the Prussian army in 1870-71 was an enormous and unexpected shock to France and to Europe. Since the Napoleonic Wars it was taken as given that France's armies were powerful, well-equipped, and well generaled. But the Prussian army quickly defeated French armies across eastern France, from Wissembourg to Sedan, with massive loss of life on the French side. And the collapse of the army was rapidly followed by the siege of Paris and the Paris uprising leading to the establishment of the Commune of Paris and eventually its bloody suppression. So this period of two years was a critical moment in France's history in the nineteenth century.

Michael Howard's 1961 history, Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France 1870-1871, is probably the most comprehensive book in English on the Franco-Prussian War. Here's how Howard expresses the the comprehensiveness and shocking totality of France's defeat:

The collapse at Sedan, like that of the Prussians at Jena sixty-four years earlier, was the result not simply of faulty command but of a faulty military system; and the military system of a nation is not an independent section of the social system but an aspect of it in its totality. The French had good reason to look on their disasters as a judgment. The social and economic developments of the past fifty years had brought about a military as well as an industrial revolution. The Prussians had kept abreast of it and France had not. Therein lay the basic cause of her defeat. (1)

So Howard's judgment of the causes of this massive military failure is ultimately technological and systemic. The technical changes to which he refers are familiar: the role that railroads could play in the logistics of nineteenth-century warfare (opportunities that needed to be recognized and incorporated into military plans and the design of operational systems); the advent of new infantry weapons (breech-loading rifles of greater range and speed of loading); and new advances in artillery. The Prussian army incorporated breech-loading rifles (the needle gun) as early as 1843; whereas the French (as well as the British and Austrian armies) retained the muzzle-loader until the 1860s. And the Prussian generals led major advances in artillery in the decades leading up to the Franco-Prussian war, with greater precision and fire power in their Krup guns.

Railroads played a key role in Prussia's mobilization and logistics. The Prussians were able to maintain coordination and organization of their rail system; whereas the French rail system quickly fell into disorder. Howard describes the military potential of railroads in these terms:

Speed of concentration was only one of the advantages which railways provided. They carried troops rapidly to the theatre of war; and they enabled them to arrive in good

physical condition, not wearied and decimated by weeks of marching. Armies needed no longer to consist of hardened regular troops; reservists from civil life could be embodied in the force as well.... Further, the problem of supplying large forces in the field was simplified. (3)

The systemic part of Howard's diagnosis is a failure of government: a failure to coordinate ministries and the bureaucracy of the military in pushing forward the reforms that would lead to effective incorporation of new technological possibilities into the order of battle and mobilization. The Prussian army made intelligent use of the General Staff as a learning organization; the French had no comparable organization.

Military failure is perhaps best viewed as a single species of organizational failure more generally. Elliot Cohen and John Gooch offer a different analytical basis for trying to understand the military disaster of the Franco-Prussian War in Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War. Bad generals can cause military disasters; but Cohen and Gooch take the position that "human error" is an explanation we turn to too quickly when it comes to large failures. (Likewise, "pilot error" and "surgeon error" are too superficial in aviation and hospital failures.) Rather, it is important to look for the systemic and organizational causes of failure. They treat war as a complex organizational activity, and they attempt to discover the causes of military failures in a variety of kinds of organizational failure. They identify three basic kinds of failure: "failure to learn, failure to anticipate, and failure to adapt" (26). And when these kinds of failure compound in a single period, it is likely enough that the result will be catastrophic failure.

Cohen and Gooch offer a fascinating "matrix of failure", partitioning "command level" (from president down to operating units) and "critical task" (communication of warning, appropriate level of alert, coordination) (55); and they demonstrate how mistakes at various levels of command in the several critical tasks can cascade into "critical failures". The cases they analyze include the failure of American antisubmarine warfare, 1942; Israel Defense Forces on the Suez Front and the Golan Heights, 1973; the British at Gallipoli, 1915; the defeat of the American Eighth Army in Korea, 1950; and the French army and airforce, 1940.

It seems that the Cohen-Gooch framework can be usefully applied to the Franco-Prussian War. Each of the key failures occurred: failure to anticipate (especially, failure to anticipate the possible consequences of Prussia's rapid military modernization in the 1850s and 1860s; failure to anticipate the fatal consequences that would follow from the French declaration of war in July 1870); failure to learn (an almost total lack of ability on the part of the French general staff to make sense of the causes of defeat as they occurred in summer and fall 1870); and, most strikingly, a failure to adapt (essentially the same tactics were used at Sedan as had first been applied at Wissembourg; Howard, 204-08).

Emile Zola's treatment of the war, The Debacle: 1870-71, is not a piece of analytical history; instead, it is a brilliant novelist's best effort to capture the horror and hopelessness of the campaigning in the summer and fall of 1870 from the point of view of the peasant Jean Macquart. The confusion of endless marches in one direction and then the reverse; the misery of driving rain; the hunger of poorly provisioned campaigning; and the seemingly endless terror of artillery and rifle fire put the reader into the shoes of the foot soldier as he approaches his end. The novel presents a textured and grim picture of the confusion of the march and the terrors of the battlefield:

In Remilly there was a dreadful mix-up of men, horses, and vehicles jamming the street

which zigzags down the hill to the Meuse. Half way down, in front of the church, some guns had got their wheels locked together and could not be moved in spite of much swearing and banging. At the bottom of the hill, where the Emmane roars down a fall, there was a huge queue of broken-down vans blocking the road, while an ever-growing wave of soldiers was struggling at the Croix de Malte inn (139-40)
And a description of fighting in Bazeilles:

Clearly the attack was going to be terrible. The fusillade from the meadows had died down. The Bavarians were masters of the little stream fringed with poplars and willows, and were now preparing for an assault on the houses defending the church square, and so their snipers had prudently drawn back. The sun shone in golden splendour on the great stretch of grassland, dotted with a few black patches, the bodies of killed soldiers. (190)

Lying on the ground, sheltering behind stones or taking advantage of the slightest projections, the men were firing all out, and along this wide, sunlit and empty street there was a hurricane of lead with streaks of smoke, like a hailstorm blown by a high wind. A young girl was seen running across the road in terror, but she was not hit. But then an old man, a yokel in a smock, was insisting on getting his horse into a stable, and he was struck in the forehead by a bullet with such force that it knocked him into the middle of the road. The roof of the church was blown in by a shell. (191)

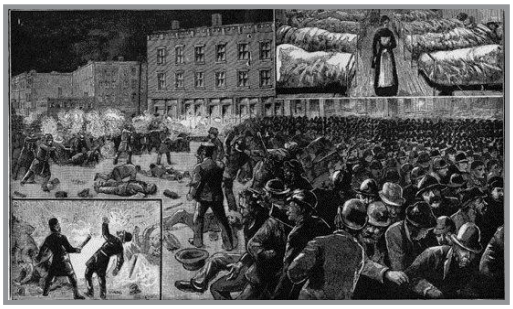
And here, the fateful trap of Sedan, where the larger part of the French army was annihilated:

The hundred thousand men and five hundred cannon of the French army were there packed together and hounded into this triangle. And when the King of Prussia turned westwards he saw another plain, that of Donchery, empty fields extending to Briancourt, Marancourt and Vrigne-aux-Bois, a waste of grey earth, powdery-looking under the blue sky, and when he turned to the east there was yet again, opposite the huddled French lines, an immense vista, a crowd of villages..... In all directions the land belonged to him, he could move at will the two hundred and fifty thousand men and the eight hundred guns of his armies, he could take in with one sweeping look their invading march. (197)
It is an interesting question to ask: to what extent do the skills of the novelist complement the theories of the social scientist and the narratives and analysis of the historian, in helping us to come to a better understanding of the reality of the historical moment? Is Zola's novel a genuine addition to our ability to make sense of this period in France's history? Or is it simply -- fiction?
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:38PM (-04:00)

Objectivity and bias in complex happenings

Sunday, April 19, 2009

Complicated things happen: riots occur, military coups take place, governments collapse. The happenings consist of a myriad of events and actions, many social actors, and a range of political interests and grievances. We want to know what happened; who did what; and who is responsible for the course that events took. It is one of the tasks of journalists, commentators, and historians to arrive at accounts of complicated things that answer many of these questions. And we want those accounts to be objective, truthful, and unbiased. Each account is a creative act of selection and narrative construction; the analyst has to sort out the evidence that is available to him or her and arrive at a



chronology and a causal interpretation that makes sense, based on the evidence.

What we want from the historian and the journalist is easily described, though achieved with difficulty. We want an account that provides an accurate and truthful narrative of the events, based on the best available factual and historical information. We want an account that avoids the biases of the actors, including especially those of the most powerful actors who have the greatest capacity to shape the story -- the government, the military, and the major parties. We want an investigator who is able to question his/her own initial assumptions -- sympathy for the underdog, patient acceptance of the government's good intentions, or whatever. And we want a narrative that provides a balanced synthesis of the many events of the time period into a storyline with a degree of coherence: what the major events were, what choices were made by the actors, what the motivations of the actors were, and perhaps -- who acted responsibly and who acted recklessly or out of narrow self-interest.

It has to be acknowledged at the start that there are often multiple truthful, unbiased narratives that can be told for a complex event. Exactly because many things happened at once, actors' motives were ambiguous, and the causal connections among events are debatable, it is possible to construct inconsistent narratives that are equally well supported by the evidence. Further, the intellectual interest that different reporters bring to the happening can lead to differences in the narrative: one reporter may be primarily interested in the role that different views of social justice played in the actions of the participants; another may be primarily interested in the role that social networks played, so the narrative is structured around network connections; and a third may be especially interested in the role of charismatic personalities, with a consequent structuring to the narrative. Each of these may be truthful, objective, unbiased -- and inconsistent in important ways with the others. So narratives are underdetermined by the facts. And there is no such thing as an exhaustive and comprehensive telling of the story -- only various tellings that emphasize one set of themes or another. That said -- it is entirely possible that a given event will have provided enough factual data in the form of witness reports, government documents, YouTube videos, etc., that the main sequence of events, cast of actors and responsibility for events are unambiguous.

The example I'm thinking of in particular is the recent period of demonstration and riot in Bangkok involving red shirts, followers of former prime minister Thaksin, and the government and military. (See several other posts here and here.) But other examples are easily found: the taking of the Bastille, the Haymarket Square riot in Chicago (pictured above), the return of Franco to Malaga, or the decision of General MacArthur to cross the Yalu River in Korea. Virtually every historical event is a complex happening; so the problems raised here are endemic to historical interpretation.

One of the important issues being debated right now in Thailand is the question of arriving at a balanced and fact-based judgment of the amount of force that was used by the military in dispersing the crowds of protesters on April 13-14. The government reports that it used minimal force -- paper bullets, firm orders to fire above the crowds when using live ammunition, and a very low number of casualties as a result. Critical observers suspect a different story; based on memories of past repression by the military in times of street demonstrations, there is suspicion that the amount of violence was much greater.

Some commentators speculate that there may have been many more deaths than have been reported and that the bodies were secretly taken away; ambiguous videos are brought forward as evidence for this possibility. So how are we to sort out the truth of the matter?

We can raise the question of objectivity at two levels: the investigator and the narrative. So let's begin with the narrative itself -- what do we want in a good comprehensive piece of journalism that tells this story accurately and fairly? We want an account that lays out the causes, events, and actions that made up this period of several weeks of protest and reaction. We want to know what organizations and leaders took what actions at what time, to call forth what organized responses. We want to know what key decisions the government made. We want to know how the prime minister and the police and military deliberated about responses to massive demonstrations. We want to know how the several occasions of mob violence against officials and offices transpired. We want to know the crucial details of the final hours of confrontation between the military and the crowd, and the degree of violence that transpired at that point.

And what do we want from the investigator of this complex happening in Bangkok? We want a commitment to arriving at the most truthful account of the story possible; a commitment to considering the full range of empirical and factual evidence available; and an ability to tell the story without regard to one's antecedent affinities and loyalties. It shouldn't be a "yellow shirt" or a "red shirt" story; it should be a factual story, based on critical reading and assessment of the available evidence. In order to arrive at such an account, the honest reporter needs to exercise critical good sense about the sources and the interests that the conveyors of the information have: the biases of the government, the press, and the parties as they provide evidence and interpretation of the events. And we want this account to be as free as possible of the interfering influences of bias and political interest. We want an honest and comprehensive synthesis, not a one-sided spin.

The good news is -- both goals are possible. The standards and values associated with both good historical writing and good journalism lead at least some investigators to exert their talents and integrity to do the best job they can to use the evidence to discover the details of the story. Not all journalists are equally committed to these standards -- that's why we prefer the I. F. Stones to the Jayson Blairs of the world. But enough are committed that we've got a good shot at sorting out the realities and responsibilities of the complex happenings that surround us through their objective, fact-based reporting.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:38AM (-04:00)

Understanding across generations

Monday, April 20, 2009

Cohorts sometimes have very different formative experiences. Perhaps this means that they form different ways of taking the world in -- different expectations, different paradigms of how things work, different basic reactions about how to behave. And, in turn, perhaps this makes intergenerational understanding difficult; both younger and older may need to engage in real hermeneutic effort to make sense of each other.

This is often said to be the case for the US birth generations of 1920 and 1950. The former experienced the Great Depression, Tommy Dorsey, World War II, and the atom bomb. The latter experienced Woodstock, Jimmie Hendrix, the Beatles, and the war in Vietnam. The values of thrift, self-sufficiency, and sacrifice attached easily to the



"Greatest Generation". Questioning authority, personal freedom in all things, and a weird combination of political engagement and personal narcissism formed the nimbus of the sixties generation.

These truly were very different social, familial, and economic circumstances for the two successive generations. But is it clear that these differences amounted to differences in worldview deep enough to make mutual comprehension difficult? Or are these differences overstated in films and novels (Death of a Salesman, The Graduate, Appocalypse Now), but really small beer in actual fact?

Part of the answer depends on what we think is involved in "understanding" the inner lives and external behavior of others. We observe people's behavior in specific circumstances -- how they treat their friends or children, how they handle important social obligations like the draft, or how they react to tragedy and loss; and we try to reconstruct how they think, feel, and reason. We try to form an idea of what they care about, what they value, and what kinds of principles they honor.

Part of what we mean when we judge we just don't understand the other person's actions, is that we can't assimilate their behavior to anything like our own core values and commitments. Likewise, we have the greatest sense of understanding when the other's conduct is compatible with our own values; we judge "she's pretty much like me in a core way."

When the other's behavior deviates widely from our own values and perceptions -- like Darnton's apprentices in their massacre of Parisian cats, or like the war protester pissing on a flag in the view of the sixtyish VFW witness -- we have to get more actively hermeneutic: what is the perception and valuation of the situation possessed by the other, in light of which his action makes sense to him? We have to actively reconstruct an interpretation of the other person's mental framework.

One thing we know from everyday experience: friendship and extended interaction leads to hermeneutic learning between people with very different starting points. So the fact that we begin with little in common doesn't ensure that we'll stay in that place. But this takes effort, and if there isn't a basis of friendship and mutual respect we may not get there. It explains, too, why parents and their children often do succeed in understanding each other in spite of these generational differences: they care enough to try to figure each other out.

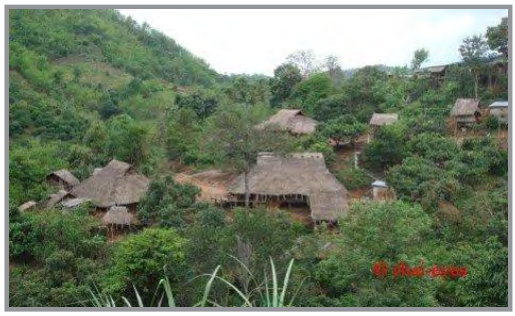
But maybe the example of mid-century America is a pretty clear case; maybe it's true that the world of the VFW sixty-year-old in 1970 is different enough from the draft-resisting protester that they are mutually opaque. They each need the skills of a Geertz or a Maslau to have a meaningful conversation with each other.

But what about today? Are there hermeneutic gaps as wide as this between the 1950, 1970, and 1990 cohorts? Is it possible that the experiences of people now sixty and now twenty-five are just as wide? Are the young truly foreign to the middle-aged? And for that matter -- is it true that sixty is today's forty?

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:54PM (-04:00)

Mobilizing a movement

Wednesday, April 22, 2009





The red shirt demonstrations in Bangkok are very interesting. Throughout March 2009 there were massive demonstrations involving tens of thousands of people. They are mostly supporters of the National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD; also designated as DAAD), the mass party of former prime minister Thaksin. And generically they are in opposition to the current government and to the yellow shirt movement that brought it to power in street demonstrations in fall 2008. (These demonstrations succeeded in forcing the closure of Bangkok's airports, which was significant because it threatened the tourist economy upon which Thailand depends.)

The social composition of the red shirt movement is loosely described as consisting primarily of poor people, largely from rural parts of Thailand. The media coverage also makes it clear that the red shirt movement is able to call upon the support of thousands of urban Bangkok people, including taxi drivers. Their immediate demand is for the resignation of the current government, which came to power through undemocratic means. But more generally, the movement seems to call for greater social equality in Thailand and greater democracy.

The question I want to raise here is a pretty limited one but theoretically crucial. It concerns the processes of mobilization through which these tens of thousands of people were induced to travel to Bangkok and involve themselves in extended and increasingly risky demonstrations. In general, massive demonstrations don't just happen; they need organization and planning. How did this mobilization transpire? What national, regional, and local organizations brought it about? I don't have the expertise to answer the question, so I'm putting the issue out here, in the hope that some of the commentators on the #redshirt twitter feed will help with some specifics.

There are a number of different ways in which this mass mobilization might have happened.

One is through the efforts of an effective and extended party organization. It might be the case that UDD is a well-organized and well-financed organization with numerous professional activists in the countryside. There may be village- and town-based UDD offices that maintain a regular presence at the grass-roots level. The activists may be experienced at keeping the grievances alive, keeping political sentiments aroused, and -- when the time is right -- they may have the capacity to mobilize bus-loads of adherents for the trip to Bangkok. On this scenario, mobilization is analogous to the "get out the

vote" processes through which political parties in the United States mobilize their supporters at the polls on election day.

Here's a second way the mobilization could work. UDD might be an umbrella organization at the urban center with little grasp into the countryside and villages; but it may loosely lead a number of independent organizations that have a substantial presence in rural areas. Then, through coalition politics and a degree of high-profile leadership, the center and the coalition partners may call for mobilization, and coalition activists at the local level may take the organizational steps needed to elicit hundreds of bus loads of volunteers. This is a bit more challenging than the first scenario from the point of view of maintaining political unity -- each partner may have a somewhat different agenda -- but may be more feasible from the point of view of the level of resources needed by the central party. Here is a posting from April 9 in New Mandala that seems to suggest this type of mechanism.

I suppose there is a third logical possibility as well: a reasonably well-organized central party, no regional partners, but a mobilization that results simply from a widely broadcast "call to action". Crudely -- UDD leaders call for large street demonstrations; the call is broadcast on friendly mass media; and tens of thousands of rural people heed the call and make their way to Bangkok.

Naturally, we can ask exactly the same kinds of questions about the yellow shirt movement; and it is possible that the answers will be different in the two cases. I don't have any way of knowing whether any of these scenarios is close to the realities in Thailand today. But it is worth knowing, and there are many smart observers in Thailand who can shed light on the matter. So, Thai tweeters, how does it work?
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:33PM (-04:00)

Creativity, convention, and tradition

Sunday, April 26, 2009



images: Picasso, Portrait of Gertrude Stein (1906); Courbet, Burial at Ornans (1849)

Conventions define how to do things correctly -- trim the hedges, choose an outfit for an evening at the opera or the racetrack, how much to tip the server. They also define or constrain productions in the arts -- writing a short story or a sonnet, performing a Brahms quintet, participating in an Andean flute group. We might define a convention as a stylized but unwritten rule of performance. A tradition is an extended set of conventions for a given area of performance. We can refer to traditions of classical German chamber composition, Japanese landscape painting, or hiphop street performance. A conventional act or performance, then, is one that directly and consistently expresses the relevant conventions.

So -- at any given time, a particular set of conventions drive the creation of works of culture and guide the interpretation of the product. These conventions are somehow



embedded in the community of creators, viewers, and critics. And innovation, breaking or stretching the rules, creates the possibility of novelty and creativity within the process. It is important to notice, though, that conventions generally don't govern every aspect of a performance. The convention of the sonnet mandates a form and meter and gives some constraint on subject. But it would certainly be possible to write a sonnet in deviant meter in praise of a farm tractor; the audience would be able to make sense of the production. So the artist always has a degree of freedom within the tradition.

I find several specific ideas to be useful in analyzing cultural conventions and their products -- in particular, "idiom", "voice", and "novelty". Within a given medium, there is an existing stock of shorthand ways of expressing an artistic or symbolic idea. We may refer to these modes of expression as "idioms" of the genre. When the stranger in the 1950s western is wearing a black hat, the audience understands he is the villain. When the soundtrack swells in an ominous minor key the audience knows there is trouble coming. These idioms aren't natural signifiers; rather, they are conventions of the B movie. So the idioms of a genre are a particularly direct form of convention within the semiotics of the genre.

"Voice" is a counterpart of originality. It is the intangible "signature" that the individual artist brings to his or her work -- what Eisenstein brings to many of his films, distinctive from Bergman and Kurosawa. Voice represents a kind of consistency over time, but it is not defined by homage to tradition; instead, it is an expression of the specific sensibility of the individual artist, the specific way in which this artist forges together his/her material and vision within the resources of the genre and its conventions. Eisenstein's films aren't formulaic, even though one can recognize a common sensibility running through them.

What about novelty and creativity? Novelty is the break outside of convention that the artist brings to the production in order to express a particular idea or perspective in a new and forceful way -- for example, the transition from sepia to color in The Wizard of Oz. The original and genuinely creative artist or writer finds ways of bringing novelty and his/her own originality into the production, giving the audience new and unexpected insights and ideas. The element of innovation needs to point the audience towards its signification without relying wholly on the existing traditions of reading. (Picasso's portrait above of Gertrude Stein displeased some friends of the writer because "it doesn't resemble Gertrude Stein." Picasso is said to have replied, "It will.")

But here is an apparent conundrum of creativity and convention. Any performance or artistic work that is wholly determined by the relevant conventions is, for that reason, wholly uncreative. It is like a conversation in a Dashiell Hammett novel: no surprises, each gambit programmed by the conventions of the crime novel. Or it is like a string quartet composed by an earnest follower of Beethoven, with no phrase breaking the flow, no note out of place. And for the careful listener, each is ultimately boring; there is no novelty in the work. And there is no opening for the original and creative voice of the creator. Originality and new perspective have no place.

But now the other half of the conundrum: novelty without regard to the frame of tradition is incomprehensible and meaningless. The classical composer of 1800 who somehow heard the world atonally, arhythmically, and to the accompaniment of falling trash cans

and who then wrote a symphony in thirty movements on this basis -- this composer is innovating, all right. But he/she is not creating works that any existing audience could hear as "music". There is no bridge of meaning or hermeneutic practice to facilitate interpretation.

It is relevant here that we are led to refer to the audience. Because cultural products require the conveying of meaning; and communication of meaning requires some reference to conventions shared with the audience -- whether in music, painting, literature, or hiphop. Meaning of any cultural performance is inherently public, and this means there have to be publicly shared standards of interpretation. The audience can only interpret the performance by relating it to some set of conventions or other. These may be conventions of representation, structure, or mythology; but the audience needs some clues in order to be able to "read" the work.

There are, of course, periods in art history where it appears that innovation is all and continuous convention is nothing. For example, Courbet and the realist painters were evidently shocking to the viewing public for their dismissal of the classical values of the Salon -- in the Burial at Ornans above, for example. But really, there was a great deal of continuity within the context of which the realist manifesto was shocking to the public. (T. J. Clark does a great job of "reading" the painting for its continuities with previous traditions of painting and the sources of its originality; Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution, pp. 80-83.)

So what does all of this imply about "creative breakthroughs" in the genres of the arts? It seems to imply that major and culturally significant breakthroughs occur when talented people fully absorb the semantic (and historically specific) conventions that define the genre at the current time; he/she finds ways of squeezing every bit of new meaning out of these conventions in the production of the cultural product; he/she plays with the limits of the convention, testing them for the possibility of forging new meanings; and sometimes, he/she breaks a convention altogether and substitutes a new meaning maker in its place (presenting *Julius Caesar* in the garb of fascist Italy of the 1930s, for example).

These topics are relevant to understanding society, because this dialectic of convention, innovation, and meaning-making is virtually pervasive in everyday life. Jokes, business meetings, and street demonstrations all have some elements of this dance of meaning, convention, and originality. So it is important to gain greater understanding of the intersection of convention and innovation.

(There are numerous unanswered questions raised by this topic. How is a tradition of painting or composition related to a scientific or technological tradition? How is a literary or artistic tradition related to a "style" of technology or a scientific research programme? How can we take measure of "radical innovators" in the arts such as Jackson Pollock and abstract expressionism, or John Cage and American experimentalism in composition? And how do beauty or aesthetic value come into this equation? What are the qualities of a work of art that lead us to say, "That is beautiful!" or "that is hideous!"? What are the threads of convention, form, meaning, and originality that contribute to great aesthetic value?)
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:39PM (-04:00)

Acting, deliberating, performing

Monday, April 27, 2009



Earlier posts have addressed aspects of action -- particularly the features that align action with purposiveness and choice, deliberation, planning, and improvisation. Here I'd like to focus on the idea of action as a **performance** -- a series of behaviors meaningfully orchestrated by the actor out of consideration of an expected "script". Here we interpret actions as falling into scripts and roles, created by the culture's history and constituting the actor's behaviors as a performance. The agent is postulated to possess a stock of mini-scripts and role expectations that are then invoked into a "syntax" of performance in specific social settings.

The anthropologist Victor Turner makes central use of this framework in constructing his ethnographies (Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society). He refers to this approach as dramaturgical ethnography. The idea here is that social groups -- cultures -- have created for themselves a set of schemes of ways of behaving that individuals internalize and play out as social settings arise. There is the role of the doctor, the salesman, the librarian, the clown, and the general, and the individuals who assume those roles know the scripts. So when they interact in social settings relevant to their roles, their behaviors reflect the role and the script. The scripts become part of the furniture of "behavioral cognition" -- the routines the players string together in ordinary and extraordinary social settings. (Note the parallel with Erving Goffman's treatment of everyday behavior (post).) And, perhaps, the script governs the social actor so deeply that his/her behavior no longer has its own individual meaning or intention. (It is said that Gary Cooper never saw his role in *High Noon* as the anti-McCarthyism allegory that most people on the progressive side of the spectrum take it to be.)

What does this framework imply about the actor's state of mind in performing an action? How much *agency* do actors maintain under this theory? And to what extent is the actor's conduct his own, deriving from his or her own authentic self rather than from an externally created role? Consider as an example, a fire captain's behaviors and speeches during his management of the fire company's handling of a major fire. Let's amplify the story a bit. The captain and the members of the company have a well-rehearsed set of procedures for various scenarios encountered in fighting a fire -- "victim trapped in bedroom", "elderly person inside", "possible toxic materials on site", "roof collapse imminent". As these contingencies arise, captain and company play out the prescribed actions. Second, though, there is probably a prescribed style of command that influences the captain's manner and conduct: be calm, give sufficient attention to the company's safety, keep control of the press and crowd on-site, don't fall into a screaming, cursing rage when things go badly. (Think of Captain Sullenberger's methodical double sweep of the USAir passenger cabin after landing his disabled aircraft on the Hudson River, before exiting for his own chance of rescue.)

So there are fairly tangible ways in which the behaviors of the commander and the company are in fact governed by scripts and roles. The dramaturgical interpretation makes sense here. The actions of these participants are not invented *de novo* on the

scene of the fire; rather, they derive from earlier practice of roles and, more intangibly, carrying out of a certain conception of behavior of a commander under stress. We don't get actions here that derive from unadorned actors, considering a range of choices and choosing the best in the circumstances.

But neither do we get the opposite extreme -- robots playing out their scripts without intelligence or adaptation to circumstance. Instead, each of the players in this story retains his/her own assessment of what is currently going on and what deviations of script may be demanded. The captain retains the ability and the responsibility to break with procedures when there is an imminent reason to do so; and this degree of autonomy extends down the line of command to the junior firefighter. So the routines and scripts guide rather than generate the behavior.

So the performative interpretation of social action is not inherently inconsistent with the idea of intelligent, purposive action. Instead, we can think of the actor in this case -- captain or junior firefighter -- as involving in a complicated series of behaviors that reflect both deliberation and internalized script. I think this interpretation is very analogous to Pierre Bourdieu's position on the subject of *habitus* in Outline of a Theory of Practice. Conduct that is guided by norms (in this case, scripts and roles) can nonetheless also be intelligent and strategic. Seen in this light, the dramaturgical interpretation supplements the purposive theory of action rather than replaces it.

It is challenging to get the balance right, though, between the compulsion of a set of norms or scripts and the practical freedom the actor maintains at every point to act differently than the prescription. It seems unavoidable that the kinds of scripts, roles, and norms mentioned here have some binding power over the agent in actual social life. Much of the time the behavior simply plays out the script, with no homunculus reconsidering the action from the point of view of other possible choices. And often the role or norm is psychologically compelling to the extent that the actor can't realistically consider breaking it. Today's British newspapers break a mini-scandal in which an environmental activist is pressured by the Scottish police to serve as a paid secret informant (story). They offer a substantial amount of money and immunity from otherwise scary criminal charges for her cooperation. Rather than accepting their terms she bugs her meeting with them with her cellphone and exposes the police effort. Why? Presumably because her understanding of her role as a principled activist with the courage of her convictions made accepting this offer humiliating and impossible. (Think, though, how many people made a different choice in the GDR when confronted by the Ministry for State Security (Stasi).)
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:35PM (-04:00)

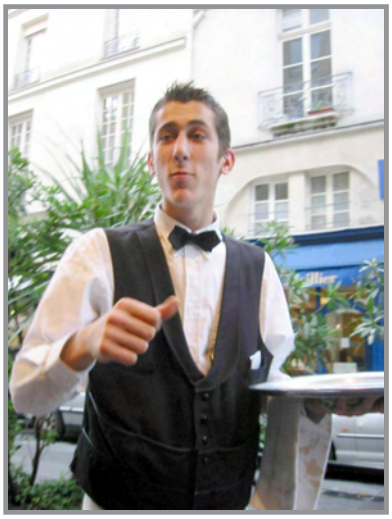
Being clumsy

Friday, May 01, 2009

We've probably all been clumsy from time to time -- knocking over the teacup on the desk when reaching for a pencil, dropping a jar when moving from the kitchen to the table, tripping on an uneven bit of sidewalk when walking the dog. We sometimes refer to this kind of behavioral mistake as "maladroit".

Can we give an explanation of clumsy behavior?

Here as elsewhere, a little conceptual work is helpful. We might characterize a clumsy



event as "an inadvertent negative result of a series of bodily movements intended to accomplish something else altogether." And, it would seem, we need to add a characteristic of causation into the definition: the negative result came about as a consequence of the agent's series of actions and movements -- not simply an unfortunate coincidence. The actor bears responsibility for the negative result in some way. (We wouldn't call it "clumsy" if I knock over the glass of wine because the waiter has just placed it at my elbow and out of my visual range; rather, this is simply an accident.)

It is also useful to consider the contrast that is intended by the use of the concept. The contraries of "clumsy" seem to include adjectives such as skillful, adroit, agile, graceful, or deft. (And consider whether there are nuances of differences among even these positive valence adjectives.) The idea of the degree of bodily control exercised by the actor comes into all of these concepts, both negative and positive. The agile and graceful person -- an athlete or a dancer -- is praised for his/her ability to place the body in exactly the way she wishes to. The clumsy person trips, drops, smashes, and spills -- that is, he/she lacks the ability to control the results of bodily movements.

So "clumsy" is a feature of bodily performance, in which the intended course of affairs has gone wrong. It is a defect of performance and, derivatively, a defect of competence. A clumsy person is one who is prone to committing more than his/her share of clumsy actions. To refer to a movement or a person as clumsy is to find fault (though perhaps without blame); it is to highlight a deviation between what we expect of normal behavior and the observed behavior.

So what is the standard of competence and performance that we implicitly have in mind when we deploy the standards of "adroit" and "clumsy" when it comes to physical performances? It's something like this. We recognize, first, that every physical action is actually a complex and orchestrated series of component movements. To catch a high fly ball requires the outfielder to predict the destination of the ball; to organize his leg and body movements in order to run to the destination; to prepare for the leap into the air; to extend the glove arm and snag the ball. But more prosaically, to pour a glass of water has a lot of the same complexity of orchestrated movements and calculations. Both activities require "body intelligence" -- an active (unconscious) process of orchestration of sub-movements into larger perfomances.

Second, there is a substantial amount of knowledge gathering, calculation, and projection that is required in order for the actor to form a cognitive map of the arena of action: where the target will be at a particular point in time, what obstacles exist in the environment, and how the bodily movements need to be orchestrated on such a way as to avoid the obstacles and achieve the desired outcome. The waiter approaching the table to refill the water glasses is illustrative: he/she needs to observe and record the placement of the guests, their glasses, the floral arrangements, and the random items on the table; he needs to approach in such a way as to avoid contacting the guest or spilling the water on the guest; he needs to navigate the pitcher past the guest and between the flower arrangements; bring the pitcher adjacent to the water glass; and pour just enough water into the glass to fill it. Mission accomplished, he needs to withdraw the pitcher without

knocking over the flowers or spilling on the guest. And, since the guests are in motion, be needs to regularly update the representation of the field of play and be alert to the possibility of sudden movements by the guest.

In other words, we expect quite a lot from the "adroit" waiter from the point of view of active knowledge gathering and skillful orchestration of movements based on the current cognitive map -- representation of the world and management of the body. The adroit person is one who has a reasonably good representation of the physical spaces around himself/herself; has a reasonably good ability to project the future configuration of the space; and has a reasonably high ability to orchestrate the series of movements needed to accomplish a task and a high ability to bring the body to implement the resulting series of steps.

So where does "clumsy" come into this story? Evidently, clumsy mistakes can derive from any of these three sources. The cognitive representation of the field may be incorrect or glaringly incomplete (the waiter may have failed to note that the guest is particularly tall and consequently bumped his head in his forward motion) (faulty representation). Second, the waiter may miscalculate times and distances -- he may think he can just clear the guest's arm gestures as he passes with the water pitcher (faulty calculation). Or he may have a faulty ability to orchestrate his own physical movements. He intends to touch the pitcher to the lip of the water glass, but he over-shoots and breaks the glass (faulty orchestration and/or faulty implementation).

So now we might speculate a bit: a clumsy person may be clumsy in virtue of deficiencies in any of the three areas -- representation, calculation, and orchestration -- and the nature of the clumsy performance is different for each of the three forms of deficiency. The first person may be clumsy because he/she doesn't pay a lot of attention to the field of play; builds up an incomplete representation of the placement of the furniture; and, as a result, bumbles into the footstool or the coffee table. Or there may be another sort of cognitive defect -- for example, a limited ability to remember the features of the cognitive map that has been developed -- he keeps forgetting the footstool. The second person may have a deficient ability to project future states of the field of play based on its current state. He sees the revolving door in front of him, but mis-estimates how quickly it is moving and collides with it. The third person may have a full and sufficient cognitive representation of the field of play; may be fully able to run the dynamics forward in time through mental calculation; but may have difficulty in arranging the movements of the body accordingly. And this deficiency in turn may derive from various causes -- a defective implementation of the routines of motion, an awkward geometry of the body so there is systematic misplacement of the feed, a slow neurological process leading to body movements that aren't quite in synch, ...

And here is one final thing we might observe, based on this treatment. A single clumsy act can be explained as the result of a single moment of bad performance -- lapsing of attention to the environment, failing to calculate carefully the relevant future states, stumbling. An enduring characteristic of clumsiness, on the other hand, invites an explanation based on a feature of deficient competence in one of the areas mentioned above -- a chronic problem in the actor's cognition of the environment, or the actor's ability to project future states, or the actor's ability to orchestrate and control the movements of the body. And, if we were in the "clumsy-therapy" business, we might try to identify where the deficiency lies and then try to find ways of improving the actor's competence in this area.

What kind of analysis is this? Partially it is an ordinary language analysis, along the lines of J. L. Austin. It involves diving into the nuances of meaning that we have in mind when we describe certain actions as "clumsy." But partly it is a phenomenological inquiry: what is the state of mind and body that is associated with committing "clumsy" mistakes? What is the "life world" of imperfect performance? (Hubert Dreyfus (A Phenomenology of Skill Acquisition), Samuel Todes (Body and World), and Richard Sennett (The Craftsman) capture different parts of this perspective.) And, finally, it is a bit of speculative cognitive psychology; it is an attempt to work out the structure of the cognitive and motor activities that need to occur in the normal performance of activities like catching a fly ball or pouring a glass of water. And, based on this schematic analysis, it is an effort to see how the mistake of "clumsiness" can emerge from normal skilled performance. This is analogous to Noam Chomsky's inventive use of grammatical "mistakes" as a clue to the underlying grammatical competence possessed by normal language users.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:00AM (-04:00)

Farms in historical materialism

Sunday, May 03, 2009



Materialist explanations in history generally attempt to discover fundamental features of technology and labor that impose a very deep imprint on the rest of society. Farming is almost always fundamental in this respect; the forces and relations of production are particularly visible, and the products of the farm system are fundamental to the survival of society. The standard of living of a traditional society is largely determined by agricultural productivity and the nature of the farming system -- nutrition, for example, is essentially determined by the ratio of total grain output to population. Finally, virtually all traditional economies are primarily rural; so farm life defines the conditions of ordinary social existence for the majority of the population. So let us consider a brief analysis of the farm. (A. V. Chayanov's classic treatment of the peasant economy, The Theory of Peasant Economy, written in the 1920s, remains highly valuable. Robert Allen's lifetime of research on the English farm economy is highly insightful (Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands, 1450-1850), as is Bozhong Li's work on the farm economy of the Lower Yangzi (Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850).)

A farm is the basic unit of agricultural production. It represents the coordinated application of diverse factors of production in order to produce crops. The factors of production include labor; land; tools, implements, and machinery; fertilizers; and water resources and irrigation techniques. Crops include both foods (e.g., rice, wheat, millet) and raw materials (e.g., cotton, soya beans). And farms may be organized for a variety of purposes: to satisfy a family's subsistence needs, to create a profit within a market system, or to provide employment for the greatest number of rural people.

Farms in different agrarian regimes may be characterized in terms of a set of technical and social features. On the technical side we need to know what the scale of cultivation is (farm size); what techniques of cultivation are employed; what varieties of crops and

seeds are available; what types of farm tools and machines are used; what types of irrigation, if any, are in use; what varieties and skills of labor are employed; what types of fertilizers are used; and what forms of agronomic knowledge are available to the farmer. (We might reduce this variety of technical features to a spectrum ranging from low-technology to high-technology farming systems.) On the social side we need to know the purpose of cultivation (family subsistence or commercial profitability); the form of land tenure in place (fixed rent, sharecropping, smallholding, etc.); the forms of labor employed (slave, serf, family labor, hired labor); the forms of supervision employed; and the processes of income distribution embodied in the agricultural system.

These features are the primary subject of research for agricultural historians such as Allen and Li. These features essentially determine the most important economic characteristics of the agricultural system. First, they determine the productivity of the farming system, whether measured in terms of land efficiency (output per hectare) or labor efficiency (output per man-day). For once we know the techniques of cultivation in a given ecological setting, it is possible to form relatively accurate estimates of output for a given input of land, labor, and capital. This set of considerations also determines what we might describe as the net rural product--the total agricultural product over and above the replacement cost of the factors of production. On this basis, Chinese historians such as Dwight Perkins attempt to estimate the overall wealth and income of late Imperial China, including estimates of quality of life for the majority of rural people (Agricultural development in China, 1368-1968).

Second, the full description of the farming system as indicated above will allow us to infer the system of surplus extraction in place; it will be possible to indicate with adequate precision how much surplus is generated and where it goes. Victor Lippit attempts to arrive at such an estimate for traditional China (Land Reform and Economic Development in China: A Study of Institutional Change and Development Finance). This in turn permits us to describe the system of rural class relations that correspond to a given farming regime.

Within this framework we can now indicate a variety of types of farms; and as a working premise, we may postulate that agrarian regimes in which different farm types are dominant will have distinctive patterns of organization and development. The following are advanced as ideal types; variants and mixed examples are possible as well. However, these types are selected as being particularly central in the development of both Asian and European traditional economies. And, significantly for the historian of social change, each farming system creates a distinctive pattern of incentives, barriers, social relations, and modes of behavior that have important consequences for historical change.

- The peasant farm. The peasant farm is small (1-10 hectares), and is organized to satisfy consumption needs of the family. It is managed and run by a peasant family using family labor. Cultivation is divided between subsistence crops and commercial crops with some risk-aversive preference for subsistence crops. There is a very low level of capital available to the peasant farmer, and cultivation is oriented towards labor-intensive techniques. Low-cost traditional techniques and tools are employed in cultivation. The peasant cultivator typically pays rent on the land he cultivates, though smallholding with clear title to the land is also possible.
- The manor. This farm is of medium size (100 hectares). It is managed by a resident lord whose aims are (1) to satisfy the consumption needs of his household, and (2) to produce a marketable surplus to generate cash income. The manor employs a sizable number of bonded laborers (serfs or slaves); it uses traditional techniques of

cultivation but benefits from some economies of scale; and it employs foremen as supervisors. Part of the estate is farmed by individual families in circumstances of peasant farming.

- The capitalist farm. This farm is medium to large (50-150 hectares) and is organized to produce a profit. It is therefore located within a commercialized rural economy within which crops may be readily marketed. The farm is organized and directed by the capitalist farmer, who may either own or rent the land. The capitalist farmer has the fiscal resources needed to make capital investments in the process of cultivation; and he is oriented towards cost-cutting in considering various alternative techniques. The capitalist farm employs wage labor, where the wage is determined by local economic circumstances and the minimal cost of subsistence. The capitalist farm represents a rationalization of available techniques aimed at maximizing the profitability of the unit.
- The cooperative farm. The cooperative farm is a large unit (100-400 hectares) owned by the cultivators (75 families). This farm is oriented towards profitability; it uses the labor of the cultivators; and it is organized by a council of the cultivators. The collective has access to investment funds, and is therefore able to invest in new techniques; moreover, the collective farm benefits from economies of scale.

Significantly, this typology of farming units corresponds broadly to the classical Marxist taxonomy of modes of production: feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. The peasant farm, however, represents a form of organization of the productive forces of rural society that is overlooked in Marxist theory: call it the "peasant mode of production." The peasant mode of production may be defined as a system in which agriculture is performed on peasant farms; the bulk of the population consists of free peasant cultivators; and agricultural surpluses are extracted through rent, interest, and taxation.

In short, careful analysis of the circumstances of farming is crucial for large-scale history, including especially the history of economic development, the history of urbanization, and the history of human well-being. And, of course, the twentieth century demonstrated the centrality of peasants in the great political movements of revolution and anti-colonialism.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:52PM (-04:00)

Subsistence ethic as a causal factor

Monday, May 04, 2009



In his pathbreaking 1976 book, The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia, James Scott offers an explanation of popular politics based on the idea of a broadly shared "subsistence ethic" among the underclass people of Vietnam and Malaysia. Earlier postings (hidden transcripts, moral economy) have discussed several aspects of Scott's contributions. Here I want to focus on the causal argument that Scott offers, linking the subsistence ethic to the occurrence of rebellion.

Scott's view is that the ensemble of values and meanings current in a society have causal consequences for aggregate facts about the forms of political behavior that arise in that

society. Speaking of the peasant rebellions in Southeast Asia of the 1930s Scott writes,

> We can learn a great deal from [peasant] rebels who were defeated nearly a half-century ago. If we understand the indignation and rage which prompted them to risk everything, we can grasp what I have chosen to call their moral economy: their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation--their view of which claims on their product were tolerable and which intolerable. Insofar as their moral economy is representative of peasants elsewhere, and I believe I can show that it is, we may move toward a fuller appreciation of the normative roots of peasant politics. If we understand, further, how the central economic and political transformations of the colonial era served to systematically violate the peasantry's vision of social equity, we may realize how a class "of low classness" came to provide . . . the shock troops of rebellion and revolution. (Scott 1976:3-4)

This passage represents a complex explanatory hypothesis about the sources of rebellion. Scott holds, first, that peasant rebels in Indochina in the 1930s shared the main outlines of a sense of justice and exploitation. This is a system of moral values concerning the distribution of material assets between participants (landlord, state, peasant, landless laborer) and the use of power and authority over the peasant. Second, this passage supposes that the values embodied in this sense of justice are motivationally effective: when the landlord or the state enacts policies which seriously offend this sense of justice, the peasant is angered and indignant, and motivated to take action against the offending party. Offense to his sense of justice affects the peasant's actions. Third, Scott asserts that this individual motivational factor aggregates over the peasantry as a whole to a collective disposition toward resistance and rebellion; that is, sufficient numbers of peasants were motivated by this sense of indignation and anger to engage in overt resistance. On this account, then, the subsistence ethic--its right of a subsistence floor and the expectations of reciprocity which it engenders--is a causal antecedent of rebellion. It is a factor whose presence and characteristics may be empirically investigated and which enhances the likelihood of various social events through identifiable mechanisms.

The subsistence ethic may be described quite simply. Scott writes, "we can begin, I believe, with two moral principles that seem firmly embedded in both the social patterns and injunctions of peasant life: the norm of reciprocity and the right to subsistence" (167). Villagers have a moral obligation to participate in traditional practices of reciprocity--labor sharing, contributions to disadvantaged kinsmen or fellow villagers, etc. And village institutions and elites alike have an obligation to respect the right of subsistence of poor villagers.

> Claims on peasant incomes . . . were never legitimate when they infringed on what was judged to be the minimal culturally defined subsistence level; and second, the product of the land should be distributed in such a way that all were defined a subsistence niche. (10)

Thus the subsistence ethic functions as a sense of justice--a standard by which peasants evaluate the institutions and persons that constitute their social universe. The subsistence ethic thus constitutes a central component of the normative base which regulates relations among villagers in that it motivates and constrains peasant behavior. And the causal hypothesis is this: Changes in traditional practices and institutions which offend the subsistence ethic will make peasants more likely to resist or rebel. Rebellion is not a simple function of material deprivation, but rather a function of the values and expectations in terms of which the lower class group understands the changes which are imposed upon it.

We can identify a fairly complex chain of causal reasoning in Scott's account. First, the subsistence ethic is a standing condition in peasant society with causal consequences. It is embodied in current moral psychologies of members of the group and in the existing institutions of moral training through which new members are brought to share these values. Through the workings of social psychology this ethic leads individuals to possess certain dispositions to behave. The features and strength of this systems of values are relatively objective facts about a given society. In particular, it is possible to investigate the details of this ethic through a variety of empirical means: interviews with participants, observation of individual behavior, or analysis of the content of the institutions of moral training. Call this ensemble of institutions and current moral psychologies the "embodied social morality" (ESM).

In line with the idea that the subsistence ethic is a standing causal condition, Scott notes that the effectiveness of shared values varies substantially over different types of peasant communities. "The social strength of this ethic . . . varied from village to village and from region to region. It was strongest in areas where traditional village forms were well developed and not shattered by colonialism--Tonkin, Annam, Java, Upper Burma--and weakest in more recently settled pioneer areas like Lower Burma and Cochinchina" (Scott 1976:40). Moreover, these variations led to significant differences in the capacity of affected communities to achieve effective collective resistance. "Communitarian structures not only receive shocks more uniformly but they also have, due to their traditional solidarity, a greater capacity for collective action. . . . Thus, the argument runs, the more communal the village structure, the easier it is for a village to collectively defend its interests" (202).

We may now formulate Scott's causal thesis fairly clearly. The embodied social morality (ESM) is a standing condition within any society. This condition is causally related to collective dispositions to rebellion in such a way as to support the following judgments: (1) If the norms embodied in the ESM were suitably altered, the collective disposition to rebellion would be sharply diminished. (That is, the ESM is a necessary condition for the occurrence of rebellion in a suitable limited range of social situations.) (2) The presence of the ESM in conjunction with (a) unfavorable changes in the economic structure, (b) low level of inhibiting factors, and (c) appropriate stimulating conditions amount to a (virtually) sufficient condition for the occurrence of widespread rebellious behavior. (That is, the ESM is part of a set of jointly sufficient conditions for the occurrence of rebellion.) (3) It is possible to describe the causal mechanisms through which the ESM influences the occurrence of rebellious dispositions. These mechanisms depend upon (a) a model of individual motivation and action through which embodied norms influence individual behavior, and (b) a model of political processes through which individual behavioral dispositions aggregate to collective behavioral dispositions. (That is, the ESM is linked to its supposed causal consequences through appropriate sorts of mechanisms.)

What this account does not highlight -- and what is emphasized by several other theories we've discussed elsewhere (post, post, post, post) -- are the organizational features that underlie successful mobilization. Instead, Scott's account focuses on the motivational features that permit a group to be rallied to the risky business of rebellion.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:27PM (-04:00)

Engaged youth

Wednesday, May 06, 2009



A while ago I posted on the subject of "disaffected youth". I don't have a basis for estimating the percentage of the youth population that falls in this category, but surely it's a fairly small number in most places. Here I want to focus on the other end of the spectrum -- the relatively small but meaningful percentage of young people who have a significant level of "civic engagement" in their blood.

You can identify some of these young people in almost every city and suburb in America. They are the high school and college students who feel passionately about community service, civic engagement, and "giving back". They are involved in activities like alternative spring break, Habitat for Humanity, and the United Way. They are involved in community service in a major way -- through mosques, temples, and churches, through social justice organizations such as Amnesty International, Big Brother/Big Sister, and Oxfam, and through organized community service programs at universities and high schools. And they are to be found in a big way in nationally organized programs for community service like AmeriCorps, Teach for America, and CityYear.

I've met quite a few of these engaged young people over the past ten years, and they are truly inspiring. They are idealistic in a thoroughly practical way. They see the impact they can have through service, and they understand the importance of designing and implementing service programs in the most practical way possible. They care about the individual people they help -- children, elderly, impaired, impoverished -- in very specific human terms. They understand the value of working together in collaboration and teamwork to accomplish great things, and they understand deeply the values and rewards of racial and religious diversity. Finally, they have very little of the crass materialism of "youth America" as it was portrayed on Beverly Hills, 90210 or other examples of this genre. So this group of young people gives a truly optimistic perspective on our society for the future.

I don't take these points to lead to a generalization about American youth as a group. In fact, what is striking is exactly how atypical these young people seem to be relative to the population as a whole -- and how similar and compatible they are with each other. But it remains the case -- whether 5% or 25%, there is a meaningful minority of today's generation of young people who give a remarkable level of commitment to social engagement.

My question here concerns the social psychology of this group. This is a question about the circumstances of social development that are in place today: where do these young people and their values come from? How has this wonderful mix of optimism, service, and respect for racial differences come about? And how can it be furthered?

One thing is immediately clear: it seems to be unrelated to affluence, race, or neighborhood. A cross-section of the CityYear corps is instructive: young people with very similar social values are showing up from middle-class suburbs, impoverished inner

cities, and towns that are neither urban nor suburban. And it is easy to find white kids, rich and poor, brown kids, African-American kids, and Asian-American kids -- all coming together into a corps of 60-150 young people in a given city. None of these groups seems either more or less concerned about social justice, none seems more readily open to learning from peers from other races, and none seems socially and culturally more ready for a serious commitment to engagement and service. In other words, class, race, and income don't seem to be critical in defining today's youth social engagement.

A couple of factors are probably highly relevant to the degree of engagement and civic values that is displayed by young people involved in AmeriCorps and CityYear.

First, there have to be strands of American culture that are creating a "pulse" of concern about social justice and individual involvement in community among young people. This set of dispositions can't be a totally random result. Whether it's a generation of young people acculturated by Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers, or by the broadening circle of awareness of the injustice of racism and poverty, or a "bounce" from the social activism of the sixties generation -- there must be some cultural currents that are making many of today's young people more ready for social involvement and more concerned about social justice. Somehow our society, our families, our schools, and our media are producing a certain fraction of the youth cohort that possess these values and commitments. (Though crucially, we can ask whether that fraction is greater than years past or is pretty much constant.)

Second, recruitment certainly plays an important role in explaining this observation about the similarity of corps members from very diverse backgrounds. AmeriCorps and CityYear members are by no means a random sample of the general population. Instead, they are young people who have actively sought out the opportunity for service presented by these organizations, and they have responded favorably to the very explicit expressions of value commitments they represent.

Another factor that seems to be operative in generating the value orientation of AmeriCorps and CityYear members is the nature of the training and bonding that occurs within the experience. Young people may come to CityYear with positive attitudes about race relations -- but their understanding, commitment, and concrete skills in working in multiracial teams certainly deepens enormously through their year of service. Likewise, what may have been a somewhat thin "will to serve" at the time of recruitment seems typically to deepen into a robust, life-changing involvement in community organizations. The experience of the organization, its leaders, peers, and the service itself leads to a profound deepening of personal engagement.

It's worth dwelling on the causes of youth engagement, because it seems very likely that many of the social problems we will face in the future will only be solved if we can come together as communities of concern, giving our time and our energy to address the serious challenges that are just over the horizon. And these young, engaged people are demonstrating how it can be done.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:22PM (-04:00)

Longue durée

Sunday, May 10, 2009



Image: Making dikes on the Yellow River

Many historical changes take place on a human scale -- the Great Depression came and went within the lived experience of many millions of people, and they were able to tell comprehensible narratives of the beginning, middle, and end. Likewise with periods of political transition and upheaval -- the Vietnam war protests, the Reagan revolution, the Cold War. So these events can be scaled within the historical sensibilities of individuals who experienced them. But what about changes that are so extended and so gradual that they are all but imperceptible? How is history of the longue durée to be understood? (This posting picks up the thread from an earlier post on "historical tempo".)

The sorts of changes I have in mind here run along these lines: a long, slow increase of population density relative to available resources; a gradual shift in the gender ratio or age structure of a population; the gradual silting of a river system and estuary; a slow erosion of a traditional system of values; and an extended process of increasing or decreasing tolerance between intermixed religious groups. In each case it is possible for the changes to be slow enough to defy recognition by historical participants; and yet each of these slow processes may have very important historical consequences.

Paul Pierson addresses many of the issues raised by slow pace of historical processes in Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis. But in a somewhat different theoretical setting the topic was also of particular interest to some of the historians of the Annales school -- Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in particular. We might say that these are examples of historical processes working "behind the backs" of the participants.

The question here is a simple one: what are the methods of observation and inference through which historians can identify and investigate these sorts of long, slow processes? And what is the standing of such processes insofar as they stand outside the scope of events of ordinary historical experience? Given that participants have no basis for identifying the long, slow processes within which they swim, what is the status of the historian's hypotheses about such processes?

As for the question of how historians can identify these kinds of century-long processes: this task is really no more challenging than the problem of arriving at hypotheses about unseen processes in other areas of science. It takes ingenuity and imagination to hypothesize how a gradual increase in local violence might relate to slow demographic trends; but once the historical demographer turns her eye in this direction, it is no great leap to hypothesize that a rising male-to-female ratio may be a part of the cause (as Valerie Hudson and Andrea Den Boer argue in Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population). What is necessary, though, is a fairly rigorous ability to measure variables of interest at different points in time and to discover trends among

these observations. In other words, the turn to cliometrics -- quantitative observation of historical trends -- is more or less essential to the history of the longue durée. And it is not too surprising that the Annales historians were deeply interested in demographic history, price series, and historical measurements of economic activity.

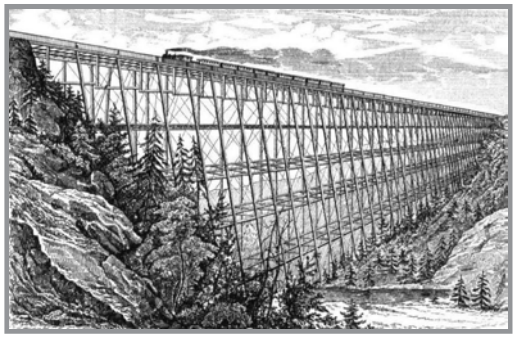
So this answers part of the question: a history of long processes requires careful observations of quantities over time, and it requires the formulation of causal hypotheses about how these trends influence other historical circumstances of interest. Jack Goldstone's efforts to link the occurrence of revolution to slow demographic processes falls in this category (Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World). And Mark Elvin's treatment of the centuries-long struggle between officials and rivers in China to gain control of flooding and silting illustrates the historian's ability to take the long perspective (The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China; see this posting on Elvin's work).

And what about the other question -- the status of historical conceptions of these long, slow processes? They are not abstractions from the historical self-understandings of participants. By hypothesis, participants cannot perceive these sorts of processes. Instead, they constitute a more hypothetical historical structure that may nonetheless play a future role in the narratives participants tell about themselves. A slow process of climate change may be imperceptible at a given point in time. But once it is identified and articulated by the analytical historian the construct may come into popular consciousness; what was previously invisible may become part of the furniture of the popular narrative.

So if we conceptualized historical episodes along the lines of life events, then the longue durée would be forever outside of history. If, on the other hand, we include in our definition of history all the structures and trends that can be identified by analytical history, then the history of the longue durée is entirely comprehensible. Moreover, it is apparent that ordinary historical apperception can itself incorporate the theories of historians. And in this sense, the longue durée can enter back into ordinary historical experience.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:21AM (-04:00)

Generalizations in history

Sunday, May 17, 2009



Historical generalizations are often suspect: "The Renaissance encouraged innovative thinking," "The Qing state stifled independent commercial activity," "The open frontier created a distinctively American popular culture." The problem with statements like these is their sweep; among other things, they imply that the Renaissance, the Qing state, or American culture were essentially uniform social realities, and they erase the forms of variation that certainly existed -- and that often constitute the most interesting of historical discoveries.

So grand generalizations in history are problematic. But then we have to ask a different

sort of question. Specifically -- what kinds of generalizations are possible in history? If we can't answer this question constructively, then historical research loses much of its interest and purpose. If historical knowledge were limited to statements about specific actors in concrete local circumstances, it would have roughly the interest of a police report. Rather, the historian needs to aggregate his/her understanding of the available evidence into statements about larger agglomerations: villages, towns, and cities; crowds, classes, and professions; assemblies, riots, and movements. Moreover, we would like to be able to make something larger of the historian's findings -- something that sheds light on broader social realities and trends. And each of these requires generalization: statements that extend beyond the particular instances that are presented by the historical record.

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's micro-history of the tiny village of Montaillou (Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324) is worth considering in this context. His opening lines raise the question of generalization:

Whoever wishes to know the peasant of the old or very old regimes, does not aim at grand syntheses -- regional, national, or continental: I think of the work of Goubert, Poitrineau, Fourquin, Fossier, Duby, Bloch ... What is always missing is the direct aspect: the witnessing, without intermediary, how the peasant presents himself.
Le Roy Ladurie gives a treatment of the history of a very specific, small place -- a specific group of village actors in a short time period. Their stories are told through the records of Inquisition investigations. So you might say -- it's all very particular knowledge about this specific time and place. But if so, what makes it historically meaningful or valuable? How does it extend our historical knowledge and imagination? Why does it have greater historical significance than an ethnographic study of the graduates of a particular high school in rural Illinois in 1967, for example? We could imagine the latter study making for interesting reading -- the valedictorian ended up as a small-town insurance agent, the class clown became a well-known agricultural expert at the university, 60% of the graduates still lived within 20 miles of their high school location in 40 years. But would this latter study constitute a significant piece of "American social history"? And what more would we ask of the author of this study, in terms of relating his/her findings to larger historical settings and contexts, before we would call it a contribution to social history?

There appear to be several different ways in which a concrete micro-study can achieve the broader significance that it needs to qualify as a genuine contribution to historical understanding.

One possibility is that the micro-study is somehow "representative" of larger social realities at the time. One might read Montaillou as being representative of many other remote places in fourteenth-century France -- so the description of this place might serve to generalize to other parts of France. And what does this mean? It means, presumably, that the historian arrives at true statements about Montaillou that are also true of other villages at other times. (Though the author's cautions against "grand synthesis" seem to count against this use of his findings.)

Another possibility is diachronic generalization: the historian may have identified, under the "microscope" of detailed study of these decades in Montaillou, the crossing and emergence of historical patterns and changes that themselves have broader significance over time. The mental significance of Catholicism for rural people, for example, may have been undergoing change over a period of centuries; we might take the Montaillou snapshot as one instant in time of the larger historical trend. (Our historian of the small

town high school class imagined above, for example, might relate her findings to changing attitudes towards universities or the government in small-town America.)

A third possibility is at the level of concepts of behavior and agency. The historian may grapple for ways of extending his/her vocabulary of action and thought for actors in the past; the micro-study may suggest a new set of categories in terms of which to understand the forms of action and thought that were possible for fourteenth-century common rural people. It is certainly an important question for the historian, to ask "why do people act as they do?" in specific historical settings -- the outposts of the Roman empire, village India, or sixteenth-century London; and the micro-study may serve to broaden the range of answers we have for this fundamental question. This intellectual task is not one of "generalization", but rather one of "speciation" -- specification of the broad range of variation that is possible within historical reality.

This may all come down to a truism: there is an irresolvable tension for historians between "specification of the local" and "generalization over trends". Too much generalization, and you lose the point of historical research -- you lose the tangible granularity of real people and social settings in history, and the surprising singularities that historians like Le Roy Ladurie or Robert Darnton are able to put in front of us. Too little generalization, however, and the research becomes pointless -- just a specification of a collection of actions and outcomes for which the existing historical record happens to provide some information. We want both from good historical writing: an adequate attention to specificity and some degree of projectability and insight into broader questions.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:51PM (-04:00)

China's agricultural history

Friday, May 22, 2009



Consider the discipline of the agricultural history of China. The following represent a sampling of research problems concerning the social and economic history of rural China in recent research:

- What were the patterns of population growth, growth of cultivated land, and growth of net output, in traditional China? (Perkins 1973)
- What was the distribution of land tenure arrangements in north China? (Arrigo 1986)
- What was the structure of rural marketing hierarchies? (Skinner 1964, 1965)
- What was the urbanization rate in 1893? (Skinner 1977)

These are all factual questions about features of economy and social institutions. The findings on these topics are, of course, fallible and revisable.

A core study in Chinese economic history is Dwight Perkins' Agricultural development in China, 1368-1968 (1973). This study plays the role in China studies that Deane and Cole (British Economic Growth 1688-1959) plays in English studies. Perkins attempts to

provide estimates of population growth, cultivated land, and grain output for a period from the late fourteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. Perkins' central thesis is that China's population increased five- or six-fold between the late fourteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that the agricultural system was able to keep pace with this increase in equal measure by expanding cultivated acreage and by raising the yield per acre (1973:13).

So what kinds of historical and empirical data provide a basis for these sorts of estimates?

For the pre-twentieth century period, Perkins' findings are largely based on primary research: Ming-Ch'ing tax records on population and cultivated acreage, local gazetteers, agricultural handbooks published over past centuries, memorials by local officials to the Emperor, and so forth. He also refers to a large volume of Chinese and Japanese research on the agrarian history of China. The local gazettes provide a great deal of information about the timing and location of markets; commodity prices; land tenure arrangements; and the activities of local elites.

For the twentieth century there are a different set of sources available: rural studies by American or European investigators (Buck, Tawney, and Gamble); data collected by the China Maritime Customs bureau; provincial gazetteers compiled by the Ministry of Industries; and a series of village studies of North China undertaken by the Japanese South Manchurian Railway Company. The earliest twentieth-century studies of the Chinese rural economy in English include Tawney (1932), Buck (1930, 1937), and Gamble (1963). Tawney and Buck provide statistical data describing the state of the Chinese rural economy in the early twentieth century. An important source in current economic research on the early twentieth century is the Mantetsu surveys. These were Japanese field studies conducted by the Japanese South Manchurian Railway Company during 1935-42, and provide extensive detail concerning the structure and organization of the rural economy in selected parts of North China.

In addition to these source materials, there are a number of core studies that have appeared since 1950 that function in much the way that was seen in English economic history. They represent a synthesis of primary data available at the time of publication which later researchers are authorized to draw upon in support of other claims. In addition to Perkins, these include Gamble (1968), Myers (1970), Rawski (1972), Skinner (1964, 1965), and Huang (1984). There is also an extensive literature in Japanese on Chinese economic history.

Current economic history of China depends on previously underutilized sources--local archives, government records, Japanese studies, and the like. Thus Huang (1984) makes extensive use of the Mantetsu surveys, Board of Punishment reports (1984:47), and county archives (the Baxian archives; 1984:51). William Rowe's study of the economic and social history of the city of Hankow is even more closely dependent on primary sources: county gazettes, records of English companies (e.g., Jardine's), and local and provincial government records. This feature may reflect the differences between stages of development of the two disciplines; in the China case there are still extensive primary sources that have not been investigated, and there are correspondingly large and important questions about Ming and Ch'ing economic history which have not been addressed, let alone resolved, in the existing literature.

Perkins pays careful attention to the problem of validating the key estimates of economic

activity upon which his analysis depends, and he refers to some of the ways in which he attempts to check the validity of these sources:

I have, in fact, frequently judged the validity of data for the decades and centuries prior to the 1950's on whether these earlier figures were consistent with those for 1957 and with historical developments in the intervening periods. (Perkins 1969:10)

Perkins gives a consistency test for his estimates of population and acreage:

If the pre-modern estimates of provincial population and acreage had been arrived at by arbitrary methods, one would expect yield data derived from such figures to rise in certain periods and fall in others with no apparent pattern. . . . But most of the estimates in Table II.3 for 1850 bear a close relation to the 1957 figures. (1969:20)

Perkins' research predates the current debate about "involution" in the field of Chinese economic history; but his estimates (and those of Bozhong Li) set the parameters for much of that debate. (See "The Involution Debate" for more on this recent controversy.)

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Posted by Daniel Little at 09:50AM (-04:00)

Israel's complexity

Sunday, May 24, 2009





A first visit to Israel has been a fascinating experience in trying to begin to understand a different society.

I've met with university administrators and professors; reporters and media people; young people with a passion for social justice in Israel; a senior official in the foreign ministry; and a senior leader in an Israeli NGO devoted to securing greater social equity in East Jerusalem. I've met Israelis of many backgrounds: people with seven generations of family in Israel and Palestine, third-generation Kurdish Jews, recent Ethiopian and Sudanese immigrants, American and Canadian immigrants from the 1970s and 1980s, recent European business immigrants -- even a French producer of Yiddish art performances in Ein Karem.

I've seen high-tech zones in Herzliya, slums in Tel Aviv, stunning new luxury apartment complexes in central Jerusalem, and the dense and squalid reality of East Jerusalem. I've seen the wall -- the security fence -- and have witnessed how it bisects neighborhoods in a tightly packed urban core. I've seen children in East Jerusalem who plainly have very limited futures -- and I've seen new settlement apartment complexes in East Jerusalem, apparently sited precisely in order to make it virtually impossible to divide Jerusalem along the lines of the Clinton plan.

I've talked with university secretaries in Haifa who nonchalantly mentioned racing down the stairs six times a day to take cover from rockets -- with only 60 seconds of warning. I've seen the student cafeteria at Hebrew University that was blown apart by a bomb in 2002, and the touching memorial to the students who lost their lives there. And I've seen a major hospital in Jerusalem with a trauma center encapsulated in bomb-blast concrete and ventilation adequate to fend off chemical weapons. I've talked with Israeli citizens who are very committed to making progress on peace and justice for Palestinians, and who are equally passionate in supporting Israel's obligation to secure its citizens against violent attack. I've visited an appealing restaurant on the Mediterranean in Tel Aviv -- only to find that it's been closed for several years following a string of deadly suicide bombings there. And, of course, I've seen armed security guards in every cafe, restaurant, and hotel, trying to assure the safety of the guests.

There are quite a few social types I haven't been exposed to in more than a passing way in this brief visit: Bedouins, Russian political bosses, human traffickers preying on girls from Eastern Europe, and settler organization activists, for example. So there is a lot of Israel's current sociology that I haven't gotten an exposure to yet. But it is clear that there

are deep social problems just under the surface -- in Israel's cities no less than other cities in the world. There are many examples -- corruption, organized criminal activity, misuse of urban land use procedures, persistent inequalities of opportunity for some Israelis.

Israel has achieved many enormous successes since its founding sixty-some years ago. It has created a robust democracy -- though one in which the Palestinians of East Jerusalem do not yet choose to participate. It has created and nurtured great universities -- the Technion, Hebrew University, the Weizmann Institute, to name just three. And it has committed in formal and informal ways to making a university education accessible to all Israelis. It has somehow nurtured an ethic of service and engagement in community among many young people -- the School of Social Work at Hebrew University, for example, is a lively place for community-based activism by students and community members. And it has embodied an entrepreneurial spirit in the high-tech world that has lent great impetus to economic growth. So these are great achievements.

But it is hard to see how Israel's future can be as bright as it could be unless the Palestinian conflict is resolved. A continuing status quo seems entirely unsustainable. The conflict needs to be resolved in ways that establish a fair foundation of life for all the communities and people of the region. And it needs to be resolved in a way that fundamentally respects Israel's rights of security for its citizens and institutions. Surely basic social justice is an irreplaceable prerequisite of a harmonious social order; likewise, the acceptance of nonviolence by all members of society is fundamental to a sustainable society.

There isn't much that one can learn in a fundamental way in just a brief exposure to a complex country. But here's a preliminary thought: Israel's course is being set today by a very wide range of actors: the Knesset and prime minister, city authorities, settler organizations, business investors, educators, NGOs, orthodox activists, and ordinary Israeli citizens. And where the policies will come out is deeply unpredictable. Will Israel succeed in solving the problem of a just solution for the people of greater Jerusalem? Will it succeed in reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians that lays the basis for harmonious shared regional life? Or will disruptive actors on both sides continue to make enduring compromise impossible? The sad reality, from many other historical examples, is that passionate minorities and self-interested private interests may well prevail in creating structures that make lasting peace and justice impossible, for their own self-interested reasons. And that would be a tragedy, for all the people of the region.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:05PM (-04:00)

Conflict as an empirical-practical study

Tuesday, May 26, 2009

Conflict and peace studies have been a part of academic research since at least the 1970s. Many universities have created major research centers devoted to the study of the causes of conflict and possible pathways of conflict resolution. In some cases the focus of study is on particular zones of inter- and intra-state conflict: recurring civil conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa; the Middle East; Northern Ireland; Hindu-Muslim conflict in South Asia; or US-Soviet conflict during the Cold War. And in other cases the focus is less regionally specific and more concerned about identifying root causes and remedies for social conflict.



Causes of large social conflict are widely varied: for example, disagreements about access to resources, including water; disagreements about the use of religious sites; direct military competition to secure hegemony in various regions; disagreements about physical borders between states; and the list can be extended. We can also speculate that there is a "social psychology" associated with conflict -- both as a cause and as an effect. Social conditions that create fear, uncertainty, or suspicion of other social groups are surely relevant to the occurrence and duration of social conflict. In turn, an extended period of conflict and violence among groups within a population further undermines the potential basis for future trust and cooperation among members of these groups. And we can likewise explore the dynamics of the processes of political entrepreneurship through which some leaders seek to mobilize support around divisive identities and issues.

It is apparent that the study of conflict inherently requires an interdisciplinary approach. It has sometimes seemed to tilt towards international relations theory, with its calculus of political interest and rational strategy. But the insights of anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, social psychologists, political scientists, and area specialists are all relevant to the key problems: arriving at applicable (and testable) theories of the causes of conflict in a variety of circumstances, and arriving at strategies for reducing the sources of conflict and defining pathways from "conflictual" to "non-conflictual". We need to have fairly concrete sociological and ethnographic understanding of the structures and mentalities that are associated with extended periods of social conflict, if we are to understand the mechanisms that create, sustain, or inhibit these conflicts.

Resolution of inter-state conflict (warfare) seems to be a special case, and in many ways an easier case, than resolution of intra-state or intra-regional conflict. Answering the question, "Why do inter-state wars occur?" is likely to be quite different from answering the question, "Why does inter-group violence occur along ethnic or religious lines?" Finding ways of establishing enduring co-existence between Hindus and Muslims in India; finding ways of stabilizing relations between Protestant and Catholic communities and populations in Northern Ireland; resolving the causes of ethnic conflict and violence in Kenya or Rwanda; or creating a basis for peaceful co-habitation among Palestinian and Jewish communities in Jerusalem -- each of these challenges seems different and more difficult than solving the Cold War or managing inter-state nuclear competition.

What are the sources of this additional level of difficulty? There seem to be several reasons for this greater intractability. First is the fact that these conflicts involve mass populations that are only subject to minimal degrees of organizational or state control. So it is often difficult to resolve these sorts of conflicts through negotiations among a few powerful parties; instead, alleviating the causes of conflict needs to be pursued on a more disaggregated level. Second, the dialectic of action and reaction, affront and retaliation, seems to take on a life of its own that makes inter-group conflict and violence very difficult to damp down. One incident leads to several, with a spreading radius of conflict.

So are there some basic hypotheses about reducing conflict that might be applied to a

situation of conflict within a population in a specific region -- whether among religious groups, ethnic identities, or other grounds of division? Here are a couple of thoughts.

- First, remove the material causes of inter-personal and inter-group conflict -- unfair rules, practices of discrimination, limited access to resources such as schools or clean water, or barriers on mobility.
- Second, find ways of addressing past hatreds in the current generation. Somehow work towards establishing an openness to sharing of the region peacefully that doesn't currently exist.
- Third, work vigorously to establish new pathways of opportunity for disadvantaged populations: schools, health, property ownership.
- Fourth, undertake a serious and goal-directed program of legislation and policy to correct past injustices.
- Fifth, pay close attention to the details of the issues that divide groups -- geography, claims on property, grievances about unequal opportunities -- and be prepared to address them in detail.
- Sixth, encourage the formation of organizations in civil society that see both sides, and that will work towards reducing objective and subjective causes of hatred and conflict.

These recommendations seem to amount to one basic point, almost Biblical in its simplicity: peace requires justice. So if we want to establish a peaceful regional or global society, we need to work very consistently and patiently towards establishing the conditions of just and equitable life circumstances for all people affected. Put the point the other way around, and you have a general hypothesis about the causes of conflict: pervasive, sustained injustice breeds violence and conflict.

But here is the hard question: is there any evidence that measures like these will work? Can a population get past its old sources of bitterness and hatred? Are there practical strategies that India, Ireland, or Israel can pursue that will methodically reduce the volatility of intra-population conflict? What kinds of empirical studies are available to help evaluate the efficacy of these various measures? Are there studies within social psychology on religious, racial, or identity politics that shed light on conflict and its resolution? These are the kinds of questions that we most need the disciplines of peace and conflict studies to address.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:20PM (-04:00)

Microstructure of strife

Friday, May 29, 2009



Let's work backwards in thinking about sustained inter-group violence, and begin by considering some of the street-level incidents that constitute a period of violence against or between groups. What factors are necessary to the occurrence of inter-group violence in a region? And how can an understanding of these factors contribute to better strategies of conflict reduction and prevention?

I'm thinking here particularly of ethnic and sectarian violence, including examples like these -- periods of violence in Northern Ireland, upsurges of the Intifada, stone-throwing against vehicles of another group, violent ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, violent settler

resistance to resettlement in Israel, ultra-orthodox attacks on more secular Jews in Jerusalem, or Hindu violence against Muslim communities in India. A group of teenagers throw rocks at visible members of another religious group. A cell of young men place a fire bomb in a department store in a Protestant area. A mob rages through a Muslim neighborhood, attacking innocent households. A gang of toughs pressures a minority family to move from the majority neighborhood with threats and beatings. What motivates the participants to involve themselves in these violent actions? And what social factors are necessary in order to turn a few violent individuals into a major violent inter-group event?

Quite a few earlier postings are relevant to various aspects of these questions (thread). And, as has been frequently mentioned here, Charles Tilly's theories of contentious politics are crucial here (Dynamics of Contention, Contentious Performances). Here my interest is in line with the idea of promoting peace: if we understand the dynamics of contention better, perhaps we can do a better job of designing institutions and policies that minimize the occurrence of inter-group strife.

We can begin to analyze these examples by providing some analytical questions: what are the contentious social groups?Are acts of violence spontaneous or orchestrated? Are there contentious organizations providing a degree of stimulus and coordination to the violent acts? Are participants "professionals" or ordinary members of civil society? What is the nature of the grievances that motivate typical participants and stimulate the incidents of violence? What role do media play in the etiology of the outburst of violence? (For example, it is now well understood how radio broadcasts were used to spread ethnic killings in Rwanda.)

Studies of contentious politics can perhaps be summarized along the lines of a small handful of causal components:

- motivation and mobilization of followers;
- actions and reach of organizations;
- availability of resources and opportunities; and
- existence of social networks.

Who are the followers and what motivates them? What are the organizations that are working towards mobilization for acts of violence? What are the motivations and tactics of leaders of these actions? The role of political entrepreneurs and their private political interests appear to be important factors in the occurrence of ethnic and religious strife. (Atul Kohli offers this kind of analysis of Hindu violence against Muslims in India in Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability.) And finally, what networks of communication and mutual support exist among individuals, leaders, and organizations? (Mario Diani and Doug McAdam have a very interesting recent collection on the latter factor; Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action.)

This broad analysis of the components of contention is useful for peace studies because it suggests a number of avenues of strategy and tactics for reducing inter-group violence. Violence requires followers; so reducing the motivations and grievances that ordinary people have to join a violent social group is obviously a positive step. (This pertains to the line of thought expressed in an earlier posting about the relationship between justice and peace.) Violent movements usually require organizations to coordinate and stimulate attacks; so governments and security services can work to disrupt or contain violent organizations. (The multi-decade struggle in the United States against the Ku Klux Klan is an example.) And, symmetrically, people interested in peace can support organizations in

the same terrain that reject violence -- thus reducing the appeal of violent organizations. Once the centrality of social networks is recognized in the mechanisms of stimulating, spreading, and escalating violence, security agencies can themselves undertake to map out the networks of violence that exist and disrupt them. And the crucial role that resources play in violent mobilization -- access to funds, weapons, or media, for example -- suggests a strategy of resource denial to the forces of order. The state and other agencies can work to reduce the availability of necessary resources to violent organizations.

It seems apparent that if we are to succeed in reducing social conflict and violence, we need to have a good understanding of the social mechanisms through which these conditions arise. And fortunately, there is a very rich literature on social contention that can be incorporated into the study of the structural conditions of peace.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:25AM (-04:00)

Pragmatic inquiry

Saturday, May 30, 2009



Intellectuals are sometimes accused of being out of touch with the real world. But there is a strong thread of intellectual life that proceeds on the basis of a commitment to linking thought to action, theory to practical outcomes. Karl Marx and John Dewey had at least this in common: they both urged intellectuals to commit themselves to joining the intellectual realm with the solution of humanity's challenges. This isn't a universal view; pure physicists and mathematicians, many philosophers, and many theorists of the arts would adamantly defend the pure search for truth and creativity, no matter what connection these may have to the improvement of humanity. But at least some thinkers and researchers see the purpose of their work as bringing the leverage of science and the mind into engagement with practical human problems. We might refer to this as a "pragmatic" perspective on inquiry.

What is involved in pursuing a life of inquiry within a pragmatic perspective? Most basically, it is the idea that inquiry can make a practical difference in the world. According to a pragmatic perspective, science is not a free-standing system for its own sake; rather, science serves humanity. There should be consequences that flow from research and inquiry that somehow or other lead to resolution of problems that we care about. This suggests a loose priority for "problem-directed research" over "curiosity-driven research." And a pragmatic orientation implies that the researcher should design his/her research activities in an intelligent portfolio around a significant set of pressing human problems.

A second implication of "pragmatism" in research comes down to expectations about methodology and epistemology. A pragmatic conception of research defines the epistemic values of research results "practically." A theory or set of measurements should be "good enough" for the needs of the problem, rather than aspiring to an abstract notion of perfect precision. The standards of precision and veridicality are set by the needs of the problem to be solved, rather than existing as free-standing requirements of ever-

greater precision. (Sometimes, of course, greater precision is of great practical importance.)

But there is a little bit of a paradox underlying these comments. We don't generally know what kind of theoretical advance will be needed or constructive in application to a particular problem. Solving problems requires valid understandings of the mechanisms that give rise to these problems; but discovery of underlying mechanisms may proceed best from apparently unrelated theoretical research. So this seems to imply that the research community as a whole will be most pragmatically successful, if there is some division of labor within the community between "curiosity-driven researchers" and "problem-solver researchers." (This seems to correspond roughly to the distinction between pure research and applied research.)

There is of course an important current of American philosophy that is labeled "American pragmatism." (See Christopher Hookway's excellent essay in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and Israel Scheffler, Four Pragmatists: A Critical Introduction to Pierce, James, Mead and Dewey.) How do the central ideas and exponents of this school -- Peirce, James, Dewey, perhaps eventually Goodman, Quine, and Rorty -- relate to the discussion to this point? William James puts the point of pragmatism in terms of a theory of semantics (link): we can explore the meaning of concepts in terms of the practical difference one interpretation or the other makes in the realm of ordinary experience. John Dewey emphasizes the practical connections that exist between knowing and living (Experience and Nature). Neither of these ideas exactly captures the sense of "pragmatic" that is at work here, though; the idea that there is a human point to inquiry, and that the investigator needs to pay attention to both ends of the "theory/world" dichotomy.

It is also interesting to realize that there is a parallel theme in Marx's thought. Marx's insistence on the unity of theory and practice falls in this general area, as does his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have sought only to understand the world; the point, however, is to change it" (link). Marx didn't diminish the importance or value of theoretical research; but he insisted on the importance of keeping in mind the relationship between theory and practice, between knowledge and social improvement.

The Chicago school of sociology provides a good illustration of a pragmatic approach to social research. (See Martin Bulmer, The Chicago School of Sociology.) The Chicago sociologists regularly went back and forth between assessment of the current material and social problems that the city of Chicago was experiencing, and formulation of theories and analytical constructs that might assist in better understanding and addressing these problems. (It is interesting that John Dewey was an important early influence on the formation of the Chicago school.)

So there is a coherent position to take concerning the relationship between intellectual inquiry and practical outcomes. We might say that one of the responsibilities of intellectuals is to assure that their work ultimately has value, and an important manifestation of value is "contribution to the solution of practical human problems." However, it is also true that there are other ways in which intellectual work can have value; so the pragmatic approach cannot be considered to be an exclusive one. Moreover, the point made above, that pure imaginative and theoretical investigation can often have great practical value assures that there is a continuing point to pure research as well. Proof of the Gödel incompleteness theorem didn't have direct practical consequences for computing, so far as I know; and yet it is unmistakeably a valuable

result of human reasoning, and one that sheds strikingly new light on the nature of mathematical truth.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:49AM (-04:00)

Many small causes

Monday, June 01, 2009



When large historical events occur, we often want to know the causes that brought them about. And we often look at the world as if these causes too ought to be large, identifiable historical factors or forces. Big outcomes ought to have big, simple causes.

But what if sometimes the historical reality is significantly different from this picture? What if the causes of some "world-historical events" are themselves small, granular, gradual, and cumulative? What if there is no satisfyingly simple and macro answer to the question, why did Rome fall? Or why did the American civil war take the course it did? Or why did North Africa not develop a major Mediterranean economy and trading system? What if, instead, the best we can do in some of these cases is to identify a swarm of independent, small-scale processes and contingencies that eventually produced the outcome?

Take the fall of Rome. I suppose it is possible that the collapse of the empire resulted from a myriad of very different contingencies and organizational features in different parts of the empire: say, logistical difficulties in supplying armies in the German winter, particularly stubborn local resistance in Palestine, administrative decay in Roman Britain, population pressure in Egypt, and a particularly inept series of commanders in Gaul. Too many moving pieces, too much entropy, and some bad luck in personnel decisions, and administrative and military collapse ensues. Alaric sits in Rome.

What an account like this decidedly lacks, is a story about a few key systemic or environmental factors that made collapse "inevitable". Instead, the account is a dense survey of dozens or hundreds of small factors, separated in time and place, whose cumulative but contingent effect was the observed collapse of Rome. No simple necessity here -- "Rome collapsed because of fatal flaw X or environmental pressure Y" -- but instead a careful, granulated assessment of many small and solvable factors.

But here is a different possible historical account of the fall of Rome. An empire depends upon a few key organizational systems: a system of taxation, a system of effective far-flung military power, and a system of local administration in the various parts of the empire. We can take it as a given that the locals will resent imperial taxation, military presence, and governance. So there is a constant pressure against imperial institutions at each locus -- fiscal, military, and administrative. In order to maintain its grip on imperial power, Rome needed to continually support and revitalize its core functions. If taxation capacity slips, the other functions erode as well; but slippage in military capacity in turn undermines the other two functions. And now we're ready for a satisfyingly simple and systemic explanation of the fall of Rome: there was a gradual erosion of administrative

competence that led to increasingly devastating failures in the central functions of taxation, military control, and local administration. Eventually this permitted catastrophic military failure in response to a fairly routine challenge. Administrative decline caused the fall of Rome.

I don't know whether either of these stories -- the "many small causes" story or the "systemic administrative failure" story -- is historically credible. But either **could** be historically accurate. And this is enough to establish the central point: we should not presuppose what the eventual historical explanation will look like.

I suppose there is no reason to expect apriori that large events will conform to either model. It may be that some great events do in fact result from a small number of large causes, while others do not. So the point here is one about the need to expand our historical imaginations, and not to permit our quest for simplicity and generality to obscure the possibility of complexity, granularity, and specificity when it comes to historical causation.

(Christopher Kelly's The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction is a very readable treatment of Rome's functioning as an empire. Kelly hands off the ball to Gibbon when it comes to explaining the fall of Rome, however (History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire -- as Kelly says, decidedly not a "short history"). Michael Mann's The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760 gives something of the flavor of my "administrative decline" musing above. Likewise, the style of reasoning about revenues and coercion is very sympathetic to Charles Tilly's arguments about a somewhat later period in Coercion, Capital and European States: AD 990 - 1992.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:24AM (-04:00)

What is Alsace?

Friday, June 05, 2009



It may seem like a strange question: What is Alsace? It is a region of France. It is a culturally and linguistically distinct population of 1.8 million people. Most visitors would observe that there is a distinctive Alsatian style in life, in architecture, and in culture. It possesses one great city (Strasbourg), many middle-sized cities (Hagenau, Wissembourg, Colmar), and hundreds of small villages. It is a beautiful collection of landscapes, villages, fields, forests, and vineyards. It is the homeland of Hansi and Marc Bloch. It is a region that has suffered acutely in warfare -- eastern Alsace was the site of most of the battles of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, and it was the site of the final stages of the Battle of the Bulge and the German counteroffensive, Northwind, with intense tank fighting and destruction in dozens of villages. The sufferings of World War II are still remembered by the octagenarians. It is a border culture, with influences from Germany and France establishing aspects of culture and social attitudes over several centuries. And there is always choucroute, kougelhopf, and Kronenberg. In short, Alsace has a history and a set of traditions that set its people



apart.

So from the point of view of travel-writing, the question has an easy answer. But the social reality is more complex and fluid. The social reality of Alsace today is highly heterogeneous, within and across villages, towns, and cities. And ongoing processes of nation-building and globalization raise the question of its cultural survival.

Take the issue of language. Stop into any grocery store or hospital in rural Alsace and you will find elderly people gossiping and talking in Alsatian. For many of these people Alsatian was their native language; for some it remained their only language. But the situation is different if you pause to watch boys playing ball in the public square; their chatter is in French -- or sometimes Arabic. So it is an open question whether the Alsatian language community will remain a vital one, or whether it will retreat into the archives. Current estimates indicate that fewer than 10 percent of children in Alsace are fluent in Alsatian. So the question arises, whether the language will reproduce itself into the the next several generations.

Or consider folkloric customs and cuisine -- the colorful costumes and dancing that are still very much a part of village festivals. How long will these customs survive in an age of mass-based entertainment and a homogenizing media culture? How are the customs transmitted across generations? How long can tarte flambée persist as an Alsatian specialty in the face of an onslaught by Pizza Hut?

And how about the distinctive modes of class relations that you find in Alsace -- the ways in which the local bourgeoisie dress and interact with each other, and how they relate to other social strata -- farmers, bus drivers, shop clerks? In what ways are these class relations distinct from those of Bourgogne? And how distinct are they from their counterparts in the United States?

More fundamentally, consider the range of contemporary social problems that Alsace faces, in both its cities and its villages: drug use, youth unemployment and disaffection, hooliganism, poorly assimilated immigrant communities. How will Strasbourg or Hagenau deal with these problems? And will "Alsace" remain? Or will the national strategies of social services, public policy, and legislation lead to a more socially uniform Alsace -- just a quaint set of historical markers on the autoroute?

So really, the question posed here has two distinct parts, both very interesting. The first is historical: what were the rich pathways of culture formation through which Alsace came to be Alsace? How did this particular mix of values, attitudes, modes of behavior, language, and culture come together?

The second part of the question is forward-looking: where is Alsace going? Will it preserve its cultural distinctiveness and its language? Or will it become simply another interchangeable part of France and the world? How much staying power does a traditional culture have in the face of the impulses of nation-building, mass communication, and globalization of consumption that the contemporary world imposes?

These questions are interesting in consideration of Alsace. But they are even more

interesting in the context of thinking about globalization itself. Is it possible for local and regional cultures to successfully negotiate the challenges of the twenty-first century in ways that permit the survival of their cultural uniqueness? Or is the global world of the future destined to look more like a very large shopping mall, with the same foods, clothes, and ethics everywhere?
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:23AM (-04:00)

Modest predictions in history

Saturday, June 06, 2009



Image: the owl of Minerva

In spite of their reputations as historical determinists, Hegel and Marx each had their own versions of skepticism about "learning from history" -- in particular, the possibility of predicting the future based on historical knowledge. Notwithstanding his view that history embodies reason, Hegel is famous for his idea in the Philosophy of Right: "When philosophy paints its grey in grey then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk." And Marx puts the point more sardonically in the Eighteenth Brumaire: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." Both, then, cast specific doubt on the idea that history presents us with general patterns that can be projected into the future. Marx's remarks to Vera Zasulich about the prospects for communist revolution in Russia are instructive: "I thus *expressly* limited the 'historical inevitability' of this process to the *countries of Western Europe*."

This is a view I agree with very profoundly: history is contingent, there are always alternative pathways that might have been taken, and history has no general plan. So -- no grand predictions in history.

But then we have to ask a different sort of question. Specifically -- what kinds of predictions or projections are possible in history? And what is the intellectual base of grounded historical predictions? Here are a few predictions that seem to be supportable, drawn from recent postings on UnderstandingSociety:

- The Alsatian language is likely to disappear as a functioning medium of communication in Alsace within the next fifty years.
- Labor unrest in China will intensify over the next ten years.
- Social unrest will continue to occur over the next decade in Thailand, with a gradual increase in influence to dispossessed groups (red shirts).
- Large and deadly technology failures will occur in Europe and the United States in the next decade.
- Social movements will arise more frequently and more adaptively as a result of the

use of social media (twitter, blogs, facebook, email).
- Conflicts between Arabs and Jews in East Jerusalem will continue to deepen in the next ten years as a consequence of the practical politics of land use and reclamation in the city.

Several things are apparent when we consider these predictions. First, they are limited in scope; they are small-scale features of the historical drama. Second, they depend on specific and identifiable social circumstances, along with clear ideas about social mechanisms connecting the present to the fruture. Third, they are at least by implication probabilistic; they indicate likelihoods rather than inevitabilities. Fourth, they imply the existence of ceteris paribus conditions: "Absent intervening factors, such-and-so is likely to occur." But, finally, they all appear to be intellectually justifiable. They may not be true, but they can be grounded in an empirically and historically justified analysis of the mechanisms that produce social change, and a model projecting the future effects of those mechanisms in combination.

The heart of prediction is our ability to identify dynamic processes and mechanisms that are at work in the present, and our ability to project their effects into the future. Modest predictions are those that single out fairly humdrum current processes in specific detail, and derive some expectations about how these processes will play out in the relatively short run. Grand predictions, on the other hand, purport to discover wide and encompassing patterns of development and then to extrapolate their civilizational consequences over a very long period. A modest prediction about China is the expectation that labor protest will intensify over the next ten years. A grand prediction about China is that it will become the dominant economic and military superpower of the late twenty-first century. We can have a fair degree of confidence in the first type of prediction; whereas there are vastly too many possible branches in history, too many "countervailing tendencies," too many accidents and contingencies, that may occur to give us any confidence in the latter prediction.

Ceteris paribus conditions are unavoidable in formulating historical expectations about the future, because social change is inherently complex and multi-causal. So even if it is case that a given process, accurately described in the present, creates a tendency for a certain kind of result -- it remains the case that there may well be other processes at work that will offset this result. The tendency of powerful agents to seize opportunities for enhancing their wealth through processes of urban development implies a certain kind of urban geography in the future; but this outcome might be offset by a genuinely robust and sustained citizens' movement at the city council level.

The idea that historical predictions are generally probabilistic is partly a consequence of the fact of the existence of unknown ceteris paribus conditions. But it is also, more fundamentally, a consequence of the fact that social causation itself is almost always probabilistic. If we say that rising conflict over important resources (X) is a cause of inter-group violence (Y), we don't mean that X is necessarily followed by Y; instead, we mean that X raises the likelihood of the occurrence of Y.

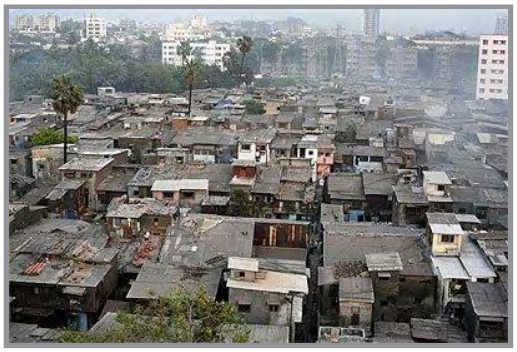
So two conclusions seem justified. First, there is a perfectly valid intellectual role for making historical predictions. But these need to be modest predictions: limited in scope, closely tied to theories of existing social mechanisms, and accompanied by ceteris paribus conditions. And second, grand predictions should be treated with great suspicion. At their best, they depend on identifying a few existing mechanisms and processes; but the fact of multi-causal historical change, the fact of the compounding of uncertainties, and the fact of the unpredictability of complex systems should all make us dubious about

large and immodest claims about the future. For the big answers, we really have to wait for the owl of Minerva to spread her wings.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:26AM (-04:00)

What cities have in common

Sunday, June 07, 2009







Images: Beijing (1900), Mexico City (2000), London (1600), Chicago (1930)

The "city" is a pretty heterogeneous category, encompassing human places that differ greatly with each other and possess a great deal of internal social heterogeneity as well. Size, population structure, economic or industrial specialization, forms of governance, and habitation and transportation structure all vary enormously across the population of cities. And so New York (2000), Chicago (1930), Rome (200), Mumbai (2008), Beijing (1800), Lagos (1970), London (1600), and Mexico City (1990) are all vastly different human agglomerations; and yet all are "cities". Ancient, modern, medieval, developed, and underdeveloped -- each of these places represents an urban concentration of population and habitation. (Here is an earlier posting that is relevant to the current topic.)

Given these many dimensions of difference, we can reasonably ask whether there are any shared urban characteristics or processes. Is there anything that a scientific or historical study of cities can discover? Is there a body of observation and discovery that might constitute the foundation for a sociology of cities?

Several points emerge quickly when we pose the question in these terms. First, a city is by definition a dense concentration of human inhabitants in a limited space. Human beings have material needs that must be satisfied daily: fresh water, food, shelter, clothing, and fuel, for example. Rural people can satisfy many of these needs directly through access to land, farms, and other natural resources. Urban populations are too dense to support individual or family self-sufficiency. So cities have this in common: they must have developed logistical systems for supplying residents with food, clean water, sanitation, and other basic necessities. This is the insight that motivated von Thünen in the development of central place theory (Isolated State: an English Edition of Der Isolierte Staat); equally it underlies William Cronon's analysis of Chicago in Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West and G. William Skinner's analysis of urban hierarchies in



China (link).

A second feature of cities is the unavoidable need for value-adding, non-agricultural production within the city. This means activities such as manufacturing, artisanal production, and the provision of services for pay. The residents of the city need to gain income in order to have "purchasing power" to acquire the necessities of life from the countryside. This implies a social organization that supports employment and occupations. So cities share this characteristic as well: they are grounded systems of production and exchange, permitting labor, production, circulation of commodities, and consumption. (Reasoning something like this underlay the analysis of Chicago into "ecological zones" pioneered by Chicago School sociologists Park and Burgess in The City: Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment.)

Given that cities are inherently spatial, the economic characteristics just mentioned also imply a circulation of persons throughout the city. And this implies that cities must possess some organized system of transportation. This may be walking pathways, roads for carriages, streetcars, buses, or subways and railroads. But economic activity and production requires circulation of people, and this implies urban transportation. But, as Sam Bass Warner showed in Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900, transport systems in turn create new patterns of residence and work in their wake.

A third common urban characteristic has to do with inequalities of power, influence, and property. Human populations seem always to embody significant inequalities along these lines. But advantages of power and wealth can be almost automatically transformed into facts of urban geography by the nomenklatura, the elites. So cities are likely to bear the signature of the social inequalities of wealth and power that are interwoven in their histories. The attractive locations for homes and gardens, preferred access to amenities such as water and roads, even locations favored from the point of view of pest and disease -- these locations are likely to be stratified by wealth and power. (Engels' description of the habitation patterns of bourgeoisie and proletariat in Birmingham and Manchester are illustrative; The Condition of the Working Class in England. Here's a more developed discussion of Engels' sociology of the city.)

Fourth, cities require formal systems of governance and law. Village society may succeed in establishing stable social order based on informal norms and processes. But cities are too large and complex to function as informal arrangements. Instead, there need to be ordinances for public health and safety, maintenance of public facilities, land use processes, and rules of public safety. Absent such governance, it is inconceivable that a city of one hundred thousand or a million would succeed in maintaining the delicate patterns of coordination needed for the continuing wellbeing of the residents.

So cities can be predicted to possess a variety of forms of social, political, economic, and geographical organization. Cities are not formless concentrations of humanity; rather, they are functional systems that can be investigated in depth. And here is the historical reality that permits this analysis to escape the charge of functionalism; the social systems that cities currently possess are the result of designs and adaptations of intelligent,

strategic actors in the past. This means that they may be markedly non-optimal; they are likely to be skewed towards the interests and comfort of elites; but they are likely to work at some level of success.

These observations don't exactly answer the original question in a tidy way; they don't establish specific forms or characteristics that all cities share. But they do define a set of existential circumstances that cities must satisfy, and they pose in turn a series of questions about social organization and function that are likely to shed light on every city. We might look at this discussion as suggesting a matrix of analysis for all cities, corresponding to the large social needs mentioned here. How does a given city handle logistics, provisioning, local economic activity, transportation, land use, governance, public order, sanitation and health, and inequalities? What are the organizations and systems through which these central and inevitable tasks are accomplished? And then, perhaps, we may find a basis for classifying cities into large groups, based on the similarities that exist at this level of structure and organization. (For example, reasoning something like this leads G. William Skinner to distinguish between administrative and commercial cities in late Imperial China.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:14AM (-04:00)

Cultural authenticity and the market

Wednesday, June 10, 2009



Images: cover illustration from Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House*; Chinese neolithic pot c. 1500 BC

People often return from their travels with objects they've purchased to represent the culture and traditions of the place they've visited -- Alsatian pottery from Betschdorf, masks from Kenya, or Navajo pots from Arizona. And sometimes they purchase such artifacts at home in Cleveland or Sacramento to gain a little resonance from a distant culture -- Tibetan temple bells, Chinese funeral figures, Mayan woven goods. And there is generally a desire that these goods should be "authentic" -- that is, they should have been produced by artisans situated in a continuous tradition with the culture the artifact represents. Imagine the traveler's disappointment to find that his beautiful artisanal Alsatian vase was mass-produced in a factory in Guangdong.



Here I'd like to dwell a bit on this idea of authenticity. The idea seems to have two somewhat distinct components: expression and artisanship. The first involves the idea that the artifact is to be valued because it somehow ***expresses and reveals*** some of the meaning, symbols, and practices of the other culture. This relates the idea of authenticity to one of Clifford Geertz's most famous statements about culture: that a culture is a web of significance (The Interpretation Of Cultures). The "authentic"

cultural object is valued because it reveals some of those meanings and relationships; it fits into this web of signification.

The second dimension here involves the idea that the artifact is the ***material product of social practices*** embedded within or deriving from that culture. Here the idea is that the actual human, practical history of the object makes all the difference between authentic and inauthentic -- the way it was made, the human communities and practices within which the artisan performed his or her work in creating the object. We might imagine a fishing net created by a team of anthropologists who have painstakingly reproduced the techniques of knot-tying, braiding, and decorating that were characteristic of a certain human community at a certain point in time. The product may be highly "accurate" from the first point of view, in that it accurately depicts the results and signification of the product within its historical setting. But it is nonetheless not "authentic" because it is an *a posteriori* simulation of the culture's fishing net -- not a direct product of the culture.

Take a few examples at the extremes. At one extreme are the African dolls one might buy in the Disney store in conjunction with the latest cartoon adventure about Africa. No one would imagine that these dolls are authentic in their correspondence to any real African culture or artisanal tradition, past or present. (Though perhaps they are authentic expressions of Disney culture!) At the other extreme, consider the objects on display from Benin at the Chicago Art Institute recently, representing local society and Portuguese colonialism *(Benin--Kings and Rituals; Court Arts of Nigeria*; link). No one would doubt the authenticity of these beautiful and engaging artifacts -- even though they embody a deep and complex collision and mingling of western and African modalities. Or consider the sculpture that Kwame Anthony Appiah used as the cover illustration of his important book, In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture. It looks highly traditional and "African" -- until we look closely and discover the old bicycle parts incorporated into the design. Is this sculpture an authentic expression of African culture? Or is it "contaminated" by the intrusion of western technologies and products? Appiah's view is a nuanced one: it is an authentic expression of something, but not of a hypostasized essential "African cultural identity."

And the story only gets more complicated. What could be more authentic to the native American cultures of North America than Inuit carvings and Navajo blankets? Surely each emerged from the material cultures and aesthetic sensibilities of Inuit and Navajo people. But there are two complications here. First, there certainly are workshops in China and elsewhere industriously turning out soapstone bears and woolen Navajo rugs. And their products may be very persuasive imitations indeed. But they aren't "authentic" -- they are simply well executed fakes. They lack the second characteristic mentioned above; they don't have the right lineage of production.

But here is the deeper problem. The genres themselves are deeply intertwined with external market forces and consumer tastes. The Navajo blankets of the 1850s existed; but they were utilitarian, drab productions, intended for use rather than display. It was the tastes of eastern consumers, conveyed through brokers, traders, and trading posts, that shifted the design and coloration of the rug to its current "traditional" form. (Here is a rough and ready summary of the history of Navajo rugs.)

And the tradition of Inuit carving is even more market-driven.

While Canada’s Inuit do have a rich visual history that dates back more than a millennium, Inuit carvings, prints and jewelry are actually the product of a relatively recent transformation in the Arctic, beginning with the emergence of an “outside” market during the whaling years, which gave rise to the birth of the contemporary Inuit art movement starting in 1949. (link)

So the practice of animal carving in soft stone perhaps did not even exist in Inuit culture prior to the arrival of traders. So we might say that blankets and soapstone polar bears are inauthentic in the first sense above: they don't correspond to deep and abiding features of the other culture, but are rather informed by the tastes and preferences of the consumer market. (This fits the history of Chinese export porcelain as well; I'm sure there are endless additional examples that could be provided.) Are either of these artifact traditions "authentic"? Do they express Navajo or Inuit culture and tradition? Or does the fact that an indigenous artisanal tradition has been self-consciously directed towards creating products that "fit" with the tastes of a distant public undermine the authenticity of the work?

The issue is more difficult than it might appear, because there is one interpretation of "authentic" that will not stand up, ***cultural essentialism***. This interpretation depends on the idea of a cultural essence underlying a given people at a certain time -- a pure form of Hopi, Navajo, Alsatian, Tokugawan, or Armenian culture in terms of which we might define the authenticity of cultural products. Here the misguided idea would be that a product is authentic if it corresponds accurately to the cultural essence to which it refers -- a strict interpretation of the first characteristic mentioned above. This won't do, however, because cultures are not fixed, uniform realities, but rather ongoing, dynamic processes of creation and change. So the story told by the Benin exhibition above is very illustrative; the cultural content and depictions of the two communities -- Benin and Portugal -- interpenetrate each other in the next moment in time, and neither is unchanged as a result. So we cannot understand authenticity as "correspondence to a cultural essence"; there are no such essences.

There is, however, a weaker form of correspondence that remains a valid characteristic of "authenticity" -- the idea that an artifact is itself a meaningful object, and its meaning needs to be fitted into the meanings and practices of the broader culture from which it emanated. The Chinese neolithic pot depicted above is dated from about 1500 BC. The distinctive crosshatching pattern can be found on many of the pots of this period, and it is striking. Why does the culture incorporate this decorative feature into many of its small pots? It is hypothesized that clay pots replaced an older container technology of tightly woven baskets; and the artisan was offering a representation of quality and continuity by decorating the pot to resemble a woven basket. This may or may not be a valid explanation; but plainly the decorations of the pot are meaningful, and -- if historically authentic -- the pot can provide content for an interpretation of various elements of the contemporary culture and its artisanal practices. (See the Minneapolis Institute of Arts page on Chinese neolithic ceramics.)

Perhaps the reason that market influences on artisanal traditions are unsettling and "inauthentic" goes back to a tension between the first and the second criterion mentioned above (expression and artisanship). A market-shaped artisanal tradition satisfies the second criterion; it results in products that are created by an artisanal tradition linked to the other culture (blankets, carvings, export porcelain). But there is the nagging fear that the influence of external consumer demand has deformed the artifact with respect to the first criterion -- fit with the culture's own values and meanings. The influence of consumer tastes may have driven the product and the tradition far away from more genuine expressions of local culture. Here, we might say, authenticity requires that the product be created according to the values and meanings of the indigenous culture -- not the profit-seeking adaptive behavior of skilled artisans aiming to create the "traditional" product that will sell best with the tourists.

If forced to answer my own question here, I think I would focus on the second criterion -- the concrete historical relationship between the product, the artisan, and the tradition. And I would then look at it as an open question for hermeneutic investigation to attempt to determine the complex and fluid ways in which the product corresponds to, expresses,

contradicts, or invades the meanings of its background culture.

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:24AM (-04:00)

A spatial twitter feed for Southeast Asia

Friday, June 12, 2009



View Southeast Asia in a larger map

Quite a few of the items included in the UnderstandingSociety twitter feed currently refer to events and conditions in Southeast Asia -- especially Burma, Malaysia, and Thailand. This posting introduces a dynamic map that I'll try to update with new feed items as they occur when it is possible to identify a specific location. It is possible to change the frame and scale of the Google map, and if you click on the pointers you'll find a link to the associated news item. Here is a direct link to the map, and it will remain accessible in the sidebar as well.



I have also provided static maps that indicate the provinces and cities of Burma and Thailand.

The integrative power of Google Maps is pretty striking in this example. If you go to the "larger map" through the link above, it is possible to turn on several other layers of the map, including photos, videos, wikipedia articles, and webcams. These are photos and videos that users have posted with geo-tags, so that they are associated with their locations on the Google map. This resource will become vastly deeper over time, as more and more users tag their photos and videos spatially. There are currently very dramatic photos available on the web of Karen refugees passing across the Burma-Thai border near the village of Noh Bo. These photos aren't geotagged at present, but one would expect that it won't be long before the user could expand the map around this key area of conflict; zoom in to find the geo-tagged photos and videos that are associated; and gain a much more vivid understanding of the current reality in the region.

This effort at linking a selected stream of news stories about Southeast Asia with their locations across the region contributes to the overall goal of UnderstandingSociety in a fairly basic way: it's an experiment in trying to organize and synthesize the hundreds of news items and events that can be observed through the twitter stream, into something that is a more structured presentation of part of the social reality of a country or region.

Several important issues are in the twitter feed at present:

- Burma -- the Junta's trial of **Aung San Suu Kyi**; the army's assault on Karen areas; the plight of Karen refugees fleeing into Thailand; the conduct of army units in Kachen; massive corruption and theft of resources by the army.
- Thailand -- aftermath of the Red Shirt demonstrations of March and April; political activities of the emerging parties; the southern insurgency and government efforts to control the southern states.
- Malaysia -- protests against discrimination directed at ethnic minorities (Indian, Chinese, Christian); jockeying among political parties.

Is this a good way of making spatial sense of the news items about what is happening in Burma, Malaysia, and Thailand?
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:00PM (-04:00)

Understanding Southeast Asia

Sunday, June 14, 2009



Themes and issues from Southeast Asia crop up fairly frequently in UnderstandingSociety. Red shirt demonstrations in Thailand, ethnic conflict in Malaysia, corruption and repression in Burma -- I think these are some of the more interesting social developments underway in the world today. And the resources needed for non-experts (like myself) to get a preliminary but factual understanding of these developments are now readily available on the web -- blogs, international newspapers, twitter, and google provide a truly unprecedented ability for any of us to gain insight into distant social processes. (A recent widget on the iPhone and iPod Touch is a case in point: the World Newspapers application gives the user easy access to almost 4,000 newspapers in 100 countries.)

One blog that I've come to appreciate quite a bit on subjects having to do with Southeast Asia is the New Mandala, based at Australian National University. Andrew Walker is one of its founders and frequent contributors, and he and several other New Mandala contributors have recently published what promises to be a very interesting book. The book is titled Tai Lands and Thailand: Community and the State in Southeast Asia, and its focus can best be described in the contributors' own words. Here are the opening paragraphs of a chapter on the orientation the contributors have taken on studying "Thai" identity:

This book provides a new approach to the study of community in the Tai world of mainland Southeast Asia.

Much of the current ethnographic work in the Tai world is constrained by a conceptual framework that associates community with tradition, locality and subsistence economy. This traditional community is commonly portrayed as being undermined by the modern forces of state incorporation, market penetration, globalisation and population mobility.

In this volume, we take a very different view. We challenge the widely held view that community is a traditional social form that is undermined by modernity. Using case studies from Thailand, Laos, Burma and China, we explore the active creation of ‘modern

community' in contexts of economic and political transformation. Our aim is to liberate community from its stereotypical association with traditional village solidarity and to demonstrate that communal sentiments of belonging retain their salience in the modern world of occupational mobility, globalised consumerism and national development.

Our focus is on the Tai world, made up of the various peoples who speak Tai languages. The largest groups are the Thai of Thailand, the Lao of Laos, the Shan of Burma and the Dai of southern China. Of course, each of these categories is problematic; they are all the modern products of historical circumstance rather than being natural or self-evident ethnic groups. There are certainly linguistic and cultural similarities that justify the shared label 'Tai' but this must be treated as a preliminary delineation of a field of interest without rushing to assumptions about a common identity or a sense of shared history. Indeed, our primary goal is to critically examine contemporary notions of belonging in this Tai world.

This is a highly engaging and innovative approach to the intellectual challenge of understanding the culture, history, and current trajectory of a large part of the peoples of Southeast Asia. The contributors capture some of the best current thinking about the fluidity and plasticity of cultural identities and the complicated ways in which cultures and modern social forces interact. Particularly pressing for historians and area specialists is the challenge of taking adequate account of language, culture, local community, extended networks, and varied political and economic interests when we try to make sense of a large population dispersed over a macro-region.

Take "red shirts" and "yellow shirts". These are two constituencies in contemporary Thailand. In the past two years there have been massive popular movements corresponding to each of them, leading to major demonstrations and challenges to the government. They are often characterized in terms of differences in social class and economic sector: rural, poor, disempowered, versus urban, affluent, and privileged. This characterization is one that political scientists and economists would be comfortable with; it locates the two groups in terms of their interests and their location within the relations of wealth and power that exist in contemporary Thailand. But it's at least worth posing the question: does this "interest"-based definition of contemporary politics in Thailand leave out something crucial, in the general zone of culture and identity? And are there possible cultural differences between the groups that are potentially relevant to political behavior and mobilization? Is there an ethnography of the red shirt movement and its followers yet?

Or take the issue of refugees, displaced persons, and migrant workers. There are flows of people across the borders of Burma and Thailand; Burma and Bangladesh; Thailand and Malaysia; and even from Burma to Cambodia. (For that matter, there is a significant population of Thai "guest workers" in Tel Aviv and other parts of the Middle East and Gulf.) How do differences in culture and identity play into the situation of these displaced people when they find themselves in the foreign country?

So research along the lines of Tai Lands and Thailand is highly valuable. It is likely to give us some new conceptual tropes in terms of which to understand these large social realities -- modern community, provisional identities, and a multi-threaded understanding of the social worlds of Southeast Asia. And I think it demonstrates another important truth as well: there is always room for fresh thinking when it comes to trying to make sense of the social world.

(See an earlier posting introducing a spatial representation of the UnderstandingSociety twitter feed on Southeast Asia. Here is a direct link to the google map for this effort.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:37PM (-04:00)

Marx's theory of political behavior

Wednesday, June 17, 2009





Marxism is concerned with the politics of class: the success or failure of working class organizational efforts, the occurrence of collective action in defense of class interests, the logic of working class electoral politics, and the occurrence of revolution. Marx attempted to analyze and explain a variety of political phenomena--e.g., the forms that working class political action took in 1848 in France, the reasons for Napoleon III's overwhelming electoral victory in 1849, and the efforts by organizations of the English working class to achieve the Ten Hours Bill. What assumptions underlie Marx's analysis of the political behavior of class? I would say that his theory comes down to three elements: a theory of individual means-end rationality, a theory of ideology, and a theory of class consciousness.

I believe, surprisingly, that there is much in common between Marxism and the rational-choice model of political behavior. (So does Adam Przeworski; Capitalism and Social Democracy.) The rational-choice approach postulates that individuals' political behavior is a calculated attempt to further a given set of individual interests--income, security, prestige, office, etc. One might suppose that such an approach is unavoidably bourgeois, depending upon the materialistic egoism characteristic of market society. However, I maintain that Marx's theory of political behavior, like his theory of capitalist economic behavior, is ultimately grounded in a theory of individual rationality. Roughly, Marx's fundamental postulate of political analysis is that:

Agents as members of classes behave in ways calculated to advance their perceived material interests; these interests are perceived as class interests (i.e., interests shared with other members of the class); and class organizations and features of class consciousness permit classes to overcome implicit conflicts of interest between private interest and class interest.
Second, Marx's theory of political behavior incorporates the concept of ideology. Ideologies, or "false consciousness", are systems of ideas that affect the worker's political behavior by instilling false beliefs and self-defeating values in the worker. An ideology may instill a set of values or preferences that propel individual behavior in ways that are contrary to the individual's objective material interests. Further, ideologies modify purposive individual action by instilling a set of false beliefs about the causal properties of the social world and about how existing arrangements affect one's objective interests.

Rational individuals, operating under the grip of an ideology, will undertake actions that are contrary to their objective material interests, but are fully rational given the false beliefs they hold about the social world they inhabit and their mistaken assumptions about their real interests and values. An ideology is an effective instrument, then, in shaping political behavior within a class system; it induces members of exploited classes to refrain from political action directed at overthrowing the class system. And this is indeed Marx's use of the concept; an ideology functions as an instrument of class conflict, permitting a dominant class to manipulate the political behavior of subordinate classes. It is an important task to try to identify the institutions and mechanisms through which an ideology is conveyed to a population.

A third important component of Marx's theory of political behavior is his concept of class consciousness. The term refers to a set of motivations, beliefs, values, and the like, that are specific and distinctive for a given class (peasantry, proletariat, petty bourgeoisie). Marx holds that these motivational factors serve to bind together the members of a class and to facilitate their collective activities. Class consciousness takes the form of such motives as loyalty to other members of one's class, solidarity with partners in a political struggle, and commitment to a future social order in which the interests of one's class are better served. Marx describes such a complex of psychological properties, and their social foundation in The Eighteenth Brumaire.

"A whole superstructure of different and specifically formed feelings, illusions, modes of thought and views of life arises on the basis of the different forms of property, of the social conditions of existence. The whole class creates and forms these out of its material foundations and the corresponding social relations. The single individual, who derives these feelings, etc. through tradition and upbringing, may well imagine that they form the real determinants and the starting-point of his activity." David Fernbach, ed., Surveys from Exile. Political Writings Volume II., pp. 173-74.

A class is supposed to develop its own conscious identity of itself as a class. Insofar as a group of people who constitute a structurally defined class fails to acquire such attitudes, Marx denies that the group is a class in the full sense at all (a class-for-itself as well as -in-itself). Marx does not provide an extensive analysis of the process through which class consciousness emerges, even within capitalism, but he suggests that it takes form through a historical process of class struggle. As workers or peasants come to identify their shared interests and as they gain experience working together to defend their shared interests, they develop concrete ties within their political groups which provide motivational resources for future collective action. Here again, we need to have a sociology of the institutions that contribute to the formation of this feature of social psychology -- perhaps along the lines of the analysis offered by E. P. Thompson in Making of the English Working Class (link).

A central function of class consciousness in Marx's political theory is to explain the moral capacity of members of exploited classes to join in prolonged, risky struggles in defense of their material interests. The concept of class consciousness thus functions as a bridge between individual interests and collective interests in classical Marxist analysis of political behavior. It gives workers effective motivation to undertake actions and strategies that favor their group interests, and it gives them motivational resources allowing them to persist in these strategies even in the face of risk and deprivation (i.e., in circumstances where the collective strategy imposes costs on the individual's interests). This treatment of class consciousness shows a sensitivity to the point that political behavior is often driven by a set of motives that are richer than a narrow calculus of self-

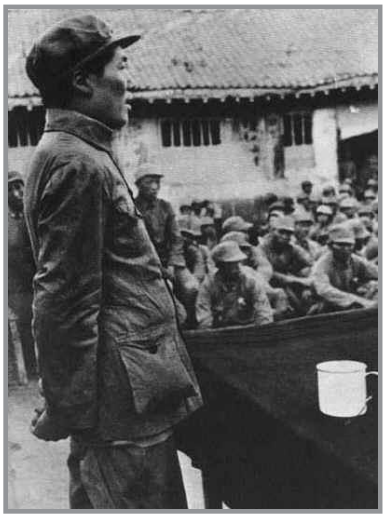
interest. Ralph Miliband's work illustrates this point; State in a Capitalist Society: An Analysis of the Western System of Power.

Here, then, we have an austere model of political behavior that can legitimately be attributed to Marx: Members of groups form beliefs about their material interests, and they act intelligently to further those interests. Members of groups form beliefs about their social world that are sometimes seriously misleading about how the social world works (ideologies). And members of groups sometimes gain a social psychology of solidarity and loyalty that gives them a degree of capacity to act as a group (class consciousness). The eventual behavior of an economic group is the aggregate result of the group's perceptions of its interests, its mental map of how the social world works, and the resources of solidarity that it possesses. It is a materialist theory; it is an agent-centered theory; and it is a theory that invites serious investigation of the processes through which the social psychology of a group are formed.

See prior postings on class, power, and mobilization: link, link, link. An important finding of much discussion of political mobilization since Marx's time is that a purely economic and materialist account of political motivation leaves out a great deal of contemporary political behavior -- for example, ethnic mobilization, identity politics, and political protest (Teheran today).
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:43PM (-04:00)

Theories of the Chinese Revolution

Friday, June 19, 2009



Let us consider a question fundamental to twentieth century world history: why did the Chinese Communist Revolution succeed? Was it the result of a few large social forces and structures? Or was this a case of many small causes operating at a local level, aggregating to a world-historical outcome? (See an earlier posting on "small causes.")

It should first be noted that the CCP's path to power was rural rather than urban. The Guomindong (GMD) had effectively expelled the CCP from the cities in 1927 and had detached the Communist Party from urban workers. (Note that this runs directly contrary to the expectations of classical Marxism, according to which the urban proletariat is expected to be the vanguard of the revolution. A massive contingency intervened -- Chiang Kai-shek's ability to wipe out the urban Communist movement in the Shanghai Massacre.) Further, the turning point in the fortunes of the CCP clearly occurred in the "base areas" during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45): the areas of rural China where the CCP was able to establish itself as the dominant political and military force opposed to the Guomindong and the Japanese Army. The success of the revolution, therefore, depended on successful mobilization of the peasantry in the 1930s and 1940s. How are we to account for its success?

This question has naturally loomed large in Western discussions of the Chinese Revolution since 1949. Two influential theories offer political culture and class conflict as

causes of revolution, and neither of these high-level theories appears to be altogether satisfactory. A more plausible analysis refers to the local politics of class. Rather than postulating a single large causal factor, it is more plausible to understand CCP success as a concatenation of a number of small causes and advantages, deployed with skill and luck to a successful national victory.

Consider first a theory based on political culture. In a celebrated book in 1962 Chalmers Johnson argued that the CCP succeeded in mobilizing peasant support during the Sino-Japanese War because (a) peasants were nationalistic and patriotic, and determined to expel the Japanese, and (b) the CCP was the organization that showed the greatest military and organizational ability to oppose the Japanese military presence in China (Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945). Johnson maintained that the CCP downplayed its social program (class conflict, land reform, etc.) during the war, in the interest of a united front against the Japanese, and that its social goals played little or no role in its mobilizational successes. Peasants therefore supported the CCP out of nationalism, and were, perhaps, unpleasantly surprised at the social program that emerged after the defeat of the Japanese. This theory made a feature of political culture -- nationalist identity -- the central determinant of largescale collective action.

Mark Selden, an American Marxist sociologist, advanced a very different view of the CCP's success in The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China (1971). He offered a class-conflict model, according to which Chinese rural society possessed an objectively exploitative class structure in opposition to which the CCP successfully mobilized support. Landlords, moneylenders, and the state exploited the peasantry by extracting rent, interest, and taxes. The CCP provided a program of social revolution aimed at overthrowing this exploitative order, and peasants followed this program, and supported the CCP, in order to pursue their class interests.

Johnson's theory hasn't stood the test of time very well because there is a dearth of evidence to support the idea that ordinary Chinese people did in fact possess the nationalistic identity and political commitments that the theory postulates. The chief failings of Selden's model are substantial as well, however. Selden assumed that the realities of exploitation and class are relatively transparent, so that peasants more or less immediately perceive their class interests. And he assumed that collective action follows more or less directly from a perception of class interests: if there is a plausible strategy for furthering class interests through rebellion (i.e., the CCP), then peasants will be disposed to do so. However, the social reality of China was much more complex than this story would allow, with region, lineage, and village society existing as a more immediate social reality for most rural people than class and exploitation. So neither Johnson nor Selden provide a framework within which a fully satisfactory theory of the revolution can be constructed.

A more convincing view has been offered by a third generation of historians of the Chinese Revolution. One of those historians is Yung-fa Chen in Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937-1945 (1986). Chen offers an explanation of the CCP's mobilization successes that depends upon a micro-level analysis of the local politics created in Eastern China as a result of local social arrangements and the Japanese occupation. Methodologically his approach is microfoundational and localistic rather than sweeping and mono-causal. And Chen's main findings disagree in some important ways with both Johnson and Selden.

The main elements of Chen's analysis are these. First, he confirmed the Marxist view that the CCP had a coherent social program (land reform and fundamental alteration of rural property arrangements), and that the CCP made this program a central part of its mobilization efforts. This program implicitly defined a forms of class analysis of rural Chinese society into poor peasants, middle peasants, rich peasants, and landlords, and endeavored to sharpen conflicts among these. Second, though, Chen rejected the view that these rural class relations and oppositions were fully transparent to participants, needing only the appearance in the village of a few ideologically correct cadres to mobilize peasant support. Rather, Chen held that the wide variety of rural social relations--lineage, family, religious organization, patron-client, friendship--worked as powerful brakes on the emergence of class consciousness. So a determined program of class-consciousness raising was needed, which the CCP attempted to provide through its "speaking-bitterness" sessions.

And, Chen maintained, peasants were highly skeptical of the ability of outside organizations to protect them against the wrath of local powers (landlords, officials) once the military threat had disappeared. A central problem of mobilization, then, was to create a local organization and militia that was capable of fending off Japanese and GMD military attack; that was sufficiently stable as to lend confidence that peasants could rely on it in the future; and to put forward a social program that would leave it well-positioned to begin the process of socialist reform through land reform, reform of credit institutions, and ultimately collectivization of agriculture and industry.

The heart of Chen's analysis depends on the assumption that peasants are rational political actors, and will support a political organization only if they judge that (a) it will support their local interests and (b) it will be powerful enough to support its local followers. (This has a lot in common with Samuel Popkin's arguments in The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam (1976).) Chen then considers available data on a large number of local communities in Eastern China during the war years in the base areas of the revolution, and finds that the CCP did a skillful job of satisfying both requirements. It was effective in creating military and political organizations capable of protecting local interests; and it was effective in communicating its class analysis to peasants in sufficient degree to lead to support for its revolutionary social program. But, contrary to the nationalist thesis offered by Chalmers Johnson, he argues that the CCP was very skillful in avoiding direct military confrontation with the Japanese Army.

Another impressive effort to provide a new reading of aspects of the Chinese Revolution is provided by Odoric Wou in Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan (1994). Focused on Henan Province, Wou attempts to uncover the complex set of factors that permitted the Communist Party to mobilize mass support for its program. He emphasizes organizational and political factors in his account: the strategies and organizational resources through which the CCP was able to move ordinary workers and peasants from concern with local interests to adherence to a national program. Wou provides fascinating detail concerning Communist efforts to mobilize miners and workers, Red Spears and bandits, and peasants in Henan Province.

Wou makes plain the daunting challenges confronting Communist cadres in their efforts to mobilize support at the village level: mistrust of outsiders, the entrenched political power of elites, and the localism of peasant interests in the region. Wou describes a social-political environment in the countryside that is reminiscent of Philip Kuhn’s account of the situation of local militarization during the Taiping Rebellion in eastern China—one

in which elite-dominated militias had evolved as an institution of self-defense against bandits and sectarian organizations (Rebellion and its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796-1864).

One of the most interesting and surprising findings that Wou puts forward is his contention that mobilization in Henan was not centered in remote and backward border areas, but rather included both remote and commercialized peasant villages (p. 129). This is somewhat inconsistent with Chen's analysis, who focuses precisely on the tactical advantages of remoteness offered by the base areas.

Wou also makes an effort to crack the riddle of peasant mentality in China. Are peasants inherently conservative? Are they latently revolutionary, awaiting only the clarion call of revolution? Both, and neither, appears to be Wou's assessment (p. 161). Wou finds a popular equalitarianism within Chinese peasant culture that provides a basis for Communist mobilization around an ideology of redistribution (p. 151); but equally he finds an entrenched hierarchicalism within Chinese popular culture that made subversion of elite power more difficult for Communist cadres (p. 135). (See an earlier post on the Chinese peasant on this subject.)

Wou also considers the political environment created for the CCP by the Sino-Japanese War. (This is the period treated by Chen's book.) Guomindang power virtually collapsed in Henan Province, and the Japanese occupied eastern Henan in 1938. The three-way struggle between the Japanese, the Guomindang, and the Communist Party gave the Party new opportunities for mobilization against both its enemies. Here Wou makes the important point that structural circumstance—military fragmentation of society, in this case—only provides the opening to successful mobilization, not its sufficient condition. The organizational and strategic competence of the CCP was needed in order to make effective use of these new opportunities for mobilization. Successful play of the game of coalition politics gave the CCP important advantages during this period, and created a position of strength that contributed substantially to post-war success of the movement.

A central tenet of Wou's analysis is the importance of Communist efforts to improve material conditions of life for the populations it aimed to mobilize. Famine relief, formation of production cooperatives, and revival of the silk industry represented efforts by the Party to demonstrate its ability to provide tangible benefits for local communities (pp. 314-326). These efforts had at least two beneficial effects: they provided material incentives to prospective followers, and, less tangibly, they enhanced confidence among villagers in the competence and endurance of the Party.

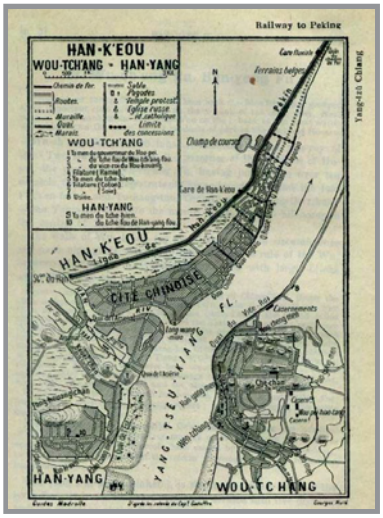
Both Chen and Wou make important contributions within a third generation of historical scholarship and interpretation of the Chinese Revolution. Their accounts are to some extent complementary and to some extent inconsistent -- as one would expect in detailed efforts to answer profound questions about causation. And both accounts share an important historical insight: it is crucial to push down into the local village circumstances of social life and mobilization that the CCP faced as it attempted to generate commitment and support for its movement if we are to understand why it succeeded in mobilizing support from millions of rural people.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:29PM (-04:00)

Wartime China

Friday, June 26, 2009



Photo: Robert Capa's photograph of The Boy Soldier, Hankou, China, late March 1938 © Cornell Capa / Magnum International Centre of Photography



China's experience of World War II (1937-1945) was in some ways as destructive and horrific as that of the Soviet Union. Japan's occupation of many parts of China was extremely brutal, with terrible massacres in Nanjing and other cities, the use of chemical and biological weapons, and extreme mistreatment of civilians and prisoners of war. And the violence deployed against civilian populations in cities -- both air attack and ground forces -- produced vast numbers of refugees surging towards safer destinations in the interior of the country. Estimates indicate that tens of millions of Chinese people, perhaps as many as one hundred million people, of all social strata, were forced into painful and dangerous migration. (The photo above suggests the chaos and suffering this implies.) Casualty figures are somewhat imprecise, but estimates range from 10 to 20 million deaths, with the great majority being civilian deaths. (The Wikipedia entry offers a number on the higher end: 3.8 million military and and 16.2 million civilian, for a total of 20 million deaths.) So the experience of war for China's population must have created a searing, formative experience for the several age cohorts who were caught up in it.



Stephen MacKinnon's recent book Wuhan, 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China casts a bright light on the great suffering that China experienced during the war years (1937-1945). MacKinnon focuses on the strategically and historically crucial role that Wuhan played in the unfolding of Japan's war of conquest over China. Wuhan is a tricity on the upper Yangzi, including Hankou, Hanyang, and Wuchang in close proximity at the juncture of the Han and Yangzi rivers. In 1938 it had a combined population of roughly two million, and hundreds of thousands of refugees soon crowded into the city. The location of Wuhan along the Yangzi placed the city in a central position from the point of view of Japanese war planning: capturing Wuhan would leave central China open to rapid conquest.

The story of Wuhan is one of the more positive episodes in China's military efforts to resist Japanese occupation. After the rapid fall of Shanghai and other coastal cities, it

was expected that Wuhan would fall quickly as well. In fact, the defense of Wuhan was much more effective than previous efforts had been, and the Chinese military was successful in delaying Japan's offensive into the interior by a crucial ten months. When it eventually fell, Republican forces were able to fall back to Chongqing, and though the Japanese subjected the wartime capital to intensive bombing, they did not succeed in capturing the city. So the prolonged defense of Wuhan set the stage for a turning point in the Chinese resistance to Japan.

MacKinnon offers an analogy that was current in 1938: Wuhan is China's Madrid. The analogy implies several things -- a place where republican forces took a major stand against their enemies; a place where there was a flowering of expression, politics, and literature; a place where desperation and hope intermingled to produce courage, resistance, and endurance. Wuhan became a focus for intellectuals, artists, and political activists throughout China and the world in these months. Much as western writers and artists made their way to Madrid in 1936, they also came to Wuhan in 1938. Robert Capa, W. H. Auden, and Christopher Isherwood traveled to Wuhan and added their creative voices to the mix. Auden and Isherwood published many of their observations about China's experience in Journey to a War, and Robert Capa's photographs from this period capture much of the pathos and destruction that the city's defense involved. (MacKinnon reproduces a number of Capa's photographs in the book.)

MacKinnon's book provides a schematic military history of the Japanese assault on Wuhan. But the book is not primarily an exercise in military history; instead, MacKinnon also gives focused attention to the civilian part of the story: the burst of journalism and political debate that took place in the city, the great expansion of social services for orphans and displaced persons, and the mobilization of students and other young people in support of the war effort. The cultural experience of Wuhan is as important a part of the story as the military events.

And in fact, MacKinnon thinks that part of the significance of the defense of Wuhan in these months was the flourishing of mobilization of the mass population in social and cultural affairs, as well as in dedicated defense of the city and the war effort. "Wuhan in 1938 became a laboratory for cultural experimentation. The intellectuals who gathered at Wuhan -- a group that included the nationally prominent figures in most fields -- shared a consensus that their nation needed to turn culture into a potent weapon in the war against the Japanese. They sought to reshape arts and letters to reach the masses -- especially the rural masses -- and persuade them, at the least, to cease cooperating with Japanese occupying forces" (115). (This is pertinent to the issue of "nationalism" discussed in the mention of Chalmers Johnson's treatment of the Chinese Revolution in a prior posting.)

The topic of Wuhan and wartime China is inherently interesting and important. But it is also valuable from the point of view of historiography. Consider the choices that an historian must face in setting out to write a history of an event of the scope of Wuhan 1938. This event is more localized and limited than "the French Revolution" or "British colonialism in South Asia." At the same time, it is far more complex and multi-stranded than events such as "the assassination of President Lincoln" or "MacArthur's decision to cross the Yalu". The Wuhan story involves millions of people, military organizations of great complexity, movements of population, rapidly changing political circumstances, the creation of dozens of newspapers, and shifts in popular culture. And the consequences of the Wuhan episode are complex and unexpected as well. So the historian is forced to decide which threads he or she will focus on; what she wants to explain; and how much

of the story to attempt to tell.

Consider the wide range of questions that could be posed about this piece of China's history: What were the actions and deployments of the Japanese and Chinese military forces in the middle Yangzi region during 1938? What was the nature of the human experience of civilians in Wuhan during the period of assault, bombardment, and destruction? How did circumstances of Guomindang leadership and power relationships influence the behavior and deployment of the Chinese military? What role did Communist forces and leaders play in the defense of Wuhan? What influence did the defense of Wuhan have on later events in the conduct of the war? How was the battle of Wuhan captured in popular memory in China? What influence did this historical moment have on future developments of politics or culture?

So one could try to use available historical sources to tell a fairly straightforward factual narrative; one could give an interpretation of the actions and choices of the leaders and generals; one could attempt to reconstruct the experiences and memories of ordinary Chinese people who lived through these events; and one could offer an analysis of historical causation: X led to Y, Y had important consequences Z. The point here is a simple one: each of these approaches is a different kind of historical reasoning and presentation, and each involves a somewhat different kind of historical reconstruction. It is possible to interweave these approaches; but their foundations in evidence and reasoning are fairly distinct.

Wuhan is one episode in a long and painful period of warfare against the Chinese people. But MacKinnon believes that this episode may have had important effects on the political psychology of China as a whole for the decades that followed. He closes his book with these sentences: "Finally, the most important impact of the wartime refugee experience on the history of modern China ... may be psychological. The scars on the national psyche are a deeply tragic legacy... In China the Great Anti-Japanese War produced a survivor mentality -- a kind of psychic numbness to violence and ability to endure oppression without protest -- that continued well after 1945 and possibly laid the groundwork for sullen acceptance of the horrors of the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s" (118).

(Another book worth reading in this general area is Poshek Fu's Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai, 1937-1945.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:42PM (-04:00)

China's inequalities

Sunday, June 28, 2009



China's Communist Revolution was founded upon the idea of equality. It was a basic principle of the early Communist Party that inequalities ought to be eradicated and the power and privilege of elite groups should be dismantled. Today in China the situation is very different. Farmers and rural people no longer have the support of the central state in their grievances against powerful forces — land

developers, factory owners, power companies. And economic and social inequalities have increased dramatically in China — inequalities between the rural population and the city population, between manual workers and professionals, between eastern-coastal regions and western regions (link). Small numbers of elites are able to capture wealth-creating opportunities; the separation between wealthy and poor widens; and often the political power of office permits self-aggrandizement within China's burgeoning economy. The situation of small farmers and of internal migrant factory workers is particularly bad, by all accounts; see Anita Chan, China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy.

Paradoxically, these facts about widening inequalities serve to point out something surprising: the sometimes narrow limits to the power of central state and party institutions -- a point that Vivienne Shue made in The Reach of the State Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic. Regional and local officials are often able to undertake actions and policies that are directly harmful to poor people and directly contrary to central policies — and the central government is unable to reign them in. There are some deliberate policy efforts from the central state to improve the conditions of rural people — as a class and as a region of disadvantaged population. But those policies have often had little effect; the benefits that were intended to redress inequalities wind up in the hands of more elite actors -- often private developers rather than public officials (link).

So how do Chinese people think about these facts — facts that are even more visible to them than to outsiders? Recent research seems to point out a generational difference with regards to the "sense of justice" that Chinese people bring to their perceptions of the society. Older people appear to have shaped a set of ideas about social justice under the Mao years that lead them to judge today's visible inequalities very unfavorably. Younger people seem to be more accepting of inequalities — if they are earned. What is most morally offensive to younger people seems to be the fact that privilege of position allows some people to do much better than others -- from access to education to access to high-paying jobs. Whether this is a function of corruption, cronyism, or the use of state and party power for personal gain — younger people seem to be very offended at these sorts of inequalities. Here is a Pew Global Attitudes Project survey released in July 2008; inequality and corruption rank high among sources of dissatisfaction in this survey. (C. K. Lee's pathbreaking work on the sociology of law and justice makes these points very clearly. See some of her related work in Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt; here is a link to a recent article by Lee on "rights activism in China".)

What should we think about China's social future if these sorts of inequalities of opportunity and outcome continue to widen? Several points are worth considering.

First, persistent deprivation and inequality is certainly a contributing cause of social contention. So China's current inability to redress these inequalities probably suggests a continuation of the pattern of social protest in China. (Tens of thousands of incidents of collective protest and resistance take place every year in China — and the rate appears to be rising; link.)

Second, the fact that China's state institutions haven't been able to regulate the local mechanisms of abuse of poor people (through property confiscations, for example) also suggests the likelihood of rising social contention. Confiscations are a leading cause of protest.

And third, a set of meaningful reforms in legal protections for all members of society, including secure property rights for farmers and labor rights for workers, would surely create an environment that is more acceptable to the younger people who are accepting of inequalities if they have arisen through processes that are procedurally fair and legitimate. So a more law-governed future for China, in which economic activity is regulated by a fair system of law, and a set of opportunities are available to make something like a level playing field, would appear to be the most sustainable course for China's leaders to attempt to achieve.

Interestingly, these are exactly the sorts of reforms that are front and center in the recent Charter '08 petition.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:36AM (-04:00)

Polanyi on the market

Wednesday, July 01, 2009



Karl Polanyi's The Great Transformation is a classic statement of a polar position in the issue of the universality of instrumental rationality and market institutions in explaining concrete historical circumstances in the recent and distant past. Polanyi maintains that the concept of economic rationality is a very specific historical construct that applies chiefly to the forms of market society that emerged in Western Europe in the early modern period. Market behavior came to replace other forms of motivation within European society in this period, and individuals came to act more and more on the basis of a calculation of self-interest. However, Polanyi holds that this form of behavior, like the economic institutions of the market within which it emerged, is highly specific to a particular time and place. To make use of this model of action as though it were a universal feature and determinant of human behavior is as unjustified as it would be to extend medieval chivalry to all times and places.

No society could, naturally, live for any length of time unless it possessed an economy of some sort; but previously to our time no economy has ever existed that, even in principle, was controlled by markets. . . . Gain and profit made on exchange never before played an important part in human economy. (Polanyi 1957:43)

While history and ethnography know of various kinds of economies, most of them comprising the institutions of markets, they know of no economy prior to our own, even approximately controlled and regulated by markets. . . . The role played by markets in the internal economy of the various countries . . . was insignificant up to recent times. (Polanyi 1957:44)
Against the idea that it is "natural" for men and women to be motivated primarily by self-interest, Polanyi writes:

For, if one conclusion stands out more clearly than another from the recent study of early societies it is the changelessness of man as a social being. His natural endowments reappear with a remarkable constancy in societies of all times and places; and the

necessary preconditions of the survival of human society appear to be immutably the same. (Polanyi 1957:46)

The outstanding discovery of recent historical and anthropological research is that man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end. Neither the process of production nor that of distribution is linked to specific economic interests attached to the possession of goods; but every single step in that process is geared to a number of social interests which eventually ensure that the required step be taken. . . . The economic system will be run on non-economic motives. (Polanyi 1957:46)

Thus Polanyi maintains that it is socially motivated behavior -- ªbehavior motivated toward the interests of one's family, clan, or village" -- rather than self-interested behavior that is "natural" for human beings; rational self-interest is rather a feature of a highly specific society: market society. Instead, Polanyi's account urges that the analysis pay primary attention to patterns of reciprocity and redistribution, shared values, traditions, and the determining role of community and politics. And he argues that virtually every society – traditional as well as modern – depends upon these sorts of social motivations.

In place of economic rationality and the market mechanism providing the basis for organization of the premarket economy, Polanyi argues that communitarian patterns of organization are to be found in a range of traditional societies:

The premium set on generosity is so great when measured in terms of social prestige as to make any other behavior than that of utter self-forgetfulness simply not pay. . . . The performance of all acts of exchange as free gifts that are expected to be reciprocated though not necessarily by the same individuals--a procedure minutely articulated and perfectly safeguarded by elaborate methods of publicity, by magic rites, and by the establishment of 'dualities' in which groups are linked in mutual obligations--should in itself explain the absence of the notion of gain or even of wealth other than that consisting of objects traditionally enhancing social prestige. . . . But how, then, is order in production and distribution ensured? . . . The answer is provided in the main by two principles of behavior not primarily associated with economics: reciprocity and redistribution. (Polanyi 1957:46-47)

Finally, Polanyi identifies the same element of materialist rationality in common among neoclassical political economists and Marx. Polanyi argues that Marxism analyzes the historical process in terms of individual self-interest, conceived largely in terms of material well-being.

There is the equally mistaken doctrine of the essentially economic nature of class interests. Though human society is naturally conditioned by economic factors, the motives of human individuals are only exceptionally determined by the needs of material want-satisfaction. That nineteenth century society was organized on the assumption that such a motivation could be made universal was a peculiarity of the age. It was therefore appropriate to allow a comparatively wide scope to the play of economic motives when analyzing that society. (Polanyi 1957:153)

All this should warn us against relying too much on the economic interests of given classes in the explanation of history. Such an approach would tacitly imply the givenness of those classes in a sense in which this is possible only in an indestructible society. (Polanyi 1957:155)

What kind of theory is this? And how should it be evaluated?

First, it is a hypothesis in historical sociology about institutions. Polanyi is asserting that history and ethnography provide a wealth of variety of fundamental economic and social institutions. Market institutions are historically specific -- there are periods of time in human history in which market institutions were barely present, and other periods in which they were essentially ubiquitous. And, though Polanyi doesn't do much with this, there is also the point that market institutions themselves show substantial variation across time and place. That said -- trade, artisanship, commodities, and production for the market appear to be activities that have very ancient roots in human societies. These kinds of economic exchanges are well documented in ancient China, Europe, and the Americas, and we can understand very well how they would emerge again and again out of ordinary human activity and interaction. So markets are surely not the nearly unique historical creation that Polanyi maintains them to be. Moreover, we can distinguish among "market" institutions (as Marx and Weber both do) according to whether they are organized around use or around accumulation; consumption or profit. (A neo-Polanyian might put forward a more limited claim: a market system aimed at accumulation is a historically recent institution.)

Second is a hypothesis about "human nature". Polanyi takes issue with a vulgar economism, according to which the most fundamental human motivation is rational self-interest. On the contrary, Polanyi maintains, this social psychology of "possessive individualism" (as C. B. Macpherson called it in The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke) is itself a very specific historical product -- not a permanent feature of human nature. In fact, Polanyi goes a step further and argues that the "social motivations" are more fundamental than rational self-interest. But here again, it seems likely that Polanyi puts his case much more absolutely than is justified. Being prudent and goal-directed -- paying attention to "costs" and "benefits" of various human activities -- is not simply a historical accident of the early modern period; it is a more or less permanent feature of the human species.

How should Polanyi's theory be assessed? There is an obvious risk of romanticizing human society that is implicit in Polanyi's reading of pre-modern societies -- expressing a moral preference for social cooperation and community, harmony and sharing, over competition, conflict, and self-striving. But romanticizing the past is not the same as understanding it factually and objectively. And it is my impression that anthropologists and historians would now be more inclined to find a mix of social and self-regarding motives in the contexts they study -- from contemporary Thai villages to the Greek polis to labor unions or environmental action groups. So Polanyi's black-and-white distinction between the past -- communitarian and social -- and the present -- egoistic and market-driven -- is too stark.

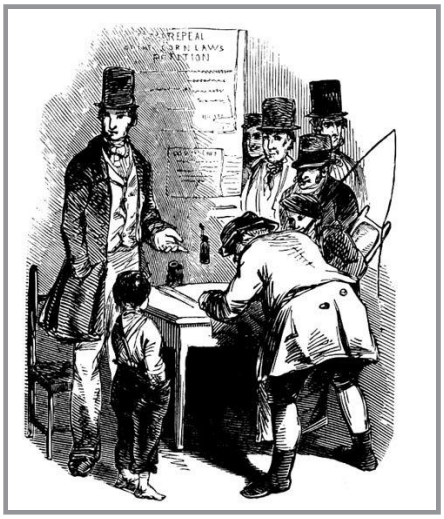
But at the same time, Polanyi's guiding intuition seems correct: human social behavior is influenced by more than simple self-interest, and human institutions are more varied than the vocabulary of the market would suggest. Human deliberativeness and purposiveness goes beyond maximizing rationality; it includes a broad range of "social" motivations and emotions. And a more adequate social psychology requires that we arrive at a better understanding of the motives that underlie cooperation and reciprocity. This is Amartya Sen's central conclusion in “Rational Fools" (link), and it is surely correct: "The purely rational economic man is indeed close to being a *social moron*”.

(The connection between Polanyi's theories and the terms of the moral economy debate

are evident (discussed in prior postings).)
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:08PM (-04:00)

Malthus blogging on the Corn Laws

Friday, July 03, 2009





I think that Thomas Malthus would have been very much at home in the blogosphere. He weighed in on the issues of the day, bringing careful logical analysis of economic theory to bear on the policy issues that were up for debate. And he was very interested in making the connection between economic principles and real empirical evidence. This is particularly true in his contributions to the debate on the Corn Laws in 1814 and 1815. Malthus authored pamphlets on these issues in 1814 ("Observations on the effects of the corn laws"; link) and 1815 ("Grounds of an opinion on the policy of restricting the importation of foreign corn"; link), and they repay scrutiny today; they are powerful instances of a very smart economist probing the theory and the facts surrounding a complex policy issue. (Here is a nice survey of Malthus's theories; link.)

The Corn Laws might be thought of as a form of "stimulus package" for the British economy in the early nineteenth century. By setting a high tariff on the import of wheat and other grains, Parliament aimed to protect the agricultural sector and to encourage the expansion of grain production to make Britain more independent from external grain providers. One might also compare the debate to the NAFTA debate or to policy deliberations in the 1960s concerning "import substitution" strategies. Opponents argued that removal of the tariffs would bring down the price of grain, a central component of the wage basket; this would help the poor and would also permit a significant reduction of the wage as well. So the issue divides the interests of land owners, industrialists, and the poor.
Malthus's position in the two essays is somewhat different. In the first article he promises to lay out the issue dispassionately, dispelling false opinions about what the effects of the proposed policy might be and diving into the advantages and disadvantages of the policy. He writes that "some important considerations have been neglected on both sides of the question, and the effects of the corn laws, and of a rise or fall in the price of corn, on the agriculture and general wealth of the state, have not yet been fully laid before the public." A bit further on, he writes:

My main object is to assist in affording the materials for a just and enlightened decision; and whatever that decision may be, to prevent disappointment, in the event of the effects

of the measure not being such as were previously contemplated. Nothing would tend so powerfully to bring the general principles of political economy into disrepute, and to prevent their spreading, as their being supported upon any occasion by reasoning, which constant and unequivocal experience should afterwards prove to be fallacious.

So--"let's do rigorous and systematic analysis based on the principles of political economy and our best understanding of the facts." Good advice for a policy debate.

Quite a bit of the analysis is devoted to refuting an idea that Malthus attributes to Adam Smith -- that "corn" is a unique commodity because increases and decreases in its price have no effect on agricultural production. The idea seems to be that the price of corn determines the wage and thereby determines all other prices in the economy; a small increase in the price of corn immediately causes an equal increase in the price of labor and all other prices. So corn is a "*numéraire*" to the whole economy; therefore the economy cannot be influenced by tariffs that alter the money price of corn. This is a notion that Malthus quickly and efficiently dispatches. Referring to the poverty studies of Frederick Morton Eden (1797) (whom Marx also relies on in the Grundrisse), Malthus examines the budget of the laboring poor and finds that only 40% of this budget is directly influenced by the price of grain. So the effect of the price of grain on the wage is only partial. (If we assume that the wage is at equilibrium when it equals the cost of the minimum wage basket, then an increase of 10% in the cost of the bread in the basket (40%) will have only 4% effect on the total cost of the wage basket.) Moreover, he points out that labor markets are different from many other commodity markets in the sense that it is not possible to quickly decrease the supply of labor; so the effect of changes in the price of corn will work only slowly into changes in the price of labor. "It is manifest therefore that the whole of the wages of labour can never rise and fall in proportion to the variations in the price of grain."

Second, on the production side, Malthus goes into quite a bit of detail in the micro-economics of farming: land quality, choice of crops, improvements of land, amount of hired labor and draft animals. And he demonstrates that an increase in the price of the crop will give a clear economic incentive to investors to expand and intensify agricultural production. so quantity responds to rising prices. Higher prices => higher profits => rational incentive to invest more capital in expanded production. In short, the Smithian idea that "corn is unique" is untenable.

The central "general principles" of political economy that Malthus attributes to Smith -- and which he endorses himself -- are essentially these: that the price of a good varies over time according to fluctuations in supply and demand; that the quantity of a good increases when producers have a price-based incentive to invest more capital in its production (and vice versa); and that capital will flow across productive uses in such a way as to bring about an equal rate of profit across sectors and industries. Malthus argues that the idea that corn is a unique commodity directly contradicts these principles. "Corn is subjected to the same laws as other commodities, and the difference between them is by no means so great as stated by Dr Smith."

This conclusion has a direct relevance to the topic of the corn laws. Malthus hereby concludes that a tariff or other restriction on imported grain will in fact have the effect of stimulating additional domestic production. So Britain's grain production would increase under this set of laws. However, here Malthus makes a point about Britain's agricultural potential and the density of its population:

On the whole then considering the present accumulation of manufacturing population in this country, compared with any other in Europe, the expenses attending enclosures, the price of labour and the weight of taxes, few things seem less probable, than that Great Britain should naturally grow an independent supply of corn.
So food self-sufficiency is impossible for Britain (in 1814!). Moreover, there is a Malthusian demographic consequence of free trade in grain that Malthus directly recognizes:

As one of the evils therefore attending the throwing open our ports, it may be stated, that if the stimulus to population, from the cheapness of grain, should in the course of twenty or twenty five years reduce the earnings of the labourer to the same quantity of corn as at present, at the same price as in the rest of Europe, the condition of the lower classes of people in this country would be deteriorated.
Malthus explicitly avoids coming to a conclusion of the overall advisability of the corn laws in this essay; but it is hard not to feel that the balance of arguments here appear to favor "open ports" -- no tariffs or restrictions on the import of grain.

So it is surprising to turn to the second essay, less than a year later ("Grounds of an opinion"), because here he lays out a specific argument in favor of the tariffs. He offers as a central reason for this conclusion the fact that protection will stimulate more agricultural production which will make Britain more nearly grain-sufficient. The argument turns less on economic principles and more on the predicted behavior of grain-producing nations such as France in times of dearth. Recent historical experience demonstrated to Malthus that countries will limit their exports of grain at times when the supply is short and prices are high; but this is precisely when Britain would need to continue to have unfettered access to foreign grain markets. In effect, we might read the first essay as creating the argument in principle for free trade in grain, and the second essay as an argument based on the specific historical facts of international trade that make the free trade policy unwise. Here is how Malthus tries to reconcile theory and empirical experience:

I am very far indeed from meaning to insinuate, that if we cannot have the most perfect freedom of trade, we should have none; or that a great nation must immediately alter its commercial policy, whenever any of the countries with which it deals passes laws inconsistent with the principles of freedom. But I protest most entirely against the doctrine, that we are to pursue our general principles without ever looking to see if they are applicable to the case before us; and that in politics and political economy, we are to go straight forward, as we certainly ought to do in morals, without any reference to the conduct and proceedings of others.
It is interesting to observe that Malthus refers on more than one occasion to the effect that a proposed policy will have on the condition of the poor; he affirms that it would be decisive in favor of free trade in grain if it could be shown that this would improve the standard of living of the poor.

If I were convinced, that to open our ports, would be permanently to improve the conditions of the labouring classes of society, I should consider the question as at once determined in favour of such a measure. But I own it appears to me, after the most deliberate attention to the subject, that it will be attended with effects very different from those of improvement.
However, he believes he can show that this is not the case. (The passage quoted above, for example, follows a line of argument something like this: cheaper food => larger families => more competition for work => lower wages.) Moreover, free trade in grain would have the effect of rapidly reducing British agricultural production, and expelling

more thousands of agricultural workers from the farm economy. But industrial labor is unlikely to increase sufficiently to absorb this influx in the medium term:

Our commerce and manufactures, therefore, must increase very considerably before they can restore the demand for labour already lost; for a moderate increase beyond this will scarcely make up the disadvantage of a low money price of wages.

Malthus offers something of a paean to the positive effects of industrialization that is worth quoting from "Observations":

Yet, though the condition of the individual employed in common manufacturing labour is not by any means desirable, most of the effects of manufactures and commerce on the general state of society are in the highest degree beneficial. They infuse fresh life and activity into all classes of the state, afford opportunities for the inferior orders to rise by personal merit and exertion, and stimulate the higher orders to depend for distinction upon other grounds than mere rank and riches. They excite invention, encourage science and the useful arts, spread intelligence and spirit, inspire a taste for conveniences and comforts among the labouring classes; and , above all, give a new and happier structure to society, by increasing the proportion of the middle classes, that body on which the liberty, public spirit, and good government of every country must mainly depend. If we compare such a state of society with a state merely agricultural, the general superiority of the former is incontestable.

Who says economics is the dismal science?
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:42PM (-04:00)

News from Kachin State, Burma

Sunday, July 05, 2009



Map: Kachin State, northern Burma

In an earlier post I initiated a geo-twitter experiment to see how much it is possible to learn from twitter about a complicated issue. My twitter feed serves as a sort of selective (and non-expert) news feed for Southeast Asia. It selectively aggregates tweets that show up through searches of Twitter on Burma, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia (as well as related items -- Kachin, Karen Burma, ...). I also add tweets based on news stories I come across in newspapers and web news sources from the region. The idea is to select a number of the news items that reference these parts of Southeast Asia in the twitter fire hose and see whether they begin to add up to an intelligible picture. Southeast Asia doesn't get extensive coverage in the western press, and using twitter appears to be a way to get a more detailed understanding of what is going on.

Part of this experiment is a Google map that locates as many of these items as possible on a master map. The idea was that a spatial display of the news feed would help to give some shape to some of the main social, cultural, and military events going on in the region. When you look at the map, you'll see that the news items fall into a handful of





large clusters. (The map has had a surprising number of visitors -- over 6,000 visits in three weeks.)

In Burma there are basically three clusters on the map right now: news on the ethnic armies in the Kachin/Shan provinces in the north; news on the Burmese army offensive against Karen independence forces on the Burma-Thai border (and the refugees and displaced persons who have been created); and news of the government's corruption and brutality as well as the trial of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Here I'm going to focus on one cluster -- the Kachin region in north Burma -- and simply reproduce the items that have come through in the past month. Here are the posts that are tagged on the map of north Burma above. Does this begin to give a somewhat coherent view of what is happening in this part of Burma?

1. Burmese Army conduct in Kachin | (5/7/09) There is a culture prevalent in Nong Mong (Naw Mung in Kachin) city in Putao district in Kachin State, northern Burma where high ranking Burmese military officers marry native Kachin woman and later abandon them and their children, a source said." link
2. Ethnic Groups in Myanmar Hope for Peace, but Gird for Fight |(18/06/09) New York Times LAIZA, Myanmar — The Kachin tribesmen who inhabit the hills along Myanmar's border with China have a reputation as stealthy jungle warriors, famous for repelling Japanese attacks in the Second World War with booby traps and instilling terror by slicing off ears to tally their kills. Now, as they have many times in their war-scarred history, the Kachin are hoping for peace but are prepared for battle with Myanmar's central government. "Whether or not there will be war again, we have to be ready," Maj. Zauja Nhkri, the head of an officer's training school that is part of the Kachin Independence Army, which has around 4,000 men under arms."If our army is strong, we can maintain the peace." As Myanmar's military government prepares to adopt a new and disputed Constitution next year, a fragile patchwork of cease-fire agreements between the central government and more than a dozen armed ethnic groups is fraying. link
3. Edmund Leach, Ethnography of Kachin | Edmund Leach -- Political Systems of Highland Burma -- A Study of Kachin Social Structure (1954) link
4. Junta to resettle 200,000 Burmans in Hukawng Valley | (17/06/09) KachinNews The Burmese military junta plans to resettle 200,000 Burman people in ethnic Kachin's Hukawng Valley (also called Hugawng in Kachin) in the country's northern Kachin State before 2010, said regime insiders. The new Burman settlers, who make up the majority of the country's population, will be mainly settled in areas close to three Kachin villages known as Nawng Mi, Sahtu Zup and Wara Zup on the Ledo or Stilwell Road also called Burma Road during WW II,

added insiders. In the guise of Rangoon-based Yuzana Company's crop plantation in the Valley, only Burman people from different areas of lower Burma have been resettled in the Valley since late 2006, said native Kachins from the Valley. link

5. Getting news out of Burma's more remote corners | (11/06/09) New Mandala: Rejecting and accepting headlines up at Laiza -- "Getting news out of Burma's more remote corners — such as the Kachin Independence Army/Organisation headquarters at Laiza — can be a difficult job at the best of times. When there is inherent, and perhaps even deliberate, ambiguity thrown into the mix it is almost impossible." link
6. Inside the Kachin Independence Army | (22/01/09) PulitzerCenter: Inside the Kachin Independence Army (youtube video) link
7. KIO in preparation mode, refurbishing armed wing | (17/06/09) New Delhi (Mizzima) The ethnic Kachin resistance group – Kachin Independence Organisation is refurbishing its military in what appears to be preparation for an impending war with the Burmese Army. Sources on the Sino-Burma border area said, the KIO off late has been re-grouping the members of its armed wing - the Kachin Independence Army and is recruiting new members. Awng Wa, Chairman of the Kachin Development Networking Group (KDNG) working in Kachin state told Mizzima that he has witnessed KIA cadres retreating into their forest camps and beefing up security around their areas of control. He said, the KIA is also calling back its old members and recruiting new cadres and is vigorously providing trainings to younger batches. link
8. KIO campaigns against Burma junta over 'known-result' | (25/06/09) The 'Known-Result' --- where the people of Kachin State have rejected the Burmese junta's proposal of transforming the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the armed-ring of KIO into a battalion of 'Border Guard Force' is being widely spread in a campaign by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), one of largest ethnic ceasefire groups in the country. The special campaign has been launched by the KIO to explain the pressure by the junta on the KIA to transform at both the organizational level and among the Kachin public in Kachin State and Northeast Shan State since early this month, said KIO leaders. link
9. KIO wants KIA to be "State Security Force" | (25/06/09) The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), one of strongest ethnic ceasefire groups in military-ruled Burma would rather transform its armed-wing to a "State Security Force" rather than a "Border Guard Force" it has told the junta, said KIO sources. The KIO has officially informed the junta of its willingness to transform the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) to a "State Security Force" (SSF) instead of the junta's proposal that it be changed to a battalion of a "Border Guard Force" when the two sides met at Mali Hka Center in the junta's Northern Command headquarters in Kachin State's capital Myitkyina on June 21 (Sunday), said KIO leaders. link
10. A land the world forgot: A photojournalist sneaks into Myanmar to report on the Kachin freedom movement | (18/06/09) NewsReview.com The car came to an abrupt stop. "Get out," the driver said. My friend and partner in journalism Tim Patterson and I stumbled in the moonless night through an uneven, bulldozed field toward the sound of a river. When we reached the river, we crossed a creaky bamboo footbridge and scrambled up a loose-dirt hill to an older SUV with its lights off. "Welcome to Free Kachin," our contact said, smiling broadly. link
11. Burmese junta allows felling of 100,000 tons of timber | (8/06/09) Burmese junta allows felling of 100,000 tons of timber per company per year link link
12. Kachin Schoolchildren Beaten And Hospitalised By Burmese Army | (17/06/09) Burma Campaign Around 15 schoolchildren and young men have been beaten,

and some hospitalised, after Burmese Army soldiers went on a rampage through Mayan village in Kachin State, Burma. According to Burma Campaign UK sources, the attacks happened after youths in the village prevented soldiers from gang-raping a 17 year old girl. On the morning of 31st May a young man in the village, Lasaw Naw, was brutally beaten by a group of army soldiers in an unprovoked attack. link

13. Kachin youths assaulted and detained for preventing rape by Burmese soldiers | (10/06/09) [Kachin News] Kachin youths assaulted and detained for preventing rape by Burmese soldiers: Many... link
14. Kachin Recruiting Drive Launched as Tension Mounts | (17/06/09) The military wing of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is recruiting former soldiers as tension builds over the Burmese regime's instruction to ceasefire groups to reassign their troops as border guards. A Kachin military source said the recruitment drive by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was to heighten the force's preparedness. "We are alert and ready to open fire if our leaders order it," he said. link
15. Burmese army bases in Kachin |(23/2/07) New Mandala: "Over at *Hugawng Kachin*, there is a useful little post with comparative maps of the Burmese army battalions based in the Kachin State in 2006 and 1994 (when the Kachin Independence Organization ceasefire was signed). In 1994 there were 26 battalions located mainly near Myitkyina and along the north-south trunk route through the southern part of the State. Now there are 41 battalions based in the State with a proliferation of smaller outposts at strategic points from Hpakant to Sadung. Anybody who has recently driven on the road between Myitkyina and Bhamo will have seen the number of relatively new bases north of Bhamo. These are all clearly marked on the 2006 map." link
16. Three Kachin peace groups give into junta | (29/06/09) Three Kachin ceasefire groups in northern Burma last week, gave into the demands of the Burmese military junta of transforming their armed-wings into the kind of forces that the regime wants, said sources close to the groups. The New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K), the Lasang Awng Wa Peace Group in Kachin State and the Kachin Defense Army (KDA) in northeast Shan State agreed to transform their armed-forces to a Border Guard Force or local militia, said sources in the three outfits. link
17. Burmese military Junta allots large tracts of virgin land to senior KIO leaders | (10/6/09) The Burmese military junta allots large tracts of virgin land to senior KIO leaders: The Burmese military junta has allotted thousands of acres of vacant-virgin land this year to senior leaders of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), one of largest ethnic ceasefire groups in the country, said local sources link
18. KIO accepts junta's idea of transformation of armed-wing | (9/06/09) [KachinNews] KIO accepts junta's idea of transformation of armed-wing link
19. Forest ranger assaulted by soldiers over sharing bribe | (13/6/09) [Kachin] Forest ranger assaulted by soldiers over sharing bribe: (corruption, logging) text
20. KIA lance-corporal disappears on way home | (28/06/09) Lance-corporal So Ba Du of the Special Gorkha Squandron of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) disappeared while returning home from the squandron base in Laiza headquarters to Myitkyina in Burma's northern Kachin State on June 7, said KIA sources. The incident comes at a time of mounting military tension between Burma's ruling junta and the KIA after the latter was pressurized to transform to a battalion of the Border Guard Force (BGF) by the regime. link
21. Junta rakes in 1,000 million Kyat from auction of seized cars | (25/06/09) The Burmese military junta has earned a whopping net profit of over 1,000 million Kyat

(an estimated over US $909,091) from its biggest auction ever of seized cars in Myitkyina, the capital of the country's northern Kachin State. The revenue was raked in, in a matter of days, local sources said. Hundreds of car dealers, brokers, businessmen and the rich, mainly from Rangoon and Mandalay dropped in at the car auction venues in the Kachin State Football Stadium and the Burmese Army compound of the No. 37 Infantry Battalion in Myitkyina in the 2nd week of this June, said local residents. link

22. Iron ore mine could destroy 7000 in Shan state of Myanmar | (2/07/09) Burma Newscasts reported that Russian and Italian engineering companies are reported to be involved in the development of a huge iron ore mine in Burma's eastern Shan state that campaigners say could displace more than 7,000 homes. The already volatile Shan state is home to Burma's second largest iron ore deposit, on the site of Mount Pinpet. Excavation of the site began in 2004, and work includes the conversion of around 11,000 acres of surrounding land for construction of a cement factory and iron processing plant. The Pa-O Youth Organization in a report released said that more than 25 villages' home to around 7000 mainly ethnic Pa-O people could be destroyed by the Pinpet Mining Project. link
23. Surprise addition in KIO delegation negotiating with junta |(6/07/09) In a surprise addition to its seven-member delegation, negotiating with the Burmese ruling junta, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) has included its Western Regional Commander. The inclusion comes at a time when there is gradual escalation of tension between the KIO and the military regime, KIO sources said. A KIO delegation was constituted last month to negotiate with the junta on the proposal regarding the transformation of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the armed-wing of KIO. Col. Lahpai Zau Raw, 4th Brigade Commander (B.C) and the KIO's Chairman of the Western Regional Committee based in Northeast Shan State was included in the KIO delegation on June 27. Now there will be eight delegates, said sources close to the KIO headquarters in Laiza on the Sino-Burma border in Kachin State. link
24. Junta deploys fresh troops secretly in Kachin State | (25/06/09) The Burmese military junta is secretly deploying more combat troops in Kachin State at a time when negotiations are on with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) over the transformation of its armed-wing into a battalion of a "Border Guard Force", said local sources. As of the second week of June, able soldiers have been selected from different battalions and secretly infused into local Burmese Army battalions and military bases in the frontlines in different regions of Kachin State by the instruction of Lt-Gen Ye Myint of Chief of Military Affairs Security of the junta. They include two unidentified Light Infantry Divisions, said a source close to Burmese troops. link
25. Junta bans construction of 'Manau Poles' in Bhamo | (2/07/09) In a fresh ban, the Burmese military junta has prohibited the construction of 'Manau Poles' – a mark of ethnic Kachin culture in Bhamo in the country's northern Kachin State, said local sources. Kachin residents in Bhamo told KNG, that Kachin 'Manau Poles' were banned from being constructed in June on the orders of the junta's Northern Regional (or Kachin State) Commander Brig-Gen Soe Win. link

These two dozen items raise several related story lines: the persistence of ethnic identities and independence movements in several parts of Burma; the persistence and military significance of the Kachin Independence Army / Kachin Independence Organization; the brutal behavior of the Burmese army around its bases in Kachin and Shan states; the corrupt exploitation of resources by the junta; and the ongoing negotiation between the Burmese junta and leaders of the KIO over the Burmese demand that KIA transform itself into a border control unit under control of the Burmese

army.

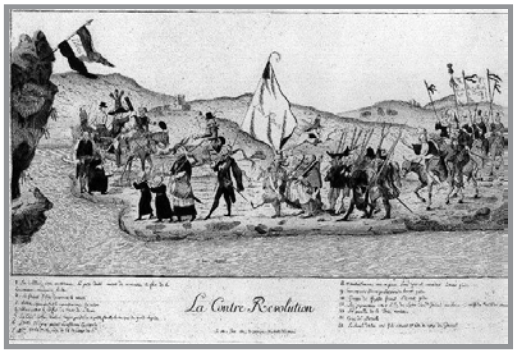
So it seems as though the experiment is at least somewhat successful: there is enough content in the twitter feed to provide a basis for beginning to see some of the lineaments of the current social and military situation in Kachin State. It's a different kind of exposure from what commentators have discussed so widely about twitter in Tehran -- almost none of these items come from local participants. Instead, they are postings by interested observers who are reading expatriate web sites, blogs like New Mandala that attract academic experts on Southeast Asia, news sources like Kachin News and The Irrawaddy that specialize in the region, and twitter contributors such as kambodscha, jonfernquest, and andrewspooner who have long experience and knowledge of Cambodia and Thailand. But when you mash it all together, you get a remarkably nuanced picture of the current social reality. And there are surprises as well -- for example, after two weeks of dozens of items on the Burmese army's assault on Karen camps on the Thai border, that issue has gone silent.

(If you absolutely insist on more traditional sources of knowledge, here are two books separated by about sixty years that shed light on Kachin society and politics: Edmund Leach, Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure and David Steinberg, Burma: The State of Myanmar.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:44PM (-04:00)

Ontology of the French Revolution

Wednesday, July 08, 2009



How does the historian need to think as he or she formulates a discursive representation of a complex period of history? What assumptions does the historian make about the structures and entities that make up the social world? And what sorts of conceptual systems are needed in order to permit the historian to do his or her work of analysis, comparison, and explanation? These questions lead us to a philosophical version of the problem: what forms of ontology do historians employ in analyzing history?

Consider a concrete and familiar example of historical conceptualization: historians confronting the realities of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799. What are the historical entities to which historians need to refer in constructing a history of these events? Consider, to start, Albert Soboul's construction of the making and carrying out of the French Revolution (A Short History of the French Revolution, 1789-1799 and The French Revolution 1787-1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon).

Soboul begins his short history with a chronology of "principal events" – roughly 150 events from February 1787 to November 1789. He refers to happenings at a variety of levels of scale in this chronology, from actions by a small number of individuals to events encompassing hundreds of thousands over a dispersed geography. Here is a partial list:



Assembly of the Notables, Calonne dismissed, abortive reform of Parlements, “Day of the Tiles” in Grenoble, rural and urban unrest increases, riot in the Baubourg St.-Antoine, fall of the Bastille, The Great Fear, Assembly moves to Paris from Versailles, Church lands nationalized, mutiny and repression of garrison at Nancy, Louis XVI’s attempted flight from the country, foundation of the Feuillants Club, massacre of the Champ de Mars, mounting unrest caused by food prices, uprising at Paris overthrows the Monarchy, massacre of prisoners in Paris, execution of Louis XVI, murder of Marat ...

... and so on through crowd violence, state action, military movements, rise and fall of revolutionary leaders, political factions, ideologies, and bloodshed.

Some of these items are events in a specific time and place enacted by a small group of people (mutiny, storming of the Bastille); others are regionally diffuse collections of such local actions (the Great Fear, for example); and others are actions of officials, leaders, and generals. So clearly Soboul’s historical ontology includes “events”, which perhaps we can define as “actions by individuals and groups, both large and small.” (This definition captures most but not all the items in Soboul’s chronology.)

What about social entities beyond the level of actions by individuals? Here are some of the sorts of higher-level structures to which Soboul refers in his account: the Revolution itself, as a thing that exists in history, has causes, and has a “nature”; but also a larger category within which the French Revolution is one instance – "revolution". He refers to earlier social orders (the seigneurial system and the privileged orders of feudal society); a new social order (liberal democracy, bourgeois economy); large historical structures such as feudalism and capitalism; and a specific category of revolution (bourgeois revolution). Several of these concepts fall in the general category of a “type of social and economic organization” – what Marx refers to as a “mode of production.” (Here is Soboul’s paraphrase of the idea of feudalism: “a concept of social and economic history, defined by a particular form of property ownership and by a system of production based on landed property, preceding the modern system of capitalist production” ((Soboul 1977) : 3).)

He refers to different forms of the social management of labor (corvée labor, slave labor). He refers to specific periods of governance in French history – for example, the Capetian monarchy; and he refers to a type of governance – the absolutist monarchy. He refers to classes – the bourgeoisie, the landlord class, the peasant class. It is apparent that Soboul’s historical ontology incorporates large stretches of Marx’s social theory of the structures that constitute society: forces and relations of production, property systems, modes of production, superstructures such as the state and the church.

There is also an ontology of social institutions in Soboul's writing about the Revolution. He refers to subordinate social organizations within existing society – the officer corps, the Church. He refers to economic and demographic processes – population increase, trends of price movements for grain. He refers to features of political consciousness on the part of various social actors – hopes, fears, revolutionary spontaneity (38). And he refers to political groups and clubs – the Girondins (“spokesmen of the commercial

bourgeoisie"; 87), Montagnards and Jacobins (bourgeois but appealing to common people; 88), and Sans-Culottes (the organized representatives of the common people; 100).

So Soboul's historical vocabulary is a rich one, in that he refers to historical things and structures at a variety of levels. We might paraphrase Soboul's historical ontology in these terms: the French populace of the 1770s consisted of a geographically dispersed collection of persons enmeshed social, economic, and political structures. The circumstances of life and opportunity created for different people by these structures in turn defined them as "classes" with interests and motivations. Peasants, artisans, landowners, lawyers, and government officials had very different views of the social world, and their political behavior was accordingly different as well. The political struggles that constituted the turmoil of the years of revolution derived from contests over power among different groups of people, mobilized by different organizations with different social, economic, and political interests.

In other words, Soboul works with a "proto-theory" of what a society is, how it works, and how individuals are influenced in their ordinary conduct; within the context of this scheme, the task of the historian is to discover some of the specific features of those social relations and features of consciousness, and explain the small and large events that combined to bring about "the Revolution".

Combining the results of a similar survey of a number of historians -- de Tocqueville, Soboul, Schama, Darnton, Cobb, Sewell, Tilly, and others -- we can arrive at something like an inventory of ontological concepts of the French Revolution – events, individuals, structures, mentalities, processes, conditions, patterns, and technologies. These categories of historical "things" encompass what begins to look like a comprehensive list of the types of entities to which historians refer when conceptualizing France's revolution. Or in other words: it is possible for us as readers of these historians to sketch out a large historical ontology, from which different historians borrow in varying proportions in their analysis of the events of the late eighteenth century in France.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:51PM (-04:00)

Opaque Burma

Saturday, July 11, 2009



It is striking how ignorant we are about the most basic facts about Burma. I don't mean simply that the western public is poorly informed; I mean that a lot of the basic facts about contemporary Burma are simply unknown, to scholars, journalists, and other expert observers. The experts don't know what is going on in Burma, in quite a few important areas of life.

Take the junta itself. How does it work as a government? how does information get collected, how do goals get set, how are policies arrived at, and how are policies implemented over the expanse of control that the Burmese army exercises? It seems that there is very little factual knowledge about these very basic questions. The general impression that the media present of the Burmese military is that it is reclusive, corrupt,

and irrational. The first two features are probably true; but "irrational" is a bit hard to reconcile with the fact that the army has successfully preserved its rule for decades. And there appear to be relatively clear strategies in place for controlling the armed ethnic populations and for securing economic development relationships with China and other non-western states. (This is where the corruption comes in; the army appears to use its control of Burma's natural resources for its own benefit and the benefit of its allies in the ethnic organizations.) We hear a lot about the junta's war with Aung San Suu Kyi, but very little about other aspects of its organization and behavior.

Or take everyday life in villages and towns in peripheral states. What is ordinary life like in the countryside? How visible is the central government and the Burmese army? What state or municipal entities provide services and collect taxes? How do people earn their livings? What is the state of public health in rural areas? What organizations and community-based groups are active?

Or consider the realities of the ethnic armies; how do the Kachin or the Karen armies preserve their organization and mobilization over time? What is the infrastructure that provides supplies, weapons, and money? How are young people recruited into these movements? What are the strategies and motives that guide decisions -- whether to continue the cease-fire or return to active armed conflict?

Or consider, finally, the circumstances of the monks' rebellion of 2007. Where are the detailed studies of this uprising in terms of motivations of participants, organization, mobilization strategies, and repression?

I suppose the explanation for this level of ignorance is fairly obvious: Burma is essentially closed to outside scholars and journalists, so it is difficult to impossible to do social-science fieldwork in Burma today. The observers who are able to gain a snapshot of insight are mainly occasional travelers and writers who manage to make their way to remote and often dangerous places. And organized social-science research is difficult or impossible to carry out under these circumstances. And there is very little by way of independent journalism within Burma -- we are dependent on emigree services that do their best to provide some of the news from the periphery. (It would appear that the situation of research in Burma is orders of magnitude more limited than in Thailand or Malaysia.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:54AM (-04:00)

Schama's revolution

Monday, July 13, 2009

Quite a number of previous posts have focused on historical cognition: how does the historian conceptualize a complex bit of history? Let's reflect a bit on Simon Schama's conceptualization of the history of the French Revolution in Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution (1989). Schama is a highly original thinker when it comes to conceptualizing history -- witness his motif of landscapes as a way of thematizing swatches of European history (Landscape And Memory), or his crossing of history and fiction in Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations. So what is distinctive about his history of the French Revolution?

To begin, his history breaks radically from earlier approaches to the Revolution. Schama distances his account from both materialist accounts like that of Albert Soboul (The



French Revolution 1787-1799) and more orthodox approaches such as that of de Tocqueville (The Old Regime and the French Revolution). Schama doubts the reality of large, impersonal historical forces; he doubts the historical reality of the concept of great classes in society; and he focuses instead on the thoughts and actions, often barely rational, of the individuals great and small who contributed to the period. He puts several of these points very clearly in the introduction:

> The 'bourgeoisie' said in the classic Marxist accounts to have been the authors and beneficiaries of the event have become social zombies, the product of historiographical obsessions rather than historical realities.... Continuities seem as marked as discontinuities. Nor does the Revolution seem any longer to conform to a grand historical design, preordained by inexorable forces of social change. Instead it seems a thing of contingencies and unforeseen consequences (not least the summoning of the Estates-General itself). (xiv)

Schama resists the totalizing impulses of other narratives, the intellectual tendency to characterize the Revolution in the most general and comprehensive terms. For Schama, the grand locales (France, Paris, and the countryside) and great actors (monarchy, bourgeoisie, peasantry) are less important than the "local passion and interests" of the regions, provinces, and villages. The upshot of this preference is clear: rather than aggregating the events of the period into a single grand process of Revolution, Schama emphasizes the separateness and particularity of the component processes and local realities. In the extreme: France did not have a revolution, but instead the territory encompassed a number of parallel social and economic processes in different places, experienced differently by individuals in those places. (But of course this strategy of disaggregation can be applied at each lower level as well: instead of a "counter-revolution" in the Vendée, there were actions, church-burnings, massacres, and other kinds of organized violence in the various villages and towns of the region.)

It is also worth pointing out that the sorts of events that Schama pays attention in the book to are very different from those highlighted by Soboul and de Tocqueville. Schama focuses on things like commemorations, ceremonial elephants, public memories, and bits of architecture. It is the particular but revealing element or action that Schama finds most interesting. He pays attention to philosophy, theatre, the Comédie-Française, paintings, leaders (potted and sane), and extravagant events (the lofting of a balloon by Etienne Montgolfier to a crowd of 100,000 comes in for a few paragraphs). And he is uninterested in constructing a logical narrative according to which events A, B, and C are constitutive of the Revolution, and this event led to that event, which led in turn to the final event.

So Schama's ontology consists of actors, cultural meanings, shifting circumstances, and contingent outcomes. He gives little attention to "structures," organizations, and forces of history, and pays much more attention to the individuals whose states of mind and action constituted the period of violence and upheaval we refer to as the "French Revolution." It is a sort of cultural commentary on the moments of the time period – rather than a sustained effort to make sense of it all, to provide an explanation in terms of causes, classes, or structures. In fact, the Revolution as an integrated event largely disappears

from his account, in place of a congeries of happenings and productions.

The overall impression of this approach to historical analysis is that it amounts to a "deconstruction" of the Revolution in favor of a large number of interesting and contingent but inherently lesser processes and events. Schama dissolves the Revolution as a grand historical event, and uses the noun simply as a handy label in terms of which to refer to a heterogeneous and sometimes disparate and confusing series of processes.

It is a fair question to ask, what precisely does Schama's account allow us to do? What intellectual insights does the reader gain? What kind of historical question is it intended to answer?

Citizens certainly doesn't amount to an explanation of the events of the French Revolution, if by that we mean a narrative that identifies specific causes that brought about the outcome. In fact, it is hard to find examples of causal reasoning or causal attribution in the book at all. So causal explanation, based on discovery of large social structures and forces, is not the goal of the book.

Further, it doesn't seem to try to answer a question about the coherence of the period: "How did these events hang together?", since quite a bit of the narrative is intended to demonstrate precisely how incongruous were many of the various events, symbols, and actions. So the book isn't intended to let the reader say to himself or herself, "So that's what it was all about; that's the kind of thing the French Revolution was." The book certainly doesn't attempt to boil the Revolution down to a few simple formulas.

Somewhat more persuasive is the idea that perhaps it is intended as a work of cultural interpretation, more analogous to art criticism than to orderly, logical story-telling. Here the historian undertakes to locate a few specific moments and artifacts that bring to light some of the features of mentality of the participants within the tangled skein of actions. (This would bring it into a parallel with Darnton's history of the Great Cat Massacre -- interpretive ethnography of the moment rather than causal explanation of a large historical event (link).)

But finally, maybe the aim is more radical than any of these possibilities. Maybe Schama is interested most fundamentally in leading the reader to think very differently about the task of the historian and the content of historical knowledge. (This seems to be the goal of others of Schama's books -- for example, Dead Certainties with its pointed skepticism about fact-based narratives.) Maybe Schama's most basic point is ontological: there is no such thing as coherent, logical, orderly, causally structured human history. Instead, all there is, is a congregation of separate threads, processes, contingencies, actions, choices, ideologies, and freakish accidents that ultimately do not add up to a coherent whole.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:43PM (-04:00)

MacIntyre and Taylor on the human sciences

Thursday, July 16, 2009

There is a conception of social explanation that provides a common starting point for quite a few theories and approaches in a range of the social sciences. I'll call it the "rational, material, structural" paradigm. It looks at the task of social science as the discovery of explanations of social outcomes; and it brings an intellectual framework of



purposive rationality, material social factors, and social structures exercising causal influence on individuals as the foundation of social explanation. Rational choice theory, Marxian economics, historical sociology, and the new institutionalism can each be described in roughly these terms: show how a given set of outcomes are the result of purposive choices by individuals within a given set of material and structural circumstances. These approaches depend on a highly abstracted description of human agency, with little attention to deep and important differences in agency across social, cultural, and historical settings. "Agents like these, in structures like those, produce outcomes like these." This is a powerful and compelling approach; so it is all the more important to recognize that there are other possible starting points for the social sciences.

In fact, this approach to social explanation stands in broad opposition to another important approach, the interpretivist approach. On the interpretive approach, the task of the human sciences is to understand human activities, actions, and social formations as unique historical expressions of human meaning and intention. Individuals are unique, and there are profound differences of mentality across historical settings. This "hermeneutic" approach is not interested in discovering causes of social outcomes, but instead in piecing together an interpretation of the meanings of a social outcome or production. This contrast between causal explanation and hermeneutic interpretation ultimately constitutes a major divide between styles of social thinking. (Yvonne Sherratt provides a very fine introduction to this approach; Continental Philosophy of Social Science.) Max Ringer, one of Weber's most insightful intellectual biographers, places this break at the center of Weber's development in the early twentieth century (Max Weber's Methodology: The Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences). (See earlier discussions of two strands of thought in the philosophy of social science; link, link, link.)

On this approach, all social action is framed by a meaningful social world. To understand, explain, or predict patterns of human behavior, we must first penetrate the social world of the individual in historical concreteness: the meanings he/she attributes to her environment (social and natural); the values and goals she possesses; the choices she perceives; and the way she interprets other individuals' social action. Only then will we be able to analyze, interpret, and explain her behavior. But now the individual's action is thickly described in terms of the meanings, values, assumptions, and interpretive principles she employs in her own understanding of her world.

Most of the arguments in support of interpretive approaches to the human sciences have come from the continental tradition -- Dilthey, Ricoeur, Gadamer, Habermas. So let's consider two philosophers who have made original contributions to the historicist and interpretivist side of the debate, within the Anglo-American tradition. Consider first Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of the possibility of comparative theories of politics ("Is a science of comparative politics possible?" in Alan Ryan, ed., The Philosophy of Social Explanation). MacIntyre poses the problem in these terms: "I shall be solely interested in the project of a political science, of the formulation of cross cultural, law-like causal generalizations which may in turn be explained by theories" (172). And roughly, MacIntyre's answer is that a science of comparative politics is not possible, because actions, structures, and practices are not directly comparable across historical settings.

The Fiat strike pictured above is similar in some ways to a strike against General Motors or Land Rover in different times and places; but the political cultures, symbolic understandings, and modes of behavior of Italian, American, and British auto workers are profoundly different.

MacIntyre places great emphasis on the densely interlinked quality of local concepts, social practices, norms, and self ascriptions, with the implication that each practice or attitude is inextricably dependent on an ensemble of practices, beliefs, norms, concepts, and the like that are culturally specific and, in their aggregate, unique. Thus MacIntyre holds that as simple a question as this: "Do Britons and Italians differ in the level of pride they take in civic institutions?" is unanswerable because of cultural differences in the concept of pride (172-73).

Hence we cannot hope to compare an Italian's attitude to his government's acts with an Englishman's in respect of the pride each takes; any comparison would have to begin from the different range of virtues and emotions incorporated in the different social institutions. Once again the project of comparing attitudes independently of institutions and practices encounters difficulties. (173-74)

These points pertain to difficulties in identifying political attitudes cross-culturally. Could it be said, though, that political institutions and practices are less problematic? MacIntyre argues that political institutions and practices are themselves very much dependent on local political attitudes, so it isn't possible to provide an a-historical specification of a set of practices and institutions:

It is an obvious truism that no institution or practice is what it is, or does what it does, independently of what anyone whatsoever thinks or feels about it. For institutions and practices are always partially, even if to differing degrees, constituted by what certain people think and feel about them. (174)

So interpretation is mandatory -- for institutions no less than for individual behavior. So MacIntyre's position is disjunctive. He writes:

My thesis . . . can now be stated distinctively: either such generalizations about institutions will necessarily lack the kind of confirmation they require or they will be consequences of true generalizations about human rationality and not part of a specifically political science. (178)

Now turn to Charles Taylor in another pivotal essay, "Interpretation and the sciences of man" (Philosophical Papers: Volume 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences). Taylor's central point is that the subject matter of the human sciences -- human actions and social arrangements -- always require interpretation. It is necessary for the observer to attribute meaning and intention to the action -- features that cannot be directly observed. He asks whether there are "brute data" in the human sciences -- facts that are wholly observational and require no "interpretation" on the part of the scientist (19)? Taylor thinks not; and therefore the human sciences require interpretation from the most basic description of data to the fullest historical description.

To be a full human agent, to be a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth. . . . My claim is that this is not just a contingent fact about human agents, but is essential to what we would understand and recognize as full, normal human agency. (3)

Thus, human behaviour seen as action of agents who desire and are moved, who have goals and aspirations, necessarily offers a purchase for descriptions in terms of meaning

what I have called "experiential meaning". (27)
One way of putting Taylor's critique of "brute data" is the idea that human actions must be characterized intentionally (34 ff.) in terms of the intentions and self understanding of the agent and that such factors can only be interpreted, not directly observed.

My thesis amounts to an alternative statement of the main proposition of interpretive social science, that an adequate account of human action must make the agents more understandable. On this view, it cannot be a sufficient objective of social theory that it just predict . . . the actual pattern of social or historical events. . . . A satisfactory explanation must also make sense of the agents. (116)
Taylor's discussion of ethnocentricity is important, since it provides a way out of the hermeneutic circle. He believes it is possible to interpret the alien culture without simply covertly projecting our categories onto the alien; and this we do through meaningful conversation with the other (124-25). This is a point that seems to converge with Habermas's notion of communicative action (The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society).

It isn't entirely clear how radically Taylor intends his argument. Is it that all social science requires interpretation, or that interpretation is a legitimate method among several? Is there room for generalizations and theories within Taylor's interpretive philosophy of social science? What should social science look like on Taylor's approach? Will it offer explanations, generalizations, models; or will it be simply a collection of concrete hermeneutical readings of different societies? Does causation have a place in such a science? (He says more about the role of theory in "Neutrality in political science"; Philosophical Papers: Volume 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences, 63.)

Both MacIntyre and Taylor are highlighting an important point: human actions reflect purposes, beliefs, emotions, meanings, and solidarities that cannot be directly observed. And human practices are composed of the actions and thoughts of individual human actors -- with exactly this range of hermeneutic possibilities and indeterminacies. So the explanation of human action and practice presupposes some level of interpretation. There is no formula, no universal key to human agency, that permits us to "code" human behavior without the trouble of interpretation.

This said, I would still judge that the "rational, material, structural" paradigm with which we began has plenty of scope for application. For some purposes and in many historical settings, it is possible to describe the actor's state of mind in more abstract terms: he/she cares about X, Y, Z; she believes A, B, C; and she reasons that W is a good way of achieving a satisfactory level of attainment of the goods she aims at. In other words, purposive agency, within an account of the opportunities and constraints that surround action, provides a versatile basis for social action. And this is enough for much of political science, Marxist materialism, and the new institutionalism.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:30PM (-04:00)

Running a dictatorship

Sunday, July 19, 2009

What is involved in running a military dictatorship in a large country like Burma? Simply having a lot of military force is obviously not enough. It is necessary to organize and manage a number of complex processes in order to manage the basic "metabolism" of the government and society. Even a dictatorship requires a political administration that is



capable of solving problems and implementing policies on a broad basis. And this means decision-makers, a bureaucracy, rules and procedures, agents at the local level, etc. There are several tasks that simply must be attended to; if not, the state would collapse:

- maintaining the nuts and bolts of a military organization -- command, discipline, recruitment, training;
- monitoring, co-opting, and repressing internal opposition groups;
- monitoring telecommunications and internet activity;
- controlling borders and potential military threats across borders;
- negotiating with and controlling internal armed groups;
- collecting revenues for use by the government and its officials;
- maintaining a minimum level of civil amenities (routine policing, sanitation, provision of electricity, water, and fuel).

Not essential but certainly in the interest of long-term stability are functions such as these: a plan for national and regional economic development, a plan for development of stable institutions for civil society, and a plan for transition to civilian rule. If it is possible to demonstrate that ordinary life is improving for the mass of ordinary people, the state is more likely to gain a degree of acceptance.

Almost none of the positive functions of government seem to be available in Burma today. Corruption is rampant. Brutality and mistreatment of civilians by soldiers appear to be rampant as well, especially in peripheral states. (Examples of brutality by soldiers drawn from the twitter feed include beatings, rapes, forced marriages, and forced labor.) And economic prospects for typical citizens are not improving; the country's wealth is being exploited for the benefit of military and political elites almost exclusively.

Burma's generals have done everything possible to keep their regime inside a black box. It turns out, however, that we know a little bit about how the Burmese military goes about a number of these tasks. Mary Callahan's 2005 book Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma provides quite a bit of detailed information and analysis of the organization and goals of the Burmese military. The Epilogue provides an extensive description of the strategies and actions of the military in the past decade. She notes the apparent stability of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) regime, indicating that it was necessary to rebuild the military state substantially after the elections and riots of 1988. Stability and order were the highest priority, and the military went about building the institutions and organizations that it needed in order to suppress threats against its survival. Callahan highlights a number of important steps that have occurred since then -- all of which fall under the general heading of "military dictatorship state-building" (211 ff.):

- Ministry of Defense reorganized
- Substantial rearmament
- New army garrisons in towns and villages throughout the country
- Expansion of military industrial base
- Expansion of system of education, health, and welfare facilities for members of the military
- Office of Strategic Studies takes charge of policy -- ethnic areas, drug trade,

economy, foreign relations
- State-building and civil administration delegated to (corrupt) regional commanders
- Funding derived from taxes and fees; profits of drug trade; control of natural resources (gems, forestry, tourism) controlled by Myanmar Economic Corporation
- Development of severe discipline problems in the ranks and corruption problems in the officer corps

So what does this suggest about Burma and its current subjection? Several things. First, the Burmese military state appears to have a very secure grasp on power; the opposition has little real leverage to force change. The ethnic armies have either come to cease-fire agreements with the regime, have been crushed (Karen National Union), or have settled into an acceptable status quo. Even the more active Kachin Independence Army poses no realistic threat to military rule. The National League for Democracy (NLD) may have widespread support in Rangoon and London; but it is hard to see how it can lead a movement that would seriously challenge the military and police system. Even mass demonstrations appear to be ineffectual in forcing change on the SLORC -- this was one of the lessons of 2007. The regime has adequate access to revenue, through its control of Burma's natural wealth. The junta's willingness to use overwhelming brutal force against civilians is entirely credible -- witness the past forty years. And internationally, only China appears to have real economic leverage with the Burmese junta -- and the Chinese are doing a great deal of investment in Burma. Western sanctions have not had economic effect on the junta or the military, and it appears that ASEAN censure is harmless as well.

So it's hard to see how this is going to turn out well for the forces of democracy in the medium term. A democracy movement needs a certain amount of space in order to act effectively on a mass scale; and the junta seems to be all too capable of ensuring that this doesn't happen.

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:16PM (-04:00)

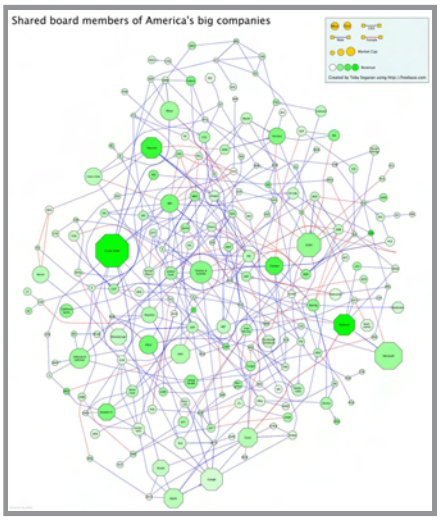
Power elites after fifty years

Wednesday, July 22, 2009



When C. Wright Mills wrote The Power Elite in 1956, we lived in a simpler time. And yet, with a few important exceptions, the concentration of power that he described continues to seem familiar by today's standards. The central idea is that the United States democracy -- in spite of the reality of political parties, separation of powers, contested elections, and elected representation -- actually embodied a hidden system of power and influence that negated many of these democratic ideals. The first words of the book are evocative:

The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern. 'Great changes' are beyond their control,



but affect their conduct and outlook none the less. The very framework of modern society confines them to projects not their own, but from every side, such changes now press upon the men and women of the mass society, who accordingly feel that they are without purpose in an epoch in which they are without power.

And a page or two later, here is how he describes the "power elite":

The power elite is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women; they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences. Whether they do or do not make such decisions is less important than the fact that they do occupy such pivotal positions: their failure to act, their failure to make decisions, is itself an act that is often of greater consequence than the decisions they do make. For they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They rule the big corporations. They run the machinery of the state and claim its prerogatives. They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they enjoy.

Mills offers a sort of middle-level sociology of power in America. He believes that power in the America of the 1950s centers in the economic, political, and military domains -- corporations, the state, and the military are all organized around networks of influence at the top of which stands a relatively small number of extremely powerful people. (It seems that Mills's description of the military is less apt today; perhaps not surprising, given that Mills was writing in the middle of the Cold War.) Power is defined as the ability to achieve what one wants over the opposition of others; and the levers of power are the great institutions in society -- corporations, political institutions, and the military. And the thesis is that a relatively compact group of people exercise hegemony in each of these areas. Moreover, power leads often to wealth, in that power permits firms and individuals to gain access to society's wealth. So a power elite is often also an economic elite.

The central thrust of the book stands in sharp opposition to the fundamental assumption of then-current democratic theory: the idea that American democracy is a pluralist system of interest groups in which no single group is able to dominate all the others (Robert Dahl (1959), A Preface to Democratic Theory). Against this pluralistic view, Mills postulates that members of mass society are dominated, more or less visibly, by a small group of powerful people in the elite. (See an earlier posting on power as influence for discussion of how power works.)

So what is Mills's theory, exactly? It is that there is a small subset of the American population that (1) possess a number of social characteristics in common (for example, elite university educations, membership in certain civic organizations); (2) are socially interconnected with each other through marriage, friendship, and business relationship; (3) occupy social positions that give them a durable ability to make a large number of the most momentous decisions for American society; (4) are largely insulated from effective oversight from democratic institutions (press, regulatory system, political constraint). They are an elite; they are a socially interconnected group; they possess durable power; and they are little constrained by open and democratic processes.

And, of course, there needs to be a theory about recruitment and the social mechanisms

of steering given individuals into the elite group. Is it family background? Is it the accident of attendance at Yale? Is it a meritocracy through which talented young people eventually grasp the sinews of power through their own achievement in the organizations of power? We need to have an account of the social means of reproduction through which a set of power relations is preserved and reproduced throughout generational change.

What is interesting in rereading Mills's classic book today, is how scarce the empirical evidence is within the analysis. It is not really an empirical study at all, but rather a reflective essay on how this sociologist has been led to conceptualize American society, based on his long experience and study. The most empirical chapter is the section on chief executives of corporations; Mills provides an historical and quantitative narrative of the rise and consolidation of the corporation over the prior 75 years. But overall, there is quite a bit of descriptive assertion in the book; relatively little analysis of the social mechanisms that reproduce this social order; and very little by way of empirical validation of the analysis as a whole.

So how does it look today? To what extent is there a compact set of powerful people in contemporary America who have a disproportionate ability to bend the future to their interests and desires? One thing is strikingly clear: the concentration of wealth in America has increased significantly since 1956. Edward Wolff provides a summary graph for the percentage of wealth owned by the top 1% of wealth holders since 1920 in Top Heavy: The Increasing Inequality of Wealth in America and What Can Be Done About It. In 1955 the top 1% held 30% of the nation's wealth; from 1970 to 1980 this percent declined to about 22%; and from the Reagan administration forward the percentage climbed past its previous highs to about 38% in 2000. So plainly there is an economic super-elite in the United States. This is a group that benefits from durable privileges and inequalities of access to wealth and income.

But this isn't exactly what Mills had in mind; he was interested in a power elite -- a fairly compact group of people who had the ability to make fundamental decisions in the three large areas of modern life that he highlights. And though he doesn't say very much about this point, he implies that it is an interconnected group -- through interlocking directorships in corporations, for example. So how can we assess the degree to which contemporary society in the United States is run through such a system? Is there a power elite today?

In one sense it is obvious what the answer is. Corporations continue to have enormous influence on our society -- banks, energy companies, pharmaceutical companies, food corporations. In fact, the collective power of corporations in modern societies is surely much greater than it was fifty years ago, through direct economic action and through their ability to influence laws and regulations. Their directors and CEOs do in fact constitute a small and interlocked portion of the population. And these leaders continue to have great ability to determine social outcomes through their "private" decisions about the conduct of the corporation. Moreover, as we have learned only too well in the past year, there is very little regulative oversight over their decisions and choices. So the existence of a "power elite" is almost a visible fact in today's world.

But to get more specific -- and to make more precise comparisons over time -- it seems that we need some way of identifying and quantifying the idea of a sociologically real "power elite." One way of trying to do that is by making use of the tools of social network analysis. For example, here is a network graph of corporate America compiled by kiwitobes. What the graph demonstrates is that the boards of America's largest

corporations are populated with directors who overlap substantially across companies; there is a high degree of interconnectedness across the boards of directors of major corporations. So this bears out part of Mills's thesis in today's corporate social reality.

But even more compelling would be a study that doesn't exist yet -- a social network map that represents something like the whole population of a community, linking individuals to the institutions in which they occupy a position of power. The vast majority of the population would exist in single points at the bottom of the map; most people don't have a position of power at all. But, if Mills is right, there will be a small subset of people who are interconnected through many relationships to institutional sources of power: memberships in boards, offices in corporations, directorships of banks, trustees of universities. And we might give our thought experiment one additional feature: we might look at snapshots of the same data for each generation identified by families. Now we have Mills's hypothesis in a nutshell: at a given time there is a small subset of the population who occupy most of the positions of power; and the probability is great that the sons and daughters of this group will occupy similar positions of power in the next generation. And in fact, it is perfectly visible in our society that the likelihood of occupying a position of power in one generation is highly influenced by the power status of the antecedent generation.

Regrettably, we don't have a direct ability to carry out this experiment. But we might consider a test case invoking an important decision and a large number of "stakeholders", large and small: the current effort to reform the health care system in the United States. Will this issue be resolved in a fully democratic way, with the interests of all elements of society being represented fairly in the outcome? Or will a relatively small group of corporations, political interests, and professions be in a position to invisibly block reforms that would be democratically selected? And if this is in fact the case, then doesn't that speak loudly in support of the power elite hypothesis?

With the advantage of fifty years of perspective, I think two observations can be made about Mills's book. First, he seems to have diagnosed a very important thread in the sociological reality of power in America -- albeit in a way that is more intuitive and less empirical than contemporary sociologists would prefer. And second, he illustrates a profoundly important ability to exercise his sociological imagination: to arrive at a way of looking at contemporary society that allows us to make sense of many of the observations that press upon us.

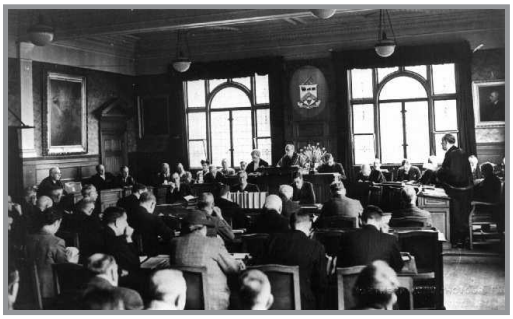
(Another important voice on this subject is G. William Domhoff, Who Rules America? Power, Politics, and Social Change (1967). Domhoff has a very nice web version of his theory on his web page.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:42PM (-04:00)

How good is deliberative democracy?

Thursday, July 23, 2009

The basic idea of deliberative democracy is an appealing one. Suppose we are faced with this basic problem of social choice. There is an important issue facing a community. There are a small number of policy options that might be chosen. The community wants to choose among these options "democratically." There are several ways in which this



task might be approached. First, the options might simply be rank-ordered by a referendum. It takes an hour, the votes are counted, and a decision is reached. "The ayes have it." Or, second, the options might be the subject of an extensive community-based forum, involving substantial debate and discussion of each option. Then, at the end of the period of debate, the community might be asked to select its preferred option -- this time, however, in a context in which voters have adjusted their thinking according to the facts and values that were involved in the discussion. Citizens have learned from each other, and many have changed their prior beliefs and preferences.

The approach that starts and ends with voting among alternatives has a major shortcoming: no one gets a chance to make persuasive arguments to other citizens; no one has the opportunity of having his/her own beliefs challenged; no one is exposed to new facts or novel considerations that might make a difference in the choice. In other words, the "vote first" approach simply takes people's preferences and beliefs as fixed, and looks at the problem of choice as simply one of aggregating these antecedent preferences.

The deliberative approach, by contrast, looks at belief formation as itself a cumulative and reasonable process; one in which the individual needs to have the opportunity to think through the facts and values that surround the choice; and, crucially, one in which exposure to other people's reasoning is an important part of arriving at a sound conclusion.

Notice how different this process is by comparison with the talk radio paradigm -- short blasts of opinion by people whose opinions are already fully cast in concrete; no opportunity for "listening for learning" among the participants; no willingness to keep an open mind in consideration of a factually and morally complex issue.

It seems intuitively persuasive that a belief in democracy ought to lead to a belief in deliberative democracy: informed and reflective preferences expressed by citizens who have taken the time to listen to the views of their fellow citizens. The advantages of deliberative democracy might include several good things:

- a greater likelihood of a good decision (because citizens do a more adequate job of canvassing the facts and values that ought to guide the decision);
- a deeper understanding of the idea of rational deliberation about what to do; and
- a greater likelihood of mutual understanding and consensus among citizens.

The first point is a version of the idea of the wisdom of the crowd; by surfacing the beliefs, values, and perspectives of numerous people we are enabled to arrive at a more adequate understanding of the complexities of the problem at hand. The second point expresses the intuition that rationality doesn't concern itself merely with finding the best means of accomplishing a given end, but also in deliberating about the ends themselves. The third point is a version of Rousseau's idea of the general will or Rawls's idea of reflective equilibrium: the idea that citizens will come to a shared understanding of each other's reasoning and to something closer to agreement, by engaging in spirited dialogue with each other. So a political community is one that has engaged in deep and respectful dialogue. And a deliberative community will be a stable community with bonds of civility that sustain it through rancorous issues. This appears to be Rawls's view in Political Liberalism. (Though for a contrary view about the value of deliberative democracy, see Ian Shapiro's The State of Democratic Theory.)

James Fishkin has written quite a bit on the subject of deliberative democracy, from the level of pure normative theory to the level of practical implementation. See When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation and Debating Deliberative Democracy. On the practical end of the spectrum, Fishkin has developed a technique he refers to as "deliberative polling" -- "a technique which combines deliberation in small group discussions with scientific random sampling to provide public consultation for public policy and for electoral issues" (link). Here is how the technique is described:

Deliberative Polling® is an attempt to use television and public opinion research in a new and constructive way. A random, representative sample is first polled on the targeted issues. After this baseline poll, members of the sample are invited to gather at a single place for a weekend in order to discuss the issues. Carefully balanced briefing materials are sent to the participants and are also made publicly available. The participants engage in dialogue with competing experts and political leaders based on questions they develop in small group discussions with trained moderators. Parts of the weekend events are broadcast on television, either live or in taped and edited form. After the deliberations, the sample is again asked the original questions. The resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions the public would reach, if people had opportunity to become more informed and more engaged by the issues. link

The goal of this method is to allow the researcher to infer to a hypothetical result: what values, judgments, or choices ***would*** a group of citizens have arrived at if they had undergone an extensive process of deliberation about the issue? For example, the technique has been applied to the question of Vermont's energy future:

The Deliberative Poll® questioned an initial random sample of Vermonters, recruited them to spend a weekend deliberating the issues of how Vermont should meet its future electricity needs, and then questioned them again at the conclusion of the weekend sessions. The results addressed a large number of policy issues: for example, what reliance should be placed on energy efficiency and on energy from various sources like wind, nuclear, and hydro in meeting Vermont’s future electricity needs; whether the state should continue to buy energy from existing suppliers and whether the state should rely more on a few large central facilities or a larger number of smaller and more geographically distributed ones. (link)

The approach offers several things: first, a concrete tool for approximating a deliberative process; but second, and more important, some concrete empirical evidence permitting assessment of the foundational question -- does a process of deliberation change citizens' attitudes, beliefs, and preferences? And the answer appears to be "yes": deliberation influences ultimate choices. (It is worth visiting the website for the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University.)

Here is another interesting example -- a current effort to gain more insight into informed public opinion about a highly complex issue: the principles on the basis of which U.S. citizens make judgments about what health conditions ought to be included in healthcare coverage. The Center for Healthcare Decisions in California (link) recently released the results of a study on citizens' values surrounding healthcare policy. The study is ***"What Matters Most: Californians' Priorities for Healthcare Coverage,"*** and it is an effort to get a more nuanced understanding of the considerations that citizens appeal to in trying to sort out issues of health policy. The study involved interviews with hundreds of respondents, based on a number of vignettes describing healthcare needs. The respondents were asked to recommend rate the priority of the vignette for inclusion within the list of conditions covered by a health plan. For example:

Scenario: A 24-year-old woman has long- standing asthma that prevents her from being active. With an inhaler and medications, she can live a more normal life.

Questions: 1) On a scale of 1 to 10, what priority would you give to cover this if you were designing a health plan for a general population in California? 2) Given that the more that health insurance covers, the more the plan may cost you and others, would you want health insurance to cover this service or not?

Researchers then followed up with focus group discussions of the same vignettes in order to arrive at a better understanding of the underlying reasoning that seemed to be at work. The results are fascinating; there is a nuanced but principled set of values that seem to guide most people's judgments about the vignettes. The executive summary is here.

Both these approaches are interesting for much the same reason: they provide a basis for delving more deeply into the reasoning and values that citizens use when they arrive at judgments about complex and important issues. And they suggest ways in which some of the guiding intuitions underlying the theory of deliberative democracy might be introduced into practical political processes.

Is it realistic to imagine that deliberative democracy might become more of our customary way of making decisions about complex issues?

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:50PM (-04:00)

"Scale" in history: micro, meso, macro

Sunday, July 26, 2009





Doing history forces us to make choices about the scale of the history with which we are concerned. Take the analogy suggested by the maps above. Are we concerned with Asia, China, or Shandong? Or in historical terms, are we concerned with the whole of the Chinese Revolution; the base area of Yenan, or the specific experience of a handful of villages in Shandong during the 1940s? And given the fundamental heterogeneity of social life, the choice of scale makes a big difference to the findings (post).

Historians differ fundamentally around the decisions they make about scale. William Hinton provides what is almost a month-to-month description of the Chinese Revolution in Fanshen village – a collection of a few hundred families (Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village). The book covers a few years and the events of a few hundred people. Likewise, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie offers a deep treatment of the villagers of



Montaillou; once again, a single village and a limited time (Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error). Diane Vaughan offers a full study of the fateful decision to launch the Challenger space shuttle (The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA). She hopes to shed light on high-risk technology decision-making through careful study of a single incident. These histories are limited in time and space, and they can appropriately be called “micro-history.” At the other end of the scale spectrum, William McNeill provides a history of the world (A World History) and a history of the world’s diseases (Plagues and Peoples); Massimo Livi-Bacci offers a history of the world’s population (A Concise History of World Population); Jared Diamond offers a history of the interrelationships between the Old World and the New World through the medium of weapons and disease (Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies); and Goudsblom and De Vries provide an environmental history of the world (Mappae Mundi: Humans and their Habitats in a Long-Term Socio-Ecological Perspective: Myths, Maps and Models). In each of these cases, the historian has chosen a scale that encompasses virtually the whole of the globe, over millennia of time. These histories can certainly be called “macro-history.”

Both micro- and macro-history have important shortcomings. Micro-history leaves us with the question, “how does this particular village shed light on anything larger?”. And macro-history leaves us with the question, “how do these grand assertions about causality really work out in the context of Canada or Sichuan?”. The first threatens to be so particular as to lose all interest, whereas the second threatens to be so general as to lose all empirical relevance to real historical processes.

There is a third choice available to the historian, however, that addresses both points. This is to choose a scale that encompasses enough time and space to be genuinely interesting and important, but not so much as to defy valid analysis. This level of scale might be regional – for example, G. William Skinner’s analysis of the macro-regions of China (post). It might be national – for example, a social history of Indonesia (M. C. Ricklefs, A History of Modern Indonesia Since c. 1200). And it might be supra-national – for example, an economic history of Western Europe. The key point is that historians in this middle range are free to choose the scale of analysis that seems to permit the best level of conceptualization of history, given the evidence that is available and the social processes that appear to be at work. And this mid-level scale permits the historian to make substantive judgments about the “reach” of social processes that are likely to play a causal role in the story that needs telling. This level of analysis can be referred to as “meso-history,” and it appears to offer an ideal mix of specificity and generality.

Here are a few works that represent the best of meso-history: R. Bin Wong, China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience; Kenneth Pomeranz, The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy; and Charles Tilly, Coercion, Capital and European States: AD 990 - 1992. Wong and Tilly define their scope in terms of supra-national regions. Pomeranz argues for a sub-national scale: comparison of England's agricultural heartland with the Yangzi region in China. Each pays close attention to the problem of defining the level of scale

that works best for the particular task. And each does a stellar job of identifying the concrete social processes and relationships that hold this regional social system together.

Both macro- and meso-history fall in the general category of "large-scale" history. So let's analyze this conception of history. Large-scale history can be defined in these terms.

- The inquiry defines its scope over a long time period and/or a large geographical range;
- the inquiry undertakes to account for large structural characteristics, processes, and conditions as historical outcomes;
- the inquiry singles out large structural characteristics within the social order as central causes leading to the observed historical outcomes;
- the inquiry aspires to some form of comparative generality across historical contexts, both in its diagnosis of causes and its attribution of patterns of stability and development.

Large-scale history falls in several categories.

- History of the “long durée”—accounts of the development of the large-scale features of a particular region, nation, or civilization, including population history, economic history, political history, war and peace, cultural formations, and religion
- Comparative history—a comparative account, grounded in a particular set of questions, of the similarities and contrasts of related institutions or circumstances in separated contexts. E.g. states, economic institutions, patterns of agriculture, property systems, bureaucracies. The objective is to discover causal regularities, test existing social theories, and formulate new social theories
- World history—accounts of the major civilizations of the world and their histories of internal development and inter-related contact and development

The choice of scale is always pertinent in historical analysis. And in many instances, I believe that the most interesting analysis takes place at the meso-level. At this level we get explanations that have a great deal of power and breadth, and yet that are also closely tied to the concrete historical experience of the subject matter.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:41PM (-04:00)

Wealth inequality

Tuesday, July 28, 2009



When we talk about inequality in the United States, we usually have a couple of different things in mind. We think immediately of income inequality. Inequalities of important life outcomes come to mind (health, housing, education), and, of course, we think of the inequalities of opportunity that are created by a group's social location (race, urban poverty, gender). But a fundamental form of inequality in our society is a factor that influences each of these: inequalities of wealth across social groups. Wealth refers to the ownership of property, tangible and intangible: for example, real estate, stocks and bonds, savings accounts, businesses, factories, mines, forests, and natural resources. Two facts are particularly important when it comes to wealth: first, that wealth is in general very unevenly distributed in the United



States, and second, that there are very striking inequalities when we look at the average wealth of major social groups.

Edward Wolff has written quite a bit about the facts and causes of wealth inequality in the United States. A recent book, Top Heavy: The Increasing Inequality of Wealth in America and What Can Be Done About It, Second Edition, is particularly timely; also of interest is Assets for the Poor: The Benefits of Spreading Asset Ownership. Wolff summarizes his conclusion in these stark terms:

The gap between haves and have-nots is greater now--at the start of the twenty-first century--than at anytime since 1929. The sharp increase in inequality since the late 1970s has made wealth distribution in the United States more unequal than it is in what used to be perceived as the class-ridden societies of northwestern Europe. ... The number of households worth $1,000,000 or more grew by almost 60 percent; the number worth $10,000,000 or more almost quadrupled. (2-3)

The international comparison of wealth inequality is particularly interesting. Wolff provides a chart of the share of marketable wealth held by the top percentile in the UK, Sweden, and the US, from 1920 to 1992. The graph is striking. Sweden starts off in 1920 with 40% of wealth in the hands of the top one percent, and falls fairly steadily to just under 20% in 1992. UK starts at a staggering 60% (!) in the hands of the top 1 percent in 1920, and again, falls steadily to a 1992 level of just over 20%. The US shows a different pattern. It starts at 35% in 1920 (lowest of all three countries); then rises and falls slowly around the 30% level. The US then begins a downward trend in the mid-1960s, falling to a low of 20% in the 1970s; and then, during the Reagan years and following, the percent of wealth rises to roughly 35%. So we are roughly back to where we were in 1920 when it comes to wealth inequalities in the United States, by this measure.

Why does this kind of inequality matter? Partly because significant inequalities of wealth have important implications for such things as the relative political power of various groups; the opportunities that groups have within and across generations; and the relative security that various individuals and groups have when faced with economic adversity. People who own little or nothing have little to fall back on when they lose a job, face a serious illness, or move into retirement. People who have a lot of wealth, by contrast, are able to exercise a disproportionate amount of political influence; they are able to ensure that their children are well educated and well prepared for careers; and they have substantial buffers when times are hard.

Wolff offers a good summary of the empirical data about wealth inequalities in the United States. But we'd also like to know something about the mechanisms through which this concentration of wealth occurs. Several mechanisms come readily to mind. People who have wealth have an advantage in gathering the information necessary to increase their wealth; they have networks of other wealth holders who can improve their access to opportunities for wealth acquisition; they have advantages in gaining advanced professional and graduate training that increase their likelihood of assuming high positions in wealth-creating enterprises; and they can afford to include high-risk, high-gain strategies in their investment portfolios. So there is a fairly obvious sense in which

wealth begets wealth.

But part of this system of inequality of wealth ownership in the United States has to do with something else: the workings of race. The National Urban League publishes an annual report on "The State of Black America." One of the measures that it tracks is the "wealth gap" -- the differential in home ownership between black and white adults. This gap continues to persist, and many leaders in the effort towards achieving equality of opportunity across racial groups point to this structural inequality as a key factor. Here is a very good study on home ownership trends for black and white adults done by George Masnick at the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard (2001). The gap in the 1990s fluctuated around 28% -- so, for example, in 1988-1998 about 52% of blacks between 45 and 54 were home owners, whereas about 80% of non-Hispanic whites in this age group were homeowners (figure 5). Historical practices of mortgage discrimination against specific neighborhoods influence home ownership rates, as do other business practices associated with the workings of residential segregation. Some of these mechanisms are illustrated in Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue's The New Suburban History, and Kevin Boyle's Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age provides an absorbing account of how challenging "home ownership" was for professional black families in Detroit in the 1920s.

So what are the remedies for the very high level of wealth inequality that is found in the United States? Wolff focuses on tax remedies, and certainly these need to be a part of the story. But remedying the social obstacles that exist for disadvantaged families to gain property -- most fundamentally, disadvantages that derive from the educational opportunities that are offered to children and young people in inner-city neighborhoods -- is crucial as well. It seems axiomatic that the greatest enhancement that can be offered to a young person is a good education; and this is true in the question of wealth acquisition no less than the acquisition of other socially desirable things.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:26PM (-04:00)

The historian's task

Saturday, August 01, 2009



What are the intellectual tasks that define the historian's work? In a sense, this question is best answered on the basis of a careful reading of some good historians. But it will be useful to offer several simple answers to this foundational question as a sort of conceptual map of the nature of historical knowing.

First, historians are interested in providing conceptualizations and factual descriptions of events and circumstances in the past. This effort is an answer to questions like these: “What happened? What was it like? What were some of the circumstances and happenings that took place during this period in the past?” Sometimes this means simply reconstructing a complicated story from scattered historical sources – for example, in constructing a narrative of the Spanish Civil War or attempting to sort out the series of events that culminated in the Detroit race riot / uprising of 1967. But

sometimes it means engaging in substantial conceptual work in order to arrive at a vocabulary in terms of which to characterize “what happened.” Concerning the disorders of 1967 in Detroit: was this a riot or an uprising? How did participants and contemporaries think about it?

Second, historians often want to answer “why” questions: “Why did this event occur? What were the conditions and forces that brought it about?” This body of questions invites the historian to provide an explanation of the event or pattern he or she describes: the rise of fascism in Spain, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the great global financial crisis of 2008. And providing an explanation requires, most basically, an account of the causal mechanisms, background circumstances, and human choices that brought the outcome about. We explain an historical outcome when we identify the social causes, forces, and actions that brought it about, or made it more likely.

Third, and related to the previous point, historians are sometimes interested in answering a “how” question: “How did this outcome come to pass? What were the processes through which the outcome occurred?” How did the Prussian Army succeed in defeating the superior French Army in 1870? How did Truman manage to defeat Dewey in the 1948 US election? Here the pragmatic interest of the historian’s account derives from the antecedent unlikelihood of the event in question: how was this outcome possible? This too is an explanation; but it is an answer to a “how possible” question rather than a “why necessary” question.

Fourth, often historians are interested in piecing together the human meanings and intentions that underlie a given complex series of historical actions. They want to help the reader make sense of the historical events and actions, in terms of the thoughts, motives, and states of mind of the participants. For example: Why did Napoleon III carelessly provoke Prussia into war in 1870 (David Baguley, Napoleon III and His Regime: An Extravaganza)? Why has the Burmese junta dictatorship been so intransigent in its treatment of democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi (Nicholas Farrelly, Burma's General Objectives)? Why did northern cities in the United States develop such profound patterns of racial segregation after World War II (Thomas Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit)? Why did young men in the 1910s and 1920s prefer dangerous, noisy internal combustion automobiles to safe, quiet electric vehicles (Gijs Moms, The Electric Vehicle: Technology and Expectations in the Automobile Age)? Answers to questions like these require interpretation of actions, meanings, and intentions – of individual actors and of cultures that characterize whole populations. This aspect of historical thinking is “hermeneutic,” interpretive, and ethnographic.

And, of course, the historian faces an even more basic intellectual task: that of discovering and making sense of the archival information that exists about a given event or time in the past. Historical data do not speak for themselves; archives are incomplete, ambiguous, contradictory, and confusing. The historian needs to interpret individual pieces of evidence; and he/she needs to be able to somehow fit the mass of evidence into a coherent and truthful story. So complex events like the Spanish Civil War present the historian with an ocean of historical traces in repositories and archives all over the world; these collections sometimes reflect specific efforts at concealment by the powerful (for example, Franco's efforts to conceal all evidence of mass killings of Republicans after the end of fighting); and the historian's task is to find ways of using this body of evidence to discern some of the truth about the past.

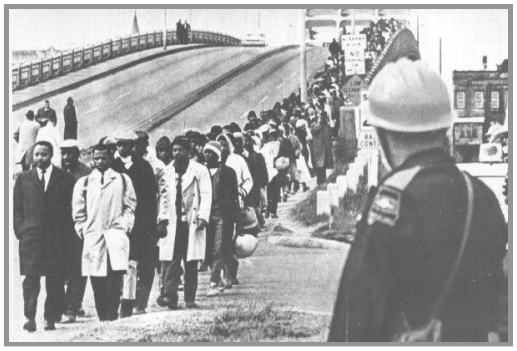
The photo above gives a small glimpse of the challenges the historian faces. In order to

interpret the photo as "a moment in the Spanish Civil War", the historian needs to provide a careful interpretation of its provenance and content. Who are these soldiers? Where is the fighting taking place? Was the photo staged? What, if anything, does it tell us about the social conflicts and military circumstances of the Civil War? How can it help the reader of history to come to a better understanding of the experience of civil war?

In short, historians conceptualize, describe, contextualize, explain, and interpret events and circumstances of the past. They sketch out ways of representing the complex activities and events of the past; they explain and interpret significant outcomes; and they base their findings on evidence in the present that bears upon facts about the past. Their accounts need to be grounded on the evidence of the available historical record; and their explanations and interpretations require that the historian arrive at hypotheses about social causes and cultural meanings. Historians can turn to the best available theories in the social and behavioral sciences to arrive at theories about causal mechanisms and human behavior; so historical statements depend ultimately upon factual inquiry and theoretical reasoning. Ultimately, the historian's task is to shed light on the what, why, and how of the past, based on inferences from the evidence of the present.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:15AM (-04:00)

History of the present

Sunday, August 02, 2009



What is involved in writing a history of the present? It's not quite the oxymoron it may appear to be. It is often enough that we find ourselves in the middle of complicated, confusing, and interwoven events locally, regionally, or globally -- events that require much the same sort of conceptual and integrative work that the Manchu conquest of China or the Odessa mutiny requires for the traditional historian. For example, think of the Red Shirt protests in Thailand a few months ago, or the financial crisis in September 2008. And think of the intellectual challenge presented for the observer to try to arrive at a somewhat detailed interpretation of what was occurring. This is an act of "apperception" -- taking many separate pieces of evidence and experience and forging them together into a unified representation. And it seems to have a great deal in common with more traditional historical cognition.

There seems to be one specific way in which the task can't be done at all. When we are in the midst of something big, we may be able to recognize that it is momentous without really being able to say what "it" is. That is because we don't know how it is going to turn out. Is it a popular revolution of the have-nots against Thailand's elites, or a short period of unrest? Is it the beginning of another Great Depression, or just a serious episode of financial turbulence? We can't answer these questions until the events play out.

That point is fair enough, but it doesn't really close off the discussion. There is still the question, what can contemporary observers do to understand and document an important event as it unfolds? And here the answer is very similar to traditional historical research. Observers can collect and record documents in real time. They can interview participants. They can view and interpret the communications of the powerful and the

insurgents. And, on the basis of these kinds of investigations, they can begin to arrive at interpretations of what is occurring, over what terrain, by what actors, in response to what forces and motives. In other words, they can attempt to arrive at an evidence-based integrative narrative of what the processes of the present amount to.

Think, for example, of western academics who found themselves in Shanghai in the late 1930s. They were in a position to talk with ordinary people, Communist activists, and Guomindang officials. They were able to collect the ephemera of the social struggle that was underway. They were able to observe at close range the Japanese assault on the city. And, perhaps, they were forced to join one of the great mass evacuations in history, with tens of thousands of ordinary Chinese people fleeing the city on foot. These observers lived a bit of China's history; but they were also in a position to write a part of its current history in 1938. One such academic was Professor Theodore Herman, who lived in China during the period and gathered an important collection of political posters and other ephemera (link).

And we can extend these examples indefinitely. Think of the young African-American activists who went south in 1963, who lived and made this piece of American history; and think of the perspective they were able to arrive at in conceptualizing America, 1963. And for some of these men and women, the discovery and writing of the history was itself an important part of the struggle. (Here is an excerpt of an interview with Professor Gloria House that gives a vivid sense of this aspect of historical experience and interpretation (link).)

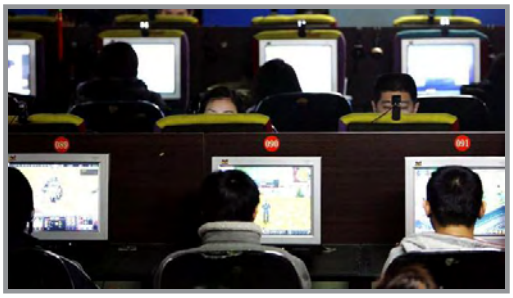
So a couple of things seem true. One is that there is a form of "historical apperception" that is just as necessary for understanding the present as for understanding the past. A second point is that a given "history of the present" is doubly contestable: the contemporary's angle of view may be limited enough that future historians will conclude that the apperception was fundamentally flawed; and the processes underway may turn out so differently from what was expected, that the mid-stream apperception may be judged basically misleading when the process is complete.

But a few other things are true as well. The participant has an immediate access to documents, speeches, and events that later historians can only envy; so by recording these observations the participant can lay a good foundation for later interpretations. The participant has often had direct experiences that give him or her a specific understanding of some aspects of the events -- for example, the passions and motives associated with the period. And third, the participant's historical observations may in fact be remarkably acute, taking observations of current activities and constructing them into a historical representation that holds up well. So attempting to write a history of significant events in the present is a valid intellectual goal.

So far I've looked at the easy part of the question: historical apperception of specific events and processes. Much harder is the more general question: to what extent is it possible for an observer in 2000 to attempt an interpretation of "fin-de-siècle" America? That is, to what extent is it possible to encapsulate the broad sweep of the present from the perspective of the present? And here we can probably agree with Zhou Enlai in 1989 when asked, "what is the significance of the French Revolution?" -- "It is too early to tell."
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:09PM (-04:00)

Internet activism in China

Tuesday, August 04, 2009



Guobin Yang's The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online is a boundary-breaking book. It is a sociology of the communities who use the internet in China; it is a contribution to the study of social movements; it is a history of a recent period of China's modern history during which internet activism became important; it is an ethnography of the wangmin -- "netizens"; and it is a snap review of some of the hottest issues in front of the Chinese public today -- environmental problems, corruption, exploitation of factory workers, abuse of power, and social inequalities. Much more than in North America or Western Europe, the internet functions as a location of social activism in China, according to Yang. And it serves an enormous audience; China's internet population is staggeringly large. Yang estimates that by June 2008 "the number of internet users had reached 253 million" (2). He indicates that surveys find that online activists are mostly young and urban, but reflecting diversity in age and occupation (32). And Yang refers to a highly heterogeneous set of internet constituencies that include "homeowners, pensioners, migrants, hepatitis-B carriers, ant farmers, consumers, even computer gamers and pet owners" (27).

Yang puts his view of the role that internet activism is playing in China in these terms:

Analyzing online activism will both reveal the new forms, dynamics, and consequences of popular contention in the age of the Internet and will shed light on general patterns and dynamics of change in contemporary China. I show how Chinese people have created a world of carnival, community, and contention in and through cyberspace and how in this process they have transformed personhood, society, and politics. This book is about people's power in the Internet age. (1)

So what is the significance of the online presence of China's internet users? Does the internet represent a new tool for organizing and expressing grievances? Is it simply "performative" -- a space where feelings and reactions can be more safely aired than in physical spaces? Yang takes the view that the activism expressed on the internet is "active" -- it is engaged, it leads to groups having stronger affinities with each other, and it can lead to a different kind of politics and democracy in the world of factories, officials, corporations, and homeowners. And in the 1990s and 2000s, these forms of collective action are more likely to be non-confrontational than was true in the mobilization leading up to 1989.

It is challenging to conceptualize the concept of "internet activism." Is it simply a communications technology? Is it a backbone of copper and fiber through which hundreds of millions of Chinese people can interact for large purposes and small? How does the social reality of "internet society" relate to our traditional categories of "government," "economy," "culture," "religion," etc.? Yang describes his theoretical approach as "multi-interactionism," by which he means that internet activism develops in dynamic relationship to a handful of separate social factors that facilitate and constrain the actions users can take. He refers to state power, culture, the market, civil society, and transnationalism (7) as the large contextual factors that bound the social reality of the

internet; and he argues that the creative and innovative users adapt flexible strategies for dealing with each in interaction. (He attributes this view to the interactionalist approach to contention taken by Tilly, McAdam, and others.)

A question that inevitably arises when we think about the internet in China is the issue of technology censorship. How important and effective are the Chinese state's efforts to regulate and control the internet? Does the "great firewall" actually put a significant brake on the forms of expression and mobilization that can occur in cyberspace? James Fallows gave an assessment of the overall effectiveness of censorship in 2008 in the Atlantic (link); his view there is that the state's aim is largely to make "subversive" uses of the internet more trouble than they are worth. Is this a fair assessment? Yang too suggests that the state's efforts at censorship are fairly ineffective, writing that "state power constrains the forms and issues of contention, but instead of preventing it from happening, it forces activists to be more creative and artful" (7). This tends to support the idea that the advantage still lies with the user; and yet it seems clear that the state is devoting a very large amount of resources to the effort. Yang describes the situation this way:

An entire apparatus of institutions and practices have appeared for the control of the Internet. Under these conditions, Internet activists have three ways of negotiating political control: rightful resistance, artful contention, and digital "hidden transcripts" of the information age. The main issues in online activism reflect both the political constraints on contention and the social milieu of activism. (23)

Yang describes the institutions and rules that the government has created to control internet activism in some detail (47-53). And he argues that the Chinese state is aware of a fundamental contemporary reality: a relatively free access to the information superhighway is a critical component of economic success. So control and economic innovation are in conflict, and so far users have been successful in finding ways of expressing themselves and gaining access to ideas and information from others.

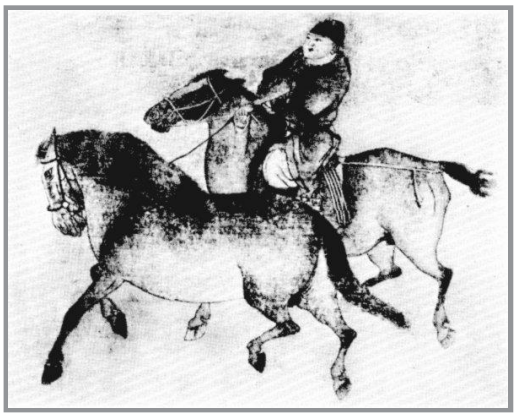
What sorts of issues have created strong responses from online activists? There are many examples of websites and campaigns that are stimulated as protests against injustice -- police beatings and killings, bad treatment of workers or homeowners, etc. And there are many instances of campaigns that have to do with assertions of group identity and rights -- for example, the hepatitis-B carriers or diabetes patients. So social protest and identity expression are key. But here is a more extensive list of issue areas that Yang identifies within online activism: popular nationalism; rights defense; corruption and power abuse; environment; cultural contention; muckraking; and online charity (55). And within the category of rights defense he lists: vulnerable persons, homeowners, forced relocation, hepatitis-B carriers and diabetes patients, consumer rights, human rights, and other issues of urban middle-class concern (56). (Many of these issues about rights are the same subjects that Kevin O'Brien identifies under the heading of "rightful protest"; Rightful Resistance in Rural China.)

We might close by asking what effects "internet activism" is likely to have in China. And after reading Guobin Yang's book, we might offer a best guess that goes along these lines. The internet serves as a large, dynamic space of expression and contention, that plays a critically important role in shaping Chinese people's political and social attitudes. Its importance is less as an instrument of political organization and mobilization, than as a decentralized medium of consciousness formation. The anger and sorrow that is expressed over a single wrongful death -- repeated tens of thousands of times in a variety of forums and forms -- can also produce a stronger sense of a need for change in

China. And so the effects of internet activism are somewhat unpredictable. But we might speculate that it can lead in the end to powerful and popular demands in earthly China for important legal and institutional reforms. Perhaps Charter '08 will be the big winner (link): legal protections and a broadened scope for life within civil society.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:45PM (-04:00)

A cognitivist philosophy of history

Thursday, August 06, 2009



Many of the posts here have raised issues about the philosophy of history. Here is a bit of a synthesis of many of those prior observations.

Fundamentally, we have unfolded a conception of historical explanation that derives from the central idea of situated human action; the idea, as Marx put the point in 1850, that “men make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.” In other words, historical explanation fundamentally involves identifying the features of agency and structure in the presence of which the great and minor events of history have transpired. Fundamentally historians are faced with the challenge of making sense of the choices that actors have made in bringing about the historical processes that interest us, given their motives and the constraints created by social institutions and structures.

Formulating ideas about agency is therefore key for historians, and we have seen a wide variety of theories of agency in prior posts: Robert Darnton’s ethnographic study of the book-makers’ apprentices; interpretations of historically specific mentalités; attributions of rational or materialist motivations to participants in riots and rebellions; interpretations of religious commitments; and so forth, throughout the almost endless variety of forms that human agency takes. This is the aspect of historical imagination that corresponds roughly to the “hermeneutic” or interpretive strand of historical thinking: what did these historical actors want? How did they think about the world? The topic of mentalités is important; to explain historical outcomes, we must have a theory of the states of mind of the actors who make history and endure it.

Arriving at better understandings of the metaphysics of social structures is a second key focus of the philosophy of history being developed here. How do structures influence and constrain human action? How are structures embodied in the actions and thoughts of individuals? What are the microfoundations of social structures? It is crucial to avoid reifying social structures – attributing to “the state” or “the proletariat” a causal and ontological presence that transcends the individuals who constitute it. But it is also true that there are coherent and defensible ways of formulating conceptions of extended social structures that do not reify them, and that nonetheless provide them with an important and potent source of historical causal force. Once embedded in barracks, police stations, businesses, social networks, and command structures, the military structure of the Burmese junta creates a highly coercive set of social constraints within which Burmese citizens must act. So the fact that each structure is necessarily embodied in the actions, thoughts, and motives of a population of people does not imply that the

structure lacks “autonomous” causal effectiveness to influence agents’ behavior.

This philosophy of history also emphasizes that it is very important for historians to arrive at deeper understandings of the metaphysics of social causation. This means, first, understanding the complete inadequacy of traditional positivist interpretations of causation: “causation is no more than regularity”. This Humean view does not serve the natural sciences well, and it certainly does not help us when it comes to social causation. So it is necessary to explore in a fair amount of detail a model of causation that fits with what we know about the actual workings of social processes. The model that I favor is “causal realism”; it holds that the task of arriving at a causal explanation comes down to discovering one or more causal mechanisms linking antecedent to outcome. This approach conforms well to the actual practice of historians constructing narratives. And it is supported by a careful analysis of the metaphysics of social causation as well. The microfoundational approach argued elsewhere holds that social causation proceeds through the behavior of individuals making choices within structures. But whether or not one accepts the microfoundational approach, it is necessary for historians to have a better idea of what they mean when they judge that “X caused Y.”

A fourth important idea that for this philosophy of history is the fact of historical contingency. Historical events are the result of the conjunction of separate strands of causation, each of which contains its own inherent contingency. And coincidence, accident, and unanticipated actions by participants and bystanders all lead to a deepening of the contingency of historical outcomes. However, the fact that social outcomes have a high degree of contingency is entirely consistent with the idea that the idea that a social order embodies a broad collection of causal processes and mechanisms. These causal mechanisms are a valid subject of study – even though they do not contribute to a deterministic causal order.

Further, we have observed repeatedly that social phenomena are heterogeneous and plastic. Institutions change over time in response to the actions and intentions of participants (plasticity); and generally similar institutions are nonetheless significantly different in their mid-level characteristics and dynamics (heterogeneity). Cities illustrate both characteristics. The institutional regimes through which a given city manages an important urban problem – handling the provisioning of clean water, let us say – change over time; this illustrates plasticity. And different cities have very different internal functional organizations, all serving to fulfill roughly the same set of urban functions but in very different ways (heterogeneity). It is important for historians and historical social scientists to keep these fundamental ontological facts about the social world in mind as they attempt to conceptualize the past. Otherwise we are likely to produce stylized and repetitive interpretations of the institutions and actions of the past, overlooking the important ways in which those institutions differed from each other and from contemporary equivalents.

The related ideas of meso-history and comparative history conform well to all these recommendations. By paying attention to the mid-level processes and institutions of a given time period, the historian is drawn into the distinguishing features as well as the common features of these institutions. (How did French absolutism really work, when it came to collecting taxes, raising armies, and managing a bureaucracy?) And by engaging in careful comparison across complex cases, the historian is brought to recognize the facts of institutional variation and, sometimes, commonality. (How did proto-industrial handicraft production work in Amsterdam and Suzhou; what were the similarities as well as differences of these pre-modern economic institutions?) Likewise,

several discussions above have illustrated the explanatory value that derives from the study of meso-level social institutions and organizations – for example, the transportation system that exists in a given region. Further, meso-history and comparative history lead the historian to have a more practical recognition of the contingency and path dependency of mid-level economic, political, or social institutions. It is difficult to maintain that there is only one way of managing a fiscal system or growing a pre-modern industrial economy, when one's research lays bare the similarities and differences that existed in different settings in France or Japan.

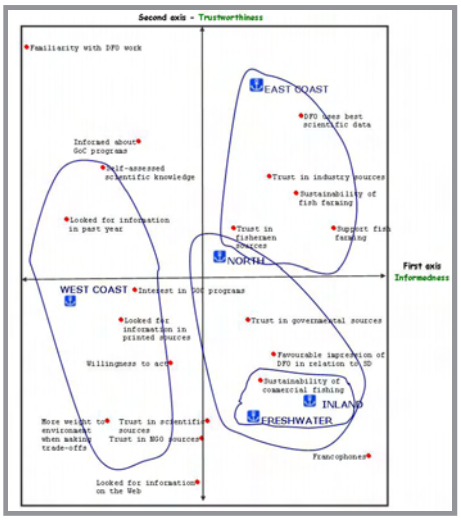
Turning to questions about evidence and objectivity, this philosophy of history offers support for the idea that historical inquiry is an empirically rigorous endeavor. Skeptics sometimes make easy statements such as "the past is unknowable," "historical interpretations are inherently subjective," and "all historical statements are the result of the historian's bias." But close examination of serious examples of historical research and debate demonstrate that historians engage in detailed historical research involving different kinds of historical evidence and theories from the social sciences, and arrive at well-grounded hypotheses about circumstances in the past. Questions like these turn out to have answers in which we can have a fair degree of confidence: "What was the typical annual food budget for an agricultural worker in England's midlands in 1700?", "Why did Parisian artisans support mobilization against the monarchy in 1848?", "Did the Chinese Cultural Revolution involve deliberate strategies of mass killing?" It will sometimes turn out that there just is not enough historical evidence available to answer a given question, but this is surprisingly uncommon. Debates exist over the interpretation of the facts; but often enough, further research suffices to narrow the range of debate for the next generation. So we have found many reasons to be optimistic about the objectivity and truthfulness of historical knowledge.

This philosophy of history does not consider every problem that arises in the doing of history. I focus instead on the knowledge enterprise: what is involved in knowing (some of) the facts about the past? And what is involved in arriving at satisfactory explanations of these facts? There are other goals that historians have in doing their work, from illustrating a moral point, to entertaining a reading audience with surprising stories about those who came before. But many of the most interesting historical writings fall squarely within the "cognitivist" approach, and their examples support an interpretation of historical knowledge that is evidence-based, rigorous, and post-positivist. On this interpretation, history is a kind of social science, sharing commitments to evidence, rigorous reasoning, and critical use of theory in arriving at true statements about the world. And this is a lofty aspiration for historians and philosophers.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:06PM (-04:00)

What do Americans think?

Tuesday, August 11, 2009

Public opinion research raises many difficult questions. (See an earlier post on this topic.) We would like to know what Americans are thinking about current circumstances and issues; we'd like to know how those attitudes differ across social groups; and we'd like to have a basis for attempting to explain changes in attitudes over time. There is a vast amount of survey research underway at any given time in the United States. For example, the Pew Research Center (link) and the Roper Center (link) provide substantial survey research on social and political attitudes in the United States. But what does it really tell us?



There are, of course, the normal statistical questions about the interpretation of results: what is a representative sample? What is the margin of error? What is the variance of the population around a given topic? But these are the easy questions; there are fairly specific statistical answers to them, no different in kind from analogous questions about quality sampling methods in a manufacturing process. But the harder questions are conceptual. What is the social fact that is being reported when a study finds that "41 percent of Americans believe that they are better off than their parents"? What are we trying to learn when we sample a population of 250 million people with a survey of a set of topically organized questions about perceptions, values, or beliefs?

Let's start constructively. We can suppose, to begin, that each person has a set of values, beliefs, or attitudes on a range of subjects. And let's say that we are interested in measuring some of these attitudes through a survey using questions based on a Likert scale (discussion); the respondent is asked to rate level of agreement with the statement on a five-point scale. Survey responses will display a distribution of answers for the topics on the survey questionnaire. We can describe this distribution in statistical terms; for example, we might find that the mean value of "trust/mistrust my elected officials" for the population is 3.5 with a standard deviation of .8. And we would probably try to group a set of questions around a single attribute (e.g., "social conservative"), and then examine the profile of individuals and groups according to their responses to these grouped questions. But here is the hard question: what really do these descriptive statistics tell us about the population? At bottom, they tell us that, if we were to randomly draw an individual subject and ask the question, there is a high likelihood that the respondent's rating will be within the range defined by the mean for the population plus/minus the standard deviation. If the mean for the question is 3.5 and the standard deviation is .8, then this implies a range from 2.7 to 4.3 -- from "slightly disapprove" to "strongly approve". So this hypothetical study doesn't tell us very much, given the underlying variation in attitudes in the general population; the random person may range from negative to strongly positive. This is where we stand for the population as a whole, and it is not very informative because there is so much variation within the population. In other words: in a fairly specific sense, there is no single answer to the question, "what do Americans think?", because there is so much heterogeneity of attitude and opinion across the full population.

We get more information if we are able to discover that there are sub-groups that show significantly less variance around a given attitudinal position. Some groupings that may have a significant association with attitudes might include: region (northeast, south, midwest, west coast); race/ethnicity; gender; occupational status; education level; income level; age; immigration status; and so forth. And when we break down the data by groups, we may find results like these: men and women have different levels of support for capital punishment; blacks, latinos, and whites have different levels of trust in their elected officials; or well-educated and poorly-educated people differ significantly in their attitudes towards immigration policy. The population distribution is simply the sum of the distributions of attitudes in the composite groups of the society.

This differentiation of results by groups tells us that the attitudes are not randomly distributed across the population, but rather are significantly associated with group membership. And this poses a significant sociological problem for research: what

explains the differences across sub-groups? How are region, gender, race, religion, age, income, or occupation relevant to the formation of attitudes and beliefs, so that groups defined by these characteristics show greater similarity to each other than does the general population?

Now we can take a stab at answering the question we began with: what do Americans think? Our studies may have allowed us to say that there are a few topics where the full population thinks roughly the same thing: there are no significant differences in the distribution of responses from individuals from sub-groups with respect to these topics. ("It is important for the recession to come to an end as early as possible"; "It is important for our country to invest in the education of children".) Second, and more commonly, there is probably a much wider group of topics where we do not find uniformity across groups; instead, African-Americans may offer one distribution of responses and Arab-Americans may offer a significantly different distribution of responses with respect to many topics. Or midwesterners and southerners may offer different distributions. In this case we can't say "Americans think X," but instead "sub-groups A, B, C, ... have significantly different attitudes with respect to this topic." And maybe this is an important possible direction for future research: how to incorporate the representation of differentiation and variation across a population into the interpretation of public opinion research. Are there better ways of ***visualizing*** the population and the modes of variation of attitude and belief that it embodies?

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:34PM (-04:00)

What is a diasporic community?

Thursday, August 13, 2009



There are many diaspora populations in the world: the African diaspora, with populations in the Caribbean, North and South America, and Europe; the Chinese diaspora, from Indonesia and Malaysia to Cuba and the United States and Canada; the Jewish diaspora, from eastern Europe and Spain across all of Europe, to South Africa and North America with historical enclaves in India and China; and so on for numerous national and cultural groups. In some instances these groups maintain a strong sense of collective identity in spite of the physical and social distances that separate various sub-populations, and in some instances the strands of identity have attenuated significantly.

The fact of diaspora is a deeply interesting one, in that it provides a kind of "natural experiment" on the subject of the persistence and plasticity of culture. It is possible to observe the variations and modifications of culture as they occur over time and geography in diasporic populations.

The question I'd like to raise here is whether a diasporic population, an archipelago of separated groups of common national or cultural origin, can be said to constitute a community. Or does a population require a greater intimacy, a deeper social reality of face-to-face contact, in order to constitute a community? And is it possible that the

unavoidable distancing and separation created by diaspora inevitably leads to the fragmentation of community?

I'm led to this question by a current reading of Tai Lands and Thailand: Community and the State in Southeast Asia, a major new contribution to southeast Asian studies edited by Andrew Walker. The authors and contributors are working with an innovative concept of "modern community", deliberately challenging the idea of traditional communities organized around stable peasant villages. And they consider a specific version of this question: do the groups scattered across nations in Southeast Asia that are bound together by a Tai language and a set of overlapping practices and values, constitute a modern community? The book warrants a careful reading, and I will return to it more specifically in a later post. But here let's look at the broader question: can a physically separated set of populations constitute a genuine community?

It won't do to attempt to reduce this question to pure semantics -- "it depends on what we mean by community". Instead, we need to understand the question in a way that makes substantive sense of the ways in which human groups are constituted over time and space. But to make it a substantive and theoretically interesting question we have to specify a few characteristics that we think communities must possess. And this requires some conceptual work that goes beyond ordinary language analysis and stretches into the realm of theory construction. So consider these features of social groups that might be considered crucial for community: a degree of shared collective identity; a degree of shared values, histories, and meanings; an orientation by members towards others as belonging to a valued social group; a degree of communication and interaction among members of the group; and a preparedness to engage in some degree of collective action in support of the group's interests. We can think of examples of social groups that possess some of these characteristics but not others, and in some cases we're inclined to deny that these groups are "communities." So what about diasporic populations?

It is clear that a separated population may certainly possess some of the qualities that paradigm cases of communities exhibit. Separated populations may maintain traditions, beliefs, and practices that extend backward in time to their origin. They may possess memories and myths that serve as a foundation for identifying them as a specific group. They may retain a strong sense of cultural identity with the group, both in the home location and throughout the world.

Moreover, in the context of modern forms of communication and the internet, it is possible for separated populations to maintain significant interaction with members of other sub-populations throughout the world. Indian sub-populations in Michigan, Germany, and Argentina can have significant real-time contact with each other through web pages, Facebook, or Twitter, and these mechanisms can create real interpersonal relationships across space. This is a significant difference in the situation of diaspora in the twenty-first century relative to the nineteenth century: we might hypothesize that there is the possibility of greater cultural unity across a diasporic group today than was the case a century ago.

It is also possible that a diasporic population will display "creolization" -- the incorporation of new cultural elements into the mix of its practices, values, and meanings. This is suggested in the photo above; one imagines that Caribo-Chinese culture is a mix that would seem foreign in Canton. And this raises the possibility of a significant degree of cultural "drift" -- with the result that isolated sub-populations no longer speak the same cultural language. This would seem to cut against the idea of community.

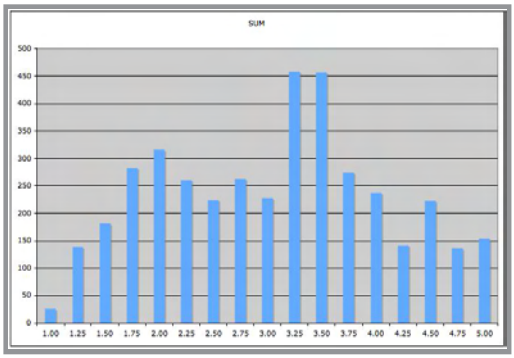
Finally, we can ask whether the motivational ideas mentioned above can persist in a diasporic community. Will members of the Chinese communities in Cuba or Canada retain a high degree of solidarity with their counterparts in China? Will they be willing to support the struggles that are presented to various of the Chinese groups across the world -- repression of Buddhism in China during certain periods, racism against Chinese workers in other countries, ethnic violence against Chinese businessmen in yet other settings? Accepting the point that there are substantial elements of Chinese culture and history that persist in the various Chinese communities around the world -- is this a sufficient basis to generate the willingness to mobilize that core communities possess? To what extent do diasporic populations support the kinds of integrative mechanisms that are needed in order to sustain solidarity across a dispersed group? And what can we say about those mechanisms of solidarity in the circumstances of diaspora?

These questions require careful theoretical and ethnographic work. But I'm inclined to agree with the perspective that Andrew Walker, Nicholas Farrelly, and other contributers to Tai Lands and Thailand put forward: the intertwining mechanisms of popular culture, personal mobility, communications technology, and a reservoir of values and histories that many modern identity groups retain, give a positive basis for thinking that diasporic community is possible in the globalizing world of the twenty-first century.

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:50PM (-04:00)

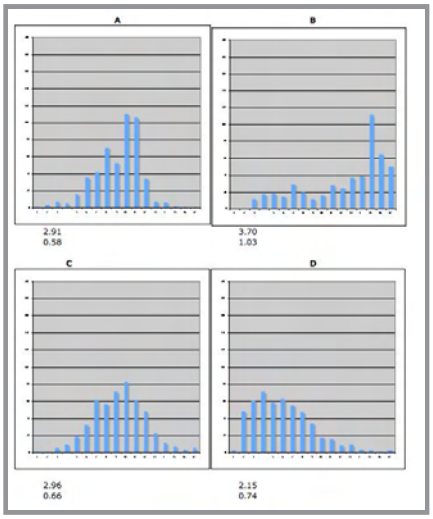
Public opinion--an example

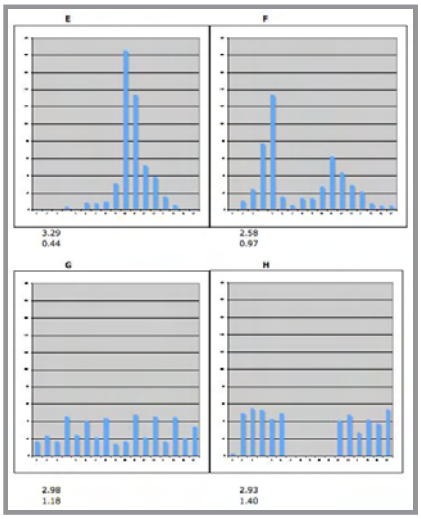
Sunday, August 16, 2009



This posting is a thought experiment that is an effort to probe the underlying components of "public opinion." I've created 8 sample data sets that I have normalized to a 1-5 scale; I've interpreted the scores as a Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree); I've assumed that each data set represents a distinct sub-population within a mass population; and I've examined the disaggregated and aggregated results in a simple spreadsheet model. This is an effort to push the questions raised in an earlier post a bit further: how do the tools of survey research allow us to answer questions about how a mass population thinks and feels about a given set of issues? The central observation there was that public opinion needs to be disaggregated around groups that have greater homogeneity. Here I am undertaking to illustrate how that disaggregation can shed greater light on the nature of public opinion.

So -- suppose we have a public that consists of eight distinct and mutually exclusive groups, A through H. Suppose we want to evaluate their attitude towards some important issue -- let's say, immigration reform. And suppose we've designed a study with a number of Likert-scaled questions that are combined and reaggregated to a 1-5 scale from "strongly oppose (1) to strongly support (5)". Finally, suppose the population as a whole shows a distribution represented in the large panel above, "SUM". The whole population





represented in the top panel is simply the sum of the sub-groups A-H.

The hypothetical study is pretty uninformative up to this point. The average value for the population as a whole is 2.94 -- almost exactly in the middle of the scale. And with a standard deviation of 1.02, there is a substantial spread of opinion around the mean. We can be confident that 95% of the population falls within two standard deviations of the mean -- roughly between 1 and 5. So the aggregate data we have for the population as a whole is almost wholly uninformative -- as suggested in the earlier post. It tells us that the average voter is neutral on the issue and that the population ranges between extremely opposed and extremely favorable.

But now suppose that we are able to break out the data for the eight sub-groups, and we find that their attitudes are described in panels A through H. Here we can sometimes provide more specific answers to the question, what does Group X think about the issue?

Here we find more useful information, in that the groups have very different profiles of response to the issue. Group A is slightly unfavorable to the issue, with a standard deviation of a little more than half a point. Group B is strongly favorable (3.70) but with a significant distribution to the left with a standard deviation of a full point. Group D is the most negative, with an average score of 2.15 and a standard deviation of .74. Groups F and H are the most interesting, in that they are bimodal, with peaks around "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree" and almost no one indifferent. (The mean value for Group H is 2.93, right in the middle of the scale -- but there are no individuals in this range!) Given the bimodal nature of these two populations, we're encouraged to explore the idea that there may be a distinguishing characteristic within the group that accounts for the divided attitudes. Group C looks pretty much like the population as a whole; and Group G is distributed evenly across the whole spectrum of opinion, with no concentration around any particular position.

So this simple thought experiment seems to validate the conclusion proposed in the prior posting: in a population consisting of a number of heterogeneous groups, it is important to attempt to disaggregate the results of opinion research in a way that allows us to examine the sub-groups separately. And the statistics describing the sum of the sub-groups are likely to be uninformative; pooling the data from the eight subgroups creates pretty much of a broad, normal distribution of responses. The real insight comes in when we are able to differentiate the population into a number of sociologically real sub-groups with their own more distinctive profiles of attitudes and responses. And more important, perhaps this experiment illustrates a different way of conceptualizing public opinion: not as a characteristic distributed in a gradient across a population, but rather a composite characteristic reflecting underlying groups with their own distributions of attitudes and

feelings.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:04PM (-04:00)

Social mobility?

Wednesday, August 19, 2009



We often think of the United States as a place with a lot of social mobility. What exactly does this mean? And is it true? Ironically, the answer appears to be a fairly decisive "no." In fact, here's a graph from a 2005 New York Times series on income mobility that shows that the United States ranks second to last among Great Britain, US, France, Canada, and Denmark when it comes to the rate of income improvement over four generations for poor families. And here are two very interesting recent studies that come to similar conclusions -- a report on social mobility by the Center for American Progress and a 2007 academic study by researchers at Kent State, Wisconsin and Syracuse. Here is how Professor Kathryn Wilson, associate professor of economics at Kent State University, summarizes the main finding of the latter study: “People like to think of America as the land of opportunities. The irony is that our country actually has less social mobility and more inequality than most developed countries” (link).

Basically social mobility refers to the likelihood that a child will grow up into adulthood and attain a higher level of economic and social wellbeing than his/her family of origin. Is there a correlation between the socioeconomic status (SES) of an adult and his/her family of origin? Do poor people tend to have poor parents? And do poor parents tend to have children who end up as poor adults later in life? Does low SES in the parents' circumstances at a certain time in life -- say, the age of 30 -- serve to predict the SES of the child at the same age?

The fact of social mobility is closely tied to facts about social inequality and facts about social class. In a highly egalitarian society there would be little need for social mobility. And in a society with a fairly persistent class structure there is also relatively little social mobility -- because there is some set of mechanisms that limit entry and exit into the various classes. In the simplest terms, a social class is a sub-population within a society in which parents and their adult children tend to share similar occupations and economic circumstances of life. It is possible for a society to have substantial inequalities but also a substantial degree of social mobility. But there are good sociological reasons to suspect that this is a fairly unstable situation; groups with a significant degree of wealth and power are also likely to be in a position to arrange social institutions in such a way that privilege is transmitted across generations. (Here are several earlier postings on class; post, post, post.)

A crucial question to pose as we think about class and social mobility, is the issue of the social mechanisms through which children are launched into careers and economic positions in society. A pure meritocracy is a society in which specific social mechanisms distinguish between high-achieving and low-achieving individuals, assigning high-achieving individuals to desirable positions in society. A pure plutocracy is a society in

which holders of wealth provide advantages to their children, ensuring that their adult children become the wealth-holders of the next generation. A caste system assigns children and young adults to occupations based on their ascriptive status. In each case there are fairly visible social mechanisms through which children from specific social environments are tracked into specific groups of roles in society. The sociological question is how these mechanisms work; in other words, we want to know about the "microfoundations" of the system of economic and social placement across generations.

In a society in which there is substantial equality of opportunity across all social groups, we would expect there to be little or no correlation between the SES of the parent and the child. We might have a very simple theory of the factors that determine an adult's SES in a society with extensive equality of opportunity: the sum total of the individual's talents, personality traits, and motivation strongly influence success in the pursuit of a career. (Chance also plays a role.) If talent is randomly distributed across the population, rich and poor; if all children are exposed to similar opportunities for the development of their talents; and if all walks of life are open to talent without regard to social status -- then we should find a zero correlation between parents' SES and adult child's SES. So, in this simple model, evidence of correlation with SES of parent and child would also be evidence of failures of equality of opportunity.

However, the situation is more complicated. Success in career is probably influenced by factors other than talent: for example, personal values, practical interests, personality qualities like perseverence, and cultural values. And these qualities are plainly influenced by the child's family and neighborhood environment. So if there is such a thing as a "culture of poverty" or a "culture of entrepreneurism", then the social fact of the child's immersion in this culture will be part of the explanation of the child's performance in adulthood -- whatever opportunities were available to the child. (French sociologist Didier Lapeyronnie makes a point along these lines about the segregation of immigrant communities that exists in French society today; post, post.) So this is a fact about family background that is causally relevant to eventual SES and independent of the opportunity structure of the society.

But another relevant fact is the sharply differentiated opportunities that exist for children and young adults from various social groups in many societies, including the United States. How is schooling provided to children across all income groups? What kind and quality of healthcare is available across income and race? To what extent are job opportunities made available to all individuals without regard to status, race, or income? How are urban people treated relative to suburban or rural people when it comes to the availability of important social opportunities? It is plain that there are substantial differences across many societies when it comes to questions like these.

Education is certainly one of the chief mechanisms of social mobility in any society; it involves providing the child and young adult with the tools necessary to translate personal qualities and talents into productive activity. So inequalities in access to education constitute a central barrier to social mobility. (See this earlier post for a discussion of some efforts to assess the impact of higher education on social mobility for disadvantaged people.)

And it seems all too clear that children have very unequal educational opportunities throughout the United States, from pre-school to university. These inequalities correlate with socially significant facts like family income, place of residence, and race; and they correlate in turn with the career paths and eventual SES of the young people who are

placed in one or another of these educational settings. Race is a particularly prevalent form of structural inequalities of opportunity in the US; multiple studies have shown how slowly patterns of racial segregation are changing in the cities of the United States (post). And along with segregation comes limitation on opportunities associated with health, education, and employment.

So the findings mentioned above, documenting the relatively limited degree of social mobility that currently exists in the United States by international standards, are understandable when we consider the entrenched structures that exist in our country determining the opportunities available to children and young adults. Race, poverty, and geography conspire to create recurring patterns of low SES across generations of families in the United States. (See an earlier post on Douglas Massey's analysis of the mechanisms of race and inequality in the US.) And limited social mobility is the predictable result.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:16PM (-04:00)

Patient safety -- Canada and France

Saturday, August 22, 2009



Patient safety is a key issue in managing and assessing a regional or national health system. There are very sizable variations in patient safety statistics across hospitals, with significantly higher rates of infection and mortality in some institutions than others. Why is this? And what can be done in order to improve the safety performance of low-safety institutions, and to improve the overall safety performance of the hospital environment nationally?

Previous posts have made the point that safety is the net effect of a complex system within a hospital or chemical plant, including institutions, rules, practices, training, supervision, and day-to-day behavior by staff and supervisors (post, post). And experts on hospital safety agree that improvements in safety require careful analysis of patient processes in order to redesign processes so as to make infections, falls, improper medications, and unnecessary mortality less likely. Institutional design and workplace culture have to change if safety performance is to improve consistently and sustainably. (Here is a posting providing a bit more discussion of the institutions of a hospital; post.)

But here is an important question: what are the features of the social and legal environment that will make it most likely that hospital administrators will commit themselves to a thorough-going culture and management of safety? What incentives or constraints need to exist to offset the impulses of cost-cutting and status quo management that threaten to undermine patient safety? What will drive the institutional change in a health system that improving patient safety requires?

Several measures seem clear. One is state regulation of hospitals. This exists in every state; but the effectiveness of regulatory regimes varies widely across context. So understanding the dynamics of regulation and enforcement is a crucial step to improving hospital quality and patient safety. The oversight of rigorous hospital accreditation

agencies is another important factor for improvement. For example, the Joint Commission accredits thousands of hospitals in the United States (web page) through dozens of accreditation and certification programs. Patient safety is the highest priority underlying Joint Commission standards of accreditation. So regulation and the formulation of standards are part of the answer. But a particularly important policy tool for improving safety performance is the mandatory collection and publication of safety statistics, so that potential patients can decide between hospitals on the basis of their safety performance. Publicity and transparency are crucial parts of good management behavior; and secrecy is a refuge of poor performance in areas of public concern such as safety, corruption, or rule-setting. (See an earlier post on the relationship between publicity and corruption.)

But here we have a little bit of a conundrum: achieving mandatory publication of safety statistics is politically difficult, because hospitals have a business interest in keeping these data private. So there was a lot of resistance to mandatory reporting of basic patient safety data in the US over the past twenty years. Fortunately, the public interest in having these data readily available has largely prevailed, and hospitals are now required to publish a broader and broader range of data on patient safety, including hospital-induced infection rates, ventilator-induced pneumonias, patient falls, and mortality rates. Here is a useful tool from USA Today that lets the public and the patient gather information about his/her hospital options and how these compare with other hospitals regionally and nationally. This is an effective accountability mechanism that inevitably drives hospitals towards better performance.

Canada has been very active in this area. Here is a website published by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. The province requires hospitals to report a number of factors that are good indicators of patient safety: several kinds of hospital-born infections; central-line primary bloodstream infection and ventilator-associated pneumonia; surgical-site infection prevention activity; and hospital-standardized mortality ratio. The user can explore the site and find that there are in fact wide variations across hospitals in the province. This is likely to change patient choice; but it also serves as an instant guide for regulatory agencies and local hospital administrators as they attempt to focus attention on poor management practices and institutional arrangements. (It would be helpful for the purpose of comparison if the data could be easily downloaded into a spreadsheet.)

On first principles, it seems likely that any country that has a hospital system in which the safety performance of each hospital is kept secret will also show a wide distribution of patient safety outcomes across institutions, and will have an overall safety record that is much lower than it could be. This is because secrecy gives hospital administrators the ability to conceal the risks their institutions impose on patients through bad practices. So publicity and regular publication of patient safety information seems to be a necessary precondition to maintaining a high-safety hospital system.

But here is the crucial point: many countries continue to permit secrecy when it comes to hospital safety. In particular, this seems to be true in France. It seems that the French medical and hospital system continues to display a very high degree of secrecy and opacity when it comes to patient safety. In fact, anecdotal information about French hospitals suggests a wide range of levels of hospital-born infections in different hospitals. Hospital-born infections (infections nosocomiales) are an important and rising cause of patient illness and morbidity. And there are well-known practices and technologies that substantially reduce the incidence of these infections. But the implementation of these

practices requires strong commitment and dedication at the unit level; and this degree of commitment is unlikely to occur in an environment of secrecy.

In fact, I have not been able to discover any of the tools that are now available for measuring patient safety in hospitals in North America in application to hospitals in France. But without this regular reporting, there is no mechanism through which institutions with bad safety performance can be "ratcheted" up into better practices and better safety outcomes. The impression that is given in the French medical system is that the doctors and the medical authorities are sacrosanct; patients are not expected to question their judgment, and the state appears not to require institutions to report and publish fundamental safety information. Patients have very little power and the media so far seem to have paid little attention to the issues of patient safety in French hospitals. This 2007 article in LePoint seems to be a first for France in that it provides quantitative rankings of a large number of hospitals in their treatment of a number of diseases. But it does not provide the kinds of safety information -- infections, falls, pneumonias -- that are core measures of patient safety.

There is a French state agency, OFFICE NATIONAL D'INDEMNISATION DES ACCIDENTS MÉDICAUX (ONIAM), that provides compensation to patients who can demonstrate that their injuries are the result of hospital-induced causes, including especially hospital-associated infections. But it appears that this agency is restricted to after-the-fact recognition of hospital errors rather than pro-active programs designed to reduce hospital errors. And here is a French government web site devoted to the issue of hospital infections. It announces a multi-pronged strategy for controlling the problem of infections nosocomiales, including the establishment of a national program of surveillance of the rates of these infections. So far, however, I have not been able to locate web resources that would provide hospital-level data about infection rates.

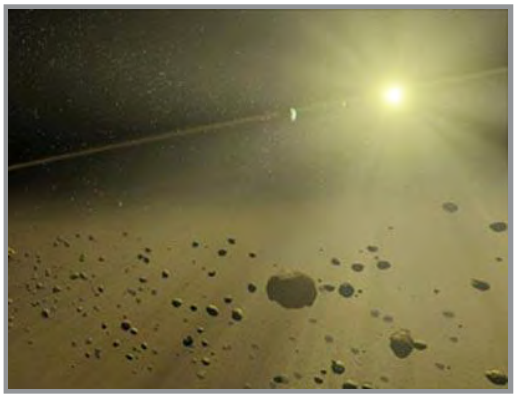
So I am offering a hypothesis that I would be very happy to find to be refuted: that the French medical establishment continues to be bureaucratically administered with very little public exposure of actual performance when it comes to patient safety. And without this system of publicity, it seems very likely that there are wide and tragic variations across French hospitals with regard to patient safety.

Are there French medical sociologists and public health researchers who are working on the issue of patient safety in French hospitals? Can good contemporary French sociologists like Céline Béraud, Baptiste Coulmont, and Philippe Masson offer some guidance on this topic (post)? If readers are aware of databases and patient safety research programs in France that are relevant to these topics, I would be very happy to hear about them.

Update: Baptiste Coulmont (blog) passes on this link to Réseau d'alerte d'investigations et de surveillance des *infections* nosocomia (RAISIN) within the Institut de veille sanitaire. The site provides research reports and regional assessments of nosocomia incidence. It does not appear to provide data at the level of the specific hospitals and medical centers. Baptiste refers also to work by Jean Peneff, a French medical sociologist and author of La France malade de ses médecins. Here is a link to a subsequent research report by Peneff. Thanks, Baptiste.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:13PM (-04:00)

Revisiting Popper

Tuesday, August 25, 2009



Karl Popper's most commonly cited contribution to philosophy and the philosophy of science is his theory of falsifiability (The Logic of Scientific Discovery, Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge). (Stephen Thornton has a very nice essay on Popper's philosophy in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.) In its essence, this theory is an alternative to "confirmation theory." Contrary to positivist philosophy of science, Popper doesn't think that scientific theories can be confirmed by more and more positive empirical evidence. Instead, he argues that the logic of scientific research is a critical method in which scientists do their best to "falsify" their hypotheses and theories. And we are rationally justified in accepting theories that have been severely tested through an effort to show they are false -- rather than accepting theories for which we have accumulated a body of corroborative evidence. Basically, he argues that scientists are in the business of asking this question: what is the most unlikely consequence of this hypothesis? How can I find evidence in nature that would demonstrate that the hypothesis is false? Popper criticizes theorists like Marx and Freud who attempt to accumulate evidence that corroborates their theories (historical materialism, ego transference) and praises theorists like Einstein who honestly confront the unlikely consequences their theories appear to have (perihelion of Mercury).

At bottom, I think many philosophers of science have drawn their own conclusions about both falsifiability and confirmation theory: there is no recipe for measuring the empirical credibility of a given scientific theory, and there is no codifiable "inductive logic" that might replace the forms of empirical reasoning that we find throughout the history of science. Instead, we need to look in greater detail at the epistemic practices of real research communities in order to see the nuanced forms of empirical reasoning that are brought forward for the evaluation of scientific theories. Popper's student, Imre Lakatos, makes one effort at this (Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes; Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge); so does William Newton-Smith (The Rationality of Science), and much of the philosophy of science that has proceeded under the rubrics of philosophy of physics, biology, or economics is equally attentive to the specific epistemic practices of real working scientific traditions. So "falsifiability" doesn't seem to have a lot to add to a theory of scientific rationality at this point in the philosophy of science. In particular, Popper's grand critique of Marx's social science on the grounds that it is "unfalsifiable" just seems to miss the point; surely Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, or Tocqueville have important social science insights that can't be refuted by deriding them as "unfalsifiable". And Popper's impatience with Marxism makes one doubt his objectivity as a sympathetic reader of Marx's work.

Of greater interest is another celebrated idea that Popper put forward, his critique of “historicism” in The Poverty of Historicism (1957). And unlike the theory of falsifiability, I think that there are important insights in this discussion that are even more useful today than they were in 1957, when it comes to conceptualizing the nature of the social

sciences. So people who are a little dismissive of Popper may find that there are novelties here that they will find interesting.

Popper characterizes historicism as “an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns’, the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history” (3). Historicists differ from naturalists, however, in that they believe that the laws that govern history are themselves historically changeable. So a given historical epoch has its own laws and generalizations – unlike the laws of nature that are uniform across time and space. So historicism involves combining two ideas: prediction of historical change based on a formulation of general laws or patterns; and a recognition that historical laws and patterns are themselves variable over time, in reaction to human agency.

Popper’s central conclusion is that large predictions of historical or social outcomes are inherently unjustifiable -- a position taken up several times here (post, post). He finds that “holistic” or “utopian” historical predictions depend upon assumptions that simply cannot be justified; instead, he prefers “piecemeal” predictions and interventions (21). What Popper calls “historicism” amounts to the aspiration that there should be a comprehensive science of society that permits prediction of whole future states of the social system, and also supports re-engineering of the social system if we choose. In other words, historicism in his description sounds quite a bit like social physics: the aspiration of finding a theory that describes and predicts the total state of society.

The kind of history with which historicists wish to identify sociology looks not only backwards to the past but also forwards to the future. It is the study of the operative forces and, above all, of the laws of social development. (45)
Popper rejects the feasibility or appropriateness of this vision of social knowledge, and he is right to do so. The social world is not amenable to this kind of general theoretical representation.

The social thinker who serves as Popper’s example of this kind of holistic social theory is Karl Marx. According to Popper, Marx’s Capital (Marx 1977 [1867]) is intended to be a general theory of capitalist society, providing a basis for predicting its future and its specific internal changes over time. And Marx’s theory of historical materialism (“History is a history of class conflict,” “History is the unfolding of the contradictions between the forces and relations of production”; (Communist Manifesto, Preface to a Contribution to Political Economy)) is Popper’s central example of a holistic theory of history. And it is Marx’s theory of revolution that provides a central example for Popper under the category of utopian social engineering. In The Scientific Marx I argue that Popper’s representation of Marx’s social science contribution is flawed; rather, Marx's ideas about capitalism take the form of an eclectic combination of sociology, economic theory, historical description, and institutional analysis. It is also true, however, that Marx writes in Capital that he is looking to identify the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production.

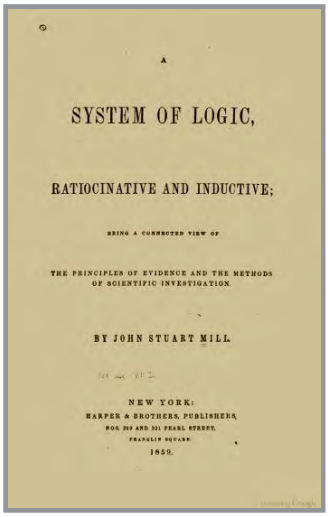
Whatever the accuracy of Popper's interpretation of Marx, his more general point is certainly correct. Sociology and economics cannot provide us with general theories that permit the prediction of large historical change. Popper’s critique of historicism, then, can be rephrased as a compelling critique of the model of the natural sciences as a meta-theory for the social and historical sciences. History and society are not law-governed systems for which we might eventually hope to find exact and comprehensive theories. Instead, they are the heterogeneous, plastic, and contingent compound of actions,

structures, causal mechanisms, and conjunctures that elude systematization and prediction. And this conclusion brings us back to the centrality of agent-centered explanations of historical outcomes.

I chose the planetary photo above because it raises a number of complexities about theoretical systems, comprehensive models, and prediction that need sorting out. Popper observes that metaphors from astronomy have had a great deal of sway with historicists: "Modern historicists have been greatly impressed by the success of Newtonian theory, and especially by its power of forecasting the position of the planets a long time ahead" (36). The photo is of a distant planetary system in the making. The amount of debris in orbit makes it clear that it would be impossible to model and predict the behavior of this system over time; this is an n-body gravitational problem that even Newton despaired to solve. What physics does succeed in doing is identifying the processes and forces that are relevant to the evolution of this system over time -- without being able to predict its course in even gross form. This is a good example of a complex, chaotic system where prediction is impossible.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:05AM (-04:00)

John Stuart Mill as a social science founder

Monday, August 31, 2009


A

SYSTEM OF LOGIC,

RATIOCINATIVE AND INDUCTIVE;

BEING A CONNECTED VIEW OF

THE PRINCIPLES OF EVIDENCE AND THE METHODS OF SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION.

BY JOHN STUART MILL.

NEW YORK:
HARPER & BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS,
NOS. 329 AND 331 PEARL STREET,
FRANKLIN SQUARE.
1859.

John Stuart Mill was Britain's leading thinker when it came to issues having to do with logic and scientific knowledge in the mid-nineteenth century. His System of Logic was first published in 1843 and was reprinted in numerous editions, and it constituted a comprehensive treatment of scientific knowledge and inference within the empiricist tradition. The book devoted an entire section to the logic of what Mill referred to as the "moral sciences" (Book VI, published separately as The Logic of the Moral Sciences). He defined the moral sciences as those areas of study having to do with human dispositions, character, and action, extending from psychology to social science. The conception of social science knowledge that he presents has had a deep impact on subsequent thinking about "scientific" social analysis and is worth examining again. (Here is a link to the Gutenberg etext edition of the System of Logic.)

Mill developed a general vision of science that was derived from the best current examples of progress in the natural sciences, and he then applied this vision to the effort to understand human and social phenomena scientifically. Putting his vision simply, science consists of the discovery of general causal laws based on systematic empirical observation. It lays the framework for a positivist conception of social science, and it prepares a charge of "Not scientific!" to social scientists who deviate from these central positivist tenets.

The social sciences barely existed in 1843; so it is intriguing to see how Mill thought about the task of creating a social science. For one thing, he had virtually no good examples to work with; political economy was just about the only significant piece of rigorous social analysis that existed. The topics considered by modern sociology were only beginning to gain rigorous attention, and political science took the form of analysis of

the interests and policies of specific nation states. Mill was very much interested in the work of Auguste Comte -- the thinker who introduced both "sociology" and "positivism" into the philosophical lexicon, and Mill wrote a critical essay about Comte's philosophy in 1865 (Auguste Comte & Positivism). But Comte's writings did not provide good examples of detailed empirical study of social phenomena. One of Comte's central goals was to discover laws of development for civilizations -- a far cry from the way we would define the focus of sociology today. Here is a summary definition of the science of society that Mill offers:

Next after the science of individual man comes the science of man in society--of the actions of collective masses of mankind, and the various phenomena which constitute social life. (Book VI, chap. VI, sect. 1)

In several earlier postings I've referred to the important role that philosophical ideas played in defining the aims and goals of the social sciences. Mill's writings certainly fall in the category of foundational, guiding ideas. So let's see what guiding ideas are expressed in the System of Logic for the social sciences.

Prediction. Mill opens his discussion of the social sciences by quoting a passage from Condorcet with evident approval on the role of prediction in the sciences and history. Condorcet draws an explicit parallel between the predictive capacity of some of the natural sciences (e.g. astronomy) and the development of history; if history is made by men, then we should be able to learn the laws of behavior and use them to predict history (Book VI). This captures Mill's conception of social science: social developments are the result of individual actions and behaviors; individual actions are subject to laws that can be discovered in psychology and ethology (the science of human development); and therefore, in principle, historical outcomes are governed by these laws as well. So the goal of the social sciences is to discover the laws of behavior that permit us to predict behavior and social outcomes.

Laws and regularities. Mill firmly believed that science involves the discovery of laws and regularities. A body of observations that lacks organizing regularities cannot be considered to be a science. So for Mill, social science research too must involve the discovery of laws of social behavior and social dynamics. "Are the actions of human beings, like all other natural events, subject to invariable laws? Does that constancy of causation, which is the foundation of every scientific theory of successive phenomena, really obtain among them?" (Book VI, chap. I, sect. 2) Mill's answer, ultimately, is affirmative: there are such laws of individual behavior and choice. In reflecting on the status of weather phenomena he writes:

Yet no one doubts that the phenomena depend on laws, and that these must be derivative laws resulting from known ultimate laws, those of heat, electricity, vaporization, and elastic fluids. (Book VI, chap. III, sect. 1)

He distinguishes between exact sciences (where a few general laws govern virtually all variation) and inexact sciences (where we need both fundamental laws and secondary influences in order to explain observed behavior). His example of an inexact science is tidology.

By combining, however, the exact laws of the greater causes, and of such of the minor ones as are sufficiently known, with such empirical laws or such approximate generalizations respecting the miscellaneous variations as can be obtained by specific observation, we can lay down general propositions which will be true in the main, and on which, with allowance for the degree of their probable inaccuracy, we may safely ground

our expectations and our conduct. (Book VI, chap. III, sect. 1)
And this model seems to capture his entire conception of scientific understanding: we understand a phenomenon when we have identified the primary causes that bring it about (and the laws that correspond to these); and the secondary influences that disturb or modify the workings of the primary causes (with their laws as well).

The science of human nature is of this description. It falls far short of the standard of exactness now realized in Astronomy; but there is no reason that it should not be as much a science as Tidology is, or as Astronomy was when its calculations had only mastered the main phenomena, but not the perturbations.... (Book VI, chap. III, sect. 2)

The subject, then, of Psychology is the uniformities of succession, the laws, whether ultimate or derivative, according to which one mental state succeeds another, is caused by, or at least, is caused to follow, another. (Book VI, chap. IV, sect. 3)
So Mill believes that a science of behavior is possible, issuing in a set of regularities of behavior. And he believes that we can also arrive at a science of development, which he refers to as "ethology"; this is a description of the ways in which circumstances influence individual character. Ethology too issues in laws and regularities, according to Mill.

A science is thus formed, to which I would propose to give the name of Ethology, or the Science of Character, from ἦθος, a word more nearly corresponding to the term "character" as I here use it, than any other word in the same language. (Book VI, chap. V, sect. 4)
This leads to a general conception of how social change works:

All phenomena of society are phenomena of human nature, generated by the action of outward circumstances upon masses of human beings; and if, therefore, the phenomena of human thought, feeling, and action are subject to fixed laws, the phenomena of society can not but conform to fixed laws. (Book VI, chap. VI, sect. 2)
Methodological individualism. So laws govern individual actions. What about social phenomena? Mill sees social phenomena as the combination of multiple individual actions. And he believes that it is self-evident that the laws of the compound derive from the workings of the laws of the parts.

The laws of the phenomena of society are, and can be, nothing but the laws of the actions and passions of human beings united together in the social state. Men, however, in a state of society are still men; their actions and passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature. Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance. (Book VI, chap. VII, sect. 1)
So social laws and regularities ought to be explained on the basis of individual-level laws and regularities. This is a pretty clear statement of the principle of methodological individualism.

Parallel to the assumption of methodological individualism is a strong inclination on Mill's part towards the idea of inter-theoretic reduction: the laws of the compound should be reducible to the action of the laws of the composing entities. So social laws should be reducible to laws of psychology, combined with factual descriptions of the particular circumstances that surround given societies.

Methods of agreement and difference. Quite a bit of attention has been directed to Mill's methods of agreement and difference within the field of comparative historical sociology. It is startling, therefore, to realize that Mill himself felt that these families of methods were

not relevant or applicable to social phenomena. Appeal to these methods in the social sciences, Mill maintains, is to succumb to the fallacy of the "chemical or experimental method" in the social sciences (Book VI, chap. VII, sect. 1). The problem is that the conditions for the application of these methods are impossibly stringent when we come to consideration of the causes of complex social events like revolutions or civil wars. There are always innumerable differences between the cases; so the methods of difference and similarity cannot direct us to the unique differentiating causes.

The Method of Difference in either of its forms being thus completely out of the question, there remains the Method of Agreement. But we are already aware of how little value this method is, in cases admitting Plurality of Causes; and social phenomena are those in which the plurality prevails in the utmost possible extent. (Book VI, chap. VII, sect. 4)
Mill offers an alternative preferred method, the deductive method. "However complex the phenomena, all their sequences and co-existences result from the laws of the separate elements" (Book VI, chap. IX, sect. 1). The deductive method involves identifying these separate elements; discovering their fundamental properties and regularities; and deducing the interactions that occur among them to produce the complex outcome.

The Social Science, therefore (which, by a convenient barbarism, has been termed Sociology), is a deductive science; not, indeed, after the model of geometry, but after that of the more complex physical sciences. It infers the law of each effect from the laws of causation on which that effect depends; not, however, from the law merely of one cause, as in the geometrical method but by considering all the causes which conjunctly influence the effect, and compounding their laws with one another. (Book VI, chap. IX, sect. 1)
The plurality of causes that is explicit in the deductive method leads Mill to qualify the scope of prediction that is possible in the social sciences. Because it is not possible to precisely determine the joint effect of multiple causes, predictions are generally approximate rather than exact.

It is evident, in the first place, that Sociology, considered as a system of deductions a priori, can not be a science of positive predictions, but only of tendencies. We may be able to conclude, from the laws of human nature applied to the circumstances of a given state of society, that a particular cause will operate in a certain manner unless counteracted; but we can never be assured to what extent or amount it will so operate, or affirm with certainty that it will not be counteracted. (Book VI, chap. IX, sect. 2)
(Daniel Hausman gives a good exposition of this method of explanation in "The Deductive Method" (Essays on Philosophy and Economic Methodology).)

The aim of sociology. Mill believes that the most fundamental aim of sociology is to derive a set of governing laws for the whole of society from the laws of individual action and ethology, and to permit the scientist to explain the particular features of the total state of society. He describes the "state of society" in these terms:

In order to conceive correctly the scope of this general science, and distinguish it from the subordinate departments of sociological speculation, it is necessary to fix the ideas attached to the phrase, "A State of Society." What is called a state of society, is the simultaneous state of all the greater social facts or phenomena. Such are: the degree of knowledge, and of intellectual and moral culture, existing in the community, and in every class of it; the state of industry, of wealth and its distribution; the habitual occupations of the community; their division into classes, and the relations of those classes to one another; the common beliefs which they entertain on all the subjects most important to mankind, and the degree of assurance with which those beliefs are held; their tastes, and

the character and degree of their aesthetic development; their form of government, and the more important of their laws and customs. (Book VI, chap. X, sect. 2)

This sounds pretty much like what we might call "macro-sociology" -- an effort to describe and explain the large-scale features of a given society. So the goal of sociology is to discover laws of behavior at the individual level that permit deduction of the features of society in which these individuals live, given the current circumstances. Sociology should provide a theory providing an understanding of the broad sweep of history, the totality of human individual and social actions.

The doctrine which the preceding chapters were intended to enforce and elucidate--that the collective series of social phenomena, in other words the course of history, is subject to general laws, which philosophy may possibly detect--has been familiar for generations to the scientific thinkers of the Continent, and has for the last quarter of a century passed out of their peculiar domain, into that of newspaers and ordinary political discussion. (Book VI, chap. XI, sect. 1)

A sociological imagination? In spite of Mill's evident interest in the foundations of a science of society, he shows little evidence of possessing a lively sociological imagination. He does not seem to have paid much attention to the actual social processes and changes underway in Britain in the beginning of the nineteenth century. There is almost no description or comment concerning the social circumstances of nineteenth-century Britain -- subjects that were of great interest to Mill as a reformer. It is striking to compare his writings with those of Tocqueville, who observes and conceptualizes a wide range of concrete social activity and behavior. Mill remains on a highly abstract plane: are there social laws? How do social laws relate to individual laws? How does evidence support or undermine various social hypotheses? (See an earlier posting on Tocqueville.)

So here we find almost all the elements that came to define the framework of positivist social science: the doctrine of the unity of science, the insistence on the primacy of the discovery of laws and regularities, the doctrines of methodological individualism and reductionism, and the assumption that the natural sciences provide a regulative guide to the social sciences (naturalism). Mill's writings about the social sciences set the stage for the development of a positivist paradigm that impaired the disciplines from adopting the fluidity and pluralistic viewpoints that they would need.

The shortcomings of Mill's philosophy of social science derive from his most basic assumptions. He treats the creation of a science of society as primarily a methodological and epistemic problem; he takes it for granted that the "phenomena" of the social world are entirely analogous to the phenomena of the natural world. But this is an error of social ontology. Social phenomena are not relevantly analogous to natural phenomena. "States" are not like "metals", and social processes like contention are not like physical processes of mixing and heating. And if Mill had devoted more of his analytical intelligence to the problem of discovering, analyzing, and explaining the actual social phenomena of contemporary Britain, he might well have been drawn to a less positivist construction of sociology.

(Here are several earlier postings that are relevant to this topic:

- philosophical frameworks of the social sciences link
- how does philosophy help guide the social sciences? link
- why a philosophy of social science? link
- proto-social inquiry link
- components of positivism link

- a non-naturalistic approach link

The unifying thread to these posts is the question, to what extent did philosophical presuppositions influence the development of the social sciences?)
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:55AM (-04:00)

Sociological knowledge

Wednesday, September 02, 2009



Is it possible to say anything useful and general about the subject matter and scope of sociology? Could we say, for example, that sociology is the discipline that uses empirical methods to arrive at hypotheses and theories about major social groups, social processes, and social patterns? Or does a definition like this suffer from both too much abstraction and too much specificity?

This isn't necessarily a question a working sociologist would ask him- or herself. But it is a good question for a philosopher of the social sciences, and possibly for a critical observer of the history and current practice of sociology as well. Essentially, the question is this: what do we want from a science of sociology? What should a good sociological theory accomplish? What standards should be used in assessing the success of a sociological theory?

Why do I say that working sociologists have no special reason to be interested in the question? Because normally a sociologist has already located him- or herself in a specific research field; has already mastered a set of research methods and strategies; has already picked out some key examples of interesting sociological problems for research. This has happened through graduate education, the influence of mentors, the practices and content of key journals, and the researcher's own intellectual and theoretical development. So the working sociologist doesn't need to ask the foundational questions; a range of mid-level research questions and methods already fills that need. This is related to the point that Thomas Kuhn (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions), Norwood Hanson (Patterns of Discovery), and Imre Lakatos (The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes) made about physics: the practicing physicist exists with a paradigm or a research tradition that defines the topics and methods that the researcher pursues. And we don't have to go the whole way with Kuhn in thinking that scientific traditions are inherently incommensurable or that the concepts and methods of a paradigm fundamentally prevent the scientist from perceiving the world differently, in order to recognize the practical truth of his description of scientific training: science is a practical cognitive activity, defined by assumptions and practices that are specific to a research tradition. Demographers, phenomenological sociologists, and comparative researchers would all answer the question, "What is sociology?", quite differently.

The critical observer of current scientific work can take a different perspective. He/she can attempt to survey the many sub-disciplines and discover some interesting trends about the ambitions of the current generation of sociologists; the critical observer can attempt to identify areas of important innovation, new conceptual breakthroughs, and new ways of formulating research questions. Craig Calhoun (Contemporary Sociological

Theory), Andrew Abbott (Chaos of Disciplines), Mayer Zald (Sociology as a discipline: Quasi-science and quasi-humanities), and Julia Adams (Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology) are particularly gifted at this, and in each case they shed some new light on the intellectual ambitions and innovations that are possible in defining contemporary sociological inquiry. On this approach, the observer is in a position to take the measure of the social sciences as they are actually developing, capturing the diversity of approaches as well, perhaps, as some common threads of empirical and theoretical reasoning.

Philosophers are interested in considering general questions like these because it reflects a basic intellectual strategy with a long tradition in philosophy: to attempt to formulate a description or definition of a certain kind of intellectual pursuit, and then to consider the means through which this goal might be satisfied. So if we wanted to raise the question, which ethical theory is best?, a philosopher might well begin by asking: what intellectual and practical role does ethical theory play? And what standards of evaluation are appropriate for comparing the strengths and weaknesses of different ethical theories (Kantianism, Aristotelianism, utilitarianism, ...)? The arguments would then turn on the merits of one or another specification of the roles and standards of ethical theories that the various participants advance, rather than the specific characteristics of the ethical theories under review.

Analogously, we might consider several different roles that sociology should play:

- to provide an accurate description of important social facts
- to identify general causes that recur across multiple social contexts
- to provide phenomenologically adequate descriptions of how people experience various social arrangements
- to provide a basis for designing policy interventions that protect things we care about
- to discover recurring social mechanisms that can be discovered in a variety of social settings
- to perform rigorously developed comparisons of social arrangements and functionings across separate social cases
- to provide simple, general hypotheses about social dynamics in a full range of settings
- to reveal the underlying relations of power and exploitation that underlie specific social arrangements and social representations

It isn't difficult to think of great sociologists who have done their work on the basis of each of these assumptions. But they are not interchangeable; so an account that is excellent on the phenomenological assumption may be very weak on the causal generalization definition, and likewise for the other statements of role. And these disagreements are not disagreements about sociological facts; rather, they are disagreements about what different communities of sociologists put forward as the intellectual role of their research -- disagreements about the nature of sociology as a scientific area of knowledge.

Once we raise the general question about the subject matter of sociology, it seems clear that sociology is in fact an eclectic domain of knowledge with numerous definitions of scope and content. So trying to reduce the intellectual role of the discipline to a single kind of knowledge and subject matter is stifling. Instead, we probably need to simply recognize that there is a range of legitimate foundational definitions for studies of society, and a range of views about what makes such studies "scientific". Max Weber (pictured above) formulated a vast range of sociological work, reflecting a fairly coherent underlying set of assumptions about science, explanation, and conceptualization. And

this implicit philosophy of social science was significantly different from those embedded in the empirical and conceptual practices of Emile Durkheim or Louis Wirth. So it might be best to simply acknowledge that the "whole" of sociology is a mix of intellectual approaches and modes of reasoning, rather than a single coherent and systematic enterprise.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:28AM (-04:00)

Poverty, growth, and sustainability

Friday, September 04, 2009





	2000	2050	change
Population (million)	6,000	9,000	50%
GDP per capita (1998 $)	$5,000	$15,000	200%
GDP for global economy (million $)	$30,000,000	$135,000,000	350%
Minimum income	$1,000	$8,000	700%
Gini coefficient	0.700	0.500	-29%
per capita			
Energy (tons of oil)	1.70	2.75	62%
Metals	500.00	1000.00	100%
grain (kg)	250.00	500.00	100%
meat (kg)	33.00	75.00	127%
fish (kg)	50.00	75.00	50%
total output			
Energy (million tons of oil)	10,200	24,750	143%
Metals (million)	3,000,000	9,000,000	200%
Grain (million kg)	1,500,000	4,500,000	200%
Meat (million kg)	198,000	675,000	241%
Fish (million kg)	300,000	675,000	125%
agricultural output			
grain per hectare (kg)	3,000	4,500	50%
meat per hectare (kg)	700	1,000	43%
fish per hectare (kg)	800	1,200	50%

agricultural land use			
Grain (hectare)	500,000,000	1,000,000,000	100%
meat (hectare)	282,857,143	675,000,000	139%
forests	3,540,000,000	2,500,000,000	-29%
agricultural land	782,857,143	1,675,000,000	114%
fish ponds	375,000,000	562,500,000	50%
Total agricultural land	1,157,857,143	2,237,500,000	93%

The extent and depth of poverty in the world today is a crushing and immediate problem. The economies of most countries in the world continue to reproduce life circumstances for the extremely poor that make it all but impossible for them to participate in normal, productive lives. The Millenium development goals that were endorsed by the United Nations and other national and international organizations are still far from realization (link). At least a billion people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America live in extreme poverty (defined by the United Nations as per capita income less than a dollar a day), and a larger number are subject to hunger and malnutrition. This is an accumulation of misery and despair that cannot be tolerated. (Here's an earlier post on food security and hunger.)

So poverty alleviation must be a crucial and high priority. Nations and regions need to give their strongest efforts to enacting economic and social reforms that consistently work in the direction of reducing the scope of poverty and increasing the degree of human fulfillment that is feasible in the world. Jeffrey Sachs (The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time), Amartya Sen (Development as Freedom), and Paul Collier (The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It) have all made good contributions on the pressing urgency of this issue and some ideas about strategies that can work.

Poverty alleviation can be understood to mean a variety of things: ensuring that families have higher disposable income,

ensuring that families have access to the goods necessary to satisfy their basic needs; or creating social safety nets that help to provide the means of health, nutrition, and education that are fundamental to improving the productivity of the poor. And all of this implies two important consequences: the world economy needs to grow consistently for a very long time, and the purchasing power of the poorest 40% of the world's population needs to increase more rapidly than the growth rate. Overall inequalities need to decline as economic growth proceeds. Getting out of poverty means, among other things, having access to more of society's resources for the sake of consumption: better diet, healthcare, education, transportation, housing, clothing, and other goods. And this is critically important, because as Amartya Sen has argued throughout his career, poverty obliterates human potential and opportunity. It destroys the individual's "capabilities and functionings" for life.

Now consider the environmental side of the coin. Sustainability means designing a social and economic system that is eventually ... sustainable. It means using non-renewable resources in a way that permits future generations to have the ability to achieve the things they will need to do; it means using renewable resources in ways that permit replacement; it means managing water and air quality in such a way that we're not locked into a downward spiral of worsening quality in these essential resources; and, of course, it means managing human activity in ways that permit control of global climate change. People like James Gustave Speth (The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability) have argued that these goals can only be met by damping down the consumption patterns of the world's affluent billion (post). But how will that work for the world's poorest billion?

Here is the hard point, however: the goals of poverty alleviation and sustainability appear on their face to be inconsistent. If we want global poverty alleviation, then it is hard to see how we can have a sustainable economy in the next fifty years; and if we insist on sustainability, then it is hard to see how we can achieve enduring and improving poverty alleviation. It appears inescapable that if we succeed in doubling the real income of the poorest 40% of the world's population, this means even greater increases in the consumption of energy and other resources. And the production of energy is the primary cause of failures of sustainability. If part of alleviating poverty in China or India means making it feasible for three times as many poor families to own a motorbike or automobile -- this implies a significant increase in the consumption of fossil fuels and the production of greenhouse gases. And yet improving mobility is an important cause and benefit of alleviating poverty. And this is true for a wide range of categories of products: being less poor means having the ability to consume more of these products.

Here is a hypothetical effort to think through the consequences of alleviating poverty for aggregate consumption of various resources from my The Paradox of Wealth and Poverty: Mapping the Ethical Dilemmas of Global Development.

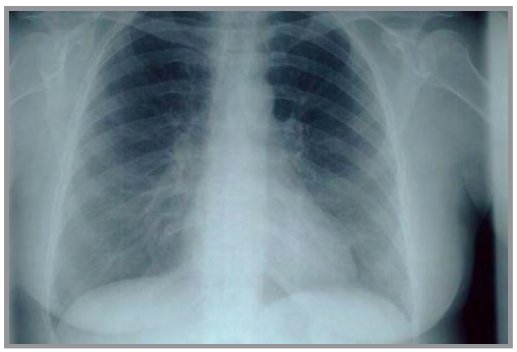
This isn't a rigorously developed model; it simply makes some basic assumptions about current and future consumption levels for the world's population and then aggregates them for the full population. It is generally recognized, for example, that there is something like a "nutrition transition" that occurs as income rises for poor people, as they have the ability to substitute more meat and fish for grains and vegetables in their diet. But this implies a disproportionate increase in the amount of farmland dedicated to livestock. And globally, this implies a reduction in forests and grasslands -- processes already underway in Central and South America -- which has major consequences for CO2 increases and species extinction. Likewise, this impressionistic projection implies a

tripling of the consumption of metals and grain; more than tripling of meat consumption; and 2.4 times the level of energy consumption. So it seems that poverty alleviation all but guarantees that the demand for environment-stressing commodities will increase significantly more rapidly than population increase.

So here is the key question: are there pathways for increasing the quality of life of the world's poorest 40% that are also compatible with reaching a sustainable global environment? The forthcoming World Bank 2010 World Development Report focuses on climate change, and there should be some important new ideas there about how to combine poverty alleviation and sustainability. These are the hardest problems we face today, and we need some fresh ideas.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:43PM (-04:00)

Tacit knowledge

Sunday, September 06, 2009





Scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi introduced the idea of "tacit knowledge" in his 1958 book, Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy (Google Books link). The book was presented as a critique of the positivist conception of scientific knowledge and the idea of knowledge as a system of logical statements. Polanyi was trained as a physician before World War I; worked as a research chemist between the wars; and found his voice as a philosopher of science subsequently. (Michael Polanyi is the brother of Karl Polanyi, discussed here.) This is an interesting concept, and one that captures an important dimension of knowledge that is absent in most philosophical treatments of epistemology ("knowledge is a system of true justified beliefs"). The simple idea is that there are domains of knowledge that are not represented propositionally or as a system of statements, but are rather somehow embodied in the knower's cognitive system in a non-propositional form. This aspect of knowledge is more analogous to "knowing how" than "knowing that". Polanyi gives the example of a physician in training learning to "read" an x-ray. What is first perceived simply as an unintelligible alternation of light and dark areas, eventually is perceived by the experienced radiologist as a picture of a lung with a tumor. So the physician has somehow acquired a set of perceptual and conceptual skills that cannot be precisely codified but that permit him/her to gain a much more knowledgeable understanding of the patient's hidden disease than the novice. (This seems to be part of what Malcolm Gladwell is getting at in Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking.)
It is unremarkable to observe that many aspects of skilled performance depend on "knowledge" that cannot be articulated as a set of statements or rules (link). The basketball guard's ability to weave through defenders and find his way to the basket reflects a complex set of representations of the court, the defenders, and probable

behaviors of others that can't be codified. So it seems fairly straightforward to conclude that human cognition incorporates representations and knowledge that do not take the form of explicit systems of statements. Rather, these areas of knowledge are more "intuitive"; they are more akin to "body knowledge." But they are nonetheless cognitive; they depend on experience, they can be criticized and corrected, and they are representational of the world. (Talk to a skilled athlete about a complex task like finding a shot on goal in hockey or beating the defender to the basket, and you will be struck by the degree of intuition, gestalt, and realism that is invoked. And the same is true if you talk to an experienced labor organizer or a police detective.)

What is striking about Polanyi's position in *Personal Knowledge* is that he shows that these forms of practical knowledge do not pertain solely to physical skills like wine-making, playing basketball, or piloting a tug boat. Instead, they extend deeply into the enterprise of scientific knowledge itself. An experimental chemist or physicist has an uncodified ability to interpret instruments, evaluate complex devices, or recognize unexpected results that is the result of experience and training and cannot be reduced to a recipe or algorithm. And the difference between a gifted sociologist and a pedestrian one is his/her ability to probe a set of social facts for the underlying patterns, mechanisms, or questions that they suggest. These are ideas that return again in post-positivist philosophers and historians of science like Thomas Kuhn, Norwood Hanson, and Peter Galison; each of these scholars emphasizes the tight relationship that exists in scientific education and imagination between scientific practices, scientific instruments, and scientific knowledge. Galison's Einstein's Clocks, Poincare's Maps: Empires of Time is particularly interesting.

This recognition opens up a number of areas for empirical and theoretical research. The cognitive psychologist can ask a series of questions about how this kind of knowledge is represented in the knower's cognitive system. Does the basketball guard have a "cognitive map" of the court that he updates regularly? (This is a subject for non-human cognitive psychology as well as human cognition.) And the phenomenological sociologist like Erving Goffman can probe in detail the forms of tacit knowledge that the skilled intellectual performer is making use of -- the lawyer or accountant, or the research scientist (link).

This line of thought converges to some extent with arguments that Hubert Dreyfus advanced in What computers can't do: A critique of artificial reason in 1972. (Here is his update of his position; What Computers Still Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason.) Dreyfus was fundamentally critical of artificial intelligence research in the 1960s, and the strategy of attempting to codify expert knowledge in the form of a set of rules that could then be implemented as computational algorithms. His position was a phenomenological one; basically, he took issue with the idea that cognitive competences like chess-playing, problem-solving, or pattern recognition could be reduced to a set of precise and separate rules and statements. Instead, there is a holistic aspect in ordinary practical knowledge that cannot be reduced to a set of discrete algorithms.

Of special interest for *UnderstandingSociety* is the question of whether ordinary people have "tacit ***social*** knowledge" of the social world they inhabit (link, link, link). What is involved in the competence a person demonstrates when he/she successfully navigates a formal dinner or a contentious union-hall argument? Can the knowledge that the competent social participant has about expected behavior from particular individuals be represented as a sum of propositional beliefs? Or, more plausibly, is this a good example of tacit knowledge, more akin to a rough map of a terrain than a codified set of statements? What about failures of tacit knowledge -- clumsiness (link)? And what is the system of social cognition through which ordinary social knowers gain these cognitive competences and update them through subsequent experience? All of this makes me think that we need richer models of mental life and competence than we currently

possess (link).

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:33AM (-04:00)

What is the Burmese junta doing?

Wednesday, September 09, 2009



Burma has been a cauldron of surprising news in the past two years or so. The generals have taken a series of actions in a number of areas: brutal repression of the monks' demonstrations in 2007, prosecution and conviction of Aung Sun Suu Kyi (ASSK) in a bizarre show trial, a major rainy season assault on the Karen militias and villages, increasing pressure on the Kachin Independence Organization, brutal assault on the Kokang cease-fire group on the Chinese border. And don't forget the mystery tunnel construction (link) and the phantom North Korean ship (link) a few months ago. (Here is a list of recent news items concerning events in Burma and the rest of southeast Asia, and here is a map displaying some of those items. Follow the UnderstandingSociety twitter feed for updates.) Is there an underlying logic to these actions? What is the junta's strategy? What are they trying to accomplish, and how do these actions fit into any sort of rational plan? (See an earlier post on the Burmese dictatorship.)

Here's a sketchy analysis about the junta's goals: to maintain the decisive military and political power of the Burmese army; to gain full control of national territory, including particularly the states with independence movements and armed militias; to retain the ability to crush any possible opposition movement; to keep the wealth-production machine going for the benefit of the generals and the military system; and to preserve diplomatic support from China. And one important date is looming: the junta's promise to conduct elections in 2010. The elections are plainly designed to leave decisive control in the hands of the army and to present a thin semblance of "democracy". And the junta is determined to manage this process so as to lead to an outcome that leaves their power unchallenged.

So what do they need in order to accomplish these goals? They need arms; they need trading partners; they need on-the-ground control of the population; and they need to retain control of Burma's resources and economy. How do recent actions conform to these goals? Is the junta merely reactive, or is it following a longterm strategy?

The trial of Aung San Suu Kyi fits into this set of goals fairly obviously. ASSK is the most charismatic leader that Burmese society possesses. She leads the National League for Democracy (NLD), the most persistent opposition group in Burma today and the overwhelming winner of the elections of 1990 (link). And her name is one of the most celebrated in Burma's post-colonial history. Her father Aung San was the hero of Burmese independence and his assassination in 1947 was a turning point in Burma's modern history. ASSK has the potential to mobilize a powerful pro-democracy movement, and the generals fear her. Moreover, there seems to be a streak of emotion in the generals' attitudes toward her; there seems to be a powerful hatred of ASSK that goes beyond rational fear. But the evident determination of the junta to keep ASSK under house arrest and out of politics through the 2010 elections makes a cruel kind of sense.

The recent military campaigns against the Karen and Kokang groups and the increasing pressure on Kachin and Shan movements also fit fairly clearly into the goals mentioned here. The generals appear to have come to the conclusion that they have a realistic opportunity to change the balance of forces between the army and the ethnic organizations. They appear to have undertaken a determined effort to do so, beginning with the Karen. This seems to be motivated by both the long-standing effort to control the non-Burmese populations and the goal of managing the 2010 elections.

The international trade strategies of the junta also appear to be directly linked to the commercial interests of the regime. Gas contracts, timber and jade sales, and exploitation of Burma's other economic assets show an aggressive but strategic effort at increasing Burma's foreign exchange revenues. The relationship with North Korea appears to represent a source of military technology not otherwise available to Burma (the mystery ship?). And western economic sanctions don't seem to dampen Burma's trade opportunities significantly. In other words, the junta appears to have created an alternative world trading system that leaves it fairly immune to western criticism and sanctions.

Burma's foreign relations also seem fairly successful in the realpolitik sense. Burma has managed to avoid much pressure from ASEAN nations; it has preserved the diplomatic support of China in the United Nations; and it maintains acceptable relations with India and Bangladesh. Its assault on the Karen areas has ruffled relations with Thailand because of the influx of refugees across the Thai border their military campaign created. And the assault on the Kokang group had strained relations with China because of the large number of refugees into Yunnan province and the mistreatment of Han people in Shan State. But so far the Chinese haven't offered much pressure to the Burmese junta either.

So it seems that there is actually a fairly coherent underlying set of goals and strategies that appear to be driving the junta's actions. The common view in the western media of the junta as mysterious, secretive, reactive, paranoid, and ineffective doesn't seem to be accurate. The junta seems to be a more dangerous enemy to the people of Burma than this description would suggest. The generals have developed bureaucracies and plans that allow them to pursue their aims fairly effectively. And this is bad news for a democratic Burma. The junta has entrenched a brutal, violent, and exploitative regime that is fundamentally unconcerned about the welfare of the people of Burma; and their military government seems pretty effective in preserving its power and pursuing its political goals.

It is interesting to note how many areas of the social sciences need to be consulted in order to deal with this question: political science (how can we explain the regime's behavior?), organizational behavior (how do the bureaucratic agencies of the Burmese state function?), military sociology (how is the army recruited and managed?), and social movements theory (how do the various oppositional groups in Burma seek to mobilize?). So Burma represents something of a laboratory for social science research and theory formation.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:17AM (-04:00)

Why the corporation?

Sunday, September 13, 2009

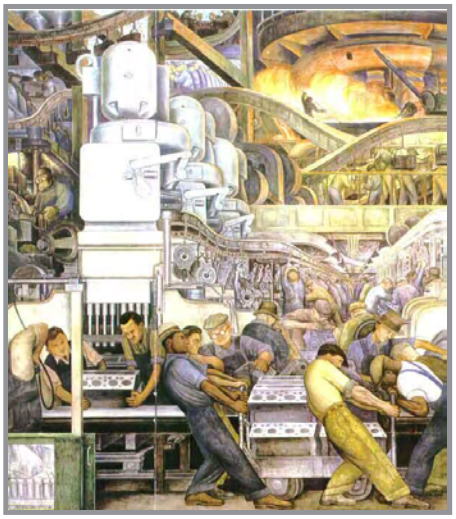


image: Diego Rivera mural of Rouge Plant, Detroit Institute of the Arts

Recently I posted about C. Wright Mills and his analysis of power elites in America (post). A major theme in Mills's book is the new power associated with the American corporation following World War II. Charles Perrow's Organizing America: Wealth, Power, and the Origins of Corporate Capitalism (2002) offers an historical account of how this system of power came into being. Perrow is a historical sociologist, and he focuses his analysis on the structural features of the organizations he considers; the historical and social factors that favored the emergence of these kinds of organizations; and the role that they now play within the complex social and political system of modern America.

The topic is particularly relevant today, when the Supreme Court is considering whether "corporations have a right to free speech", and therefore a right to further deepen their influence on political directions and policies through their funding of political messages.

Perrow gives close empirical attention to the evolution of the institutions through which the American economy functioned from the mid-nineteenth century into the twentieth century. Textiles and railroads play key roles in this early history. Perrow tells the story of how the American economy came to feature the large corporation as its central business organization -- an outcome that was far from inevitable. He argues that the large corporation is a historically contingent creation; other forms of enterprise activity could have emerged. And he teases out of this account a pretty compelling set of conclusions that are very supportive of Mills's basic line of thought concerning the disproportionate power that is wielded by corporations and their officers. Here's his summary statement:

Our economic organizations -- business and industry -- concentrate wealth and power; socialize employees and customers alike to meet their needs; and pass off to the rest of society the cost of their pollution, crowding, accidents, and encouragement of destructive life styles. In the vaunted "free market" economy of the United States, regulation of business and industry to prevent or mitigate this market failure is relatively ineffective, as compared to that enacted by other industrialized countries. (1-2)

Perrow notes that organizations do not have to be large to be effective and efficient; along with Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin (World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization) and Philip Scranton (Endless Novelty), he argues that "networks of small firms can drive innovation and distribute wealth and power more equitably" (2). So large, hierarchical organizations are not mandated by the technical demands of modern economic life. In fact, innovation, flexibility, and community responsiveness are more likely to be associated with networks of small organizations rather than solitary large organizations, and these types of organizations were abundant in our economic history. "Many conditions were in place to grow a society of well-regulated and moderate-sized firms focused upon regional economic development; at

various points in the century many citizens argued for this" (19). But that is not what we got; instead, the large organization and the corporation became the central unit of economic activity.

So why did large organizations and corporations come to have the central and dominating role that they have had in economic and social life since the early twentieth century in the United States? Perrow's answer to this represents a synthesis of the best thinking to date on the role that corporations play. He refers to his approach as a "society of organizations" approach, involving these key elements:

- History is path-dependent, accidental, only partially developmental
- structure and environment rather than entrepreneurship explain success / failure
- technologies are chosen to fit preferred structure / ideology
- culture shapes and is shaped by organization; the latter is emphasized
- labor process is shaped in part by workers' resistance and can occasionally be a key factor, but acquiescence in dependency, and tradeoffs in benefits, are more often the common lot of employees
- bureaucracy (formalization, standardization, centralization, hierarchy) is the best unobtrusive control device that elites ever had (19)

The point about labor process is an important one. Perrow notes that the central challenge of how to discipline and regularize a labor force in textiles or other mass-production industries itself led to the early development of bureaucratic and hierarchical rules within emerging organizations. For example, "uniform work rules for all mills in Philadelphia including Manayunk were established at meetings of the owners in the early 1830s" (55). (Michael Burawoy explores this role of the corporation throughout his work; Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism.)

Perrow also gives quite a bit of attention to the legal and policy environment in the United States as a key variable in the specific pathway that American business took. The enactment of legislation permitting incorporation was an important step, in that it provided significant rights and powers to corporations (36 ff.). And Perrow notices that the development of railroads and their business organizations in the United States took a very different course than counterparts in Europe because of significant differences in political values and culture in the United States (a point that leads Perrow to intersect with Frank Dobbin's analysis in Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain, and France in the Railway Age, discussed here.)

What is the upshot? Perrow argues that in the United States the national political economy was led to create a system that gave enormous and very lightly regulated power to large organizations and corporations; that, once established, these organizations were very capable of defending their rights and freedom of action; and that the corporations exercise power at every level in American society. Corporations and large organizations wield micro-power over the tens of millions of Americans who work within them, meso-power over the environmental status of communities and regions and the consumption patterns of individuals, and macro-power over the direction that legislation and policy takes. And this degree of power is now deeply entrenched:

Belatedly, the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century sought to redress the power imbalances and the costly externalities for workers and communities. But the organizational infrastructure of the nation was not to be seriously disturbed or even ideologically challenged, up to the present. A society with small- and modest-sized firms, regional rather than national markets, and with civic welfare provisions that are a right of citizenship rather than a benefit of employment--a society with wealth and power

distributed widely--is now out of the question. Large bureaucratic organizations, public and private, will be our fate for the foreseeable future. It might have been otherwise. (228)

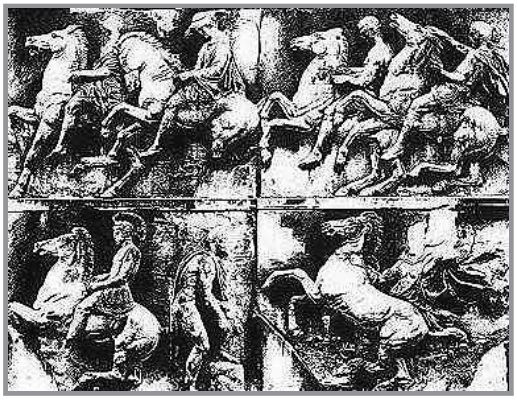
And finally, Perrow argues that this system was not economically or technologically inevitable. Networks of smaller firms and organizations could satisfy the needs for efficient production and innovation that a robust and dynamic economy presents. And a substantially less centralized political economy would be favorable to democracy and modern quality of life.

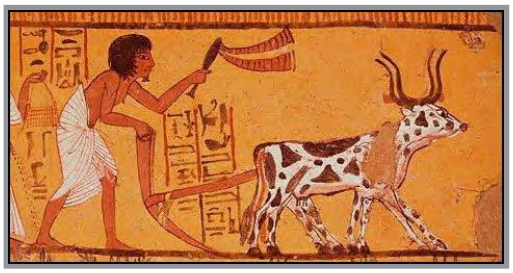
(Perrow's most recent book is also very timely and worth reading (The Next Catastrophe: Reducing Our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters). Here Perrow returns to the subject of catastrophe and its prevention. He outlines the very significant possibilities of catastrophic failure that are inherent in our current industrial and economic organization, and offers some ideas about how we might reduce these vulnerabilities. There is a connection between the two books; the wide scope of the corporation as the basic unit of economic organization directly implies the concentration of dangerous industrial processes that a more decentralized network of smaller producers would have avoided. Try a sample chapter on the Kindle.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:43PM (-04:00)

Agrarian history -- the Weber edition

Tuesday, September 15, 2009

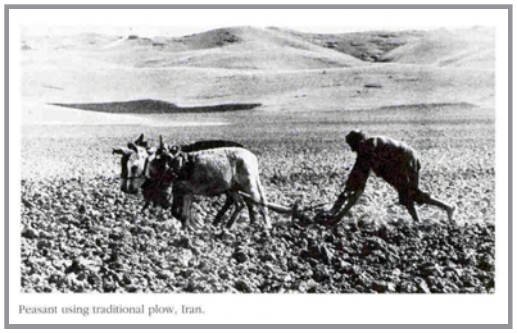




One of Max Weber's early areas of research was what might be called "macro agrarian history". This was a field of research that Weber himself largely invented. He undertook to document and explain the large patterns of economic development in the ancient world, including especially the social systems surrounding farming and animal husbandry. Weber's cases include Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Rome. How did the fundamental material activities of farming, trading, and consuming contribute to the development of major civilizations? This research culminated in several important manuscripts, including in particular Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations (1909; translated and edited by R. I. Frank in 1976). Weber was particularly interested in the causal and structural features of the specific forms of property relations, labor, trade, taxation, and consumption that characterized the social economies of the ancient world. And he tries to show how certain features of the agrarian system influenced the emergence of certain political and legal forms.

The title "Agrarverhältnisse in Altertum" is translated as "Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations"; but this is a little misleading. It's not so much a work of sociology as it is a work of economic and political history at a civilizational level. The essay is offered as an account of the history and particularity of the rural economies of the ancient world --





Peasant using traditional plow, Iran.

closer to economic history than sociology.

Weber's treatment of ancient Greece is particularly detailed. So let's inventory some of the main components of his account to get a flavor of his approach. This will give us a better idea of how he set about trying to understand and explain the social world that is presented through ancient Greek literature. Here are the first few paragraphs of his description of the agrarian society of "historic Greece" -- the contemporary society of Homer, or roughly 1000 BCE:

The Greeks raised spelt, barley, and wheat, alternating this in each field with grass (hence leases were for an even number of years). This system continued to be followed except in those areas specializing in a particular crop. Occasionally, it seems, the three-field system was used, but there was no change of crops, except that legumes were grown on fallow land. The use of manure is mentioned in Homer (but green manure was not used until later times); in general, however, agricultural techniques were stabilized at a rather primitive level and thereafter did not develop.

Thus the main features of Greek agriculture continued to be ploughing with a hooked plough (for long entirely of wood) drawn by oxen, sowing seed in furrows, hacking and weeding the grain fields, and harvesting with sickle and threshing board. Hence labour intensity was considerable, and since virgin land was no longer available, it was difficult to shift from subsistence agriculture to market production, even though grain prices were high in later times.

Cattle raising does not seem to have been much reduced in extent by farming until the age of the tyrants, who favoured the peasantry. The Homeric epics indicated a diet based mainly on cheese, milk, and -- among aristocrats -- meat. Clothing was made of wool and skins. (147)
So -- crops, technology and practice, labor productivity, and consumption patterns. And what about the social relationships within which these farm activities took place?

In historical times the prevalent form of living unit was the patriarchal nuclear family. Women and children were in much the same position as among Semitic peoples: women could be bought or else married with dowry; husbands had the right to send away their wives, and could sell, rent, expel, or kill their children. Later the laws governing legitimacy, and the feeling for kin ties cultivated among the great families combined to reduce these powers of the father over his children; by the time when the Gortyn Code was first framed these changes had all taken place. (148)

But whereas the masses lived in nuclear families, nobles and kings -- at first the same -- lived as elsewhere in large households including agnates of a clan (genos). The purpose of this was to preserve the unity of inheritable landed estates. Thus both separate and group inheritance are mentioned in the Homeric epics; see the homosipuoi of Charondas,

equivalent to the homogalaktes of Attic law. (148)

Here we have some social detail: the family, property in land, inheritance, and a "class" distinction between the farmer class and the elite families. And we have regular reminders of the primary historical sources underlying these descriptions: the Homeric epics and other surviving texts from Greek literature and history.

Weber quickly identifies social inequality in ancient Greek society and points to a system of wealth extraction from the masses to the elite families:

Those people who did not belong to a numerous and economically established clan, who were in short without land, found themselves forced to enter the clientele of one or another aristocrat. This was a later development, as the supply of new land declined and differences in wealth developed; originally membership of the community and ownership of land each presupposed the other. (149)

What about politics -- the use of military force to extract resources and compel population behavior?

The Dorian cities were fundamentally military states, and so everywhere they maintained the same three tribes. Elsewhere there was great variety, but everywhere and always the formal division of a community into tribes signified one thing: that a people had constituted itself as a polis ready for war at any time. It should be noted here that the proper word for a tribe in a non-urbanized community was ethnos, as is shown by the documents of the Delphic Amphictyone. (151)

More precise information is not available for the political and social structures of autonomous communities in early times. If, however, we rely on analogies with other peoples, then we can assume that in each community the position of ruler (anax) came to be hereditary in a family made prominent by wealth in cattle and marked out as favoured by the gods by success in war and equity in judgment. (151)

When he moves on to the later period in ancient Greek history he extends the list of concepts used to characterize society; he describes the development of cities, the extension of long-distance trade, the social and cultural influence of Asia Minor, and the growth of political power wielded by aristocratic kings.

This is just a small snapshot of Weber's historical reasoning in Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations. The book is methodical, and it moves through an orderly series of objective concepts of social organization in order to provide a description of the historically given society.

So the text is full of interesting claims and details about the agrarian regimes of human society 3,000 years ago. But here is the question that needs posing in the context of UnderstandingSociety: What is Weber trying to accomplish in this piece of writing? And how does his analysis shed light on his intuitive views of social and historical knowledge? What can we discover about Weber's sociological imagination from this book? Several summary comments seem fairly clear.

First, much of the intellectual work here is devoted to de-coding the social and economic implications of surviving Greek literature, including particularly the Homeric poems. Weber is trying to piece together a coherent story of the modes of farming, technology,

property, family, kinship, and kingship that are implied in the many small clues about social life contained in the Homeric corpus. So there is a large part of the work that is intended to be conceptual and descriptive.

Second, Weber lays bare one of his own interests in his construction of the text: a concern for viewing large social formations -- civilizations or social-economic regimes -- and discovering some of the material and situational factors that influence their development. This introduces an explanatory ambition to the work; Weber wants to be able to explain how some developments are the causal result of other developments.

Third, there is an important element of comparison involved in the book. Weber is plainly interested in noticing the differences as well as the similarities in the agrarian regimes he describes in Egypt, Greece, or Rome.

Fourth, there is not much attention given to the role of ideas or ideologies in this book -- in contrast to the central role that ideas play in his comparative religion research some years later. And there is no trace of "interpretive" inquiry in this book either. Weber is trying to discover an objective vocabulary in terms of which to describe the material and social arrangements that are implied by the Homeric corpus, without attempting to say how the agents experienced or represented these social relations. This is not a "hermeneutic" book; if anything, it more resembles an ethnographically sensitive materialism. We might even say that the book is Weber's, but it is something other than Weberian.

Finally, the topic of power returns repeatedly throughout the book. Weber demonstrates his recurring interest in the role that coercion and military force play in the organization of society and the concentration of wealth.

Several generations later, the great classical historian M. I. Finley undertook a parallel investigation of the agrarian economies of Greece and Rome in The Ancient Economy (1973). Finley's work is more clearly organized by the goal of showing how the material, technical, and social relations he describes constitute an economic system -- a system of production and reproduction. And it reflects a modest kind of Marxism in its effort to describe the forces and relations of production in the ancient world. Certainly the body of historical data that was available to Finley about the social arrangements of the ancient world was much greater than what was available to Weber; in this sense we are likely to judge that Finley's account is more likely to be accurate in detail. But it is very interesting to read the two books side-by-side; they have a lot in common. And each presents an ambitious view of what is involved in knowing how ancient societies worked.

(It is interesting to discover that M. I. Finley and R. I. Frank, the translator and editor of Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations, had a bit of a dust-up in the New York Review of Books in 1970 over a review that Finley wrote of several books on the Roman Empire.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:28PM (-04:00)

History of sociology as sociology

Thursday, September 17, 2009



I find the history of various approaches to sociology to be an interesting subject. When we look at the history of the Chicago School of sociology or the positivist-quantitative paradigm of the American 1950s and 1960s, we see a very particular set of intellectual problems and theories; we see personalities and universities; and we see specific prominent social problems that come in for study. And the resulting frameworks of assumptions about topics, scope, and method are very different. So there is a lot of contingency and path-dependency involved in the development of a sociological research tradition. I've commented on differences in national approaches to sociology in earlier postings (French sociology, Chinese sociology). Here I'd like to reflect a bit on some of the complexities involved in doing a history of a particular sociological tradition.

Craig Calhoun's Sociology in America: A History illustrates much of what I find interesting about this subject; the contributors have generally provided fascinating and nuanced insights into some of the main currents of American sociological thinking over the past century or so. George Steinmetz's contribution, "American Sociology Before and After World War II" is particularly interesting, in that it is both empirical and epistemic. "The burden of my argument in this chapter is to track the postwar narrowing of sociology's intellectual diversity or, more precisely, the shift from a relative equality between nonpositivist and positivist orientations in terms of scientific prestige to a condition in which positivism as defined here was clearly dominant" (315-6). Andrew Abbott and James Sparrow look at the impact of massive social events on the development of American sociology -- the events of World War II. And they treat this question in a rigorously sociological fashion; they examine the institutions, the demography, and the funding mechanisms that influenced the development of sociology in the United States between 1940 and 1955. And Doug McAdam provides a really fascinating and insightful examination of how the social context of the 1960s affected the discipline of sociology. Altogether, the collection represents the best historical sociology of the disciplines of sociology that I've seen.

A key foundational question in considering this subject is this: what is the historian of sociology trying to accomplish? What does he/she hope to discover? There are a range of possible questions: Where did the fundamental concepts and methods come from? How were the founders influenced in their theories and methods by prior intellectual frameworks? How did institutions and funding mechanisms influence the particular directions that were taken in the research tradition? How did individual innovators and pathbreakers impose their own innovations into the emerging tradition? How do the concepts and methods reflect background social conditions and events? These are all questions of causation and genesis, and they can be treated empirically -- even sociologically.

What is the intellectual standing of this sort of inquiry? What does a good history of the

Annales school or the Chicago school tell us? Here are a couple of possibilities.

First, a good history of a concrete sociological tradition may lay out some of the intellectual influences that stimulated thinkers through the formative period--the ideas about science and knowledge, the ideas about what the interesting historical questions are, and even what's involved in being an iconoclast in the current state of the broader discipline. In the case of the Annales school, the history will likely drill down on the concrete influence wielded by Durkheim, Mauss, and their tradition on the Annales founders; and it will highlight what the founders were reacting against in defining their approach -- perhaps the towering influences of Ranke and Michelet. And the history will be attentive to detail -- not just the broad brush, but the specific controversies and influences that shaped the development of the field at various points. This aspect of the work converges with the methods and content of intellectual history more generally.

Second, the history of a sociological tradition may give a lot of attention to uncovering the specific institutions of knowledge validation and dissemination that set the context for the founders -- the universities, journals, state institutions, funding sources, and academic associations that promoted or impeded the creation of new knowledge. This is core sociology of science, reflecting the recognition that science is a social product and is deeply influenced by the concrete institutions that exist or are subsequently created.

A third component of a history of a sociological tradition might be an account of the historical and social environment in which the tradition takes shape. In the case of the Annales school, the fact that it emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Great War is surely relevant; Marc Bloch's experience of war and the French army surely had some influence on his development as an historian. Likewise, the Frankfurt school's development within the jaws of emerging fascism must be relevant to understanding of the social theorists of the school (and of the New School in New York!). And the buoyant optimism of America in the 1950s must play a role in the development of American sociology (e.g. Daniel Bell, The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties).

But now we're brought face to face with the crucial questions of validity and truth. We want our sociologies to shed real light on the nature of various social settings. We want sociological results to be validated by empirical investigation. We want sociologists to be in a position to create genuinely innovative ideas and representations of the social world -- ideas that genuinely increase our ability to understand society. And therefore we want to avoid any sort of determinism in the realm of scientific inquiry; we want it not to be the case that the sociologist is trapped in the "prison-house" of ideas and social context that surround him/her. Marx's simple formula, "the hand-mill gives you the feudal lord" (German Ideology) makes scientific knowledge impossible; likewise with Karl Mannheim's deterministic sociology of knowledge (Ideology And Utopia).

Here is the picture I favor in understanding the evolution of the various traditions of social knowledge (post). There is no such thing as comprehensive social knowledge; there is no general "first theory" that we might aspire to as a universal sociology. Rather, social knowledge takes the form of an indefinite series of sometimes overlapping domains and definitions of knowledge. Some of these give us a better understanding of social factors like race or caste; others focus on agency and constraint; yet others try to discover quantifiable patterns within the social world. So social knowledge is a dynamic and expanding tool box of theories and approaches, each of which adds something to our overall understanding of society.

And if this is our view of social knowledge, then the history of sociology has a very substantial role to play in helping us understand the intellectual and practical path that brought us to various sociological approaches, without undermining the epistemic status of those traditions. There is a lot of contingency in the story; there is an unavoidable incompleteness in the composite mosaic of traditions of inquiry and knowledge; but there are straightforward intellectual strategies that permit us to empirically evaluate the theories and traditions. Criticism, validation, and knowledge are consistent with the fact that specific historical paths led us to the theories we currently possess. Of course, we need to recognize that those traditions could have emerged significantly differently.

This understanding of the relationship between sociology and the history of sociology means, in turn, that we can treat a sociological tradition simultaneously in terms of ...

- the specific sociological and institutional pathways through which it developed and
- the degree of truth, justification, and insight that it has as a partial representation of the social world.

In other words, an historical sociology of sociology can be both empirical and institutional, and at the same time epistemic and critical. It can shed light on how we got where we are, and on the question of how good are our current understandings of the social world.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:41PM (-04:00)

The Vienna Circle on interdisciplinary science

Saturday, September 19, 2009

Image: in place of a network map of the contributors to the Vienna Circle

One of the central projects of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s and 1930s was an ambitious one: to create an International Encyclopedia of Unified Science that would demonstrate the crucial unity of all the empirical sciences -- including sociology and psychology (INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF UNIFIED SCIENCE. VOLUME I; 1938). The Vienna Circle group included a distinguished number of philosophers and scientists, including Moritz Schlick, Otto Neurath, Rudolph Carnap, and Charles W. Morris; and non-Circle members Niels Bohr, John Dewey, and Bertrand Russell lent their names to the project as well. Their central intellectual commitments constituted the cutting edge of positivist empiricism in the early part of the twentieth century; they advocated for the unity of science, inter-theoretic coherence, and the aspiration to a comprehensive empirical-logical method of scientific knowledge validation. This group was highly influential in the development of subsequent analytic philosophy of science (e.g., Herbert Feigl, Ernest Nagel, and Carl Hempel); in fact, Neurath's description of "logical empiricism" is one that pretty well describes the philosophy of science of the 1940s through the early 1960s. This was a very important stage in the development of twentieth-century thinking about the sciences, and some of the most incisive thinkers in the world were involved in the project. (See Thomas Uebel's article on the Vienna Circle in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.)

The positions and interpretations of Vienna Circle thinkers are particularly important here because these philosophers and scientists concentrated their thoughts on the question, what is science? And how do the various areas of scientific research relate to each other? And their writings have the advantage of a close acquaintance with some of the most important advances in a wide range of the sciences in the first several decades in

the twentieth century, including physics, biology, psychology, and economics. So their writings have one of the characteristics that I think is most important in doing the philosophy of science: they formed their views in close engagement with particular areas of scientific research. These were brilliant thinkers; they were, on the whole, not dogmatic in their assumptions and judgments; they were sensitive to nuance in the doing of science; and they were deeply respectful of scientific work across a range of areas.

The first part of the Encyclopedia appeared in 1938, and it set the stage for the work that this international group of scientists and philosophers proposed to do (International Encyclopedia of Unified Science ; Volume 1 Part 2). Otto Neurath edited this volume, and his opening sentences in the initial essay set the stage:

Unified science became historically the subject of this Encyclopedia as a result of the efforts of the unity of science movement, which includes scientists and persons interested in science who are conscious of the importance of a universal scientific attitude. (1)

A bit later he links the work of the "unity of science" movement of his time to the writings of John Stuart Mill (discussed in an earlier post):

Modern scientific empiricism attained very late in its development a comprehensive work which analyzes empirical procedure in all scientific fields: John Stuart Mill's A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation. Mill does not question the fact that astronomy and social science, physics and biology, are sciences of the same type. ... Mill's work influenced modern empiricism despite the fact that many of his particularly statements were criticized. (9)

The central thrust of the Vienna Circle position on scientific knowledge is a joining of "empiricism" -- the view that all knowledge depends on empirical observations -- with "logicism" -- the idea that it is possible to give exact and rigorous interpretation of the idea of a valid inference. So the sciences are the ways in which we attempt to logically organize and express the facts of observations and the inferences we draw from these observations. And the work of the great logicians around the turn of the 20th century on the foundations of arithmetic -- Piano, Frege, Tarski, Russell -- gave the Vienna Circle thinkers a great deal of confidence in the power that is brought to scientific knowledge by formal systems of deductive logic.

The most extreme version of empiricism -- "knowledge consists of statements based on observations and deductively valid inferences from those statements" -- doesn't quite do the job, because it was quickly recognized that hypotheses and theories are not deductively entailed by a set of facts of observation. Consequently it is necessary to formulate a formal logic of confirmation (the task that Carl Hempel picked up with his hypothetico-deductive model of confirmation). In other words, empiricism needs something like an inductive logic in order to get the enterprise of science going. But the main elements of scientific knowledge are here: observation and inference.

The project of the Encyclopedia is to investigate how the various areas of existing science fit into this conception of scientific knowledge, and how they relate to each other. And the collaborators in the project think that there is a common scientific attitude -- respect for the empirical facts and logical deductions -- that extends across all the sciences.

It is interesting to notice the fact that Neurath's version of the unity of science does not

imply reduction of all science to one super-theory:

Science itself is supplying its own integrating glue instead of aiming at a synthesis on the basis of a "super science" which is to legislate for the special scientific activities. The historical tendency of the unity of science movement is toward a unified science departmentalized into special sciences, and not toward a speculative juxtaposition of an autonomous philosophy and a group of scientific disciplines. (20)

Some of these observations make me think that it might be worth rethinking the import of the Vienna Circle. We're inclined to caricature the Vienna Circle as reductionist, positivist, and hyper-empiricist; and we tend to think of the movement as eliding the important differences across scientific disciplines. But there is a strong strand of scientific pluralism that flows through the project that is at odds with the reductionist reputation the movement has.

One might almost be inclined to call the Encyclopedia project one that emphasizes the value of inter-disciplinary collaboration, rather than a reductionist programme that seeks to impose a single set of principles and methods on all sciences. And in fact, Neurath seems to go out of his way to disavow the hope of reducing the special sciences to some single core science. Here is how Charles H. Morris ends his contribution in this opening volume with the title, "Scientific Empiricism":

This Encyclopedia, reflecting this inclusive standpoint, rightfully sounds the roll call of those distinguished logicians, scientists, and empiricists whom the traditional history of ideas has so shamefully neglected. But basically it aims to present through extensive co-operation the existing status and the unrealized possibilities for the integration of science. Its existence signalizes the union of scientific and philosophic traditions in a common task. (74-75)

And the scientific value of cross-disciplinary collaboration that the Vienna Circle members shared is reflected in the international group of scholars they gathered together in the 1930s. Here is the International Committee of the International Congresses for the Unity of Science (International Encyclopedia of Unified Science ; Volume 1 Part 2, p. 26):

N. Bohr, M. Boll, H. Bonnet, P. W. Bridgman, E. Brunswik, R. Carnap, E. Cartan, J. Clay, M. R. Cohen, J. Dewey, F. Enriques, P. Frank, M. Frechet, F. Gonseth, J. Hadamard, P. Janet, H. S. Jennings, J. Joergensen, E. Kaila, T. Kotarbinski, A. Lalande, P. Langevin, K. S. Lashley, C. I. Lewis, J. Lukasiewicz, G. Mannoury, R. von Mises, C. W. Morris, O. Neurath, C. K. Ogden, J. Perrin, H. Reichenbach, A. Rey, C. Rist, L. Rougier, B. Russell, L. S. Stebbing, J. H. Woodger

Later volumes add several additional names to the list of the membership of the Advisory Committee:

Herbert Feigl, Clark Hull, Waldemar Kaempffert, Victor Lenzen, William M. Malissoff, Ernest Nagel, Arne Naess, Alfred Tarski, Edward C. Tolman (1944)

Out of the 46 individuals listed, 11 are from France; 15 are located in the United States; and only one is located in Austria. The disciplines of philosophy, psychology, physics and logic are the largest groups, and there are a few economists included as well. It would be very interesting to extend this into a map of networks of influence in the next generation.

Here are the tables of contents for Volumes I and II. There are a few surprises on the contents for the second volume.

Volume 1

- Encyclopedia and Unified Science / Otto Neurath et al
- Foundations of the Theory of Signs / Charles Morris
- Foundations of Logic and Mathematics / Rudolph Carnap
- Linguistic Aspects of Science / Leonard Bloomfield
- Procedures of Empirical Science / Victor Lenzen
- Principles of the Theory of Probability / Ernest Nagel
- Foundations of Physics / Phillipp Frank
- Cosmology / E. Finlay-Freundlich
- Foundations of Biology / Felix Mainx
- The Conceptual Framework of Psychology / Egon Brunswik

Volume 2

- Foundations of the social sciences / Otto Neurath
- Structure of scientific revolutions / Thomas Kuhn
- Science and the structure of ethics / Abraham Edel
- Theory of valuation / John Dewey
- Technique of theory construction / J. H. Woodger
- Methodology of mathematical economics / Gerhard Tintner
- Fundamentals of concept formation in empirical science / Carl Hempel
- Development of rationalism and empiricism / Giorgio De Santillana and Edgar Zilsel
- Development of logical empiricism / Jorgen Jorgensen
- Bibliography and index / Herbert Feigl and Charles Morris

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:22PM (-04:00)

Neurath on sociology

Sunday, September 20, 2009



Otto Neurath was one of the central figures in the Vienna Circle in the 1930s and 1940s. And he was the most important figure in the group to consider the social sciences within the "unified sciences" of the twentieth century. As noted in an earlier post, the Vienna Circle set the stage for a powerful tradition of "logical empiricism" as the received view in the philosophy of science in the 1950s and 1960s; and many of these ideas played back into the explicit methodologies of various areas of the sciences as well (physics and behaviorist psychology, for example).

Here I want to focus on the assumptions that some of the Vienna Circle thinkers made about the social sciences. Neurath contributed an article to the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science on the foundations of the social sciences (Foundations of the Social Sciences; 1944), and this is the most extensive commentary on social science methodology that was issued by Vienna Circle thinkers. So it warrants a close reading. Neurath was trained in political economy, and he served as a centralized economic planning official in the German Social Democratic Party in Munich. He was also a key member and leader of the Vienna Circle, and his writings and editorial work for the group were highly influential.

So how does Neurath understand the social sciences? And what does he recommend by way of methodology? Neurath begins by treating the subject matter of sociology empirically rather than definitionally: what do social scientists actually study?

I shall speak of sociological statements as members of one big family of statements which may be found in volumes filled with results of research on the behavior of tribes, on the behavior of customs and languages as they spread through mankind, on the behavior of whole nations, on the growing-up of the fine arts in human societies, on the behavior of human groups and representative individuals (e.g., of artists, priests, statesmen, pirates, peasants, workers, and other people in various societies), on the patterns of cities, on the behavior of markets and administration, and on the various ways of personal life within various societies. (1)

In other words, Neurath is taking the content of a wide range of existing social-science studies of human behavior and society as constituting the domain of "social science" -- rather than beginning with an abstract or theoretical definition of the scope and methods of the social sciences. This approach is consistent with the over-arching Vienna Circle attitude of respect for the content and conduct of the various areas of science as they were currently practiced.

And what does he take to be the scientific goal of such research? He isn't entirely explicit, but here is a preliminary statement:

All the techniques for making well-arranged descriptions, finding correlations, and preparing predictions belong to the field of scientific practice with which I have to do here. ... Up to now we have met an overwhelming number of expressions dealing with social matters. (1-2)

So a fundamental goal of social-science research and thinking, on this approach, is providing a conceptual system -- a vocabulary -- in terms of which to describe social matters. Social scientists then use those concepts to describe the social data that they discover, and they attempt to discover correlations and make predictions based on the statements they have arrived at. Along the lines of Vienna Circle thinking about "criteria of significance," Neurath suggests that sociological concepts need to have clear and specific criteria of application to observable behavior. He refers to this kind of work as "terminological analysis." And the goal, evidently, is to create a uniform and logically specified language for the conduct of social science research and analysis: "Not only the unification of the sociological language is at stake, but a much more comprehensive unification and orchestration, which leads us to a lingua franca of unified science" (2). The resulting concepts need to have "observation content" -- that is, the researcher needs to be able to specify the connection the concept has to the observation of behavior. It is necessary to provide criteria of application based on observation.

But this is where Neurath's criticisms come in. Not all writings in the social or historical sciences conform to this ideal of conceptual clarity and empirical applicability. Neurath offers as a negative example of a social concept, the idea of the "spirit of nations." He suggests that this concept appears to be incapable of being connected to specific observable facts about social behavior; it functions as a speculative postulate of something inherently unobservable; and it should be avoided. "I suggest that it would be better not to discuss these remarks further within logical empiricism, because I see no way of transforming them into physicalist statements" (4). This corresponds to a very basic prescription for sociologists: make sure that the concepts one uses are logically

clear and have explicit connections to observation.

We see how perplexing anthropological and historical analyses sometimes appear to be, because the phraseology is anything but consistent. It will not bolster up any argument to add that something belongs to the "mental world" or that there are "motives behind an action" instead of using a simple correlation phraseology. Generalities, such as "factors of social change," even when they are connected with empiricist statements, do not seem to further descriptions or predictions; they often serve as a kind of healing balsam." (17-18)
Several points in this passage warrant comment. First, there is the requirement of "consistency" of language. Here Neurath is reaffirming the goal of arriving at a universal language for social science research. Second is the rejection of mentalistic vocabulary. The point, I believe, is that the scientist cannot provide any observational criteria for applying the mental term to the individual. He/she may be able to provide behavioral criteria for the mental term; but in that case the mental term can be eliminated in terms of a feature of behavior. Instead of: "Berty broke the glass because he was angry," we can replace the sentence with: "Berty broke the glass; Berty displayed a, b, c features of angry-behavior; angry-behavior is commonly associated with things like breaking glasses." This leads us immediately to behaviorism as a methodological requirement for psychology. And the problem with "factors of social change," evidently, is that the phrase is entirely abstract and vacuous -- and therefore does not help with description or prediction. If, on the other hand, the "factor" were specified more concretely -- say, "rising population density as a factor of social change" -- then presumably Neurath would be satisfied. It would then be possible to study a number of societies; evaluate them for population density and social unrest; and arrive at testable statements about the correlation between the two factors.

Consider an example that I think will illustrate Neurath's point here. Suppose we say that "capitalism exists because of a pre-existing spirit of Calvinism." (Neurath begins to consider this example, understanding both concepts in terms of a set of "human attitudes"; p. 16. His use of the example obviously indicates that he is thinking of Max Weber, but he doesn't explicitly mention Weber.) Neurath would require that we be able to answer a series of questions: what are the criteria by which we apply the concept of capitalism to a specific society or group? What are the criteria by which we apply "Calvinism" to a population of people? And what observations and deductive arguments exist that would allow us to assess the truth or falsity of the claim of causation? If we are unable to answer any of these questions, then the statement is not yet an acceptable sociological assertion. Ultimately Neurath argues that we should refrain from making causal claims (21); but if we have clear criteria of application for C and P, then we can arrive at acceptable statements like "All C societies are P societies" or "Some P societies are not C societies". In other words, we can discover observational correlations in the occurrence of C and P across a range of societies or groups.

Neurath gives attention to the topic of "corroborating and supporting hypotheses" (25 ff.) -- what he refers to as "assaying" the statement (19). Here he takes a Duhemian view (Pierre Duhem, The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory), according to which a scientific account of a phenomenon consists of a network of hypotheses that jointly (not singly) have implications for observation. "We look at a network of hypotheses only, and we cannot say from which hypotheses certain difficulties arise." He denies that "crucial experiments" exist that permit the scientist to refute a single hypothesis based on a single experimental outcome. Instead, the system of hypotheses as a whole gains empirical support through positive findings, and loses empirical credibility through negative findings. "I should therefore say we may 'shake' or 'corroborate' the assertion of a

hypothesis and finally prefer some hypothesis; but I should not suggest saying that we may 'confirm a sentence more and more,' because even this 'weak' statement deals at least with some 'limit'" (25).

What I do not find in this essay is a clear conception of a "theoretical construct" or theoretical concept -- that is, a scientifically useful concept that does not have criteria of empirical application. Theoretical concepts in physics are thought to be "non-observational" -- that is, there are no direct criteria for applying the concept of a quark to a specific observable thing in a specific time-space location. Instead, theoretical terms are employed in theoretical hypotheses along with "bridge laws" that permit us to relate the theory to the range of observable evidence. The observation-theoretic distinction becomes a crucial one in later analytic philosophy of science; but it doesn't seem to be explicit here in Neurath's essay. (He does refer to the Newtonian concept of gravity; but he doesn't specifically describe the logic of this concept and how it relates to observation; 26.)

Neurath also advocates caution in the search for predictions about social behavior and social processes: "As social scientists, we have to expect gulfs and gaps everywhere, together with unpredictability, incompleteness, and one-sidedness of our arguing, wherever we may start" (27). He reinforces this point with a strikingly modern-sounding point about the non-linearity of social processes: a small deviation at one end can lead to a major deviation at the other end (28).

So the main elements of a logical empiricist philosophy of sociology are here, in the form of a number of prescriptions:

- logical specification of concepts
- specification of empirical criteria of application of concepts to observations
- description of social phenomena in terms of this conceptual system
- observational assessment of statements
- discovery of regularities among descriptive statements
- avoidance of claims of causation
- disregard of theoretical concepts

And these prescriptions, in turn, seem to lead to a particular model of sociology research -- one that appears to have guided the conduct of quantitative-statistical sociological research for several decades at mid-century. This is a variant of positivist philosophy of science that most strongly encourages general descriptive concepts, strong empirical procedures, and the discovery of statistical regularities among variables. It is what Andrew Abbott refers to as the "variables" paradigm.

Did the Vienna Circle view of the social sciences have any influence on working sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s? Or, more generally, did the writings of logical positivism influence the development of the methodologies and theories of sociology? One direct form of influence can be traced through the priority that behavioral scientists gave to "concept formation" and operationalizability -- for example, Carl Hempel's Fundamentals of Concept Formation in Empirical Science (International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, Vol 2 No 7) (1952) or P. W. Bridgman's The logic of modern physics (1927). The requirement of testability certainly recurs throughout much methodological writing by sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s. The insistence on discovering regularities among social facts plays directly into more sophisticated efforts to understand sociology as a statistical/quantitative science. The idea that the social sciences should avoid using "cause-effect" vocabulary seems to resonate with methodologists who insist that "we discover regularities but cannot assess causal relationships." So there does appear to be

a fairly high degree of fit between the views that Neurath advances concerning sociology, and the content of positivist sociological methodology a few decades later.

A final question is this: how should science and philosophy interrelate? Do philosophical findings about scientific method imply that the scientific enterprise needs to start over? In response to this question, the book closes with one of Neurath's most famous passages -- the description of what is now known as "Neurath's raft".

Imagine sailors who, far out at sea, transform the shape of their clumsy vessel from a more circular to a more fishlike one. They make use of some drifting timber, besides the timber of the old structure, to modify the skeleton and the hull of their vessel. But they cannot put the ship in dock in order to start from scratch. During their work they stay on the old structure and deal with heavy gales and thundering waves. In transforming their ship they take care that dangerous leakages do not occur. A new ship grows out of the old one, step by step -- and while they are still building, the sailors may already be thinking of a new structure, and they will not always agree with one another. The whole business will go on in a way we cannot even anticipate today. That is our fate. (47)

This is his metaphor for the reconstruction of the sciences along the lines of logical empiricism and terminological empiricism: gradual reconstruction of the enterprise while underway in the business of performing scientific research.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:09PM (-04:00)

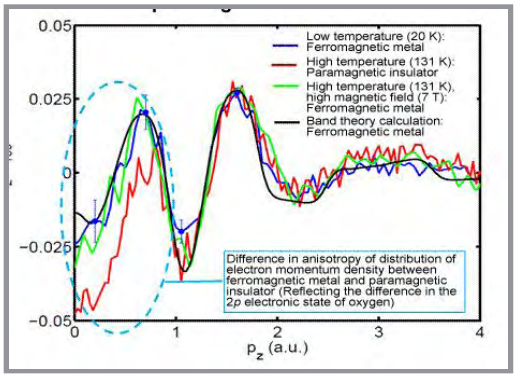
Neo-positivist philosophy of social science

Sunday, September 27, 2009



The 1960s witnessed the development of a second generation of analytic philosophy of science inspired broadly by logical positivism and the Vienna Circle (post, post). The "received view" of the 1950s and 1960s, as expressed by philosophers such as Carl Hempel, Ernest Nagel, and Israel Scheffler (and others pictured above), presented a view of scientific knowledge as consisting of theories, general laws, observational predictions, and a logic of confirmation according to which theories are evaluated by their observational consequences (Patrick Suppes, The Structure of Scientific Theories). There was a largely unquestioned assumption that all scientific theories have the same logical structure (the unity of science doctrine; post); so physics, economics, or evolutionary biology could equally be represented as a system of theoretical terms and statements, a set of general laws, and a set of observational or experimental consequences that can be empirically evaluated. Here is an illustration of the idea in the natural sciences; the black line is the theoretical calculation of ferromagnetic properties, and the colored lines are the observed behavior of metals under difference conditions.

This general view of the logic of scientific knowledge was applied to the social sciences by some philosophers of science, and the result was a neo-positivist philosophy of social



science. Richard Rudner was an important player in the formation of the received view in the 1960s, and he served as editor-in-chief of the core journal, Philosophy of Science, from 1959 to 1975. (His collected papers are held at Washington University, and the breadth of his correspondence gives some idea of his centrality in discussions of neo-positivist philosophy of science.) His 1966 textbook, Philosophy of social science, represents the high-water mark of neo-positivist philosophy of social science. So let's review the main features of Rudner's representation of social-scientific knowledge. (May Brodbeck's 1968 Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences is a fairly direct complement to Rudner's book, in that it provides a fairly definitive representation of the philosophy of social science in the late 1960s.)

Several core assumptions about the social sciences are advanced in Rudner's book.

- unity of science and naturalism; all sciences should resemble physics
- emphasis on the distinction between the context of discovery and context of justification
- insistence on the symmetry of explanation and prediction
- insistence on the essential role of lawlike generalizations in explanation
- fundamental reliance on a strict distinction between observation and theory
- advancement of "formalizability" as a desirable characteristic of a theory

Here is Rudner's definition of a theory:

A theory is a systematically related set of statements, including some lawlike generalizations, that is empirically testable.... Accordingly, to the extent that a theory has been fully articulated in some formulation, it will achieve an explicit deductive development and interrelationship of the statements it encompasses. (10-11)

This formulation doesn't yet make explicit the notion that "theory" is non-observational, or that theoretical concepts lack direct criteria of application to observational experience. Rather, Rudner emphasizes the characteristic of formalizability and deductive consequences. And this takes him in the direction of non-observational concepts; they are the concepts that are introduced into a scientific system as formal "place-holders" without explicit definition. Instead, their meaning is determined by the deductive consequences that the sentences in which they appear give rise to. The intended analogy here is with the axioms of geometry; the concepts of "point," "line," and "plane" are introduced as primitives without further definition, and their meaning is defined simply by the role they play in the full deductive system of geometry. So, notably, Rudner treats the problem of theory formation in the sciences as entirely analogous to the problem of creating a formal mathematical system -- number theory or topology, for example. All concepts are either primitive -- introduced without definition; or defined -- introduced with strict logical definitions in terms of other concepts that already exist in the theoretical vocabulary. (It is interesting to note that Carl Hempel's contribution to the Vienna Circle International Encyclopedia of Unified Science is on this subject; Fundamentals of Concept Formation in Empirical Science (International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, Vol 2 No 7) .)

Notice how foreign this approach is to actual theoretical work by social scientists. Weber or Durkheim do not attempt to strip away "connotation" or ordinary associations from their theoretical concepts; rather, they make full use of the complexity and open-endedness of concepts like capitalism or solidarity as a way of allowing them to describe and theorize complex social realities. Rudner's approach seems to reflect the program of logical positivism, attempting to utilize the apparatus of formal logic to clarify scientific reasoning. But it misses the mark in application to the actual reasoning of path-breaking social thinkers such as Durkheim, Weber, Tocqueville, or Marx.

Rudner turns to the observation-theoretic distinction in short order. First, he describes observational concepts or predicates in these terms: "One set of primitives should be comprised of observational, or as we shall sometimes say, experimental terms (i.e., that such predicates should refer to observable features of the universe)" (21). And second, he introduces theoretical concepts: "The latter refer to nonobservable or nonmanifest characteristics of nonobservable entities. Thus, theoreticals include terms such as 'electron,' 'superego,' 'institutional inertia,' 'cultural lag,' which do not or are not (when the appropriate theories come to be formulated) likely to apply to observable entities at all" (23).

This is the standard view of the observation-theoretic distinction within the "received view" of neo-positivist philosophy of science. It was recognized that it is not possible to achieve the scientific goals of physics or chemistry if we are restricted to a purely observational vocabulary. We evidently need to refer to hypothetical entities and forces if we are to be able to explain observable phenomena. So hypothetical constructs must be permitted. But their "empirical content" is exhausted by their observational consequences.

Rudner attempts to provide a positivistic interpretation of Weber's concept of ideal types. He writes, "Our concern is with the logical character of idealizations and their methodological uses. In this latter respect, concepts that happen to be idealizations have, as we shall see, no special methodological role--regardless of the heuristic or suggestive value they may have in leading theorists to form hypotheses or frame theories about related phenomena" (56). This is a surprising exercise, since it involves the requirement that the social scientist provide a precise specification of the scope and implications of the term. I've always understood Weber's emphasis to be on the open-endedness of ideal-type concepts; and certainly Weber's use of ideal-type concepts did not remotely resemble the axiomatic, formalistic use that Rudner attributes to scientific concepts generally.

So what is the logic of scientific explanation in the social sciences, according to Rudner? His answer is straight from Hempel's covering law theory:

The formal structure of a scientific explanation of some particular event has three parts: first, a statement E describing the specific event to be explained; second, a set of statements C1 to Cn describing specific relevant circumstances that are antecedent to, or otherwise causally correlated with, the event described by E; third, a set of lawlike statements L1 to Ln, universal generalizations whose import is roughly 'Whenever events of the kind described by C1 through Cn take place, then an event of the kind described by E takes place.' (60)

Perhaps the key philosophical assumption that Rudner defends is the idea that the logic of science is everywhere the same. Concept formation, deduction, confirmation, and explanation all involve the same formalizable operations. A theory should be formalized

as a first-order deductive system with primitive terms and defined terms; some of its terms should have criteria of application to observable outcomes; explanation proceeds by deriving a description of the explanandum from the theory; and the theory should be tested by evaluating the truth or falsity of its observational consequences.

In addition to these extended discussions of the putative logic of social-science reasoning, Rudner also addresses the topics of "objectivity" in social-science research and the concepts of functionalism and teleology in the social sciences.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to the philosophy of the social sciences? The strength of the book is also its debilitating weakness: it is an exceptionally clear exposition and development of the central ideas of logical positivism in application to social-science theorizing. Unfortunately, this approach proves to be singularly unhelpful when it comes to actually understanding and criticizing the social sciences as they actually exist. It has the effect of attempting to force a style and form of reasoning onto social researchers that deforms the ways in which they attempt to theorize and explain the social world.

Key weaknesses include these points.

First, this formulation pays virtually no attention to the actual content and methods of existing social science disciplines. The foundational premise is that all sciences have the same fundamental logic. So it isn't necessary to examine sociology, political science, or economics in detail in order to trace out the particular characteristics of inquiry, explanation, and theory in these disciplines. Either the social-science disciplines conform to the received view, or they do not and for that reason show themselves to be defective as science. So the philosophy of a special science is simply the special case of the more general theory of scientific knowledge represented by the received view. This is a bad way of beginning the philosophical study of any science, whether the social sciences or the biological sciences.

Second, by highlighting the issues that are central to the exposition of the received view -- for example, the observation-theoretic distinction -- the neo-positivist philosopher of social science is drawn away from consideration of other, more substantive problems to which philosophers could make a useful contribution. For example, the assumptions of purposive rationality underlie many explanations in areas of political science and economics; and it turns out to be very productive to examine the intricacies that arise when we try to give a careful explanation of the concept of rationality and to link this assumption to particular areas of social explanation. The intellectual disposition created by the neo-positivist view is to reduce this question to a simple matter of "concept formation." "Rationality" becomes simply another theoretical construct to be introduced into scientific theories. But as Sen, Harsanyi, Margolis, and dozens of other philosophers and social scientists have demonstrated, we need to spend quite a bit of intellectual energy to the task of unpacking the theory of rationality if it is to be of use in the social sciences.

Third, this approach imposes an inappropriate simplification on the social sciences when it comes to empirical evaluation of social-science hypotheses. It presupposes the comprehensive generality of the hypothetico-deductive model of confirmation theory. Once again, the intellectual error derives from the assumption that the logic of scientific reasoning must be the same in every area of science. The social sciences sometimes involve the sorts of theoretical systems that are found in physics; but more commonly a

social science analysis is comprised of a number of relatively independent models and mechanisms -- theories of the middle range -- that are amenable to piecemeal evaluation. Social science analyses are not generally not unified theoretical systems along the lines of the theory of thermodynamics or genetics. And there are other ways of providing empirical evaluation and support for these sorts of analyses -- for example, process-tracing, piecemeal empirical evaluation, and applying the logic of comparative causal analysis.

In hindsight, the neo-positivist paradigm for analyzing the social sciences just didn't go very well. It pushed an esoteric theology of logical analysis onto the enterprise of understanding society that really didn't conform very well to the reasoning and explaining that talented sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists were creating for themselves. And it did not succeed in focusing productive attention by philosophers on the difficult problems of theory construction and explanation that social scientists really confronted.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:40PM (-04:00)

Alternative economists

Tuesday, September 29, 2009



Traditional neoclassical economics has missed the mark quite a bit in the past two years. There is the financial and banking crisis, of course; neoclassical economists haven't exactly succeeded in explaining or "post-dicting" the crisis and recession through which we've traveled over the past year and more. But perhaps more fundamentally, neoclassical economics has failed to provide a basis for understanding the nuance and range of our economic institutions -- nationally or globally. Contemporary academic economics selects a pretty narrow range of questions as being legitimate subjects for economists to study; so topics such as hunger, labor unions, alternative economic institutions, and the history of economic thought generally get fairly short shrift. Don't expect to see the perspectives of Steven Marglin or Samuel Bowles in Economics 101 in most U.S. universities! The profession has a pretty narrow conception of what "economics" is.

And yet, when intelligent citizens think about the key problems of economics in a broader sense -- the problems that we really care about, the problems that will really influence our quality of life -- we certainly think of something broader than the mathematics of supply and demand or the solution of a general equilibrium model. We're ultimately not as interested in the formalisms of market equilibrium as we are in an analysis of the institutions that define the context of economic activity. We want to know more about the ways in which features of economic organization and the basic institutions of our economy influence individual behavior; we are curious about how our institutions create distributive outcomes that fundamentally affect people's lives differently across social groups. We would like to have a clearer understanding of some of the ways that non-economic factors -- race, gender, age, city -- influence people's economic outcomes. We want to know how the institutions and incentives defined by our economic system bring about effects on the natural environment. And we are often curious about how it might be

possible to reform our basic economic institutions in ways that are more favorable to human development. In other words, we are often brought to think along the lines of some of the great dissenters in the economics tradition -- Polanyi, Dobb, Marx, Sen, McCloskey, and Dasgupta (An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution), for example. (In a very contemporary and topical way, Richard Florida takes on a lot of these issues; see his blog, the Creative Class.)

It is therefore pleasing to find that some publishers like Routledge are bringing out serious academic works in what they refer to as "social economics". The Routledge series, Advances in Social Economics, has a list of titles representing recent work that is rigorous and insightful but that explores other points of the compass within the field of political economy. I certainly hope that university libraries around the world are paying attention to this series; these are titles that can add a lot to the debate.

One book in the series in particular catches my eye. My colleague Bruce Pietrykowski raises an important set of "alternative" economic issues in his recent book, The Political Economy of Consumer Behavior: Contesting Consumption. (Here is a preview of the book from Routledge.) The book is a valuable contribution and very much worth reading.

Pietrykowski has two intertwined goals in the book. First, he wants to provide a broader basis for understanding ***consumer behavior and psychology*** than is presupposed by orthodox economists. And second, he wants to help contribute to a broader understanding of the scope, methods, and content of political economy than is provided by mainstream economics departments today.

Here is his preliminary statement of his goal:

I argue that in order to arrive at a more compelling account of consumer behavior we need to transform the discipline of economics by opening up the borders between economics and sociology, geography, feminist social theory, science studies and cultural studies. (2)

The fact of consumption is a crucial economic reality in any economy. How do individuals make choices about what and how to consume? Pietrykowski makes the point that consumption behavior shows enormous heterogeneity across groups defined in terms of ethnicity, gender, region, and time -- a point made here as well (post). So a single abstraction representing the universal consumer won't do the job. The standard economic assumption of the rationally self-interested consumer with consistent and complete preference rankings is seriously inadequate; instead, we need to develop a more nuanced set of views about the psychological and social factors that influence consumer preferences and choices.

So it is important to develop alternative theoretical tools in terms of which to analyze consumer psychology. Here Pietrykowski draws on ideas from Karl Marx (fetishism of commodities), Amartya Sen, and other political economists who have attempted to provide "thick" descriptions of economic behavior. The point here is not that we cannot usefully investigate and theorize about consumer behavior; rather, Pietrykowski is looking for an analytical approach that operates at the "middle range" between complete formal abstraction and the writing of many individual biographies.

Second, Pietrykowski is interested in contributing to a "re-mapping" of the knowledge system of economic thought, by exploring some of the alternative constructions that have

been bypassed by the profession since World War II. (These arguments are largely developed in Chapter Two.) Pietrykowski begins with the assumption that the discipline and profession of economics is itself socially constructed and contingent; it took shape in response to a fairly specific set of theoretical and methodological ideas, it was subject to a variety of social and political pressures, and there were viable alternatives at every turn. Here is how he formulates the social construction perspective:

> The claim that economic knowledge is socially constructed allows for an understanding of the field as the outcome of interpretation, negotiation and contestation over the constituents of economic knowledge and the legitimacy of particular practices, methods, and techniques of analysis. (19)

Like Marion Fourcade, Pietrykowski argues that there is a great deal of path dependence in the development of economics as a discipline and profession; and there are identifiable turning points where we can judge with confidence that themes that were eliminated at a certain time would have led to a substantially different intellectual system had they persisted. Pietrykowski's analysis of the fifty years of development of professional economics in the first half of the twentieth century is a very nice contribution to a contemporary history of science, and very compatible with Fourcade's important work in Economists and Societies: Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain, and France, 1890s to 1990s.

The discipline of "home economics" in the 1920s and 1930s is the example that Pietrykowski examines in detail. "This task ... of defining economics as a distinct professional discipline involved both recruitment and exclusion" (28). Here is how Pietrykowski describes home economics:

> Departments of home economics were quite diverse in the early twentieth century. Commonly associated with maintaining and preserving the cult of domesticity, home economics programs emerged from multiple sources including progressive political reform of public health, labor conditions, and household management. (35)

And, of course, home economics did not long remain a part of the professional discipline of economics. Pietrykowski looks in detail at the way in which home economics developed as an academic discipline at Cornell University; and he documents some ways in which the discipline of economics was constructed in a gendered way to exclude this way of understanding scientific economics: "The decision was made that women involved in the emerging field of home economics were to be excluded from the AEA.... Economics was to be concerned neither with women's activities in the home nor with women's activities in the workplace" (28-29).

Pietrykowski develops his full analysis of consumption by focusing on three heterodox approaches to understanding consumption: home economics and feminist analysis, psychological and behavioral research on consumer behavior (George Katona), and Fordism and the theory of mass consumption. He also gives some attention to the emerging importance of experimental economics as a tool for better understanding real economic decision-making and behavior (20-25).

After discussing these heterodox theories, Pietrykowski illustrates the value of the broader framework by examining three fascinating cases of consumption: the complex motivations that bring consumers to purchase the Toyota Prius, the motivations behind the Slow Food movement, and the choice that people in some communities have to engage in a system of alternative currency. These are each substantial examples of arenas where consumers are choosing products in ways that make it plain that their

choices are influenced by culture, values, and commitments no less than calculations of utilities and preferences.

Between the theories and the cases, Pietrykowski offers a remarkably rich rethinking of how people choose to consume. He makes real sense of the idea that consumption is socially constructed (drawing sometimes on the social construction of technology (SCOT) literature). He demonstrates that models based on the theory of the universal consumer are not likely to fit well with actual economic outcomes. And he makes a strong and persuasive case for the need for academic economics to expand its horizons.

I find it interesting to notice that Pietrykowski's account of the ascendency of neoclassical economics since the 1950s converges closely with prior postings on positivist philosophy of science. One of the explicit appeals made by neoclassical economists was a methodological argument: they argued that their deductive, formal, and axiomatic treatments of economic fundamentals were more "scientific" than case studies and thick descriptions of economic behavior. So many of the failings of mainstream economic thought today can be traced to the shortcomings of the positivist program for the social sciences that was articulated in the middle of the twentieth century.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:19PM (-04:00)

A Michigan job loss tsunami

Wednesday, September 30, 2009



The whole country knows that unemployment is very high in Michigan, and most people also know that the automotive manufacturing industry has taken a nose dive in the past five years. But the situation is even worse than most people imagine. Bureau of Labor statistics indicate several important facts. In 2000 the total private sector employment in the United States was 110,798,000; by August 2009 this number had dropped to 109,540,000 -- a net loss of 1,258,000 jobs nation-wide. This is a 1.1% drop. In 2000 the number of private sector jobs in Michigan was 3,996,000; this number dropped to 3,213,000 by August 2009 -- a drop of 783,000 jobs (19.6%). This is a shocking number -- one out of five jobs in Michigan has disappeared since 2000.

Other Midwestern manufacturing states also had significant job losses during the period. Ohio lost 9.8% of its 4,840,000 jobs since 2000, and Illinois lost 6.6% of its 5,205,000 jobs since 2000. But Michigan's losses dwarf every other state by a large margin. Among the fifty states and the District of Columbia there were winners and losers; 25 states gained private sector jobs during these years, with Texas the big winner (700,000 new jobs). Altogether 1,952,000 new jobs were created in 25 states and 3,207,000 jobs were lost in 25 states and DC. But consider this: fully 24% of all private sector job losses nation-wide occurred in Michigan during this time period. Think of that: one out of four of all private-sector job losses in the country during these years occurred in one state, Michigan. This could reasonably be called a one-state depression. It is as if a slow-moving Katrina had hit the state, and no one noticed.

So what is needed in order for Michigan to regain its economic wellbeing?

Plainly a 20-30% unemployment rate is unacceptable. So if the state maintains its current population, then the communities, businesses, and government of the state need to stimulate substantial job growth. And we can put some numbers on this obvious truth. If the population remains constant then it would take eight years for the state to recover to the 2000 level if jobs grow at 3% per year. And this would require the creation of about 100,000 new private sector jobs each year.

What would be needed in order to get to 100,000 new jobs per year in Michigan? Here is one pathway: succeed in attracting or creating --

- two large firms of 5,000 workers,
- 10 firms of 1000 workers,
- 50 firms of 500 workers,
- 400 firms of 100 workers,
- 1500 small businesses of 10 workers, and
- 2000 small businesses that expand by three workers.

That gets us to 106,000 new jobs. And it means creating or attracting two large firms, almost 2,000 small and medium businesses, and expanding another 2,000 small businesses. And this needs to happen every year for eight years.

Is this feasible? Is it possible for a state of about 10 million people to create new businesses and jobs on this scale? That is the crucial question for the state of Michigan. And there are many organizations and incubators devoted to this goal in the state of Michigan -- Ann Arbor SPARK, TechTown, Automation Alley, Detroit Renaissance, Michigan Economic Development Corporation, and the Detroit Regional Chamber, to name a few. Further, the universities are doing everything possible to help provide the talented graduates and the new innovations that will be needed for the creation of successful new businesses. But ultimately it is very hard to see how this kind of business creation and job growth can occur year after year.

So Michigan's problem is also a crucial challenge for the nation as a whole. The plain truth is that Michigan has born the largest burden of the decline of manufacturing jobs in the past decade, and the solutions may be beyond the grasp of the state itself. This situation may require intelligent and substantial Federal solutions.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:12PM (-04:00)

Internal migration

Friday, October 02, 2009



People move around in most modern societies. Recent graduates of most universities often compete in national job markets, and large engineering, accounting, and consulting firms recruit at elite universities throughout the country. So there is a certain amount of location churning created by the need for talent that draws talented young people from one region to another. (In fact, it would be interesting to try to quantify this fact of



geographical mobility: for example, what percentage of college graduates from New York or Florida take their first job in another state or economic region?)

But this kind of career-based mobility isn't quite what we mean when we refer to internal migration. Intuitively, we mean significant numbers of people relocating from their home region to another region for economic reasons. Internal migration leads to enduring population shifts across regions of the country.

We've seen periods of this kind of population relocation several times in our own history: the westward movement from the east coast of poor and working people in the mid-nineteenth century, the mass migration of African-Americans from the rural south to northern cities in the 1920s, and the exodus of the Tom Joad family and their generation from Oklahoma to California in the 1930s. We might even put the flow of people from Michigan to the sunbelt in the 1980s into this category, and perhaps the displacement of poor people from New Orleans by Katrina and its aftermath reaches the threshold as well.

So here is my question for the moment: is the United States on the verge of another period of significant internal migration, as workers downsized in Detroit or Akron make the painful decision to relocate in Houston or Phoenix? Are we about to see a significant shift of population from the rustbelt to the sunbelt? And what consequences would this have for Illinois, Ohio, or Michigan?

Think about the situation that faces young people in these states today. What is the best strategy for 25-year-olds in Akron or Detroit? One is to maximize their twenty-first century source of wealth and well-being -- their education and talent levels. But the second is to relocate to a place where there are the largest number of economic opportunities available to them at their existing levels of skills. And today that means a certain number of cities and much of the sunbelt. Chicago looks good, Houston looks good, and maybe Salt Lake City looks good.

If these are the primary choices available to young people in the industrial midwest, what should we expect about their behavior? And what consequences do these incentives give rise to? First, this situation seems to imply a surge in university enrollments (a good thing); rationally, we would imagine that young people would invest their time, energy, and resources towards getting a good education. But second, these considerations also seem to imply a surge in out-migration to more dynamic regions once it becomes clear that current conditions are likely to persist (a bad thing). So current economic conditions in the midwest seem to increase the chances that significant internal migration will occur in the next few years.

One way of thinking about the likelihood of significant population movement from one economic region to another is to consider the economic capacity of a state or region to support a certain level of income for a given population size. Industrial states in the Midwest were strong economic engines in the 1950s through the 1980s. Steel, cars, and chemicals generated a great deal of revenue every year, and this supported a large and relatively prosperous population. But two things happened: these industries were forced

into lower costs and higher productivity -- so the demand for labor fell even when demand for cars remained high. And global competitors appeared on the scene to capture part of the market for these products -- reducing even further the demand for labor. Moreover, both processes led to a premium on skilled labor, thus further reducing the demand for one segment of the workforce.

There is an important implication here: it seems to imply that the basis for a high quality of life for 10 million people in Michigan or Ohio has basically disappeared. If technology and market conditions don't change, then Michigan and Ohio will either lose population or adjust to a permanently reduced standard of living.

We would prefer to believe that we'll find a way out of the box. But looking at things dispassionately, what seems equally likely is a restructuring of population around the new realities of America's economic macroregions. (Texas alone gained 700,000 jobs during the period of 2000-2009.) And this would mean large-scale internal migration, with a "right-sizing" of the population sizes of states and regions around their current economic capacities. (Basically, this is the central theorem of the theory of labor markets: we should expect migration from one region to another up to the point where employment prospects and wages are equal in the two regions.) For Michigan this might imply a loss of population of one or two million people, as workers and their families seek to improve their prospects. Moreover, there is a great risk that among the first to go will be the best educated and most innovative young people; these are the people who have the greatest options throughout the national labor market. And they are precisely the people who will be needed if Michigan or Ohio are to succeed in nurturing a "New Economy."

This scale of internal migration would have enormous consequences on both ends. Communities would be significantly disrupted, as families exit their locations in the social networks of their local communities. This magnitude of loss of population would mean a shift of political representation; for example, Michigan would lose roughly 10-20% of its Congressional seats (depending on the population results for the rest of the country). Michigan's public schools, community colleges, and universities would lose a significant number of students and would need to downsize. The state's fiscal equation would change on both expenditures and revenues. Tax revenues would fall as a result of fewer taxpayers, less business activity, and less aggregate demand and sales tax revenue. But the volume and cost of public services would also fall. So managing change and rationalizing the delivery of public services could actually improve the state's fiscal situation. The ultimate result would be a fundamental transformation of the cultural and social life of the state -- and not in a direction that most people would willingly choose.

Is this just a worst-case scenario? Maybe not. Here is a well researched Detroit News story by Ron French and Mike Wilkinson in April 2009. The story estimates that Michigan has lost 465,000 people since 2001 -- and the number continues to rise. Moreover, French and Wilkinson offer data that confirm that there is a disproportionate number of talented, skilled professionals in the mix -- with substantial costs to the Michigan economy with their departure. Ohio State University economist Mark Partridge is quoted in the article in these words (webpage):

Migration is good for the migrants but bad for the state they're leaving. It's a vicious downward cycle; the best and brightest leave; entrepreneurs don't come to the state because the best and brightest are elsewhere; as more people leave, that leaves fewer people to pay for services. Neither one will make Michigan a very appealing place.
There is a happier alternative, of course -- the creation of a New Economy for the

rustbelt. This is what governors like Jennifer Granholm in Michigan and Ted Strickland in Ohio are advocating. Elected officials, economic development experts, and business leaders call for the creation of new and diversified industries for the rustbelt economy. Some experts and politicians point to a new green economy based on alternative energy technologies; others point to the prosperity possible by producing and selling innovations in biological and medical products. And yet others pin their hopes on the encouragement of large numbers of innovative, nimble companies that generate wealth, jobs, and prosperity. Let's hope that some of these strategies will succeed on a large scale. But, as noted in an earlier posting, the challenge is a great one. New economic activities need to create a hundred thousand jobs a year if we are to recover the ground we've lost in Michigan. And that is a large number.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:46PM (-04:00)

Kuhn's paradigm shift

Sunday, October 04, 2009



Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962) brought about a paradigm shift of its own, in the way that philosophers thought about science. The book was published in the Vienna Circle's International Encyclopedia of Unified Science in 1962. (See earlier posts on the Vienna Circle; post, post.) And almost immediately it stimulated a profound change in the fundamental questions that defined the philosophy of science. For one thing, it shifted the focus from the context of justification to the context of discovery. It legitimated the introduction of the study of the history of science into the philosophy of science -- and thereby also legitimated the perspective of sociological study of the actual practices of science. And it cast into doubt the most fundamental assumptions of positivism as a theory of how the science enterprise actually works.

And yet it also preserved an epistemological perspective. Kuhn forced us to ask questions about truth, justification, and conceptual discovery -- even as he provided a basis for being skeptical about the stronger claims for scientific rationality by positivists like Reichenbach and Carnap. And the framework threatened to lead to a kind of cognitive relativism: "truth" is relative to a set of extra-rational conventions of conceptual scheme and interpretation of data.

The main threads of Kuhn's approach to science are well known. Science really gets underway when a scientific tradition has succeeded on formulating a paradigm. A paradigm includes a diverse set of elements -- conceptual schemes, research techniques, bodies of accepted data and theory, and embedded criteria and processes for the validation of results. Paradigms are not subject to testing or justification; in fact, empirical procedures are embedded within paradigms. Paradigms are in some ways incommensurable -- Kuhn alluded to gestalt psychology to capture the idea that a paradigm structures our perceptions of the world. There are no crucial experiments -- instead, anomalies accumulate and eventually the advocates of an old paradigm die out and leave the field to practitioners of a new paradigm. Like Polanyi, Kuhn emphasizes the

concrete practical knowledge that is a fundamental component of scientific education (post). By learning to use the instruments and perform the experiments, the budding scientist learns to see the world in a paradigm-specific way. (Alexander Bird provides a good essay on Kuhn in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)

A couple of questions are particularly interesting today, approaching fifty years after the writing of the book. One is the question of origins: where did Kuhn's basic intuitions come from? Was the idea of a paradigm a bolt from the blue, or was there a comprehensible line of intellectual development that led to it? There certainly was a strong tradition of study of the history of science from the late nineteenth to the twentieth century; but Kuhn was the first to bring this tradition into explicit dialogue with the philosophy of science. Henri Poincaré (The Foundations of Science: Science and Hypothesis, The Value of Science, Science and Methods) and Pierre Duhem (The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory) are examples of thinkers who brought a knowledge of the history of science into their thinking about the logic of science. And Alexandre Koyré's studies of Galileo are relevant too (From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe); Koyré made plain the "revolutionary" character of Galileo's thought within the history of science. However, it appears that Kuhn's understanding of the history of science took shape through his own efforts to make sense of important episodes in the history of science while teaching in the General Education in Science curriculum at Harvard, rather than building on prior traditions.

Another question arises from the fact of its surprising publication in the Encyclopedia. The Encyclopedia project was a fundamental and deliberate expression of logical positivism. Structure of Scientific Revolutions, on the other hand, became one of the founding texts of anti-positivism. And this was apparent in the book from the start. So how did it come to be published here? (Michael Friedman takes up this subject in detail in "Kuhn and Logical Positivism" in Thomas Nickles, Thomas Kuhn (link).) George Reisch and Brazilian philosopher J. C. P. Oliveira address exactly this question. Oliveira offers an interesting discussion of the relationship between Kuhn and Carnap in an online article. He quotes crucial letters from Carnap to Kuhn in 1960 and 1962 about the publication of SSR in the Encyclopedia series. Carnap writes,

I believe that the planned monograph will be a valuable contri-bution to the Encyclopedia. I am myself very much interested in the problems which you intend to deal with, even though my knowledge of the history of science is rather fragmentary. Among many other items I liked your emphasis on the new conceptual frameworks which are proposed in revolutions in science, and, on their basis, the posing of new questions, not only answers to old problems. (REISCH 1991, p. 266)
I am convinced that your ideas will be very stimulating for all those who are interested in the nature of scientific theories and especially the causes and forms of their changes. I found very illuminating the parallel you draw with Darwinian evolution: just as Darwin gave up the earlier idea that the evolution was directed towards a predeter-mined goal, men as the perfect organism, and saw it as a process of improvement by natural selection, you emphasize that the develop-ment of theories is not directed toward the perfect true theory, but is a process of improvement of an instrument. In my own work on in-ductive logic in recent years I have come to a similar idea: that my work and that of a few friends in the step for step solution of prob-lems should not be regarded as leading to “the ideal system”, but rather as a step for step improvement of an instrument. Before I read your manuscript I would not have put it in just those words. But your formulations and clarifications by examples and also your analogy with Darwin’s theory helped me to see clearer what I had in mind. From September on I shall be for a year at the Stanford

Center. I hope that we shall have an opportunity to get together and talk about problems of common interest. (REISCH 1991, pp.266-267)

Against what Oliveira calls "revisionist" historians of the philosophy of science, Oliveira does not believe that SSR was accepted for publication by Carnap because Carnap or other late Vienna School philosophers believed there was a significant degree of agreement between Kuhn and Carnap. Instead, he argues that the Encyclopedia group believed that the history of science was an entirely separate subject from the philosophy of science. It was a valid subject of investigation, but had nothing to do with the logic of science. Oliveira writes,

Thus, the publication of Structure in Encyclopedia could be justified merely by the fact that the Encyclopedia project had already reserved space for it. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that the editors commissioned Kuhn's book as a work in history of science especially for publication in the Encyclopedia.

Also interesting is to consider where Kuhn's ideas went from here. How much influence did the theory have within philosophy? Certainly Kuhn had vast influence within the next generation of anti-positivist or post-positivist philosophy of science. And he had influence in fields very remote from philosophy as well. Paul Feyerabend was directly exposed to Kuhn at UCLA and picks up the anti-positivist thread in Against Method. Imre Lakatos introduces important alternatives to the concept of paradigm with his concept of a scientific research programme. Lakatos makes an effort to reintroduce rational standards into the task of paradigm choice through his idea of progressive problem shifts (The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Volume 1: Philosophical Papers). An important volume involving Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Lakatos came directly out of a conference focused on Kuhn's work (Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge: Volume 4: Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, London, 1965). Kuhn's ideas have had a very wide exposure within the philosophy of science; but as Alexander Bird notes in his essay in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, there has not emerged a "school" of Kuhnian philosophy of science.

From the perspective of a half century, some of the most enduring questions raised by Kuhn are these:

- What does the detailed study of the history of science tell us about scientific rationality?
- To what extent is it true that scientific training inculcates adherence to a conceptual scheme and approach to the world that the scientist simply can't critically evaluate?
- Does the concept of a scientific paradigm apply to other fields of knowledge? Do sociologists or art historians have paradigms in Kuhn's strong sense?
- Is there a meta-theory of scientific rationality that permits scientists and philosophers to critically examine alternative paradigms?
- And for the social sciences -- are Marxism, verstehen theory, or Parsonian sociology paradigms in the strong Kuhnian sense?

Perhaps the strongest legacy is this: Kuhn's work provides a compelling basis for thinking that we can do the philosophy of science best when we consider the real epistemic practices of working scientists carefully and critically. The history and sociology of science is indeed relevant to the epistemic concerns of the philosophy of science. And this is especially true in the case of the social sciences.

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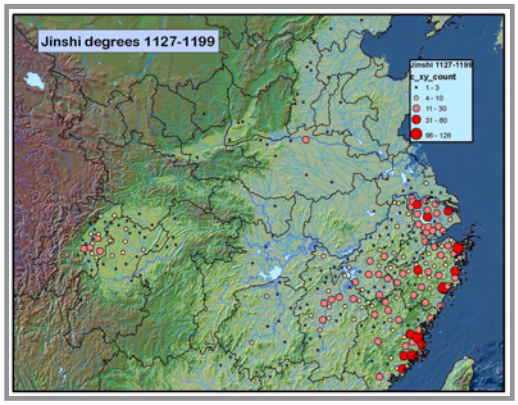
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:43AM (-04:00)

Technology innovation in Chinese agriculture

Tuesday, October 06, 2009


醫藥鏡合序
竊聞澤物之謂仁辨物之謂智
二者相分若蓬與楹然欲行澤
物之事必先施辨物之材故日
月照臨品彙昭蘇水火澄灼古

It is a commonplace in world history to observe that China had achieved a high level of sophistication in science, medicine, and astronomy by the Middle Ages, but that some unknown feature of social organization or culture blocked the further development of this science into the expansion of technology in the early modern period. Chinese culture was "blocked" from making significant technological advances during the late Ming and early Qing periods -- in spite of its scientific advantage over the West in medieval times; or so it is believed in a standard version of Chinese economic history.



A variety of hypotheses have been offered to account for this supposed fact. For example, Mark Elvin argues that China's social and demographic system created conditions for a "high-level equilibrium trap" in the early modern period in The Pattern of the Chinese Past. According to Elvin, Chinese social arrangements favored population growth; innovative and resourceful farmers discovered all feasible refinements of traditional agricultural techniques to refine a highly labor-intensive system of agriculture; and population expanded to the point where the whole population was at roughly the subsistence level while consuming virtually the whole of the agricultural product. There was consequently no social surplus that might have been used to invest in discovery of major innovations in agricultural technology; so the civilization was trapped. (Here is a more developed discussion of Elvin's argument.)

Other historians have speculated about potential features of Confucian culture that might have blocked the transition from scientific knowledge to technology applications. The leading Western expert on Chinese science is Joseph Needham (1900-1995), whose multi-volume studies on Chinese science set the standard in this area (Science and Civilisation in China. Volume 1: Introductory Orientations; Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West). And Needham attributes China's failure to continue to make scientific progress to features of its traditional culture.

But here is a more fundamental question: is the received wisdom in fact true? Was Chinese technology unusually stagnant during the early-modern period (late Ming, early Qing)? Agriculture is a particularly important aspect of traditional economic life; so we might reformulate our question a bit more specifically: what was the status of agricultural technology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (late Ming, early Qing)? (See an earlier posting on Chinese agricultural history for more on this subject.)

Economic historian Bozhong Li considers this question with respect to the agriculture of the lower Yangzi Delta in Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850. And since this was the most important agricultural region in China for centuries, his findings are important. (It was also the major cultural center of China; see the concentration of literati in the map above.) Li makes an important point about technological innovation by distinguishing between invention and dissemination. An important innovation may be discovered in one time period but only adopted and disseminated over a wide territory much later. And the economic effects of the innovation only take hold when there is broad dissemination. This was true for Chinese agriculture during the Ming period, according to Li:

The revolutionary advance in Jiangnan rice agriculture technology appeared in the late Tang and led to the emergence and development of intensive agriculture composed of double-cropping rice and wheat. But this kind of intensive agriculture in pre-Ming times was largely limited to the high-fields of western Jiangnan. In the Ming this pattern developed into what Kitada has called the 'new double-cropping system' and spread throughout Jiangnan, but only in the late Ming did it become a leading crop regime. Similar were the development and spread of mulberry and cotton farming technologies, though they were limited to particular areas and cotton technology's advances came later because cotton was introduced later. Each had its major advances in the Ming. Therefore, technology advances in Ming Jiangnan agriculture were certainly not inferior to those of Song times which are looked at as a period of 'farming revolution'. (40)

Li also finds that there was a significant increase in the number of crop varieties in the early Qing -- another indication of technological development. He observes, "The later the date, the greater the number of varieties. For example, in the two prefectures of Suzhou and Changzhou, 46 varieties were found in the Song, but the number rose to 118 in the Ming and 259 in the Qing" (40). And this proliferation of varieties permitted farmers to adjust their crop to local soil, water, and climate conditions -- thus increasing the output of the crop per unit of land. Moreover, formal knowledge of the properties of the main varieties increased from Ming to Qing periods; "By the mid-Qing, the concept of 'early' rice had become clear and exact, and knowledge of 'intermediate' and 'late' strains had also deepened" (42). This knowledge is important, because it indicates an ability to codify the match between the variety to the local farming environment.

Another important process of technology change in agriculture had to do with fertilizer use. Here again Li finds that there was significant enhancement, discovery, and dissemination of new uses of fertilizer in the Ming-Qing period.

A great advance in fertilizer use took place in Jiangnan during the early and mid-Qing, an advance so significant that it can be called a 'fertilizer revolution'. The advance included three aspects: (a) an improvement in fertilizer application techniques, centring on the use of top dressing; (b) progress in the processing of traditional fertilizer; and (c) an introduction of a new kind of fertilizer, oilcake. Although all three advances began to appear in the Ming, they were not widespread until the Qing. (46)

And the discovery of oilcake was very important to the increases in land productivity that Qing agriculture witnessed -- thus permitting a constant or slightly rising standard of living during a period of some population increase.

There were also advances in the use of water resources. Raising fish in ponds, for example, became an important farming activity in the late Ming period, and pond fish

became a widely commercialized product in the Qing. Li describes large-scale fishing operations in Lake Tai in Jiangnan using large fishing boats with six masts to catch and transport the fish (62).

So Li's estimate of agricultural technology during the Ming period is that it was not stagnant; rather, there was significant diffusion of new crops, rotation systems, and fertilizers that led to significant increases in agricultural product during the period. "In sum, in the Jiangnan plain, land and water resources were used more rationally and fully in the early and mid-Qing than they had been in the late Ming" (64).

Two points emerge from this discussion. First, Li's account does in fact succeed in documenting a variety of knowledge-based changes in agricultural practices and techniques that led to rising productivity during the Ming-Qing period in Jiangnan. So the stereotype of "stagnant Chinese technology" does not serve us well. Second, though, what Li does not find is what we might call "science-based" technology change: for example, the discovery of chemical fertilizer, controlled experiments in rice breeding, or the use of machinery in irrigation. The innovations that he describes appear to be a combination of local adaptation and diffusion of discoveries across a broad territory.

So perhaps the question posed at the start still remains: what stood in the way of development of empirical sciences like chemistry or mechanics that would have supported science-based technological innovations in the early modern period in China?
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:12PM (-04:00)

Rebuilding employment

Friday, October 09, 2009



The Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago hosted a two-day conference in Detroit this week on the subject of work force adjustment (link). It was convened by the Federal Reserve Bank, the W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, and the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program. This is one of the many efforts underway to attempt to address the unemployment crisis we now face in the industrial Midwest. Participants included state and federal jobs officials, foundation leaders, and a few academic specialists.

Are there strategies that a region can pursue that will result in significant jobs creation? To grow employment in a region there are only a couple of possibilities: to expand employment in existing companies, to stimulate the creation of new businesses, and to recruit relocation of existing businesses from other regions. In each case the business owner or entrepreneur needs to be confident that he/she can add marginal revenue to the company by hiring the additional worker. This requires that the worker has knowledge and skills whose use will contribute to a saleable product. The product needs to have features of quality and utility that consumers want. Finding the workers who have the right kinds of talent, skill, and knowledge is a key challenge for the business owner. And availability of talented prospective workers is a key aspect of the company's decision to locate or grow in the region.

So what options do these pathways suggest for policy intervention to increase employment? It might be the case that there is latent labor demand out there in existing industries, where employers would hire more workers if they could find people with the right qualifications. In this case, remedial and transformative training could lead to new jobs, shifting workers from old industries to new industries. Second, there may be identified areas of potential expansion of employment where there are specific skills missing in the workforce. Maybe specialized bakeries could sell more products if they could only hire more qualified pastry chefs. Here too it is credible that we could devise specialized training programs that fill in the missing skills. There are specific community college programs that were developed for this reason, responding to the specialized needs of existing employers. But third, we can imagine a region preparing itself for a new surge of business creation and job growth in new industries and sectors. And this requires raising the number of college-educated adults in the region. This constitutes a talent pool that will encourage the expansion of businesses and overall employment.

And sure enough -- this conference focused on "talent" and "entrepreneurship." The industrial Midwest needs more of both; it is pretty well recognized that revitalization requires enhancement of the talent base of the region, and it is recognized that recovery requires the creation of vast numbers of new small businesses.

But what I find interesting and worrisome is the level of skill development that gets most of the attention in these discussions. There is a very clear focus on training rather than higher education. Much of the focus in this conferences was on targeted jobs training at a pretty low level -- training programs that provide new skills for unemployed and underemployed workers, with emphasis on laid-off auto workers in Ohio and Michigan. Several speakers emphasized that training programs need to tailor their educational programs closely to the specific needs of regional employers. The key words are skills and training --not creativity, innovation, and the bachelor's or master's degree.

But this seems wrong-headed to me; surely the most valuable asset a region can have is a significant population of well-educated, creative, and innovative people who have been challenged and stretched by a demanding university education. So shouldn't there be a lot of priority given to the complicated challenge of sustaining high-quality universities and making sure that a high percentage of high school graduates attend them?

In fact, people like Richard Florida at CreativeClass sound a very consistent drumbeat when they talk about the twenty-first century economy, emphasizing innovation and the college-educated workforce. Creativity and invention are the central components of future economic success. But the jobs-training orthodoxy points in a different direction. They emphasize vocational training and community college programs -- the message conveyed by President Obama in his July announcements at Macomb Community College relating to investments in the US community college system. (Perhaps the President's position was influenced by the findings of the 2009 Economic Report to the President, which is worth reading in detail; post.)

It seems to me that Richard Florida is surely right about the medium- and long-term story: our economy needs to constantly move towards greater innovation and greater concentration on knowledge-based sectors. So the goal of increasing the percentage of baccalaureate-level adults in a region is a crucial element of our future economic success. The ability to offer innovative ideas, to provide new kinds of problem-solving, and to work well in nimble teams -- these are crucial "skills" that emerge most frequently

from a college-educated workforce. And they are crucial for vibrant business and job growth.

This means that states really need to recognize the crucial role that their universities play in their economic potential for the future. And we need to work hard in seeking out ways of allowing talented young adults to complete their college degrees -- including those 25-34 year-olds who have done some college without completing a degree. Unfortunately, public universities are suffering from fiscal crisis almost everywhere in the country. This implies that we are likely to fall even further behind in creating the highly qualified talent pools that our regional and national economies need in order to thrive in conditions of global competition. And this in turn is likely to impede the growth of employment that we all want to see.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:49PM (-04:00)

If Marx had been born in Shanghai

Saturday, October 10, 2009



Is Marx's vision still relevant in the twenty-first century world?

At bottom, Marx's biggest ideas were "critique," "exploitation," "alienation," "ideology," and "class." He also constructed a fairly specific theory of capitalism and capitalist development -- a theory that has historical pluses and minuses -- and a theory of socialism that can be understood along more democratic and more authoritarian lines. We might say that his theory of capitalism was too deeply grounded in the observed experience of mid-nineteenth-century Britain, and his theory of socialism paid too little attention to the crushing possibilities of power wielded by a future socialist state. Too much economics, too little politics in his worldview -- and too much of a Hegelian "necessitarianism" in his expectations about the future.

History has shown us a few things that Marx too would have recognized, with the benefit of another century of experience. History does not conform to a necessary logic of development. Capitalism is not one thing, but a set of institutions that have proven fairly malleable. There is no single "logic of capitalist development." Compromises and institutional accommodations are possible between contending economic classes. Social democracy, democratic socialism, Stalinist communism, fascist dictatorship, and liberal democracy are all feasible political institutions governing "modern" economic development.

So we might take a deep breath, take a step back, and ask a big counterfactual: How might Marx, with his critical eye for inequality and power and his acute sensibilities as a sociologist -- how might this social critic and theorist have processed the social realities of China in Shanghai in the 1980s?

The question forces a lot of refocusing for historical particulars. China was a "proletarian and peasant" state under the governance of a Communist Party. The Great Leap Forward had taken place, massive famine had occurred during agricultural collectivization, the Cultural Revolution had recently ended with great violence throughout

-- and the beginnings of a new direction in economic life were starting. Private incentives and market forces were beginning to find a place in the economy. The "family responsibility system" in agriculture was beginning to demonstrate major improvements in productivity in farming. Similar reforms were beginning in industrial ownership and management.

Given these large differences between China and Birmingham -- what sorts of analysis might Marx have arrived at? What would Capital have looked like?

Here are a few possibilities. Given the pre-eminence of politics in China's affairs, the book would have been less exclusive in its focus on the "economic mode of production" and might have offered analysis of the instruments and institutions of coercion. It would have given less prominence to the labor theory of value, even as it would have retained some scheme for tracking value and wealth. Political institutions, and the forms of power associated with office and position, would have been a prominent part of the analysis. The role and dynamics of great cities would have come in. The book would have paid much more attention to international economic relations -- Marx would surely have had much to say about globalization. (Why? Because Marx was an astute and nuanced social observer; and these are crucial factors in metropolitan China in the 1980s-2000.)

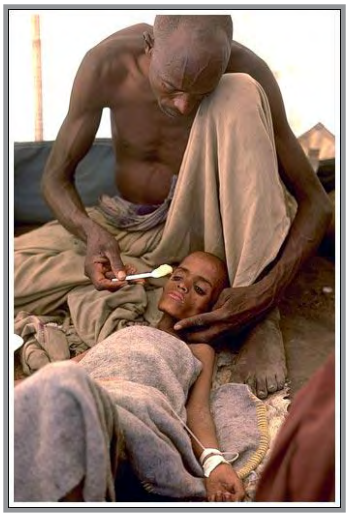
But a distinctly Marxist analysis could nonetheless have emerged. The Chinese version of Capital would have emphasized some of the same human and social circumstances that are highlighted in Capital: coercion, inequality, exploitation, domination, and human suffering as a result of social institutions; the leverage provided for the personnel of the state; population movement; and the alienation of ordinary people from their species being. Marx surely would have examined very carefully the large social effects of official corruption, as a system of surplus extraction. The result would have been a different theory, emphasizing different social mechanisms; but giving primacy to many of the same large social characteristics of inequality, domination, and exploitation; perhaps more about the full social order and less of a microscopic view of the economic relations of "capitalism."

This small counterfactual experiment perhaps underlines something else too: that there are important threads of Marx's social theory and social critique that continue to be relevant as we try to analyze and diagnose the fundamental social realities of contemporary societies. And we might also draw this hypothetical impression as well: Marx would probably have been as unwelcome to the authorities of the CCP in China as he was to the rulers of the Prussian state.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:18AM (-04:00)

Food security

Friday, October 16, 2009

Food security is a crucial aspect of life, both for a population and a household. By "food security" specialists often mean two different things: the capacity of a typical poor ***household*** to secure sufficient food over a twelve-month period (through farm work, day labor, government entitlements, etc.); and the capacity of a poor ***country*** to satisfy the food needs of its whole population (through direct production, foreign trade, and food stocks). This involves both food availability and the ability to gain access to food (through entitlements).



A representative description of food security is offered by Shlomo Reutlinger in Malnutrition and Poverty: Magnitude and Policy Options:

Food security ... is defined here as access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Its essential elements are the availability of food and the ability to acquire it. Conversely, food insecurity is the lack of access to sufficient food and can be either chronic or transitory. Chronic food insecurity is a continuously inadequate diet resulting from the lack of resources to produce or acquire food. Transitory food insecurity, however, is a temporary decline in a household's access to enough food. It results from instability in food production and prices or in household incomes. The worst form of transitory food insecurity is famine.

Here is how Sen formulates his "capabilities" understanding (developed, for example, in Hunger and Public Action):

The standard of adequacy is best understood functionally: a person, household, or population has food security if it has sufficient access to food to permit full, robust human development and realization of human capacities.

There is an obvious connection between the two definitions at the household and country levels; but from a human point of view it seems more useful to focus on household food security rather than national food security. A country may in principle have more than sufficient resources to satisfy the food needs of its population, but fail to do so because of internal inequalities. Thus achieving household food security in the less-developed world requires both equity and growth. Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze have made major contributions on hunger and famine in the developing world, and their work can almost always be linked back to the household level. Here is a good source on their writings: The Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze Omnibus: (comprising) Poverty and Famines; Hunger and Public Action; India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity.

Michael Lipton has also been an important voice on this set of topics. His central task in Poverty, Undernutrition, and Hunger is an attempt to provide criteria for distinguishing between the poor and the ultra-poor. The ultra-poor have incomes and entitlements that are absolutely below that required to gain access to 80% of 1973 FAO/WHO caloric requirements. Below this level is likely to lead to undernutrition (the failure of food security). Lipton constructs a "food adequacy standard" as a way of measuring the incidence in a given country of absolute poverty. Here is his statement of a food adequacy standard:

Income or outlay, just sufficient on this assumption to command the average caloric requirement for one's age, sex and activity group (ASAG) in a given climatic and work environment, will be taken as meeting the poverty FAS; this is income or outlay on the borderline of poverty, indicating a risk of hunger. Income or outlay, just sufficient to command 80% of this average requirement, will be taken as meeting the ultra-poverty FAS; this is income or outlay at the borderline between poverty and ultra-poverty, indicating a risk of undernutrition and a severe risk of important anthropometric shortfalls. (Lipton 1983): 7.)

Food security can be put at risk in a variety of ways. Natural conditions can lead to a shortfall of grain production -- flood, drought, or other natural disasters can reduce or destroy the crop across a wide region, leading to a shortfall of supply. Population increase can gradually reduce the grain-to-population ratio to the point where nutrition falls below the minimum required by the population or household. And, perhaps most importantly, prices can shift rapidly in the market for staple foods, leaving poor families without the ability to purchase a sufficient supply to assure the nutritional minimum. It is this aspect of the system that Amartya Sen highlights in his study of famine (Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation). And it is the circumstance that is most urgent in developing countries today in face of the steep and rapid rise in grain prices over the past year.

The results of a failure of food security are dire. Chronic malnutrition, sustained over months and years, has drastic effects on the health status of a population. Infant and child mortality increases sharply. Often the gender differences in health and mortality statistics widen. And economic productivity falls, as working families lack the strength and energy needed to labor productively. Famine is a more acute circumstance that arises when food shortfalls begin to result in widespread deaths in a region. The Great Bengal famine, the Ethiopian famine, the Great Leap Forward famine, and the famines in North Korea offer vivid and terrible examples of hunger in the twentieth century.

So what is needed to maintain food security in a poor nation? Some developing countries have aimed at food self-sufficiency -- to enact policies in agriculture that assure that the country will produce enough staples to feed its population. Other countries have relied on a strategy of purchasing large amounts of staple foods on international markets. Here the strategy is to generate enough national income through exported manufactured goods to be able to purchase the internationally traded grain. This is the strategy recommended by neoliberal trade theory. If agriculture is a low value-added industry and the manufacture of electronic components is high value-added, neoliberals reason, then surely it makes sense for the country to generate the larger volume of income through the latter and purchase food with the proceeds.

This logic has given rise to several important problems, however. First is the vulnerability it creates for the nation in face of sharp price shocks. This is what we have seen in many countries over the past year. And the second is the reality of extensive income inequalities in most developing countries -- with the result that the "gains of trade" may not be sufficiently shared in the incomes of the poorest 40% to permit them to maintain household food security.

These considerations suggest the wisdom for developing countries to expend more resources on agricultural development (which often has an income-inequality narrowing effect) and a greater emphasis on national and regional food self-sufficiency.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:00PM (-04:00)

Demystifying social knowledge

Saturday, October 17, 2009



There seem to be a couple of fundamentally different approaches to the problem of "understanding society." I'm not entirely happy with these labels, but perhaps "empiricist" and "critical" will suffice to characterize them. We might think of these as ***styles*** of sociological thinking. One emphasizes the ordinariness of the phenomena, and looks at the chief challenges of sociology as embracing the tasks of description, classification, and explanation. The other highlights the inherent obscurity of the social world, and conceives of sociology as an exercise in philosophical theory, involving the work of presenting, clarifying and critiquing ***texts*** and abstract philosophical ideas as well as specific social circumstances.

The first approach looks at the task of social knowing as a fairly straightforward intellectual problem. It could be labeled "empiricist", or it could simply be called an application of ordinary common sense to the challenge of understanding the social world. **It is grounded in the idea that the social world is fundamentally accessible to observation and causal discovery.** The elements of the social world are ordinary and visible. There are puzzles, to be sure; but there are no mysteries. The social world is ***given*** as an object of study; it is partially orderly; and the challenge of sociology is to discover the causal processes that give rise to specific observed features of the social world.

This approach begins in the ordinariness of the objects of social knowledge. We are interested in other people and how and why they behave, we are interested in the relationships and interactions they create, and we are interested in institutions and populations that individuals constitute. We have formulated a range of social concepts in terms of which we analyze and describe the social world and social behavior -- for example, "motive," "interest," "emotion," "aggressive," "cooperative," "patriotic," "state," "group," "ethnicity," "mobilization," "profession," "city," "religion." We know pretty much what we mean by these concepts; we can define them and relate them to ordinary observable behaviors and social formations. And when our attention shifts to larger-scale social entities (states, uprisings, empires, occupational groups), we find that we can observe many characteristics of each of these kinds of social phenomena. We also observe various ***patterns and regularities*** in behavior, institution, and entity that we would like to understand -- the ways in which people from different groups behave towards each other, the patterns of diffusion of information that exist along a transportation system, the features of conflicts among groups in various social settings. There are myriad interesting and visible social patterns which we would like to understand, and sociologists develop a descriptive and theoretical vocabulary in terms of which to describe and explain various kinds of social phenomena.

In short, on this first approach, the social world is ***visible***, and the task of the social scientist is simply to discover some of the observable and causal relations that obtain among social actors, actions, and composites. To be sure, there are hypothetical or

theoretical beliefs we have about less observable features of the social world -- but we can relate these beliefs to expectations about more visible forms of social behavior and organization. If we refer to "social class" in an explanation, we can give a definition of what we mean ("position in the property system"), and we can give some open-ended statements about how "class" is expected to relate to observable social and political behavior. And concepts and theories for which we cannot give clear explication should be jettisoned; obscurity is a fatal defect in a theory. In short, the task of social science research on this approach is to discover some of the visible and observable characteristics of social behavior and entities, and to attempt to answer causal questions about these characteristics.

This is a rough-and-ready empiricism about the social world. But there is another family of approaches to social understanding that looks quite different from this "empiricist" or commonsensical approach: critical theory, Marxist theory, feminist theory, Deleuzian sociology, Foucault's approach to history, the theory of dialectics, and post-modern social theory. These are each highly distinctive programs of understanding, and they are certainly different from each other in multiple ways. But they share a feature in common: **they reject the idea that social facts are visible and unambiguous.** Instead, they lead the theorist to try to uncover the ***hidden*** forces, meanings, and structures that are at work in the social world and that need to be brought to light through critical inquiry. Paul Ricoeur's phrase "the hermeneutics of suspicion" captures the flavor of the approach. (See Alison Scott-Baumann's Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion for discussion.) Neither our concepts nor our ordinary social observations are unproblematic. There is a deep and sometimes impenetrable difference between appearance and reality in the social realm, and it is the task of the social theorist (and social critic) to lay bare the underlying social realities. The social realities of power and deception help to explain the divergence between appearance and reality: a given set of social relations -- patriarchy, racism, homophobism, class exploitation -- give rise to systematically misleading social concepts and theories in ordinary observers.

Marx's idea of the fetishism of commodities (link) illustrates the point of view taken by many of the theorists in this critical vein: what looks like a very ordinary social fact -- objects have use values and exchange values -- is revealed to mystify or conceal a more complex reality -- a set of relations of domination and control between bosses, workers, and consumers. With a very different background, a book like Gaston Bachelard's The Psychoanalysis of Fire makes a similar point: the appearance represented by behavior systematically conceals the underlying human reality or meaning. The word "critique" enters into most of Marx's titles -- for example, "Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy." And for Marx, the idea of critique is intended to bring forward a methodology of critical reading, unmasking the assumptions about the social world that are implicit in the theorizing of a particular author (Smith, Ricardo, Say, Quesnay). So Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy is a book about the visible realities of capitalism, to be sure; but it is also a book intended to unmask both the deceptive appearances that capitalism presents ***and*** the erroneous assumptions that prior theorists have brought into their accounts.

The concepts of ideology and false consciousness have a key role to play in this discussion about the visibility of social reality. And it turns out to be an ambiguous role. Here is a paragraph from Slavoj Zizek on the concept of ideology from Mapping Ideology:

These same examples of the actuality of the notion of ideology, however, also render clear the reasons why today one hastens to renounce the notion of ideology: does not the

critique of ideology involve a privileged place, somehow exempted from the turmoils of social life, which enables some subject-agent to perceive the very hidden mechanism that regulates social visibility and non-visibility? Is not the claim that we can accede to this place the most obvious case of ideology? Consequently, with reference to today's state of epistemological reflection, is not the notion of ideology self-defeating? So why should we cling to a notion with such obviously outdated epistemological implications (the relationship of 'representation' between thought and reality, etc.)? Is not its utterly ambiguous and elusive character in itself a sufficient reason to abandon it? 'Ideology' can designate anything from a contemplative attitude that misrecognizes its dependence on social reality to an action-orientated set of beliefs, from the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power. It seems to pop up precisely when we attempt to avoid it, while it fails to appear where one would clearly expect it to dwell.

Zizek is essentially going a step beyond either of the two positions mentioned above. The empiricist position says that we can perceive social reality. The critical position says that we have to discover reality through critical theorizing. And Zizek's position in this passage is essentially that there is no social reality; there are only a variety of texts.

So we have one style that begins in ordinary observation, hypothesis-formation, deductive explanation, and an insistence on clarity of exposition; and another style that begins in a critical stance, a hermeneutic sensibility, and a confidence in purely philosophical reasoning. Jurgen Habermas draws attention to something like this distinction in his important text, On the Logic of the Social Sciences (1967), where he contrasts approaches to the social sciences originating in analytical philosophy of science with those originating in philosophical hermeneutics: "The analytic school dismisses the hermeneutic disciplines as prescientific, while the hermeneutic school considers the nomological sciences as characterized by a limited preunderstanding." (This text as well as several others discussed here are available at AAARG.) Habermas wants to help to overcome the gap between the two perspectives, and his own work actually illustrates the value of doing so. His exposition of abstract theoretical ideas is generally rigorous and intelligible, and he makes strenuous efforts to bring his theorizing into relationship to actual social observation and experience.

A contemporary writer (philosopher? historian? sociologist of science?) is Bruno Latour, who falls generally in the critical zone of the distinction I've drawn here. An important recent work is Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory, in which he argues for a deep and critical re-reading of the ways we think the social -- the ways in which we attempt to create a social science. The book is deeply enmeshed in philosophical traditions, including especially Giles Deleuze's writings. The book describes "Actor-Network-Theory" and the theory of assemblages; and Latour argues that these theories provide a much better way of conceptualizing and knowing the social world. Here is an intriguing passage that invokes both themes of visibility and invisibility marking the way I've drawn the distinction between the two styles:

Like all sciences, sociology begins in wonder. The commotion might be registered in many different ways but it's always the paradoxical presence of something at once invisible yet tangible, taken for granted yet surprising, mundane but of baffling subtlety that triggers a passionate attempt to tame the wild beast of the social. 'We live in groups that seem firmly entrenched, and yet how is it that they transform so rapidly?' ... 'There is something invisible that weights on all of us that is more solid than steel and yet so incredibly labile.' ... It would be hard to find a social scientist not shaken by one or more

of these bewildering statements. Are not these conundrums the source of our *libido scindi*? What pushes us to devote so much energy into unraveling them? (21)

What intrigues many readers of Latour's works is that he too seems to be working towards a coming-together of critical theory with empirical and historical testing of beliefs. He seems to have a genuine interest in the concrete empirical details of the workings of the sciences or the organization of a city; so he brings both the philosophical-theoretic perspective of the critical style along with the empirical-analytical goal of observational rigor of the analytic style.

Also interesting, from a more "analytic-empiricist" perspective, are Andrew Abbott, Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences, and Ian Shapiro, The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences. Abbott directly addresses some of the contrasts mentioned here (chapter two); he puts the central assumption of my first style of thought in the formula, "social reality is measurable". And Shapiro argues for reconnecting the social sciences to practical, observable problems in the contemporary world; his book is a critique of the excessive formalism and model-building of some wings of contemporary political science.

My own sympathies are with the "analytic-empirical" approach. Positivism brings some additional assumptions that deserve fundamental criticism -- in particular, the idea that all phenomena are governed by nomothetic regularities, or the idea that the social sciences must strive for the same features of abstraction and generality that are characteristic of physics. But the central empiricist commitments -- fidelity to observation, rigorous reasoning, clear and logical exposition of concepts and theories, and subjection of hypotheses to the test of observation -- are fundamental requirements if we are to arrive at useful and justified social knowledge. What is intriguing is to pose the question: is there a productive way of bringing insights from both approaches together into a more adequate basis for understanding society?
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:01PM (-04:00)

Paying for health

Monday, October 19, 2009



A person's income determines his/her access to many things he wants and needs: food, clothing, transportation, housing, entertainment, and the internet, for example. And people who have higher income are able to consume more of all of these categories than people with lower income, if they choose to. More affluent people shop for food at Papa Joe's or Whole Food; live in larger and more luxurious homes; buy their clothing from boutiques rather than Penny's or the thrift shop; and drive multiple handsome cars. Poor people can't afford the luxury end of these forms of consumption. And in some way our culture has judged that these sorts of inequalities of consumption are a legitimate and fair part of a market economy; if you judge that inequalities of income are justifiable (perhaps with some limits on extremes), then you pretty much have to support the idea of inequalities of consumption as well.

But what about goods that have a price but that are essential to living a decent human life? Food certainly falls in this category; if 30% of society could literally not afford to purchase enough calories to provide 2200-2900 calories per day for adults and 1800 calories for children, then we would probably have a different idea about the fairness of a market for food -- the principle that says "to each according to his/her earning capacity" doesn't seem very convincing in circumstances where it leads to malnutrition or starvation. In other words, if the normal workings of a market economy left a significant segment of the population without the ability to purchase enough food for subsistence, we would surely judge that this isn't a fair or socially just way of distributing income and food. And there is an important point to be noted here: there is hunger in America, and the system of producing goods and income isn't fully satisfying the subsistence needs of the whole population. (This is exactly what makes it compelling that our government needs to provide food assistance for the very poor, through food stamps or targeted income supplements.) So there is an important issue about the justice of current actual distributions of such basic goods as food, clothing, or shelter across the U.S. population.

But push a little deeper and consider the "market for health care". Supporting one's current healthy status is a costly effort; repairing the body in times of traumatic injury or serious illness is even more costly; and our society leaves a lot of the allocation of health care services to private purchasing power. Health insurance is the primary vehicle through which many Americans provide financially for their health care needs. Some people have insurance provided or subsidized through their employers; some families purchase health insurance through the private market; and many families lack health insurance entirely. Upwards on 47 million Americans are uninsured, including 20% of adults and 9% of children (CDC link). And this includes a wide range of Americans, from the extremely poor to the working poor to the solidly middle class.

It is clear that access to doctors, hospitals, nurses, and prescription drugs is a critical need that everyone faces at various points in life. It is obvious as well that one's future ability to live and work productively and to enjoy a satisfying life is conditioned by one's ability to gain access to health care when it is needed. It is also clear that uncertainty about the availability of health care is a major source of anxiety for many, many people in U.S. society today. So it is self-evident that decent health care is one of our most basic and unavoidable needs.

So what do people do when they lack health insurance and serious illness or injury occurs? This isn't a mystery anymore; families go into debt to doctors and hospitals, they face bankruptcy, they find some limited sources of free care (free clinics, pro bono doctors' services), and they forego "optional" treatments that may well extend the length or quality of life. And it is evident that this pattern results in very serious harms and limitations for people in these groups. People who have the least access to health care through our basic institutions may be expected to live shorter lives and to suffer more.

And what about people at the high end of the income spectrum? How do they relate to the problems of health? Here too the answers are fairly well known: they are able to seek out the best (and most expensive) specialists, travel to national centers for specialized treatment, and undergo advanced diagnostic tests that are not covered by insurance. (Here is a news story from CNN on boutique health care.) The affluent aren't able to assure their health through expenditure -- but they can certainly improve their odds.

In other words, ability to pay influences the quality and extent of health care that an

individual or family is able to gain access to; and the health status of the family is affected by these variations in quality and access. So, to some meaningful extent, our social system places health care in the category of a market good.

But here is the question I'm working around to: what does justice require when it comes to health care? Is it right to look at health care as just another consumption good like shoes -- affluent people wear Gucci and poor people wear Dollar Store, but everyone has his/her feet covered? Or is health care in a special category, too closely linked to living a full human life to allow it to be distributed so unequally? (Norm Daniels has spent most of his career looking at this issue, from the points of view of philosophy and concrete policy reform. See Just Health: Meeting Health Needs Fairly for some of his findings.)

It seems a bitter but unavoidable truth that there are very substantial inequalities in the provision of health care in our society. One person's likelihood of surviving a devastating cancer may be significantly less than another person's chances, simply based on the second person's ability to pay for premium health care services. Further, it seems unavoidable that these extreme inequalities are flatly unjust in any society that believes in the equal worth of all human beings. And where this seems to lead is to the conclusion that some system of universal health insurance is a fundamental requirement of justice.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:57PM (-04:00)

Cooperation

Thursday, October 22, 2009



How important is cooperation in a market society?

First, what is cooperation? Suppose a number of individuals occupy a common social and geographical space. They have a variety of individual interests and things they value, and they have outcomes they'd like to bring about. Some of those outcomes are purely private goods, and some can be brought about through private activities by each individual. These are the circumstances where private market-based activity can bring about socially optimal outcomes.

But some outcomes may look more like public or common goods -- for example, greater safety in the neighborhood or more sustainable uses of resources. These are outcomes that no single individual can bring about, and -- once established -- no one can be excluded from the enjoyment of these goods. (Public choice theorists sometimes look at other kinds of non-private goods such as "club goods"; see Dennis Mueller, Perspectives on Public Choice: A Handbook.)

Further, some outcomes may in fact be private goods, but may be such that they require coordinated efforts by multiple individuals to achieve them efficiently. An example of this is traditional farming: it may be that the yield on one individual's plot is greater if a group of neighbors provide concentrated labor on weeding this plot today and the neighbor's plot tomorrow than if each of us do all the weeding on our individual plots. The technical conditions surrounding traditional agriculture impose a cycle of labor demand that makes cooperation an efficient strategy.

This is where cooperation comes in. If a number of the members of a group agree to contribute our efforts to a common project we may find that the total results are greater -- for both common goods and private goods -- than if we had each pursued these goods through individual efforts. Cooperation can lead to improvement in the overall production of a good for a given level of sacrifice of time and effort. This description uses the word "agree"; but Robert Axelrod (The Evolution of Cooperation) and David Lewis (Convention: A Philosophical Study) observe that many examples of cooperation depend on "convention" and tacit agreement rather than an explicit understanding among participants.

So cooperation can lead to better outcomes for a group and each individual in the group than would be achievable through entirely private efforts.

Cooperation should be distinguished from altruistic behavior; cooperation makes sense for rationally self-interested individuals if appropriate conditions are satisfied. A cooperative arrangement can make everyone better off. So we don't have to assume that individuals act altruistically in order to account for cooperation.

So why is cooperation not ubiquitous? It is in fact pretty widespread. But there are a couple of important obstacles to cooperation in ordinary social life: the rational incentive that exists to become a freerider or easy rider when the good in question is a public good; and the risk that cooperators run that the endeavor will fail because of non-contribution from other potential contributors. There is also often a timing problem: it is common for the contribution and the benefit to be separated in time, so contributors are even more concerned that they will be denied the benefits of cooperation. If Mr Wong is asked to weed today in consideration of assistance from Mr Li in harvesting the crop four months from now, he may be doubtful about the future benefit.

The basic logic of this situation has stimulated a mountain of great social science research and theory. Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" (Managing the Commons) and Mancur Olsen's The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups set the negative case for thinking that cooperation is all but impossible to sustain. Elinor Ostrom's Nobel-prize winning work on common property resource regimes documents the ways in which communities have solved these cooperation dilemmas (Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action). Douglas North essentially argues that only private property and binding contracts can do the job (The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History). And Robert Axelrod has made the case for the rational basis of cooperation in The Evolution of Cooperation: Revised Edition. He argues that there are specific conditions that enhance or undermine cooperation and reciprocity; essentially, participants need to be able to reidentify each other over time and they need to have a high likelihood of continuing to interact with each other over an extended time. (His analysis is based on a series of experiments involving repeated prisoners' dilemmas.)

A market can "simulate" cooperation through enforceable contracts; so, for example, a peasant farming community could create a legally binding system of labor exchange among households. And organizations can create quasi-binding agreements for cooperation through "memoranda of understanding" and "inter-governmental agreements" -- written agreements that may not be enforceable through legal remedies but nonetheless create a strong incentive for each party to fulfill the obligations of cooperation. However, quite a bit of the opportunities for cooperation seem to fall outside

the sphere of these formal and semi-formal mechanisms for binding agreements.

Informal cooperation needs some kind of institutional or normative setting that encourages compliance with the cooperative arrangement. So there has been an energetic debate in the past twenty years over the feasibility of non-coercive solutions to cooperation problems; this is an area where the new institutionalism has played a key role. And in the real world, we do in fact find numerous sustainable examples of informal cooperation. Individuals work in community gardens; foundations join together in supporting urban renewal projects; villagers create labor-sharing practices. But it is an interesting question to consider: are there institutional reforms that we could invent that would allow us as a society to capture more of the benefits of cooperation than we currently realize?
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:06PM (-04:00)

Comparative life satisfaction

Saturday, October 24, 2009



We tend to think of the past century as being a time of great progress when it comes to the quality of life -- for ordinary people as well as the privileged. Advances in science, technology, and medicine have made life more secure, predictable, productive, educated, and healthy. But in what specific ways is ordinary life happier or more satisfying for ordinary people in 2000 compared to their counterparts in 1900 or 1800 -- or the time of Socrates, for that matter?

There are a couple of things that are pretty obvious. Nutrition is one place to start: the mass population of France, Canada, or the United States is not subject to periodic hunger, malnutrition, or famine. This is painfully not true for many poor parts of the world -- Sudan, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh, for example. But for the countries of the affluent world, the OECD countries, hunger has been largely conquered for most citizens.

Second, major advances in health preservation and the treatment of illness have taken place. We know how to prevent cholera, and we know how to treat staph infections with antibiotics. Terrible diseases such as polio have been eradicated, and we have effective treatments for some kinds of previously incurable cancers. So the basic health status of people in the affluent twenty-first century world is substantially better than that of previous centuries -- with obvious consequences for our ability to find satisfaction in life activities.

These advances in food security and public health provision have resulted in a major enhancement to quality of life -- life expectancy in France, Germany, or Costa Rica has increased sharply. And many of the factors underlying much of this improvement are not high-tech, but rather take the form of things like improvement of urban sanitation and relatively low-cost treatment (antibiotics for children's ear infections, for example).

So living longer and more healthily is certainly an advantage in our quality of life relative to conditions one or two centuries ago.

Improvements in labor productivity in agriculture and manufacturing have resulted in another kind of enhancement of modern quality of life. It is no longer necessary for a large percentage of humanity to perform endless and exhausting labor in order to feed the rest of us. And because of new technologies and high labor productivity, almost everyone has access to goods that extend the enjoyment of life and our creative talents. Personal computing and communications, access to the world's knowledge and culture through the Internet, and ability to travel widely all represent opportunities that even the most privileged could not match one or two centuries ago.

But the question of life satisfaction doesn't reduce to an inventory of the gadgets we can use. Beyond the minimum required for sustaining a healthy human body, the question of satisfaction comes down to the issue of what we do with the tools and resources available to us and the quality of our human relationships. How do we organize our lives in such a way as to succeed in achieving goals that really matter?

Amartya Sen's economic theory of "capabilities and realizations" supports a pretty good answer to these questions about life satisfaction (Development as Freedom). Each person has a bundle of talents and capabilities. These talents can be marshalled into a meaningful life plan. And the satisfying life is one where the person has singled out some important values and goals and has used his/her talents to achieve these goals. (This general idea underlies J. S. Mill's theory of happiness as well in Utilitarianism.)

By this standard, it's not so clear that life in the twenty-first century is inherently more satisfying than that in the eighteenth or the second centuries. When basic needs were satisfied -- nutrition, shelter, health -- the opportunities for realizing one's talents in meaningful effort were no less extensive than they are today. This is true for the creative classes -- obviously. The creative product of J. S. Mill's or Victor Hugo's generation was no less substantial or satisfying than our own. But perhaps it is true across the board. The farmer-gardener who shapes his/her land over the course of a lifetime has created something of great personal value and satisfaction. The mason or smith may have taken more pride and satisfaction in his life's work than does the software programmer or airline flight attendant. The parent who succeeded in nurturing a family in 1800 County Cork may have found the satisfactions as great or greater than parents in Boston or Seattle today. (Richard Sennett explores some of these satisfactions in The Craftsman.)

So we might say that the chief unmistakable improvement in quality of life in the past century is in the basics -- secure nutrition, improved health, and decent education during the course of a human life. And the challenge of the present is to make something meaningful and sustaining of the resources we are given.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:54AM (-04:00)

Fair prices?

Wednesday, October 28, 2009

We live in a society that embraces the market in a pretty broad way. We accept that virtually all goods and services are priced through the market at prices set competitively. We accept that sellers are looking to maximize profits through the prices, quantities, and quality of the goods and services that they sell us. We accept, though a bit less fully, the idea that wages are determined by the market -- a person's income is determined by what competing employers are willing to pay. And we have some level of trust that





competition protects us against price-gouging, adulteration, exploitation, and other predatory practices. A prior posting questioned this logic when it comes to healthcare. Here I'd like to see whether there are other areas of dissent within American society over prices.

Because of course it wasn't always so. E. P. Thompson's work on early modern Britain reminds us that there was a "moral economy of the crowd" that profoundly challenged the legitimacy of the market; that these popular moral ideas specifically and deeply challenged the idea of market-defined prices for life's necessities; and that the crowd demanded "fair prices" for food and housing (Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture). The moral economy of the crowd focused on the poor -- it assumed a minimum standard of living and demanded that the millers, merchants, and officials respect this standard by charging prices the poor could afford. And the rioting that took place in Poland in 1988 over meat prices or rice riots in Indonesia in 2008 are reminders that this kind of moral reasoning isn't merely part of a pre-modern sensibility. (For some quotes collected by E. P. Thompson from "moral economy" participants on the subject of fair prices see an earlier posting on anonymity.)

So where do contemporary Americans show a degree of moral discomfort with prices and the market? Where does the moral appeal of the principles of market justice begin to break down -- principles such as "things are worth exactly what people are willing to pay for them" and "to each what his/her market-determined purchasing power permit him to buy"?

There are a couple of obvious exceptions in contemporary acceptance of the market. One is the public outrage about executive compensation in banking and other corporations that we've seen in the past year. People seem to be morally offended at the idea that CEOs are taking tens or hundreds of millions of dollars in compensation -- even in companies approaching bankruptcy. Part of the outrage stems from the perception that the CEO can't have brought a commensurate gain to the company or its stockholders, witness the failing condition of many of these banks and companies. Part is a suspicion that there must be some kind of corrupt collusion going on in the background between corporate boards and CEOs. But the bottom line moral intuition seems to be something like this: ***nothing*** could justify a salary of $100 million, and executive compensation in that range is inherently unfair. And no argument proceeding simply along the lines of fair market competition -- "these are competitive rational firms that are offering these salaries, and therefore whatever they arrive at is fair" -- cuts much ice with the public.

Here is another example of public divergence from acceptance of pure market outcomes: recent public outcries about college tuition. There is the common complaint that tuition is too high and students can't afford to attend. (This overlooks the important fact that public

and private tuitions are almost an order of magnitude apart -- $6,000-12,000 versus $35,00-42,000!) But notice that this is a "fair price" argument that would be nonsensical when applied to the price of an iPod or a Lexus. People don't generally feel aggrieved because a luxury car or a consumer device is too expensive; they just don't buy it. It makes sense to express this complaint in application to college tuition because many of us think of college as a necessity of life that cannot fairly be allocated on the basis of ability to pay. (This explains why colleges offer need-based financial aid.) And this is a moral-economy argument.

And what about that other necessity of life -- gasoline? Public complaints about $4/gallon gas were certainly loud a year ago. But they seem to have been grounded in something different -- the suspicion that the oil companies were manipulating prices and taking predatory profits -- rather than an assumption of a fair price determined by the needs of the poor.

Finally, what about salaries and wages? How do we feel about the inequalities of compensation that exist within the American economy and our own places of work? Americans seem to accept a fairly wide range of salaries and wages when they believe that the differences correspond ultimately to the need for firms to recruit the most effective personnel possible -- a market justification for high salaries. But they seem to begin to feel morally aggrieved when the inequalities that emerge seem to exceed any possible correspondence to contribution, impact, or productivity. So -- we as Americans seem to have a guarded level of acceptance of the emergence of market-driven inequalities when it comes to compensation.

One wonders whether deeper resentment about the workings of market forces will begin to surface in our society, as unemployment and economic recession settle upon us.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:30PM (-04:00)

Causal realism for sociology

Friday, October 30, 2009



The subject of causal explanation in the social sciences has been a recurring thread here (thread). Here are some summary thoughts about social causation.

First, there is such a thing as social causation. Causal realism is a defensible position when it comes to the social world: there are real social relations among social factors (structures, institutions, groups, norms, and salient social characteristics like race or gender). We can give a rigorous interpretation to claims like "racial discrimination causes health disparities in the United States" or "rail networks cause changes in patterns of habitation".

Second, it is crucial to recognize that causal relations depend on the existence of real social-causal mechanisms linking cause to effect. Discovery of correlations among factors does not constitute the whole meaning of a causal statement. Rather, it is necessary to have a theory of the mechanisms and processes that give rise to the

correlation. Moreover, it is defensible to attribute a causal relation to a pair of factors even in the absence of a correlation between them, if we can provide evidence supporting the claim that there are specific mechanisms connecting them. So mechanisms are more fundamental than regularities.

Third, there is a key intellectual obligation that goes along with postulating real social mechanisms: to provide an account of the ontology or substrate within which these mechanisms operate. This I have attempted to provide through the theory of methodological localism (post) -- the idea that the causal nexus of the social world is constituted by the behaviors of socially situated and socially constructed individuals. To put the claim in its extreme form, every social mechanism derives from facts about institutional context, the features of the social construction and development of individuals, and the factors governing purposive agency in specific sorts of settings. And different research programs target different aspects of this nexus.

Fourth, the discovery of social mechanisms often requires the formulation of mid-level theories and models of these mechanisms and processes -- for example, the theory of free-riders. By mid-level theory I mean essentially the same thing that Robert Merton meant to convey when he introduced the term: an account of the real social processes that take place above the level of isolated individual action but below the level of full theories of whole social systems. Marx's theory of capitalism illustrates the latter; Jevons's theory of the individual consumer ss a utility maximizer illustrates the former. Coase's theory of transaction costs is a good example of a mid-level theory (The Firm, the Market, and the Law): general enough to apply across a wide range of institutional settings, but modest enough in its claim of comprehensiveness to admit of careful empirical investigation. Significantly, the theory of transaction costs has spawned major new developments in the new institutionalism in sociology (Mary Brinton and Victor Nee, eds., The New Institutionalism in Sociology).

And finally, it is important to look at a variety of typical forms of sociological reasoning in detail, in order to see how the postulation and discovery of social mechanisms play into mainstream sociological research. Properly understood, there is no contradiction between the effort to use quantitative tools to chart the empirical outlines of a complex social reality, and the use of theory, comparison, case studies, process-tracing, and other research approaches aimed at uncovering the salient social mechanisms that hold this empirical reality together.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:42PM (-04:00)

Assurance game

Sunday, November 01, 2009



How does a group of people succeed in coming together to contribute to a collective project over an extended period of time? For example, what leads a group of unemployed workers to travel to the capital to lobby for an extension of unemployment benefits, or a group of expatriate Burmese people in London to attend demonstrations against the junta? What motivations are relevant at the individual level? And what circumstances are most conducive to creating

and sustaining collective action?

Purely self-interested egoists won't make it -- that is the message of Mancur Olson's Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods. The maximizing egoist will reason that the activity will either succeed or fail independent of his/her own participation. If it succeeds then he will enjoy the benefits of cooperation; and if it fails he will have avoided the wasted costs of participation. Either way the egoist does better by refraining from participation. So collective action in pursuit of a public good is all but impossible within a society of rationally disinterested egoists. As Amartya Sen observes in "Rational Fools" (link), "The purely economic man is indeed close to being a social moron."

But we know that this conclusion does a bad job of describing real social life. People in villages, communities, political parties, religious organizations, public television audiences, and ethnic groups do in fact often succeed in getting themselves organized and mobilized in pursuit of a public good for the group. Often the level of mobilization is below the level that would be optimal for production of the good for the population; often it is fairly straightforward to identify the symptoms of incipient free-riding; but ordinary social experience and history alike are replete with examples of voluntary collective action.

Many theories can be articulated in order to account for the spontaneous occurrence of collective action. People may be irrational; they may be motivated entirely by non-utility considerations; they may be governed by norms of solidarity beyond their rational control; they may be disciplined by grassroots organizations that punish defectors; there may be an evolutionary basis hard-wired into the human cognitive-deliberative system that favors cooperation; or, for that matter, there may be a hard-wired impulse towards punishing defectors from common projects that tips the balance of utility calculation for would-be free-riders.

But here is a factor that seems to be a credible observation about social motivation and that still makes sense of the behavior in deliberative terms. Many real social actors seem to be what might be called "conditional altruists": they are willing to contribute some effort or personal resource to a collective project **if** they have grounds for confidence that a reasonable number of other members of the group will contribute as well. (Jon Elster explores the idea in The Cement of Society: A Survey of Social Order.) And it isn't that these actors make a calculation error along the lines of the fallacy of unanimity -- "I want the benefits of the collective action, and it won't occur without me." Instead, they seem to ***reason*** in ways that would please a communitarian: "I'm a member of this group, I believe that other members will do what's good for the group, and I'm willing to do my part as well." This is a fairly explicit willingness to sacrifice the benefits of free riding. But the ***conditional*** part is important as well: the conditional altruist is calculating about the likelihood of success in the collective undertaking, and is willing to participate only if he/she judges that enough other people will contribute as well to make the undertaking feasible.

Conditional altruism thus attributes a common moral psychology to social actors, which we might refer to as the "fairness factor." Individuals are willing to factor collective goods into their calculation of the costs and benefits of action, and they have some degree of motivation to act in accordance with a proposed collective action that would benefit them even if they could evade participation. They are disposed to act fairly: "If I benefit from the action, I should take my fair share of creating the benefit." (Allan Gibbard's Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment offers an effort to bring together the evolutionary history of the species with a philosopher's analysis of moral reasoning.)

If fairness or conditional altruism are real components of human agency (for all or many human beings), then we can identify a few factors that are likely to increase the likelihood of cooperation and collective action. Measures that increase the actor's **assurance** of the behavior of others will have the effect of eliciting higher levels of collective action. And it is possible to think of quite a few social circumstances that have this effect. A shared history of success in collective action is clearly relevant to current actors' level of assurance about future cooperation. Shared history can be made more powerful in the present through the currency of songs, stories, and performances that highlight earlier successes (Michael Taylor, Community, Anarchy and Liberty). Researchers who study peasant village communities emphasize the importance of face-to-face relations among villagers; individuals know a good deal about the past behavior of their neighbors, which can provide a better basis for predicting their future cooperative behavior (Robert Netting, Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture). And members of small, stable communities also know that they will need to interact with each other long into the future -- increasing the cost of non-cooperation today (Robert Axelrod, The Evolution of Cooperation: Revised Edition).

What is particularly interesting about this topic is the fact that actual social outcomes show a wide range of variations in the degree of self-interest and fairness that seems to be present. Some groups seem to act more like Mancur Olson egoists; others (like Welsh coal miners) seem to act as though they have a very high "solidarity and fairness" quotient. So no single answer to the question of collective action seems to work: "people are rational **egoists**," "people are **altruists**," or "people are **conditional altruists**." Rather, a given opportunity for collective action seems to display a mix of all these styles of reasoning. These variations could be the result of several independent factors: differences in the formation of individuals' moral psychology (emphasizing individualism or community from infancy); differences in current institutional settings (arrangements that make future interactions seem more likely to each participant); even potentially differences in personality or the genetic basis of decision-making across individuals.

I'm sure that there is work in experimental economics that probes the boundaries of this feature of practical reasoning. Ordinary social experience informs us that people have different levels of willingness to undertake sacrifice for a group's projects. And having a more nuanced empirical understanding of how people behave in the settings of potential cooperation and collective action would help refine our understanding of the thought-processes and styles of reasoning through which individuals decide what to do. Here is an interesting paper by Ernst Fehr and Klaus Schmidt titled "The Economics of Fairness, Reciprocity and Altruism – Experimental Evidence and New Theories."
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:56PM (-05:00)

A modern world-system?

Tuesday, November 03, 2009

Source : Minard’s Map of Port and River Tonnage

Immanuel Wallerstein created a huge stir in the 1970s with the publication of The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century (1974). The book is an intellectual masterpiece, synthesizing a vast range of fundamental literature on the economic history of Europe and the world. You could look at the book as the first serious and extended effort to theorize



globalization -- a term that barely existed at the time of publication. Or you could look at it as a general theory of colonialism -- an account of the pathways and influences through which the metropole dominated and exploited the periphery. It is worth looking back at this work today to tease out some of the guiding assumptions about history, sociology, and globalization it reflected.

The concept of "world system" is itself a key component of our current understanding of globalization, in that it captures the idea of causal interconnectedness across the globe among major organizations, firms, populations, and states. Wallerstein observes that earlier social scientists had usually centered their analysis at the level of the political unit -- the nation-state; whereas his own approach is different:

This book makes a radically different assumption. It assumes that the unit of analysis is an economic entity, the one that is measured by the existence of an effective division of labor, and that the relationship of such economic boundaries to political and cultural boundaries is variable, and therefore must be determined by empirical research for each historical case. Once we assume that the unit of analysis is such a "world-system" and not the "state" or the "nation" or the "people", then much changes in the outcome of the analysis. (xi)

But what, more exactly, did he mean by a system? Did he imagine something analogous to a mechanical system in which the relations among the parts were governed by a few simple laws? He seems to suggest this possibility when he asks the question, "What do astronomers do? As I understand it, the logic of their arguments involves two separate operations. They use the laws derived from the study of smaller physical entities, the laws of physics, and argue that ... these laws hold by analogy for the system as a whole. Second, they argue a posteriori. If the whole system is to have a given state at time **y**, it most porrobably had a certain state at time **x**" (7). Here he seems to suggest that social systems are tied together by the working of governing laws -- a particularly unconvincing starting point.

But Wallerstein's practice as a sociologist is far more defensible than this language would suggest. He was in fact sensitive to causal heterogeneity, contingency, and variation in the systemic relations he meant to capture -- particularity as well as universality. So he doesn't actually treat the modern world system as if it were analogous to a set of gravitational objects governed by fixed laws of nature.

I think the clue to an answer to his working definition of a system is found in his definition of scope in terms of an "effective division of labor": a set of regions constitute a system in his framework if there is significant exchange and dependence among various of the regions for products, people, knowledge, skills, and resources from other regions. If Europe, Asia, or the Americas had been "autarkic" in 1700 -- that is, if one or more of these continental regions had been a closed economy and society making no substantial use of products, knowledge, resources, or people from other regions -- then there would not have been one "world system" but rather several independent macro-regional systems. And Wallerstein explicitly affirms this point late in the book:

By saying that in the sixteenth century there was a European world-economy, we indicate that the boundaries are less than the earth as a whole. But how much less? We cannot simply include in it any part of the world with which "Europe" traded. In 1600 Portugal traded with the central African kingdom of Monomotapa as well as with Japan. Yet it would be *prima facie* hard to argue that either Monomotapa or Japan were part of the European world-economy at that time. And yet we argue that Brazil (or at least areas of the coast of Brazil) and the Azores were part of the European world-economy. (199)

So in postulating the concept of world system as a framework for analysis of the modern period (let's say 1700), Wallerstein is laying a few important cards on the table; he is indicating his judgment that there was significant and necessary exchange among virtually all accessible places on the planet. There were economically meaningful movements of resources, people (emigrants and slaves), crops (cotton, sugar), finished products, and ideas throughout the system of places defining the system of transport and trade. This in turn implies that we cannot properly understand the workings of the regional economy without taking into account its exchange relations with other regions -- or in other words, we need to place the regional economy into the system of international division of labor in which it is located. And in fact, historians like Ken Pomeranz make a substantial case for the empirical accuracy of that judgment (see for example The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy and The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture, And the World Economy, 1400 to the Present).

If we begin with this assumption -- the idea of the substantial interdependence of continental regions in the early modern period -- then we are naturally drawn to the question, what were the terms of trade? Was exchange among regions mutually beneficial, as trade theory would have it? Or was it extractive and exploitative, as the theory of colonialism would have it? This is where Wallerstein makes substantial use of the core-periphery framework in his analysis.

The periphery of a world-economy is that geographical sector of it wherein production is primarily of lower-ranking goods ... but which is an integral part of the overall system of the division of labor, because the commodities involved are essential for daily use. The external arena of a world-economy consists of those other world-systems with which a given world-economy has some kind of trade relationship ... what was sometimes called the "rich trades." (199-200)

Wallerstein was particularly interested in interconnections between places that were the expression of power and commerce. Core and periphery are linked by relations of subordination -- military and economic domination, leading to the persistent disadvantage of the latter in favor of the former. These features define the "general attributes of a colonial situation" (5).

This analysis lays a theoretical and historical foundation for a theory of globalization. Wallerstein writes late in the book:

One of the persisting themes of the history of the modern world is the seesaw between "nationalism" and "internationalism." I do not refer to the ideological seesaw ... but to the organizational one. At some points in time the major economic and political institutions are geared to operating in the international arena and feel that local interests are tied in some immediate way to developments elsewhere in the world. At other points of time, the social actors tend to engage their efforts locally, tend to see the reinforcement of state

boundaries as primary, and move toward a relative indifference about events beyond them. (147)

Where has the effort to theorize globalization gone in the thirty-five years since Wallerstein's book appeared? A particularly important contemporary voice on this subject is that of Saskia Sassen. Her recent A Sociology of Globalization (2007) represents a current cutting-edge effort to provide a vocabulary and set of theoretical premises in terms of which to understand the global interconnectedness that characterizes the contemporary world. And she wants to provide a *sociology* of these processes -- that is, she wants to provide a theoretical vocabulary and a set of hypotheses about the causal mechanisms that are involved that are adequate to the problem of describing and explaining the workings of this system. One thing this means is providing a framework within which the empirical details and structures of global networks can be investigated. Another key point in her approach is her attention to differentiation across institutions and mechanisms.

A deeply important part of her analysis is her effort to overturn the assumption of "linearity" and hierarchy among levels of analysis -- the line of thought that assumes that neighborhoods are encompassed by cities, which fall within regions, which fall within states, which fall within international relations. She argues repeatedly and effectively that this linear scheme doesn't work for today's global relationships. The local neighborhood may be implicated in extra-national relations of immigration, crime, and trade that make it a global place. More importantly, what she calls "global cities" have crucial relationships at many levels in these supposed hierarchies -- local, national, and supra-national. So the question of scale cannot be defined within a simple hierarchy of relationships of locality, nationality, and globality. (Significantly, Wallerstein opens his treatment of the modern world system by wrestling with this issue -- a discussion that he frames in terms of the idea of the appropriate unit of analysis in considering colonialism.)

Sassen is particularly interested in the networks of communication, finance, and service organizations that constitute the fabric joining what she calls "global cities" (link; see also an earlier posting on regional interdependence). But in this book Sassen broadens considerably the angle of view in order to consider social networks at many levels of scale, including sub-national as well as supra-national.

Sassen makes an important point about international economic power that has a Wallerstein-like feel to it but that would probably not have been true in 1700 or 1970. This is her view that there has been an important process of "de-nationalization" that has removed traditional powers of the state and placed them in the scope of international economic and finance institutions that are significantly controlled by large economic actors and firms. We sometimes refer to this process as one of "liberalization"; Sassen makes the point that the construction of the new supra-national regulatory regimes is an extended historical process that can be studied in detail. She refers to the result of this process as the global corporate economy. One of Wallerstein's key arguments is that nations in the periphery were dominated and controlled by an economic system run by European nations. Sassen argues for the reality of a world system of regulatory arrangements that subordinates the sovereignty of even previously hegemonic nations to a non-democratic set of institutions and rules that implicitly favor one set of economic actors over others. But Sassen's inference from this fact about international economic power is less about north-south exploitation and more about the rising likelihood of global exploitation of all ordinary citizens by powerful extra-national economic forces that are beyond the reach of democratic processes (what she refers to as the "democratic

deficit").

Sassen's book warrants a close reading. It proposes a significantly different way of conceptualizing the meaning of globalization, and one that will suggest many new research agendas.

(The Minard trade map above is borrowed from the fascinating blog Cartographia. The blog has many great discussions of some very interesting maps.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:07PM (-05:00)

Singular and generic causal assertions

Friday, November 06, 2009



It is worthwhile to notice that we can ask causal questions at two extremes of specificity and generality. We can ask why the Nicaraguan Revolution occurred—that is, what was the chain of circumstances that led to the successful seizure of power by the Sandinistas? This is to invite a specific historical narrative, supported by claims about causal powers of various circumstances. And we can ask why twentieth-century revolutionary movements succeeded in some circumstances and failed in others—that is, we can ask for an account of the common causal factors that influenced the course of revolution in the twentieth century. In the first instance we are looking to put forward a causal hypothesis about a particular event; in the latter we are seeking a causal explanation concerning the behavior of a class of events.

Take the idea that the outbreak of hostilities in World War I was ***caused*** by the assassination of Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914. This claim might be supported by identifying a chain of events that proceeded from the assassination, to decisions in various capitals, to the mobilization of troops, to the outbreak of fighting. The assassination was the spark that led to the conflagration. But this is a purely singular chain of events, and there is no regular connection between occurrences of this set of events and the outbreak of war. The sequence of causal links in this story involves pure contingency at many stages. Assassinations don't generally cause wars; sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. Events in the category of "political assassination" do in fact have a set of causal powers -- through the influence that a political assassination can have on powerful decision-makers and public opinion. But there is no single mechanism that links assassinations to the outbreak of war.

Consider an analogy with professional basketball. We might ask the question, "What circumstances permitted the Pistons to defeat the Celtics in Game Seven of the NBA playoffs?" And the answer may include a mix of general and particular factors: their guards were quicker, their center shut down the lane, the Piston's coach had a great game plan; as well as the entirely contingent events: two Celtics players collided at a critical moment, a three-point shot at the buzzer banged off the rim, there was a clock malfunction that gave the Pistons a breather. The former types of factors are the sorts of things that might be used to attempt to explain basketball success over the course of a

season and a full range of teams; these are common causal factors explaining success and failure. The latter types of factors are fundamentally contingent and non-repeatable. These are random events with respect to a basketball season.

Much inquiry in the social sciences has to do with singular causal processes (historical outcomes): individual revolutions, specific experiences of modernization and development, specific histories of collective action. Charles Tilly‘s career-long treatment of the collective political behavior of the French is a case in point; Tilly attempts to identify a characteristic tradition of French political action, and attempts to identify the historical occurrences which gave this tradition its specificity (Tilly 1986). But Tilly is also interested in identifying common social mechanisms of contention; and this allows him to identify general causes as well as singular causes.

Historical investigation and "process tracing" permit us to analyze particular singular causal sequences—for example, "a floating iceberg caused the sinking of the Titanic." This kind of singular historical analysis permits discovery of the causal mechanisms and contingent happenings that were involved in the production of the event to be explained.

A ***general*** hypothesis about causation is based on a discovery of a pattern across a number of similar cases. For example, Theda Skocpol's States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China attempts to discover causal regularities leading to the occurrence of revolution that emerge from study of a small number of particular revolutions, and Jeffrey Paige's Agrarian Revolution offers a large-N study of cases of revolution and rebellion to attempt to discover common causal conditions. And through either type of study we might arrive at evidence supporting general causal claims like these: "the occurrence of subsistence crises is a causal factor in the occurrence of rebellion," "a strong state inhibits the occurrence of rebellion," and "international crises make rebellions more likely."

To assert that A’s are causes of B’s is to assert that there is a typical causal mechanism through which events of type A lead to events of type B. Here, however, we must note that there are rarely single sufficient conditions for social outcomes; instead, causes work in the context of causal fields. So to say that revolutions are causally influenced by food crisis, weak states, and local organization, is to say that there are real causal linkages from these conditions to the occurrence of revolution in specific instances. If we have enough cases, then these causal mechanisms will also produce some regularities of association between the hypothesized causal factors and the outcome; but without a large number of cases these regularities will be difficult or impossible to discern.

To what extent is such a causal analysis of a unique event ***explanatory***, rather than merely true? The account is explanatory if it identifies influences that commonly exert causal power in a variety of contexts, not merely the case of the French in 1848 or Russia in 1917. And a case study that invokes or suggests no implications for other cases, falls short of being explanatory.

I will put it forward as a methodological maxim that a causal assertion is explanatory only if it identifies a causal process that recurs across a family of cases. A historical narrative is an answer to the first sort of question (“why did this particular event come about?”); such a narrative may or may not have implications for more general causal questions. A true causal story is not always explanatory.

There is another issue raised by this topic of general and particular causal hypotheses,

which has to do with the idea of "over-determination." Return to the case of World War I. It might be argued that there were broad structural forces at work that were steadily increasing the likelihood of war throughout 1912-1914 -- deepening economic and geographical conflicts of interest among the great powers, large-scale military planning by various governments, and a worsening arms race, for example; so war was "inevitable" with or without the spark created by the assassination of the Archduke. If this event had not occurred, some other instigating event would have cropped up; so the conflagration was inevitable. On this interpretation, the assassination of the Archduke was a critical part of the actual pathway leading to the outbreak of war; but there were many other hypothetical pathways that would have led to the same result. So it is the background structural conditions that were the real and substantive causes of World War I -- not the contingent and accidental fact of the assassination in 1914.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:40PM (-05:00)

Are social networks fundamental?

Monday, November 09, 2009



There are several natural starting points when we begin thinking seriously about the social world and how it works. For example, we can begin with individual agents and try to understand social patterns as the expression of common features of reasoning and motivation by stylized agents. This is roughly the strategy underway in rational choice theory, neoclassical economics, game theory, and methodological individualism. Or we might begin with an account of group attributes -- race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion. This is roughly the way in which Durkheim, Giddens, and Du Bois begin -- with a kind of macro-social set of categories in terms of which we attempt to understand social structure and behavior.

The concept of a social network doesn't fit neatly into either category. It is larger than a collection of individuals, in that we have to specify a set of ***relationships*** among individuals in order to define a social network. But it is much more concrete and agent-based than the super-categories of race, class, or gender turn out to be. So my question here is a fundamental one: Is the concept of a social network one of a very small number of concepts that must be invoked in virtually every kind of social explanation? As such, is the concept of a social network, and the associated concepts of concrete social relationships it brings with it, a fundamental component of any satisfactory social ontology? And does the concept of a social network define a crucial space between the micro and the macro? (A good recent effort to link social networks theory to an important area of social science research is Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action.)

A couple of points are pretty obvious. One is that social networks do in fact constitute a key causal mechanism underlying many social processes. We can explain important features of social and political life by identifying the concrete social networks that exist within the population: the transmission of ideas, knowledge, and styles through a population; the selection of important leaders in government and industry; the effective

reach of the state; the course of mobilization within a community around an important issue; and the effectiveness of a terrorist group, to name a few examples. A second point is that networks have specific features of topology and functioning that have causal consequences that are largely independent from the personal characteristics of the people who constitute it. For example, information may travel more quickly through a network of people containing many midsized nodes than one containing just a few mega-hubs. And this structural fact may suffice to explain some social outcomes: for example, this rebellion succeeded (because of rapid transmission of information) whereas that one petered out (because of ineffective communications).

Consider two very different examples of group behavior: synchronized cheering in a stadium and the spread of boycotts in Alabama in the early 1960s. The first case involves no social network at all. Cheerleaders stationed around the field initiate the chant as the noise moves to their part of the stadium, and many fans respond when called. Fan behavior is explained by the fan's observation of the behavior of other fans and the motions of the cheerleader. The boycotts had a different dynamic. Organizations emerged which set about to mobilize support for the strategy of boycott. Some of this effort took the form of public calls to action. But a larger part of the mobilization occurred through the workings of extended networks of engaged people -- ministers, union activists, student organizations, and civil rights groups. And the effectiveness and pattern of dissemination of the call to action depended critically on the scope and structure of each of these networks of networks -- networks among leaders of diverse organizations and subordinate networks clustered around each leader. (Doug McAdam describes these processes in detail in Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970.)

These examples seem to lead to a couple of observations. One is that social networks are not critical for ***every*** form of social action. But the exceptions are pretty simple cases of spontaneous coordination. And second, the example of civil rights mobilization illustrates very clearly why we should expect that social networks are usually crucial. The reason is straightforward: almost all social outcomes require a degree of coordination, communication, and mobilization. A social network is not the only way of bringing these factors about -- cheerleaders and television stations can do it too. But the causal importance of social networks is likely to be great in many cases. And for this reason it seems justified to conclude that social networks are in fact fundamental to social explanation. Likewise, it appears correct to say that they function as bridging mechanisms from micro to macro, in that they help to convey the actions of local agents onto larger social outcomes (and back!).

(Several earlier posts are relevant to this topic: agent-based modeling, transnational protest, ethnic strife.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:15PM (-05:00)

Methodological localism

Thursday, November 12, 2009

I offer a social ontology that I refer to as **methodological localism** (ML). This theory of social entities affirms that there are large social structures and facts that influence social outcomes. But it insists that these structures are only possible insofar as they are embodied in the actions and states of socially constructed individuals. The “molecule” of all social life is the ***socially constructed and socially situated individual***, who lives, acts,



and develops within a ***set of local social relationships, institutions, norms, and rules***.

This account begins with the ***socially constituted person***. Human beings are subjective, purposive, and relational agents. They interact with other persons in ways that involve competition and cooperation. They form relationships, enmities, alliances, and networks; they compose institutions and organizations. They create material embodiments that reflect and affect human intentionality. They acquire beliefs, norms, practices, and worldviews, and they socialize their children, their friends, and others with whom they interact. Some of the products of human social interaction are short-lived and local (indigenous fishing practices); others are long-duration but local (oral traditions, stories, and jokes); and yet others are built up into social organizations of great geographical scope and extended duration (states, trade routes, knowledge systems). But always we have individual agents interacting with other agents, making use of resources (material and social), and pursuing their goals, desires, and impulses.

At the level of the socially constituted individual we need to ask two sorts of questions: First, what makes individual agents behave as they do? Here we need accounts of the mechanisms of deliberation and action at the level of the individual. What are the main features of individual choice, motivation, reasoning, and preference? How do these differ across social groups? How do emotions, rational deliberation, practical commitments, and other forms of agency influence the individual's deliberations and actions? This area of research is purposively eclectic, including performative action, rational action, impulse, theories of the emotions, theories of the self, or theories of identity.

Second, how are individuals formed and constituted? Methodological localism gives great importance to learning more about how individuals are formed and constituted—the concrete study of the social process of the development of the self. Here we need better accounts of social development, the acquisition of worldview, preferences, and moral frameworks, among the many other determinants of individual agency and action. What are the social institutions and influences through which individuals acquire norms, preferences, and ways of thinking? How do individuals develop cognitively, affectively, and socially? So methodological localism points up the importance of discovering the microfoundations and local variations of identity formation and the construction of the historically situated self.

So far we have emphasized the socially situated individual. But social action takes place within spaces that are themselves socially structured by the actions and purposes of others—by property, by prejudice, by law and custom, and by systems of knowledge. So our account needs to identify the **local social environments** through which action is structured and projected: the inter-personal networks, the systems of rules, the social institutions. The social thus has to do with the behaviorally, cognitively, and materially embodied reality of social institutions. An institution is a complex of socially embodied powers, limitations, and opportunities within which individuals pursue their lives and goals. A property system, a legal system, and a professional baseball league all represent examples of institutions. Institutions have effects that are in varying degrees independent from the individual or "larger" than the individual. Each of these social entities is embodied in the social states of a number of actors—their beliefs, intentions,

reasoning, dispositions, and histories. Actors perform their actions within the context of social frameworks represented as rules, institutions, and organizations, and their actions and dispositions embody the causal effectiveness of those frameworks. And institutions influence individuals by offering incentives and constraints on their actions, by framing the knowledge and information on the basis of which they choose, and by conveying sets of normative commitments (ethical, religious, interpersonal) that influence individual action.

It is important to emphasize that ML affirms the existence of social constructs beyond the purview of the individual actor or group. Political institutions exist—and they are embodied in the actions and states of officials, citizens, criminals, and opportunistic others. These institutions have real effects on individual behavior and on social processes and outcomes—but always mediated through the structured circumstances of agency of the myriad participants in these institutions and the affected society. This perspective emphasizes the contingency of social processes, the mutability of social structures over space and time, and the variability of human social systems (norms, urban arrangements, social practices, and so on).

This approach highlights the important point that all social facts, social structures, and social causal properties depend ultimately on facts about individuals within socially defined circumstances. Social ascriptions require ***microfoundations*** at the level of individuals in concrete social relationships. According to this way of understanding the nature of social ontology, an assertion of a structure or process at the macro-social level (causal, functional, structural) must be supplemented by two things: knowledge about what it is about the local circumstances of the typical individual that leads him or her to act in such a way as to bring about this relationship; and knowledge of the aggregative processes that lead from individual actions of that sort to an explanatory social relationship of this sort. So if we are interested in analysis of the causal properties of states and governments, we need to arrive at an analysis of the institutions and constrained patterns of individual behavior through which the state's characteristics are effected. We need to raise questions such as these: How do states exercise influence throughout society? What are the institutional embodiments at lower levels that secure the impact of law, taxation, conscription, contract enforcement, and other central elements of state behavior? If we are concerned about the workings of social identities, then we need to inquire into the concrete social mechanisms through which social identities are reproduced within a local population—and the ways in which these mechanisms and identities may vary over time and place. And if we are interested in analyzing the causal role that systems of norms play in social behavior, we need to discover some of the specific institutional practices through which individuals come to embrace a given set of norms.

The microfoundations perspective requires that we attempt to discover the pathways by which socially constituted individuals are influenced by distant social circumstances, and how their actions in turn affect distant social outcomes. There is no action at a distance in social life; instead, individuals have the values that they have, the styles of reasoning, the funds of factual and causal beliefs, etc., as a result of the structured experiences of development that they have undergone as children and adults. On this perspective, large social facts and structures do indeed exist; but their causal properties are entirely defined by the current states of psychology, norm, and action of the individuals who currently exist. Systems of norms and bodies of knowledge exist—but only insofar as individuals (and material traces) embody and transmit them. So when we assert that a given social structure causes a given outcome, we need to be able to specify the local pathways

through which individual actors embody this causal process. That is, we need to be able to provide an account of the causal mechanisms that convey social effects.

It is evident that methodological localism implies a fairly limited social ontology. What exists is the socially constructed individual, within a congeries of concrete social relations and institutions. The socially constructed individual possesses beliefs, norms, opportunities, powers, and capacities. These features are socially constructed in a perfectly ordinary sense: the individual has acquired his or her beliefs, norms, powers, and desires through social contact with other individuals and institutions, and the powers and constraints that define the domain of choice for the individual are largely constituted by social institutions (property systems, legal systems, educational systems, organizations, and the like). Inevitably, social organizations at any level are constituted by the individuals who participate in them and whose behavior and ideas are influenced by them; sub-systems and organizations through which the actions of the organization are implemented; and the material traces through which the policies, memories, and acts of decision are imposed on the environment: buildings, archives, roads, etc. All features of the organization are embodied in the actors and institutional arrangements that carry the organization at a given time. At each point we are invited to ask the question: what are the social mechanisms through which this institution or organization exerts influence on other organizations and on agents' behavior?

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:27PM (-05:00)

Localism and assemblage theory

Thursday, November 12, 2009





Several earlier posts have described the idea of "methodological localism" (post). This is part of an argument I want to defend in support of the idea that we need new and better ways of thinking about the "stuff" of society. We need to thoroughly question and rethink the assumptions we make about social objects -- groups, mentalities, structures, forces, power, states, and organizations. In short, we need a better social ontology -- one that is free from the patterns of thinking we have inherited from positivism and the natural sciences (post).

Here is the thrust of methodological localism. The only ontologically stable stuff that exists in the social world is the socially constructed and socially situated individual actor, embedded within a set of relationships with other concrete social actors. There are higher-level social frameworks -- police departments, professional soccer leagues, and civil wars. But these higher-level structures and events derive all their properties and powers from the extended systems of local activity

that they encompass. And they are plastic and deformable in their properties over time (post, post).

One way to put this point is to say that higher-level social structures and entities are only composites or assemblages of lower-level structures, all tracing back ultimately to an extended set of local contexts of activity (post).

And this paraphrase brings the view into some kind of relationship with the theory of "***assemblage***" that has emerged from several strands of continental thought, including especially some writings of Gilles Deleuze. Manuel DeLanda's book A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory And Social Complexity presents an appealing and accessible version of the perspective. Nick Srnicek's master's thesis "Assemblage Theory, Complexity and Contentious Politics" is a good exposition and critical discussion of the theory. And Bruno Latour's book Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory provides a coherent and useful reconstruction of "actor-network theory" (ANT) within the general framework of assemblage theory.

Latour's theory stems significantly from the tradition of "social construction of technology" and recent sociology and history of science and technology. ***Reassembling the Social*** is a radical call to action in the social sciences. Latour wants us to dispense entirely with traditional sociological concepts when they purport to refer to fixed, stable social things. And he wants a new conceptual scheme that puts the emphasis on relationships and associations, on dynamic patterns of action and coordination, rather than on structures and institutions.

The argument of this book can be stated very simply: when social scientists add the adjective ‘social’ to some phenomenon, they designate a stabilized state of affairs, a bundle of ties that, later, may be mobilized to account for some other phenomenon. There is nothing wrong with this use of the word as long as it designates what is already assembled together, without making any superfluous assumption about the nature of what is assembled. Problems arise, however, when ‘social’ begins to mean a type of material, as if the adjective was roughly comparable to other terms like ‘wooden’, ‘steely’, ‘biological’, ‘economical’, ‘mental’, ‘organizational’, or ‘linguistic’. At that point, the meaning of the word breaks down since it now designates two entirely different things: first, a movement during a process of assembling; and second, a specific type of ingredient that is supposed to differ from other materials.(1)

The key task for social science research, according to Latour, is systematic tracing of compound associations among diverse elements. Here is a description of what this might mean:

In such a view, law, for instance, should not be seen as what should be explained by ‘social structure’ in addition to its inner logic; on the contrary, its inner logic may explain some features of what makes an association last longer and extend wider. Without the ability of legal precedents to draw connections between a case and a general rule, what would we know about putting some matter ‘into a larger context’? Science does not have to be replaced by its ‘social framework’, which is ‘shaped by social forces’ as well as its own objectivity, because its objects are themselves dislocating any given context through the foreign elements research laboratories are associating together in unpredictable ways.

...

And the same is true for all other domains. Whereas, in the first approach, every activity—law, science, technology, religion, organization, politics, management, etc.—could be related to and explained by the same social aggregates behind all of them, in the second version of sociology there exists nothing behind those activities even though they might be linked in a way that does produce a society—or doesn't produce one. Such is the crucial point of departure between the two versions. To be social is no longer a safe and unproblematic property, it is a movement that may fail to trace any new connection and may fail to redesign any well-formed assemblage. (7,8)

The social realities of "law", "science", or "technology", then, are to be understood in terms of the network of associations that they encompass among actors and other elements. These social "things" are not static realities, but rather assemblages of dynamic actor relationships or "associations".

John Law provides a similar statement of some of the fundamental starting points of ANT in "Notes on the Theory of the Actor Network" (link), emphasizing the same skepticism about existing assumptions of social ontology:

Here is the argument. If we want to understand the mechanics of power and organisation it is important not to start out assuming whatever we wish to explain. For instance, it is a good idea not to take it for granted that there is a macrosocial system on the one hand, and bits and pieces of derivative microsocial detail on the other. If we do this we close off most of the interesting questions about the origins of power and organisation. Instead we should start with a clean slate. For instance, we might start with interaction and assume that interaction is all that there is. Then we might ask how some kinds of interactions more or less succeed in stabilising and reproducing themselves: how it is that they overcome resistance and seem to become "macrosocial"; how it is that they seem to generate the effects such power, fame, size, scope or organisation with which we are all familiar. This, then, is the one of the core assumptions of actor-network theory: that Napoleons are no different in kind to small-time hustlers, and IBMs to whelk-stalls. And if they are larger, then we should be studying how this comes about -- how, in other words, size, power or organisation are generated.

I said above that there is a convergence between methodological localism and assemblage theory. But it is an uneasy convergence, on both sides. What the two perspectives have in common is easiest to identify. Each calls for a radical rethinking of social ontology. Each emphasizes plasticity, heterogeneity, and contingency in social life and structure. And each works with a metaphor of construction or composition as a way of understanding complex social stuff -- cities, for example (post). So far, so good.

But I have a suspicion that Latour would have more to criticize than to applaud in my approach. For one thing, it may appear to be reductionist: it attempts to ground social statements and theories in facts about the local circumstances of action. And it is unsympathetic to the idea of "emergent" social properties -- properties of the social whole that do not derive from the properties of the underlying social actors and their behavior. (Though see this post for a qualified defense of holism.) Further, contrary to Latour, my perspective asserts that there is a distinctive domain of social stuff; it is the domain of purposive actors in interaction, cooperation, and competition with each other. Third, the ML approach provides a basis for attributing relatively stable causal powers to higher-

level social structures -- provided we can offer appropriate microfoundations for these powers (post). Finally, in spite of my insistence on not reifying higher-level structures, Latour would probably still feel that I'm giving a degree of "thing"-ness to states and organizations that is inconsistent with his view of sociology as a study of associations among actors rather than a study of social entities and forces.

These considerations suggest there are important disagreements between the views. However, it still seems to me that there are important areas of convergence between the two bodies of thought as well: the need for a new social ontology, emphasis on the composition of the social, and an insistence on the fluidity of social life.

What seems particularly worthwhile is to probe in detail how either perspective may turn out to have real utility when it comes to framing an empirical research programme in sociology. How does either perspective help to contribute to a more successful empirical study of society? If it is just philosophical theory with no implications for doing better science, then neither framework should be taken seriously by working social researchers. But I think there is concrete practical value in these ideas; most fundamentally, if we misconceptualize a domain of inquiry, we are not likely to succeed in understanding it. Delanda, Latour, and other theorists of *assemblage* are worth reading carefully.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:38PM (-05:00)

Variation as a social fundamental

Sunday, November 15, 2009


1966年8月，清华大学红卫兵在砸毁牌坊上的“清华园”题字。

Over 700 historians, sociologists, demographers, and political scientists enjoyed a splendid program of panels at the Social Science History Association in Long Beach this week (link). There were panels on recent historical demography, comparative historical analysis, and social mobilization research, as well as a pair of great panels on the work of Charles Tilly. There was even a smattering of papers suggesting possible opportunities for innovation in theory and research methods in historical sociology. (A book panel on Neil Smelser's recent The Odyssey Experience: Physical, Social, Psychological, and Spiritual Journeys illustrates this point: the book is highly original and demonstrates the value of seeking out new perspectives and angles of view on social behavior and social change.)

Here is one strong impression that emerges from the program. ***Variation*** within a social or historical phenomenon seems to be all but ubiquitous. Think of the Cultural Revolution in China, demographic transition in early modern Europe, the ideology of a market society, or the experience of being black in America. We have the noun -- "Cultural Revolution" -- which can be explained or defined in a sentence or two as an extended social phenomenon of mobilization and conflict that took place in China from 1966-76; and we have the complex underlying social realities to which it refers, spread out over many cities, villages, and communes across China (The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History). Or consider another general noun, "demographic transition," defined as a period in which a population experiences abrupt decline in mortality, followed by a decline in

fertility. Using a variety of statistical methods, historical demographers can document the occurrence of a demographic transition in different periods in Sweden, Italy, Britain, and China. And it turns out that there are both common features and distinguishing characteristics that emerge from detailed study -- differences in timing, differences in social composition, differences in the mechanisms bringing these changes about.

In each case there is a very concrete and visible degree of variation in the factor over time and place. Historical and social research in a wide variety of fields confirms the non-homogeneity of social phenomena and the profound location-specific variations that occur in the characteristics of virtually all large social phenomena. Social nouns do not generally designate uniform social realities (post). These facts of local and regional variation provide an immediate rationale for case studies and comparative research, selecting different venues of the phenomenon and identifying specific features of the phenomenon in this location. Through a range of case studies it is possible for the research community to map out both common features and distinguishing features of a given social process.

This description focuses on locational variation in processes -- village to village, country to country. But social scientists often also highlight variations across social segments ***within*** a given location: class, race, gender, religion, occupation. Do sharecroppers have a different fertility profile over time than the wealthy in a particular region at a particular time? Are there significant differences in survival strategies for distinct groups defined by race or ethnicity in a city or a group of cities?

This situation of variation and case-specific research raises a number of challenging questions. One is the question of whether the phenomenon designated by the noun is one integrated social reality, with varied expressions across locations, or whether instead the different locations are simply loosely similar but independent occurrences. Simon Schama's radical question -- was there a French Revolution, or were there simply a congeries of periods and locations of disturbance? -- illustrates this question (post), as does a previous discussion of the revolutions of 1848 (post).

A second major question is the challenge of discovering causal and social mechanisms connecting the various social locations encompassed by the phenomenon. How did the activism and ideology of Cultural Revolution spread from Beijing to Nanjing and other locations? How did activism spread from city to rural locations? How did local circumstances cause changes and variations in the political movement? How much path dependency existed in the spread of revolutionary ideas and strategies?

There is a more epistemic set of questions as well, concerning generalizability. Fundamentally, if there is substantial variation across locations and instances of a given phenomenon, then to what degree can we say anything about the phenomenon as a whole? And what does the study of one location allow us to say about the larger processes? Does study of the Tsinghua student Red Guard movement tell us anything about Red Guard mobilization in other places? Or is it simply one of many different and contingent develoments of contentious politics during the period? Can we generalize from case studies and comparative research?

We can also look at the problem from the other end of the telescope: are there any social phenomena that occur fairly homogeneously across all places where this phenomenon occurs? Candidates might include:

- Anti-Semitic violence across 19th-century Ukraine villages

- Marriage / fertility practices across rural Sweden 1700-1800
- Peasant revolts in medieval Germany
- Process of protoindustrialization in villages and towns in Low Countries 1300-1600 (Industrialization Before Industrialization)

For examples like these we can ask a symmetrical set of questions to those posed above. What factors explain the uniformity of results for these processes across separate locations? Various explanations are possible:

- There is a common set of conditions across the regions (e.g. famine or drought)
- There are common causes that mobilize people in many separate places (tax protests, land confiscations)
- There are common political traditions
- There is substantial inter-location communication and influence
- There are no large institutional or circumstantial variations that would drive significant variations in outcomes across locations

This is where the appeal to social mechanisms seems once more to be highly relevant and helpful. If we work on the assumption that any large social process -- the dispersed locations of contention associated with the French Revolution, say -- is the compound result of a set of underlying causal social mechanisms, and if we hypothesize that many of these mechanisms are in play in some places but not in others; then we can explain both similarity and difference in the occurrence of the phenomenon across time and place. Now the work of historical investigation can be put in these terms: identify some of the social mechanisms that evidently recur in various locations; identify some of the mechanisms that lead to significantly different results in some places; and identify some of the cross-location mechanisms that are at work to secure a degree of synchrony and parallel in the developments observed in different locations (communication systems, networks of leaders, dissemination of activists). Case studies and comparative research permit both a degree of generalization and an explanation of variation.

In other words, the intellectual strategy here is to disaggregate the large social factor into the results of a larger number of underlying mechanisms; and then to attempt to discover how these mechanisms played out differently in different settings throughout the range of the French Revolution, protoindustrialization, or ethnic conflict in South Asia. Significantly, this is exactly the strategy of research and explanation that Charles Tilly was led to in his emphasis on discovering the component social mechanisms that underlie social contention (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly, Dynamics of Contention).
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:17AM (-05:00)

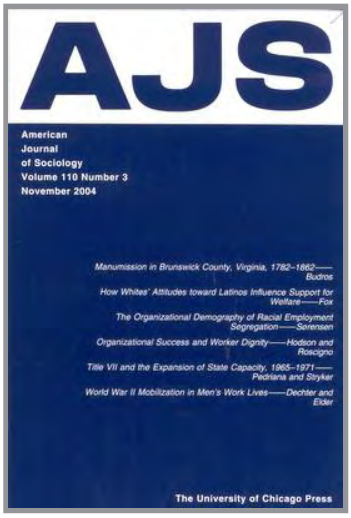
Was Durkheim a professional sociologist?

Monday, November 16, 2009

At some point in the history of sociology there was a transition from the founding non-professional genius to the professional disciplinary researcher. Marx and Tocqueville certainly fall in the former category; Robert Merton, Mayer Zald, and Neil Smelser fall clearly in the latter. By some time in the mid-twentieth century sociology had become "professionalized." What is the situation of the "professional" sociologist? To what extent and why is this an improvement? And where do Durkheim and Weber fall in this transition?

We might characterize a discipline as --

a complex set of social institutions that organize, validate, and evaluate the work



products of knowledge seekers.

This means several things: organized processes for identifying and ranking important research problems; institutions for selecting and training young scientists; formal processes for evaluating scientific work; institutions for valorizing and disseminating scientific results; and ways of prioritizing certain methods of knowledge formation and discouraging others. As Andrew Abbott shows in Department and Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred, the discipline of sociology is an amalgam of journals and editorial boards, annual conferences, associations, research universities, departments of sociology, tenure processes and standards, and funding mechanisms. And the discipline succeeds to a substantial degree in fostering certain forms of scientific behavior among young sociologists while discouraging other forms. Heterodox researchers and innovators -- counter-disciplinary thinkers -- have a harder time in building a career in the discipline at every stage: dissertation, job seeking, promotion and tenure, and publication in high-value journals. So we might say that an academic field has become professionalized when it has created the institutions and norms that serve to guide, constrain, and regulate the scientific activities of its practitioners. (Abbott offers an extensive sociology of the professions in The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor. And he analyzes academic disciplines in Chaos of Disciplines. Here is an earlier post on the sociology of the professions.)

We should begin by asking this basic question: why might professionalization of sociology be thought to be a good thing? Why is the formalization of a scientific or academic discipline a good step forward? The answers, if there are any, ought to be epistemic. We'd like to think that the professionalization of science leads to an improvement in the quality of the product -- the veridicality, scope, depth, and practical value of the products of the social activity of science. And disciplines might do this in at least two ways.

First, they might serve to embody and enforce standards of scientific rigor; they might give institutional expression to valid methods of scientific research and inference. And on the people side, they might create mechanisms of evaluation of researchers and their products that consistently identify talent and sort out high quality researchers. This promotes the high achievers, motivates everyone, and winnows out the unproductive.

And second, the institutions of a discipline might serve to enhance the collective effectiveness of the research community by establishing and organizing a scientific division of labor; they might serve to focus collective attention on a limited set of problems selected to be important -- cognitively or practically. In other words, the rules and norms of the discipline might be epistemically virtuous: they might serve to ratchet up the veridicality and scope of science as a social activity.

But do the norms and institutions of the social science disciplines actually achieve these good results? Not always. In fact, we can identify directly dysfunctional features of the disciplines: a dogmatic insistence on some methods over others, a myopic focus on research problems that are ideologically selected; a tendency to discourage innovators. (See several earlier posts on the negative potential of disciplines in the social and human

sciences; sociology, political science.)

So now let's return to the cases of Tocqueville and Durkheim. How do these beacons of French sociology fare on the spectrum of the academic professions? Tocqueville is the easier case. He was an innovative and rigorous thinker when it came to understanding the social world around him. But he was clearly not a "professional," for several reasons. He was not immersed in an evaluative framework in the context of which his scientific work was to be judged. His research questions were of his own design, not part of an active community of sociologists with considered judgments about what topics were important. His reasoning about society and history followed his own intuitions about inference and explanation, not a community-based set of norms dictating answers to these questions. There was no professional discipline of sociology in 1835, and Tocqueville was not a professional.

The case of Durkheim is a bit more difficult. (Steven Lukes's Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study is a superb critical discussion of Durkheim's intellectual development (google books). Robert Nisbet's The Sociology of Emile Durkheim is also valuable.) Durkheim was highly credentialed, with degrees from the École Normale Supérieure -- and of course credentialing is a crucial component of professionalization. At the same time he was a ***founder***; he was a highly original thinker with his own intuitions about what society consists of and how to research it. This implies that he was a "genius founder" or a *sui generis* amateur. But he was also embedded within a tradition of thought that was beginning to look more like an emerging discipline of sociology. His thought fit logically and clearly -- albeit with originality -- into a tradition of teachers and writers like Fustel de Coulanges and Hyppolite Taine -- another mark of being part of a discipline or research tradition. And he distinguished himself from Comte and Spencer by committing himself to specialized studies of particular social phenomena -- yet another sign of professionalism (Lukes, 137-38; 289).

And what about publications and external standards of quality assessment? Here again, Durkheim was on the cusp of a transition. He himself was the creator and long-time editor of one of the first sociological journals in 1896, *L'Année Sociologique*. His goal was to establish a working collaboration of young sociologists to contribute to the progress and specialization of the new science of sociology. Other young sociologists associated with the journal included Célestin Bouglé, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, Robert Hertz, Maurice Halbwachs, and François Simiand. Durkheim was a prolific reviewer of other people's academic work in the journal (a discipline-like activity), and he did so on the basis of standards that were clearly sociological. And of course he published numerous important and influential books on different aspects of social order, and these books helped to set the research agenda for French sociology for the next generation -- yet another disciplinary activity.

So perhaps we can say that Durkheim played a dual role with respect to sociology as a professional social science. He both contributed to the definition and articulation of a discipline of sociology, and he also fell within that discipline. He was a professional sociologist in the somewhat unusual sense that Bob "Barky" Barkhimer was a professional NASCAR driver: he helped to create the very institutional processes and institutions that would eventually validate his work.

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:45AM (-05:00)

Defining the university curriculum

Saturday, November 21, 2009



What is the purpose of a university education? And who ought to answer this question when it comes to the practical business of maintaining and reforming a university curriculum?

The second question is the easier of the two. In the United States university, the faculty generally have the responsibility and authority to make decisions about the curriculum -- from the content of a particular course to the requirements of a disciplinary major, to the nature of the general education requirements to the university's graduation requirements. To be sure, there are other significant sources of influence and constraint on this faculty-centered process. Accreditation agencies like the HLC (Higher Learning Commission), ACS (chemistry), AACSB (business), and ABET (engineering) constrain various levels of curricular design at the university level and the professional or disciplinary levels. Schools of business, colleges of engineering, and chemistry departments are constrained and guided by the agencies that control their accreditation. But it is the faculty of a particular university, school, or department that fundamentally drive the process of curriculum design and maintenance.

It could have been otherwise, of course. Other nations have implemented more centralized processes where ministries of education determine the structure and content of a university program of study. And we could imagine vesting this authority in the hands of local academic administrators -- deans and provosts. But in the United States the role of the academic administrator is largely one of persuasive collaborator rather than authoritative decision-maker when it comes to the curriculum. And the reason for this is pretty compelling: faculty are experts on the content and structure of knowledge and it makes sense to entrust them with the responsibility of organizing the educational experience.

But let's go back to the harder question: what is our society trying to accomplish through a university education? Why is this a worthwhile goal? And how can we best accomplish the goal?

Most fundamentally universities exist to continue the intellectual and personal development of young people; to help them gain the skills and knowledge they will need to carry out their plans of life; and to help them fulfill their capacities as citizens, creators, and leaders. A university education ought to be an environment in which the young person is challenged and assisted in the process of expanding and deepening his or her intellectual capabilities.

We might put these ideas in more practical terms by saying that a university education should allow the student to develop the capabilities he or she will need to succeed in a career and to make productive contributions to the society of the future.

And what do these goals require in terms of a curriculum? What are those skills, capabilities, and bodies of knowledge that young people need to cultivate in order to achieve the kinds of success mentioned here?

This is the point at which there is often disagreement among various academic voices and non-academic stakeholders. There is a very career-oriented perspective that holds that there are specific professional skills that should be the primary content of a university education. On this approach, the specialized major needs to be the focus of the undergraduate's work, and the bulk of the student's effort should be directed towards acquiring these specific skills.

But there is also an approach that emphasizes the importance of breadth and pluralism within the university curriculum. On this "liberal learning" philosophy, the university student needs to be broadly exposed to the arts, humanities, mathematics, and the social and natural sciences. Here the emphasis is on helping the student acquire a broad set of intellectual capacities, not tied to a particular professional body of knowledge.

The reasons offered for this answer to the question are pragmatic ones. A leader or creator -- in whatever career -- needs to have an understanding of the social and historical context of the problems he or she confronts. He/she needs to have a rich imagination as he confronts unprecedented challenges -- within a startup company, a non-profit organization, or a state legislature. He/she needs to have the ability and confidence needed to arrive at original approaches to a problem. And he/she needs a broad set of skills of analysis, reasoning, and communication, as he works with others to discover and implement new solutions. So a liberal education is a superb foundation for almost any career -- engineer, accountant, doctor, community activist, or president.

This picture argues for breadth in the undergraduate experience. It also argues for two other curricular values: interdisciplinarity and multicultural breadth. It is evident that the difficult problems our civilization faces do not fit neatly into specific academic disciplines. Climate change, mortgage crises, and the legacy of racism all pose dense, "wicked" problems that demand cross-discipline collaboration. And likewise, the advantages created for US society by the racial and ethnic diversity of our population will be wasted if our young adults don't learn how to see the world through multiple perspectives of different human circumstances. A university isn't the only place where multicultural learning takes place, but it is one very important place. And to date universities have only scratched the surface in creating a genuinely multicultural learning environment.

So these are a few leading values that can serve to guide decisions about what an effective university education for the twenty-first century ought to include: breadth, imagination, historical and social context, rigorous reasoning, and a genuine ability to live and work in a multicultural world. And most great universities in the United States have placed their bets on some version of this philosophy of liberal learning. This bundle of features should lead to flexibility of mind, readiness for innovation, preparation for working collaboratively, and a set of intellectual skills that support effective problem solving. (Martha Nussbaum's Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education lays out a very similar educational philosophy; her book is worth reading by everyone with an interest in university curriculum reform.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:54AM (-05:00)

Marc Bloch and the French social sciences

Tuesday, November 24, 2009



Marc Bloch was one of the twentieth century's most important and pathbreaking historians. Several features of his work are particularly important: his attention to the specifics of medieval economic institutions, his interest in historically specific customs and practices, and his interest in uncovering the social and technical characteristics of medieval agriculture. He helped to define contemporary social history and economic history. (See an earlier post on Bloch's historical writings.) Somehow Bloch developed a way of thinking about the history of France that deeply incorporated some of the mental frameworks of the emerging social sciences -- geography and sociology, for example -- at a time when mainstream French history was still very much driven by the chronicling of events and personages. As a discipline, history in France was very specifically defined in terms of its definition of subject matter and historical method, and Bloch's historiography challenged some very important pillars of this framework. Along with Lucien Febvre he created the intellectual impetus that led to several generations of deeply innovative historical research within the *Annales* school. So it is an interesting question for the sociology of knowledge to trace out some of the influences that were present in the 1890s and 1900s in French intellectual life that propelled Bloch's development. (The topic has some parallels to an earlier posting on "The history of sociology as sociology.")

Susan Friedman's Marc Bloch, Sociology and Geography: Encountering Changing Disciplines provides an excellent and detailed study of the intellectual and academic context in which Bloch's development occurred. (The book is also available in a much more affordable Kindle edition, and here is a link to the Google Books version.) Friedman documents a major methodological debate, extended over roughly the decade surrounding 1903, concerning the relevance of geography and sociology to academic history. The debate was in part intellectual -- how should the new ideas emerging from these social-science disciplines be incorporated into history? But it was also institutional: how should the new disciplines of geography and sociology be represented within the university and the qualification system? The École Normale Supérieure (ENS), the Collège de France, and the Sorbonne and their students and faculty played crucial roles throughout the debates. The key figures in these debates were Durkheim and his followers, including especially François Simiand; Vidal and the young scholars who wanted to extend Vidal's ideas of human geography; and the defenders of traditional French historiography, centered around Charles Seignobos. (Interestingly enough, Marc Bloch's father, Gustave Bloch, was an important voice on the side of history in this debate.)

Friedman sets up the institutional context of the French university (and the process of reform that was underway) at roughly the turn of the twentieth century, and she skillfully and knowledgeably traces through the intellectual debates and networks that provided the context to Bloch's development. The book is of great value for any reader wanting to come to a better knowledge of the intellectual and institutional currents that shaped

French intellectual life in the early twentieth century -- and particularly valuable if we are interested in learning more about the micro-development of Durkheimian sociology. The book offers a detailed account of the development of the Durkheimian school of sociology and the approach to "human geography" championed by Paul Vidal de la Blache, and the controversies that arose between both schools and mainstream history. (Here is a summary description of Vidal's theories of human geography and parallel thinking by Friedrich Ratzel.)

The central divides in these debates have a strikingly contemporary sound to them. Main themes included:

- Can history be a "scientific" discipline? What does this require?
- Is sociology subsumed under history or is history subsumed under sociology?
- Can social facts be explained by anything other than social facts (Durkheim)? (This cuts against both the historians, who want to explain social outcomes in terms of individual motives; and the geographers, who want to explain social outcomes in terms of physiographic features such as mountains, soil fertility, or river systems.)
- Should history study "events" or "processes, customs, and institutions"?
- What is a social or historical cause? Is there a distinction between causes and conditions?
- Should history focus its attention on the particulars of a given historical event or period; or should it use methods of comparison to arrive at generalizations and laws?

In reading Friedman's account of these debates, it is tempting to consider which positions were the most productive in the long term. The Durkheimians' insistence on the autonomy of social facts, their inflexible holism, and their insistence on discovering general social laws all seem like mis-steps from the contemporary point of view. They leave little room for social contingency and variation across social circumstances; and they leave no room whatsoever for an "agent-centered" approach to social and historical explanation. Given these shortcomings, it is perhaps a good thing that the Durkheimians never fully dominated the history profession. The Vidalians -- the human geographers -- seem like an improvement in each of these respects. Their approach emphasizes regional variation; they are eclectic in their openness to a variety of types of historical causes; and they emphasize the crucial importance of paying attention in detail to the particulars of a case. Their weakness, however, is a relative lack of attention to the specifics of social institutions. But best of all is the historian who learns something from each perspective but then constructs his own intellectual framework for the historical setting of interest to him.

And in fact, this latter position seems to be the one that Bloch took. Friedman argues that Bloch's historical sensibilities and methods were deeply influenced by these debates among the historians, sociologists, and geographers; but that ultimately his thinking remains "historical."

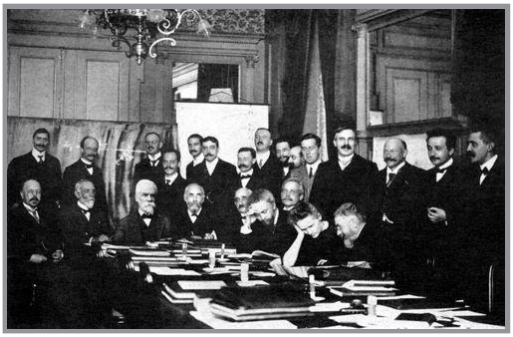
Even in his later years when he came closest to Durkheimian sociology, Marc Bloch remained essentially an historian. He was an historian in the sense that his primary interests lay in change and differences rather than laws and theory and that the problems which he chose to address were human ones rather than those of the physical environment. (chapter 10)

It is interesting to observe that the writings of Marx and the ideas of historical materialism do not come into this story at any point. These currents do not appear to have played a significant role in the academic debates over the future of French history in 1900. Friedman observes that Bloch was impressed by Marx. She notes that he wrote to

Febvre "that he was considering using Marx to bring some 'fresh air into the Sorbonne' and that though he suspected that Marx was a 'poor philosopher' and probably also an 'unbearable man,' Marx was without a doubt a great historian" (Kindle loc 223-35). But there is no indication in this book about what role Marx's writings played in his development. And even the statement about being a "great historian" is somewhat mysterious, since the bulk of Marx's work was plainly theoretical and immersed in political economy rather than historical research and narrative. (See an earlier posting on primitive accumulation and a posting on Marx's strengths and weaknesses as an historian.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:24AM (-05:00)

The German mandarins

Thursday, November 26, 2009



Fritz Ringer's The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933 is a key source on the content and social location of German academic and intellectual culture in a crucial period of its development, 1870-1933. The book appeared in German in 1967, and it presents a detailed intellectual and institutional history of the issues and actors. The concept of mandarin is Ringer's shorthand for "influential educated elite." Humanistically educated in a system that emphasized literature, classical languages, and philosophy, the mandarins played the role of the educated and powerful elites of late nineteenth-century Germany, as officials, professors, and other highly educated professionals. These were men of letters who played key roles in German social and political life. Ringer concentrates on one important segment of this elite group: Germany's professors and university leaders, primarily in the humanities and social sciences. And Ringer's central finding is that there was a highly distinctive mentality and set of social emotions that pervaded this group, and these ideas and emotions had dramatic consequences both for the nature of their theories and the direction of their political behavior as Germany's crisis deepened in the twentieth century.

Ringer's approach differs from other more internalist conceptions of intellectual history in several important respects. First, he gives a great deal of attention to the social and political context of German academic culture, essentially implying a significant degree of social causation of thought. And second, he tries to understand much of the thinking and action of this group in terms of a set of shared emotions towards the present and towards German culture. He identifies the rapid processes of economic change, industrialization, and political upheavals as being key sources of impetus for the sense of intellectual upheaval that pervaded the period. And the most important current of social emotion that he highlights is a progression from enthusiasm for a Romantic conception of education, to a profound pessimism and malaise about the current and future prospects for German culture in the face of mass democratization of society.

One way of reading this approach is to say that Ringer is functioning as a sociologist rather than strictly as an historian in his analysis of this period of intellectual history. What makes Ringer's analysis *sociological* is his effort to locate the social position of the mandarin intellectual within a theory of comparative social and political development of

early modern societies. His way of approaching the task recalls that of Karl Mannheim or Max Weber himself: situating an intellectual tradition within a broad and pervasive set of social circumstances. This approach leads to an understanding of a particular social segment -- the mandarin -- that is highly sensitive to changing social conditions: "Thus all will go well for the mandarins until economic conditions around them change radically enough to introduce powerful new groups upon the social scene" (12).

Key to the development of academic culture is the educational system, and Ringer shows how different Germany's educational institutions were from other European nations. He provides a detailed treatment of the evolution of German educational institutions during the nineteenth century, including especially the elite gymnasium and the university. His treatment demonstrates how elite academic culture and the associated institutions incorporated the romantic and idealist strains of philosophy and literature through the theory of ***Bildung***, or personal intellectual development. The cultivation of the individual is the central goal of education. (This assumption has some similarity to the theory of liberal learning mentioned in an earlier post; but current ideas about liberal learning do not insist on a sharp separation between intellectual and practical activities.)

Ringer also documents the very sharp forms of social stratification that these educational institutions created within German society, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century. So the academic elites were separated from the rest of society by the exclusive institutions through which they were educated and by an academic philosophy that was contemptuous of practical or utilitarian skills. The mandarins were defensive of German high culture, and they were hostile to the social processes of industrialization and democratization that seemed to threaten that culture.

Another distinctive feature of Ringer's treatment is his interest in providing a ***psychological*** account of how Germany's circumstances shaped the values and goals of its intellectual class. Contrasting "logical", "traditional", and "ideological" explanations of beliefs, he argues that German intellectuals were shaped by their "emotional group preferences" (4). Ringer attempts to explain quite a bit of the development of social theory during this period in terms of the fit between a given theoretical position and the emotional perspective of the mandarin on current history.

Ringer's interpretations of the thoughts and values of these German intellectuals display a fascinating combination of assumptions about sources of influence on the character of an intellectual's thought. First, there is the fact of situatedness and limited perspective. Ringer often characterizes a thinker's choices of theories and topics in terms of the unquestioned background assumptions of this particular historically situated group. The person who grows up surrounded by the unlimited, flat horizons of Illinois will probably think differently from the one who experienced the mountain villages of the Alps since childhood -- and likewise with unquestioned social verities that differ from epoch to epoch. Second, there is the factor of self-interest. The mandarins favored a particular theory of education because it supported their positions of distinction within the university. And finally, of course, there is logic and the rational development of a particular line of thought. Ringer's presentation of Weber's exploration of the concept of the Protestant ethic is a case in point.

The first kind of intellectual influence is unconscious and invisible. The second is closer to being conscious to the thinker. And the third is analytical and intentional on the part of the thinker. These frameworks bear some analogy to the three perspectives mentioned above -- "logical", "traditional", and "ideological" explanations. But the correspondence is

not exact. We might say that the three perspectives correspond to the three different ideas about how thought corresponds to the world: that thought reflects social reality; thought advocates for social position; and thought interrogates social reality. Ringer echoes this in his coda on Weber by suggesting that Weber was able to transcend the limitations of perspective and interest to some degree, permitting him to exercise some independent critical intelligence:

Max Weber and a few other leading social scientists in the modernist camp hold a special place in the intellectual history of the mandarin community. They apparently shared some of the emotions with which the majority of their colleagues viewed the social transformations of their time. But their intellectual response to these changes far surpassed the orthodox norm in subtlety, critical control, and precision. Though never without a certain pessimism, they put their ambivalence at the service of analysis. They became at least partly conscious of their own situation. (180)

What is particularly tragic in Ringer's account is how poorly this mandarin culture prepared universities and academics for the onslaught of National Socialism and antisemitism in the 1930s. The nostalgia and pessimism that were the dominant themes of the mandarin social psychology left intellectuals unequipped for the struggle against fascism within the university and within German society. Their ideas and emotions left them ready for "conservative revolution" during the Weimar period, and provided no positive basis for mobilizing society against fascism when the time came.

These differences of tone and emphasis played a role in the political struggles of the early 1930's, in which the National Socialists triumphed over their rivals among the enemies of the Republic. ... Most academics realized at last that this was not the spiritual revolution they had sought. It was too violent and too vulgar. It declared itself the master of geist, not its servant. ... The wrote in defense of historical continuity and tradition, as if they sensed that the minimal restraints of civilization were under attack. Their tone was one of helplessness and pessimism. In 1931 Karl Jaspers warned of a coming abyss of individual nullity and unfreedom. Typically enough, he regarded the mass and machine age as the ultimate source of the approaching disaster. (436-7)

As a bit of contrast it is worth reading Arthur Koestler's autobiography, The Invisible Writing, in which he describes his experience as a radical journalist in Berlin in the early 1930s. Koestler describes his own experience and that of other politicized European intellectuals in the face of the rise of National Socialism. These too were intellectuals; but they were intellectuals who clearly perceived the deadly threat presented by the Nazi rise to power, and they were willing to fight.

Throughout the long, stifling summer of 1932 we fought our ding-dong battles with the Nazis. Hardly a day passed without one or two being killed in Berlin. The main battlefields were the *bierstuben*, the smoky little taverns of the working-class districts.... Among the Communist intellectuals who were prominent in pre-Nazi Berlin, my favourite was Hans Eisler, the composer. His family belonged to the high Comintern aristocracy and deserves a brief description. (29, 48)

(See an earlier post on Koestler's recollections.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:55PM (-05:00)

Comparative history

Monday, November 30, 2009





One of Marc Bloch's most important contributions was to reinvigorate the idea of "comparative history." Bloch believed that we could understand French feudalism better by putting it into the context of European legal and property regimes; and more broadly, he believed that the careful comparison of agrarian regimes across time and space could be an important source of insight into human societies. Moreover, he did not believe that the cases needed to be sociologically connected. He thought that we would learn important new truths by comparing medieval French serfdom with bonded labor in Senegal in the twentieth century, and one of the innovations developed in Bloch's editorship of ***Annales d'histoire économique et social*** was precisely his openness to this kind of comparison. (Bloch's ideas about comparative history are presented in his 1928 article, "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," reprinted in Frederick C. Lane and Jelle C. Riermersma, eds., Enterprise and Secular Change: Readings in Economic History. See William Sewell's article, "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History" (link), for a sophisticated discussion of Bloch's theory of comparative history. Another useful resource is Colleen Dunlavy's syllabus for seminar on comparative history at the University of Wisconsin (link).)

What is "comparative history"? Most basically, it is the organized study of similar historical phenomena in separated temporal or geographical settings. The comparative historian picks several cases for detailed study and comparison, and then attempts to identify important similarities and differences across the cases. Theda Skocpol's treatment of social revolution is a case in point (States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China); Skocpol is interested in examining the particulars of the French, Chinese, and Russian Revolutions in order to discover whether there are similar causal processes at work in these three cases.

Other possible comparative research projects might include --

- Slave-based agriculture in Rome and the antebellum United States South
- Rituals of royal healing in medieval France and Bali
- Religious pilgrimages in Islam and Christianity

- Periods of rural unrest in Britain and Malaysia
- Modern economic development in England, France, and China
- Frontier societies in nineteenth-century North America and seventeenth-century Russia
- Feudal legal institutions in eastern and western Europe
- Processes of urban development in London, Mumbai, and Berlin

What is the intellectual purpose of comparative history? What might we expect to learn through careful examination of sets of cases like these? What sorts of knowledge can comparative historical research provide?

There might be several goals. First, we might imagine that some of these phenomena are the effect of ***similar causal processes***, so comparison can help to identify causal conditions and regularities. This approach implies that we think of social structures and processes as being part of a causal system, where it is possible to identify recurring causal conditions. This seems to be Skocpol's approach in *States and Social Revolutions*, though she later extends her views in an article mentioned below. Researchers often make use of some variant of Mill's methods in attempting to discover significant patterns of co-variation of conditions and outcomes. See an earlier posting on "paired comparisons."

Second, we might have a theory of ***social types and subtypes*** into which social formations fall. The purpose of comparison would be to identify some of the sub-types of a general phenomenon such as "slave economy". This sounds pretty much like the approach that Comte and Durkheim took; it corresponds to a social metaphysic that holds that there are finitely many distinct types of society, and the central challenge for sociology is to discover the structural characteristics of the various types.

Third, we might have a fundamentally ***functionalist view of social organization***, along with a basic repertoire of social functions that need to be performed. We might then look at religious systems as fulfilling one or more social functions -- social order, solidarity, legitimacy -- in alternative ways. Comparison might serve to identify functional alternatives -- the multiple ways that different social systems have evolved to handle these functional needs.

Another possible purpose of comparative history is to attempt to discover ***historical and social connections*** across separate historical settings. For example, examining different methods of labor control in different fascist countries in the 1930s may give us a basis for assessing some of the forms of influence that existed between these movements and governments (post). And Victor Lieberman's comparative study of the rise and fall of state power in France and Burma falls in this category as well; see an earlier posting on his metaphor of "strange parallels".

Finally, we might have a social metaphysics that emphasizes ***contingency and difference***. This perspective differs from the first several ideas, in that it looks at structured comparative study as a vehicle for identifying ***difference*** rather than underlying similarity. Examining the histories of Berlin and Delhi may shed a great deal of light on the range of social forces and historical contingencies that occurred in these ostensibly similar cases of "urbanization". Here the goal of comparison is more to discover alternatives, variations, and instances of path dependency. Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin's analysis of alternative forms of capitalist development in "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production" illustrates this possibility (link; see also World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization).

So there are a number of different intellectual purposes we might have in undertaking comparative historical research. How have other social scientists understood these issues?

Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers address precisely this issue in "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry" (link). Their analysis highlights three distinct models of analysis that can underlie comparative inquiry:

There are, in fact, at least three distinct logics-in-use of comparative history. One of them, which we shall label comparative history as *macro-causal analysis*, actually does resemble multivariate hypothesis-testing. But in addition there are two other major types: comparative history as the *parallel demonstration of theory*; and comparative history as the *contrast of contexts*. Each of the three major types of comparative history assigns a distinctive purpose to the juxtaposition of historical cases. Concomitantly, each has its own requisites of case selection, its own patterns of presentation of arguments, and--perhaps most important--its own strengths and limitations as a tool of research in macrosocial inquiry. (175)

R. Bin Wong offers a different view of the value of comparison in historical studies in his important comparative study of Chinese economic and political development (China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience). Wong argues that comparison allows the historian to discover what is distinctive about a particular series of historical developments. Features which perhaps looked inevitable and universal in European economic development look quite different when we consider a similar process of development in China; we may find that Chinese entrepreneurs and officials found very different institutions to do the work of insurance, provision of credit, or long-distance trade. Likewise, elements that might have been taken to be *sui generis* characteristics of one national experience may turn out to be widespread in many locations when we do a comparative study.

Ultimately it seems that there are really only two fundamental intellectual reasons for being particularly interested in historical comparisons. One is the hope of discovering recurring social mechanisms and structures. This is what Charles Tilly seems to be about in his many studies of contentious politics. And the second is the hope of discovering some of the differentiating pathways that lead to significantly different outcomes in ostensibly similar social settings. The first goal serves the value of arriving at some level of generalization about social phenomena, and the second serves the goal of tracing out the fine structure of the particular.

(The images above represent rice cultivation in Bali and grain cultivation in France. As Marc Bloch might have observed, they depict landscapes that reflect fundamentally different agrarian regimes: intensive cultivation in small plots in Bali, versus extensive cultivation making use of a considerable amount of animal or machine traction in France. And Bloch would have been likely to spend a great deal of effort at discovering the legal, cultural, religious, and technical characteristics of the two regimes.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:16PM (-05:00)

Styles of epistemology in world sociology

Tuesday, December 01, 2009



Table 2. Theory and Evidence in Mexico and the United States

	United States (%)	Mexico (%)
Use of theory		
Mertonian "middle-range" logic	77	0
Draw "freely" on grand-theory	10	50
Do not explicitly employ theories	0	47
Other	13	3
Statement that theories should be tested by data		
Yes	87	0
No	13	100
General proposition among central claims		
Yes	87	7
No	13	93
Role of the empirical problem		
Empirical problem in itself is the main concern	7	93
Empirical problem speaks to a broader theoretical issue	93	7
Justification of problem in terms of a broader theoretical issue		
Yes	90	0
No	10	100
Deductivism		
Yes	60	0
No	40	100
Number of cases	30	30

One of the basic organizing premises of the sociology of science is that there are meaningful differences in the conduct of a given area of science across separate communities, all the way down. There is no pure language and method of science into which diverse research traditions ought to be translated. Rather, there are complex webs of assumptions about ontology, evidence, observation, theory, method, and reasoning; and there are highly significant differences in the institutions through which scientific activities are undertaken and young scientists are trained. Sociologists and philosophers such as Thomas Kuhn, David Bloor, Paul Feyerabend, Bruno Latour, and Wiebe Bijker have attempted to lay out the reasons for thinking these forms of difference are likely to be ubiquitous, and several of them have done detailed work in specific areas of scientific knowledge to demonstrate some of these differences. (Here is a post on Kuhn's approach to the history of science.)

In this vein is a genuinely fascinating and important article by Gabriel Abend with the evocative title, "Styles of Sociological Thought: Sociologies, Epistemologies, and the Mexican and U.S. Quests for Truth" (*Sociological Theory* 24:1, 2006). Abend attempts to take the measure of a particularly profound form of difference that might be postulated within the domain of world sociology: the idea that different national traditions of sociology may embody different ***epistemological*** frameworks that make their results genuinely incommensurable. Abend offers an empirical analysis of the possibility that the academic disciplines of Mexican and U.S. sociology embody significantly different assumptions when it comes to articulating the role and relationships between "evidence" and "theory." Here is how he summarizes his findings:

[The] main argument is that the discourses of Mexican and U.S. sociologies are consistently underlain by significantly different epistemological assumptions. In fact, these two *Denkgemeinschaften* are notably dissimilar in at least four clusters of variables ... : their thematic, theoretical, and methodological preferences; their historical development and intellectual influences; the society, culture, and institutions in which they are embedded; and the language they normally use.(2)

The core of Abend's analysis is an empirical study involving content analysis of four leading sociology journals in Mexico and the U.S. and sixty articles, randomly chosen through a constrained process. He analyzes the articles with respect to the practices that each represents when it comes to the use of empirical evidence and sociological theory. And he finds that the differences between the Mexican articles and the U.S. articles are

highly striking. Consider this tabulation of results on the question of the role of evidence and theory taken by the two sets of articles:

His central findings include these:

- U.S. and Mexican sociologists have very different understandings of "theory" and the ways in which theories relate to data. U.S. sociologists conform to Merton's idea of "theories of the middle range" in which a theory relates fairly directly to empirical observations through its deductive consequences. Mexican sociologists tend to use theories and theoretical concepts as ways of interpreting or thematizing large social phenomena.
- U.S. sociologists see the burden of their work to fall in the category of testing or confirming sociological hypotheses. Mexican sociologists see the burden of their work in detailing and analyzing complex social phenomena at a fairly factual level. "93 percent of M-ART are principally driven by the comprehension of an empirical problem" (10).
- U.S. sociologists are strongly wedded to the hypothetico-deductive model of confirmation and explanation. This model plays very little role in the arguments presented in the sample of articles from Mexican sociologists.
- U.S. and Mexican sociologists have very different assumptions about "scientific objectivity". U.S. authors aspire to impersonal neutrality, whereas Mexican authors embrace the fact that their analysis proceeds from a particular perspective.
- U.S. authors attempt to exclude value judgments; Mexican author incorporate value judgments into their empirical analysis. "Among U.S. sociologists, the standard reference is Weber's purportedly sharp distinctions between value and fact, *Wertfreiheit* (value freedom or ethical neutrality) and *Wertbezogenheit* (value relevance or value relatedness), and context of discovery and context of justification" (22). Concepts such as "oppression," "exploitation," and "domination" are used as descriptive terms in many of the Mexican research articles.

Table 3. Epistemic Objectivity in Mexico and the United States

	United States (%)	Mexico (%)
Rational reconstruction of research process		
Yes	80	0
No	20	100
Sections		
Standard	93	0
Nonstandard	7	80
Two or no sections	0	20
Average number of tables	4.40	0.33
Data discussion		
Yes, in a section	67	0
Yes	20	10
No	13	90
Methods discussion		
Yes, in a section	63	0
Yes	7	0
No	30	100
Number of cases	30	30

Here is a striking tabulation of epistemic differences between the two samples:

Abend believes that these basic epistemological differences between U.S. and Mexican sociology imply a fundamental ***incommensurability*** of results:

To consider the epistemological thesis, let us pose the following thought experiment. Suppose a Mexican sociologist claims p and a U.S. sociologist claims not-p. Carnap's or Popper's epistemology would have the empirical world arbitrate between these two theoretical claims. But, as we have seen, sociologists in Mexico and the United States hold different stances regarding what a theory should be, what an explanation should look like, what rules of inference and standards of proof should be stipulated, what role evidence should play, and so on. The empirical world could only adjudicate the dispute if an agreement on these epistemological presuppositions could be reached (and there are good reasons to expect that in such a situation neither side would be willing to give up its epistemology). Furthermore, it seems to me that my thought experiment to some degree misses the point. For it imagines a situation in which a Mexican sociologist claims p and a U.S. sociologist claims not-p, failing to realize that that would only be possible if the problem were articulated in similar terms. However, we have seen that Mexican and U.S. sociologies also differ in how problems are articulated—rather than p and not-p, one

should probably speak of p and q. I believe that Mexican and U.S. sociologies are perceptually and semantically incommensurable as well. (27)

Though Abend's analysis is comparative, I find his analysis of the epistemological assumptions underlying the U.S. cases to be highly insightful all by itself. In just a few pages he captures what seem to me to be the core epistemological assumptions of the conduct of sociological research in the U.S. These include:

- the assumption of "general regular reality" (the assumption that social phenomena are "really" governed by underlying regularities)
- deductivism
- epistemic objectivity
- a preference for quantification and abstract vocabulary
- separation of fact and value; value neutrality

Abend is deliberately agnostic about the epistemic value of the two approaches; he is explicit in saying that he is interested in discovering the differences, not assessing the relative truthfulness of the two approaches. But we cannot really escape the most basic question: where does truth fall in this analysis? What is the status of truth claims in the two traditions? Are there rational grounds for preferring one body of statements over the other, or for favoring one of these epistemologies over its alternative north or south?

This is important and original work. Abend's research on this topic is an effort well worth emulating; it adds a great deal of depth and nuance to the effort to provide a philosophy of sociology. I hope there will be further analysis along these lines by Abend and others.

(There is a lot of social observation and theory in the image above -- and no pretense of academic objectivity. Class opposition, global property systems, and a general impression of deep social conflict pervade the image.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:17PM (-05:00)

Messy regional problems and collaborative leaders

Wednesday, December 02, 2009



Regions are highly complex social formations: millions of people, thousands of businesses, hundreds of non-profit organizations, and lots of problems. Some problems are relatively simple to deal with. If the local river is being polluted by sanitary system overflows during heavy storms, the solution is costly but straightforward: the region needs to invest in a sewer separation infrastructure project.

What is more difficult for a region to handle is a situation where it is confronted by a complex of problems that are substantially inter-related and that fall outside the scope of traditional policy-making organizations. These are sometimes referred to as "wicked" problems, and they are difficult both scientifically and practically. They are difficult scientifically because it is hard to trace the various interlinked forms of causation that have created the problem. And they are difficult

practically because their solution requires the cooperation of groups and actors whose interests and understandings of the situation are often at odds. And this cooperation may need to persist over a very extended period of time -- longer than the attention span of many of the politicians, business leaders, and university presidents who have taken an interest in the problem.

Take the problem of job losses in the Detroit metropolitan region. This is a situation that is caused by a complex set of conditions and occurrences of long and short duration: business decisions about plant closings, national trends in consumer behavior, the financial crisis of 2008, family traditions of college attendance, cultural expectations about blue-collar and white-collar work, patterns of racial segregation, fiscal problems for state and local governments, and deterioration of the natural and built environment. This problem is particularly difficult to deal with for several important reasons:

- the causes of the problem are interdependent
- high unemployment itself reinforces some of the causes of rising unemployment
- the policies that would reverse job losses are not easy to identify or implement
- solutions fall outside the scope of authority of the individual decision-making organizations
- solutions may require legislative action, business decisions, and mass behavioral changes that are difficult to elicit or coordinate

Solutions that have been proposed include --

- increase the percentage of college-educated adults
- make the metropolitan area more attractive to talented young people
- encourage entrepreneurship
- create a more business-friendly environment
- lower the tax burden on businesses
- restructure state and municipal government to reduce public costs
- encourage investment in high-tech industries such as alternative energy and bioengineering
- create an "arts corridor" that links Motown and the design talents of the auto industry

But notice this important fact: these recommendations do not add up to a coherent and actionable strategy. This is true for several reasons. The relationship between the factor and the intended result is not a certain one in any of these cases; the actors who would need to take concrete actions in order to bring the factor into being are different in most of these cases; each intervention is costly, so we can't actually do all of these at once; the operational timeframes of these strategies are very different, from months to decades; and some of the strategies here would interfere directly with the efficacy of others.

More abstractly, interventions that might have a positive effect on employment may be difficult to achieve for a number of different reasons:

- they require coordinated action by multiple actors: for example, the legislature, the county executive, and several major corporations; and coordination is difficult to achieve
- the promising interventions may be conditional on achievement of several other difficult actions as well by other actors
- there may be a "blocking" actor whose interests would be harmed by the intervention in spite of its otherwise positive effects

It seems evident that a region that faces "wicked" and strongly interlinked problems like these needs to manage to create a ***plan*** for addressing the problem and a ***coalition*** of actors who have the resources and decision-making authority to take the steps specified by the plan. The plan needs to be based on the best possible ***analysis*** of the economic

and social effects of various ***interventions***, based on sound social science and social policy analysis. The actors might include: a group of legislators and the governor and mayor; multiple business groups; a cohesive set of labor leaders; and a few regional foundations which are prepared to commit significant resources to the plan.

Every step of this description poses new challenges for the region, because essentially we are faced with a public-goods problem at the level of a large, complicated public with a number of independent actors: there are costs associated with the formulation of a plan and the marshalling of a coalition, and the benefits of the effort will be broadly shared by the public as a whole. So no single organization or actor has an incentive to play the lead as agent of change, and the incentives for collaboration are weak as well.

This is where "leaders" come in. One would hope that a region has a cohort of individuals and organizations with a specific set of characteristics:

- an evidence-based vision concerning the way forward -- the changes that are needed in order to address the problem and the sorts of interventions that would bring these changes about
- a broad conception of the balance of public and private interests
- a willingness to engage in costly collaborations that promote the public good
- a practical ability to create and sustain collaborations among other powerful actors
- access to the resources of an organization: money, staff, prestige, and influence with other actors

The traditional categories of leaders are easy to understand. Their positions might include "elected official," "corporate CEO," "non-profit CEO," "foundation president," "newspaper publisher," "labor leader," or "university president." These individuals stand at the head of formal organizations, and their organizational positions give them ready-made channels of influence on public policy. Their experiences in leading their organizations may also give them a degree of insight into how to approach the broad problems that a region often faces -- disaster recovery, loss of major industries, a rising trend in social or ethnic conflict.

Some of these leaders are officially charged with the responsibility of formulating strategies and policies that will assist in the solution of problems; so mayors and governors need to be actively involved in the formulation of plans for dealing with these sorts of challenges. But most of these leaders are not charged in this way; instead, their formal responsibilities include specific organizational goals: "maximizing stockholder value," "achieving the philanthropic goals established by the board of directors," "increasing readership and advertising revenues," "protecting the interests of the members." There will always be a wide distribution of balance points between private and public interest that are chosen by these leaders; some are more public-spirited, and some are more single-minded about the interests of the organization they lead.

In addition to these traditional categories, there are sometimes leaders in a complicated community who don't fit into the usual boxes. They don't have executive authority in corporations, foundations, or labor unions, and they aren't elected to positions of official leadership. What they do have is a set of assets that fall in the category of ***social capital***:

- a big rolodex filled with relationships to powerful and influential people
- a strong and positive reputation in the leadership community
- an ability to be persuasive in dealing with a wide range of actors
- a passionate commitment to "making the region better"
- a philosophy of collaboration that they can make compelling to other actors

We might call this kind of leader a "high-level socially connected broker" (HLSCB) -- a

person who is well positioned to broker relationships among other powerful "elite" actors. The influence these leaders wield does not derive from the dollars they can commit from their own organizations (foundations, corporations), or the votes they can marshall (labor unions, student organizations), or the direct legislative influence they can wield (lobbyists, large law firms, business associations). Instead, their influence stems from ideas, passion, and relationships, and their ability to facilitate durable collaboration among actors with somewhat divided interests. The size of the rolodex is a measure of the density of the networks within which this actor functions; the HLSCB is unusually rich in a set of network relationships that permit him/her to make contact with an unusually large number of other influential actors. And the HLSCB has a set of personality characteristics that lead him/her to make use of the networks and personal charisma he/she possesses to form working coalitions dedicated to solving difficult problems. These leaders can be successful in helping a region address its wicked problems -- and perhaps more successful than the more traditional varieties of leaders are likely to be.

Why is this an interesting set of topics for ***UnderstandingSociety***? For several important reasons: it casts a spotlight on some of the most difficult types of problems that a region can face; it highlights some of the reasons that actors in a single sector are unlikely to be able to solve such problems; it underlines the question of motives and incentives for leaders and stakeholders that plague efforts to solve these types of problems; and it postulates one of the conditions that may be most important for securing meaningful collaboration around efforts to solve these large problems. And it would appear that the broker-leader is one of those ingredients for successful collaboration.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:15PM (-05:00)

Current historical sociology: George Steinmetz

Thursday, December 03, 2009

George Steinmetz, professor of sociology at the University of Michigan, is a leading scholar in the contemporary field of historical sociology. His most recent book is The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa, and his volume The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others is a major contribution to current debates on the methods and aims of the social sciences today. Here is a video interview and conversation I conducted with George at the University of Michigan this month. Quite a few of George's academic papers are available on his website.

This is part of an ongoing series of interviews I am conducting with innovative social scientists. The goal of the series is to provide a forum in which some very innovative and productive thinkers are able to reflect on some of the ideas and perspectives that are creating innovative work in sociology today. Visit my research page for links to prior interviews. All the videos are available on YouTube.

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:08PM (-05:00)

The German debate over method

Friday, December 04, 2009



A prior post described a major debate around 1900 in the French academic world over the terms of exchange among history, geography, and sociology. The debate also involved disagreements among France's academic elites over the structure of the future French university system. This was sometimes referred to as the "new Sorbonne" debate, and it had important implications for future developments in French social and historical thinking (post on French sociology).

Germany underwent its own debates about similar issues at about the same time. At stake was the fundamental question, how should the human sciences be construed? The central axes of these debates were ***positivism*** and the search for general causal explanations, and ***historicism*** and the search for hermeneutic understanding of specific individuals and historical moments. The several schools of thought offered very different ideas about how best to understand the social world. A central point of debate was the famous distinction drawn by Wilhelm Windelband between nomothetic and idiographic sciences. Fritz Ringer formulates Windelband's distinction (1894) in these terms:

> Methodologically, the empirical disciplines in fact fall into two groups: the *Gesetzeswissenschaften* pursue "nomothetic" knowledge of the general in the form of invariant "laws"; the *Ereigniswissenschaften* strive for "idiographic" knowledge of singular patterns or events. (Ringer, 32)

Within the terms of this distinction, the historicists were offering idiographic knowledge, whereas the natural scientists were offering nomothetic knowledge. And the more positivist theorists of the human sciences argued that the social sciences should aspire to the kind of generality and universality that is required by nomothetic science.

These German debates played key roles in the development of twentieth-century sociology. Just as Durkheim played centrally in the French debate, Max Weber was a key actor in the German debates. His own treatment of the historical school is contained in several essays in Roscher and Knies and Critique of Stammler, and his later development was deeply influenced by his engagement with these controversies. (G. H. von Wright's Explanation and Understanding provides a philosopher's analysis of the two traditions.)

Fritz Ringer's Max Weber's Methodology: The Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences is a good source on the content and importance of the German methodology debate about the cultural sciences. Ringer attempts to understand the logic of Weber's conception of methodology and theory in sociology through his responses to historicism, positivism, and *verstehen* theory. Weber was committed to contributing to a scientific study of society; but what does science require when it comes to human society? These strands of historical and social thought in German intellectual life imply rather different answers to this question. And Ringer argues that Weber's methodology is designed to

make sense of the valid insights of each current of thought. Ringer holds that Weber's approach is both causal and interpretive; both general and particular.

Another important study of this set of debates is Woodruff Smith's 1991 book, Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany, 1840-1920 (Google Books link). Here is how Smith describes his subject:

In the nineteenth century, there appeared a new group of academic disciplines that took culture as a primary object of scientific study. These included anthropology in its many varieties, human geography, culture history, and branches of psychology that focused on culture. In other fields, the concept of culture became a significant part of the apparatus of interpretation. Bodies of theory about culture emerged, often overleaping the boundaries between disciplines. The development of these "cultural sciences" was an international phenomenon to which people of all major European nations and the United States contributed. But distinctive national approaches also revealed themselves, each largely shaped by the public context of intellectual life in a particular country.

This book is concerned with the cultural sciences in Germany between the 1840s and about 1920. During those years, German academia exercised its most profound influence on the rest of the world -- an influence that is generally acknowledged in some cultural sciences, for example geography, but to which rather little attention is paid in others, such as cultural anthropology. In the German intellectual setting, *Kulture* and *Kulturwissenschaft* came to have many meanings. Here we shall concentrate on cultural scientists who believed that they were practicing a nomothetic science (i.e., searching for the laws of human society as revealed in culture) and who regarded culture itself mainly in its anthropological sense. (3)

Ringer is writing as an historian of ideas, and he borrows an important concept from Bourdieu as an intellectual framework for his analysis -- the idea of an ***intellectual field***. He explains the idea in these terms:

I have elsewhere drawn upon Pierre Bourdieu's writings to define the "intellectual field" as a constellation of positions that are meaningful only in relation to one another, a constellation further charactrized by differences of power or authority, by the opposition between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and by the role of the cultural preconscious, of tacit "doxa" that are transmitted by inherited practices, institutions, and social relations. Specifying the vague notion of "context" in this way, one can see that individuals may stand in a variety of specific relationships to their intellectual and social environment. (5)

This concept works well for Ringer's purposes, because it permits analysis of both the intellectual and the institutional settings of the debates that shaped Weber's thinking about the human sciences. The structure of the university and the relations of power that existed within the academic world are relevant -- as was equally true in the case of the French debate; and the inherent logic and rational force of a given school of thought is determining as well for the formation of the young investigator's understanding of "sociology." To borrow a metaphor from Marx, "intellectuals make their own thoughts, but not in circumstances of their own choosing." So the concept of intellectual field works well as a framework for the sociology of knowledge.

The historicist tradition included writers such as Ranke, Roscher, Knies, Schmoller, and Sombart. (Joseph Schumpeter offers some notes on the historicist school in his massive

volume on the history of economics, History of Economic Analysis (IV:4); Google Books link.) Historicists reject the idea that the social sciences (or economics) should aspire to the discovery of universal laws of society or universal and unchanging human institutions. The concrete study of specific economic institutions of the past -- economic history -- is a more insightful way of understanding the workings of economies than pure mathematical theories of competitive equilibria that are intended to apply in all times and places. Johann Gustav Droysen was a particularly articulate critic of the positivist strand of thought. "[Droysen's] main argument had to do with the divide between the search for regularities and the historian's predominant concern with the interpretive understanding of the unique and particular" (Ringer, 12). Instead of general laws and uniform structures, the historicists argue that human society illustrates historical particularity and individuality -- in structures and institutions as well as persons.

Often this insistence on historical particularity converged with the hermeneutic view that social understanding always involves the interpretation of meaningful human action and motivation. (Here is an earlier post on interpretation theory, and here is a post on the ways in which Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor have adapted these ideas.) Wilhelm Dilthey (1883) argued that the human sciences were profoundly different from the natural sciences because they involved interpretive understanding of human action rather than mechanical explanation of a system of causes. Ringer observes, further, that another of the founders of modern sociology, Georg Simmel, arrived at a very similar theory of *verstehen* in the 1890s, and that Simmel's influence on Weber was greater than that of Dilthey. Even more important for Weber, though, was a book by Heinrich Rickert, The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science: A Logical Introduction to the Historical Sciences (1902). Rickert's theories reconsider the distinction proposed by Windelband, proposing that the distinction between nomothetic and idiographic knowledge does not correspond to the distinction between natural and social knowledge.

The positivist framework became important in German intellectual life in the middle of the nineteenth century, though Ringer observes that "positivism" in the Comtean sense had virtually no advocates in German intellectual life prior to the Vienna Circle (post). But there was a current of thought in Germany in the late nineteenth century that took its lead from the logic of the natural sciences and attempted to apply this model to the human sciences. Mid-century philosophers such as Friedrich Albert Lange advocated for a philosophy that combined the methods of the natural sciences with a neo-Kantian metaphysics (19). Ringer singles out a stratum of what he calls "scientist-philosophers" -- Rudolf Virchow, Wilhelm Ostwald, Friedrich Ratzel, Adolf Bastian, Karl Lamprecht, and Wilhelm Wundt, as a group of intellectuals who brought the epistemic values of the natural sciences into an effort to construct the human sciences (20). If there is to be such a thing as a social science, positivism maintains that it should have the same logical characteristics as natural sciences like physics and chemistry; and this was taken to mean that it should seek out lawlike generalizations that are independent of space and time.

One important voice representing a broadly naturalistic perspective on the social sciences was Carl Menger. His critique of the historicist school from the point of view of pure economic theory is an important stage in the debate.

Our cognitive interest is directed either at the concrete phenomena in their position in space and time and at their concrete interrelationships, or else ... at the recurrent patterns in which they appear. The former research direction aims at knowledge of the concrete or, more correctly, the individual, the latter at knowledge of the general.

(Investigations into the Methods of the Social Sciences, quoted in Ringer, 16)

It appears that we could summarize the development of the two traditions as including a few branching streams of thought:

- Positivism =====> science seeks to discover universal laws
- =====> science offers causal explanations

Historicism =====> the historical and human sciences study particular human institutions in specific historical settings

- =====> the human sciences proceed through systematic interpretation of the subjective meanings and intentions of individual actors

The two major ideas associated with historicism can certainly be separated; one can accept the point that institutions are historically variable without accepting the unavoidably hermeneutic nature of social knowledge; and one could be a thorough-going hermeneutic without committing to the point about the historical boundedness of institutions or human nature. And there is a similar disconnect on the side of positivism; as Ringer points out, it is possible to be a causalist without assuming that causes are ahistorical and universal. One might take the view that a given kind of cause has a set of social powers within the context of one set of institutions but not another -- in the context of the Roman empire but not in the context of British colonialism. So both schools of thought have important distinctions collapsed within them.

Fundamentally we might say that these debates raised a small number of key questions: Is there a sharp distinction between the natural and social sciences? Is causation relevant to the interpretation of human affairs? Is there a distinctive method of interpretation of human action that underlies the scientific study of society and culture? Are there laws that govern social phenomena? Should the social sciences make use of universal concepts that apply in all times and places, or should its concepts be tailored to specific historical settings? In what ways are "history" and "nature" distinguished? Taking positions on these topics also sets the parameters for the kind of research and knowledge the social scientist will pursue.

From the vantage point of the present, it seems that we can provide some fairly compelling answers to these questions. Social institutions are plastic, heterogeneous, and contingent; so the historicists were right about this point. Human action and human nature are historically conditioned as well, in the concrete and ordinary sense that "character," "motivation," "knowledge," and "identity" are all historical products; once again, the historicists were right. The social sciences do not need to discover universal, timeless laws of society; such a quest is futile and inspired by a bad philosophy of science. So the positivists and naturalists were wrong on this point, and the historicists were closer to the truth.

But this doesn't mean that we are forced to conclude that the social sciences are idiographic and particularistic. Rickert was right in doubting the sharp distinction between human action and the natural world; it is entirely coherent to assert that human mentality and action are natural phenomena. And there is plenty of room in the human sciences for a causal analysis of social change and social persistence. But we should not understand these causal judgments as resting on an as-yet unknown set of causal laws. Instead, we are better off working with an ontology of causal mechanisms, embodied in institutions and actions of persons. And, finally, we are not forced to choose between idiographic and nomothetic science; instead, the social sciences should aspire to an empirical analysis of the world that is sensitive to the particularity of social institutions and identities, while at

the same time discovering the limited generalizations that are made possible through the discovery of common social mechanisms. In a sense, we might say that current historical sociology represents the resolution of these debates that took place in Germany in the 1870s through 1920s. Researchers such as Tilly, Moore, Steinmetz, Adams, and Skocpol have made a great deal of progress in defining the balance between the particular and the general in their studies of complex historical processes.

(These historicism debates have also been of interest in recent Japanese social science research. An interesting pair of contributions from a Japanese perspective are Yuichi Shionoya's The Soul of the German Historical School: Methodological Essays on Schmoller, Weber and Schumpeter and The German Historical School: The Historical and Ethical Approach to Economics.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:01PM (-05:00)

Alleviating rural poverty

Monday, December 07, 2009



What theories and values ought to underlie our best thinking about global economic development? Along with Amartya Sen (Development as Freedom), I believe that the best answer to the ethical question involves giving top priority to the goal of increasing the realization of human capabilities across the whole of society (The Paradox of Wealth and Poverty: Mapping the Ethical Dilemmas of Global Development). We need to put the poor first. However, I also believe that our ability to achieve this goal is highly sensitive to the distributive structures and property systems that exist in poor countries. The property institutions of developing countries have enormous impact on the full human development of the poor. As a result, ethically desirable human development goals are difficult to attain within any social system in which the antecedent property relations are highly stratified and in which political power is largely in the hands of the existing elites.

The fundamental question of poverty is this: how do people earn their livings? The economic institutions of the given society (property relations and market institutions, for example) determine the answer to this question. An economy represents a set of social positions for the men and women who make it up. These persons have a set of human needs—nutrition, education, health care, housing, clothing, etc. And they need access to the opportunities that exist in society—opportunities for employment and education, for example. The various positions that exist within the economy in turn define the entitlements that persons have—wages, profits, access to food subsidies, rights of participation, etc. The material well-being of a person—the “standard of living”—is chiefly determined by the degree to which his or her “entitlements” through these various sources of income provide the basis for acquiring more than enough goods in all the crucial categories to permit the individual to flourish (Sen, Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation). If wages are low, then the consumption bundle that this income will afford is very limited. If crop prices are low, then peasants will have low incomes. If business taxes are low, then business owners may retain more business income in the form of profits, which will support larger consumption bundles and larger

savings. There is thus a degree of conflict of interest among the agents within the economic system; the institutions of distribution may favor workers, lenders, farmers, business owners, or the state, depending on their design. And it is very possible for economic development to proceed in a way that gives the greatest benefit to the upper levels of society without leading to much change at the bottom.

Here I want to review an important empirical example of economic development without commensurate gain for the poor of the region: the effects of the Green Revolution in the rice-growing regions of Malaysia. James Scott provides a careful survey of the development process in Malaysia in Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (1985). The chief innovations were these: a government-financed irrigation project making double-cropping possible; the advent of modern-variety rice strains; and the introduction of machine harvesting, replacing hired labor. Scott considers as relevant factors the distribution of landholdings, the forms of land tenure in use, the availability of credit, the political parties on the scene, and the state's interests in development.

Scott's chief finding is that double cropping and irrigation substantially increased revenues in the Muda region, ***and*** that these increases were very unequally distributed. Much of the increase flowed to the small circle of managerial farmers, credit institutions, and outside capitalists who provided equipment, fertilizers, and transport. Finally, Scott finds that the lowest stratum—perhaps 40%—has been substantially marginalized in the village economy. Landlessness has increased sharply, as managerial farms absorb peasant plots; a substantial part of the rural population is now altogether cut off from access to land. And mechanized harvesting substantially decreases the demand for wage labor. This group is dependent on wage labor, either on the managerial farms or through migration to the cities. The income flowing to this group is more unstable than the subsistence generated by peasant farming; and with fluctuating consumption goods prices, it may or may not suffice to purchase the levels of food and other necessities this group produced for itself before development. And these circumstances have immediate consequences for the ability of poor households to achieve the development of their human capabilities. Their nutritional status, their health, their literacy, and their mobility are all directly impaired by the fact of low and unstable household income. Finally, the state and the urban sector benefits substantially: the increased revenues created by high-yield rice cultivation generate profits and tax revenues that can be directed towards urban development.

Scott draws this conclusion:

> The gulf separating the large, capitalist farmers who market most of the region's rice and the mass of small peasants is now nearly an abyss, with the added (and related) humiliation that the former need seldom even hire the latter to help grow their crops. Taking 1966 as a point of comparison, it is still the case that a majority of Muda's households are more prosperous than before. It is also the case that the distribution of income has worsened appreciably and that a substantial minority—per-haps 35-40 percent—have been left behind with very low incomes which, if they are not worse than a decade ago, are not appreciably better. Given the limited absorptive capacity of the wider economy, given the loss of wages to machines, and given the small plots cultivated by the poor strata, there is little likelihood that anything short of land reform could reverse their fortunes. (Scott 1985:81)

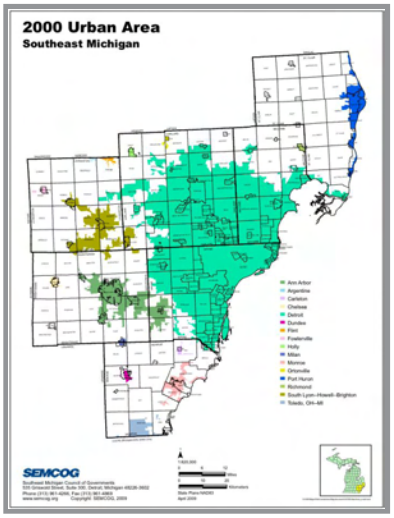
This example well illustrates the problems of distribution and equity that are unavoidable in the process of rural development. The process described here is one route to

"modernization of agriculture," in that it involves substitution of new seed varieties for old, new technologies for traditional technologies, integration into the global economy, and leads to a sharp increase in the productivity of agriculture. Malaysia was in effect one of the great successes of the Green Revolution. At the same time it created a sharp division between winners and losers: peasants and the rural poor largely lose income, security, and autonomy; while rural elites, urban elites, and the state gained through the increased revenues generated by the modern farming sector.

Gillian Hart, Andrew Turton, and Benjamin White's Agrarian Transformations: Local Processes and the State in Southeast Asia (1989) provides detailed case studies of these sorts of processes of property and power in development in Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:29PM (-05:00)

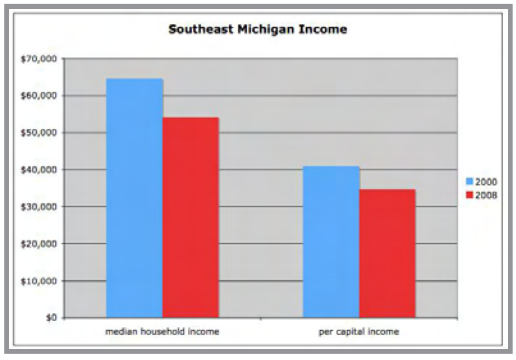
Measuring recession's impact: Michigan

Wednesday, December 09, 2009



Michigan has been in a rolling crisis since 2002 or so: the state has experienced the loss of manufacturing jobs, mortgage foreclosures, and plummeting state and municipal revenues at a pace that has left the region badly shaken. What have been some of the macro-level effects? How have population, income, employment, and housing changed since 2000? In particular, what effects has the recession had on southeast Michigan, where almost half of the state's population lives?

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) has released a preliminary analysis of the data collected in the 2008 American Community Survey (a periodic resurvey conducted by the US Census Bureau; link). Some of the results are startling. Most dramatic is what has happened to income, but the region also shows important changes in residential occupancy, poverty rates, and unemployment.



The report considers data for seven counties in southeast Michigan -- Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw, and Wayne. (This corresponds loosely to the definition of the Detroit Metropolitan Statistical Area, which consists of the six counties of Lapeer, Livingston, Macomb, Oakland, St. Clair, and Wayne.) The population of this region was 4.8 million in 2008, essentially unchanged since the 2000 census. So the region had not experienced significant net out-migration as of 2008 (post). But the age structure of the population has changed noticeably, from a median age of 35.2 in 2000 to a median age of 38.1 in 2008.

The most striking change in this period is a dramatic drop in household and per capita



income. In 2000 the median household income was $64,590, which fell to $54,184 in 2008 -- a 16% decline in household income. And per capita income fell from $40,993 to $34,665 -- a 15% decline in per capita income. This is a very large decline in a short time.

The report also documents a wide income gap based on race. In 2008 median white household income was $63,183, whereas in black households it was $40,021 and in Hispanic households it was $44,548. White households were about 50% more affluent than black households.

Both parts of these findings are important. The overall decline in personal and family income in eight years is quite remarkable; it certainly represents a very significant decline in the standard of living in the region as a result of recession-related job losses and wage cuts. And the racial disparities indicated by the gaps between white, black, and Hispanic households demonstrate the persistent racial disadvantages that seem to be hard-wired into the region.

The decline in family income has other harmful consequences as well. The net purchasing power of the region dropped by a significant percentage -- which translates into the loss of revenues for small businesses whose revenues depend on consumer purchases. And state revenues based on income taxes and sales taxes in the region fell as well by a comparable percentage -- leading to a fiscal crisis for the state and for municipalities.

Not surprisingly, the ACS data demonstrate that there was a significant upsurge in the poverty rate in the region between 2000 and 2008. In 2000 10.6% of the population lived below the poverty line; and in 2008, this group had risen to 13.9% -- a 31% increase. The percentage of families with children in poverty rose from 11.5% to 15.7%, an even greater increase than in the general population.

The effects of the foreclosure crisis are visible in this report as well. Changes in residential vacancy rates are an indicator of rising frequency of foreclosures. In 2000 there were 106,680 vacant housing units (5.5%). In 2008 this number had risen to 260,974 units (12.6%). This reflected large increases in both homeowner and rental vacancy rates over the time period.

Another noteworthy feature of the report is the light it sheds on differences by county in some important variables across the region. Most striking is the percentage of adults with a college degree. The region as a whole has 28% of its adults with a bachelor's degree or higher. And this number has increased from 25% in 2000. (At the other end of the spectrum, 12.4% of the adult population lacks a high school degree in 2008.) But this average masks a very wide range of college attainment rates by county, from a low of 13.9% in St. Clair County (the extreme northeast of the map above) to highs of 42.3% in Oakland County and 51.3% in Washtenaw County. Wayne County has a college completion rate of 19.5%.

Also striking are the income differences across counties. Median household incomes

ranged from a low of $42,376 (Wayne County) to a high of $71,486 (Livingston County). Washtenaw County (home of Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan) is somewhat anomalous: it has the highest percentage of college-educated adults, but its median household income is in the middle, at $57,848.

Predictably, poverty rates varied across counties as well. Livingston County had the lowest poverty rate in 2008 (7.6%), while Wayne County had the highest poverty rate by a significant margin (20.1%). So a person in Wayne County had almost three times the likelihood of living in poverty as a person in Livingston County. Washtenaw County's poverty rate is also surprisingly high, at 14.6%.

Finally, it appears that the foreclosure crisis had differential impact across the region as well. Wayne County shows the highest residential vacancy rate in 2008 (17.9%), whereas Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, and Washtenaw Counties fall between 7.6% and 8.6%. So the residential vacancy rate in Wayne County is at least double that of other parts of the region.

This set of data from the 2008 American Community Survey sheds light on two very important facts. First, southeast Michigan has suffered deeply and rapidly as a result of the recession. The loss of jobs and shrinking of business activity resulted in rapid and sharp declines in family income; the recession greatly increased the number of home foreclosures; and it resulted in placing another 155,000 people in poverty -- a 31% increase in the number of people in poverty. And second, the 2008 data demonstrate that these effects are not uniformly distributed across the region. Several counties weathered the recession relatively well. The worst effects have been experienced in Wayne County and the city of Detroit. And, given the degree of racial segregation that is demonstrated in Southeast Michigan, this implies that the recession had disproportionately harmful effects on the African-American population of the state.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:38PM (-05:00)

Koestler's nightmares

Thursday, December 10, 2009



Image: book burning by National Socialist paramilitaries, 1933

Image: Ukraine peasants fleeing famine

Image: street battle, Spanish Civil War

Arthur Koestler was an articulate witness of the atrocities of the twentieth century; and much of what he witnessed was terrible. Reading his books gives one an intense and personal vision of fascism, dictatorship, mass murder, starvation, and cruelty on a monstrous scale. As George Orwell wrote of Koestler's books in 1944, "The subject-matter of all of them is similar, and none of them ever escapes for more than a few pages from the atmosphere of ***nightmare***" (link). Koestler worked as a Communist journalist in Berlin in the early 1930s during the rise of the brown shirts; he was the first European journalist to travel through the Ukraine to witness the results of famine in Stalin's war against the Kulaks (Lynne Viola, The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930: The



Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside); and he observed the Spanish Civil War, where he was arrested after the fall of Malaga, imprisoned, and sentenced to death as a Red. (Here is an earlier post on Koestler.)



These experiences are described in his autobiography, The Invisible Writing, and the narrative of his experiences in Spain is presented in Dialogue With Death. But Koestler's best known book is a novel, Darkness at Noon, which is the story of the final weeks of life of the fictional Soviet revolutionary Rubashov in Stalin's purges of the 1930s and the Moscow show trials. After a life as leader, theorist, and agent in service of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party, Rubashov is arrested for fictitious crimes of conspiracy and betrayal against the State. He is arrested before dawn; it takes him quite a while to find his pince-nez. He is thrown into a Soviet political prison -- it is reminiscent to him of the fascist prisons in which he had suffered beatings and torture years earlier. He is brought to confess to these crimes and others under interrogation by his former comrade-in-arms, Ivanov, and the new Soviet thug, Gletkin. Ivanov is psychologically manipulative; Gletkin is brutal; but both strive to break Rubashov and compel his confession. They are successful; Rubashov confesses to betraying the Revolution; and like Bukharin, he is convicted and summarily shot in the back of the neck. Along the way there is quite a bit of debate about history, the individual, the Party, and the Future of Humanity. The key question of the novel is the puzzle: why did Rubashov confess rather than following the secret advice of the prison barber -- "die in silence!"?

Koestler himself was a committed Communist agent in Berlin in the 1930s; so his descriptions of Rubashov's activities in eastern Europe have the ring of truth -- including Rubashov's betrayals of Richard and Little Loewy in the name of socialism. The novel recreates the Moscow show trials of 1937 with uncanny insight. Rubashov is loosely based on Nikolai Bukharin, one of the intellectual and political leaders of the Russian Revolution. Koestler's novel was written only two years after the trial and execution of these leaders of the Russian Revolution at the hands of Stalin's functionaries. Here is what he says about the central character:

The characters in this book are fictitious. The historical circumstances which determined their actions are real. The life of the man N. S. Rubashov is a synthesis of the lives of a number of men who were victims of the so-called Moscow Trials. Several of them were personally known to the author. This book is dedicated to their memory. Paris, October, 1938-April, 1940

But here is what I find fascinating. Koestler's fictional recreation of the arrest and trial of the top Party officials, in the person of Rubashov, and the background assumptions and rationalizations assumed by the prosecutors and interrogators, is remarkably close to the

historical reality. Here is Koestler's description of his own arrest and arrival in a Spanish fascist prison in Malaga:

It is a unique sound. A cell door has no handle, either outside or inside; it cannot be shut except by being slammed to. It is made of massive steel and concrete, about four inches thick, and every time it falls to there is a resounding crash just as though a shot has been fired. But this report dies away without an echo. Prison sounds are echo-less and bleak.

When the door has been slammed behind him for the first time, the prisoner stands in the middle of the cell and looks round. I fancy that everyone must behave in more or less the same way.

First of all he gives a fleeting look round the walls and takes a mental inventory of all the objects in what is now to be his domain:

- *the iron bedstead,*
- *the wash-basin,*
- *the W.C.,*
- *the barred window.*

His next action is invariably to try to pull himself up by the iron bars of the window and look out. He fails, and his suit is covered with white from the plaster on the wall against which he has pressed himself. (*Dialogue with Death*, 59)

And now turn to Rubashov's first few minutes in Stalin's jail cell:

Rubashov walked up and down in the cell, from the door to the window and back, between bunk, wash-basin and bucket, six and a half steps there, six and a half steps back. At the door he turned to the right, at the window to the left. It was an old prison habit; if one did not change the direction of the turn one rapidly became dizzy. .... Rubashov stood hesitantly in the middle of the cell, then put his pince-nez on again and propped himself at the window. (*Darkness at Noon*, 14, 18)

Much of the drama of *Darkness at Noon* is the series of interrogations Rubashov undergoes, and the mental transformation that they bring about in this courageous man to bring him to confess to the most farfetched and unbelievable crimes. The transcripts of Bukharin's prosecution exist; Robert Tucker and Stephen Cohen's THE GREAT PURGE TRIAL provides extensive transcripts of the interrogation of Bukharin and other show trial victims. It is striking to compare the interrogation of Bukharin with the interrogation of Rubashov. Consider this bit of interrogation of Rubashov, beginning with the voice of prosecutor Ivanov:

"To return to more tangible things: you mean, therefore, that 'we' -- namely, Party and State -- no longer represent the interests of the Revolution, of the masses or, if you like, the progress of humanity."

"This time you have grasped it," said Rubashov smiling. Ivanov did not answer his smile. "When did you develop this opinion?"

"Fairly gradually: during the last few years," said Rubashov.

"Can't you tell me more exactly? One year? Two? Three years?"

"That's a stupid question," said Rubashov. "At what age did you become adult? At seventeen? At eighteen and a half? At nineteen?"

"It's you who are pretending to be stupid," said Ivanov. "Each step in one's spiritual development is the result of definite experiences. If you really want to know: I became a man at seventeen, when I was sent into exile for the first time." (69)

And now a similar moment in the actual transcripts of the interrogation of Bukharin.

Vyshinsky: Allow me to begin the interrogation of the accused Bukharin. Formulate briefly what exactly it is you plead guilty to.

Bukharin: Firstly, to belonging to the counter-revolutionary "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites."

Vyshinsky: Since what year?

Bukharin: Roughly since 1928. I plead guilty to being one of the outstanding leaders of this "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites." Consequently I plead guilty to what directly follows from this, the sum total of crimes committed by this counter-revolutionary organization, irrespective of whether or not I knew of, whether or not I took a direct part, in any particular act. Because I am responsible as one of the leaders and not as a cog in this counter-revolutionary organization.

Vyshinsky: What aims were pursued by this counter-revolutionary organization?
Bukharin: This counter-revolutionary organization, to formulate it briefly ...

Vyshinsky: Yes, briefly for the present.

Bukharin: The principal aim it pursued, although, so to speak, it did not fully realize it, and did not dot all the "i's" -- was essentially the aim of restoring capitalist relations in the U.S.S.R. (Tucker, 328)

And now, back to *Darkness at Noon* and Rubashov; the porter's daughter reads aloud the newspaper account of the last minutes of Rubashov's testimony:

"Asked whether he pleaded guilty, the accused Rubashov answered 'Yes' in a clear voice. To a further question of the Public Prosecutor as to whether the accused had acted as an agent of the counter-revolution, he again answered 'Yes' in a lower voice ...."

Here seems to be Koestler's own explanation of the puzzle of the confessions:

Some were silenced by physical fear, like Hare-lip; some hoped to save their heads; others at least to save their wives or sons from the clutches of the Gletkins. The best of them kept silent in order to do a last service to the Party, by letting themselves be sacrificed as scapegoats -- and, besides, even the best had each an Arlova on his conscience. They were too deeply entangled in their own past, caught in the web they had spun themselves, according to the laws of their own twisted ethics and twisted logic; they were all guilty, although not of those deeds of which they accused themselves. There was no way back for them. Their exit from the stage happened strictly according to the rules of their strange game. The public expected no swan-songs of them. They had to act according to the text-book, and their part was the howling of wolves in the night.... (DN, 105)

Fiction and reality are deeply intertwined here. I don't believe that Koestler had access to transcripts of the show trials at the time he wrote *Darkness at Noon* in 1940, though he had read accounts of the trials. So the convergence of the fictional Rubashov and the historical Bukharin is remarkable. And the transformation of Koestler's own experiences -- in Communist activism and in fascist prison under sentence of death -- into the fiction of Rubashov is very striking.

The state prosecutor who conducted the show trial of Bukharin was Andrei Vyshinsky. Following his success in the show trials, Vyshinsky became a prominent diplomat under Stalin. And after World War II he served as permanent representative to the United Nations during the period that the Universal Declaration on Human Rights was drafted and adopted. He led the Soviet Bloc nations in abstention from the vote adopting the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Here is a fragment of the outrageous speech he gave on this occasion:

Human rights could not be conceived outside the State; the very concept of right and law was connected with that of the State. (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent, 21-22)

I am drawn to Koestler's writings -- both his fiction and his autobiographical writings -- in part because he provides such a powerful example of an engaged mind attempting to make sense of the history around him. Much of his work is a first-person effort to "understand society" -- to make sense of the social forces and individual behavior that the twentieth century presented. George Orwell is another of my favorites in this aspect of literature, including especially Homage to Catalonia and A Collection of Essays; so it is very interesting to me that Orwell wrote the short essay about Koestler mentioned above. It is also interesting that they were both published in England by Victor Gollancz, along with E. P. Thompson.

(Louis Menand has an interesting profile of Koestler in the *New Yorker* this month.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:49PM (-05:00)

Sewell on history

Saturday, December 12, 2009

William Sewell, Jr., is a particularly talented historian of French social history. His study of the guild mentalities of workers in Marseille ***after*** the Revolution breaks many preconceptions about "class" and the definition of labor (Structure and Mobility: The Men and Women of Marseille, 1820-1870). But he is also a philosophically minded observer



and critic of historical writing. In Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation he offers a singular contribution to historiography by an innovative interdisciplinary historian and sociologist. The book is a contribution to what I would call "applied philosophy of history": careful, analytical attention to some of the problematic constructs and frameworks that underlie the ways in which scholars attempt to characterize and explain historical change. The issues Sewell raises resonate strongly with comparative historical sociologists — scholars who are concerned with analyzing social processes in a variety of settings over an extended period of time.

Why do historians and social scientists need this kind of analysis? Because the logic and constructs involved in thinking historically are still incompletely understood. We will do a better job of understanding and probing the past, if we are more self-conscious about some of the assumptions and frameworks that we bring to our work. What is a historical “period”? What is an "event"? How are large historical constructs to be defined (revolutions, Tudor state, Marseillaise working class)? For that matter -- is there anything of historical importance captured in the snapshot of a Marseille street scene in 1914 pictured above?

Many historians have judged that the social sciences should somehow be relevant to their work of explaining historical outcomes. But what is involved in making use of social science theories in historical research and explanation? It has been evident for several decades that social processes are diverse, messy, and heterogeneous. So the impulse towards finding general laws of social transformation has been discouraged. But what is to take the place of a generalizing, universalizing approach within a “social science” study of social transformation? The best answer available at present is, an extensive borrowing from a wide range of the human sciences. The social sciences can provide a toolbox of mid-level theories of mechanisms, mentalities, and institutions that can provide resources for historians as they attempt to analyze and explain particular historical episodes. What can anthropologists tell historians about the challenge of reconstructing the mentalities of people in the past? What can the geographers of place tell us about the logic of trading and transport networks? What can researchers on collective action tell us about some of the factors that may have accelerated or inhibited popular protest in particular historical settings?

Some philosophers have offered to shed light on these abstract questions about the ontology of history and the logic of historical explanation through philosophical analysis -- for example, Ian Hacking's Historical Ontology. Sewell’s approach to these meta-historical questions is not from the point of view of philosophy, but rather from that of the methodologically sophisticated practitioner. And the results are noteworthy. *Logics of History* makes a very substantive contribution to the revitalization of the field of the philosophy of history.

Sewell's volume provides a reading of the intellectual development of social history as a discipline since the 1960s: the currents of Marxism, anthropology, and post-modernism, and the themes of underclass history, local meanings, and multiple texts. Sewell's central goal is to shed light on some of the core theoretical constructs that are used in historical research. There are chapters on the concepts of temporality, structure, culture,

synchrony, the event, and historical duration.

A recurring topic in the book is the question of "temporality". Sewell points out that social scientists often give short shrift to the temporal properties of a set of social changes or processes. In "Three Temporalities: Towards an Eventful Sociology" he carefully teases apart the different ways in which historically minded sociologists have treated historical processes, and he singles out teleological temporality, experimental temporality, and "eventful" temporality. The first approach places historical events into a supposed necessary series of stages; the second takes events out of historical settings in order to use them as the fodder of quasi-experiments in causal reasoning; and the third approach emphasizes the path dependence of historical sequences. Events in their particular historical settings have causal consequences for the shaping and occurrence of later events. Sewell characterizes events in this way: "Events may be defined as that relatively rare subclass of happenings that significantly transforms structures. An eventful conception of temporality, therefore, is one that takes into account the transformation of structures by events" (100). Sewell returns to his understanding of events in several later essays in the book as well, including "A Theory of the Event" and "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures."

Other important topics that Sewell considers include the intellectual foundations of our conceptions of structure ("A Theory of Structure") and culture ("The Concept(s) of Culture"), and the involvement of both these concepts in historical cognition. In both instances Sewell takes up a large meta-concept within the social sciences and subjects it to careful analytical attention. The results are substantial; both essays suggest new ways of thinking of the role of social structures and cultures within historical processes—not as fixed, uniform causal influences, but as flexible and plastic constructs within which historical actors live and act.

These topics are important because their nuances can significantly affect the practitioner's process of reasoning and inquiry as he or she treats historical processes. If the investigator begins with an assumption of fixed causal laws, then he or she is inclined to regard specific historical developments as instances of historical regularities. If, on the other hand, one approaches historical processes as involving a high degree of contingency and plasticity of historical events and structures, then one will give substantially greater attention to the specifics of the case.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:28PM (-05:00)

Who invented the totalitarian state?

Tuesday, December 15, 2009



The world has known ruthless, violent, and murderous rulers for centuries. Queen Elizabeth ran a secret service that ruthlessly pursued her enemies in the Catholic underground. Isabella and Ferdinand persecuted and expelled the Jews of Spain. And the French government was perfectly ready to use deadly force against workers and rebels in Paris in 1848 and 1871. But the totalitarian state was a creation of the twentieth century. The fascist states of Italy, Spain, and Germany as well as the Soviet state seem to have been



qualitatively different from even the most repressive of their nineteenth century predecessors. By comparison, Bismarck's Prussia, Napoleon III's France, Czar Alexander's Russia, and Victor Emmanuel's Italy were quaint amateur affairs when it came to organized coercion and mass politics.

The differences are striking -- the apparatus of political prisons, the extensive secret police networks, the purposive use of violent organizations, the ideologies of national and ethnic purity. Most fundamental, though, is the degree and depth of bureaucratic control that the modern totalitarian state achieved. This is what made the modern fascist or soviet state "total" -- an ability to monitor and intimidate civil society down to the street level.

The distinction between the realm of the state and the realm of civil society has been fundamental to political theory. Civil society encompasses the private activities of individuals and their associations, and the realm of the state involves the political apparatus of law, enforcement, and coercion. We can roughly estimate the degree to which the apparatus of the state is able to penetrate down into civil society. And European states prior to the twentieth century were objectively limited in their capacity to rule civil society. This is true for the imperial Chinese state in the nineteenth century as well; it was commonly said that the power of the Emperor ended at the yamen wall (or at the county level). As Mark Allee puts it in Law and Local Society in Late Imperial China: Northern Taiwan in the Nineteenth Century,

The limited effectiveness of yamen runners as police prompted local administrators in Danshui and Xinzhu to search for ways to augment and supplement their runner cadre. In so doing, sub-prefecture and county heads aimed to create more intimate linkages to the people in their jurisdiction and to extend the reach of local government beyond the yamen wall into the countryside. (197)

Weak states have only a limited ability to enforce their will against the mass populations of city and countryside; mechanisms such as tax farming and collective tax liability are therefore called upon in order to secure the resources needed by the central authorities. And the scope of law and the effective enforcement of laws and decrees is limited as well in a weak state. European polities of the nineteenth century were generally weak states; Britain, France, Germany, and Italy had central governments with only limited administrative capacity and limited ability to impose their authority at the local level. But there was a dramatic increase in the beginning of the twentieth century in the administrative capacity of the state and its ability to govern local society. The scope of the political grew much broader, and the domain of civil society -- the relatively safe and insulated zone of individual activity and choice -- grew more limited. The creation of the totalitarian state depended on this radical increase in state power and state coercive capacity.

A striking feature of the totalitarian states of the twentieth century is their aggressiveness and brutality towards all opposition. These fascist states were ruthless and effective in their ability to attack and dismantle oppositional groups -- including communists, labor unions, radical peasants, rent resistance organizations, liberals, and anarchists. Chuck Tilly's discussion of "trust networks" is relevant here; the balance of power between the

trust networks of civil society and the central power of the state apparatus shifted profoundly with the advent of the modern dictatorship; Trust and Rule.

One index of the administrative and coercive capacity of the state is the degree to which it is successful in exacting a greater percentage of the national wealth in taxes. Weak states are relatively inefficient at collecting taxes. So careful historical study of systems of taxation is an important contribution to the topic of the power of the state. Isaac Martin, Ajay Mehrotra, and Monica Prasad's The New Fiscal Sociology: Taxation in Comparative and Historical Perspective provides a good exposure to the field of comparative fiscal sociology. With a foreword and article by Charles Tilly, it examines the ways in which states since the early modern period have intensified their ability to collect tax revenues.

One piece of this new capacity was organizational. Fascist states in the 1930s created bureaucracies of surveillance, enforcement, punishment, and killing that went vastly beyond the capacity of nineteenth century state organizations. The organizations of police and army in Italy, Spain, and Germany took major steps forward in size and complexity in the twentieth century. The personnel of the forces of coercion -- police and other armed state forces such as militias -- were few in the early nineteenth century; but by the middle of the twentieth century these numbers had grown exponentially.

Improved communication and transportation were also key to the possibility of the totalitarian state. The telephone and the railroad allowed fascist states to collect information quickly and to move their forces around the cities and countryside efficiently; functionally, this meant that rural groups and ordinary people were no longer buffered from the state by poor roads and rudimentary communication.

Another technological advance that was crucial for the totalitarian state was a substantial improvement in the technology of record keeping and retrieval. James Scott argues that the modern state's imperative to regiment and record its population is fundamental to its capacity to collect taxes and conscript soldiers -- and therefore fundamental to the nature of modern political power (Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed). The technology of organized record keeping improved dramatically in the first several decades of the twentieth century -- thus making the state's goal of closely monitoring its subjects more attainable. (Edwin Black describes the use of IBM punch card systems to manage National Socialist records of Jews and other enemies in IBM and the Holocaust.) So communication, transportation, and record-keeping were crucial to the creation of the totalitarian state.

Of course greater state capacity is not synonymous with totalitarianism. Liberal democratic states too increased their capacity to impose their will at the local level. What distinguished totalitarian regimes was the set of ideological and political goals that fascist states sought to accomplish on the basis of their greater repressive capacity and the cult of violence that each embodied. Other states took some of these sorts of steps forward in the twentieth century; the "reach of the state" increased dramatically in the United States, France, and Britain as well. The administrative functions of the state and the ability to extract revenues through taxation increased exponentially. It would be interesting to compare the total tax percentages in 1860 and 1930 for the United States and France; surely the increase is dramatic. And likewise, the personnel of these states increased dramatically during the same time period as a percentage of population. But this broad increase in state capacity did not lead to repression and dictatorship in these countries.

This topic is historically interesting; much turns on how we explain the power and human

tragedies associated with Franco's Spain or Mussolini's Italy. But it is also interesting today when we consider the undisguised efforts of the Iranian state, and its Republican Guard military organization, to dominate the whole of Iranian civil society. Here too we see the use of surveillance, intimidation, mass arrests, forced confessions, and political murder as tactics in the effort to control civil society.

(There is quite a bit of scope for new comparative historical research on this topic. Chuck Tilly has always emphasized these issues in his analysis of the development of the modern state. Michael Mann's findings in The Sources of Social Power, Vol. 2: The Rise of Classes and Nation States, 1760-1914 are certainly relevant as well to this line of thought. But there isn't much empirical detail available at present. Simply attempting to measure the dimensions highlighted here for a number of countries -- scale of tax collections, size of state apparatus, size and complexity of police organizations, and overall state capacity to regulate local society -- requires research that doesn't appear to exist at present.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:27PM (-05:00)

Merton's sociology of science

Thursday, December 17, 2009



The organized study of "science" as an epistemic practice and a knowledge product has taken at least three major forms in the past century: the ***philosophy*** of science, the ***history*** of science, and the ***sociology*** of science. Philosophers have been primarily interested in the logic of scientific inquiry and the rational force of scientific knowledge. Historians have been interested in the circumstances, both external and internal, through which important periods of the growth of scientific knowledge have occurred -- the Newtonian revolution, the Darwinian revolution, the "discovery" of cold fusion (above). And sociologists have been interested in examining the norms and organizations through which "science" is practiced -- how young scientists are trained, how collaboration and competition work within a scientific discipline or a laboratory, how results are assessed and communicated.

And because the intellectual frameworks within which philosophers, historians, and sociologists have been educated differ substantially, these meta-disciplines of the study of science are significantly different as well. The philosophers are largely interested in the quality of the product -- the rational force of a given body of scientific knowledge. The historians are interested in the contingencies of development of a given field. And the sociologists are interested in the social processes that lead to the creation of a body of scientific knowledge; they are inclined to "bracket" the epistemic standing or truth-value of the theories and hypotheses that a tradition has produced.

Robert Merton was one of the giants of American sociology. One of his core contributions had to do with his efforts to define the subject matter and methodology of the sociology of science. A volume of Merton's essays from the 1930s through 1960s on the sociology of

science appeared in 1971, The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations, and these essays are worth re-reading today. Here are some of Merton's formulations of the task of the sociology of science in "The Neglect of the Sociology of Science" (1952):

Numerous works ... have variously dealt with one or another part of the subject [of the sociology of science]. But these ... have not examined the linkage between science and social structure by means of a conceptual framework that has proved effective in other branches of sociology. (210)

Among current introductory textbooks in sociology ... all deal at length with the institutions of family, state, and economy, many with the institution of religion, but very few indeed with science as a major institution in modern society. (211)

Unlike the pattern in solidly established disciplines, in the sociology of science, facts are typically divorced from systematic theory. Empirical observation and hypothesis do not provide mutual assistance. Not having that direct bearing on a body of theory which makes for cumulative knowledge, the empirical studies that have been made, from time to time, by natural scientists have resulted in a thin scattering of unconnected findings rather than a chain of closely linked findings. (212-13)

So the goal of the sociology of science is to examine the linkage between science and social structure using the "conceptual frameworks" of sociology. The sociology of science needs to be based on empirical observation -- i.e. it cannot be a purely conceptual discipline. But it must possess an appropriate framework of sociological theory within the context of which empirical observations of scientific practice can be explained.

Several ideas were particularly important in Merton's efforts to conceptualize the processes of science:

- the importance of discovering the norms that underlay the research and thinking of scientists in a given field (the ethos of science); ("the emotionally toned complex of rules, prescriptions, mores, beliefs, values and presuppositions that are held to be binding upon the scientist")
- the internal social structure of various scientific disciplines (training, communication, information flow, evaluation)
- the incentives that exist within the scientific disciplines that constitute the driving force for scientists to aggressively pursue publishable results; the reward system. How do the imperatives of the ethos and the institutions of science come together to determine the patterns of behavior of the individual working scientist?

One of Merton's key methodological contributions was the idea that it was possible to observe and measure the institutions of science through careful empirical examination of the biographies, journals, and other objective markers of scientific activity. (This is what he refers to as the conceptual framework of sociology.) He repeatedly attempts to quantify and measure the activities of science -- publication rates, inventions, numbers of scientists in a field, and so forth. For example, in "Changing Foci of Interest in the Sciences and Technology" (1938) he attempts to estimate the pattern of shifting scientific interest in England over the period of 1665-1702 by counting the numbers of articles to be published in various areas of science (tables 3-4). He finds that the physical and formal sciences fall in frequency during this time period, while the life sciences rise significantly (201). How should we explain this shift in the interests of the scientific

community? Merton advocates a sociological cause. Referring back to Rickert and Weber, he argues that this shift is likely to be linked to the broader societal interests of the time period:

Scientists often choose problems for investigation that are vitally linked with major values and interests of the time. Much of this study will examine some of the extra-scientific elements which significantly influenced, if they did not wholly determine, the foci of scientific interest. (203)

Another of Merton's key ideas is the role of the reward system of science, which he takes to be the motor of scientific change:

Like other institutions, the institution of science has developed an elaborate system for allocating rewards to those who variously live up to its norms.... The evolution of this system has been the work of centuries, and it will of course never be finished. (297)

And he finds that this reward system gives great weight to originality and priority -- which leads to the recurring phenomena of priority disputes, fraud, and plagiarism in science (309). And it leads as well to the phenomenon of multiple discovery by independent researchers:

The pages of the history of science record thousands of instances of similar discoveries having been made by scientists working independently of one another. Sometimes the discoveries are simultaneous or almost so; sometimes a scientist will make anew a discovery which, unknown to him, somebody else had made years before. Such occurrences suggest that discoveries become virtually inevitable when prerequisite kinds of knowledge and tools accumulate in man's cultural store and when the attention of an appreciable number of investigators becomes focused on a problem, by emerging social needs, by developments internal to the science, or by both. (371)

A final topic of interest in Merton's sociology of science is his treatment of "peer review". Here is how he describes this part of the institutions of science in "Institutionalized Patterns of Evaluation in Science" (1971):

The referee system in science involves the systematic use of judges to assess the acceptability of manuscripts submitted for publication. The referee is thus an example of status judges who are charged with evaluating the quality of role-performances in a social system. They are found in every institutional sphere. (460)

So we might encapsulate Merton's intellectual framework for the sociology of science in a few basic ideas: the sociologist needs to find ways of observing scientific practice empirically; the conduct of science is driven by the values that the institutions of science inculcate and enforce; the incentives created by the scientific institutions shape and motivate the behavior of scientists; and the product of science is the result of the constrained activities of scientists shaped and motivated in these particular ways. So the sociologist needs to discover and document the values, he/she needs to uncover the evaluation mechanisms, and he/she needs to discover in detail how innovations and theories have emerged in specific research environments.

What this description leaves out from a contemporary perspective might include:

- analysis of social networks of collaboration and communication among scientists
- analysis of the institutions of training through which scientists learn their craft

- content analysis of the results of scientific inquiry -- recurring features of theory and explanation within specific research traditions

(Trevor Pinch is an important contemporary contributor to current sociology of science and is one of the editors of the 1995 volume, Handbook of Science and Technology Studies. Here is a link to his syllabus for a seminar on the sociology of science that indicates how he conceptualizes the discipline.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:05PM (-05:00)

What makes a sociological theory compelling?

Sunday, December 20, 2009



In the humanities it is a given that assertions and arguments have a certain degree of rational force, but that ultimately, reasonable people may differ about virtually every serious claim. An interpretation of *Ulysses*, an argument for a principle of distributive justice, or an attribution of certain of Shakespeare's works to Christopher Marlowe -- each may be supported by "evidence" from texts and history, and those who disagree need to produce evidence of their own to rebut the thesis; but no one imagines there is such a thing as an irrefutable argument to a conclusion in literature, art history, or philosophy. Conclusions are to some degree persuasive, well supported, or compelling; but they are never ineluctable or uniquely compatible with available evidence. There is no such thing as the final word, even on a well formulated question. (Naturally, a vague or ambiguous question can always be answered in multiple ways.)

In physics the situation appears to be different. Physical theories are ***about*** a class of things with what we may assume are uniform characteristics throughout the range of this kind of thing (electrons, electromagnetic waves, neutrinos); and these things come together in ensembles to produce other kinds of physical phenomena. So we often believe that physical theories are deductive systems that attribute a set of mathematical properties to more-or-less fundamental physical entities; and then we go on to derive descriptions of the behavior of things and ensembles made of these properties. And the approximate truth of the physical theory can be assessed by the degree of success its deductive implications have for the world of observable ensembles of physical things. So it seems that we can come to fairly definitive conclusions about various theories in the natural sciences: natural selection is the mechanism of species evolution; gravitational force is the cause of the elliptical shapes of planetary orbits; the velocity of light is a constant. And we are confident in the truth of these statements because they play essential roles within deductive systems that are highly confirmed by experiment and experience.

So what about the empirical domains of sociology or history? Is it possible for careful empirical and theoretical research to provide final answers to well formulated questions in these fields? Is it possible to put together an argument in sociology on a particular question that is so rationally and empirically compelling that no further disagreement is possible?

There is a domain of factual-empirical questions in sociology where the answer is probably affirmative. What is the population of Detroit in 2000? What percentage of likely voters supported McCain in October 2008? What is the full unemployment rate among African-American young people in Ohio? When was the International Brotherhood of Teamsters recognized in Cleveland? There are recognized sources of data and generally accepted methods that would allow us to judge that a particular study definitively answers one or another of these questions. This isn't to make a claim of unrevisability; but it is to assert that some social inquiries have as much empirical decidability as, say, questions in descriptive ecology ("what is the range of the *Helicinidae* land snail in North America?") or planetary astronomy ("what is the most likely origin of the planetary body Pluto?").

But most major works in sociology do not have this characteristic. They do not primarily aim at establishing a limited set of sociological or demographic ***facts***. Instead, they take on larger issues of conceptualization, explanation, interpretation, and theory formation. They make use of empirical and historical facts to assess or support their arguments. But it is virtually never possible to conclude, "given the available body of empirical and historical evidence, this theory is almost certainly true." Rather, we are more commonly in a position to say something like this: "Given the range of empirical, historical, and theoretical considerations offered in its support, theory T is a credible explanation of P." And it remains for other scholars to either advance a more comprehensive or well-supported theory, or to undermine the evidence offered for T, or to provisionally accept T as being approximately correct. Durkheim put forward a theory of suicide based on the theoretical construct of ***anomie*** (Suicide). He argued that the rate of suicide demonstrated by a population is caused by the degree of anomie characteristic of that society; and he offered a few examples of how the theoretical construct of anomie might be operationalized in order to allow us to measure or compare different societies in these terms. But his theory can be challenged from numerous directions: that it is monocausal, that it assumes that suicide is a homogeneous phenomenon across social settings, and even that it overstates the degree of consistency that exists between "high anomie" and "high suicide" social settings.

Take Michael Mann's analysis of fascism (Fascists). He considers a vast range of historical and sociological evidence in arriving at his analysis. His theory is richly grounded in empirical evidence. But numerous elements of his account reflect the researcher's best judgment about a question, rather than a conclusive factual argument. Take Mann's view that "materialist" and class-based theories of fascist movements are incorrect. I doubt that his richly documented arguments to this conclusion make it rationally impossible to continue to find support for the materialist hypothesis. Or take his definition of fascism itself. It is a credible definition; but different researchers could certainly offer alternatives that would lead them to weigh the evidence differently and come to different conclusions. So even such simple questions as these lack determinate answers: What is fascism? Why did fascist movements arise? Who were the typical fascist followers? There are credible answers to each of these questions, and this is exactly what we want from a sociological theory of fascism; but the answers that a given researcher puts forward are always contestable.

Or take Howard Kimeldorf's analysis of the different political trajectories of dock-workers' unions on the East and West Coasts (Reds or Rackets?: The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront). Kimeldorf provides an explanatory hypothesis of the differences between the nature of these unions in the east and west in the United States, and he offers a rich volume of historical and factual material to fill in the case and support the hypothesis. It is an admirable example of reasoning in comparative historical

sociology. Nonetheless, there is ample room for controversy. Has he formulated the problem in the most perspicuous way? Are the empirical findings unambiguous? Are there perhaps other sources of data that would support a different conclusion? It is reasonable to say that Kimeldorf makes a credible case for his conclusions; but there are other possible interpretations of the facts, and even other possible interpretations of the phenomena themselves.

These are both outstanding examples of sociological theory and analysis; so the point here isn't that there is some important defect in either of them. Rather, the point is that there is a wide range of indeterminacy in each of these examples: in the way in which the problem is formulated, in the basic conceptual assumptions that the author makes, and in the types and interpretation of the data that the author provides. Each provides a strong basis, in fact and in theory, for accepting the conclusions offered. But each is contestable within the general framework of scientific rationality. And this seems to suggest that for the difficult, complex problems that arise in sociology and history, there is no basis for imagining that there could be a final and rationally compulsory answer to questions like "Why fascism?" and "Why Red labor unions on the Pacific Coast?" And perhaps it suggests something else as well: that the logic of scientific reasoning in the social sciences is as close to arguments in the humanities as it is to reasoning in the physical sciences. It is perhaps an instance of "inference to the best explanation" rather than an example of hypothetico-deductive testing and confirmation.
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:48PM (-05:00)

Repression in China

Friday, December 25, 2009



The Chinese government signaled a major escalation in its policy of repressing dissidents with this week's conviction of dissident intellectual Liu Xiaobo on charges of subversion (New York Times link). Liu's eleven-year sentence on charges of subversion sends a chilling message to all Chinese citizens who might consider peaceful dissent about controversial issues. Other dissidents have been punished in the past year, including environmental protesters, advocates for parents of children killed in the Sichuan earthquake, and internet activists. But Liu is one of the first prominent activists to be charged with subversion. Liu is a major advocate of Charter 08, and his conviction and sentencing represent a serious blow to the cause of political liberalization in China. Regrettably, the regime of citizen rights of expression, association, and dissent has not yet been established in China.

What is Charter 08? It is a citizen-based appeal for the creation of a secure system of laws and rights in China, and has been signed by several thousand Chinese citizens (New York Review of Books translation). The central principles articulated in the Charter include:

- Freedom
- Human rights

- Equality
- Republicanism
- Democracy
- Constitutional rule

The specific points included in the Charter include:

1. A New Constitution
2. Separation of Powers
3. Legislative Democracy
4. An Independent Judiciary
5. Public Control of Public Servants
6. Guarantee of Human Rights
7. Election of Public Officials
8. Rural-Urban Equality
9. Freedom to Form Groups
10. Freedom to Assemble
11. Freedom of Expression
12. Freedom of Religion
13. Civic Education
14. Protection of Private Property
15. Financial and Tax Reform
16. Social Security
17. Protection of the Environment
18. A Federated Republic
19. Truth in Reconciliation

What is involved in advocating for "legality" and "individual rights" for China's future? Most basically, rights have to do with protection against repression and violence. These include freedom of association, freedom of action, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, and the right to security of property. History makes it clear that these rights are actually fundamental to a decent society -- and that this is true for China's future as well. Moreover, each of these rights is a reply to the threat of violence and coercion.

Take the rights of expression and association. When a group of people share an interest -- let's say, an interest in struggling against a company that is dumping toxic chemicals into a nearby river -- they can only actualize their collective interests if they are able to express their views and to call upon others to come together in voluntary associations to work against this environmental behavior. The situation in China today is harshly inconsistent with this ideal: citizens have to be extremely cautious about public expression of protest, and they are vulnerable to violent attack if they organize to pressure companies or local government to change their behavior.

The use of private security companies on behalf of companies, land developers, and other powerful interests in China is reasonably well documented. And these companies are largely unconstrained by legal institutions in their use of violence and gangs of thugs to intimidate and attack farmers, workers, or city dwellers. It's worth visiting some of the web sites that document some of this violence -- for example, this report about thugs attacking homeowners in Chaoyang. Similar reports can be unearthed in the context of rural conflicts over land development and conflicts between factory owners and migrant workers.

So this brings us to "legality." What is the most important feature of the rule of law? It is to preserve the simple, fundamental rights of citizens: rights of personal security, rights of property, rights of expression. What does it say to other people with grievances when

private security guards are able to beat innocent demonstrators with impunity? What it says is simple -- the state will tolerate the use of force against you by powerful agents in society. And what this expresses is repression.

It is also true that the state itself is often the author of repression against its own citizens for actions that would be entirely legitimate within almost any definition of core individual right: blogging, speaking, attempting to organize migrant poor people. When the state uses its power to arrest and imprison people who speak, write, and organize -- it is profoundly contradicting the core rights that every citizen needs to have.

It should also be said that these legal rights cannot be separated from the idea of democracy. Democracy most fundamentally requires that people be able to advocate for the social policies that they prefer. Social outcomes should be the result of a process that permits all citizens to organize and express their interests and preferences -- that is the basic axiom of democracy. What this democratic value rules out is the idea that the state has a superior game plan -- one that cannot brook interference by the citizens -- and that it is legitimate for the state to repress and intimidate the citizens in their efforts to influence the state's choices. A legally, constitutionally entrenched set of individual civil and political rights takes the final authority of deciding the future direction of society out of the hands of the state.

Give the Chinese people democratic rights and they can make some real progress on China's social ills -- unsafe working conditions, abuse of peasants, confiscation of homeowners' property, the creation of new environmental disasters. Deprive them of democratic rights, and the power of the state and powerful private interests can create continuing social horrors -- famine, permanent exploitation of workers, environmental catastrophes, development projects that displace millions of people, and so on. The authoritarian state and the thugocracy of powerful private interests combine to repress the people.

(Here is a very interesting audio interview with Perry Link on the NYRB website about the context of Charter 08. Also of interest is a piece by Daniel Drezner (post) on Charter 08 on the ForeignPolicy blog. See also this very extensive analysis of the Charter by Rebecca MacKinnon at Rconversation.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:29PM (-05:00)

The finish line

Tuesday, December 29, 2009

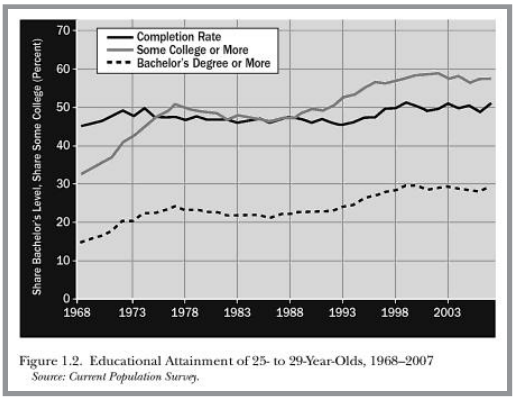


Figure 1.2. Educational Attainment of 25- to 29-Year-Olds, 1968–2007
Source: Current Population Survey.

Source: Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, C*rossing the Finish Line*

For quite a long time the United States had a global advantage in its educated population. No more. The US now ranks low among OECD nations for percentage of adults with a baccalaureate degree. And the increases in this percentage witnessed in the United States in the 1950s leveled off in the 1970s. These facts have major consequences -- both for quality of life in

the United States for individual citizens and for the ability of the US to compete globally in a knowledge-based economy.

William Bowen, Matthew Chingos, and Michael McPherson have completed another important piece of research on the current social realities of higher education in the US with Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities. This research goes significantly beyond the prior important work Bowen and his collaborators have done. Here Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson have shifted focus from the issue of ***access*** (the core issue in Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education) to ***degree completion***, and they have shifted from elite private colleges and universities to public universities -- flagships and regionals. The book is mostly concerned with first-time freshmen, but also provides valuable data on the educational careers of transfer students. (Chapter seven looks at transfer student outcomes in particular.)

The heart of their research here is the creation of a pair of large databases of students that permit tracking the outcomes of a large student population over time. They have collected data on several hundred thousand students who entered universities in 1999. One data set is the "flagship" database including records of over 120,000 students enrolled in 21 leading public universities. The second is the "state systems" database with over 60,000 students enrolled in 47 regional campuses in four states. Here is how they describe the two databases:

The Flagships Database was assembled between September 2005 and August 2006. The core of the database is an institutional file that contains detailed demographic, academic, and financial aid data on essentially every student who entered one of 21 selective public universities in the fall of 1999 (although most universities excluded from their data students who began their studies on a part-time basis).1 The institutional file is linked with secondary data files provided by the College Board, ACT, the National Student Clearinghouse, and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). Additionally, the home addresses of the students have been matched to their corresponding geographical codes (“geocodes”) and can be linked to census data down to the block level.

The State Systems Database, which covers a wider range of institutions in four states—Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia—was assembled between June 2006 and June 2008. This database, also on the 1999 entering cohort, includes institutional files from every public university in Maryland, North Carolina, and Ohio as well as every public and private college and university in Virginia.2 Additionally, we have data on every North Carolina student who was a high school senior in 1999. These files are linked with secondary data files provided by the College Board and the National Student Clearinghouse, and the students’ home addresses have been linked to their corresponding geocodes. (Appendix B, pp. 5-6)

(The authors and the publisher have posted a 150-page PDF document on the publisher's website providing extensive details on the data sets and chief quantitative results (link).)

A particularly important data source they employ is the National Student Clearinghouse (link), which permits tracking the same student from one institution to another. NSC now encompasses over 90% of undergraduates in the United States, so it serves as an existing national tracking system. It allows us to answer the important question, what

happens to a student when he/she leaves a given institution? Does she become a permanent dropout, or does she go on to graduate from another university? Another large data source they employ is the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of the 1992 high school class.

Using these databases they are able to probe for significant differences in outcomes based on SES, race/ethnicity, gender, parental education, and type of institution. The outcomes they are particularly interested in are completion rates, time to degree, field of study, and grades. This represents a real breakthrough in empirical studies of higher education; no existing data source had the size needed to break out these sub-populations meaningfully. The data permit the construction of a segmented national profile of college attendance and completion, and the data sets are large enough to allow for a significant degree of testing of causal hypotheses about differences across groups.

The logical structure of the questions posed in the research looks a lot like this:

- Are there significant differences across ***{demographic features -- e.g. ethnicity}*** with respect to ***{outcome feature -- e.g. completion rate}***?
- how much of the observed variation can be explained by ***{readiness feature -- e.g. SAT/ACT score}***?

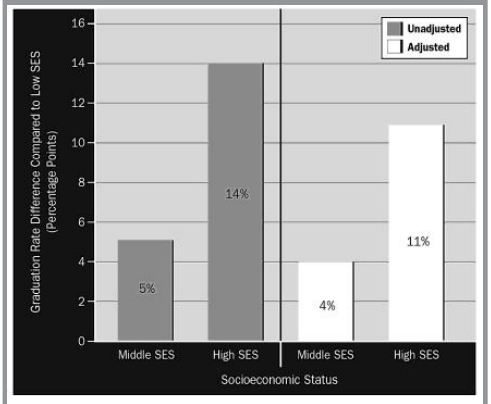


Figure 3.7. Differences in Six-Year Graduation Rates by Socioeconomic Status (Compared to Low SES), 1999 Entering Cohort, Flagships, Unadjusted and Adjusted
Source: Flagships Database.
Note: Adjusted differences control for SAT/ACT scores, high school GPA, state residency status, race/ethnicity, gender, and university attended.

Their approach to the second type of question is to control for the readiness feature(s) using a regression or other statistical technique and examine the residual differences in an adjusted data graph. Here is an example:

There are many striking findings in the research that speak to the profound effects of stratification on life prospects. Take bachelor's degree attainment broken out by family income (fig. 2.3a) and race/ethnicity (fig. 2.5). A young person from the bottom quartile of family income has an 11% chance of receiving a bachelor's degree, compared to a 52% chance for the person from the top quartile. There is also a major disparity between white and black young adults. The data indicate strikingly different bachelor's degree attainment rates across race and gender: white males 29%, white females 36%, black males 10%, black females 21%. One way of reading these results is this: the cumulative disadvantages associated with poverty and race in the United States have permanent effects on the opportunities available to disadvantaged people later in life. And our education system is not succeeding in erasing these disadvantages. The research offered here can at least help to design institutions that are more successful in doing exactly that; and this is one of the key goals that Bowen and his colleagues have for the work:

We want to end this first chapter by reiterating that the purpose of the research reported in this book is not only to improve our understanding of patterns and relationships but also--as a high priority--to search for clues about ways to make America's colleges and universities more successful in moving entering students on to graduation. (19)

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:56AM (-05:00)

Protests in China

Tuesday, December 29, 2009

Carrefour protest in Beijing

China has witnessed a visible increase over the past ten years in the number of protests, demonstrations, and riots over a variety of issues. Areas of social problems that have stimulated collective protests include factory conditions, non-payment of wages, factory closures, environmental problems (both large and small), and land and property takeovers by developers and the state.

It isn't surprising that social conditions in China have given rise to causes of protest. Rapid growth has stimulated large movements of people and migrant workers, development has created massive environmental problems for localities, and opportunities for development have created conflicts between developers and local people over land and property rights. Following the terrible earthquake in Sichuan and the collapse of many buildings and schools with tragic loss of life, there was a wave of angry protests by parents against corrupt building practices. So there are plenty of possible causes for protest in China today.

What is more surprising, though, is that the state has not been successful so far in muzzling protest, or in keeping news of local protests from reaching the international public.

YouTube provides a surprisingly wide window on protests in China and other parts of the world. It is worth viewing a sampling of clips from YouTube that surface when one searches for Chinese protest. The following clips were collected in January 2009. But here is a sobering fact: most of these clips have disappeared from YouTube with a message indicating that they violate "terms of use." One is forced to speculate about the pressures that brought this about.

Unemployment for Chinese migrant workers

Labor protest in Shanghai

Shoe factory protest for back wages

Environmental protest in Xiamen

Protest about water pollution in Xiamen

Parents protesting children's death in Sichuan

Will the sociology of the future be able to use the contents of YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook as an important empirical indicator of social change in societies such as China, Malaysia, or Russia? One thing is evident from this small experiment: YouTube is not an archive, and researchers are well advised to capture and document the items they want to study.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:14PM (-05:00)

The Brenner debate revisited

Saturday, January 02, 2010



One of the defining controversies in the field of economic history in the past 35 years is the Brenner debate. Robert Brenner published "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe" in Past and Present in 1976 (link) and "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism" in 1982. In between these publications (and following) there was a rush of substantive responses from leading economic historians, including M. M. Postan and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. (Many of the most significant articles are collected in Aston and Philpin's The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe.) Brenner's theories injected important new impetus into the old question: what led to the advent of capitalism? (Maurice Dobb had stimulated a similar burst of scholarship on this topic with his 1963 Studies In The Development Of Capitalism (link). Brenner's discussion of the Dobb debate can be found in his essay, "Dobb on the transition from feudalism to capitalism" here.)

The core issue of the debate is large and important: what were the social factors that brought about the major economic transformations of the European economy since the decline of feudalism? Feudalism was taken to be a stagnant economic system; but in the sixteenth century things began to change. There was something of an agricultural revolution in England, with technological innovation, changes of cropping systems, and significant increase in land productivity. There were the beginnings of manufacture, leading eventually to water- and steam-powered machines. There was a population shift from the countryside to towns and cities. There was industrial revolution. (Marx describes much of this process in *Capital*; here's an earlier post of his concept of "primitive accumulation.") So what were the large social factors that caused this widespread process of social and economic change? What propelled these dramatic changes of economic structure?

The great economic historian M. M. Postan offered a simple theory: “Behind most economic trends in the middle ages, above all behind the advancing and retreating land settlement, it is possible to discern the inexorable effects of rising and declining population” (Medieval Economy and Society: An Economic History of Britain in the Middle

Ages, p. 72). Against this view, Brenner writes: "Under different property structures and different balances of power, similar demographic or commercial trends, with their associated patterns of factor prices, presented very different opportunities and dangers and thus evoked disparate responses, with diverse consequences for the economy as a whole. Indeed, . . . under different property structures and balances of class forces . . . precisely the same demographic and commercial trends yielded widely divergent results" (Brenner 1982:16-17). Key to Brenner's argument is the fact that agricultural change was substantially different in England and France; so he insists that an adequate causal explanation must identify a factor that varies similarly.

From the distance of several decades, the dividing lines of the Brenner debate are pretty clear. One school of thought (Postan, Ladurie) attempts to explain the economic transformations described here in terms of facts about population, while the other (Brenner's) argues that the central causal factors have to do with social institutions (social-property relations and institutions of political power). The demographic theory focuses its attention on the factors that influenced population growth, including disease; the social institutions theory focuses attention on the institutional framework within which economic actors (lords, peasants, capitalist farmers) pursue their goals. The one is akin to a biological or ecological theory, emphasizing common and universal demographic forces; the other is a social theory, emphasizing contingency and variation across social space.

A voice that doesn't come into the debate directly but that is highly relevant is that of Douglass North. His book (with Robert Paul Thomas), The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History, offers a theory of modern economic development that falls within the category of "social institutional theory" rather than demographic theory. But whereas Brenner finds primary causal importance in the institutions that define local class relations (a Marxian idea), North argues that property relations that create the right kinds of incentives will stimulate rapid economic growth (a Smithian idea). And North finds that this is the innovation that took place in England in the early modern period. It was the creation of capitalist property relations that stimulated economic growth.

This schematic representation of the strands of argument in the Brenner debate suggests competing causal diagrams:

- population growth => economic activity => sustained economic growth (Postan)
- weak peasant farmers, strong capitalist farmers => enclosure and farming innovations => rapid agricultural growth (Brenner)
- enhanced protections of property rights => incentive for profitable activity => sustained economic growth (North)

But it seems clear in hindsight that these are false dichotomies. We aren't forced to choose: Malthus, Marx, or Smith. Economic development is not caused by a single dominant factor -- a point that Guy Bois embraces in his essay (Aston and Philpin, 117). Rather, all these factors were in play in European economic development -- and several others as well. (For example, Ken Pomeranz introduces the exploitation of the natural resources, energy sources, and forced labor of the Americas in his account of the economic growth of Western Europe (The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy). And I suppose that it would be possible to make a climate-change argument for this period of change as well.) Moreover, each large factor (population, prices, property relations) itself is the complex result of a number of great factors -- including the others on the list. So we shouldn't expect simple causal diagrams of large outcomes like sustained economic growth.

Not all the heat of this debate derives from a polemic between a neo-Marxist theorist and the Malthusians; there is also a significant disagreement between Brenner and another important Marxist economic historian, Guy Bois. Bois' Crisis of Feudalism appeared in 1976 -- the same year as Brenner's first paper in the debate. The crisis to which Bois refers is an analogy with a classic Marxist claim about capitalism: where Marx discerned a crisis in capitalism deriving from the falling rate of profit, Bois found a crisis in feudalism deriving from a falling rate of feudal levy. (Here is an interesting review by Chris Harman of another of Bois' books, The Transformation of the Year One Thousand: The Village of Lournard from Antiquity to Feudalism.) Bois criticizes Brenner's account for being excessively theory-driven. He argues that Brenner begins with a commitment to class struggle as a fundamental explanation, and then forces the facts of French and English rural life into this framework. Better, he argues, to let the complexity of the historical situations emerge through careful evaluation of the evidence. "Brenner's thought is, in fact, arranged around a single principle: theoretical generalization always precedes direct examination of historical source material" (Aston and Philpin, 110). And Bois argues that the evidence will suggest that it is the declining feudal levy rather than the capacity for resistance by French peasants that best explains the course of events in France.

In short, one important consequence of the Brenner debate was the renewed focus it placed on the question of social causation. Brenner and the other participants expended a great deal of effort in developing theories of the causal mechanisms that led to economic change in this period. And in hindsight, it appears that a lot of the energy in the debates stemmed from the false presupposition that it should be possible to identify a single master factor that explained these large changes in economic development. But this no longer seems supportable. Rather, historians are now much more willing to recognize the plurality of causes at work and the geographical differentiation that is inherent in almost every large historical process. So the advice that Bois extends -- don't let your large theory get in the way of detailed historical research -- appears to be good counsel.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:16PM (-05:00)

Separate social worlds

Saturday, January 02, 2010



It is an interesting and important fact that most of us live our lives on orbits that seldom intersect with the orbits of some other categories of people in society. The boundaries of our social worlds are often marked by major forms of social separation -- race, income, residence, work, region, or age. And this creates the result that we have very little understanding of how people from other social segments think, reason, feel, and organize their experiences. We think in terms of stereotypes about other people in other segments of society, rather than having a concrete experiential basis in common with them.

When geography is a large part of this separation it is easy to understand -- a suburban tax accountant in Massachusetts has very little daily experience that would permit him/her to gain knowledge of the thoughts, values, and experiences of rural Thai

villagers. But the striking fact is that there is often an equally deep separation between the phenomenal worlds of the suburban tax accountant and the homeless person in the nearby city or the blue collar woman who drives the local school bus.

This wouldn't matter too much if everyone's experiences and mental worlds were essentially similar. But they plainly are not. Take poverty and affluence: the things that a poor person thinks about first when confronted with a small cash windfall are surely quite different from the affluent person. Chronic deprivation probably gives the poor person a very clear recognition of his/her priorities for consumption that look very different from the affluent person. Being offered a pair of basketball tickets to a Pistons game, for example: the poor person is likely enough to see the resale value of the tickets and the more pressing needs that he/she has for cash -- and therefore is more likely to come to the decision to sell the tickets rather than attend the game. Or take ethnic differences -- a Yemeni immigrant in urban Michigan is likely to see the visit of a census worker in very different terms than does the middle-class suburbanite.

So the differences in worldview and values of people in different social segments are probably quite large. And here is the important part of the story: it is valuable and interesting to find ways of reaching across these forms of separation and come to see how other people experience their worlds. Each person's experiences and perspectives on the world are enriched by deep, extensive engagement with people very different from him/herself. This is one of the chief values of a diverse but interconnected social community. And it is one of the most regrettable costs of a highly divided society.

Social institutions that help to allow people to connect meaningfully across these social divides are particularly valuable. This is how the social value of "diversity" gets actualized. Sometimes religious organizations offer this possibility to their members, when different economic or national communities come together to worship. Military service can also have this effect -- especially in countries with wide or universal military obligations such as Israel. Community service organizations like CityYear and AmeriCorps provide young people with an environment where they can have the opportunity of coming to know other people from very different social backgrounds. And universities have this potential as well -- though colleges haven't been as successful as they should be at gaining this kind of cross-group understanding. Service-learning courses are one way that faculty in some universities have found to give their students meaningful exposure to the social realities that surround them -- and therefore to give them a broader avenue through which to encounter the experiences and worldviews of the segments of society that don't wind up in their middle-class orbits.

One of the reasons that Studs Terkel was such a fascinating writer and radio personality, was his ability to connect with people from widely different worlds. His understanding of working America was dramatically different from that of most of us -- because he had great curiosity about other people, and he had the motivation to go out and talk to them. Here is Studs talking about the experience of the Great Depression -- and the recession of 1997.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:23PM (-05:00)

The disciplines of economics

Sunday, January 03, 2010

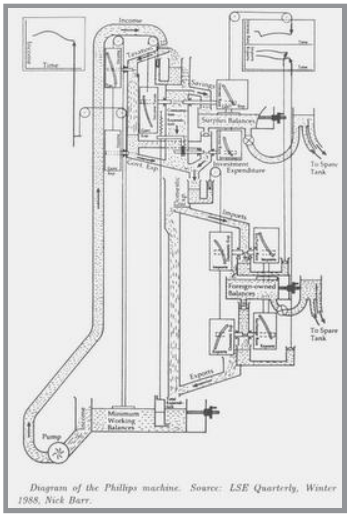


Diagram of the Phillips machine. Source: LSE Quarterly, Winter 1988, Nick Barr.

Economics is sometimes presented as the most "scientific" of the social science disciplines. It is mathematical, it involves sophisticated models, it makes use of enormous data sets, and it is invoked in the formulation of social and economic policies in much the way that the science of mechanics is invoked in the building of bridges. So one might imagine that the foundations, objectivity, and empirical credibility of modern economics are now beyond question.

Each of these assumptions is debatable, however. Daniel Hausman, a sympathetic critic and the leading authority in the philosophy of economics, casts doubt on the claims for precision and comprehensiveness of economic theory in The Inexact and Separate Science of Economics. Essays in my volume, On the Reliability of Economic Models: Essays in the Philosophy of Economics, cast doubt on the validity and reliability of some of the computational models that are used in current economics, including especially the computable general equilibrium models (CGE). And economists like Bruce Pietrykowski have pointed out that there are multiple traditions bundled into the history of contemporary economics, some of which have been overlooked to the detriment of the science of economics (The Political Economy of Consumer Behaviour: Contesting Consumption). (See an earlier post on Pietrykowski's work).

We need to have a better history and sociology of the formation of the disciplines of economics in order to have a better understanding of the scope and limits of current theory. There is, of course, a major literature on the history of economic thought, including such beacons as Joseph Schumpeter's History of Economic Analysis, Mark Blaug's Economic Theory in Retrospect, and I. I. Rubin's History of Economic Thought. (Rubin saw the muzzle-end of economic history, by being executed by Stalin in 1937 for crimes against the state.) But traditional approaches to the history of economic thought almost always look for synthesis and logical progression; so the account that we often get represents the development of economics as a fairly linear evolution from the physiocrats to the classical political economists to the marginalist revolution to Keynes and general equilibrium theory. The differences, contingencies, and choices that occurred along the way tend to disappear.

What the ***sociology*** of science can add to the history of science is a detailed, empirical examination of the institutions, processes, networks, and knowledge systems of a discipline. Sociologists like Robert Merton (link) and Andrew Abbott (Chaos of Disciplines) attempt to provide a micro-level account of the development and workings of a scientific discipline, using the empirical and theoretical tools of sociology. And this approach sheds a great deal of light on the way the particular field of science works, as well as providing greater granularity to the status of scientific claims within various disciplines. (It should be said that the current generation of historians of science also sometimes take this kind of micro-level view -- for example, Peter Galison's treatment of Einstein and Poincaré in Einstein's Clocks, Poincare's Maps: Empires of Time. But to date this hasn't been true of historians of the social sciences.)

Marion Fourcade's profoundly innovative book, Economists and Societies: Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain, and France, 1890s to 1990s, takes a sociologist's toolkit to work on the disciplines of economics. Here is a good statement of her fundamental thesis:

Economics arose everywhere. But everywhere it was distinctive. If we look back just a few decades, we see that the institutionalization of economics expertise in science, policy, or business took different routes across nations. Scientific and practical knowledge about the economy was conceptualized and institutionalized in different ways in different places, and for identifiable reasons. (3)

What is some of the evidence for thinking that "economics" is different in different national settings? Here is a good example of an empirical approach a sociologist can take to this question. Fourcade cites opinion surveys that have been conducted of "professional economists" in seven European and North American countries, on topics relevant to economic theory and policy. For most of these questions there are significant differences between U.S., French, U.K., and Canada economists -- documenting the idea that there are meaningful differences in the theoretical presuppositions of economists in those national cultures. Here are a couple of questions from table 0-2 (p. 6):

*Tariffs and quotas reduce welfar*e

Agree U.S. 95% France 70% U.K. 84%

Disagree U.S. 3% France 27% U.K. 15%

Reducing the influence of regulatory authorities (e.g., in air traffic) would improve the efficiency of the economy

Agree U.S. 75% France 37% Canada 56%

Disagree U.S. 21% France 56% Canada 43%
On these two questions (only a subset of eight in the table), economists in the U.S. and France demonstrate very significant differences of judgment on very basic economic policy issues, with U.K. and Canada falling between them. The regulatory question is particularly revealing. So survey research -- a very basic tool of sociological research -- turns out to have useful and surprising results when directed at the profession of economics.

Another tool that Fourcade uses to good advantage is something that Merton emphasized as well: examination of scientific biographies and interviews with current practitioners. How did specific influential individuals develop into professional economists? And what can the sociologist learn about the profession from these detailed intellectual itineraries?

Fourcade is careful and reflective in formulating the methodology she pursues in the book. She makes use of the comparative framework employed by comparative historical sociologists in other fields as well; she singles out the U.S., U.K., and France as specific

national cases within which she attempts to reconstruct the specific values, attitudes, and institutions that defined "economics" as a profession. (This is methodologically similar to Frank Dobbin's study of "policy cultures" in these same three countries; Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain, and France in the Railway Age.) She calls her approach "critical organized comparison" (13).

This approach defines the bulk of the book; Fourcade provides chapters on the economic cultures of professional economics in the U.S., U.K., and France, in which she examines in detail the academic institutions, policy environments, and epistemic assumptions that went into the creation of economics as a discipline of knowledge and expertise in each country. She argues that each national setting represents a "constellation of practices" that distinguishes it from the others; so that the profession of economics is defined differently in the three settings. Here are the components of the French constellation as she sorts it out: limited private jurisdiction, segmentation of economics training, legitimacy of technocratic generalist discourse, state jurisdiction dominant, and late and piecemeal institutionalization (16).

A key insight in the book is Fourcade's insistence that economic knowledge, economic policies, economic expertise, and the profession of economics are jointly specified within a specific national culture. They are socially constructed in ways that she makes perfectly understandable. These social products are interrelated, and they are differently understood in the separate cultures studied. "In short, we want to examine the historical conditions that helped crystallize the very idea of what economics is, and attend closely to changing local classifications and representations of this idea over time" (13).

She also pays close attention to the institutions through which economists are trained and validated -- another key sociological insight:

The structure of the academic system and the place of economics education and research within it are particularly relevant to understanding the nature of economic knowledge production in each country. As an academically organized form of knowledge, and a training ground for a vast array of business and administrative professions, economics is shaped by broader research and higher education ecologies. (22-23)

Here is a nice statement of how she sees her work hanging together:

This book has been particularly concerned with one specific type of affinity, that which ties knowledge to its social setting. Instead of focusing--in Foucault's manner-- on what makes particular sorts of knowledge possible at a given historical moement, I have thus tried to analyze interactions between forms of political organization and forms of knowledge making within specific social contexts. (239)

Economists and Societies is a very appealing piece of sociology, and it is a highly insightful contribution to a very fundamental question: what is the status of economic knowledge?

(Related work on the significant differences that can be discerned across national traditions of a social science discipline is being done for the discipline of sociology as well; see this post on national differences in the discipline of sociology, highlighting work by Gabriel Abend.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:27PM (-05:00)

Labor abuses in China

Thursday, January 07, 2010



The world press has begun to find ways of documenting the conditions of workers in many of the factories in China devoted to manufacturing goods for export to the United States and other countries (for example, In Chinese Factories, NYT, 1/5/08). The reportage is eye-opening but not surprising. Reporters have documented excessive hours of work, pay that is lower than what Chinese law requires, working conditions that are chronically unsafe, and persistent exposure to the very dangerous chemicals that American toy consumers have been so concerned about. One of the authorities sometimes quoted in these articles is Professor Anita Chan from the Australian National University, and Professor Chan has been documenting these conditions for years. Her book, China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy, is a detailed and factual examination of some of these conditions. She documents the fact that the most vulnerable groups of workers -- in the range of tens of millions! -- are the internal migrants of China, who have left their home regions in search of jobs. Very significantly, Professor Chan bases some of her fact-finding on the slowly emerging field of local investigative journalism in China.

Why do these abuses occur? For several related reasons. First, the motive of generating profits in the context of a rapidly growing economy. Since China's industrial economy was reformed in the 1990s, permiting private ownership of factories and enterprises, there have been strong incentives to be successful in business and to become rich. There has been tremendous demand for low-cost Chinese-manufactured goods, and great fortunes are being made in consumer electronics, toys, clothing, and dozens of other sectors. And in the downturn of world demand, equally abusive practices have been used to reduce costs. The profit motive leads factory owners and managers to strive hard to keep wages and factory expenses as low as possible; and the vast population of poor rural people in China who are available for unskilled factory work makes the bargaining position of the factory owner very strong. (Chan documents some of the forms of coercion and intimidation that are used in some Chinese factories to keep workers on the job and to prevent them from leaving or resisting.) And the global purchasers are insistent about cost-cutting and price-cutting on the finished goods. So the result is -- a chronic competitive "race to the bottom" in which each factory tries to produce at the require level of quality with the absolutely lowest level of cost; and this means continuous pressure on working conditions, health and safety conditions, and environmental effects. (C. K. Lee describes the situation of protest and resistance in "sunbelt" and "rustbelt" factories in Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt.)

So part of the story has to do with the economic incentives and advantages that factory owners have relative to a large working population that has few alternatives. But this part of the story is familiar from other economies as they have developed through intensive industrialization. It has been learned elsewhere in the world that the imperatives of profitability by themselves almost mandate the abuse of labor; so government regulation and inspection are a necessary part of a manufacturing system if it is to succeed in

treating all the population fairly and humanely. We might have imagined that the Chinese government would have been prepared to provide the regulatory environment that was necessary to protect the best interests of farmers and workers; it is, after all, governed by the party of farmers and workers. However, this is not the case. China has been so concerned to support economic growth that it has been very slow to implement effective regulatory systems to protect labor and the environment. Moreover, the balance of power between factory owners and local officials seems to be tilted towards the owners; other Times reporting has documented the fact that local officials cannot impose their will upon the owners. And, of course, there is ample opportunity for corrupt collusion between owners and officials.

This failure to regulate has been evident in other areas besides labor; the Chinese government has shown itself to be unwilling or unable to enact effective environmental regulations or to establish an effective regime of inspection and regulation for foods, drugs, and other potentially harmful products. It appears that middle-class Chinese consumers themselves are now expressing anxiety about the absence of this kind of regulation within their food and drug system.

So what other avenues exist for improving the conditions of workers in China?

There are three possibilities -- all mutually compatible. First, workers themselves can protect their interests in fair wages, safe working conditions, and limited hours of work -- if they are permitted to organize in unions. Woody Guthrie had it right: as individuals, workers are weak, but together they are strong. It seems inescapable that a major part of the problem is the enormous imbalance that exists between the powers associated with ownership and management, and those assigned to workers and their organizations. So a more just China will need to permit the development of real independent labor unions that work hard for the interests of their members.

Second, labor mobility can improve the conditions of labor everywhere. It is not an accident that some of the worst abuses documented by Professor Chan have to do with the forms of coercion that factory owners use to keep workers in their factories. If workers can vote with their feet, then we would expect that they will migrate to factories and other employers who offer better conditions of work and pay. And this will force employers to bid for qualified labor on the basis of improved working conditions.

And finally, there is obviously a role for consumers and companies in North America and Europe in all of this. North American consumers benefit from the low manufacturing costs currently available in China; but these low costs are unavoidably associated with the labor abuses we see today. We have a model for how international companies can take responsibility for the conditions of labor and environmental behavior, in the form of the Fair Labor struggles of the 1990s on university campuses in the United States. Large apparel manufacturers took on the responsibility of subjecting their suppliers to standards of conduct, and they subscribed to third-party organizations that undertook to "audit" the level of compliance with these standards by the supply chain. (Visit the Fair Labor website for an example of such an organization.) As the Times story observes, this is a tricky business, given the substantial degree of sub-contracting that occurs in the manufacturing process in China. But it can have a measurable effect.

China is plainly destined to be a major economic and political power in the coming fifty years. But to succeed in creating a society in which everyone has a continuing stake in a good quality of life and a fair deal from society, it will have to solve the problems of

regulation of labor, health, and environment. And this will mean a degree of redistribution of China's wealth and power towards its poorest people.

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:21PM (-05:00)

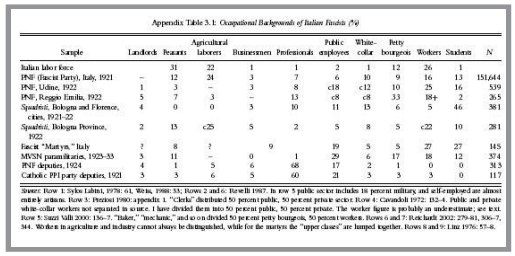
Fascist movements

Friday, January 08, 2010



Image: resistance to Spanish fascism, Abraham Lincoln Brigade

The crimes of fascist governments in Spain, Italy, and Germany are among the most terrible pages of twentieth-century history. And these governments commonly came to power by long mass-based mobilization by right-wing nationalist parties rather than by seizure of power by a strategically located minority. How was it possible for parties based on hatred and violence to be able to gain support from large parts of the populations of these states? And how should the social sciences proceed in efforts to diagnose and explain these processes?



Appendix Table 3.1: *Occupational Backgrounds of Italian Fascists (%)*

Sample	Landlords	Peasants	Agricultural laborers	Businessmen	Professionals	Public employees	White-collar	Petty bourgeois	Workers	Students	*N*
Italian labor force		31	22	1	1	2	1	12	26	1	
PNF (Fascist Party), Italy, 1921	–	12	24	3	7	6	10	9	16	13	151,644
PNF, Udine, 1922	1	3	–	3	8	c18	c12	10	25	16	539
PNF, Reggio Emilia, 1922	5	7	3	–	13	c8	c8	33	18+	2	265
Squadristi, Bologna and Florence, cities, 1921–22	4	0	0	3	10	11	15	6	5	46	381
Squadristi, Bologna Province, 1922	2	13	c25	5	2	5	8	5	c22	10	281
Fascist "Martyrs," Italy	?	8	?	9		19	5	5	27	27	145
MVSN paramilitaries, 1923–33	5	11	–	0	1	29	6	17	18	12	574
PNF deputies, 1924	4	1	5	6	68	17	2	1	0	0	313
Catholic PPI party deputies, 1921	5	3	6	5	60	21	3	3	3	0	117

Sources: Row 1: Sylos Labini, 1978: 61, Weiss, 1988: 33; Rows 2 and 6: Revelli 1987. In row 5 public sector includes 16 percent military and self-employed are almost entirely artisans. Row 3: Preziosi 1980: appendix 1. "Clerks" distributed 50 percent public, 50 percent private sector. Row 4: Corvaglia 1972: 152–4. Public and private white-collar workers not separated in source. I have divided them into 50 percent public, 50 percent private. The worker figure is probably an underestimate; see text. Row 5: Sarti Valli 2000: 136–7. "Baker," "mechanic," and so on divided 50 percent petty bourgeois, 50 percent workers. Rows 6 and 7: Reichardt 2002: 279–81, 306–7, 344. Workers in agriculture and industry cannot always be distinguished, while for the martyrs the "upper classes" are lumped together. Rows 8 and 9: Linz 1976: 57–8.



Map 2.1. The two interwar Europes.

In Fascists Michael Mann offers a thorough and nuanced account of the rise of fascist movements in many countries in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century. And in The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing he looks at the processes that have led to genocidal violence by a range of modern states. These are important books by a particularly acute historical sociologist of political power and the state. It is particularly interesting to examine Mann's research strategy -- the empirical research he brings to bear to his research questions and the assumptions he makes about what is needed in order to arrive at an explanation of various aspects of fascism. (Another important sociological contribution to the study of fascism is Juan Linz, Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes.)

Mann's approach is through the people, ideologies, and social movements that led to the establishment of fascist regimes:

This book seeks to explain fascism by understanding fascists -- who they were, where they came from, what their motivations were, how they rose to power. I focus here on the rise of fascist movements rather than on established fascist regimes. I investigate fascists

at their flood tide, in their major redoubts in interwar Europe, that is, in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and Spain. To understand fascists will require understanding fascist movements. We can understand little of individual fascists and their deeds unless we appreciate that they were joined together into distinctive power organizations. (9)

Here is Mann's definition of fascism:

I define fascism in terms of the key values, actions, and power organizations of fascists. Most concisely, fascism is the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism. (13)

Mann disputes the common dichotomy between "idealist" and "materialist" theories of large movements and structures such as fascism. Instead, he brings forward his own long-developed analysis of the four major sources of power in complex societies:

But my own approach to fascism derives from a more general model of human societies that rejects the idealism-versus-materialism dualism. My earlier work identified four primary “sources of social power” in human societies: ideological, economic, military, and political. ... To attain their goals, social movements wield combinations of control over ultimate meaning systems (ideological), control over means of production and exchange (economic), control over organized physical violence (military), and control over centralized and territorial institutions of regulation (political). (5)

His analysis of the fascisms of Europe attempts to assess each of them in terms of these sources of power. This analysis also plays into his account of the failure of fascism in countries such as France or Sweden. Mann makes an important point when he observes that fascism never prevailed in countries where parliamentary democracy had developed a secure base. There were fascist parties and leaders in France, Great Britain, and Sweden; but democratic institutions held, and fascism did not prevail in these countries.

Mann makes a very important point when he emphasizes that fascism was not an historical anomaly; rather, it was the expression of forces and crises that can recur in the twenty-first century as well. "Fascists have been at the heart of modernity.... Fascists only embraced more fervently than anyone else the central political icon of our time, the nation-state, together with its ideologies and pathologies" (9).

The largest single topic in each of the country studies is Mann's effort to understand the motivations of the fascist followers themselves. Who were the committed followers? Who were the sympathetic but less-engaged followers?

As in all my case studies I examine in some detail the social backgrounds of the fascists. They offer the best evidence regarding ordinary fascists. Yet social movements are not mere aggregations of individuals, each of whom can be counted equally and statically. Movements contain particular social structures and processes. This fascist movement greatly respected order and hierarchy, and the attainment of substantial power within the movement was an important part of the “career” of fascists. Moreover, paramilitary violence conferred distinctive powers on a “mass” (though less than “majority”) movement committed to violence. (100)

Mann uses a variety of empirical sources to answer simple questions: what were the occupational backgrounds of the members? What can we infer about their values and motivations?

Which particular social groups within these countries were most attracted to fascism? I spend many pages over several chapters examining the social backgrounds of fascist leaders, militants, members, fellow-travelers, coconspirators and voters – compared (wherever possible) with their counterparts in other political movements. How old were fascists, were they men or women, military or civilian, urban or rural, religious or secular, economic winners or losers, and from which regions, economic sectors, and social classes did they come? (25-26)

He goes to some effort to refute the Marxist interpretation of fascist movements: that they were led and supported by the lesser bourgeoisie. Instead, he finds that there was significant support for fascist ideology and movements across a wide range of social-class locations.

Ideology and values play a large role in Mann's interpretation and explanation of the program of fascism. He rejects the view that fascism was wholly opportunistic and succeeded solely through its adeptness with propaganda; rather, he takes fascist social and political theory seriously, judging that fascist parties offered plausible solutions to perceived social problems (p. 2). These parties attracted followers because they persuaded large numbers of Italians, Germans, or Spaniards that they had the ability to solve the problems their societies faced. Key ideological themes were nationalism (the aggressive values and emotions of ethnicity and the nation) and "state-ism" (the legitimacy and necessity of a strong state with few limits on its power as an institution for solving "modern" problems). "Fascists were motivated by a highly emotional struggle to cleanse their nation of “enemies,” and so they indulged in reckless aggression and terrible evil" (22).

Another key characteristic of fascist movements in the 1930s was the role played by paramilitary organizations as tools of intimidation, coercion, and mobilization.

Paramilitarism also conferred a concrete and enveloping social identity. The returning soldiers were young, mostly unmarried with little labor market experience, poorly integrated into local communities centered on family, occupation, and religion, prone to identify with the nation as a whole – which the mass army had claimed to “represent” (104).

Mann also spends some time assessing the role that "crisis" played in the rise of fascism: war, defeat, economic crisis. He does not believe that crisis was the primary cause of the rise of fascism; rather, it was a contributing condition that helped to accelerate processes that were underway already. And Mann notes that there is a pronounced geographical dimension to fascism and authoritarianism, as indicated in the following map representing the state of affairs in 1929.

So what does Mann's explanatory scheme amount to? It comes down to something like this: fascist parties and leaders articulated a vision of the current problems and their solutions. A significant proportion of the young adults (18-35) were receptive to these messages, including the call for radical change and the use of street violence. War, financial crisis, class conflict, and insecure parliamentary institutions created an environment in which the ideology of fascism could flourish and fascist mobilization was feasible. In several countries demobilized and defeated veterans represented a population of prospective recruits to fascist groups. Paramilitary violence could not defeat the military arm of the state; but it could intimidate other parties and pressure

governments. The experience of a fascist organization was itself a reinforcing one; young people who found their way into a fascist group were reinforced in the attitudes that had brought them there in the first place. State and military organizations varied in effectiveness across the map of Europe, and those states whose governments were weak and unstable were less able to repress the rising fascist challenge.

There is a deep question implicated in the effort to provide a ***definition*** of fascism. Is the definition Mann offers a stipulative statement about how Mann will use the word "fascism"? Or is it a condensed empirical theory, abstracted from the small number of clear cases -- Italy, Austria, Germany? Is it an inductive discovery that "fascism is the extreme version of nation-ism and state-ism"; or is it a purely conventional stipulation? Put it another way; does it make a difference that Mann finds that Spain is not "fascist" by this definition? Does such a finding provide any genuine sociological/empirical insight? Does it allow us to judge that "Spain's regime was likely to have other important behavioral differences relative to Italy"? I am tempted to think that Weber's conception of the ideal type is relevant here; the definition offered above is a description of the ideal type of fascism, and each of the existing fascisms differ in various ways from this description. The empirical issue is one level lower: not at the level of "fascism", but rather at the cluster of characteristics that are invoked in the ideal-type theory (paramilitary organizations, ideology of nationalism, authoritarian theory of the state, anti-democratic rhetoric).

It is interesting to think back to Fritz Ringer's analysis of the intellectual climate of the German mandarins (link) and relate his interpretation to Mann's treatment of the conservative-authoritarian ideologies of central Europe. Ringer's treatment singles out many of the same ideological themes and dissatisfactions that Mann identifies -- hostility to class conflict and mass democracy and the main elements of liberal modernity. Ringer's narrative serves as something like a snapshot of the educated elites going through the intellectual-ideological progressions Mann describes.

These crises were exacerbated by an ideological crisis. On the right, though only in one half of Europe, this became a sense that modernity was desirable but dangerous, that liberalism was corrupt or disorderly, that socialism meant chaos, that secularism threatened moral absolutes – and so cumulatively that civilization needed rescuing before modernization could proceed further. So there emerged a more authoritarian rightist view of modernity, emphasizing a more top-down populist nationalism, developmental statism, order, and hierarchy. (355)

The book also suggests something else about the present: that there are good reasons to pay close attention to the claims, complaints, values, and resentments of the American right today. As Mann discovered a coherent worldview and programme for the future in the rightist authoritarian movements he discusses, so we may find there is greater coherence, greater popular appeal, and greater danger in the rightist movements today. Conservative Christian values, hostility to government and to social welfare provisioning, hostility to unions, antipathy to immigrants, and hateful, inflammatory rhetoric give talk radio and cable television a worrisome coherence.

Here is a sobering and tragic video (in Spanish) documenting the Spanish Nationalist government's expulsion of thousands of Republican veterans to the Austrian concentration camp Mathausen, where most of them were murdered. There is a Facebook group, Plataforma Memoria Histórica - Guerra Civil Español (link), which is collecting materials on the Civil War. This is a great collective effort to remember and to

make sense of that struggle with fascism.

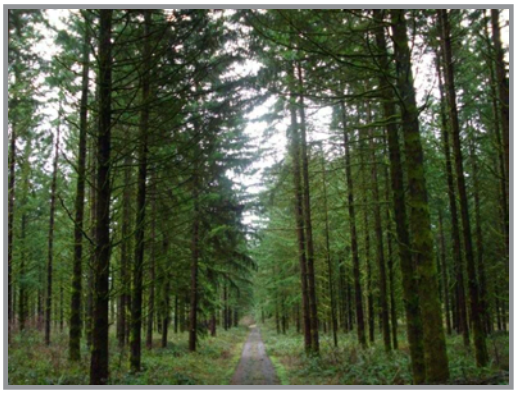
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:26PM (-05:00)

High modernism and expert knowledge

Saturday, January 16, 2010







James Scott is one of the really exceptional social scientists of his generation. His contributions to peasant studies have been transformative -- his ideas of the "moral economy of the peasant" and "weapons of the weak" are now part of the tool set that we all use in trying to make sense of agrarian societies (The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts). And his historical and ethnographic accounts of peasant life and struggle have given us a strong basis for understanding these movements that were so important during the anti-colonial struggles of the mid-twentieth century. (I've treated several of these contributions in earlier posts here, here, here, and here.)

What is particularly striking about Scott's work is the range of his sociological imagination. He is a genuinely creative thinker when it comes to making sense of some of some very complex human phenomena -- peasant mobilization, agricultural modernization, and large-scale efforts to transform the world. Each of his books introduces something new (for example, his treatment of Gramsci and hegemony in *Weapons of the Weak*, or his use of "hidden transcripts" in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*). He is a master at coming up with a concept, theory, or metaphor that can help to explain complex forms of social behavior, from the points of view of the actors. And he does a great job of overcoming the dichotomy between "material circumstances" and "culture"; the peasant communities and movements that he treats are both materially situated and culturally specific.

A more recent book that makes a number of important new contributions is Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (1998). Here

Scott shifts focus in two ways. His analysis here differs from his earlier books in that it is both more *macro* -- he examines the ways that states think; and more *micro* -- he also examines the nature of individually situated expert local knowledge. Both parts of the analysis are interesting and novel.

The book explores what Scott calls "high modernism" -- essentially, the effort to use science and theory to order and regularize the social world, and to use theories of the future to remake the present. Scott defines high modernism in these terms:

It is best conceived as a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the beliefs in scientific and technical progress that were associated with industrialization in Western Europe and in North America from roughly 1830 until World War I. At its core was a supreme self-confidence about continued linear progress, the development of scientific and technical knowledge, the expansion of production, the rational design of social order, the growing satisfaction of human needs, and, not least, an increasing control over nature. (89)

Initially he puts the point in terms of the modern state's agenda of "sedentarianization" -- reducing the mobility and anonymity of nomadic peoples and organizing them into "legible" formations.

The more I examined these efforts at sedentarization, the more I came to see them as a state's attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion. (2)

Much of early modern European statecraft seemed similarly devoted to rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format. The social simplifications thus introduced not only permitted a more finely tuned system of taxation and conscription but also greatly enhanced state capacity. (Introduction)

The core thesis of the book is the damage that states have done when they have attempted to implement antecedent theories of social change:

I believe that many of the most tragic episodes of state development in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries originate in a particularly pernicious combination of three elements. The first is the aspiration to the administrative ordering of nature and society, an aspiration that we have already seen at work in scientific forestry, but one raised to a far more comprehensive and ambitious level.... The second element is the unrestrained use of the power of the modern state as an instrument for achieving these designs. The third element is a weakened or prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans. (88-89)

High modernism was evident in agriculture; but it was also visible in urban planning.

Le Corbusier had no patience for the physical environment that centuries of urban living had created. He heaped scorn on the tangle, darkness, and disorder, the crowded and pestilential conditions, of Paris and other European cities at the turn of the century ... He was visually offended by disarray and confusion. (106)

The French-inspired urban design of colonial-era Saigon is pictured above.

Scott's view is that the central development disasters of the twentieth century derived from this toxic combination of epistemic arrogance and authoritarian power, including especially an excessive confidence in the ability of principles of "scientific management" to order and organize human activity. He provides case studies of the creation of Brasilia as a completely planned city; Soviet collectivization of agriculture in 1929-30; villagization in Tanzania; and the effort to regularize and systematize modern agriculture (266). And we could add China's Great Leap Forward famine to the list. In each case, the high-modernist ideology led to a catastrophic failure of social development.

In sum, the legibility of a society provides the capacity for largescale social engineering, high-modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the leveled social terrain on which to build. (5)

A constant contrast in the book is between the objectifying knowledge of modernist science -- social and natural -- and the particular knowledge systems of practitioners and locals about the nature of their local environment -- what he calls "metis". "Throughout this book I make the case for the indispensable role of practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of unpredictability" (6). A particularly clear instance of these two perspectives comes in through Scott's discussion of scientific forestry and the local knowledge of forest ecology possessed by villagers. Beekeeping, traditional farming, and the cultivation of the mango tree (333) are other good examples. Two forests are pictured below; the first is an old-growth forest, and the second is the result of scientific forestry. And Scott documents the ecological destruction that resulted when these principles of scientific forestry were exported from Germany to Southeast Asia.

Scott's perspective here is not anti-scientific or anti-modern. Instead, it is fundamentally anti-*authoritarian*: the high-modernist impulse coupled with the power of the modern state has led to massive human disasters. And confidence in comprehensive, abstract theories -- whether of forests, bees, or cities -- has been an important element of these destructive endeavors. So the conclusion is a moderate one: pay attention to local knowledge, be suspicious of totalizing experiments in transforming society or nature, and trust the people who are affected by policies to contribute to their design.

Scott's arguments in *Seeing Like a State* provide some resonance with two other insightful writers discussed in earlier postings: Michael Polanyi (on the importance of tacit knowledge) and Karl Popper (on the hazards associated with comprehensive social engineering).

(Scott's most recent book is The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia. Here is a very interesting working paper by Grant Evans reviewing Scott's contributions; From moral economy to remembered village: The sociology of James C. Scott (Working paper / Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University).)

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:05PM (-05:00)

Civic engagement and formative institutions

Sunday, January 17, 2010



A disposition towards civic engagement and community service seems to be a very fundamental component of social psychology that differs significantly across cohorts and populations. But the frequency of this motivation across the population is also surely a key component of the health of social order. One would hypothesize that this is an aspect of individual motivation and identity that determines the level at which a community will succeed in accomplishing its most critical tasks such as poverty alleviation, remedies for poor schools, or addressing homelessness. If a city has a significant level of high-poverty schools, with associated low levels of student academic success in the early grades, surely it is helpful when a significant number of adults and young people experience a desire to help address the problem through mentoring and tutoring programs.

But the question of how this component of social psychology works is a complex one. What are the influences in daily life through which children and young people acquire this sensibility? What are the value systems and institutional arrangements that encourage or discourage a disposition towards civic engagement? What kinds of experiences increase (or reduce) an individual's motivation to be involved in community service? (Here is an earlier posting on this question.)

Doug McAdam and Cynthia Brandt have addressed part of this question through a study of young people who have been involved with Teach for America (NYT story). Their article, "Assessing the Effects of Voluntary Youth Service: The Case of Teach for America," appeared in Social Forces this month. Here is how the authors describe their project:

We use survey data from all accepted applicants to Teach for America (TFA) between 1993-98 to assess the longer-term effect of youth service on participants' current civic attitudes and behaviors.

Their survey includes individuals who were accepted into Teach for America in the relevant years. They break the population into three groups: graduates, drop-outs, and non-matriculants. Their central findings are these:

- "The graduates seem to have emerged from their TFA experience with an enhanced attitudinal commitment to service and civic life."
- "Bottom line: relative to their age peers, our subjects participate at very high levels in all the forms of civic/political participation we examine."
- "The graduates lag significantly behind one or both of the other groups in their current levels of participation in “civic activity,” “institutional politics” and “social movements.”"

- "On all seven dimensions of civic life—service, civic activity, institutional politics, social movements, voting, charitable giving and pro-social employment—the graduates lag significantly behind one or both comparison groups."

These are surprising findings. The TFA population as a whole shows a higher level of civic engagement than the general population. But within the TFA population, the graduates lag. This seems to cast doubt on one of the central claims for community service: that the experience leads young people to develop characteristics that make them ***more*** engaged in the future.

McAdam and Brandt offer a few hypotheses about how we might explain these findings: burnout, delay in transition to career, a feeling of "having done my part," a sense of disillusionment with service; and the possibility that non-matriculants may have had other experiences that are even more conducive to lifetime civic engagement.

Here is their summary conclusion:

What, in the end, are we prepared to say about the significantly lower levels of current service on the part of matriculants relative to non-matriculants? Temporary exhaustion on the part of recent graduates (and drop-outs) appears to be a part of the story. But so too are negative reactions to TFA and, for many, the isolating nature of the teaching experience. Whatever the mix of these (and unmeasured) explanatory factors, the stark fact remains: far from increasing subsequent civic involvement, the TFA experience appears, for some, to depress current service participation.

But here is another striking conclusion based on their data: the gap evidenced in the civic engagement of the graduates is entirely explained by the 15% of graduates whose experience with TFA left them dissatisfied. The 85% who were satisfied with the program demonstrate the same levels of civic engagement as the drop-outs and non-matriculants. "It is the 15 percent of the graduates who have a retrospectively negative view of their TFA experience who account for the service/civic “gap” between graduates and the other two subject groups." This suggests that a program for community service needs to work hard to assure that the expectations of its volunteers are met.

McAdam and Brandt go out of their way to indicate that their research should not be understood as a foundation of criticism of TFA or of programs of civic engagement more broadly. Rather, their goal is to find ways of assessing causal claims that are made on behalf of programs of youth engagement and community service. In order to influence attitudes and behavior, we need to have evidence-based analysis of how a variety of relevant institutions actually work. This kind of survey research is one such instrument of assessment.

The largest national service program in the US today is AmeriCorps (including CityYear). Here is a link to an ongoing study of AmeriCorps members and their levels of civic engagement following their period of service. McAdam and Brandt summarize the most recent findings of the AmeriCorps study:

The 2008 results are representative of the findings from the study as a whole. While AmeriCorps members differ from those in the comparison group on some attitudinal items, behavioral effects are few and far between. The two groups—AmeriCorps and comparison—were compared on fourteen measures of civic participation, including voting, charitable giving, and volunteer service. They differed on only four, with one of the differences favoring members of the comparison groups. In short, the modal behavioral

effect appears negligible.

The survey research that McAdam-Brandt have done is one interesting and important way of trying to gauge the impact of a certain kind of institution on a feature of social psychology. It is intriguing to wonder whether other tools might also shed light on the transformative and developmental processes that occur within the experience of intensive community service. For example, how does the experience of working together in a racially and socially mixed group affect the social understandings and motivations of the young people who are involved? How does the experience of spending a summer in a public health clinic in Chiapas influence the college students who participate? Are there qualitative methodologies available that would shed more light on these concrete mechanisms of identity formation? Would a study based on interviews and focus groups provide some insight into the processes of change that young people undergo in an AmeriCorps placement, a CityYear team, or an intense two months in a poor community in Mexico?

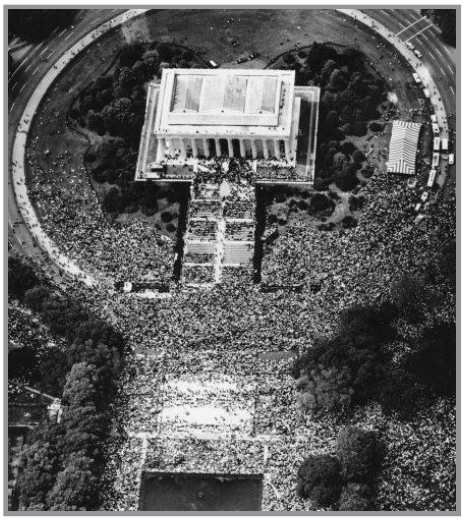
Suppose a researcher carried out a focus-group study on a group of CityYear corps members from September to April, and suppose the research provided evidence suggesting that Corps members had acquired specific competences of inter-community understanding. Suppose interviews and focus group videos show that white corps members had demonstrated a growing ability to understand the situations and worldviews of their black or brown fellow corps members, and vice versa. This would be evidence for judging that the CityYear environment leads to social-psychological development in the area of inter-cultural and inter-racial competence. The young people who have undergone these experiences have become more attuned to racism, racial disadvantage, and the nuances of difference that exist in the perceptions of white, black, and brown young people. They have increased their skill and confidence in interacting with a wider range of people. And, presumably, they will live their adult lives with greater commitment to inter-group dialogue and struggle to reduce the inequalities associated with race in our country. How might this set of facts relate to the framing of a longitudinal survey of CityYear alumni?

Essentially we would reason along these lines. If the changes and developmental mechanisms that were documented in the qualitative study are real and durable, then there should also be differences in the attitudes and behaviors of CityYear alumni five, ten, and fifteen years later. So a survey of alumni, along with an appropriately defined control group, should demonstrate significant differences in attitude and behavior. And if there are no such differences, then we would be pushed towards concluding either that the developmental changes identified in the qualitative study were spurious, or they were indurable. So there is a close logical relationship between the hypotheses suggested by the qualitative study (about processes and effects of social development) and the longitudinal study (about the attitudes and behaviors of a population at later moments in time).

This is important work if we are interested in helping young people acquire the attitudes, values, and practices that will make them good citizens and caring members of communities. And ultimately, it is a question that can be usefully investigated using a variety of tools of social and behavioral research.
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:27PM (-05:00)

The March on Washington, August 1963

Monday, January 18, 2010



African-American citizens and a host of supporters made some of this country's most important history almost forty-seven years ago in the mobilization that resulted in the March on Washington in August, 1963. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his most famous speech on the occasion, and of course many of us are remembering Dr. King's legacy today as thousands of people throughout the country give a day of service in his memory.

(Over eight million people have viewed this YouTube video of the speech.)

The civil rights movement created deep and permanent changes in our country, and they were hard won. And what is clear today is the depth of change that was needed -- not at the margin, not gradually, but at the core and rapidly. The attitudes and structures that constituted racial inequality and racism in this country in the 1950s and 1960s were a profound, coercive social reality. Only a concerted, courageous, and sustained social movement involving millions of people could have broken the roots of that system of thought and power. (Doug McAdam's Freedom Summer and Taylor Branch's Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63 provide vivid narratives of the depth of these challenges and responses.)

It is hard to think of many historical social movements that had as much impact and success as the U.S. civil rights movement. Its objective was not to change a temporary situation -- a war, a military occupation, an egregious dictatorship, or a famine -- but to create a thorough change in attitudes, ideas, and institutions; and to do that in a nation in which racism was organic. Laws, public schools, housing, jobs, universities, hospitals, and transportation -- all were racialized, all demanded change. And then to create a movement that deliberately worked through nonviolent change -- this was exceptional.

A rich tradition of leadership within the black community is one part of the story of success of this struggle for equality. Of course many of the leaders and agents of change of that movement are now household names -- Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy. But many other key figures are not so well remembered. One man in particular deserves recognition, ***Bayard Rustin***. Rustin was a civil rights activist throughout the 1940s and 1950s. He was one of the earliest organizers of what became known as the Freedom Rides, and he served 22 days on a chain gang in North Carolina for violation of segregation laws in transportation in 1947. (He also was sentenced in 1944 to two years in the Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary for violations of the Selective Service Act as a Quaker pacifist and war resister.)

Rustin was the key organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, and he was an invaluable strategist for Dr. King. But because of his open homosexuality he kept his visible role in the mobilization of the March on Washington to a minimum. Numerous

participants credit his organizational abilities and acute perception of what the moment required as crucial to the success of the March and what followed from it. He went on to become an outspoken advocate for gay and lesbian rights in the 1980s. Rustin is a great example of the persistence and courage shown by so many civil rights activists and leaders throughout America's struggles. (Here is some basic information about Rustin's biography. The NPR program ***State of the Re:Union*** ran an excellent piece on Rustin this morning; link. Here is a film based on Rustin's life.)

Rustin stands out as a particularly vivid example of a kind of leader who was common throughout the early decades of the modern civil rights movement: articulate, smart, passionate, committed, and courageous in the face of prejudice and threat. And there were hundreds of such men and women. For example, Doug McAdam provides an appendix in Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970 listing well over 150 leaders from churches, NAACP local chapter, independents, and students who were important protest leaders during the late 1950s. And the networks and organizational capabilities of these men and women translated into successful mobilizations throughout the South.

McAdam's account of the rise of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s also gives particular emphasis to the organizations that existed within African-American society, and the millions of people who supported those organizations. Particularly important were the churches, the local NAACP chapters, and the universities. "Perhaps the most important resource supplied by these institutions wa a potentially mobilizable body of participants. By virtue of their integration into the most organized segments of the black community, the students, church members, and NAACP personnel were readily available for recruitment into the movement" (128). The movement was successful in the face of often violent opposition, because hundreds of thousands of African-American people supported its efforts with courage and tenacity.

As we reflect on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., it is crucial to remember how steep the challenges were and how much we all owe to the activists and followers who joined with King and brought us closer to a society embodying racial justice and equality. And as an observation about history, we can marvel at the magnitude of change that these men and women brought about.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:43PM (-05:00)

Defining and specifying social phenomena

Sunday, January 24, 2010



Insect (df): a class within the arthropods that have a chitinous exoskeleton, a three-part body (head, thorax, and abdomen), three pairs of jointed legs, compound eyes, and two antennae.

What is involved in offering a definition of a complex social phenomenon such as "fascism", "rationality", "contentious politics", "social capital", or "civic engagement"? Is there any sense in which a definition can be said to be correct or incorrect, given the facts we find in the world? Are

some definitions better than others? Does a definition correspond to the world in some way? Or is a definition no more than a conventional stipulation about how we propose to use a specific word?

There are several fundamental questions that need answering when we consider the meaning of a term such as "fascism" or "contentious politics". What do we intend the term to refer to? How is the term used in ordinary language? What are the paradigm cases? What are the ordinary criteria of application of the term -- the necessary and sufficient conditions, the rules of application? What characteristics do we mean to pick out in using the term? What is our proto-theory that guides our use and application of the concept?

From the scientific point of view, the use of a concept is to single out a family of objects or phenomena that can usefully be considered together for further analysis and explanation. "Metals" are a group of materials that have similar physical properties such as conductivity and ductility. And it turns out that these phenomenologically similar materials also have important underlying physical properties in common, that explain the phenomenological properties. So it is possible to provide a physical theory of metals that unifies and explains their observable similarities. The scientist's interest, then, is in the phenomena and not the concept or its definition.

In order to investigate further we need to do several kinds of work. We need to specify more exactly what it is that we are singling out. What is "civic engagement"? Does this concept single out a specific range of behaviors and motivations? Would we include a spontaneous gift to a fund for a family who lost their home to a fire "civic engagement"? What about membership in a college fraternity? So we have to say what we mean by the term; we have to indicate which bits of the world are encompassed by the term; and perhaps we need to give some reason to expect that these phenomena are relevantly similar.

Several semantic acts are relevant in trying to do this work. "Ostension" is the most basic: pointing to the clear cases of civic engagement or fascism and saying "By civic engagement I mean things like these and things relevantly similar to them." If we go this route then we put a large part of the burden of the semantics in the world and in the judgment of the observer: is this next putative example of the stuff really similar to the paradigm examples?

But there is also an intensional part of the work: what do we ***intend*** to designate in pointing to this set of paradigm cases? Is it the motivation of the activity, the features of social connections involved in the activity, or the effects of the activity that are motivating the selection of cases? Is fascism a kind of ideology, a type of social movement, or a type of political organization? These questions aren't answered by the gesture of ostension; rather, the observer needs to specify something about the nature of the phenomena that are intended to be encapsulated by the concept.

Once we have stipulated the extension and criteria of application of the term, we can then take a further step and offer a theory of this stuff. It may be a theory in materials science intended to explain the workings of some common characteristics of this stuff -- electrical or thermal conductivity, melting point, hardness. Or it may be a social theory of the origins and institutional tendencies of the stuff (fascism, social movements, civic engagement). Either way, the theory goes beyond semantics and makes substantive empirical statement about the world.

It is not the case that all scientific concepts are constructed through a process of abstraction from observable phenomena. A theoretical concept is one whose meaning exceeds the observable associations or criteria associated with the concept. It may postulate unobservable mechanisms or structures which are only indirectly connected to observable phenomena, or it may hypothesize distinctions and features that help to explain the gross behavior of the phenomena. The value of a theoretical concept is not measured by its fit with ordinary language usage or its direct applicability to the observable world; instead, a theoretical concept is useful if it helps the theorist to formulate hypotheses about the unobservable mechanisms that underlie a phenomenon and that help to provide some empirical order to the phenomena.

In order to support empirical research, theoretical concepts need somehow to be related to the world of observation and experience. An important activity is “operationalizing” a theoretical concept. This means specifying a set of observable or experimental characteristics that permit the investigator to apply the concept to the world. But the operational criteria associated with a concept do not exhaust its meaning, and different investigators may provide a different set of operational criteria for the same concept. And a specific scheme of operationalization of a concept like "social capital" or "civic engagement" may itself be debated.

The idea of a "natural kind" arises in the natural sciences. Concepts like metal, acid, insect, and gene are linguistic elements that are thought to refer to a family or group of entities that share fundamental properties in common. Kinds are thought to exist in the world, not simply in conceptual schemes. So having identified the kind, we can then attempt to arrive at a theory of the underlying nature of things like this. (It is an important question to consider whether there are any "social kinds;" in general, I think not.)

These reflections raise many of the intellectual problems associated with defining a field of empirical research in the social sciences. Research always forces us to single out some specific body of phenomena for study. This means specifying and conceptualizing the phenomena. And eventually it means arriving at theories of how these sorts of things work. But there is a permanent gap between concept and the world that means that certain questions can't be answered: for example, what is fascism **really**? There are no social essences that definitions might be thought to identify. Instead, we can offer analysis and theory about specific fascist movements and regimes, based on this or that way of specifying the concept of fascism. But there is nothing in the world that dictates how we define fascism and classify, specify, and theorize historical examples of fascism. The semantic ideas of family resemblance, ideal type, and cluster concept work best for concepts in the social sciences.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:06AM (-05:00)

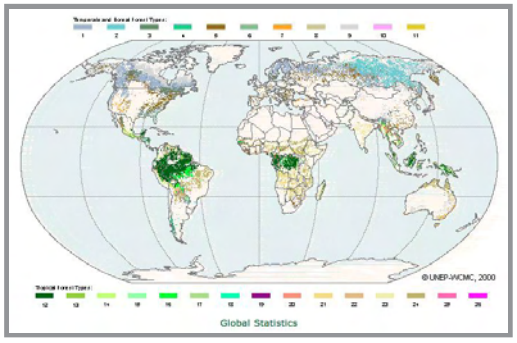
What exists in the social realm?

Tuesday, January 26, 2010

What sorts of social things exist? Does the "proletariat" exist as a social entity? There are certainly workers; but is there a "working class"? What is needed in order to attribute existence to a social agglomeration?

We might want to say that things exist when they have enough persistence over time to admit of re-identification and study from one time to another. Persistence involves some degree of stability in a core set of properties. A cloud shaped like a cat has a set of visible





characteristics at a given moment; but these characteristics disappear quickly, and this collection of water droplets quickly morphs into a different collection in a short time. So we are inclined not to call the cat-shaped cloud an entity. On the other hand, "the Black Forest" exists because we can locate its approximate boundaries and composition over several centuries. The forest is an agglomeration of trees in a geographical space; but we might reasonably judge that the forest has properties that we can investigate that are not simply properties of individual trees (density and canopy temperature, for example). The forest undergoes change over time; the mix of types of trees may shift from one decade to another, the density of plants changes, and the human uses of forest products change. And we can ask questions like: "How has the ecology of the Black Forest changed in the twentieth century?" So it seems reasonable enough that we can refer to the forest as a geographical or ecological entity.

We can also classify individual forests into **types** of forests: temperate rain forest, tropical rain forest, coniferous forest, etc. (Here is a 26-fold classification of forests by UNEP-WCMC; the map below represents the global distribution of these types of forests.) And we can ask ecological questions about the properties and processes that are characteristic of the various types of forests.

So what characteristics should a putative social entity possess in order to fall within the working ontology of the social sciences? Here are a few possible candidate ontological features that might be associated with thing-hood in the social realm:

- persistence of basic characteristics over time -- spatio-temporal continuity and social analogs such as nucleated population with shared norms and identities
- an internal structural-functional organization
- some sort of regulative social process that maintains the thing's identity over time, either internal or external
- social cohesion among the individuals who constitute the entity deriving from their social orientation to the entity (labor union, religious community, ethnic group)
- an account of the particular material-social mechanisms through which the identity and persistence of the entity are maintained

According to these sorts of criteria, we might say that social things like these examples exist:

- United Auto Workers
- General Motors corporation
- First Presbyterian Church of Dubuque
- Missouri Synod
- Kylie Minogue Facebook fan club

- 18th Street gang of Los Angeles
- Michigan Legislature
- Internal Revenue Service
- University of Wisconsin
- apprentice system for electrical workers
- social practice of Islamic charity

Here is a slightly more abstract formulation. We might say that these kinds of social entities exist: organizations, both formal and informal; networks of individuals oriented to each other and/or a social goal; social groups unified by features of consciousness or existential circumstance; bureaucracies of the state; enduring social practices; institutions possessing internal organization, rules, and purposes.

Social entities are composed of socially constituted individuals. So the sinews of composition are important. We can recognize a wide range of ways in which individuals are composed into larger social entities: agglomeration, adherence, mutual recognition, coercion, contractual relationships, marketing, recruitment, incentive systems, ... This is one place where "assemblage" theory seems to be useful (Manuel DeLanda, A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory And Social Complexity.)

Part of the confusion in this topic is the distinction between things and kinds of things. We might agree that the Chicago Police Department exists as a social entity. But we may remain uncertain as to whether "police departments" or "state coercive apparatuses" exist as higher-order categories of social things. And perhaps this is a confusion; perhaps the issue of existence applies only to individual entities, not kinds or classes of entities. On this approach, we would stipulate the minimum characteristics of existence we would want to require of individual social entities and then be "nominalistic" about the higher-level categories or concepts into which we classify these singular individuals.

In considering the ontology of the social world it is important to be attentive to the fallacy of reification: the error of thinking that the fact that we can formulate an abstract noun (proletariat, fascism) allows us to infer that it exists as a persistent, recurring social entity. So when we identify a given social entity as an X, we need to regard it as an open question, "What do X's have in common?" We can avoid the fallacy of reification by focusing on the importance of providing microfoundations for the enduring characteristics of social entities. It is the underlying composition of the entity rather than its location within a classificatory system that provides an explanatory foundation for the behavior of the entity.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:39PM (-05:00)

Relations, processes, and activities

Thursday, January 28, 2010

An earlier post asked what sorts of social entities exist. Posing the question this way leads us to think of persistent abstract things populating the social world -- for example, structures, organizations, or institutions. But as a commentator to the earlier post pointed out, there are persistent phenomena in the social world that don't look much like **things** and look more like **activities** and **processes**. Grammatically they have more in common with verbs than nouns. And when many such social phenomena are described using nouns, we are often forced to interpret them in a non-referential way.

Take the social realities of friendship, solidarity, and inflation.



The first is a characteristic of social relationships; it is a relational concept. It doesn't make sense to think of "friendship" as a concatenation of monadic atoms of "friend units"; rather, the concept of friend evinces a set of relational characteristics between persons. So "friendship" doesn't designate a continuing "thing" in the world; instead, it designates a complex relational and psychological feature of pairs of persons, widely separated across population and space. Our theory of friendship encapsulates our interpretation of the mental and behavioral states of persons who are in the relationship of friendship with each other.

Solidarity has this feature of relationality, and it adds a feature of social motivation and psychological orientation to a group. We can ask whether solidarity exists in the social world, and we can reasonably answer that it does. But when we affirm that "solidarity exists", we really mean that "there are numerous instances of groups and individuals in which members of the group willingly conform their behavior to the needs and purposes of the group." Our explanation of "solidarity" is likely to invoke abstract ideas about individuals within consciously constituted groups rather than something analogous to a social substance. So solidarity is not a thing, but rather a dynamic feature of consciousness shared in varying ways by individuals who orient themselves to a group.

"Inflation" is a different sort of social noun. It refers to a complex social state of affairs reflecting a set of ***processes*** in which prices of goods are determined by market forces and prices are rising across a range of commodities. We cannot define the social reality of "inflation" without specifying a set of distributed social facts and identifying a number of social processes. So inflation too doesn't look at all like a social thing.

Each of these social nouns corresponds to a social reality. But this reality doesn't look much like a set of fixed entities or composites of entities. The semantics of objects and things doesn't work well for this range of social vocabulary. And yet each of these terms identifies a domain that is perfectly well suited to empirical inquiry and discovery. The social reality of friendship practices differs across cultures; friendship practice has some degree of stability over time; and we can discover quite a bit about the culture, norms, and practices of friendship in a particular culture. And likewise with solidarity and inflation. Each is a legitimate object of empirical inquiry; and neither conforms to the ontology of "thing" with fixed location and properties.

What this discussion suggests is that our ontology of the social world needs to encompass not only a range and variety of ***entities*** -- structures, institutions, organizations, but also ontological categories that reflect a more fluid set of social realities: processes, practices, rules, relations, and activities. This observation converges with the styles of thought of thinkers as various as Charles Tilly and Norbert Elias; Tilly refers to "relational realism," and Elias is an advocate of "process sociology".
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:57PM (-05:00)

Conceptual schemes and social ontology

Thursday, February 04, 2010



What does grammar tell us about the nature of our representations of the world? Do the linguistic categories that we use fundamentally shape the way we organize our understanding of the world? Do different cultures or different linguistic communities possess different "conceptual schemes"? Are different conceptual schemes incommensurable or can we translate from one to the other? These questions come up in the context of any discussion of social ontology -- what does the social realm consist of? In an earlier post we noticed that "thing" and "object" are ontological categories that perhaps don't work as well in the social realm. Perhaps more fluid categories such as process, relation, or activity work better.

First, what is a conceptual scheme? It is an interrelated set of high-level, abstract concepts that allow us to break the empirically or historically given into a discrete set of cognitive boxes. We might think of it as our highest-level concept vocabulary, within which more specific descriptors are arranged. Our conceptual scheme gives us the mental resources needed to represent, describe, and explain the empirical reality we encounter. Color, shape, mass, position, and force might be examples of components of a conceptual scheme for the realm of ordinary empirical experience. Structure, group, ideology, and network might be components for the realm of ordinary sociological experience. A conceptual scheme is thought in some way to be ***comprehensive***: all the phenomena in a certain domain ought to find a place within the conceptual scheme.

Peter Strawson offered a very focused analysis of the everyday metaphysics involved in the ways we analyze and represent the world around us. He proposes in Individuals (1959) that we can do "descriptive metaphysics" by examining the conceptual schemes we actually use. And he argues that there are core conceptual categories that are universal. (Paul Snowdon provides a useful discussion in his article in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

Here is Strawson's preliminary description of a conceptual scheme:

We think of the world as containing particular things some of which are independent of ourselves; we think of the world's history as made up of particular episodes in which we ourselves may or may not have a part; and we think of these particular things and events as included in the topics of our common discourse, as things about which we can talk to each other. These are remarks about the way we think of the world, our conceptual scheme. A more recognizably philosophical, though no clearer, way of expressing them would be to say that our ontology comprises objective particulars.... Part of my aim is to exhibit some general and structural features of the conceptual scheme in terms of which we think about particular things. (*Individuals*, 15)

How might we begin to provide a "descriptive metaphysics" for social knowledge along the lines of what Strawson describes? It is clear, to begin, that sociological analysis generally involves a rich and intertwined set of concepts and ontological assumptions

about social phenomena. Consider the range of approaches we might take in analyzing a complex historical phenomenon such as fascism: as a social movement, as a political psychology, as an expression of psychopathology, as an ensemble of ideological currents, as a set of political institutions, as a collection of social constituents, and so on, indefinitely.

More fundamentally, what conceptual choices do we need to make when we consider the swirling, fluid complexity of politics, culture, and struggle in Europe in the 1930s? We might place ideological and cultural change at the center; we might focus on the artistic and literary creations of the period; we might emphasize power or social class; we might give primary emphasis to economic change; or we might be drawn particularly to differences in behavior and regime across countries and regions of Europe. Each represents a different way of conceptualizing the historical reality of the 1930s in Europe.

So how can we make some progress towards analyzing social grammar or social conceptual frameworks? We can ask this sort of question at two levels -- ordinary social cognition and language, and organized empirical social science. At the ordinary-language level, we can ask questions like these: how do ordinary speakers represent the social world in which they live? What is the nature of the American-English social vocabulary, the descriptive and referential terms that American people use to make statements, draw distinctions, and offer generalizations about the social world they inhabit? At the level of theory, we can consider a given area of research and ask about the semantics and logical relationships associated with the terms that theorists use to describe and explain the phenomena of interest.

For ordinary language, we might find a list of common terms such as these:

- Washington [the Federal government, the bureaucracy, the political system of the Congress, the major Federal agencies]
- Lansing [state government and its bureaucracy]
- justice / injustice [of taxation, affirmative action, executive salaries]
- corruption [misuse of powers of office in private or public sectors]
- major economic institutions [banks, banking system, corporations]
- major economic facts and circumstances [unemployment, poverty, recession]
- religious institutions
- religious / ethnic identities
- facts about race, racial differences, racial inequalities
- interpretations of socially oriented behavior by others [altruism, egoism, pride, shame, rudeness]
- judgments about unfavorable social change ["kids have no values anymore"]

Ordinary people use these concepts and other to organize and criticize their social world; and they are often articulate about what they mean by the various concepts. But ordinary social cognition is perhaps less able to sketch out the relations that exist among the various social phenomena; this, perhaps, is one of the key tasks of social theory. (Here is an earlier post on ordinary social cognition.)

Second, we might consider the vocabulary and conceptual resources of a given sociologist or sociological tradition. For example, here are the main concepts Michael Mann uses in his description and analysis of European fascism in Fascists:

- fascism [to be defined as "the pursuit of a transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism"]
- socialism
- fascist followers and activists

- power organizations
- social movement
- nation-state
- nationalism
- ideology
- social constituency [groups characterized by status, class, occupation]
- individuals
- modernity
- paramilitarism
- authoritarian regime
- democratic regime
- capitalism [as an industrial social whole]
- social power [ideological, economic, military, political]
- individualism, racism, ethnic purity ideology [as components of ideology]
- major events and crises -- World War I, the Great Depression
- religious institutions and ideologies

These specific concepts could be related to a fairly short list of higher-level social concepts or what we might call social ***categories***: individuals and their characteristics; social groups; structures; ideologies; events; influence terms [power, prestige, status]. But almost all the concepts on the list drawn from Mann's work involve a conceptual assemblage from the higher-level categories. Capitalism is a set of structures, a set of social movements, and a set of ideologies. Racism depends upon both structure and ideology. Modernity is an ideological-cultural formation, a technological-scientific stage, and a socio-economic formation. So the relation between the higher-level category system and mid-level sociological concepts is not one of subsumption but rather one of assembly, combination, or construction.

It is sometimes thought that our conceptual systems are simultaneously contingent and deeply influential in determining how we analyze the world around us. Different conceptual systems lead to different and incommensurable representations of the world. Donald Davidson wrote a pivotal essay on some of these questions ("On the very idea of a conceptual scheme" (1974; link)). Here is how Davidson summarizes the conceptual-relativist view:

> Conceptual schemes, we are told, are ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene. There may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, desires, hopes and bits of knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme. Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another. (5)

But ultimately Davidson argues that conceptual relativism and incommensurability are unintelligible. They are claims that cannot be stated coherently. And more positively, Davidson argues that we can understand each other's concepts and words by making use of a principle of charity: we interpret the other's speech, vocabulary, and syntax in such a way as to maximize the truth of statements he/she utters.

> We do this sort of off the cuff interpretation all the time, deciding in favor of reinterpretation of words in order to preserve a reasonable theory of belief. As philosophers we are peculiarly tolerant of systematic malapropism, and practised at interpreting the result. The process is that of constructing a viable theory of belief and meaning from sentences held true. (18)

We get a first approximation to a finished theory by assigning to sentences of a speaker conditions of truth that actually obtain (in our own opinion) just when the speaker holds those sentences true. The guiding policy is to do this as far as possible, subject to considerations of simplicity, hunches about the effects of social conditioning, and of course our common sense, or scientific, knowledge of explicable error. (18)
(Here is a good discussion of Davidson's view in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)

What is the situation in the field of social knowledge? Are there deeply divided conceptual beginnings for the analysis of the social realm? Or can we be confident in the mutual comprehensibility across practitioners of Marxist sociology, Durkheimian sociology, and ethnomethodology?

We can get some leverage on this question by asking whether we can provide concrete examples of candidates for alternative sets of social conceptual schemes. For example, are individualism and holism distinct conceptual schemes for social cognition? The first identifies human individuals as the fundamental "particular"; whereas the second identifies the social whole (structure, morality, ideology, class, way of life) as the fundamental particular. The first requires that we define or specify higher-level social entities or conditions in terms of a compound of features of individuals; the second takes the social whole as irreducible and specifies individuals in terms of their relations to a set of social factors.

Here is another possible example -- perhaps materialism and idealism are distinct conceptual schemes within which to organize social experience. The materialist scheme identifies a set of circumstances of the human organism (needs), the natural and build environment, and the forms of social activity that transform the environment as fundamental to social analysis. The idealist scheme takes states of consciousness -- ideas, ideologies, moralities, wants, preferences, modes of reasoning -- as fundamental to social analysis and undertakes to characterize social facts in these terms.

Or consider a third possible example: structure and process. A structure is an enduring configuration of social characteristics and positions, reproducing a set of powers and constraints for individuals enmeshed in these social relations. A process is an ensemble of things in circumstances of change over time. Structures emphasize permanence and stability; processes emphasize change and impermanence. So perhaps the "structure" lens leads sociologists to a very different representation of the social world than the "process" lens.

These examples make it credible that there are in fact alternative conceptual beginnings from which we can analyze the social world. What does not seem to be true, however, is the idea that these beginnings are incommensurable. Instead, it seems persuasive that ideas and statements that originate in an ontology of social wholes can be effectively restated in an ontology that originates in a world of individuals; likewise, materialist and ideological approaches to the social world seem compatible and mutually constructive rather than contradictory and incommensurable. The dichotomies considered here are not exclusive or incompatible. In fact, any adequate explanation of a social process or outcome is likely to need to refer to both sets of categories. And this implies something very similar to the position Strawson and Davidson arrive at: the idea of inter-translatability and mutual comprehension across these large conceptual divides.

(These questions converge to some extent with several other lines of thought -- the Whorf hypothesis (Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf), Quine's theories of indeterminacy of translation and ontological relativity (Word and Object, Ontological Relativity), Kant's view that all knowledge is structured through a set of "categories" including cause, space, time, and objects (Critique of Pure Reason), and Kuhn's view of the incommensurability of scientific paradigms (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions). Significantly, Strawson discusses Kant at length in The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, and Davidson takes up the debate with Quine, Whorf, and Kuhn.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:47PM (-05:00)

The inexact science of economics

Saturday, February 06, 2010

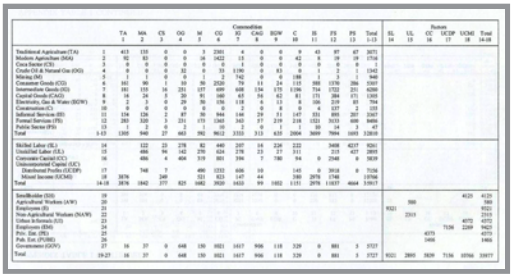


Image: social accounting matrix, Bolivia, 1997

Economics is an "inexact" science; or so Daniel Hausman argues in The Inexact and Separate Science of Economics (Google Books link). As it implies, this description conveys that economic laws have only a loose fit with observed economic behavior. Here are the loosely related interpretations that Hausman offers for this idea, drawing on the thinking of John Stuart Mill:

1. Inexact laws are approximate. They are true within some margin of error.
2. Inexact laws are probabilistic or statistical. Instead of stating how human beings always behave, economic laws state how they usually behave.
3. Inexact laws make counterfactual assertions about how things *would be* in the absence of interferences.
4. Inexact laws are qualified with vague *ceteris paribus* clauses. (128)

Economics has also been treated by economists as a ***separate*** science: a science capable of explaining virtually all the phenomena in a reasonably well-defined domain of social phenomena. Here is Hausman's interpretation of a separate science:

1. Economics is defined in terms of the causal factors with which it is concerned, not in terms of a domain.
2. Economics has a distinct domain, in which its causal factors predominate.
3. The "laws" of the predominating causal factors are already reasonably well-known.
4. Thus, economic theory, which employs these laws, provides a unified, complete, but inexact account of its domain. (90-91)

These characteristics of economic theories and models have implications for several important areas: truth, prediction, explanation, and confirmation. Is economics a scientific theory of existing observable economic phenomena? Or is it an abstract, hypothetical model with only tangential implications for the observable social world? Is economics an empirical science or a mathematical system?

Let's look at these questions in turn. First, can we give a good interpretation of what it would mean to believe that an inexact theory or law is "true"? Here is a possible answer: we may believe that there are real but unobservable causal processes that "drive" social phenomena. To say that a social or economic theory is true is to say that it correctly

identifies a real causal process -- whether or not that process operates with sufficient separation to give rise to strict empirical consequences. Galilean laws of mechanics are true for falling objects, even if feathers follow unpredictable trajectories through turbulent gases.

Second, how can we reconcile the desire to use economic theories to make predictions about future states with the acknowledged inexactness of those theories and laws? If a theory includes hypotheses about underlying causal mechanisms that are true in the sense just mentioned, then a certain kind of prediction is justified as well: "in the absence of confounding causal factors, the presence of X will give rise to Y." But of course this is a useless predictive statement in the current situation, since the whole point is that economic processes rarely or never operate in isolation. So we are more or less compelled to conclude that theories based on inexact laws are not a useable ground for empirical prediction.

Third, in what sense do the deductive consequences of an inexact theory "explain" a given outcome -- either one that is consistent with those consequences or one that is inconsistent with the consequences? Here inexact laws are on stronger ground: after the fact, it is often possible to demonstrate that the mechanisms that led to an outcome are those specified by the theory. Explanation and prediction are not equIvalent. Natural selection explains the features of Darwin's finches -- but it doesn't permit prediction of future evolutionary change.

And finally, what is involved in trying to use empirical data to confirm or disconfirm an inexact theory? Given that we have stipulated that the theory has false consequences, we can't use standard confirmation theory. So what kind of empirical argument would help provide empirical evaluation of an inexact theory? One possibility is that we might require that the predictions of the theory should fall within a certain range of the observable measurements -- which is implied by the idea of "approximately true" consequences. But actually, it is possible that we might hold that a given theory is inexact, true, and wildly divergent from observed experience. (This would be true of the application of classical mechanics to the problem of describing the behavior of light, irregular objects shot out of guns under water.) Hausman confronts this type of issue when he asks why we should believe that the premises of general equilibrium theory are true. But here too there are alternatives, including piecemeal confirmation of individual causal hypotheses. Hausman refers to this possibility as a version of Mill's deductive method.

I take up some of these questions in my article, "Economic Models in Development Economics" link, included in On the Reliability of Economic Models: Essays in the Philosophy of Economics. This article discusses some related questions about the reliability and applicability of computable general equilibrium models in application to the observed behavior of real economies. Here are some concluding thoughts from that article concerning the empirical and logical features that are relevant to the assessment of CGE models:

"The general problem of the antecedent credibility of an economic model can be broken down into more specific questions concerning the validity, comprehensiveness, robustness, reliability, and autonomy of the model. I will define these concepts in the following terms.

- Validity is a measure of the degree to which the assumptions employed in the construction of the model are thought to correspond to the real processes underlying

the phenomena represented by the model.

- **Comprehensiveness** is the degree to which the model is thought to succeed in capturing the major causal factors that influence the features of the behavior of the system in which we are interested.
- **Robustness** is a measure of the degree to which the results of the model persist under small perturbations in the settings of parameters, formulation of equations, etc.
- **Autonomy** refers to the stability of the model's results in face of variation of contextual factors.
- **Reliability** is a measure of the degree of confidence we can have in the data employed in setting the values of the parameters.

These are epistemic features of models that can be investigated more or less independently and prior to examination of the empirical success or failure of the predictions of the model."

(Hausman's book is virtually definitive in its formulation of the tasks and scope of the philosophy of economics. When conjoined with the book he wrote with Michael McPherson, Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy and Public Policy, the philosophy of economics itself becomes a "separate science": virtually all the important questions are raised throughout a bounded domain, and a reasonable set of theories are offered to answer those questions.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:35PM (-05:00)

Scott's social imagination

Monday, February 08, 2010

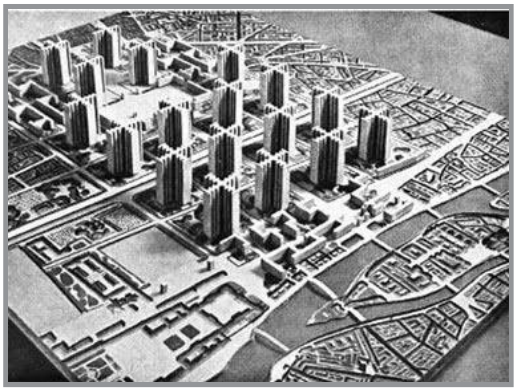
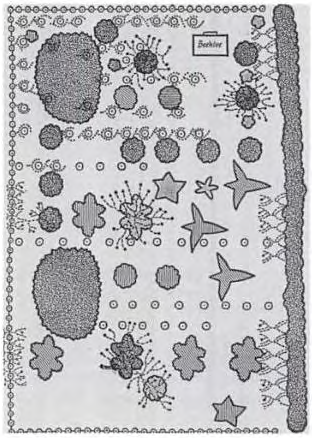


Image: Le Corbusier, Paris plan What is most remarkable about Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed is the texture and grain of the argument that Scott makes. This is a high-resolution argument that leaves little to doubt.

The guiding thesis is original and striking enough -- that a mental framework of "high modernism" guided the thinking of a wide range of twentieth-century reformers, from agricultural specialists to city planners to revolutionaries; and that this framework led to predictable disasters. Ecology, social behavior, and cityscapes are complex, involuted systems that demand locally tailored knowledge, and the abstract simplifications of scientific forestry or le Corbusier's geometric abstractions lead to unidimensional disasters. This is powerful and insightful stuff. (See an earlier post for more discussion of the main argument of the book.)

What I'd like to highlight here is something beyond this. It is the remarkable density and variety of the evidence upon which Scott draws to illustrate and confirm his thesis. This is a kind of research and discovery that seems to have virtually no counterpart in either the social sciences or the humanities.

His discussion of tropical agriculture is detailed and exact. He finds Edgar Anderson writing on Guatemalan gardens -- complete with diagrams; and it precisely confirms the



36. Edgar Anderson's drawing of an orchard garden in Santa Lucia, Guatemala

point that traditional cultivator cultures have finetuned their crops and patterns of cultivation to the specific features of the micro-environment. He describes in great detail the goals, values, and drawings of le Corbusier and the plans he developed for Brasilia -- and these precisely capture the high modernist values that he has described. So Scott's thesis doesn't look like a hypothetical theory that needs to be confirmed through its consequences so much as an extended empirical interpretation that can be directly established or refuted.

It seems that Scott's thinking in this book -- the origins of the empirical, historical, and textual research that Scott eventually carried out -- began with the idea of legibility and state power, his insight that states seek to increase their ability to see and record the situations of their subjects. This is how he begins the book --

Originally, I set out to understand why the state has always seemed to be the enemy of "people who move around," to put it crudely. In the context of Southeast Asia, this promised to be a fruitful way of addressing the perennial tensions between mobile, slash-and-burn hill peoples on one hand and wet-rice, valley kingdoms on the other. .... Much of early modern European statecraft seemed similarly devoted to rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format. (Introduction)
(This topic becomes the central focus in his next book, The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia.)

But two other main insights accumulated as well. A second and somewhat independent source of inspiration is Scott's longstanding respect for the knowledge systems and agency of ordinary people. Several strands of his research experience in Malaysia show up here --the mango tree and the ants, the local ecological wisdom of peasant farmers, and even the capacity of peasant communities to organize themselves. Scott has been face-to-face with local peasant knowledge, and he respects it. This knowledge he seeks to theorize as "Metis".

A third component of the inspiration and guiding thrust of the book is the puzzle of well-intentioned development disaster. Colonial agriculture and monocropping, Soviet collectivization, and city modernization all had some component of good intentions for human welfare; so why did they go so badly wrong?

Scott has taken these interests and has built a highly original, factual, and insightful argument. He offers an interpretation of states, modernism, change, knowledge, and material culture that is exquisitely well matched to the historical details he provides.

It is as if we are watching a great art historian working through the corpus of a Picasso, shedding new light and insight on every page. But Scott isn't working with a previously defined corpus of paintings; he is pulling together wildly different areas of human behavior and building in the twentieth century. His canvas is the historical experience of twentieth century "modernization". And he demonstrates a depth knowledge of each of these areas sufficient to nail the interpretation cold. In Scott's hands the high modernism thesis isn't just a sketchy hypothesis or theory; it becomes close to an established fact.

Perhaps the best analogy to the kind of work Scott has done here is a great synthetic historian of medieval France who maintains that this period was driven by a very specific set of guiding ideas -- and then demonstrates in micro-level detail the impact and manifestation of these ideas in the early kings, the Burgundian city, the Loire estate, and the Norman village. But I'm not aware of any historian who has offered this level of depth interpretation of France -- not Bloch, not Pirenne, not Braudel. Perhaps Le Roy Ladurie comes close in Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324; but Ladurie's canvas is small. A different parallel is with Schama's interpretation of France during its revolution in Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution -- illustrating an interpretive point with small but deeply telling historical events like the Goncourts' balloon flight or the revolutionary monuments of Paris.

So what kind of work is this? Certainly not straight "political science". There is a good reason why Scott is named in the perestroika manifesto (post). It is not philosophy -- though it is admirably reflective, and in fact offers some original and valuable ideas about epistemology and ordinary knowledge. It has some similarity to historical interpretation of an epoch -- though it is thoroughly empirical and detail-oriented. And in some ways it resembles a careful, innovative piece of interpretive work in the humanities -- literature, art history, music criticism -- in that it works back and forth between an interpretive hypothesis and careful, detailed work at the micro-level (text, painting, farming culture). This is a powerful and original effort towards "understanding society" -- or at least important bits of the twentieth century.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:48PM (-05:00)

Works councils and US labor relations

Tuesday, February 09, 2010

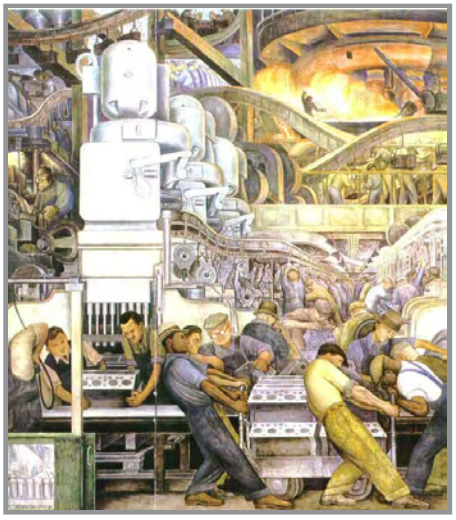


image: Diego Rivera, Rouge Plant mural, Detroit Institute of Arts

The United States has one of the lowest rates of union representation of all developed countries. The 1994 level of unionized workers in the US had fallen to about 12 percent of private sector employment, and the trend is downward. And the sole institutional form through which representation occurs in the US context is the union. So the vast majority of American workers are left with no formal representation within the firm when it comes to wages, benefits, or work practices.

This situation contrasts strikingly with the labor-management institutions in place in much of Europe and Japan. In most other countries legislation establishes the opportunity or the mandate for a second form of worker representation within the workplace, the **works council**. Industry-wide unions establish wage levels; public policy stipulates the level of the "social wage"; and works councils provide an institutionalized context in which management and employees consult with each other, exchange workplace information, and work out firm-specific implementations of industry-wide agreements. And, as Kathleen Thelen demonstrates, differences in the institutions surrounding labor in a market society can have major effects on important social and economic factors in the

societies in which they are embedded (How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan).

Joel Rogers and Wolfgang Streek's Works Councils: Consultation, Representation, and Cooperation in Industrial Relations is the result of an extensive NBER cross-country study of the economic and social effects of broadly implemented works councils in Europe and Japan. The bottom line is fairly clear: where they exist, these formal institutions of labor representation within the firm have clear theoretical and empirical benefits for productivity, worker skill levels, and willing patterns of cooperation between workers and management. (Richard Freeman's America Works: Critical Thoughts on the Exceptional U.S. Labor Market (2007) is a more general discussion of the singular nature of the American labor system.)

Generally speaking a works council system can be defined in these terms:

We define works councils as institutionalized bodies for representative communication between a single employer ("management") and the employees ("workforce") of a single plant or enterprise ("workplace"). (Rogers and Streek, 6)

This involves several aspects:

- It is a system of mandatory consultation by management to give organized expression to the considered views of employees to contemplated changes.
- Works councils do not have the authority to negotiate for wages and benefits; this is typically done by sectoral unions.
- Works councils are typically firm-specific, limited to consultation and exchange of information about local decision-making.

The benefits associated with works councils in Europe and Japan are many and well documented More specifically, the contributors found that works councils facilitate a number of welfare-enhancing outcomes:

- Exchange of information
- Enforcement of regulations
- Improvement of mutual trust and labor productivity
- Greater democracy and freedom for workers
- Enhancement of productivity
- Incentives for both management and employees to increase skill levels

Each of these outcomes is a substantial benefit within a market-based economic system. Take the issue of the enforcement of regulations, including OSHA rules, environmental regulations, and food safety assurance regimes. The inspectorate of the agencies responsible for these regulatory regimes cannot be sized to the levels needed to ensure enforcement through inspection and fines. There are simply too many workplaces and firms. And the only other current mechanism, private litigation when violations lead to individual damages, is too sporadic to constitute an effective enforcement regime. So, for example, workplace accident rates are dramatically higher in the United States than Japan and Sweden; the US death rate is 3.5 times that of Japan and 5.8 times that of Sweden (398). Works councils specifically empowered to gain knowledge about the regulatory requirements combined with detailed workplace knowledge can change this situation.

Or take the area of a cooperative exchange of information within the firm. When various actors have the opportunity and incentive to hoard information to further their particular interests -- whether management or employee -- then decisions will be faulty, efficiencies will be overlooked, and the production process will be less efficient than it could be. Works councils give employees a greater degree of confidence and trust in management and therefore a greater willingness to share useful workplace information. And management has a legal mandate to share pertinent information and to consult with employees about prospective decisions. These intersecting incentives and obligations promote a valuable cooperative exchange of information.

Richard Freeman and Edward Lazear go into detail in laying out the reasons grounded in microeconomics for expecting that works councils will be welfare-enhancing but need to be mandatory rather than voluntary. Central to their analysis is the issue of information flow within a firm:

Economic theory recognizes that asymmetries in information between labor and management can produce inefficient social outcomes. Different levels of a firm's hierarchy can use private information opportunistically, possibly through coalitions against other levels of the hierarchy. ... Legal requirements that management disclose information to elected works councils raises the possibility that councils may help resolve the communication problem and raise rents. (33)

They also emphasize the benefits for quality of decision making that flow from the obligation to consult with employees. "Consultation can increase enterprise surplus when workers offer solutions to firm problems that management fails to see ... and when management and labor together discover solutions to company problems that neither would have conceived separately" (44).

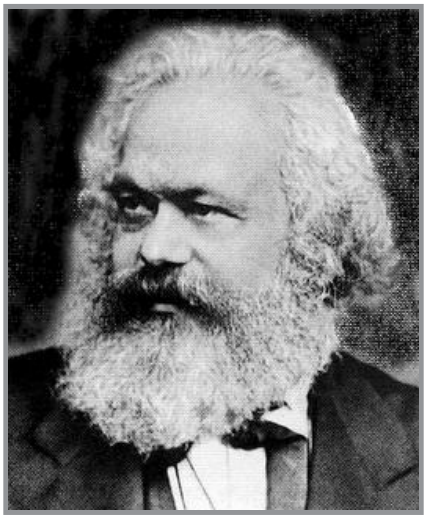
On first principles it would seem that the US economy would be better served by a system that incorporates works councils as a supplement to union representation. And workers are likely to be benefited in very specific ways --greater satisfaction in the workplace, greater involvement in a high-skills (and high-wage) economy, and a greater level of democratic equality. So what stands in the way of reforms leading in this direction? Joel Rogers considers this question in discouraging detail in the concluding chapter. The foundations of US labor law directly prohibit these forms of workplace representation, and the political will for implementing these policy changes is lacking on both sides. And it is difficult to see a gradual process of evolution in this direction based on voluntary establishment of these institutions by employers; the history of labor relations after both world wars suggest that these forms tend to extinguish when based on voluntary choices by enterprise owners. So it is difficult to see where the political will for this major reform of US labor relations might originate.

There is another consideration that favors the establishment of works councils that is not highlighted in this report -- the terrible situation of workers in the informal sector in the United States. Restaurant workers, day laborers, taxi drivers, non-unionized hotel workers, nannies, and housekeepers have very little ability to protect their interests and defend their legal rights. Health and safety standards apply to informal workplaces; all workers have a right to receive their wages in a timely way; and physical or verbal abuse should not be accepted in any workplace. But informal sector workers have very few means at their disposal to secure their rights in even these basic ways. Often undocumented, always in desperate need for a job, they are often at the mercy of bosses and managers who take advantage of them. There are emerging efforts to create analogs for works councils to help workers in these sectors to defend their rights and their livelihoods. Intriguing experiments have emerged; for example, Restaurant Opportunity Centers in several cities (link) and Domestic Workers United in New York City (link). See Janice Fine, Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream. Here is an extended description of the book (link) and here is a link to her Economic Policy Institute working paper, "Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream". Also of interest is the website for WorkingAmerica, the policy organization associated with the AFL-CIO. Progress along these lines would sigificantly improve basic features of social justice in our society.

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:46PM (-05:00)

"Theory" in sociology

Thursday, February 11, 2010



What is a sociological theory? And how does it relate to the challenge of providing explanations of social facts?

In the natural sciences the answer to this question is fairly clear. A theory is a hypothesis about one or more entities or processes and a specification of their operations and interactions. A theory is articulated in terms that permit rigorous and unambiguous derivation of implications for the behavior of a body of phenomena -- perhaps through specification of a set of equations or through a set of statements with deductive consequences. A theory may specify deterministic properties of a set of entities -- thus permitting point predictions about future states of the relevant system; or it may specify probabilistic relations among entities, giving rise to statements about the distribution of possible future states of the system. And a theory is provided with a set of "bridge" statements that permit the theorist to connect the consequences of the theory with predictions about observable states of affairs.

So in the natural sciences, theories are expected to have precise specification, deductive consequences, and specific bridge relationships to observable phenomena.

Is there anything like this construct in the social sciences?

The question of the role of theory in social thinking is a complex one, and the concept of theory seems to be an ambiguous one (as Gabriel Abend points out in an article mentioned below). At one end of the spectrum (is it really a spectrum?) is the idea that a theory is a hypothesis about a causal mechanism. It may refer to unobservable processes (and is therefore itself "unobservable"), but it is solidly grounded in the empirical world. It postulates a regular relationship between or among a set of observable social factors; for example, "middle class ideology makes young people more vulnerable to mobilization in XYZ movements."

At a much more abstract level, we might consider whether a theory is a broad family of ideas, assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses about how the world works. So Marxism or feminism might represent a theory of the forces that are most important in explaining certain kinds of phenomena. We might refer to this broad collection of ideas as a "theory". Or we might instead regard this type of intellectual formation as something more than a theory -- a paradigm or mental framework -- or something less than a theory -- a conceptual scheme.

Consider this taxonomy of the field of social knowledge-creation:

- **concepts** -- a vocabulary for organizing and representing the social world
- **theory** -- one or more hypotheses about causal mechanisms and processes

- **mental framework / paradigm** -- a set of presuppositions, ontological assumptions, guiding ideas, in terms of which one approaches a range of phenomena
- **epistemology** -- a set of ideas about what constitutes valid knowledge of a domain

And we might say that there is a generally rising order among these constructs. We need concepts to formulate hypotheses and theories; we need theories to give form to our mental frameworks; and we need epistemologies to justify or criticize theories and paradigms. In another sense, there is a descending order from epistemology to framework to concepts and theories: the framework and epistemology guide the researcher in designing a conceptual system and a set of theoretical hypotheses.

Where do constructs like feminism, critical race theory, or Marxism fall within this scheme? We might say that each of these bodies of thought involves commitments in each of these areas: specialized concepts, specific causal hypotheses, an organizing framework of analysis, and an epistemology that puts forward some specific ideas about the status of knowledge and representation.

The theory of "resource mobilization" and social movements is somewhat less comprehensive (McAdam and Snow, Readings on Social Movements: Origins, Dynamics, and Outcomes; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings ; link, link, link). It functions as a linked body of hypotheses about how social movements arise. So RMT is a good example of the limited conception of theory. Zald, McCarthy, Tilly, McAdam, and others purport to identify the controlling causal variables that explain the success or failure of mobilization around grievance. Their theories reflect a mental framework -- one that emphasizes purposive rationality (rational choice theory) and material factors (resources). And they offer specific hypotheses about mobilization, organization, and social networks.

Gabriel Abend's article "The Meaning of Theory" (link) in *Sociological Theory* (2008) is a valuable contribution on this subject. Abend offers explications for seven varieties of theories and shows how these variants represent a wide range of things we might have in mind by saying that "theory is important." Here are his formulations:

1. ***Theory1****. If you use the word 'theory' in the sense of theory1, what you mean by it is a general proposition, or logically-connected system of general propositions, which establishes a relationship between two or more variables.*
2. ***Theory2****. A theory2 is an explanation of a particular social phenomenon.*
3. ***Theory3****. Like theory1 and theory2, the main goal of a theory3 is to say something about empirical phenomena in the social world. However, the main questions that theory3 sets out to answer are not of the type 'what x causes y?' Rather, given a certain phenomenon P (or a certain fact, relation, process, trend), it asks: 'what does it mean that P?,' 'is it significant that P?,' 'is it really the case that P?,' 'what is P all about?,' or 'how can we make sense of or shed light on P?'*
4. ***Theory4****. The word 'theory' and some of its derivatives are sometimes used to refer to the study of and the students of the writings of authors such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Parsons, Habermas, or Bourdieu.*
5. ***Theory5****. A theory5 is a Weltanschauung, that is, an overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world. Unlike theories1, theories2, and theories3, theories5 are not about the social world itself, but about how to look at, grasp, and represent it.*
6. ***Theory6****. Lexicographers trace the etymology of the word 'theory' to the late Latin noun 'theoria,' and the Greek noun 'the¯oria' and verb 'the¯orein' (usually translated as "to look at," "to observe," "to see," or "to contemplate"). The connotations of these words include detachment, spectatorship, contemplation, and vision. This etymology*

notwithstanding, some people use the word 'theory' to refer to accounts that have a fundamental normative component.

7. ***Theory7****. Many sociologists have written about issues such as the 'micro-macro problem,' the 'problem of structure and agency,' or 'the problem of social order.' This type of work is usually thought to fall within the domain of sociological theory. One may also use the word 'theory' to refer to discussions about the ways in which 'reality' is 'socially constructed'; the scientific status of sociology (value freedom, the idea of a social law, the relations between explanation and prediction, explanation and understanding, reasons and causes, and the like); or the 'relativity' of morality. In these examples the word 'theory' assumes a distinct meaning, which I distinguish as theory7.* (177-181)

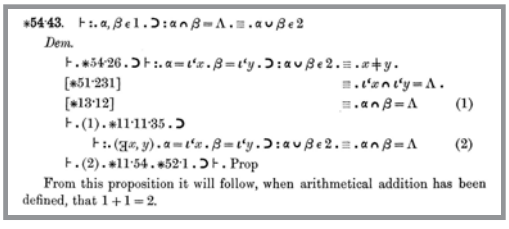
Abend comes to a very good conclusion about the ways we should think about theory -- and refrain from legislating the forms that theory can take. He argues for a principle of "ontological and epistemological pluralism":

I believe that a satisfactory solution to SP [semantic predicament] should make as few ontological and epistemological demands as possible. The set of conditions under which the word 'theory' can be correctly used should not have too much built-in ontological and epistemological baggage. I call this the 'principle of ontological and epistemological pluralism.' The reason why I advocate this principle is, very roughly put, the following. Suppose sociologists made a certain picture of the world or idea about what can be known a prerequisite for something being a sociological theory at all. Consider some examples. We may demand that theories be underlain by the assumption that "the social world consists of fixed entities with variables attributes" (Abbott 1988:169). We may require that causality be taken to be the cement of the universe, the most important relation that can hold between two entities. Or, we could build into the definition of 'theory' the idea that social processes are regulated by laws of nature. Alternatively, we may demand the belief that the distinction between text and reality is misleading, or even the belief that there are no such things as 'reality' and 'objectivity.' Or else, we may demand the assumption that nothing exists but what can be actually observed or otherwise grasped by our senses, thereby denying existence to such 'mysterious' things as causality and similar 'underlying theoretical mechanisms' (Steinmetz 2005). In any of these scenarios, only to the extent that you shared the required ontology or epistemology, could you be said to have a theory of the social world. You could have other things about the social world—opinions, views, beliefs, ideas—but not a theory. By definition, that particular ontology or epistemology would be obligatory for one to be allowed to enter a theoretical discussion, make a theoretical contribution, or theorize at all. (195)

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:06AM (-05:00)

Symbolic logic and ontology

Sunday, February 14, 2010



*54·43. $\vdash :. \alpha, \beta \in 1 . \supset : \alpha \cap \beta = \Lambda . \equiv . \alpha \cup \beta \in 2$

Dem.

$\vdash . *54·26 . \supset \vdash :. \alpha = \iota'x . \beta = \iota'y . \supset : \alpha \cup \beta \in 2 . \equiv . x \neq y .$

[*51·231] $\equiv . \iota'x \cap \iota'y = \Lambda .$

[*13·12] $\equiv . \alpha \cap \beta = \Lambda$ (1)

$\vdash . (1) . *11·11·35 . \supset$

$\vdash :. (\exists x, y) . \alpha = \iota'x . \beta = \iota'y . \supset : \alpha \cup \beta \in 2 . \equiv . \alpha \cap \beta = \Lambda$ (2)

$\vdash . (2) . *11·54 . *52·1 . \supset \vdash .$ Prop

From this proposition it will follow, when arithmetical addition has been defined, that $1 + 1 = 2$.

image: theorem from Russell and Whitehead, *Principia Mathematica*

In what ways do the abstract features of symbolic logic reflect characteristics of thought?

The syntax of symbolic logic is illustrative. First order predicate theory provides syntactic categories for ***individuals*** (a, b, c; x, y, z), ***properties*** (Fx, Gx), ***relations*** (xRy), ***n-place relations*** (R(x1, ..., xn)), logical connectives (∧, ∨, ~, ⊃), and ***quantifiers*** (∀x, ∃x). We also need to introduce the notation of mathematical ***functions*** (x = f(w,y,z)) -- though this represents a significant expansion of the formal power of symbolic logic. Individuals are objects that possess properties and fall within relations with other objects. Properties and relations may be interpreted intensionally or extensionally: in terms of a verbal definition or in terms of a class of objects possessing the property or relation. Functions are mathematical relations specifying the value of the dependent variable for all settings of the independent variables.

This syntax permits us to formulate statements about individuals and their properties and relations:

- Bj (John is bald)
- jTa (John is taller than Alice)
- ∃x(xTa) (there exists some x such that x is taller than Alice; someone is taller than Alice)
- ∀x(Cx ⊃ xTa) (for all x, if x is C then x is taller than Alice; all members of the choir are taller than Alice)
- p = nRT/v (pressure equals n times R times temperature divided by volume)

So the syntax of symbolic logic has a relationship to a small subset of English syntax: nouns (singular and generic), adjectives, and relation terms. What this syntax lacks is a direct way of expressing "doing" or becoming -- verbs or process terms. To express a thought like "The Roman Empire was becoming more corrupt over time" we would need to do some gymnastics. If we restrict ourselves to the predicate core of symbolic logic, then we would need to introduce a new predicate:

- Cx = x is becoming more corrupt over time
- r = Roman Empire
- Cr = The Roman Empire is becoming more corrupt over time

This solution is unsatisfactory because it leaves elements of the statement that are inferentially relevant in English, invisible in the logical paraphrase. This is precisely the idea of change over time. If we make use of the conceptual machinery of mathematical functions and differential equations, then we can provide a more refined analysis of the sentence:

- r = Roman Empire
- C(x,t) = the degree of corruption possessed by x at time t
- dC(r,t)/dt > 0 = the value of C for r is increasing over time

Here we have been able to represent change or process as a derivative: the rate of change of the value of the function with respect to time. This gives us a way of representing action, process, and change; though it is an open question whether this formalism will suffice for all types of change. Consider this statement: "Robert's personality has changed a lot over the past decade." In order to capture this idea we need a set of characteristics that constitute personality -- that is, we need a theory or definition of personality; and we need to represent these characteristics as functions of time. Suppose this is our working analysis of "personality":

- A(x,t) = degree of agreeableness x shows at time t
- E(x,t) = degree of extroversion x shows at time t
- O(x,t) = degree of openness x shows at time t
- N(x,t) = degree of neuroticism x shows at time t
- C(x,t) = degree of conscientiousness x shows at time t

To say that Robert's personality is unchanging is the simplest case:

- dA(r,t)/dt = dE(r,t)/dt = dO(r,t)/dt = dN(r,t)/dt = dC(r,t)/dt = 0

And to say that Robert's personality is changing in that he is becoming less agreeable

and more neurotic might be paraphrased this way:

- $dA(r,t)/dt < 0 \wedge dN(r,t)/dt > 0$

It is a premise of logical positivism, including Bertrand Russell in Principia Mathematica, Ludwig Wittgenstein in the Tractatus, and Rudolph Carnap in The Logical Structure of the World, that all the knowledge claims of science can be formulated using only these syntactic elements. (In fact, it is possible to reduce the logical connectives to a single connective, the sheffer stroke ("not and"), and the quantifiers to a single quantifier and the negation sign.) The vocabulary of a science consists of a finite number of primitive (undefined) terms and a number of terms defined in terms of logical compounds of primitive terms. For example, mass, time, and location might be primitive terms in classical mechanics; then velocity and momentum are defined as logical compounds of these primitives. And this view of the adequacy of first-order predicate logic for the whole of science implies something like claim of "concept neutrality": the vocabulary of any science can be reformulated in terms of these simple logical elements.

Does this formulation help when it comes to inquiring about our "conceptual schemes" when we attempt to categorize the social world (link)? Not very much. The hard questions that arise when we attempt to articulate a conceptual system for analyzing personality, social movements, revolutions, or ideologies are not aided by the putative fact that we could represent any adequate scheme of concepts in terms of the formalism of first order predicate theory plus mathematical functions. If we were willing to treat revolutions as discrete historical individuals with fixed properties, then of course it is true that we can formulate our theories of revolution in terms like these:

- "All revolutions involve either widespread social unrest or defeat in war."
- $\forall x(Rx \supset (Ux \vee Dx))$ [all historical things are such that if they are revolutions then either they possess social unrest or experience defeat in war]

The ontological problem is simply this: revolutions are not uniform across instances or across time. Revolutions do not have fixed, invariant properties. So we cannot really treat revolutions as individuals over which we can quantify. And the syntactical choice of representing "revolutions" as unchanging individuals is unsatisfactory.

Two observations seem justified. First, the syntax of first-order predicate theory plus functions probably succeeds as a "grammar" within which we can express any knowledge claim in science. (The most obvious exception is modal logic: claims that express necessity and possibility. But many philosophers and scientists would argue that modal claims are not necessary to the vocabulary of science.) But second, this logical syntax does not help to solve the deep conceptual and theoretical problems that must be addressed in real exercises of social science. To define "revolution," "corruption," or "anomie" requires conceptual work that goes beyond the task of representing a given system of scientific statements in terms of a set of predicates and functions. So symbolic logic is simply a scheme of representation, not a master system of concepts and syntax.

(See an earlier posting on these issues under the rubric of "Knowledge Claims in the Social Sciences".)

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:47AM (-05:00)

Scientific realism for the social sciences

Thursday, February 18, 2010

What is involved in taking a realist approach to social science knowledge? Most generally, realism involves the view that at least ***some*** of the assertions of a field of knowledge make true statements about the properties of unobservable things, processes,



and states in the domain of study. Several important philosophers of science have taken up this issue in the past three decades, including Rom Harre (Causal Powers: Theory of Natural Necessity) and Roy Bhaskar (A Realist Theory of Science). Peter Manicas's recent book, A Realist Philosophy of Social Science: Explanation and Understanding, is a useful step forward within this tradition. Here is how he formulates the perspective of scientific realism:

The real goal of science ... is understanding of the processes of nature. Once these are understood, all sorts of phenomena can be made intelligible, comprehensible, unsurprising. (14)

Explanation ... requires that there is a "real connection," a generative nexus that produced or brought about the event (or pattern) to be explained. (20)

So realism has to do with discovering underlying processes that give rise to observable phenomena. And causal mechanisms are precisely the sorts of underlying processes that are at issue. Here is how Manicas summarizes his position:

Theory provides representations of the generative mechanisms,including hypotheses regarding ontology, for example, that there are atoms, and hypotheses regarding causal processes, for example, that atoms form molecules in accordance with principles of binding. We noted also that a regression to more fundamental elements and processes also became possible. So quantum theory offers generative mechanisms of processes in molecular chemistry. Typically, for any process, there will be at least one mechanism operating, although for such complex processes as organic growth there will be many mechanisms at work. Theories that represent generative mechanisms give us understanding. We make exactly this move as regards understanding in the social sciences, except that, of course, the mechanisms are social. (75)

Manicas's illustrations of causal powers and mechanisms are most often drawn from the natural world. But what basis do we have for thinking that social entities have stable causal properties -- let alone a profile of causal powers that are roughly invariant across instances?

Consider an example, Theda Skocpol's definition of social revolutions:

Social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of socio-economic and political institutions, and--as Lenin so vividly reminds us--social revolutions are accompanied and in part effectuated through class upheavals from below. It is this combination of thorough-going structural transformation and massive class upheavals that sets social revolutions apart from coups, rebellions, and even political revolutions and national independence movements. (link)

Realism invites us to consider whether "social revolutions" really have the characteristics she attributes to them. Do social revolutions have an underlying nature distinctive causal powers that might be identified by a social theory? More generally, what basis do we have for thinking that certain ***types*** of social entities possess a specific set of causal powers?

The answer seems to be, very little. Types of social entities -- revolutions, states, riots, market economies, fascist movements -- are heterogeneous groupings of concrete social formations rather than "kinds" along the lines of "metal" or "gene". Each of the extended historical events that Skocpol offers as instances of the category "social revolution" is unique and contingent in a variety of ways; these historical episodes do not share a common causal nature. It is legitimate to group them together under the term "social revolution"; but it is essential that we not commit the error of ***reification*** and imagine that the group so constituted must share a fundamental causal nature in common. So the most direct application of this kind of realism to the social sciences seems somewhat unpromising.

But we are on firmer ground when we consider a particularly central type of assertion in the social sciences: claims about underlying causal mechanisms or social processes. So what does it mean to assert that a given social mechanism "really exists"?

Take the idea of "stereotype threat" as one of the mechanisms underlying an important social fact, the racial and gender differences in performance that have been observed on some standardized tests (Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans" (link); see also this article in the *Atlantic*). We can summarize the theory along these lines: "Prevalent assumptions about the characteristics and performance of various salient social groups can depress (or enhance) the performance of members of those groups on intellectual and physical tasks. This provides a partial explanation of the observed differentials in performance." This mechanism is hypothesized as one of the ways in which performance by individuals in various groups is socially influenced in such a way as to lead to differential performance across groups. It postulates a set of internal psychological mechanisms surrounding cognition and problem-solving, all related to the individual's self-ascribed social identity.

The realism question is this: do these hypothetical psychological effects actually occur in real human individuals? And do these differences in cognitive processes lead to differential performance across groups? If we confirm both these points, then we can conclude that "stereotype threat is a real social psychological mechanism." The microfoundations of this mechanism reside in two locations: the concrete cognitive processes of the individuals, and the social behaviors of persons around these individuals, giving subtle cues about stereotypes that are discerned by the test-taker.

So we might say that we can conclude that a postulated social mechanism "really" exists if we are able to provide piecemeal empirical and theoretical arguments demonstrating that the terms of the mechanism hypothesis are confirmed in the actions and behavior of agents; and that these patterns of action do in fact typically lead to the sorts of outcomes postulated. In other words, we need to look at our hypotheses about social mechanisms as small, somewhat separable theories that need separate empirical, historical, and theoretical evaluation. And when we are successful in providing convincing support for these mechanism-theories, we are also justified in concluding that the postulated mechanism really exists. The social world really embodies stereotype threat if individuals are really affected in their cognitive performances by the sorts of subtle behavioral cues mentioned by the theory, in roughly the ways stipulated by the theory. And we will feel most confident in this assertion if we also find new areas of behavior where this mechanism also appears to be at work.

This approach has an important implication about social ontology. The reality of a social mechanism is dependent on facts about agents, their characteristics of agency, and the

environment of social relationships within which they act. So there is a close intellectual relationship between the ontology of methodological localism and realism about causal mechanisms.

(The smokestack image above illustrates a different kind of social mechanism -- the workings of externalities in a market economy, creating pollution by dumping public harms to save private costs.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 08:28AM (-05:00)

What do we want from sociology?

Sunday, February 21, 2010

Let's say we've absorbed the anti-positivism argued many times here -- sociology should not be modeled on the natural sciences, we shouldn't expect social phenomena to have the homogeneity and consistency characteristic of natural phenomena, and we shouldn't expect to find social laws. What remains for the intellectual task of post-positivist sociology? What do we want from sociology?

Here are a handful of topics that are both important and feasible.

- description and theory of social movements / collective action / popular politics
- comparative study of large historical social-political formations such as fascism, colonialism, fiscal systems
- descriptive analysis of social inequalities (race, gender, class, ethnicity) and their mechanisms
- descriptive and theoretical accounts of major social institutions (corporations, unions, universities, governments, religions, families) and how they work (mechanisms)
- Concrete studies of identity formation

So there is plenty for a post-positivist sociology to do. But more specifically, what can the science of sociology offer us? To start, we would like to understand some of the myriad social processes that surround us. We would like to understand how social stratification works; how economic power is translated into political power; why racial disadvantage persists from one generation to another; and what leads people to behave as they do in specific social settings. To put a name on this, we would like to have convincing theories of social mechanisms and processes, and some idea of how these aggregate into larger social processes.

Second, to whatever degree possible, we would like to have theories of social behavior that will permit us to intervene to prevent undesirable outcomes. We would like to greatly reduce the rate of teen violence in cities like Detroit and Chicago. And this requires theories of the factors that lead to the behavior so we can have some hope of designing solutions. So we would like for sociology to provide a degree of theoretical support for the design of helpful social policies.

Third, we would like for sociology to be an empirical discipline. And thus means that we want to "test" or otherwise empirically evaluate the hypotheses and theories produced by sociologists.

All three of these goals seem to point in the direction of a sociology of the middle range (as Robert Merton put it) -- theories that attempt to capture mid-range social processes such as racial discrimination in housing, power brokerage, or identity formation. The value of this level of focus is parallel to the three points just made. Mid-level analysis is

suitable to investigation and discovery of social mechanisms. Mechanisms and processes at this level are likely to be most useful when it comes to designing policies and social interventions. And, finally, this level of sociological theory is most likely to admit of empirical investigation and validation through piecemeal inquiry.

What this suggests to me is that piecemeal inquiry into specific social phenomena is a more promising approach than grand unifying sociological theories. And this in turn suggests the metaphor of toolbox rather than orrery -- a collection of explanatory hypotheses rather than a unifying theoretical system.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:35PM (-05:00)

Equality and violence in Alabama, 1960s

Wednesday, February 24, 2010

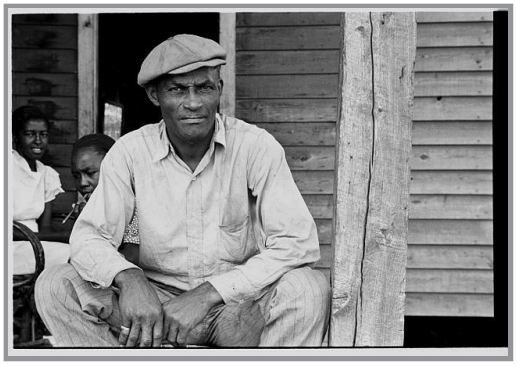


image: Ben Shahn photo of Arkansas sharecropper

Creating civil and political rights for African Americans in the 1960s required courage and persistence by hundreds of thousands of ordinary people. The system of Jim Crow assured subordination in fundamental rights and needs for millions of rural southern black people -- the right to vote, the right to own property, the right to use public amenities, and the right to a decent education. This system was held in place by the threat and reality of violence -- beatings, lynchings, shootings, and pervasive threats against individuals and families. This kind of violent environment made it particularly difficult to see the road from subordination to equality. The people of Lowndes County, Alabama, played a key role in this journey. This is the core message of Hasan Kwame Jeffries' excellent recent book, Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt. "Bloody Lowndes" was considered the most repressive and most violent area of black suppression in the South. So success in achieving African American voter registration and elected representation would be an important step forward.
Here is how Jeffries describes the county:
Jim Crow was a grim reality in Lowndes County, Alabama, at the beginning of 1965. African Americans attended separate and unequal schools, lived in dilapidated and deteriorating housing, and toiled as underpaid and overworked domestics and farm laborers. They were also completely shut out of the political process. There were five thousand African Americans of voting age in the overwhelmingly black rural county, but not a single one was registered. (Introduction)
Jeffries tells the story of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) and its effort to succeed in registering the black population of the county. The struggle for equal rights in Lowndes County was nationally important, and SNCC activist Stokely Carmichael played a central role in the sustained effort. This independent political party struggled to register black voters in order to gain elected offices for black candidates. The LCFO -- represented by the image of the black panther -- struggled for two years against violent opposition, attempting to exercise rights created by the 1965 Voting Rights Act. (Huey Newton and Bobby Seale eventually drew inspiration from the LCFO and its symbol in the establishment of the Black Panther Party in Oakland.)

Racist violence in Lowndes County was common, and it is instructive to listen to oral histories of people who were there. One example is Professor Gloria House, who participated in the SNCC effort to mobilize the county as a young Berkeley graduate student who "went south". Here is an interview in which she offers a first-hand account of one particularly violent incident in Lowndes County. It is an important and dramatic testimony about the period. Dr. House describes the arrest of a small group of SNCC workers; their imprisonment in the local jail for two weeks; their release; and the murder of one of the SNCC workers at the hands of white extremists.

A crucial part of the story of Lowndes County that Jeffries tells is the role that forcible resistance played. The example of nonviolent protest was available, of course, through the strategies and actions of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But in the face of shotguns, torches, and ropes, the tactics of vigils, demonstrations, and boycotts seemed inadequate to the task. Part of the success of the LCFO movement in Lowndes County was the clear statement by ordinary people in the county that they would not be intimidated, and that they would defend their rights and their lives with force if necessary.

It is interesting to compare Jeffries' detailed study of the struggle in Lowndes County with the more general treatment of the movement in Doug McAdam's Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970. McAdam looks in detail at the factors across the South that facilitated or impeded the movement for civil and economic rights. But Lowndes County doesn't come into his narrative directly. More generally, the factor of "forcible resistance" doesn't play much of a role in his theoretical analysis. Generally his view appears to be that forcible resistance was largely counter-productive to the movement, in that it stimulated vastly greater white supremacist response (142). This question is worth examining in detail; there is a commonsense logic that implies that a population that makes clear its willingness to use force to defend itself against violence would deter violent attack. So we might speculate that populations with this willingness to use force in self-defense would be more successful in establishing a zone of rights in local society.

It is important to recognize clearly and honestly the degree of violence that was exercised through the rule of the Jim Crow South, and the role that armed self-defense sometimes played in the struggle for equal rights. It is one of the remarkable achievements of the American civil rights movement that its leaders and followers were able to steer their course towards freedom in a way that ultimately quieted the appeal to violence on all sides.

(Here is some background on Lowndes County, Alabama (link). The *ChangeDirection* blog has a good multi-part series of posts on Stokely Carmichael's evolution as a leader in Lowndes County and nationally.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:28PM (-05:00)

Business interests and democracy

Saturday, February 27, 2010



The central ideal of democracy is the notion that citizens can express their political and policy preferences through political institutions, and that the policies selected will reflect those preferences. We also expect that elected officials will act ethically in support of the best interests of the public. This is their public trust.

The anti-democratic possibility is that popular debates and expressions of preference are only a sham, and that secretive, powerful actors are able to secure their will in most circumstances. And in contemporary circumstances, that sounds a lot like corporations and business lobbying organizations. (Here is an earlier post on a report about corrupt behavior at the Department of the Interior.)

The January Supreme Court decision affirming the status of corporations as persons, and therefore entitled to unfettered rights of free speech, is the most extreme expression of the power of business, corporations, and money. As distinguished law professor Ronald Dworkin argues in the *New York Review of Books* (link), this decision dramatically increases the ability of corporations to influence elections and decisions in their favor -- vastly disproportionately to citizens' organizations. And, as Dworkin points out, corporations don't need to exercise this right frequently in order to have enormous impact on candidates and issues. The mere threat of a well-financed media campaign against key representatives will suffice to sway their behavior.

There are too many examples of pernicious influence of business interests on public policy. Take a useful policy that many states and cities have tested, pretrial release programs. It appears that the public interest has been defeated by ... the bail bondsmen. NPR ran a story on the pretrial release program in Broward, Florida (link). The program was successful, with a high appearance rate for court appearances and annual savings of $20 million for the county. But this program cost the bail bondsmen business. They hired a lobbyist, and in the dead of night the county commission scaled back the program. Here is how the "industry" describes the issue (link). It is a pretty shocking story:

According to campaign records, Book [the lobbyist] ... and the rest of Broward's bondsmen spread almost $23,000 across the council in the year before the bill was passed. Fifteen bondsmen cut checks worth more than $5,000 to commissioner and now-county Mayor Ken Keechl just five days before the vote.

Keechl and several other commissioners declined NPR's repeated requests for an interview. At the meeting last January, they said they were concerned that Broward's pretrial program cost more than other counties' programs, and they vigorously denied that campaign contributions played any role.

Book had his work cut out for him. Broward's own county attorney wrote a memo warning commissioners that cutting back pretrial could be unconstitutional. But Book worked behind the scenes.

He met with commissioners, and according to county records, he had unusual access. That's because at the same time he was hired by the bondsmen to lobby commissioners, he was also hired by the commissioners to be their lobbyist. (transcript from NPR report)
The story makes the sequence pretty clear: Through the use of campaign contributions and influence of votes by commissioners, the bondsmen groups have prevailed to abandon the policy which was unmistakably in the public interest. The commission acted in deference to the narrow financial interests of a business group; campaign contributions by that group played a decisive role; and an overburdened county government was denied a tool that was good public policy from every point of view. And similar efforts are taking place in many cities. So where is the public's interest?
Or take the largest issues we face today in national politics -- cap-and-trade policy, healthcare reform, and the nation's food system. The influence of large financial interests in each of these areas is perfectly visible. Energy companies, coal companies, insurance companies and trade associations, and large food companies and restaurant chains pretty much run the show. Regulations are written in deference to their interests, legislation conforms to their needs and demands, and elected officials calculate their actions to the winds of campaign contributions. And the Supreme Court reverses a century of precedent and accords the rights of freedom of expression to corporations and unions that are enjoyed by individual citizens. So the influence of financially powerful corporations and industry groups will become even greater.

It would be deeply interesting if we had a sort "influence compass" that would allow us to measure the net deviation created by the private interests of companies and industries for a number of policy areas. How far from the due north of the public's interest are we when it comes to --

- Environmental protection
- Banking regulation
- Insurance regulation
- Energy policy
- Cost-effective military procurement
- Urban land use policy
- Airline safety
- Licensing of public resources such as gas and coal leases

Of course the metaphor of "north" doesn't really work here, since there is no purely objective definition of the public good in any of these areas. That is the purpose of open democratic debate about policy issues -- what are the facts, what do we want to achieve, and what are the most effective ways of achieving our ends? But when private interests can influence decision makers to adopt X because it is good for the profits of industry Y -- in spite of the clear public interest in doing Z -- then we have anti-democratic distortion of the process.

Where are the democratic checks on this exercise of power? A first line of defense is the set of regulations most governments and agencies have concerning conflict of interest and lobbying. These institutions obviously don't work; no one who pays attention would seriously think that agencies and governments are uninfluenced by gifts, contributions, promises of future benefits, and the blandishments of lobbyists. And these influences range from slight deviations to gross corruption. Moreover, influence doesn't need to be corrupt in order to be anti-democratic. If an energy company gets a privileged opportunity

to make the case for "clean coal" behind closed doors, this may represent a legitimate set of partial arguments. The problem is that experts representing the public are not given the same opportunity.

A related strategy is publicity: requiring that decision-making agencies make their deliberations and decision-making processes transparent and visible to the public. Let the public know who is influencing the debate, and perhaps this will deter decision-makers from favoring an important set of private interests. Then-Vice-President Cheney's refusal to make public the list of companies involved in consultations to the National Energy Policy Development Group (link) is an instructive example; it is very natural to suspect that the recommendations put forward by the NEPDG reflected the specific business concerns of an unknown set of energy companies and lobbyists (link). So greater publicity of process can be a tool in enhancing the fit between policy and the public's interests. (Here are earlier posts on the capacity of publicity to serve as a check on bad organizational behavior (post, post).)

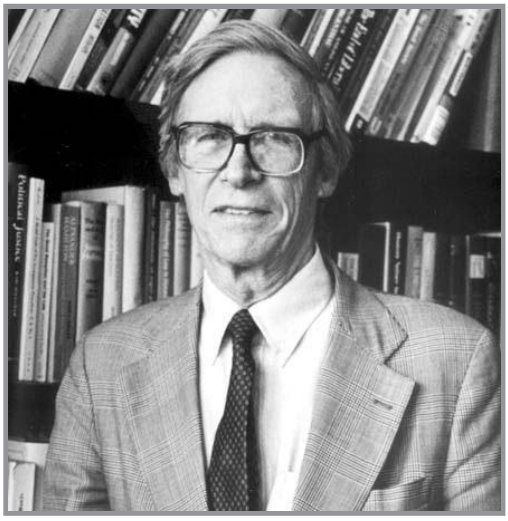
Another line of defense is the independent press and media. Our newspapers and magazines have historically had the resources and mission to track down the influence of private interests on the formulation of legislation, regulation, and policy. Bill Moyers is a great example (link); for example, his recent story on the role of campaign contributions in the election of judges (link). But the resources are disappearing and the cheerleaders at Fox News are gaining influence by the month. So relying on the investigative powers of an independent media looks like an increasingly long-odds bet.

So we have our work cut out for us to validate the main premise of democracy: that the interests of the public will be served faithfully by government without significant distortion by private business interests.

(Here is a recent post on C. Wright Mills' analysis of power elites and the influence accorded to corporations in the United States.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:01PM (-05:00)

Rawls and decision theory

Sunday, February 28, 2010



John Rawls's A Theory of Justice was a strikingly original contribution to political philosophy upon its appearance in 1971. Against the prevailing preference for "meta-ethics" in the field of philosophical ethics, Rawls made an effort to arrive at substantive, non-tautological principles that could be justified as a sort of "moral constitution" for a just society. The theory involves two fundamental principles of justice: the liberty principle, guaranteeing maximal equal liberties for all citizens, and the difference principle, requiring that social and economic inequalities should be the least possible, subject to the constraint of maximizing the position of the least-well-off. (The principle also requires equality of

opportunity for all positions.)

Two elements of Rawls's philosophical argument were particularly striking. The first was his adoption of the anti-foundationalist coherence epistemology associated with Quine and Goodman (SEP article by Jonathan Kvanvig); so Rawls conceded that it is not possible to provide logically decisive arguments for moral positions. Though his theory of justice has much in common with the ideas of Kant and Rousseau, Rawls rejected the Kantian idea that moral theories could be given secure philosophical foundation. It is rather a question of the overall fit between a set of principles and our "considered judgments" about cases and mid-level moral judgments. He refers to the situation of "reflective equilibrium" as the state of affairs that results when a moral reasoner has fully deliberated about his/her considered moral judgments and tentative moral principles, adjusting both until no further changes are required by the requirement of consistency.

Another and perhaps even more distinctive part of Rawls's approach is his use of the apparatus of decision theory to support his arguments in favor of the two principles of justice against plausible alternatives (including especially utilitarianism). Essentially the argument goes along these lines. Suppose that representative individuals are brought together in a situation in which they are expected to make a unanimous and irreversible decision about the fundamental principles of justice that will regulate their society; and suppose they are profoundly ignorant about their own particular characteristics. Participants do not know whether they are talented, strong, intelligent, or eloquent; and they do not know what their fundamental goals are (their theories of the good). Rawls refers to this situation of choice as the ***original position***; and he refers to the participants as deliberating behind the ***veil of ignorance***. Rawls argues that rational individuals in these circumstances would unanimously choose the two principles of justice over utilitarianism. And this conclusion is taken to be a strong basis of support for the two principles as correct. This is what qualifies Rawls's theory as falling within the social contract tradition; the foundation of justice is the fact of unanimous rational consent (albeit hypothetical).

Once we connect the question, "what is the best theory of justice?", with the question, "what principles of justice would rationally self-interested persons choose?", there are various ways we might proceed. Rawls's description of the original position is just one possible starting point out of several. But if we begin with Rawls's assumptions, then it is natural to turn to formal decision theory as a basis for answering the question. How should rational agents reason in these circumstances? How should they decide which of several options will best serve their future interests? And one point becomes clear immediately: the choice of a decision rule makes a critical difference for the ultimate choice. If we were to imagine that decision-making under conditions of uncertainty mandates the "maximize expected utility" rule, then one choice follows (utilitarianism). But Rawls argues that the expected utility rule is not rational in the circumstances of the original position. The stakes are too high for each participant. And therefore he argues that the "maximin" rule would be chosen by rational participants in the circumstances of the original position. The maximin rule requires that we rank options by their worst possible outcome; and we choose that option that comes with the least bad outcome. In other words, we "maximize the minimum." (The maximin rule was described by von Neumann and Morgenstern in 1944 in their Theory of Games and Economic Behavior.)

Notice that this analysis involves a question of second-order rationality: not "what outcome would the rational agent choose?", but rather "what decision rule would the rational agent follow?". So it is the rationality of the decision rule rather than the rationality

of the choice that is at issue.

Another important qualification has to do with defining more carefully what part of the theory of rationality Rawls is using in this argument. It is sometimes said that Rawls applies game theory to the situation of the original position; and there is a certain logic to this interpretation. Game theory is the theory of strategic rationality; it pertains to that set of situations in which the payoff for one participant depends on the rational choices of other participants. And the original position seems to embody this condition. However, the requirement of unanimity and the complete absence of a context of bargaining makes the situation non-strategic. So Rawls's use of rational choice theory does not involve game theory per se, and he is not interested in demonstrating a Nash equilibrium in the OP. Instead, he believes that there is a single best strategy that will be chosen by each individual--the two principles of justice. (Here is a good brief description of the main assumptions of game theory.)

One might ask whether the two features singled out here -- anti-foundationalism and decision theory -- are consistent. If Rawls's theory of justice depends on an argument within formal decision theory, then why is it not a foundationalist argument? (And in fact, Rawls on occasion refers to his argument as reflecting a "kind of moral geometry".) What makes Rawls's use of decision theory "anti-foundationalist" is the fact that this argument itself is philosophically contestable. Reasonable decision theorists may differ about the rationality of the maximin rule (as John Harsanyi argued against Rawls). So the appeal to decision theory does not obviate the need for a balance of reasons in favor of the approach and the particular way in which it is specified in this situation; and this in turn sounds a lot like the role of physical theory and methodology within Quine's notion of "The Web of Belief."

(A mountain of words have been written about Rawls's moral epistemology. Here is Samuel Freeman's excellent article on the original position in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; here is a useful compendium of the history of rational choice theory; and here is an old article of mine on the epistemology of reflective equilibrium.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:21PM (-05:00)

Democracy and agency in development ethics

Tuesday, March 02, 2010



Development ethics is an area of applied ethics that attempts to explore the moral issues involved in global social and economic transformation. Key to the urgency of the field is the fact of massive global poverty, hunger, and inequality. The current situation of the world's poor -- in Egypt, India, Mexico, Sudan, or Brazil, for example -- is entirely unacceptable from a human point of view. And governments, organizations, and individuals have positive moral obligations to work towards reducing these forms of massive suffering, and helping construct social and economic institutions that systematically reduce poverty. So much is clear from the 60,000 foot level. But how much more specificity can we provide about the bad of poverty, the principles of global justice, or the goals of development, so that moral theory can provide something of a

guide to policy and action? To what extent can we usefully connect moral theory to the practical challenges of designing workable development strategies?

Philosophers and social scientists have made a series of efforts at formulating a foundation for development ethics since the end of World War II. Early contributors were Denis Goulet (Development Ethics: A Guide to Theory and Practice) and Robert Chambers (Rural Development: Putting the last first). But the major progress in the field occurred through the writings of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, in the formulation of the "capabilities approach" to development. Sen argued that the fundamental goal of development should be to create social and economic institutions within which every individual is enabled to fulfill his/her capabilities and to realize the functionings of a full human life (Development as Freedom). And Nussbaum extended this idea with particular emphasis on the ways in which gender inequalities in development have deeply harmed women in the developing world (Women and Human Development).

There is now a third generation of thinking in the field of development ethics, well represented by David Crocker's excellent recent book, Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy. (Other important examples include Sabina Alkire, Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction and Bina Agarwal, A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia.) Crocker has been actively involved in the formulation of theories of development ethics for decades, and is the founder of the International Development Ethics Association (IDEA). This is an important forum for philosophers and practitioners to come together to discuss the ethical issues of development. Crocker has been an exponent of the capabilities approach throughout his career, and has succeeded in deepening the debate by insisting on the importance of bringing the moral theories into direct engagement with the realities and practices of development.

The current book takes an important step forward. It is framed around the foundation of the capabilities approach; but it goes beyond existing capabilities theory by emphasizing the crucial role of agency and democracy within development. The capabilities approach focuses on achieving a form of society in which individuals can realize their capabilities and enjoy high quality of life. This is a focus on the ***outcome*** of development. Crocker refocuses this picture to emphasize the intrinsic and instrumental importance of the ***agency*** of the people involved in development -- the ***process*** of development. And people best exercise their agency through a deliberative, participative process -- through a ***democratic*** process. So Crocker's ethics of development might be described as a joining of the capabilities approach with current theorizing about deliberative democracy. (Here is an earlier post on deliberative democracy.)

So what does this emphasis on agency and democracy involve? Here is a concrete example: Indian economist V. K. Ramachandran's description of how the development process works in West Bengal and Kerala.

Here and elsewhere in the interview Ramachandran describes a process through which the West Bengal development agencies conduct their work. They consult broadly with social groups, labor organizations, feminist organizations, and local communities and villages. Proposals, goals, and strategies are developed through these consultations and deliberations; and the ultimate policy package is intended to represent a synthesis of the insights and claims of the various groups involved in the process. So the process

represents a practical illustration of the approach advocated by Crocker.

Why is a deliberative process along these lines appealing? First, it captures a set of social ideals associated with Rousseau and Marx about the value of individuals and groups self-constituting their goals and values through reflection and deliberation. Rather than the World Bank or the OECD Development Assistance Committee imposing a set of goals on a country or region (liberalization, more rapid urbanization, improvement of markets), the people of the region should have the opportunity and responsibility of setting their course and choosing the strategies they will pursue. Development should proceed through a process of local self-determination, and such a process is itself an intrinsic good.

Second, there is the idea is that the goals chosen through such a process will be in better alignment with the needs of the region, and will be better embraced by the people affected, because they have been refined and chosen through a deliberative, democratic process. Policies developed through a democratic process have a greater level of legitimacy with those affected by the policies.

Third, there is the expectation that the people of the community will have a better factual understanding of their natural and social circumstances, and will therefore be better able to formulate strategies that will work in the given environment. So Crocker and others expect that a process of deliberative democracy through which development goals and strategies are selected by a given community will have a higher probability of succeeding. (Notice the convergence between this set of ideas and Scott's critique of "high modernism"; link.)

This set of values suggests several institutional features: decentralization of decision-making, massive consultation, and a requirement of equality among citizens. Can we be confident that such a process will work well to reform society and reduce poverty and inequality? Ramachandran highlights one obstacle to this process in the interview posted above: the fact of extreme inequalities of wealth and poverty in rural India. But if the social setting is one of great inequalities between landlords, tenants, and landless workers, then to what extent can the requirements of democratic deliberation take place? Ramachandran argues for the necessity of agrarian reform (land reform and caste reform) as a necessary precondition for just economic development in India.

Decentralization of decision-making raises another potential problem -- the myopia of the local. A development plan that may be best for West Bengal as a whole may be undesirable to many communities; so how can we expect the process of deliberative democracy to arrive at a good outcome for the state as a whole? (The collapse of the Tata Motor Nano project in West Bengal perhaps illustrates this possibility.) And the massive consultation involved in this ideal poses its own problems of practicality. Can we be confident that such a process will come to a resolution, or will debate continue indefinitely?

Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright address practical responses to some of these issues in Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance. Here is how they set the stage for their analysis:

As the tasks of the state have become more complex and the size of polities larger and more heterogeneous, the institutional forms of liberal democracy developed in the nineteenth century -- representative democracy plus techno-bureaucratic administration -

- seem increasingly ill suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century. "Democracy" as a way of organizing the state has come to be narrowly identified with territorially based competitive elections of political leadership for legislative and executive offices. Yet, increasingly, this mechanism of political representation seems ineffective in accomplishing the central ideals of democratic politics: facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society, and, in more radical egalitarian versions fo the democratic idea, assuring that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth. (3)
David Crocker's focus on the importance of the values and practices of deliberative democracy within the development process is an important step forward. It helps to make more tangible the implications of the capabilities approach for specific development challenges; and it gives substance to the priority that Sen and Nussbaum accord to "freedom" as a central development value.

(Some readers may also be interested in my 2003 book, The Paradox of Wealth and Poverty: Mapping the Ethical Dilemmas of Global Development. This book likewise places the capabilities approach at the center of the analysis.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:40PM (-05:00)

Appearance and reality in public life

Wednesday, March 03, 2010

So what kind of democracy do we have? Do our institutions do a great job of establishing the public interest over the medium term, or have our institutions been captured by private interests, leaving essentially no real power in the hands of citizens?

The way it is supposed to work, according to Civics 101:

- Elected officials faithfully consider proposed legislation, based on their expressed political values, the interests of their constituents, and their perception of the best longterm interest of the polity.
- Decisions are made in public view.
- Legislative debates turn on the public presentation of reasons in favor of or against proposed legislation, invoking only rational assessment of likely consequences, fitness of proposed legislation to the longterm best interests of the polity, and consistency with existing law and constitution.
- Agencies use experts to faithfully create regulations that implement legislation in ways that are consistent with legislative intent, grounded in rational study of relevant scientific findings, and impartially applied without regard to persons or specific private interests.
- Lobbyists are able to influence legislation and regulation only through compelling rational arguments based on cost-benefit analysis, legitimate expression of a given set of affected interests, and public knowledge of their advocacy.

This sounds pretty much like the way that Rousseau would have expected the legislative process to have worked within the ideal polity; legislation enacts the "general will".

The not-so-ideal case:

- Elected officials give excessive importance to the impact their positions will have on the voters back home -- thereby paying less attention to the facts and consequences for the public good of various legislative initiatives.
- Elected officials sometimes permit themselves to be influenced by campaign

contributions and other personal advantages from industries and other private interests, thereby supporting or opposing initiatives for reasons other than the overall goodness or badness of the legislation for the public good.
- Regulative agencies are influenced by industry "experts" in writing regulations, with the result that regulatory regimes are tilted towards the private interests of the regulated industries rather than neutrally establishing public health and safety.
- Lobbyists have substantial access to legislators and regulators, with the result that they are able to move the dial in their favored direction.

We might describe this scenario as the pluralism scenario, along the lines of Robert Dahl's theories of democracy. Various interests contend through the use of various legal tools of influence, and the resulting set of laws, policies, and regulations represent a rough-and-ready balance of the many interested parties in a complex society. Private interests have weight on this scenario, but they don't determine the outcomes.

The nightmare scenario for democracy:

- Elected officials have no sincere adherence to the public good; they pursue their own private and political interests through all the powers available to them. (Senator Jim Bunning's unembarrassed willingness to block extension of unemployment legislation for narrow personal and political reasons falls in this category.)
- Elected officials are sometimes overtly corruptible, accepting significant gifts in exchange for official performance.
- Elected officials are intimidated by the power of private interests (corporations) to fund electoral opposition to their re-election. (The Supreme Court decision on corporate free speech makes this much more likely.)
- Regulatory agencies are dominated by the industries they regulate; independent commissioners are forced out of office; and regulations are toothless when it comes to environmental protection, wilderness protection, health and safety in the workplace, and food safety.
- Lobbyists for special interests and corporations have almost unrestricted access to legislators and regulators, and are generally able to achieve their goals.

This is the nightmare scenario if one cares about democracy, because it implies that the apparatus of government is essentially controlled by private interests rather than the common good and the broad interests of society as a whole. It isn't "pluralism", because there are many important social interests not represented in this system in any meaningful way: poor people, non-unionized workers, people without health insurance, inner-city youth, the environment, people exposed to toxic waste, ...

The fact that healthcare reform, regulation of CO2 emissions, and significant reform of the financial system have all been essentially blocked in the current legislative process seems to point to one of these scenarios; and it isn't the first or the second.

I'll quote an idea used in the previous posting to suggest one possible way forward for our democracy: a movement towards substantially greater participatory democracy in this country. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright address the future of our democracy in Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance. Here is how they set the stage for their analysis:

As the tasks of the state have become more complex and the size of polities larger and more heterogeneous, the institutional forms of liberal democracy developed in the nineteenth century -- representative democracy plus techno-bureaucratic administration -- seem increasingly ill suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century. "Democracy" as a way of organizing the state has come to be narrowly identified with

territorially based competitive elections of political leadership for legislative and executive offices. Yet, increasingly, this mechanism of political representation seems ineffective in accomplishing the central ideals of democratic politics: facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society, and, in more radical egalitarian versions fo the democratic idea, assuring that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth. (3)

It is an interesting question to consider whether a participatory process surrounding the issue of healthcare reform would have led to a more satisfactory outcome. Given the results of the raucous, aggressive, and incivil disruption of town-hall meetings that occurred last summer around this issue, it is hard to be too optimistic about this approach either.

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:00PM (-05:00)

Essentializing race?

Friday, March 05, 2010



PBS is running a program this month called "Faces of America" (link), hosted by distinguished African-American Studies professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The program focuses on a handful of celebrity guests, a genetic profile for each, and then a variety of "surprising" discoveries about the genealogies of various of the guests.

What I found surprising and jarring in viewing Episode 3 is the degree of essentialism about race the script seems to presuppose. Gates's script seems to suggest that one's racial or ethnic identity is a function of one's genotype and one's ancestral (though unknown) history. At one point Professor Gates has a discussion with Kristi Yamaguchi, the Japanese figure skater. Pointing out that her genetic profile indicates descent from a particular genetic group that originated in far northern Asia some hundred thousand years ago, he makes a joke to the effect that perhaps her skating talent is a reflection of her ancestry in an extremely cold climate. It's a joke, of course; but it is a telling one. It conveys the idea that genes make the person; that one's biological ancestry constitutes one's race or ancestry and one's current characteristics.

What is surprising about this biological essentialism is the fact that most scholars who think deeply about race have decisively concluded that race is ***not*** a biological category but a cultural one. A person's race is socially constructed, deriving from the cultural communities in which he/she was formed and ***not*** primarily from his/her genotype or biological ancestry. Population geneticists find that there is as much genetic variation within a "racial" group as across racial groups; which seems to imply directly that the race of each group is not determined by the genetic profile of the group. Instead, racial or ethnic identity is created by the cultural environment in which one forms his/her most basic psychological dispositions.

The American Anthropological Association has had good reason to think deeply and critically about the concept of "race." In 1998 the AAA released a careful statement on

race. Here are a few specific claims included in the statement:

In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies within so-called racial groups. Conventional geographic "racial" groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within "racial" groups than between them. In neighboring populations there is much overlapping of genes and their phenotypic (physical) expressions. Throughout history whenever different groups have come into contact, they have interbred. The continued sharing of genetic materials has maintained all of humankind as a single species.

...

At the end of the 20th century, we now understand that human cultural behavior is learned, conditioned into infants beginning at birth, and always subject to modification. No human is born with a built-in culture or language. Our temperaments, dispositions, and personalities, regardless of genetic propensities, are developed within sets of meanings and values that we call "culture." Studies of infant and early childhood learning and behavior attest to the reality of our cultures in forming who we are.

It is a basic tenet of anthropological knowledge that all normal human beings have the capacity to learn any cultural behavior. The American experience with immigrants from hundreds of different language and cultural backgrounds who have acquired some version of American culture traits and behavior is the clearest evidence of this fact. Moreover, people of all physical variations have learned different cultural behaviors and continue to do so as modern transportation moves millions of immigrants around the world.

So fundamentally, my reaction to the "Faces of America" script is that it seriously misrepresents the social reality of race and ethnicity, implying that identity follows from biology. Now, of course Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is perfectly well aware of this view of the status of the category of race; he is in fact one of the country's leading thinkers on this subject. So it is surprising that he would have permitted the simplistic version of the facts of race, ethnicity, and ancestry that the series conveys.

The most convincing voice I heard in the program was a statement by Ojibwe novelist Louise Erdrich who declined to undergo the genetic screening for the program. Her explanation of her thinking, roughly, was that her Ojibwe identity was constituted by her experience of family and community, not by ancestry; and she preferred not to confuse that identity by conflating it with facts about her distant ancestors.

The point I am making here is not that the genetic techniques to which the program refers are scientifically invalid; I would be willing to assume that there is good science behind the inferences from one person's genotype to conclusions about distant ancestry (including the gimmick of discovering that several of the guests have an ancestor in common). But my point is that this doesn't tell us anything at all of much interest about race or ethnicity; these are cultural constructs rather than biological facts.

Personally the conclusion I would rather come to goes along these lines: our genotypes

matter very little to our current experience and social location. The origins of our most distant ancestors is of some scientific interest but not much social significance. If we take pride in being "Asian-American," "Irish," or "African-American," it is because we have had specific social, family, and community experiences that lead us to identify with those groups and to give special importance in their struggles and achievements through history. The child who was a foundling in New York in 1900 and was raised in an Irish-Catholic family is no less Irish and no less Catholic if it turns out her father was an Italian anarchist and her mother was a Swedish Protestant. It is the particular communities into which we have socialized that constitute our identities, and I think that extends to racial and ethnic identities. Of course, some readers may think that this perspective also leads to somewhat paradoxical conclusions -- for example, the foundling who is "Irish" without a bit of Celtic ancestry, or that one could be Native American without any tribal ancestry.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:50AM (-05:00)

Rawls on Marx; December 1973

Wednesday, March 10, 2010



John Rawls taught a course on the history of political philosophy throughout much of his career at Harvard University. The course contained his description and analysis of the most important figures in modern political philosophy, including Mill, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Marx. The course evolved over time; the final version from 1994 is edited in Samuel Freeman's Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy. I served as graduate assistant in Rawls's lectures on this subject in fall 1973, and recently reread my notes of the course. Here are my notes of a particularly important lecture towards the end of the course: Rawls's treatment of Marx's ideas about economic justice. This lecture demonstrates Rawls's understanding of the fundamentals of Marx's economic theories and the labor theory of value. (I am inclined to think that Joseph Schumpeter's History of Economic Analysis (1954) was an important source for Rawls on the history of economic thought, including Marx's economics, though I can't at this moment confirm this.) This lecture is particularly significant in that it is roughly simultaneous with the emergence of "analytical Marxism" announced by the publication of an important article by Allen Wood, "The Marxian Critique of Justice" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* in 1972 (link).

MARX'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE THEORY OF JUSTICE

John Rawls, History of Political Philosophy, Phil 171, fall 1973
Notes from lecture, December 11, 1973
[notes taken by Daniel Little; intended to capture Rawls's formulations of the main points presented in the lecture]

[Quoting Rawls:]

Capital seems to be a description of an unjust society. The owners of the means of production live in relative abundance and idleness at the expense of the ever-growing

class of wretched laborers. But Marx doesn't make any attempt to present an argument that capitalism is unjust, nor any concept of justice which would back up such an argument. Moreover, we have vitriolic criticisms of utopian socialists who did condemn capitalism on the grounds of justice. Marx asserts on the contrary, that capitalism is perfectly fair, perfectly just. Why so?

(a) It is not enough to say Marx is averse to preaching or moralizing. He is so averse; but judgments of justice can be reasoned and hence not properly described as "preaching".

(b) It is not enough to say that he didn't want the critique of capitalism to rest on some social ideal. He does reject the utopian socialists' program; but that would not prevent him from stating his own opinion. And he doesn't do that either. He reproaches the utopians for not realizing that some major social change must precede an adjustment along moral lines.

Here is my conjecture as to why Marx didn't judge capitalism unjust. He thinks of justice as a political and juridical conception which is associated with a particular conception of the state and society; so it belongs to the prehistory of mankind. Given his picture of human society, these political and juridical institutions belong to the superstructure, and reflect the workings of the mode of production. For each mode of production there is a conception of justice appropriate to it, at least in prehistory. A further qualification: It is worthwhile to distinguish between the high time of a form and its low period -- where the form is a progressive force and where it stands in contradiction to the mode of production.

Here is a brief discussion of justice in *Capital III*:

To speak here of natural justice, as Gilbart does, is nonsense. The justice of the transactions between agents of production rests on the fact that these arise as natural consequences out of the production relationships. The juristic forms in which these economic transactions appear as wilful acts of the parties concerned, as expressions of their common will and as contracts that may be enforced by law against some individual party, cannot, being mere forms, determine this content. They merely express it. This content is just whenever it corresponds, is appropriate to the mode of production. It is unjust whenever it contradics that mode. Slavery on the basis of capitalist production is unjust; likewise fraud in the quality of commodities. (*Capital III*, 339-40)

Here Marx conceives of justice in terms of adequacy to the mode of production. **(1) The justice of legal forms cannot be discovered on the basis of those forms alone. Rather it depends upon their adequacy to the mode of production. The juridical institution is formal; to give it content we must look to the way of life and its requirements. A consequence: There is no universal theory of justice which allows us to evaluate generally the social institutions of any society. There is no general principle like "slavery is always unjust." There are thus no general rules of natural rights, no universal justice. (2) This adjustment of justice to the mode of production doesn't mean there are no injustices. Slavery is unjust under capitalism; wage labor is just under capitalism, provided that the worker is paid the value of his labor power.**

This view seems to suggest a sort of relativism; but this would be a faulty conclusion. We have a theory matching theories of justice with modes of production, and we might at some time find a function systematically linking them.

Let's now try out this suggestion on the conception of surplus value. The utopians argued

that workers ought to be paid the value of their contribution to the firm. Since they are not, capitalism is unjust. Marx rejects this view. It makes the appropriation of surplus value appear accidental -- as if the capitalists could act differently. Marx required a theory of value which made the appropriation of surplus value a necessary part of the capitalist system. On the theory of value every commodity is exchanged for a strict equivalent.

Marx distinguishes between the product of labor and labor power. The worker is given the value of his labor power, not his product. It is on this ground that he is fairly treated. Thus he is undercutting the Ricardian socialist position by rejecting and replacing the principle of contribution. It is the system itself which brings about surplus value, not the behavior of individuals who violate moral principles. Surplus value is an intrinsic part of the working of the social institutions of capitalism.

Consider the description of the production of surplus value in *Capital*.

Every condition of the problem is satisfied, while the laws that regulate the exchange of commodities, have been in no way violated. Equivalent has been exchanged for equivalent. For the capitalist as buyer paid for each commodity, for the cotton, the spindle and the labour-power, its full value. He then did what is done by every purchaser of commodities; he consumed their use-value. ... This metamorphosis, this conversion of money into capital, takes place both within the sphere of circulation and also outside it; within the circulation because it is conditioned by the purchase of the labour-power in the market; outside the circulation, because what is done within it is only a stepping-stone to the production of surplus value. (*Capital I*, p. 194)

The fact that surplus value arises is a piece of good fortune for the buyer, but no injustice to the seller.

Marx thus rejects the Ricardian principle of contribution. He finds it a bourgeois notion, basing property rights on one's labor.

Summing up. (1) Marx views the notion of justice as a virtue of legal forms and institutions, and thus perhaps it is a notion which belongs to prehistory. The state depends upon the mode of production. (2) Marx doesn't deny that the various conceptions of justice have formal features in common -- exchange of equivalents for equivalents -- but the notion of what is equivalent is determined in different ways. Marx would be prepared to admit that capitalism in its high period is just. One reason he rejects the utopian's argument is that it is misleading. It rests on a misapprehension of where the essential problem lies: not in the superstructure, but in the mode of production. He felt that the key enterprise is to give a scientific theory of the mode of production.

A second point: justice is a distributive notion. The appeal to justice suggests that we can separate the mode of distribution from the mode of production. This is for Marx incorrect. Appeals to justice are thus supposed to be superficial. Moreover, appeal to justice suggests that important social change can be achieved by legislation.

[Other relevant materials from the course:]

From the syllabus:

(a) Marx's criticism of the liberal state; (b) His attitude towards theories of justice; (c) The theory of alienation and exploitation; (d) The conception of rational human society

Final exam questions on Marx:

4. Present and discuss Marx's theory of alienation (as developed in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*)
5. Present and discuss Marx's theory of historical materialism (as developed in the *German Ideology*)
6. Present and discuss Marx's analysis of historical change in the *Communist Manifesto*.
7. Outline Marx's analysis of the basic characteristics of capitalism: the social relations which define it and the nature of the form of economic production.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:14AM (-05:00)

The moral sentiments

Thursday, March 11, 2010





One of Adam Smith's contributions to the study of philosophical ethics is his book, The Theory of Moral Sentiments. It is an interesting work, one part descriptive moral psychology, one part theory of the emotions. Here is the opening paragraph (link):

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.
So Smith asserts as a matter of empirical fact that there are common moral emotions and feelings -- sympathy, pity, compassion -- that underlie human social and moral behavior. And the most basic kinds of morally motivated behavior -- altruism in particular -- are explained by the workings of these natural emotions of empathy with other human beings. So Smith posed a fundamental question: is there an innate human moral psychology, beyond the reach of training and teaching, that accounts for our willingness to give to others and sometimes sacrifice important interests for the good of others? Why do firemen rush into the highly dangerous environment of a large fire in order to rescue the people inside?



Now fast-forward to the post-Darwinian world; look at the human organism from the point of view of the study of primate behavior; and ask this key question: Is there an evolutionary basis for social behaviors? Are there emotions supporting cooperation that were selected for through our evolutionary history? Is a moral capacity hardwired?

Philosophers have treated this question in the past. Allan Gibbard's Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment is a particularly good example. Here is how Gibbard describes the situation.

Consider now human beings evolving in hunting-gathering societies. We could expect them to face an abundance of human bargaining situations, involving mutual aid, personal property, mates, territory, use of housing, and the like. Human bargaining situations tend to be evolutionary bargaining situations. Human goals tend toward biological fitness, toward reproduction. The point is not, of course, that a person's sole goal is to maximize his reproduction; few if any people have that as a goal at all. Rather, the point concerns propensities to develop goals. Those propensities that conferred greatest fitness were selected; hence in a hunting-gathering society, people tended to want the various things it was fitness-enhancing for them to want. Conditions of primitive human life must have required intricate coordination--both of the simple cooperative kinds involved, say, in meeting a person, and of the kind required for bargaining problems to yield mutually beneficial outcomes. Propensities well coordinated with the propensities of others would have been fitness-enhancing, and so we may view a vast array of human propensities as coordinating devices. ***Our emotional propensities, I suggest, are largely the results of these selection pressures, and so are our normative capacities.*** (67)
One of Gibbard's key points is an analytical one. He argues against the idea of there being specific moral content, ethical principles, or moral emotions that are embodied in the central nervous system (CNS) as a result of variation and selection. Instead, he argues for there being a hardwired set of more abstract capacities that have CNS reality and selection advantage: the ability to learn a norm and to act in accordance with it. (Richard Joyce makes a similar point: "Evolutionary psychology does not claim that observable human behavior is adaptive, but rather that it is produced by psychological mechanisms that are adaptations. The output of an adaptation need not be adaptive" (5).)

This is the part that seems counter-intuitive from a simple Darwinian point of view. Wouldn't an organism possessing a genetically determined disposition to act contrary to its mortal interests almost necessarily have less reproductive success? So shouldn't such a gene quickly lose out to a more opportunistic alternative? Gibbard considers the evolutionary arguments surrounding the topic of altruism (including Richard Dawkins' Selfish Gene), and concludes -- not necessarily. It is possible to mount an evolutionary argument that establishes the fitness-enhancing characteristics of some specific kinds of altruistic behavior.

So what does the current research on this topic add to what we already knew? And, can we draw any interesting connections back to the venerable Smith?

In fact, there seems to be a new surge of interest in the topic. A number of philosophers and psychologists are now interested in treating moral psychology as an empirical question, and they are interested in working back to the evolutionary environment in which these human capacities emerged. (For example, Richard Joyce, The Evolution of Morality and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., Moral Psychology, Volume 1: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness.) Particularly interesting is research by Michael Tomasello and his collaborators. Tomasello is the co-director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. He argues that human beings are hardwired for cooperation, empathy, and social intensionality in a very interesting recent book, Why We Cooperate. A great deal of his research has to do with experiments and observations of human children (9-24 months) and of young non-human primates. He finds, essentially, that infants and children display a range of behaviors that seem to reveal a natural readiness for altruism, sharing, coordination, and eventually following of norms. "I only propose that the kinds of collaborative activities in which young children today engage are the natural cradle of social norms of the cooperative variety. This is because they contain the seeds of the two key ingredients" (89-90). He presents a range of experimental data supporting these ideas:

- Human infants have a pre-cultural disposition to be helpful and empathetic (12-14 months)
- Human toddlers adjust their cooperative and normative behavior to be more attentive to the behavior of others: generous to the generous and not to the ungenerous.
- Human infants and toddlers have a precultural disposition to absorb and enforce norms.
- The emotions of guilt and shame to be hardwired to conformance to norms.
- Infants appear to take a "we" intentional stance without learning. They are able to quickly figure out what another agent is trying to do.
- Chimps differ from human infants in virtually each of these areas.

Here is a particularly interesting piece of evidence that Tomasello offers in support of the idea that human evolution was shaped by selection pressures that favored social coordination: the whites of the eyes in the human being. Almost all non-human species have eyes that are primarily dark; whereas human eyes feature a large and conspicuous circle of white (the sclera). The whites of the eyes permit an observer to determine what another individual is looking at -- allowing human individuals to achieve a substantially greater degree of shared attention and coordination. "My team has argued that advertising my eye direction for all to see could only have evolved in a cooperative social environment in which others were not likely to exploit it to my detriment" (76).

So does this recent work on the evolutionary basis of moral emotions have anything to do with Smith and the moral sentiments? What the two bodies of thought have in common is the idea that there is a psychological foundation to moral behavior, cooperation, altruism, and helping. Pure maximizing rationality doesn't get you to "helping"; rather, there needs to be some psychological impulse to improve things for the other person. Where evolutionary psychology differs from Smith is precisely in the nature of the explanation that is offered for this moral psychology; we have the advantage of having a pretty good idea of how natural selection works on biological traits, and we are therefore in a better position than Smith was to explain why human beings possess moral sentiments. What we cannot yet answer is the question of the nature of the mechanism at the level of the central nervous system or the cognitive system, of how these moral sentiments are embodied in the human organism.

(It is interesting to contrast this line of argument with that of Tom Nagel in The Possibility of Altruism. Nagel argues against the moral psychology of Hume -- very similar to that of

Smith -- and argues that altruism is actually a feature of rationality. We behave altruistically, fundamentally, because we have a rational representation of the reality of the external world and of other persons; and to recognize the reality of another person is immediately to have a reason to help the other person. So no "motor" of moral emotion is needed in order to explain altruistic behavior. On this approach, we don't need to postulate moral sentiments to explain moral behavior; all we need is a rich conception of practical rationality.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:15PM (-05:00)

Marx's influence on Rawls

Tuesday, March 16, 2010

John Rawls and Karl Marx shared a number of core intellectual concerns. Both were interested in the question of what features a good and just society should have; both had theories about the good human life; and both understood that the benefits of modern life depend upon social cooperation. So it is interesting to ask whether Marx's thought had an influence on Rawls. In brief, the answer seems to be largely "no." In particular, Marx's economic writings and his theory of exploitation seem to have been of no special interest to Rawls during the period leading up to the publication of A Theory of Justice in 1971.

I didn't have the opportunity to study with Marx; but I did have that opportunity with Rawls. I attended both of his lecture series on the history of moral philosophy and the history of social and political thought in 1972 and 1973, and I served as a graduate assistant in the latter course. And eventually Rawls agreed to serve as primary advisor on my dissertation, "Marx's *Capital*: A Philosophical Study" (1977). (This eventually became the germ of my first book, The Scientific Marx.) Rawls's two primary lecture series have now been compiled by former students of Rawls's: Samuel Freeman's edition of Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy and Barbara Herman's edition of Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy. The lectures continued into the 1990s, and they certainly evolved significantly during that time. In particular, the lectures on Marx are substantially more extensive by the time of the 1990s than they were in the 1970s. (An earlier posting provides the notes I took on a lecture that Rawls gave in 1973 on Marx's critique of justice.)

Rawls's teachings about Marx in his courses on ethics and social and political philosophy focused primarily on the early Marx -- the "philosophical Marx". He taught and reflected upon the theory of alienation and species being, and the main texts he focused on were the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, *On the Jewish Question*, and *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. He gave little serious attention to *Capital* or Marx's own economic theories. It was Marx's theory of the human person, Marx's philosophical anthropology, that he seems to have found of the greatest philosophical interest and value. (Robert Tucker's The Marx-Engels Reader (Second Edition) remains a good source on Marx's writings. and Rawls used it as the primary source of Marx's writings in his course. Rawls also used Tom Bottomore's collection, Karl Marx: Early Writings.)

There is only one substantive comment about Marx in the lectures on moral philosophy:

A difference between Hegel and Marx in this respect is that Hegel thinks that the citizens of a modern state are objectively free now, and their freedom is guaranteed by its political and social institutions. However, they are subjectively alienated. They tend not to

understand that the social world before their eyes is a home. .... By contrast, Marx thinks that they are both objectively and subjectively alienated. For him, overcoming alienation, both subjective and objective, awaits the communist society of the future after the revolution. (Herman, 336)
(Shlomo Avineri's Hegel's Theory of the Modern State, which appeared in 1972, provides a similar treatment of Hegel view of the modern state and the citizen's freedom.)

Rawls gave his primary attention to Marx in his lectures on the history of social and political philosophy. (This occupied roughly two weeks of the 12-week course.) Here are the selections of Marx's writings that Rawls assigned in this course: *On the Jewish Question*, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, selections from the *German Ideology*, selections from *Capital*, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, *Capital*, Vol. I, chs I: sec. 4; VI-VII; IX, sec. 1; X, sec.1; XIII-XIV; and *Critique of the Gotha Program*. (These are the assignments listed in the syllabus for Philosophy 171, fall 1973-74.)

The materials assigned from the early Marx in this syllabus provide a fairly complete exposure to Marx's theories of species being, true human emancipation, and alienation. *On the Jewish Question* and the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* contain rich bodies of argument in which Marx lays out his conception of human activity and freedom. Sections from the *German Ideology* provide some exposure to the theory of historical materialism. And the *Critique of the Gotha Program* is a vehicle for discussing Marx's ideas of a socialist society. So this batch of materials offer a reasonably thorough exposure to Marx's thought prior to his political economy and his formulation of an economic theory of capitalism.

By contrast, the imprint of Marx's political economy in this set of lectures is very limited. The readings from *Capital* break out this way:

- Vol I, ch I, sec. 4: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof
- VI: The Buying and Selling of Labour-Power
- VII, sec. 1: The Labour-Process or the Production of Use-Values
- X, sec.1: The Limits of the Working-Day
- XIII: Co-Operation
- XIV: Division of Labour and Manufacturing

This amounts to about 55 pages of reading from *Capital*, out of the 774 pages of volume 1. These readings introduce a few fundamental ideas such as the fundamentals of the labor theory of value, the idea of commodity fetishism, and some of the basics of Marx's sociological description of capitalist society and the economic process within capitalism. But it is a very sketchy introduction to Marx's thinking in *Capital*. And the most extensive discussion that Rawls provided of any ideas from *Capital* in his 1973 course -- the discussion of Marx's conception of justice in the 1973 lectures -- is largely a paraphrase of Allen Wood's analysis in "The Marxian Critique of Justice" (*Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1972, link). This is true all the way down to the two passages that Rawls mentions from *Capital* in the course of this lecture; both were previously discussed in Wood's article. So there is nothing original in the 1973 lecture; Rawls has pretty much adopted Wood's frame of analysis in treating the question of Marx's conception of justice. This isn't surprising, in that Wood's article was highly original and rigorous, and opened up a largely new line of interpretation of Marx's theories. But Rawls didn't have much to add to the debate in this lecture.

In other words: As of 1973, two years after the publication of A Theory of Justice, Rawls's references to the economic theories and sociological descriptions contained in *Capital*

were very slender indeed. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Rawls had not been significantly immersed in a reading of Marx's economic and sociological writings during the formative period of his development of the theory of justice.

This breakdown of topics and readings gives a clue to what Rawls found appealing about Marx. The conception of individuals forging themselves through labor is central; it reflects a line of thought extending from Aristotle to Hegel to Marx, and it seems to be foundational for Rawls himself when he describes his theory of the good.

But there are other core ideas in Marx's thought that plainly did not appeal to Rawls. Central are the ideas of ***critique*** and ***exploitation***. Both ideas are absolutely core to Marx; but they play no role in Rawls's theories.

The idea of critique involves the notion that there are hidden presuppositions underlying a given theory, and critical philosophy can uncover them. Ludwig Feuerbach represents on ideal along these lines; Feuerbachian criticism of religion "lays bare" the hidden agendas represented by official religion. Marx's own arguments in the *German Ideology* reflect this method. And in fact, many of Marx's titles have the subtitle "towards a critique of political economy". Does Rawls ever give attention to this intellectual style? In a word, no. Rawls pays no attention to Marx's philosophical method when it comes to "critique" as a tool of intellectual discovery.

The other unspoken Marxian concept in Rawls's writings and teachings is exploitation. Marx believed, as a matter of objective economic analysis, that capitalism is a system of exploitation in a specific technical sense: the capitalist is enabled to expropriate the unpaid surplus labor of the worker. This perspective on modern economic relations as representing a set of fundamentally unfair economic relations between the powerful and the weak is not one that Rawls found compelling, apparently. And the fundamental "ontological" framework of Marx's thinking -- the idea of capitalism as a system of relations of production through which economic activity transpires -- never comes in for detailed description or discussion in Rawls.

This aspect of Marx's theory of capitalism became central in the debate in the 1970s and 1980s over "Marx's theory of justice" (for example, Allen Buchanan, Marx and Justice: The Radical Critique of Liberalism and Allen Wood, Karl Marx). If capitalism is exploitative in its most fundamental institutions, then presumably Marx would judge that capitalism is unjust. Debate raged.

The topic of justice comes up directly in Rawls's 1973 lectures. But significantly, Rawls's analysis here is taken almost point-by-point from Wood; Rawls doesn't seem to have given the question much thought himself. So the theory of exploitation, in spite of its relevance to Rawls's central topic, is not an area of influence on the development of Rawls's thought.

And why is this? Apparently because both ideas are fundamentally anti-liberal. As Rawls writes in his lectures on political philosophy, "I will consider Marx solely as a critic of liberalism" (Freeman, 320). The two ideas mentioned here both fall in the category of fundamental critique of liberalism. The first discredits the philosophical foundations of Smithian political economy, promising to lay bare the underlying and contradictory assumptions it rests upon. The second lays out an explicit theory purporting to demonstrate the explicit inequality and unfairness of market institutions at their core. Perhaps it was cognitive dissonance that kept Rawls from giving more attention to the

later Marx.

It is interesting to note that the explosion of interest in Marx by analytic philosophers took place in the early 1970s -- about the time of publication of A Theory of Justice. Philosophers such as Allen Wood, George Brenkert, Allan Buchanan, John McMurtry, Gerald Cohen, Jon Elster, Adam Przeworksi (a political scientist), and John Roemer (an economist) began taking Marx's writings seriously and offering extensive analysis and criticism of his theories. This resurgence began in discussions of "Marx's theory of justice," but extended quickly into many other areas of Marx's thought -- the theory of exploitation, the labor theory of value, the theory of historical materialism, and his theory of capitalism as a distinctive mode of production. (I myself argued for a "rational choice" interpretation of Marx's theory of capitalism in The Scientific Marx.) Early arguments discrediting the labor theory of value fall in this category as well. Examples of some of this work are included in John Roemer, ed., Analytical Marxism: Studies in Marxism and Social Theory. This work was referred to as "rational choice Marxism" or "analytical Marxism," and it represented an intellectual agenda that took Marx seriously as a thinker but often came to conclusions that offended orthodox Marxist theorists.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:35PM (-04:00)

Detroit: Taking charge of our story

Thursday, March 18, 2010



New Detroit (link) and Wayne State University are putting on a major and significant conference on how the story of Detroit is being told today. Detroit is getting a lot of press these days --and it's mostly about crisis, decline, and despair. It is hard for a city to move forward in the context of such a negative picture. And many in Detroit find this national story to be superficial and misleading. So how can we do a better job of understanding and presenting our story? (Here is a link: Ourdetroitstory.)

There is a persistent feeling in the region that the national press is writing the story of Detroit in ways that retell the myths about the past and sensationalize the present. And it makes a difference. We need more nuanced stories, and today's conference is an important effort in that direction.

The lead speaker was Tom Sugrue, author of the 1997 book, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit. Sugrue made several key points. Most importantly, he points out that the received wisdom about Detroit is wrong. It's not mostly about the 1967 uprising, the white flight of the 1960s, or the racialized politics of Mayor Coleman Young. Instead, our current situation is the result of racial discrimination in employment in the 1940s through 1960s, the flight of industry from the city that began following World War II, and the patterned and systematic racial segregation that followed from Federal home loan policies, real estate steering, and violent and harrassing homeowner associations aimed at intimidating black home buyers.

So Sugrue argues that telling today's story requires an honest understanding of 70 years of our past. The past has created a set of social forces and patterns of economic and

political inequality that profoundly affect the present and future. And he argues that the boundaries that divide our region have become a deep barrier to our progress.

The next panel involved lively presentations and discussions by distinguished observers: Robin Boyle (Wayne State University), Malcolm Dade (former political strategist for Coleman Young), David Freund (University of Maryland and author of Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America), and Marcella Wilson (Matrix Human Services). There is a strong theme of needing to achieve a greater reality of racial justice to our city -- and that so many other forms of progress won't be achieved without this important dimension of change.

The discussions today are an important part of Detroit's efforts to reinvent itself in a more equitable and affluent way. And this means understanding our history and our patterns of systemic racial disadvantage more fully.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:44PM (-04:00)

Influences and arguments

Sunday, March 21, 2010



Lately I've been writing about the influences that can be discerned in the theories of John Rawls. Rawls was a "social contract theorist"; to what extent were his theories shaped and framed by his reading of the great contract theorists such as Locke, Rousseau, or Kant? He was also influenced by the history of economic thought; so is it possible to find parallels or echoes of the thought systems of Adam Smith or Karl Marx in Rawls's thinking? And to what extent were there more local influences in the 1940s and 1950s that created fairly specific directions and characteristics in Rawls's thinking?

This is an interesting question in application to one particular philosopher. But it also raises a more general question: where do philosophical theories come from? To what extent is it the case that a given philosopher is working within a "micro-tradition" -- a particular and specific field of influence -- and to what extent is the thinker "original", bringing forward new ideas on a topic? And once a fundamental topic has been established for a thinker -- e.g., "What defines the principles of justice for a property-owning democracy?" -- to what extent does the theory then develop autonomously according to the arguments and analysis of the philosopher?
This way of formulating the problem invokes several related ideas: influence and tradition; originality and creativity; and orderly, logical development of a position or theory.
I suppose that there are many instances of philosophers who fall mostly in the "influence" part of the map: their philosophical work largely takes the form of carefully working out the ideas of their influencers. (This might be part of the legacy of Rawls; I suppose there has been quite an ocean of philosophical work dedicated to specifying more exactly what "primary goods" are, or how "reflective equilibrium" works.) This might be described as "normal science" -- taking the foundations of a field of study as being unquestioned, and then attempting to work out the details more exactly.

There are also some good examples of philosophers who were largely driven by the "logical analysis" part of the map: formulate a good, difficult question, and then spend the rest of one's career working out analytically sound answers to the problems this question spawns. "Naturalized epistemology" might fall in this sector; we might say that the philosophers who have tried to give a biological interpretation of the conditions of knowledge are taking one fundamental question -- how do biological organisms arrive at knowledge of their environment? -- and attempt to apply the findings of cognitive science and evolutionary biology to the issues that arise. Kant's philosophy also seems to have this character: once having chosen the topics "What can we know metaphysically?" or "What creates moral duty?", his mind seems to have proceeded analytically and logically, without correction or stimulus from a contemporary literature.

And what about originality? Are there examples of philosophers who have largely invented a set of questions and approaches that defined a new philosophy for a given domain? Wittgenstein is commonly recognized as a highly original philosopher; but certainly his theories were embedded in a tradition of philosophy. Several things are apparently true about Wittgenstein when it comes to influence and argument. (a) Many of his ideas and assumptions in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus derived from careful readings of Frege and Russell; (b) his insights and assertions in Philosophical Investigations were responsive to a surrounding set of ideas about language, behavior, and meaning, but his solutions and theories still strike one as being highly original; and (c) for certain themes and problems he continued to work carefully to move his position forward through analytical discovery and inference. So Wittgenstein seems to illustrate all three dimensions of philosophical theory formation and knowledge construction.

Several things seem to be true about the formation of the theories and perspectives of individual philosophers:

- They are introduced into a fairly specific "philosophical research community" through graduate education that provides paradigm examples of philosophical questions and issues and prescriptive advice about the nature of philosophical argument and analysis.
- They are introduced to their field at a particular moment in social history: World War II, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the civil rights period, 9-11; and historical events and shifts have an influence on the formation of their thought.
- "Originality" can take the form of arriving at new questions ("How is group mentality possible?"); new methods of analysis (Frege-Russell's formal deductivism as a solution to the question of the nature of mathematical truth); or new substantive approaches to philosophical theory (Kant's Copernican Revolution in thought).

An interesting contribution to this set of topics is an innovative series of volumes posing "5 Questions" to philosophers in a variety of fields (link). A recent volume is Philosophy of the Social Sciences: 5 Questions, edited by Diego Rios and Christoph Schmidt-Petri. Contemporary philosophers were asked to respond to five important questions about their approaches to the field of the philosophy of social science. The format offers the beginning of a triangulation among "beginnings," "fundamental assumptions," and "future directions" for each of these philosophers. The questions that were provided to the philosophers are these:

1. How did you get interested in the philosophical aspects of the social sciences?
2. Which social sciences do you consider particularly interesting or challenging from a philosophical point of view?
3. How do you conceive the relation between the social sciences and the natural sciences?
4. What is the most important contribution that philosophy has made to the social sciences?

5. Which topics in the philosophy of social science will, and which should, receive more attention than in the past?

Contributors include David Bloor, Raymond Boudon, Mario Bunge, Nancy Cartwright, Margaret Gilbert, Daniel Hausman, Harold Kincaid, Daniel Little, Steven Lukes, David Papineau, Philip Pettit, Alexander Rosenberg, David-Hillel Ruben, John Searle, and Raimo Tuomela. This list includes quite a few of the people who have helped to shape current thinking in this sub-discipline of philosophy; so it is very interesting to have a chance to see what they have to say about some of the original influences on their thinking about the social sciences, as well as their own definitions of the frameworks they have arrived at. I found it very interesting to think seriously about these questions in my own case, because it forces one to reflect on the ideas, events, and ideologies that led one to choose one set of topics and approaches rather than another. I would have added a sixth question for each of the contributors: "What are the most basic ideas that you have come to in the course of your studies of the social sciences?"

What I would like to see is a next step conducted by a gifted sociologist of the professions, who would attempt to map out the streams of influence and contribution that are documented within the essays in this volume. Andrew Abbott's careful analysis of the currents of thought constituting the discipline of sociology in the 1960s and 1970s is a good case in point (Chaos of Disciplines). Another good example is William Sewell's attempt to provide a geography of the discipline of social history in the 1960s (Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation).

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:08PM (-04:00)

Zomia -- James Scott on highland peoples

Wednesday, March 24, 2010



James Scott opens his most recent book with quotations from frustrated pre-modern administrators and missionaries whose territories included the peoples of inaccessible highland regions -- Guizhou, highland Burma, and Appalachia. Scott finds that the geographical circumstances of highland peoples mark them apart from the political organizations of the valleys; states could control agriculture, surplus, and labor in the lowlands, but were almost entirely incapable of exerting sustained rule in the highlands. And he finds that highland cultures and systems are more or less deliberately shaped to elude the grasp of the state; linguistic variety, swidden agriculture, and ethnic opacity all work to make the art of rational administration all but impossible. The book is The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia, and it is a significant contribution to the social and political analysis of very large swatches of the world. (Here are the table of contents and introduction to Edmund Leach's classic book, Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure.)

Scott makes use of the concept of "Zomia" to capture the highland peoples of Southeast Asia.



One of the largest remaining nonstate space in the world ... is the vast expanse of uplands, variously termed the Southeast Asian *ma s-si f* and more recently, Zomia. This great mountain realm on the marches of mainland Southeast Asia, China, India, and Bangladesh sprawls across roughly 2.5 million square kilometers -- an area roughly the size of Europe. As one of the first scholars to identify the massif and its peoples as a single object of study, Jean Michaud has traced its extent: "From north to south, it includes southern and western Sichuan, all of Guizhou and Yunnan, western and northern Guangxi, western Guangdong, most of northern Burma with an adjacent segment of extreme [north]eastern India, the north and west of Thailand, practically all of Laos above the Mekong Valley, northern and central Vietnam along the Annam Cordillera, and the north and eastern fringes of Cambodia." (chapter 1)
(The Michaud citation refers to Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif.)

Scott estimates the population of the minority peoples of Zomia at 80-100 million. Here is a map posted by Martin Lewis on GeoCurrents.Info.

What is intriguing about this definition of space and social reality is that it is not defined by nation-state boundaries and jurisdiction, by linguistic groupings, or by ethnic and national identities. Scott emphasizes the enormous linguistic and ethnic variation that occurs across this expanse of space. "In the space of a hundred kilometers in the hills one can find more cultural variation--in language, dress, settlement pattern, ethnic identification, economic activity, and religious practices--than one would ever find in the lowland river valleys" (chapter 1; Kindle location 343).

Two central arguments take up much of Scott's attention in the book. One is an argument about the logistics of state power in a pre-modern agrarian society. Essentially he argues that pre-modern agrarian societies were only able to impose their rule over a tight radius of perhaps 300 kilometers, when it came to collecting taxes, grain, and manpower. Moreover, this radius of power reduced significantly when population was distributed over mountainous country. So as a practical matter, the pre-modern states of Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia were river-valley states, and the peoples of the highlands were rarely subject to central rule. This argument resonates with Michael Mann's analysis of pre-modern state power in The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760. On this scale, the Kingdom of Chicago would barely be able to exert its will over the peasants of Peoria or Milwaukee; and Indianapolis would be a distant and irrelevant place.

The precolonial state, when it came to extracting grain and labor from subject populations, could project its power only within a fairly small radius of the court, say, three hundred kilometers, and that undependably and only during the dry season. (Kindle loc 610)
And, he argues, the peoples of the highlands deliberately organized their activities in ways that made the power of the state least effective.

Virtually everything about these people's livelihoods, social organization, ideologies, and (more controverially) even their largely oral cultures, can be read as strategic positionings designed to keep the state at arm's length. (Kindle loc 26)

The very diversity, fluidity, and mobility of their livelihoods meant that for an agrarian state adapted to sedentary agriculture, this ungoverned landscape and its people were fiscally sterile. (Kindle loc 217)
The other central theoretical argument that Scott offers concerns the question of ethnicity and identity. Like Ben Anderson (Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism), Scott believes that the identities of Burman, Mon, Khmer, Tai, or Shan are constructed identities, not essential or ancient.

Identity at the core was a political project designed to weld together the diverse peoples assembled there. Bondsmen of allied strongmen, slaves captured in warfare or raids, cultivators and merchants enticed by agricultural and commercial possibilities: they were in every case a polyglot population. (Kindle loc 1166)

The central plain of what would become Siam was, in the thirteenth century, a complex mix of Mon, Khmer, and Tai populations who were an "ethnicity-in-the-process-of-becoming" Siamese. (Kindle loc 1172)
The book takes up the argument that Scott began in Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed: that a central task of the state it to render its territory and population "legible". The state needs to be able to regiment and identify its subjects, if it is to collect taxes and raise armies; so sedentary, mobile, peripheral peoples are antithetical to the needs of the state. This argument begins in *Seeing Like a State*; and it gains substantial elaboration here. And it is a fundamental call for a different approach to conceptualizing and studying the cultures and populations of Southeast Asia: not by ethnic group, not by national boundaries, but rather by the common circumstances of material and political life in high, rugged terrain.

As I've suggested in treating Scott's other contributions to "peasant studies", Scott's work almost always takes the form of an imaginative re-framing of problems that we thought we had understood. But once looking at the facts from Scott's point of view, we find that the social phenomena are both more complex and perhaps more obscure than they initially appear to be.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:35PM (-04:00)

Skinner's spatial imagination

Saturday, March 27, 2010



images: presentations of Skinner's data by Center for Geographic Analysis, Harvard University, AAS 2010

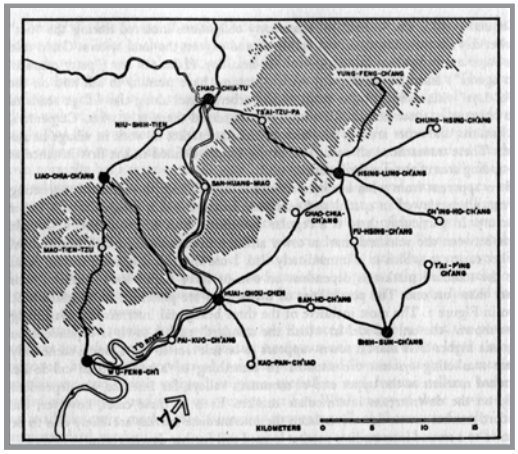
G. William Skinner was a remarkably generous scholar who inspired and assisted several generations of China specialists. (Here is a link to a remembrance of Bill.) He was prolific and fertile, and there is much to learn from rereading his work. There is quite a corpus



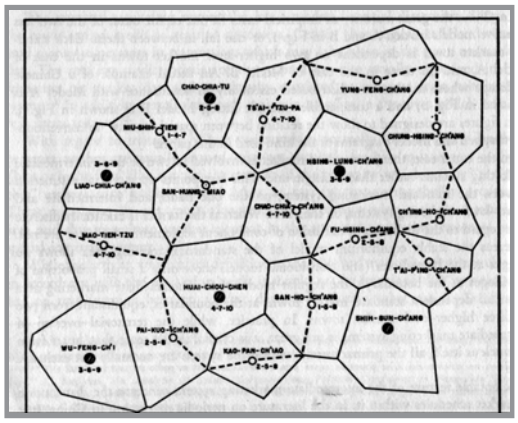
of unpublished work in the form of research reports and conference papers. Rereading this work is profoundly stimulating. It holds up very well as a source of ideas about social science analysis of concrete historical and social data, and there are many avenues of research that remain to be further explored.

Skinner is best known for his efforts to provide regional systems analysis of spatial patterns in China. He thought of a social-economic region as a system of flows of people, goods, and ideas. He argued for the crucial role that water transport played in knitting together the economic activities of a region in the circumstances of pre-modern transport.

Skinner's work demonstrated the great value of spatial analysis. Patterns emerge visually once we've selected the appropriate level of scope. Mapping social and economic data is tremendously insightful. He was also highly sensitive to the social and cultural consequences of these flows of activity. For example, patterns of gender ratios show a pronounced regional pattern; Skinner demonstrates the relevance of core-periphery structure to social-cultural variables such as this one.

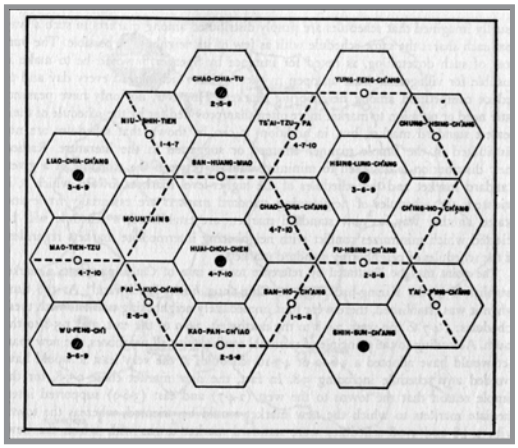


Skinner plainly anticipated the historical GIS revolution conceptually. And this is a feature of imagination, not technology.



A classic series of articles on the spatial structure of the Chinese countryside in the 1960s provided an important basis for rethinking "village" society. They also provided a rigorous application of central place theory to the concrete specificity of China. Here are several maps drawn from these essays ("Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China." *Journal of Asian Studies* 24 (1-3), 1964-65). Here Skinner is trying out the theories of central place theory, and the theoretical prediction of economic space being structured as a system of nested hexagons with places linked by roads.

Another key contribution of Skinner's work is his analysis of China in terms of a set of eight or nine "macroregions". He argues that China was not a single national economic system, and it was not a set of separate provincial economies. Instead, it consisted of a small number of "macroregions" of trade, commerce, and population activity, linked by water transport. And macroregions were internally differentiated into core and periphery. Skinner used meticulous county-level databases to map the economic and demographic boundaries of the region. Skinner identified core and periphery in terms of population density, agricultural use, and other key variables. And he then measured a host of other variables – female literacy, for example – and showed that these vary systemically from



core to periphery. There is also an important ecological dimension to the argument; Skinner demonstrated that there is a flow of fertility from periphery to core as a result of the transfer of food and fuel from forests to urban cores. (This analysis is developed in "Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth-Century China" in *The City in Late Imperial China*, edited by G. W. Skinner, Stanford University Press, 1977.) Here are three maps developed by Skinner and his collaborators on the basis of the macroregions analysis.



Map 1. China's macroregional systems in relation to provinces, showing metropolitan cities, 1990

This is a particularly expressive map of the Lower Yangzi macroregion, differentiated into 4 levels of core and periphery. This is pretty much the full development of the macroregional analysis.

Another key idea in Skinner's work is his analysis of city systems into a spatial and functional hierarchy. He argued that it is possible to distinguish clearly between higher-level and lower-level urban places, and that there is an orderly arrangement of economic functions and marketing scope associated with the various urban places in a macroregion.

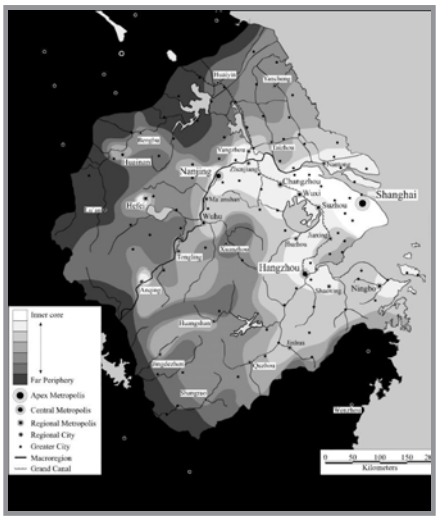
So regional analysis of China is a key contribution in Skinner's work. But Skinner did not restrict his research to China alone. He also did significant work on Japanese demography and family structure and female infanticide in the 1980s (for example, "Reproductive Strategies and the Domestic Cycle among Tokugawa Villagers," an AAS presentation in 1988).



And he brought his regional systems analysis to bear on France in an extended piece of research in the late 1980s. The maps that follow are drawn from an unpublished conference paper titled "Regional Systems and the Modernization of Agrarian Societies: France, Japan, China," dated 1991. This paper builds upon a 1988 paper titled "The Population Geography of Agrarian Societies: Regional Systems in Eurasia."

This analysis builds a view of France as a set of interrelated regions with core-periphery stucture. Through the series of working maps Skinner painstakingly constructs an empirically based analysis of the economic regions of France in mid-nineteenth century. And Skinner then asks one of his typically foundational questions: how do these geographical features play a causal role in cultural and demographic characteristics?

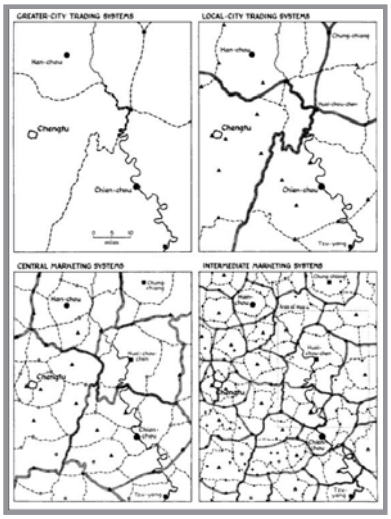
This map of never-married/married female ratios is one illustration of Skinner's effort to relate social, cultural, and demographic variables to the core-periphery structure of a region. The pattern of high ratio corresponds fairly well across the map of France to the

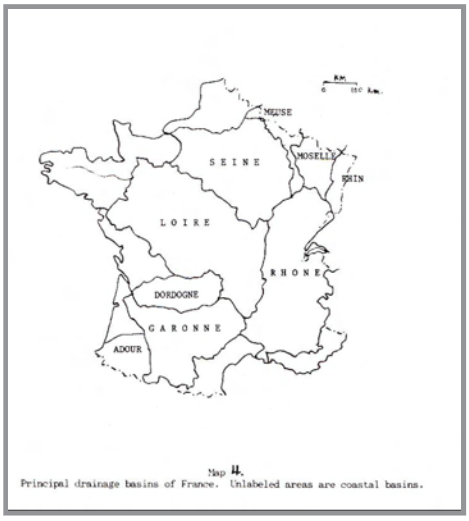


regions identified by demographic and agricultural factors. And this serves to confirm the underlying idea -- that economic regionalization has major consequences for cultural and demographic behavior.

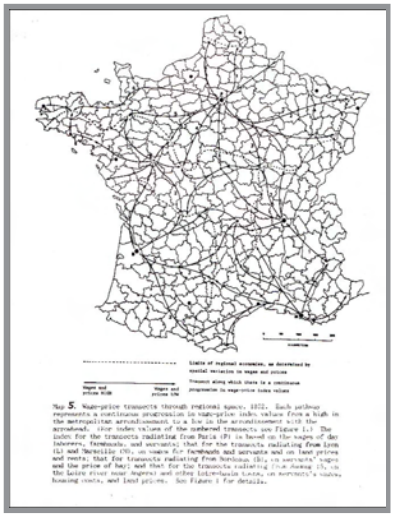
Likewise patterns of female life expectancy and net migration; here again we find the kind of regionalization of important social variables that Skinner documents in great detail in late imperial China.

Finally, Skinner also played an important role as a "macro-historian" of China. His 1985 Presidential Address to the Association for Asian Studies was a tour-de-force, bringing his macroregional analysis into a temporal framework (Skinner, G. William. 1985. Presidential Address: The Structure of Chinese History. *Journal of Asian Studies* XLIV (2):271-92). In this piece he demonstrates a "long-wave" set of patterns of economic growth and contraction in two widely separated macroregions. And he argues that we understand China's economic history better when we see these sub-national patterns. He analyzes the economic and population history of North China and Southeast Coast, two widely separated macroregions, over several centuries. And he demonstrates that the two regions display dramatically different economic trajectories over the long duree. Skinner brings Braudel to China. Here is the pattern he finds for two macroregions over a centuries-long expanse of time. And significantly, if these patterns were superimposed into a "national" pattern, it would show pretty much of a flat performance, since the two macroregions are significantly out of phase in their boom and bust cycles.

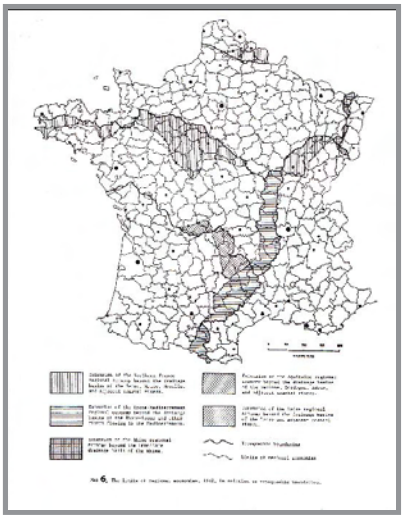




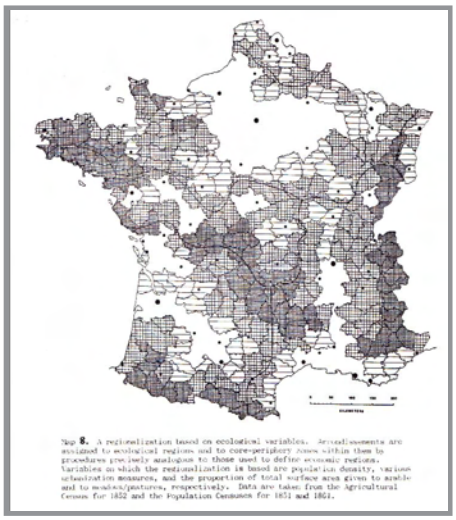
Finally, an enduring contribution that Skinner made is his cheerful disregard of discipline. Economic anthropology, regional studies, demography, urban studies, history … Skinner moved freely among all these and more. It was topics and questions, not disciplinary strictures, that guided Skinner's fertile and rigorous imagination. And area specialists and social scientists alike can fruitfully gain from continued study of his research. Fortunately, work is underway to make Skinner's unpublished research and data available to other scholars. Here are some major projects:



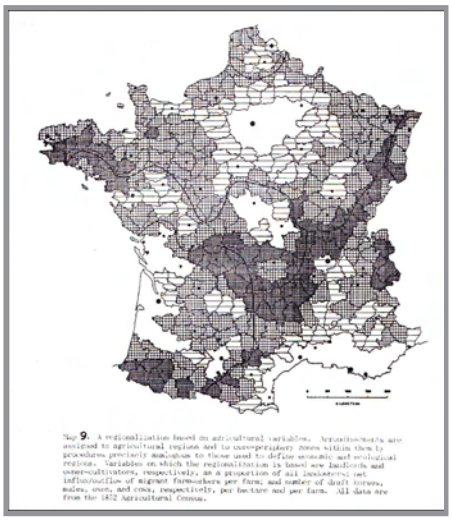
Map 5. Wage-price transects through regional space, 1852. Each pathway represents a continuous progression in wage-price index values from a high in the metropolitan arrondissement to a low in the arrondissement with the arrowhead. (For index values of the numbered transects see Figure 1.) The index for the transects radiating from Paris (P) is based on the wages of day laborers, farmhands, and servants; that for the transects radiating from Lyon (L) and Marseille (M), on wages for farmhands and servants and on land prices and rents; that for transects radiating from Bordeaux (B), on servants' wages and the price of hay; and that for the transects radiating from Nancy (N), on the Loire river near Angers and other intermediate areas, on servants's wages, housing rents, and land prices. See Figure 1 for details.



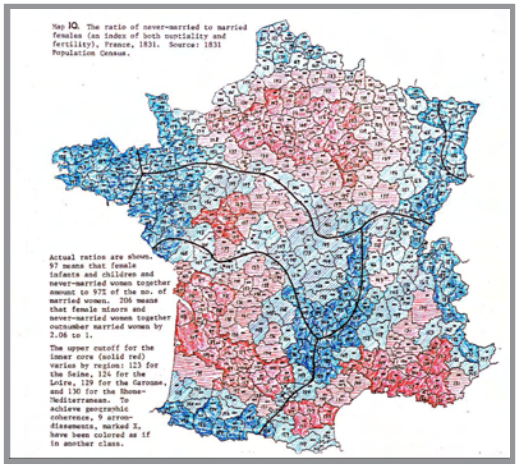
Map 6. The Limits of regional economies, 1852, in relation to topographic boundaries.



Map 8. A regionalization based on ecological variables. Arrondissements are assigned to ecological regions and to core-periphery zones within them by procedures precisely analogous to those used to define economic regions. Variables on which the regionalization is based are population density, various urbanization measures, and the proportion of total surface area given to arable and to meadow/pastures, respectively. Data are taken from the Agricultural Census for 1852 and the Population Censuses for 1851 and 1861.



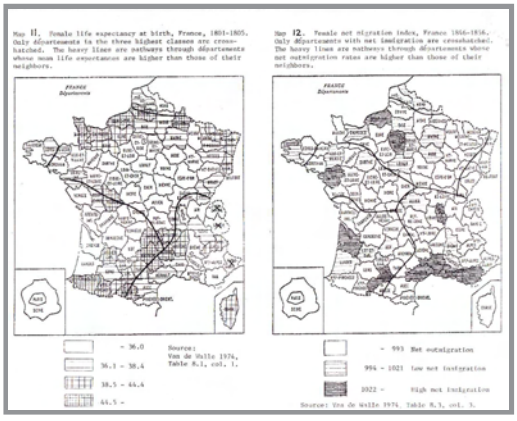
Map 9. A regionalization based on agricultural variables. Arrondissements are assigned to agricultural regions and to core-periphery zones within them by procedures precisely analogous to those used to define economic and ecological regions. Variables on which the regionalization is based are landlords and owner-cultivators, respectively, as a proportion of all inhabitants; net influx/outflux of migrant farmworkers per farm; and number of draft horses, mules, oxen, and cows, respectively, per hectare and per farm. All data are from the 1852 Agricultural Census.



Map 10. The ratio of never-married to married females (an index of both nuptiality and fertility), France, 1831. Source: 1831 Population Census.

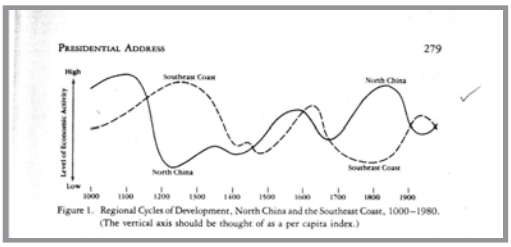
Actual ratios are shown. 97 means that female infants and children and never-married women together amount to 975 of the no. of married women. 206 means that female minors and never-married women together outnumber married women by 2.06 to 1.

The upper cutoff for the inner core (solid red) varies by region: 123 for the Seine, 124 for the Loire, 129 for the Garonne, and 130 for the Rhone-Mediterranean. To achieve geographic coherence, 9 arrondissements, marked X, have been colored as if in another class.



Map 11. Female life expectancy at birth, France, 1801-1805. Only départements in the three highest classes are cross-hatched. The heavy lines are outlines through départements whose mean life expectancies are higher than those of their neighbors.

Map 12. Female net migration index, France 1866-1936. Only départements with net immigration are cross-hatched. The heavy lines are outlines through départements where net outmigration rates are higher than those of their neighbors.



- Data and maps are being curated and presented at Harvard. Here is a beta site and here is the platform the China GIS team is using at AfricaMap.
- The Skinner Archive at Harvard (link)
- Skinner's unpublished papers and research materials are being digitized and presented at the University of Washington. Here is a link.
- The China Historical GPS project at Fudan University is presenting an ambitious digital mapping collection as well (link).

(Presented at the Association for Asian Studies, Philadelphia, March 2010; panel on Skinner's legacy.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:34PM (-04:00)

Contentious politics in China

Sunday, March 28, 2010



By official count, the incidence of popular protest in China has increased ten-fold in the past fifteen years. Kevin O'Brien and Rachel Stern report that the Chinese state reported 8,700 "collective incidents" in 1993, and this number had grown to 87,000 by 2005 (12). And the issues that have evoked protest have expanded as well: land seizures, egregious local corruption, lay-offs and labor mistreatment, ecological and environmental concerns, and the Sichuan earthquake and building collapses, for example. (The photo above is drawn from a 2008 story on factory protests in Dongguan in the *Telegraph* (link).) A recent volume by O'Brien and Stern, Popular Protest in China, is a collection of some of the best current work by China scholars on popular protest in contemporary China. Contributors include some of the researchers who are doing the most detailed work on this topic today, including William Hurst (The Chinese Worker after Socialism), Kevin O'Brien (Rightful Resistance in Rural China), Guobin Yang (The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online), and Yongshun Cai (Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail). So the volume offers an excellent perspective on the state of the field.

(It is mildly ironic to note that the conference on which the volume is based was held in 2006 -- several years ***before*** the global financial collapse that threw millions of Chinese workers out of work. The incidence and severity of factory protests has certainly increased in the intervening years.)
Sidney Tarrow frames the volume by observing that there has been a welcome recent convergence between China studies and the field of contentious politics. The contributors to the volume have made productive use of some of the core concepts of the theories of

contentious politics that have been developed in the past two decades -- resource mobilization, political opportunity, issue framing, social networks, issue escalation, etc., that have proven so productive in the analysis of a range of instances of contention and collective action. And Tarrow poses a comparativist's challenge: to what extent is it possible to discern similar processes of mobilization and escalation in the China case? Further, Tarrow points out that much of the theorizing about contentious politics has taken place in the context of more democratic regimes; so how much of a difference does the fact of China's authoritarian political system make for the occurrence and character of social contention?

One of the important insights offered by several of the contributors is the importance of disaggregating structures like "political opportunity," "actor," and "issue." O'Brien and Stern put it this way in their introduction:

The essays in this volume show that political opportunity in China depends (at a minimum) on the identity of the participants, the region, the grievance at hand, and the level of government engaged. (14)

The Chinese state is not a "monolith" but a "hodge-podge of disparate actors," an "attractive, multidimensional target." (14, quoting O'Brien and Li, Rightful Resistance in Rural China)

And, of course, we have to recognize the widely different circumstances facing potential contentious actors in different regions and segments of the country. The point is an important one: we should not look to the intellectual framework of contentious politics research as a set of conceptual recipes for deductively explaining contention. Rather, we are better off looking at the literature on contentious action as a toolbox of "mechanisms and processes" that recur across contexts and that aggregate differently in different circumstances. (This is, of course, the methodology that Tarrow, McAdam, and Tilly advocate in Dynamics of Contention.)

Each chapter focuses, by and large, on a different thread within the current literature on contentious politics: framing (William Hurst), trust (Teresa Wright), transnational actors (Patricia Thornton), leadership (Feng Chen), networks (Yanfei Sun and Dingxin Zhao), repression (Yongshun Cai), communication (Guobin Yang), and opportunity (Yanfei Sun and Dingxin Zhao). As such, the volume also serves as something like a tutorial on current theories of contentious politics.

Liz Perry's concluding essay frames the argument around "rebellion" (protest against particular officials) versus "revolution" (protest against principles and structures of government). And she is inclined to think that the rise in protest in China today falls in the former category -- mostly harmless from the point of view of the power and structure of the regime.

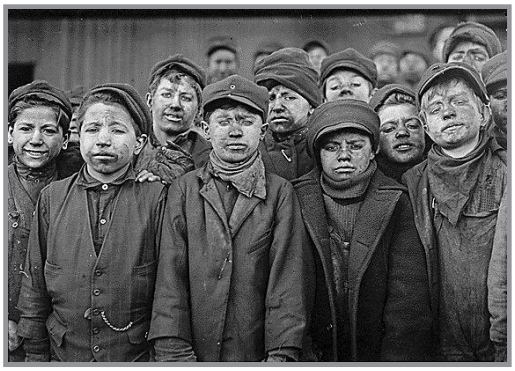
Despite its remarkable frequency, then, contention in contemporary China remains limited in size, scale, and scope. With few exceptions, the social composition, territorial reach, and endurance of individual protests have all been highly circumscribed. (206)

But I'm inclined to think that this misses one of the most important implications of the contentious politics literature, and the import of its most important case. Small-scale mobilization and protest can escalate to fundamental and widespread demands for justice. And a broad movement can emerge that is not **revolutionary** -- devoted to the overthrow of the state -- and yet is persistently **transformative**: dedicated to the long, slow transformation of society and state in the direction of equality and dignity for all members of society. The great historical example of this -- the example that motivated some of the best work in the literature of contentious politics -- is the American civil rights movement. This movement demanded a fundamental change of law and of culture, and it succeeded. And we might say that this is what ordinary people in China today demand and deserve. The demand for voice and legal protections of lawful activities that swims

throughout the more specific claims currently being made has the potential of becoming a very widespread movement.
(There are a number of earlier posts on these issues, collected under the tag CAT_collective action.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:38PM (-04:00)

Public health estimates in Marx's Capital

Friday, April 02, 2010



Long stretches of Marx's *Capital* take the form of an effort at developing and defending an economic model of capitalism, based on the theories of value and surplus value. But there are also recurring efforts at providing a descriptive ***sociology*** of capitalism: the forms of day-to-day life that British economic relations imposed upon the working class. This dimension of the book is descriptive and detailed; it has much in common with Engels's approach in The Condition of the Working Class in England.

Marx was very interested in these descriptive investigations -- Dr. Simon, Dr. Julian Hunter, Mr. Smith, Dr. Bell, and the inquiries and Acts of Parliament in the 1860s that shed light on the depth of English poverty. The index for *Capital* includes a section, "Parliamentary Reports and Other Official Publications," which includes references to over a hundred reports on factories, poverty, nutrition, and health. These range from a Report of Select Committee, London, 1855, on "Adulteration of Bread", to "Reports of the Medical Officer of the Privy Council on Public Health" (1861-66). And these reports constitute the core of empirical evidence that Marx brings to bear for his economic assertions throughout the work. In fact, we might describe some parts of *Capital* as a sort of "meta-study" of current investigations of the public health status of England's cities.

This interest is particularly evident late in *Capital* where Marx turns to the topic of "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation." Consider one fairly detailed section, "The Badly Paid Strata of the British Industrial Class" (link). Here Marx is offering the best information available, at the household level, concerning the standard of living of this stratum of the British working class. Consider this passage:

During the cotton famine of 1862, Dr. Smith was charged by the Privy Council with an inquiry into the conditions of nourishment of the distressed operatives in Lancashire and Cheshire. His observations during many preceding years had led him to the conclusion that “to avert starvation diseases,” the daily food of an average woman ought to contain at least 3,900 grains of carbon with 180 grains of nitrogen; the daily food of an average man, at least 4,300 grains of carbon with 200 grains of nitrogen; for women, about the same quantity of nutritive elements as are contained in 2 lbs. of good wheaten bread, for men 1/9 more; for the weekly average of adult men and women, at least 28,600 grains of carbon and 1,330 grains of nitrogen. His calculation was practically confirmed in a surprising manner by its agreement with the miserable quantity of nourishment to which want had forced down the consumption of the cotton operatives. This was, in December, 1862, 29,211 grains of carbon, and 1,295 grains of nitrogen weekly.

Marx then quotes a Privy Council inquiry in 1863, which finds that

"in only one of the examined classes of in-door operatives did the average nitrogen-supply just exceed, while in another it nearly reached, the estimated standard of bare sufficiency [i.e., sufficient to avert starvation diseases], and that in two classes there was defect — in one, a very large defect — of both nitrogen and carbon. Moreover, as regards the examined families of the agricultural population, it appeared that more than a fifth were with less than the estimated sufficiency of carbonaceous food, that more than one-third were with less than the estimated sufficiency of nitrogenous food, and that in three counties (Berkshire, Oxfordshire, and Somersetshire), insufficiency of nitrogenous food was the average local diet."

In other words, the Privy Council finds that important segments of the English working class were undernourished by the prevailing scientific standard of the day. This official report is fundamentally damning of the current economic system; it led to conditions of near-starvation for its workers.

Marx goes on to describe other components of the standard of living -- housing, crowding, sanitation, and clothing, for which the working class are seriously deprived. And in each case he believes that independent, disinterested observers have documented the conditions of misery in which the working class lived in England in the 1860s.

Consider another interesting example, Marx's use of the Select Committee's report on the adulteration of bread. This occurs in an extended footnote in Chapter VI, "The Buying and Selling of Labour-Power."

In London there are two sorts of bakers, the "full priced," who sell bread at its full value, and the "undersellers," who sell it under its value. The latter class comprises more than three-fourths of the total number of bakers.... The undersellers, almost without exception, sell bread adulterated with alum, soap, pearl ashes, chalk, Derbyshire stonedust, and such like agreeable nourishing and wholesome ingredients. (note 3)

Marx goes on to describe in a little bit of detail the specific timing of the payment of wages, demonstrating the economic coercion that leads workers to agree to buy this adulterated bread.

Or we might notice that Marx's index refers to a series of Parliamentary reports on child labor, and then consider the use that Marx makes of these reports. Here is one example of his use of the child labor reports in the chapter on "The Working-Day":

The potteries of Staffordshire have, during the last 22 years, been the subject of three parliamentary inquiries.... For my purpose it is enough to take, from the reports of 1860 and 1863, some depositions of the exploited children themselves. ... William Wood, 9 years old, was 7 years and 10 months when he began to work. He "ran moulds" (carried ready-moulded articles into the drying-room, afterwards bringing back the empty mould) from the beginning. He came to work every day in the week at 6 a.m., and left off about 9 p.m. "I work till 9 o'clock at night six days in the week." (*Capital I*, chap 7, sect. 3)

What is of special interest in these passages is the way that Marx's mind seems to have worked on these questions. He was genuinely interested, it would seem, in the concrete details of the conditions of the English working class; and he was fortunate that there was something of an explosion of official and non-official interest in the same set of questions, including especially Parliamentary Blue Books. These inquiries fall in the category of what we would today call the field of public health, and Marx was plainly an avid reader of the reports that resulted from these investigations.

It is not accident that brings Marx's detailed discussion of the nutritional status of the industrial poor into Part VII of *Capital*, "Accumulation." It is Marx's view that the production of surplus value, and the accumulation of wealth that it enables, is directly

related to the production of the poverty of the worker. So the circumstances that Marx describes in this section do not constitute simply an unfortunate current reality; they are the apotheosis of a system of production that was working well.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:10AM (-04:00)

Norbert Elias on the individual

Sunday, April 04, 2010



Norbert Elias opens his 1987 book The Society of Individuals with these words:

The relation of the plurality of people to the single person we call the "individual", and of the single person to the plurality, is by no means clear at present. But we often fail to realize that it is not clear, and still less why. We have the familiar concepts "individual" and "society", the first of which refers to the single human being as if he or she were an entity existing in complete isolation, while the second usually oscillates between two opposed but equally misleading ideas. Society is understood either as a mere accumulation, an additive and unstructured collection of many individual people, or as an object existing beyond individuals and incapable of further explanation. In this latter case the words available to us, the concepts which decisively influence the thought and action of people growing up within their sphere, make it appear as if the single human being, labelled the individual, and the plurality of people conceived as society, were two ontologically different entities.
This Preface was written around the time of the publication of the volume in 1987; but the core of the book was originally written in the context of the composition of Elias's 1939 book, The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations. So the ideas expressed in the primary essay of the book belong to the classic period of the development of his thought.

What is striking about this paragraph is Elias's insistence, essentially, that we don't know what we are referring to when we use the terms "individual" and "society." He rejects the twin views of "individualism" and "holism", and he wants to arrive at a conception of "individual/society" that avoids the polarity between the two.

I interpret Elias's analysis here in a way that roughly parallels the intuition I was grappling with in formulating the idea of "methodological localism" (link). Fundamentally, the idea is that we can't take the individual out of society or society out of the individual; instead, we begin with the socialized individual and build up more complex social processes and structures. Here is a passage from the Preface that anticipates this idea of the socially constructed individual:

The entire stock of social patterns of self-regulation which the individual has to develop within himself or herself in growing up into a unique individual, is generation-specific and thus, in the broader sense, society-specific. My work on the civilizing process therefore showed me very clearly that something which did not arouse shame in an earlier century could be shameful in a later one, and vice versa - I was well aware that movements in the opposite direction were also possible. But no matter what the direction, the evidence of

change made clear to what extent individual people are influenced in their development by the position at which they enter the flow of the social process. (viii)
So individuals are socially and historically constructed; there is no such thing as the "pre-social" or "extra-social" individual. Here is another statement of this point:

At birth individual people may be very different through their natural constitutions. But it is only in society that the small child with its malleable and relatively undifferentiated mental functions is turned into a more complex being. Only in relation to other human beings does the wild, helpless creature which comes into the world become the psychologically developed person with the character of an individual and deserving the name of an adult human being. (21)
But there are also dynamic and individuating features of societies; societies are distinct in ways that ultimately derive from the characteristics of existing individuals:

Society, as we know, is all of us; it is a lot of people together. But a lot of people together in India and China form a different kind of society than in America or Britain; the society formed by many individual people in Europe in the twelfth century was different from that in the sixteenth or the twentieth century. And although all these societies certainly consisted and consist of nothing other than many individuals, the change from one form of living together to another was clearly unplanned by any of these individuals. (3)

What we lack - let us freely admit it - are conceptual models and an overall vision by which we can make comprehensible in thought what we experience daily in reality, by which we could understand how a large number of individuals form with each other something that is more and other than a collection of separate individuals - how they form a "society", and how it comes about that this society can change in specific ways, that it has a history which takes a course which has not been intended or planned by any of the individuals making it up. (7)
And here is how Elias suggests that we commonly think about social reality:

One section of people approaches sociohistorical formations as if they had been designed, planned and created, as they now stand before the retrospective observer, by a number of individuals or bodies. ... The opposing camp despises this way of approaching historical and social formations. For them the individual plays no part at all. ... A society is conceived, for example, as a supra-individual organic entity which advances ineluctably towards death through stages of youth, maturity and age. (4-5)
It appears that Elias frames a false dichotomy here when he asks how society came about: **either** specific individuals planned and intended that social institutions should have specific functions, **or** a society is a whole that possesses its own dynamics of development. But there is a third possibility: social institutions have their current characteristics because of the actions and choices of countless individuals; but these characteristics are largely the **unintended** consequence of the strategic interactions among many individuals. So individual agency lies behind social institutions and structures; but these agents are usually operating within the framework of a limited set of goals and beliefs that have nothing to do with the eventual shape of the social institution.

So we need to follow Elias's suggestion and look for new metaphors for understanding the relation between "society" and "individual." We need metaphors that work better for the third option -- society as the unintended assemblage of many strategic activities of individuals. Here is one: we might think of a social institution as a potlach supper rather than a seven-course meal designed by a chef. Or, to use a metaphor explored in an earlier posting, we can understand society along the lines of a flea market: a somewhat

orderly affair that derives from the separate and sometimes coordinated actions of hundreds of participants (link). And in fact, Elias actually uses a similar metaphor:

> And even in each present moment, people are in more or less perceptible motion. What binds the individuals together is not cement. Think only of the bustle in the streets of a large city: most of the people do not know each other. They have hardly anything to do with each other. They push past each other, each pursuing his or her own goals and plans. They come and go as it suits them. Parts of a whole? The word "whole" is certainly out of place, at least if its meaning is determined solely by a vision of static or spatially closed structures, by experiences like those offered by houses, works of art or organisms. (13)

Here is another interesting metaphor that Elias explores as a way of capturing "the social" -- the complex intertwining of behavior in formal dance.

> Let us imagine as a symbol of society a group of dancers performing court dances, such as the frangaise or quadrille, or a country round dance. The steps and bows, gestures and movements made by the individual dancer are all entirely meshed and synchronized with those of other dancers. If any of the dancing individuals were contemplated in isolation, the functions of his or her movements could not be understood. The way the individual behaves in this situation is determined by the relations of the dancers to each other. (19)

But within the bustle of the street or the coordination of the dance there is an underlying order (just as we found in thinking about the flea market analogy):

> The invisible order of this form of living together, that cannot be directly perceived, offers the individual a more or less restricted range of possible functions and modes of behaviour. By his birth he is inserted into a functional complex with a quite definite structure; he must conform to it, shape himself in accordance with it and perhaps develop further on its basis. (14)

And this order poses a problem for individualism:

> This network of functions within a human association, this invisible order into which individual purposes are constantly being introduced, does not owe its origin simply to a summation of wills, a common decision by many individual people. (15)

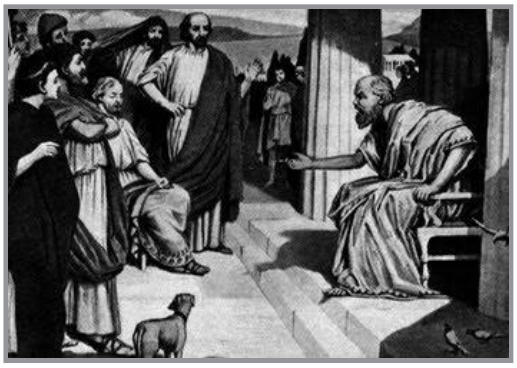
But here the false dichotomy mentioned above is important. It doesn't take an announced master plan to create a peasant militia or an age-specific practice of dating and courtship; rather, a series of opportunistic choices are made over time, by a number of different actors, leading to an institution that has characteristics that were intended by no one (see illustrations in Elizabeth Perry, Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945).

This is an interesting and important contribution to the philosophy of society. I'm inclined to think, though, that Elias does a better job of situating the "socialized, civilized individual" than he does in conceptualizing the social institution or structure. There is a persistent structural-functionalism in the language, and a persistent attempt to attribute intentional design to social institutions, that fail to deliver on the promise of arriving at a better way of understanding both aspects of the "individual-society" relationship.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:56PM (-04:00)

Teaching philosophy

Tuesday, April 06, 2010







What is it that we expect students to learn when we teach philosophy? Is philosophy an arcane and charmingly useless vestige of a nineteenth-century university education? Or does it have something crucial to add to the liberal education of the twenty-first century -- whether in the arts and sciences or in pre-professional schools?

Philosophers would probably answer this question in a wide variety of ways. In my own case, I have several high-level goals in mind when I approach a new group of undergraduate students in philosophy. I hope to help them to develop in several ways:

- to gain a set of intellectual skills: analysis, reasoning, clarity of thinking and exposition, open-mindedness and a readiness to try to see a problem from multiple points of view
- to learn some of the developed approaches to "philosophical" problems: knowledge, ethical behavior, individual rights, social justice, the authority of the state, the nature of rationality, the meaning of human life
- to gain an engaged involvement in some great thinkers and their theories and reasoning in detail
- to gain some meaningful acquaintance with some important philosophical theories (utilitarianism, empiricism, mind-body materialism, ordinary language philosophy ...)
- to gain an ability to see the connections between philosophical reasoning and real human problems -- scientific knowledge, addressing poverty or racism, resolving conflicts of value or conflicts of interest or desire, ...

Most of these goals have to do with developing intellectual capacity -- imagination,

reasoning, analytical ability, critical capacity to probe behind ordinary assumptions -- more than gaining specific bits of knowledge about the history of philosophy. Students are exposed to pieces of philosophical traditions that result in exam questions such as these: What was Anselm's ontological argument? What was Russell's paradox? What were the higher pleasures according to J. S. Mill? But the real learning goal isn't that the student should have the ability to draft a short Wikipedia entry on one of these topics. Rather, the goal is that he/she has enough of a set of analytical and critical skills so that she can pick up a philosophical problem; explore and develop the problem with insight and imagination; consider a variety of ways of addressing the problem; and put forward a philosophical argument that attempts to resolve the problem. The student needs to learn how to **think** -- philosophically, imaginatively, and critically.

It is true, of course, that being able to formulate and resolve a philosophical problem requires a degree of acquaintance with the systems and theories that previous generations of philosophers have brought to bear on the problems they raise. So it is important to have grappled seriously with Anselm, Russell, or Mill. And this means taking seriously the positions these philosophers and others advanced and the intellectual frameworks within which they reasoned. So a degree of knowledge of some of the fields and traditions of philosophy is an important intellectual attainment for a philosophy student. But the goal of pursuing this knowledge is not so that the student can become a mini-expert on Anselm or Russell; rather, the goal is to broaden the set of intellectual frameworks and reference points on the basis of which the student's philosophical imagination can address new problems.

This approach addresses one of the large dichotomies that we have to face in designing a university curriculum: the split between "intellectual skills and capacities" and "mastery of content". My position puts primary emphasis on the former over the latter. One might ask, in good philosophical fashion, why we might want to make this choice? My own reason has to do with the highest goal I think universities ought to pursue: to help their students to gain a rich range of skills, tools, and intellectual resources on the basis of which they can address the widest range of problems they will face in their civic and professional lives. When a philosophy student graduates, attends law school or business school, and enters the world of professional activity, he/she may not be able to reproduce specific arguments from the course she took in epistemology or the philosophy of science. But what we hope is that the challenge of working with those arguments as an undergraduate, challenging and dissecting the assumptions the philosopher made, and considering alternative solutions to the problem, will have given him/her a broad intellectual range and acuity, and a flexible and imaginative ability to think through a set of issues. And, we would hope, these skills are highly transportable, from the context of philosophy to the practical intellectual challenges of being a good doctor, lawyer, or engineer. Ultimately the intellectual capacities of imagination, analytical ability, critical insight, and intellectual rigor are the best and most enduring attainments of a good liberal education.

This goal has to do with intellectual capacity and imagination. But we have another and equally important goal as well in designing a university education or a philosophy course. This is the goal of helping our students become engaged and morally motivated members of the organizations and communities to which they belong. We would hope that our students have cultivated an ability to think independently and seriously about the issues of social justice and personal conduct that arise in the society that they are helping to constitute; and we would hope that they have acquired some of the components of personal seriousness that lead them to act with conviction on the basis of their moral

ideas. The transition from narcissism to engagement is not an automatic or inevitable one, and a suitable learning environment in the university can have a large impact on this process of personal development. So my hope in my own philosophy classroom is that students will have an opportunity to explore and challenge their own moral ideas; to come to see how the contemporary world measures up with respect to those ideas; and to see that their own engagement in issues of community, justice, and social progress can make a meaningful difference in the state of their world.

Some of this process of critical self discovery can happen in the classroom. But some of it is best stimulated by the other activities that can help students get engaged in the important social issues of their day -- poverty alleviation, literacy, racial disparities, etc. Involvement in organizations such as Habitat for Humanity or Amnesty International can give students a genuine understanding of the needs their world presents to them, and the difference that their engagement can make. And the teamwork that unavoidably accompanies all these activities gives a concrete illustration to the student of the value of collaboration.

This line of thought converges with one of the common refrains of current thinking about pedagogy: the idea of the student as an "active learner." As Socrates and Habermas illustrate in the images above, a very large part of teaching philosophy is the challenge of getting the student to think for himself/herself. The student needs to take on the intellectual challenge as a serious one; and he/she needs to expend the real mental effort required to understand and deal with the problem. This can't be distilled into an artful lecture by the professor; rather, it seems to require dialogue and intellectual exchange. The student needs to be engaged in the debate; and he or she needs to be brought to see the stakes of the issue. (In spite of the vast lecture hall that Michael Sandel confronts in the third image above, he too is capable of engaging and challenging the students in his classroom. Here is a video of a lecture from his Harvard course on justice.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:03PM (-04:00)

Trust networks

Friday, April 09, 2010



Chuck Tilly had a fascination with the mechanisms of social interaction at all levels. His 2005 book, Trust and Rule, picks up on one particular feature of social organization that is often instrumental in political and social episodes, including especially in the everyday workings of predation and defense. This is the idea of a *trust network*: a group of people connected by similar ties and interests whose "collective enterprise is at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, and failures of individual members" (chapter 1, kindle loc 186). Here is a definition:

Trust networks, then, consist of ramified interpersonal connections, consisting mainly of strong ties, within which people set valued, consequential, long-term resources and

enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of others. (chapter 1, kindle loc 336)

A band of pirates, a group of tax resisters, or a village of non-conformists in a period of religious persecution fall in the category of trust networks. The stakes are high for all participants. On the other hand, the American Medical Association, the League of Women Voters, and the pickpockets who work the Gare St Lazare train station do not represent trust networks, though they have the properties of social action networks more generally. There is little real risk for any particular physician even if other members of the AMA don't play their parts in a lobbying campaign. The willingness of members of the extended group to commit their own actions to a risky common effort depends on their level of trust in other members -- trust that they will make their own contributions to the collective enterprise, and trust that they will not betray their comrades. (French historian Marc Bloch belonged to a trust network, the French Resistance, that led to his death in 1944 by the Gestapo; link.)

The general idea is that there are numerous examples of networks of people who share substantial interests in common, and who have a high level of trust in one another that permits them to undertake risky joint activities. Here is a more complete statement of Tilly's conception:

How will we recognize a trust network when we encounter or enter one? First, we will notice a number of people who are connected, directly or indirectly, by similar ties; they form a network. Second, we will see that the sheer existence of such a tie gives one member significant claims on the attention or aid of another; the network consists of strong ties. Third, we will discover that members of the network are collectively carrying on major long-term enterprises such as procreation, long-distance trade, workers' mutual aid or practice of an underground religion. Finally, we will learn that the configuration of ties within the network sets the collective enterprise at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, and failures of individual members. (chapter 1, kindle loc 186)

Trust networks are particularly relevant in the context of efforts at violent extraction and domination -- both on the side of predators and prey. Predators -- bandits, pirates, and gangs -- need to establish strong ties within their organizations in order to be able to effectively coerce their targets and to escape repression by others. And prey -- farmers in ranch country, rural Jews in Poland, or home owners in central Newark -- are advantaged by the existence of strong ties of family, religion, or ethnicity through which they can maintain the collective strategies that provide some degree of protection. But Tilly makes the interesting point that the workings of trust networks cross over both contentious and noncontentious activities. Here is a general statement that frames much of Tilly's discussion in the book:

Noncontentious politics still make up the bulk of all political interaction, since it includes tax collection, census taking, military service, diffusion of political information, processing of government-mediated benefits, internal organizational activity of constituted political actors, and related processes that go on most of the time without discontinous, public, collective claim making. Trust networks and their segments get involved in noncontentious politics more regularly -- and usually more consequently -- than in contentious politics. (chapter 1, Kindle loc 208)

The idea of a trust network represents a different way of getting a handle on the contrast between self-interested agency and group-oriented agency, which in turn corresponds to "economistic" and "sociological" approaches to social behavior. Is it ***interests*** or ***norms*** that guide social behavior? By introducing the idea of a trust network, Tilly is able to find a position someplace else on the spectrum -- neither purely self-interested behavior nor

routine normative conformance. Instead, agents within trust networks behave as purposive, goal-directed actors; but they have commitments and resources that people in other social settings lack, and they are thereby enabled to achieve forms of collective action that are impossible elsewhere. We might say that Tilly is offering an account of the microfoundations of collective action, or of a certain kind of collective action.

In line with Tilly's lifelong interest in taxation and state-building, the idea of resource extraction plays a central role in his analysis of trust networks. A central theme is the struggle between the tax-collecting state and the elusive, tax-evading trust networks that exist in civil society. "Rulers have usually coveted the resources embedded in such networks, have often treated them as obstacles to effective rule, yet have never succeeded in annihilating them and have usually worked out accommodations producing enough resources and compliance to sustain their regimes" (kindle loc 229).

It is interesting to connect this dialectic of predation and evasion with the arguments Jim Scott puts forward in The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia (link). Part of the effectiveness of the highland peoples of Burma in Scott's account is the density of their social relationships and a consequent ability to sustain a degree of collective resistance that would be impossible in a less dense society. And, in fact, Tilly's analysis of the tactical situation of a trust network subject to the superior coercive power of some other entity is enlightening in Scott's story as well. Consider these avenues that Tilly advances as collective strategies for protecting a given trust network against the pressures of the surrounding state: concealment, dissimulation, clientage, predation, enlistment into the regime, bargaining, and dissolution (chapter 2, kindle loc 794). We can find examples of each of these strategies in Scott's analysis of Burma. More pointedly, we can see instances of almost all these strategies in the current conflicts between the Burmese junta and the cease-fire groups such as the Kachin Independence Organization (link, link).

So what kind of analysis is Tilly offering here? What is the use of this concept from the point of view of the social sciences, beyond the metaphor and analytical specifics? Are there concrete historical or sociological hypotheses in play? Does this concept provide a better basis for explaining some puzzling outcomes than existing theories? Or, possibly, is the concept of a trust network another example of a part of the sociologist's toolkit: an ideal-typical description of a real social mechanism whose workings can be discerned in a variety of contexts?

Tilly is relatively explicit about several of these questions. To start: he does not believe that "trust networks" constitute a homogeneous social kind. We cannot offer a general account of the essential features of a trust network (kindle loc 823). We can do a certain amount of classification within the group of social configurations that we call "trust networks". So "trust networks" are socially real, and we can use ordinary methods of social and historical inquiry to map out some of their properties.

Further, he believes, we can state some mid-level regularities about trust networks and political regimes: for example,

- Trust networks survive and hold off predators when they generate enough resources to reproduce themselves;
- trust networks are absorbed into systems of rule when existing autonomous trust networks disintegrate or cease to provide substantial benefits;
- variations in the kinds of trust networks that exist help explain the variety of the consolidation of rule that occurs in given settings. (loc 1096)

- trust networks that mark, maintain, and monitor sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders generally operate more effectively than others (loc 1238)
- trust networks most commonly defend themselves from predation by adopting some combination of the strategies of concealment, clientage, and dissimulation (loc 1724)

Another important question is the role of evidence in this treatment. Tilly offers dozens of examples of significant historical instances of trust networks at work -- as predators, as prey, and as potential subjects of extractive rule. And we can ask this question: what is the evidentiary value of the examples? Are they merely illustrative? Do they serve to pinpoint some of the specifics of discrete social mechanisms? Or are they more like suggestive heuristic cases that may point us in the direction of a more developed theory?

I think that Tilly's view would be something close to the second option here: the examples are valuable and insightful because they provide relatively transparent instances in which the mechanisms are fully exposed. They are a bit like the observations of "animalcules" through van Leeuwenhoek's microscope: glimpses of an underlying mechanism that proves to be an important constituent of more macro-level processes.

At the same time, the analysis doesn't add up to a "theory" of trust networks; it is more analogous to descriptive ecology than it is to the theory of the gene. When Darwin documents the variety of finches in the Galapagos Islands, or when Wallace painstakingly describes the myriad distinct species of beetles he finds in the jungles of the Malay archipelago, each is involved in a kind of scientific work that stands between pure description and explanatory theorizing. And this seems to be roughly where Tilly's dissection of trust networks falls as well.

It is also interesting to consider whether there are important examples of trust networks in the world today. And it seems clear that there are. The situation of the ethnic movements in contemporary Burma is one good example. Domestic terror groups and right-wing militias provide another clear set of examples. The American Civil Rights movement, the Freedom Riders, and SNCC's organizing efforts offer another good set of examples as well (link). So the concept of a trust network is in fact a valuable contribution to the study of collective action and social mobilization.
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:00PM (-04:00)

Marx on Russia

Wednesday, April 14, 2010



In 1881 Marx wrote a letter to Vera Zasulich, an important Russian follower, that addresses the question of theory and prediction when it comes to thinking about the future course of history. In particular, he denies that his theories have determinate predictive implications for the development of capitalism or socialism in Russia. Here is a link to the letter, and below are a few paragraphs.

The issue is an important one: did Marx think of his body of knowledge as constituting a general predictive theory? And the letter clearly implies that he did not.

The letter is interesting in several respects. First, it explicitly rejects the notion that Marx's economic and historical theories are suited to the task of identifying the necessary or inevitable course of historical development. It summarily dismisses the idea of a necessary sequence of modes of production. Instead, Marx shows himself to recognize the contingency that exists in historical development, as well as the degree to which history creates new conditions in its course that influence future developments.

The other important feature of the letter is its substantive analysis of the material characteristics of the Russian peasant commune, and the potential that this social form has for constituting the material core of an alternative route to socialism in Russia. As the letter makes clear, Marx thinks that the social relations associated with the peasant commune provide a possible social foundation for a modern socialist economy; and this would be an economy that was not "post-capitalist" but nonetheless technologically and socially advanced.

In a way Marx's argument anticipates the theory of "late developers" -- for example, Gerschenkron's Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective. Marx argues that a socialism in Russia was possible through an alternative pathway. A version of socialism in Russia based on the "archaic" commune can take advantage of the developments in technology and social organization created by advanced capitalism. It is not necessary for Russian society to go throughout the several-centuries long process of agricultural and technological modernization that England underwent; rather, Russia can simply adopt the modern technologies now available.

The interest of this letter is not to be found in the historical predictions it makes, but rather in the example it offers of the way that Marx's mind worked. The reasoning here represents a good example of Marx's materialist approach to history. He wants to arrive at a fairly detailed level of understanding of the social and economic relations -- the property relations -- that constituted a historical form of the rural commune. And he then seeks to provide an analysis of the way in which those relations might be expected to develop under a specific set of historical circumstances. And key within this analysis is the workings of the specific form of property that corresponded to this social system -- the social relations of production.

I suppose the letter illustrates something else as well: Marx's interest at the end of his life in finding an alternative pathway to socialism. The revolutions of 1848 were long in the past, and a proletarian revolution had not ensued. The Paris Commune had been decisively and violently repressed in 1871. Working-class militancy was not propitious in the advanced capitalist countries -- France, Germany, or Britain. So the prospects of revolution in the advanced capitalist world were not encouraging to Marx. And so finding some hope for an alternative process of social development through which the ends of socialism might be achieved was an appealing prospect for Marx.

Here are the first few paragraphs of the letter, which is worth reading in full:

1) In dealing with the genesis of capitalist production I stated that it is founded on “the complete separation of the producer from the means of production” (p. 315, column 1, French edition of *Capital*) and that “the basis of this whole development is the expropriation of the agricultural producer. To date this has not been accomplished in a radical fashion anywhere except in England... But all the other countries of Western Europe are undergoing the same process” (1.c., column II).

I thus expressly limited the “historical inevitability” of this process to the countries of Western Europe. And why? Be so kind as to compare Chapter XXXII, where it says:

The “process of elimination transforming individualised and scattered means of production into socially concentrated means of production, of the pigmy property of the many into the huge property of the few, this painful and fearful expropriation of the working people, forms the origin, the genesis of capital... Private property, based on personal labour ... will be supplanted by capitalist private property, based on the exploitation of the labour of others, on wage labour” (p. 341, column II).

Thus, in the final analysis, it is a question of the transformation of one form of private property into another form of private property. Since the land in the hands of the Russian peasants has never been their private property, how could this development be applicable?

2) From the historical point of view the only serious argument put forward in favour of the fatal dissolution of the Russian peasants’ commune is this: By going back a long way communal property of a more or less archaic type may be found throughout Western Europe; everywhere it has disappeared with increasing social progress. Why should it be able to escape the same fate in Russia alone? I reply: because in Russia, thanks to a unique combination of circumstances, the rural commune, still established on a nationwide scale, may gradually detach itself from its primitive features and develop directly as an element of collective production on a nationwide scale. It is precisely thanks to its contemporaneity with capitalist production that it may appropriate the latter’s positive acquisitions without experiencing all its frightful misfortunes. Russia does not live in isolation from the modern world; neither is it the prey of a foreign invader like the East Indies.
And here is an important summary statement:

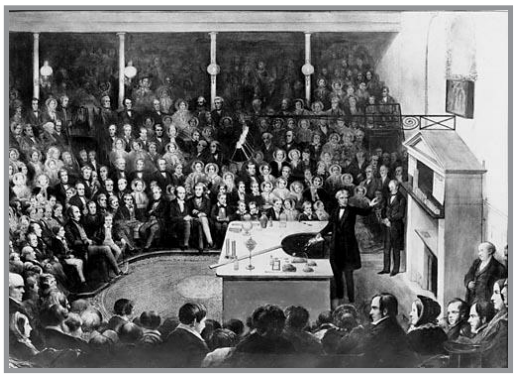
Theoretically speaking, then, the Russian “rural commune” can preserve itself by developing its basis, the common ownership of land, and by eliminating the principle of private property which it also implies; it can become a direct point of departure for the economic system towards which modern society tends; it can turn over a new leaf without beginning by committing suicide; it can gain possession of the fruits with which capitalist production has enriched mankind, without passing through the capitalist regime, a regime which, considered solely from the point of view of its possible duration hardly counts in the life of society. But we must descend from pure theory to the Russian reality.
There is a major irony in rereading Marx's analysis of the emancipatory possibilities inherent in the social form of the "peasant commune" in Russia. Most striking is the experience of the collectivization of Soviet agriculture in the 1920s and Stalin's war on the kulaks. Rather than representing a bright new future for the peasants, collectivization represented a cruel war by starvation against rural society (Lynne Viola, The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside, Volume one (Annals of Communism Series) (v. 1)).

It is also also interesting to recall that one of the disputes among the Bolsheviks within Soviet leadership in the 1920s and 1930s was the issue of cooperatives in agriculture. A. V. Chayanov advocated for a more democratic route to Soviet socialism, through the mechanism of locally established rural cooperatives (link). His reasoning had quite a bit in common with Marx's analysis in this letter to Vera Zasulich; and, of course, it led to his persecution and execution in 1937.

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:24AM (-04:00)

Feyerabend as artisanal scientist

Friday, April 16, 2010



I've generally found Paul Feyerabend's position on science to be a bit too extreme. Here is one provocative statement in the analytical index of Against Method:

Thus science is much closer to myth than a scientific philosophy is prepared to admit. It is one of the any forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the best. It is conspicuous, noisy, and impudent, but it is inherently superior only for those who have already decided in favour of a certain ideology, or who have accepted it without having ever examined its advantages and its limits. And as the accepting and rejecting of ideologies should be left to the individual it follows that the separation of state and church must be supplemented by the separation of state and science, that most recent, most aggressive, and most dogmatic religious institution. Such a separation may be our only chance to achieve a humanity we are capable of, but have never fully realised.

Fundamentally my objection is that Feyerabend seems to leave no room at all for rationality in science: no scientific method, no grip for observation, and no force to scientific reasoning. A cartoon takeaway from his work is a slogan: science is just another language game, a rhetorical system, with no claim to rational force based on empirical study and reasoning. Feyerabend seems to be the ultimate voice for the idea of relativism in knowledge systems -- much as Klamer and McCloskey seemed to argue with regard to economic theory in The Consequences of Economic Rhetoric.

This isn't a baseless misreading of Feyerabend. In fact, it isn't a bad paraphrase of Against Method. But it isn't the whole story either. And at bottom, I don't think it is accurate to say that Feyerabend rejects the idea of scientific rationality. Rather, he rejects one common interpretation of that notion: the view that scientific rationality can be reduced to a set of universal canons of investigation and justification, and that there is a neutral and universal set of standards of inference that decisively guide choice of scientific theories and hypotheses. So I think it is better to understand Feyerabend as presenting an argument against a certain view in the philosophy of science rather than against science itself.

Instead, I now want to understand Feyerabend as holding something like this: that there is "reasoning" in scientific research, and this reasoning has a degree of rational credibility. However, the reasoning that scientists do is always contextual and skilled, rather than universal and mechanical. And it doesn't result in proofs and demonstrations, but rather a preponderance of reasons favoring one interpretation rather than another. (Significantly, this approach to scientific justification sounds a bit like the view argued about sociological theories in an earlier posting.)

Here are a few reasons for thinking that Feyerabend endorses some notion of scientific rationality.

First, Feyerabend is a philosopher and historian of science who himself demonstrates a great deal of respect for empirical and historical detail. The facts matter to Feyerabend, in his interpretation of the history of science. He establishes his negative case with painstaking attention to the details of the history of science -- Newton, optics, quantum mechanics. This is itself a kind of empirical reasoning about the actual intellectual practices of working scientists. But if Feyerabend were genuinely skeptical of the enterprise of offering evidence in favor of claims, this work would be pointless.

Second, his own exposition of several scientific debates demonstrates a realist's commitment to the issues at stake. Take his discussion of the micro-mechanisms of reflection and light "rays". If there were in principle no way of evaluating alternative theories of these mechanisms, it would be pointless to consider the question. But actually, Feyerabend seems to reason on the assumption that one theory is better than another, given the preponderance of reasons provided by macro-observations and mathematical-physical specification of the hypotheses.

Third, he takes a moderate view on the relation between empirical observation and scientific theory in "How to Be a Good Empiricist":
The final reply to the question put in the title is therefore as follows. A good empiricist will not rest content with the theory that is in the centre of attention and with those tests of the theory which can be carried out in a direct manner. Knowing that the most fundamental and the most general criticism is the criticism produced with the help of alternatives, he will try to invent such alternatives. (102)
This passage is "moderate" in a specific sense: it doesn't give absolute priority to a given range of empirical facts; but neither does it dismiss the conditional epistemic weight of a body of observation.

So as a historian of science, Feyerabend seems to have no hesitation himself to engage in empirical reasoning and persuading, and he seems to grant a degree of locally compelling reasoning in the context of specific physical disputes. And he appears to presuppose a degree of epistemic importance -- always contestable -- for a body of scientific observation and discovery.
What he seems most antagonistic to is the positivistic idea of a universal scientific method -- a set of formally specified rules that guide research and the evaluation of theories. Here is how he puts the point in "On the Limited Validity of Methodological Rules" (collected in Knowledge, Science and Relativism).
It is indubitable that the application of clear, well-defined, and above all 'rational' rules occasionally leads to results. A vast number of discoveries owe their existence to the systematic procedures of their discoverers. But from that, it does not follow that there are rules which must be obeyed for every cognitive act and every scientific investigation. On the contrary, it is totally improbable that there is such a system of rules, such a logic of scientific discovery, which permeates all reasoning without obstructing it in any way. The world in which we live is very complex. Its laws do not lay open to us, rather they present themselves in diverse disguises (astronomy, atomic physics, theology, psychology, physiology, and the like). Countless prejudices find their way into every scientific action, making them possible in the first place. It is thus to be expected that every rule, even the most 'fundamental', will only be successful in a limited domain, and that the forced application of the rule outside of its domain must obstruct research and perhaps even bring it to stagnation. This will be illustrated by the following examples. (138)
It is the attainability of a universal, formal philosophy of science that irritates him. Instead, he seems to basically be advocating for a limited and conditioned form of local rationality

-- not a set of universal maxims but a set of variable but locally justifiable practices. The scientist is an artisan rather than a machinist. Here is a passage from the concluding chapter of *Against Method*:

The idea that science can, and should, be run according to fixed and universal rules, is both unrealistic and pernicious. It is unrealistic, for it takes too simple a view of the talents of man and of the circumstances which encourage, or cause, their development. And it is pernicious, for the attempt to enforce the rules is bound to increase our professional qualifications at the expense of our humanity. In addition, the idea is detrimental to science, for it neglects the complex physical and historical conditions which influence scientific change. It makes our science less adaptable and more dogmatic: every methodological rule is associated with cosmological assumptions, so that using the rule we take it for granted that the assumptions are correct. Naive falsificationism takes it for granted that the laws of nature are manifest and not hidden beneath disturbances of considerable magnitude. Empiricism takes it for granted that sense experience is a better mirror of the world than pure thought. Praise of argument takes it for granted that the artifices of Reason give better results than the unchecked play of our emotions. Such assumptions may be perfectly plausible and even true. Still, one should occasionally put them to a test. Putting them to a test means that we stop using the methodology associated with them, start doing science in a different way and see what happens. Case studies such as those reported in the preceding chapters show that such tests occur all the time, and that they speak against the universal validity of any rule. All methodologies have their limitations and the only 'rule' that survives is 'anything goes'.

His most basic conclusion is epistemic anarchism, expressed in the "anything goes" slogan, but without the apparent relativism suggested by the phrase: there is no "organon," no "inductive logic," and no "Scientific Method" that guides the creation and validation of science. But scientists do often succeed in learning and defending important truths about nature nonetheless.

(Here is an online version of the analytical contents and concluding chapter of Against Method. And here is a link to an article by John Preston on Feyerabend in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:25PM (-04:00)

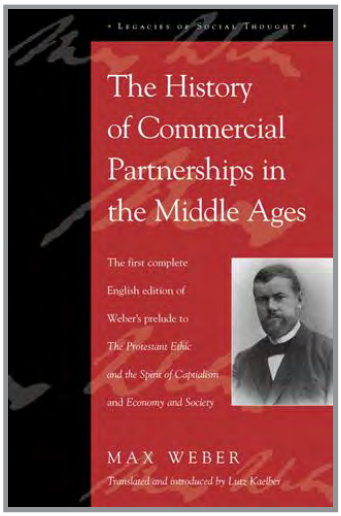
Ideal types, values, and selectivity

Monday, April 19, 2010

image: cover of Max Weber, The History of Commercial Partnerships in the Middle Ages

I've never really understood why the exposition of one of Max Weber's most important methodological ideas, his theory of ideal types, occurs in the context of an essay that is primarily about the role of values in the social sciences. This is his essay, "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy" in The Methodology of The Social Sciences. The central thrust of the essay is to attempt to spell out the ways that objectivity and truth relate to partisanship and values within the course of social science research and teaching. And Weber draws a sharp distinction between what can be known and demonstrated (empirical facts and causal relationships) and what can be internally tested for consistency but not demonstrated (fundamental value commitments). Here is how Weber puts the point early in the essay:

What has been the meaning of the value-judgments found in the pages of the *Archiv* regarding legislative and administrative measures, or practical recommendations for such



measures? What are the standards governing these judgments? What is the validity of the value-judgments which are uttered by the critic, for instance, or on which a writer recommending a policy founds his arguments for that policy? In what sense, if the criterion of scientific knowledge is to be found in the "objective" validity of its results, has he remained within the sphere of *scientific* discussion? We will first present our own attitude on this question in order later to deal with the broader one: in what sense are there in general "objectively valid truths" in those disciplines concerned with social and cultural phenomena? (50-51)

The theory of ideal types is an important contribution to the specification of the nature of concepts in the human and historical sciences. But why is this subject particularly relevant in the context of a discussion of values and social policy?

One reason for the conjoining of ideal types and values is the unavoidable fact of **selectivity** in the social sciences. Weber makes the point repeatedly in this essay that there is an infinite depth to social phenomena -- even to a single phenomenon or event -- and therefore it is necessary to **select** a finite representation of the object of study if we want to approach a problem scientifically. But how do we select a specific aspect of a phenomenon for study? We do so on the basis of a judgment of what aspects are important -- and this is a value judgment, either directly or indirectly. In a very specific sense, our **interests** (material and intellectual) guide the formation of our social-science research projects. "The quality of an event as a 'social-economic' event is not something which it possesses 'objectively.' It is rather conditioned by the orientation of our cognitive interest, as it arises from the specific cultural significance which we attribute to the particular event in a given case" (64). And a few pages later: "Social economic problems do not exist everywhere that an economic event plays a role as cause or effect -- since problems arise only where the significance of those factors is problematical and can be precisely determined only through the application of the methods of social-economics" (66).

Or in other words: what constitutes an economic situation as a "problem" is the fact that it has consequences that intersect with things we care about -- or our fundamental scheme of values. So the subject matter of "social-economics" is doubly dependent on our interests: our cognitive interests in how things work, and our practical interests in how to promote "good" outcomes and avoid "bad" outcomes.

This is where the issue moves into connection with the theory of ideal types. Weber makes it clear that he regards the formulation of a scientific research topic as being generated by a set of ***interests*** -- cognitive and practical. And this is where the idea of an ideal type is relevant. Because an ideal type is a selective, one-sided representation of an aspect of social life. Here is the foundational description that Weber offers in conjunction with the idea of a "commodity-market":

This conceptual pattern brings together certain relationships and events of historical life into a complex, which is conceived as an internally consistent system. Substantively, this construct is itself like a utopia which has been arrived at by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality. Its relationship to the empirical data consists solely in the fact that where market-conditioned relationships of the type referred to by the abstract

construct are discovered or suspected to exist in reality to some extent, we can make the characteristic features of this relationship pragmatically clear and understandable by reference to an ideal-type. It is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description. It is thus the "idea" of the historically given modern society, based on an exchange economy, which is developed for us by quite the same logical principles as are used in constructing the idea of the medieval "city economy" as a "genetic" concept. ... An ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. (90)

This specification of the concept of an ideal type links back to Weber's discussion of the value of specialization in the social sciences: "the justification of the *one-sided* analysis of cultural reality from specific 'points of view' -- in our case with respect to its economic conditioning -- emerges purely as a technical expedient from the fact that training in the observation of the effects of qualitatively similar categories of causes and the repeated utilization of the same scheme of concepts and hypotheses offers all the advantages of the division of labor" (71). In other words, the specialization of research methods and training that is implied by the establishment of disciplines in the social sciences is justified pragmatically rather than epistemically -- it is the practical advantage in research productivity rather than the nature of the social world that justifies the establishment of disciplines.

There is no absolutely "objective" scientific analysis of culture -- or put perhaps more narrowly but certainly not essentially differently for our purposes -- of "social phenomena" independent of special and "one-sided" viewpoints according to which -- expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously -- they are selected, analyzed and organized for expository purposes. (72)

This locates the role and justification of the "ideal type" very precisely. An ideal type -- of a market economy, of a university, or of a banking institution -- creates a selective model of social organization that can then be explored analytically and empirically by specialists. The ideal type is not intended to be a general representation of a category of phenomena; but rather as a heuristic model that permits exploration and extension of some of the characteristics of the concrete social institutions and behaviors that it partially represents.

Throughout this discussion is woven the methodological debate between advocates of nomothetic and idiographic interpretations of the social sciences (link). Weber indicates his own understanding of the crucial importance of the individuality and particularity of historical phenomena -- without abandoning the viability of discovering limited generalizations and regularities.

Laws are important and valuable in the exact natural sciences, in the measure that those sciences are universally valid. For the knowledge of historical phenomena in their concreteness, the most general laws, because they are most devoid of content are also the least valuable. The more comprehensive the validity -- or scope -- of a term, the more it leads us away from the richness of reality since in order to include the common elements of the largest possible number of phenomena, it must necessarily be as abstract as possible and hence devoid of content. In the cultural sciences, the knowledge of the universal or general is never valuable in itself. (80)

Here again, the historically detailed ideal type is a better basis for historical and social

analysis.

Here is one additional qualification that Weber offers that is very important to his understanding of social-scientific knowledge:

We have designated as "cultural sciences" those disciplines which analyze the phenomena of life in terms of their cultural significance. The *significance* of a configuration of cultural phenomena and the basis of this significance cannot however be derived and rendered intelligible by a system of analytical laws, however perfect it may be, since the significance of cultural events presupposes a *value-orientation* towards these events. The concept of culture is a *value-concept*. (76)

This makes a final important connection between the two themes of the essay, objectivity and values. Values come into the social science at the stage of defining and examining social-economic-cultural problems; they come into the choice of subject matter by establishing the framework in terms of which a phenomenon is a "problem"; and they must be invoked in our interpretations of the phenomena when we attribute cultural meanings to the participants. The construct of the ideal type provides conceptual resources for each of these zones of intersection between social-science inquiry and the schemes of values that we humans endorse.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:24PM (-04:00)

UnderstandingSociety Facebook page

Wednesday, April 21, 2010



You are invited to participate in the new UnderstandingSociety Facebook page. The page has links to recent posts on the blog, news items on recent developments in Burma, Thailand, and China, and updates on earlier topics concerning the social sciences in the blog. Best of all, readers can participate by offering their own observations and posting photos that capture their own social insights.

Readers of UnderstandingSociety come from all over the world. It would be great if you would post occasional photos from your location that speak to the processes of social change you observe where you live. Readers in France, India, Italy, Thailand, or Argentina -- what images can you share with us that would cast a light on social conditions there?

This can be a powerful tool for better understanding our global, complex society. Each person has daily experiences that are relevant to getting a better understanding of the social processes that envelop us. The Facebook page for UnderstandingSociety can be a location for pooling some of those insights.

Facebook page for UnderstandingSociety

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:51AM (-04:00)

Citizens' assemblies

Friday, April 23, 2010



There is quite a bit of interest today in exploring better mechanisms for implementing the goals of democracy in more effective and broadly legitimate ways than most electoral democracies have succeeded in doing to date. A core democratic goal is to create deliberation and decision mechanisms that permit citizens to become sufficiently educated about the issues that confront the polity that they can meaningfully deliberate about them, and to find decision-making processes that fairly and neutrally permit each citizen to contribute equally to the final outcome.

The deficiencies of current democratic processes are fairly visible around the television dial, the Internet, and the town-hall meeting and state house: demagogic leaders who deliberately whip up the most negative emotions in their followers, citizens who take almost no effort to learn the details of the issues, strident and verbally violent attacks against one's political adversaries, the excessive power possessed by economic interests to prevail through influence on agencies and legislators, and an overall lack of civility and trust within the polity. (Many of these deficiencies are highlighted in an earlier post.) It is hard to see that the public's considered interests are the ultimate guide to our democratic actions. Some people are now referring to these flaws as the "democratic deficit" -- a set of structural flaws in existing democratic institutions that lead to disappointing results.

So how can we do better? There are several important kinds of experiments underway that seem to have a lot going for them, both in principle and in practice, and these generally fall within the category of experiments in "deliberative, participatory democracy." (Here is a link to an earlier post on some of these issues.)

Particularly interesting is an experiment undertaken a few years ago in British Columbia in Canada. Following several elections that generated a great deal of popular complaint about the nature of the voting processes that led to the perverse outcomes, the Liberal Party pledged to create a "Citizens' Assembly for Electoral Reform" to consider the existing procedures and feasible alternatives and to recommend a single reform if warranted. The LP came to power in the next election in 2000 and the government of British Columbia kept its pledge. A citizens' assembly was created in 2004, composed of 160 citizens selected quasi-randomly from each of the province's districts. The body was asked to deliberate carefully about existing voting procedures and feasible alternatives, and to make a recommendation to be presented in a referendum to the voters of the province as a whole. The deliberations of the assembly occurred over an eleven-month period. They were supported by a professional staff and sufficient resources to conduct their work. And in 2005 they duly issued a considered recommendation to be presented to the BC electorate. This was the single transferable vote recommendation (STV). (The Wikipedia article on the "single transferable vote" system provides a good background on the Citizens' Assembly process as well; link.)

Here is a good video that describes the process in some detail; the full playlist is found here, and is worth watching in full:

This whole process was observed carefully by a team of social scientists at the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions at the University of British Columbia, and their assessment of the process is documented in Mark Warren and Hilary Pearse, eds., Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (Theories of Institutional Design). The book is a fascinating work in "experimental democracy." Here are the central questions posed by the researchers:

1. "What role should citizen bodies play in representative democracies generally, and what kind of legitimacy do citizen bodies have to decide questions of constitutional reform?
2. In what sense was the CA a representative body? How did CA design choices affect the representation of social groups within the Assembly and the empowerment, participation, and deliberation of CA participants?
3. Did the Citizens' Assembly transform citizens into competent decision-makers?
4. How did deliberations within the CA relate to deliberation and decisionmaking by the broader public?" (xii)

The summary conclusions are quite favorable to the process: citizen participants took their task seriously, they learned a great deal about different voting mechanisms, they debated the values that ought to guide selection of a mechanism, and they came to near-unanimity about the eventual recommendation -- a system of proportional representation referred to as "single transferable vote" (STV). Briefly, it is a system in which voters are permitted to rank candidates, and their votes are passed on to lower-ranked choices once the first choice has received sufficient votes. This permits minority groups to achieve representation when they would otherwise be entirely shut out of government.

Here is a summary statement about the CA process provided by the editors:

The authors of this volume are far from uncritical of the CA process. But they lend strong support to the judgment that the CA represents the first time a democratic institution has been deliberately and relatively successfully designed to address a constitutional issue. And if there is a broad lesson, it is that new democratic institutions can be successful if their design is closely related to broadly legitimate goals as well as to the specific characteristics of the issue at hand. (xii)

An important issue is the status of a citizens' assembly as a representative institution. It is not representative in the traditional electoral sense; citizens of British Columbia did not elect them as their representatives in this process. Instead, the quasi-random process of selection that was used ensured a different kind of representativeness in the resulting body. It was representative of the gender composition of the province, and it was modestly representative of the range of income, age, and education that was present in the province. It was necessary to add several slots to provide representation for indigenous groups. And, most important, it was a process that essentially excluded the likelihood of over-representation of "special interests", whether business, labor, or social issues. It was credible to expect, therefore, that this group would be able to consider the specific issues presented to it in a reasonably neutral and representative way.

Another important empirical question is whether a group of citizens will succeed in educating themselves about a complex issue and arrive at well considered opinions that bring together their understanding of the relevant values they share and the facts of institutional design that can be discovered. Here again, the CA example is a heartening one. The authors of *Designing Deliberative Democracy* give ample evidence, based on

ethnographic data, of the effectiveness of this forum in stimulating this kind of values reflection and learning that good decisions by a group of typical citizens require. The process appears to have worked very well, even by the high standards of philosophical theories of deliberative democracy. Habermas would be pleased!

What was the eventual result of this effort? The proposal did not reach the 60% super-majority required for adoption, but it came close with about 57.7%. A second referendum was conducted in 2009, and the proposal failed again, gaining only 38.8%. But in spite of electoral failure, the experiment appears to be a very important one, and one that other polities may well want to attempt to emulate.

It is deeply interesting to consider whether mechanisms like the citizens' assembly might help to repair the democratic deficit we experience in the United States. Are there mechanisms that we can adopt at the local, regional, or national level that would permit us to arrive at a better understanding of complex issues, a better ability to find common ground with each other, and an ability to arrive at recommendations for public policies that are feasible and fair? Could we address issues of healthcare reform, social security reform, financial regulation, budget planning, or environmental protection through mechanisms like this? And would the result be something that we could all find to be superior to the current processes of legislation, referendum, and cable television rants? The evidence of British Columbia suggests a favorable answer to all these questions.

(Another piece of research in this general vein is Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy. This will be the topic of a future post.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:21PM (-04:00)

Sociology in time: cohorts

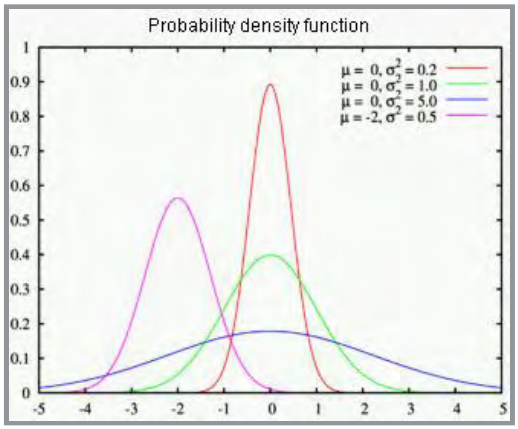
Sunday, April 25, 2010



What difference does it make to a person's personality, values, agency, or interpretive schemes that she was born in 1950 rather than 1930 or 1970? How does a person's place in time and in a stream of historical events influence the formation of his or her consciousness? (I've raised some of these questions in prior posts, here and here.)

If we thought of people as being pretty much uniform in their motivations and understandings of the world, then we wouldn't be particularly interested in the micro-circumstances that defined the developmental environment of a cohort; these circumstances would have been expected to lead to pretty much the same kinds of actors. We don't think it is useful to analyze ants or cattle into age cohorts.

If, on the other hand, we think that a person's political and social identity, the ways in which she values a range of social and personal outcomes, the ways in which she organizes her thinking about the world -- if we think that these basic features of cognition, valuation, and motivation are significantly influenced by the environment in which



development and maturation take place, then we are forced to consider the importance of cohorts.

The ideas of the "Great Generation" the "Children of the Depression," or the "Sixties Generation" have a certain amount of resonance for us. We think of the typical members of these cohorts as having fairly important features of personality, memory, and motivation that are different from members of other cohorts. Americans born in the 1920s were thrown into social environments that were very different from those of people born twenty years earlier or later. And their political consciousness and behavior seem to reflect these differences.

But here is the difficult question raised by these considerations: how should sociologists attempt to incorporate the possibility of cohort differences in behavior and outlook? Here is one possible way of conceptualizing cohort differences with respect to a personality characteristic -- let's say "propensity to trust leaders." Suppose we have conducted a survey that operationalizes this characteristic so that the trust propensity of each individual can be measured. We might postulate that every individual has some degree of trust, but that different cohort groups have different mean values and different distributions around the mean.

The graph below represents four **hypothetical** cohorts: purple, blue, green, red. Blue, green, and red cohorts have the same mean value for trust (normalized to 0). But they differ in terms of the degree of variation there is within the cohort with respect to this feature. The red cohort is tightly scattered around the mean, whereas the blue cohort is very widely distributed. The "average" red individual has the same degree of trust as the average blue individual; but there is a much wider range of the blues than the reds. Members of the purple cohort show a fundamentally different behavior. They have a significantly lower level of trust, with a mean of -2. And the degree of distribution around the mean is moderate for the purple cohort -- not as tight as the reds, not as broad as the blues. Finally, it should be noted that there are reds, greens, and blues who are as untrusting as some purples, and there are some purples who are more trusting than some reds, greens, and blues. In other words, the distributions overlap.

If we were confronted with data like these, our next question would be causal and historical: what were the circumstances of development in which the generation of people in the purple cohort took shape that caused them to be less trusting than other cohorts? And what circumstances led the blue cohort to have such a wide distribution of variation in comparison to the green and red cohorts?

Now let's put some dates on the curves. Suppose that the purple cohort is the baby-boom generation -- people born between 1945 and 1954. Red is the "Greatest Generation", born between 1915 and 1924. And blue is the "me-generation", born between 1955 and 1964. We might speculate that growing up in the sixties, with a highly divisive war in Vietnam underway, a government that suffered a serious credibility gap, and a youth culture that preached the slogan, "trust no one over 30!", would have led to a political psychology that was less inclined to trust government than generations born earlier or later. So the Purple cohort has a low level of trust as a group. The social necessity of

sticking together as a country, fighting a major world war, and working our way out of the Great Depression, might explain the high degree of unanimity of trust found in the Red cohort. And the Blue generation is all over the map, ranging from a significant number of people with extremely low trust to an equal group of extremely high trust. We might imagine that the circumstances of maturation and development following the wild and crazy sixties imposed little structure on this feature of political identity, resulting in a very wide distribution of levels of trust.

It is also important to consider some of the factors that vary across time that might have important influences on the development of different cohorts. Circumstances like war, famine, or economic crisis represent one family of influences that are often markedly different across age cohorts. Ideologies and value systems also change from decade to decade. The turn to a more conservative kind of Christianity in the United States in the 1990s certainly influenced a significant number of young people coming of age during those decades, and the value system of nationalism and patriotism of the 1940s and 1950s influenced the young people of those decades. Third, institutions change significantly over time as well. Schools change, the operations and culture of the military change, and the internal workings of religious institutions change. So the institutions in which children and young adults gain their perspectives, motives, and allegiances are often significantly different from one decade to another. And presumably, all these factors are involved in the formation of the consciousness and identity of the young people who experience them. Difference in settings (events, ideologies, institutions) lead to differences in psychology across cohorts.

Andrew Abbott raised some of these questions in his presidential address to the Social Science History Association in 2004 (link). The title he chose is illuminating -- "The Historicality of Individuals". And the central point here could be put in the same terms: it is important for us to attempt to understand processes of social and historical change, through the shifting characteristics of the age-specific populations that make these processes up. The historicality of individuals adds up to the sociological importance of cohorts.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:20PM (-04:00)

Revitalizing our cities

Wednesday, April 28, 2010



It is hard to think of an American city that is doing really well these days. Dense urban poverty in the core, super-high rates of unemployment, failing schools for many urban children, high rates of crime, chronic and overwhelming fiscal crises resulting from too little public revenue for needed public services, and health outcome discrepancies that mark debilitating life disadvantages for urban people -- these seem to be fairly widespread features of cities from Miami to Cleveland to Los Angeles to Chicago to Detroit.

The most recent victim of the urban crisis in the area of publicly provided social services



in my city, Detroit, is indicative; this week it was announced that Detroit's Neighborhood Services Organization would lose 2/3 of its funding effective immediately (link). This program reaches out to Detroit's homeless people and provides transition assistance permitting 1000 people per year to return to housed status. It is now forced to close down its operations entirely until October 1, since the program has already expended 1/3 of its budget for 2009-10. No one disputes that NSO is doing great work and returning multiples of benefits relative to its budget; but the state's fiscal crisis has been passed on to this effective, people-oriented program. (CEO Sheilah Clay was featured as a guest on the Craig Fahle show on WDET today -- one of the best parts of the urban Detroit dial. Thanks, Craig!)

So cities are suffering from very significant structural disadvantages in the United States today. And yet, as Richard Florida argues so persistently and so correctly, cities are crucial to the future of the United States and the rest of the world (link). When they are healthy, they create a concentration of talent, innovation, and synergy that simply cannot be beaten. So we need healthy cities and metropolitan regions if we are to thrive in the twenty-first century.

So what can be done, given that the deck seems to be stacked against our cities? This evening Judith Rodin, president of the Rockefeller Foundation and former president of the University of Pennsylvania, gave an important lecture on this subject at Wayne State University in its Van Dusen Forum on Urban Issues. Rodin is an ideal speaker on this subject, because the University of Pennsylvania developed very strong urban renewal strategies aimed at West Philadelphia during her tenure, and because the Rockefeller Foundation has taken urban revitalization as one of its core goals for quite a few decades. Rodin is the author of an important book about the process that unfolded in Philadelphia around the University of Pennsylvania (The University and Urban Revival: Out of the Ivory Tower and Into the Streets), and it is worth reading. She estimates that there are roughly 50 "megaregions" in the United States -- Detroit Metro, Chicago-Land, ... -- and that these megaregions represent 65% of the population and a higher percentage of all economic activity. So healthy development of American cities is enormously important. But likewise, the institutions that find themselves deeply integrated into the geography of these cities urgently need a future in which their cities begin to grow more habitable, healthy, and equitable. Here is a memorable line from the speech -- "Blight of the city becomes the plight of the university."

What actors and strategies can help attain a positive trajectory of urban revitalization? Rodin's central thrust is that universities and health systems can serve as "anchor" institutions in cities, and that they can design strategies that substantially improve the economic development and quality of life of the cities they inhabit. (She calls these institutions "***eds and meds***".) They provide very significant employment opportunities and purchasing power in the city; and more important, they necessarily make significant investments in real estate and infrastructure in the city. So in principle, it is credible that the resources of these institutions could be used in ways that leverage positive change in the cities in which they live.

But Rodin draws several very important lessons from the example of Penn and

Philadelphia. There needs to be a broad and sustained institutional commitment to making strategic decisions around the goal of enhancing the process of urban development. The strategies can't be "one-off" -- they need to be sustained and thoughtful. Strategies need to be coherent and comprehensive -- not piecemeal and stop-and-go. Third, she emphasizes that successful revitalization strategies require us to think innovatively. Existing solutions haven't worked; we need to bring fresh thinking to the situations we confront and the outcomes we want to achieve. And, finally, she emphasizes over and over the need for partnership and community participation in the plans that the institution arrives at. Full, uninhibited partnership is essential if any of these strategies are to work. So communication, partnership, and genuine collaboration with all stakeholders is essential to a successful strategy. Another memorable line -- "Urban revitalization can't be done **for** the community or **to** the community; it must be done **with** the community."

The examples that Rodin offered from Philadelphia largely had to do with neighborhood revitalization and investments by the university in stabilizing the neighborhoods surrounding it in West Philadelphia. For example, the university bought dozens of homes and buildings in the neighborhoods, renovated them, and leased them back to residents and businesses; and, significantly, it did so at a loss. The idea was to make attractive properties available to city residents and businesses, bringing housing, children, and consumers into once-blighted neighborhoods. Another example -- she highlighted crime and safety on the streets as a key issue; so the university organized a program for street lighting in a number of neighborhoods. The new lighting system invited people back into the streets; but more people in the streets in turn reduced the prevalence of crime. A third example -- she talked about a mortgage incentive program the university offered to faculty and staff, to give them an incentive to live in the targeted neighborhoods. In other words, through a targeted and sustained investment strategy in real estate and neighborhoods the university was able to help Philadelphia achieve meaningful change.

The upshot of these examples comes down to two basic causal ideas: invest in real estate in ways that invite people to live and work in the central city; and find ways of changing behaviors so that the neighborhoods will be increasingly attractive. Crucially, Rodin suggests that the university's investment is a sizable one; but it is a small fraction of the total investment in these neighborhoods that eventually comes about as residents, business owners, and investors acquire more confidence in the safety and stability of the neighborhoods. So the change of behavior is really essential to the whole plan; unless people begin occupying homes, purchasing in grocery stores and other businesses, and enjoying parks and cinemas in these neighborhoods, nothing fundamental will change. No single institution has the resources to turn West Philadelphia into Back Bay, but early investments by "anchor institutions" may pay off through their ability to leverage many times those resources through other sources.

What Rodin didn't talk about so much in her lecture is how the research energies of the university can be a positive factor in urban revitalization. But this aspect of the university's ability to contribute is crucial. The social problems that modern cities face are "wicked" problems -- big, messy, complex, and multi-sectoral problems (link). Everyone wants to improve the quality of urban schools. But what interventions might actually work? This requires a broad research effort, incorporating teacher training, pedagogy, curriculum, the cultural and social environments that poor children live in, school leadership, system bureaucracy and governance, and a host of other complex causal processes. So 800-word editorials in the local newspaper won't be able to provide a guide to policy reform. The remedies won't be simple. Or take racial disparities in health outcomes. Why are

certain diseases so much more prevalent in poor neighborhoods? Some of the answers are fairly simple; but overall, this is a complex phenomenon that requires careful, detailed applied research. And schools of public health have exactly the right constellations of talent and expertise to help sort out the causal processes leading to these outcomes -- and the kinds of policy interventions that can reverse them. Here again, the research capacity of a university is crucial to the solution or amelioration of the problems our cities face.

Another major impact that a university can offer a city is in the form of an engaged student body. If students are motivated to support community service organizations, they can have an immediate impact. If they are encouraged to take service-learning courses that give them a better understanding of the city, this will deepen their ability to contribute. And both these forms of engagement will produce something even more important: adults who are prepared to extend themselves in forms of community service throughout their lives. Learning the habit of engagement can be a lifelong change.

Significantly, a number of urban and metropolitan universities are adopting institutional missions that highlight the kinds of partnership, engagement, and urban/metropolitan impact that is described here. In particular, the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities represents a group of universities with precisely those commitments. Here is the Declaration that members of the coalition endorse. Another important recent development is the establishment of a new Carnegie classification of universities, the classification for Community Engagement (link).
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:15PM (-04:00)

Outcast London

Monday, May 03, 2010



A city is a complex social agglomeration, and all too often it represents a concentration of social ills that are very difficult to eradicate. Poverty, violence, and poor public health are three social problems that seem to be almost synonymous with "urban." We might ask two rather different sorts of questions about these facts. One is "Why so?", and the other is, "Under what circumstances not?"

The "why" question has a number of fairly obvious answers -- not all consistent with each other. A city is often a magnet for extremely poor people looking for better opportunities than those afforded in their current locations. A city is often segregated and stratified, with high barriers to exit; so poor people are concentrated in their cores. Extreme poverty reproduces extreme poverty, as businesses and other social activities exit the core.

The question, "what circumstances help a city to avoid these outcomes?" also has some obvious answers. Robust business growth promotes jobs at a range of skill levels, so unemployed unskilled people (usually poor) are able to find work and to climb the ladder of economic advancement. The presence of a well funded and robust social welfare net helps the poor population. A high degree of civic pluralism in the population facilitates

easy movement across the neighborhoods and jobs of the city. And there are virtuous circles at work among these factors: more job growth enables more pluralism, and helps to fund more social welfare spending; which in turn stimulates more job growth.

As we contemplate these social processes in the contemporary U.S. city, it is instructive to think about an important historical example as well. In this context it is interesting to reread Gareth Stedman Jones' Outcast London: Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society, a brilliant piece of social and urban history first published in 1971.

Stedman Jones frames his narrative around the shocking puzzle that London presented to the English nation in the first half of the nineteenth century. London was the cultural, financial, and political center of England, a world city with a privileged and affluent population. But at the same time it was the home to a large population of extremely poor people who fell under the general label of "casual labor." And, as Stedman Jones points out repeatedly, educated London had almost no conceptual framework within which to categorize the social reality of the slum.

In fact, there was a growing perception of "two Englands" and two races of English people -- the poor and the rest. As Stedman Jones makes clear, the political economists of the mid-nineteenth century devoted a good deal of their time to the effort to decipher this paradox of wealth and poverty. Malthus placed much of the responsibility for the slums of London on over-population; slum dwellers represented the cutting edge of "positive checks" on population growth. Alfred Marshall, on the other hand, took a more benign view of the possible future of the working class; he argued for a gradual process of improvement that lifted the quality of life for many poor people.

Economic institutions are the product of human nature, and cannot change much faster than human nature changes. Education, and the raising of our moral and religious ideals, and the growth of the printing press and the telegraph have so changed English human nature that many things which economists rightly considered impossible thirty years ago are possible now. (S-J, 9, quoting Marshall in "How far do Remediable causes influence prejudicially (a) continuity of employment, (b) the rates of wages?")
But there was a lower end of the lower class in Marshall's worldview: the "residuum" of people who would never benefit from the rising tide.

Marshall expressed the prevailing opinion when he characterized the 'residuum' as those who are limp in body and mind'. The problem was not structural but moral. The evil to be combated was not poverty but pauperism: pauperism with its attendant vices, drunkenness, improvidence, mendicancy, bad language, filthy habits, gambling, low amusements, and ignorance (11).
So Marshall's diagnosis of extreme poverty came down to something akin to a biological moral theory: there is a segment of humanity who cannot benefit from the progress of civilization and the economy. And London was ground zero for this segment:

London was regarded as the Mecca of the dissolute, the lazy, the mendicant, 'the rough' and the spendthrift. The presence of great wealth and countless charities, the unparalleled opportunities for casual employment, the possibility of scraping together a living by innumerable devious methods, all were thought to conspire together to make London one huge magnet for the idle, the dishonest, and the criminal. (12)
Dock labor was the largest source of casual-labor employment in these decades, and it was notoriously prone to fluctuation. And the collapse of traditional industries left even

more people unemployed. S-J quotes George Godwin in an ethnographic mode:

At the corners of the streets may be seen groups of youths of the age from 16 to 20 (evidently not of the vicious class), lean, wan and ragged. On speaking to these lads, they will tell you that they are sons of silk weavers: they have no employment: some have tried to get into a man of war, but being over 15 years of age have been refused: they have tried to enlist into the army, but their chest or height would not pass inspection. (102)

In order to treat these conditions rigorously Stedman Jones provides a careful analysis of the dynamics of the casual labor market in London in the mid-nineteenth century and its high degree of seasonality, and demonstrates that economic insecurity and immiseration were the foundation of slum culture. He quotes Henry Mayhew from London Labour and the London Poor:

Where the means of subsisence occasionally rise to 15s. per week, and occasionally sink to nothing, it's absurd to look for prudence, economy, or moderation. Regularity of habits are incompatible with irregularity of income... it is a moral impossibility that the class of labourers who are only occasionally employed should be either generally industrious or temperate. (263)

An interesting feature of *Outcast London* is the dual perspective that Stedman Jones takes: he offers a narrative of economic change and social class; but he also dissects the intellectual frameworks through which economists and policy makers sought to understand these processes. So the book does a good job of both describing the economic circumstances as well as the shifting theories through which British intellectuals and the public tried to make sense of these circumstances.

Here is the interesting and relevant conclusion of Stedman Jones's argument: in the end, it was not dissoluteness or poor morals that condemned the extreme poor to their stations, but simply the lack of economic opportunity presented by the urban environment of London in the 1850s. It was the lack of jobs, not the lack of morals, that constructed the great slums of London.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:49PM (-04:00)

Mental models for the social world

Wednesday, May 05, 2010

What is involved in being prepared to understand what is going on around you?

In a sense this is Kant's fundamental question in the Critique of Pure Reason: what intellectual resources (concepts, categories, frameworks) does a cognitive agent need in order to make sense of the contents of consciousness, the fleeting experiences and sensations that life brings us? And his answer is pretty well known: we need concepts of fixed objects in space and time, subject to causal laws. The stream of experiences we have is organized around a set of persistent objects located in time and space with specific causal properties. Space, time, cause, and object are the fundamental categories of cognition when it comes to understanding the natural world. This line of thought leads to an esoteric philosophical idea, the notion of transcendental metaphysics. (P. F. Strawson's work on Kant is particularly helpful; The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.)

But we can ask essentially the same kind of question about the ordinary person's ability

to make sense of the social world around him or her. Each person is exposed to a dense stream of experiences of the social world, at various levels. We have ordinary interactions -- with friends, bus drivers, postal carriers, students -- and we want to interpret the behavior that we observe. We read news reports and tweets about happenings in the wider world -- riots in Athens, suicide attacks in Pakistan, business statements about future sales, ... -- and we want to know what these moments mean, how they hang together, and what might have caused them. In short, we need to have a set of mental resources that permit us to organize these experiences into a representation of a coherent social reality.

So is it possible to provide a transcendental metaphysics for ordinary social experience? Can we begin to list the kinds of concepts we need to have in order to cognize the social world?

We might say that a very basic building block of social cognition is a set of scripts or schemas into which we are prepared to fit our observations and experiences. Suppose we observe two people approach each other on the street, exchange words, bow heads slightly, and part. This interaction between two strangers might be categorized as "courtesy" during a chance meeting. But it might be construed in other ways as well: ironic insults, sexual innuendo, or condescension from superior to inferior. Each of these is an alternative interpretive frame, a way of conceptualizing and "seeing" a complex series of behaviors. So the scripts or frames that we bring to the observations impose a form of organization on the observations.

Or take the current rioting in Greece: we might construct these masses of collective behavior as rationally directed economic protest, righteous resistance, or opportunistic anarchism. Each alternative has different implications, and each corresponds to a somewhat different set of background assumptions about how social interactions unfold. Each corresponds to a different social metaphysic. Different observers bring a different set of assumptions about how the social world works to their observations. And these frameworks lead to different constructions of the events.

Or consider the question of the social "things" around which we organize our social perceptions: nations, financial markets, cities, parties, and ideologies, for example. How much arbitrariness is there in the ontological schemes into which we organize the world? Could we have done just as well at making sense of our experience with a substantially different ontology? Is there a most basic ontology that underlies each of these and is a scheme that cannot be dispensed with?

We might try a "fundamental" ontology along these lines: we must identify individuals as purposive, intentional agents; we must recognize relations among individuals -- giving us social networks, knowledge transmission, and groups; and we must recognize social processes with causal powers, constituted by individuals within specific social relations. And we must recognize the situation of consciousness -- beliefs, desires, values, and ideologies. And, we might hypothesize, we can build up all other more specific social entities out of aggregations of these simple things.

This is one possible way of formalizing a social ontology. But there are others. For example, we might give priority to relations rather than individuals; or we might give priority to processes rather than structures. So it is hard to justify the notion that there is a single uniquely best way of conceptualizing the realm of the social.

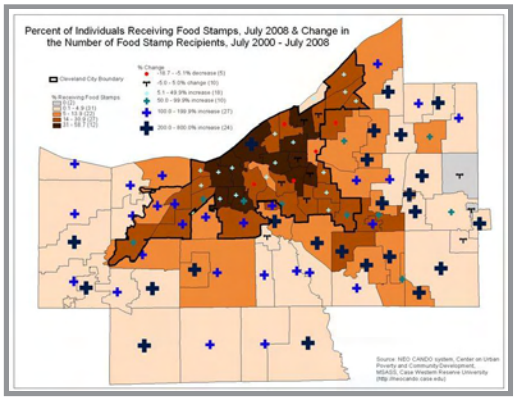
An interesting collateral question has to do with the possibility of systemic error: is it possible that our metaphysical presuppositions about the social world sometimes lead us to construe our social observations in ways that systematically misrepresent reality? For example, would a "metaphysics of suspicion" (the idea that people generally conceal their true motives) lead us to a worldview along the lines of Jerry Fletcher, the central character in Conspiracy Theory?

Several things seem likely. First, there is no single and unique set of ontological "simples" for the social world. Rather, there are likely to be multiple starting points, all of which can result in a satisfactory account of the social world. So there is no transcendental metaphysics for the social world -- including the candidate sketched above.

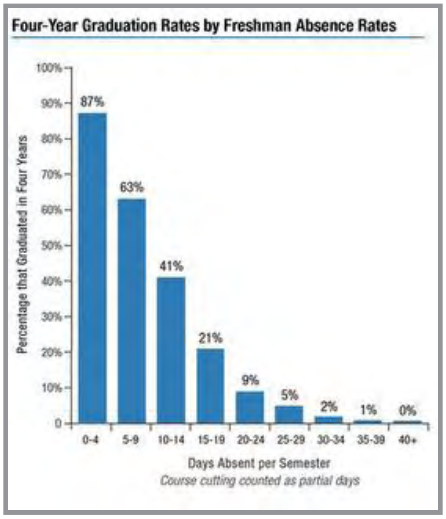
Second, it seems that the unavoidable necessity of having a set of causal, semantic, and process schemata does not guarantee correctness. Our schemata may systematically mislead us. So the schemata themselves amount to a large empirical hypothesis; they may be superseded by other schemata that serve better to organize our experiences. The schemata are not determined by either apriori or empirical considerations. And therefore our social cognitions are always a work in progress, and our conceptual frameworks are more like a paradigm than an ineluctable conceptual foundation.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:25PM (-04:00)

Urban inequalities and social mobility

Sunday, May 09, 2010



Most American cities commonly look a lot like the poverty map of Cleveland above, when it comes to the spatial distribution of poverty and affluence. There is a high-poverty core, in which residents have low income, poor health, poor education, and poor quality of life; there are rings of moderate income; and there are outer suburbs of affluent people with high quality of life.



We can ask two different kinds of sociological questions about these facts: What factors cause the reproduction of disadvantage over multiple generations? And what policy interventions have some effect on enhancing upward social mobility within disadvantaged groups? How can we change this cycle of disadvantage?

The persistence of inequalities in urban America was addressed in a special 2008 issue of the Boston Review in a forum on "ending urban poverty." Particularly interesting is Patrick Sharkey's article "The Inherited Ghetto." Sharkey begins with a crucial and familiar point: that racial inequality has changed only very slightly since the

passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968. The concentration of black poverty in central cities has not substantially improved over that period of time, and the inequalities of health, education, and employment associated with this segregation have continued. And the association between neighborhood, degree of segregation, and income and quality of life is very strong: children born into a poor and segregated neighborhood are likely to live as adults -- in a poor and segregated neighborhood.

Sharkey documents these statements on the basis of his analysis of the data provided the University of Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the first major statistical study of several generations of families in terms of residence, income, occupation, health, and other important variables. Using a computer simulation based on the two-generation data provided by the Panel Study, Sharkey indicates that it would take five generations for the descendants of a family from a poor, black neighborhood to have a normal expectation of living in a typical American neighborhood. (That's one hundred years in round numbers.) In other words: the progress towards racial equality in urban America is so slow as to be virtually undetectable.

Particular frustrating is the persistence of segregation in the forty years since the passage of the Fair Housing Act. Sharkey argues that this fact is partially explained by the fact that the policy choices made by federal and local authorities concerning housing patterns have more or less deliberately favored segregation by race. Beginning with the initial Fair Housing legislation -- which was enacted without giving the Federal agencies the power of enforcement -- both federal and state policies have reinforced segregation in housing. Sharkey notes that federal housing programs have subsidized the growth of largely white suburbs, while redlining and other credit-related restrictions have impeded the ability of black families to follow into these new suburban communities. The continuation of informal discrimination in the housing market (as evidenced by "testers" from fair housing agencies) further reinforces continuing segregation between inner-city black population and the suburban, mostly white population.

So racial segregation is one important mechanism that maintains the economic and social inequalities that our society continues to embody.

How about policies that would work to speed up social progress? It is commonly agreed that improving access to higher education for disadvantaged people is the best way to speed their economic advancement. The theory is that individuals within the group will benefit from higher education by enhancing their skills and knowledge; this will give them new economic opportunities and access to higher-wage jobs; the individuals will do better economically, and their children will begin life with more economic support and a set of values that encourage education. So access to higher education ought to prove to be a virtuous circle or a positive feedback loop, leading to substantial social mobility in currently disadvantaged groups.

This theory appears to be substantially true: when it is possible to prepare poor children for admission to college, their performance in college and subsequent careers is good and lays a foundation for a substantial change in quality of life for themselves and their families (link).

However, most of our cities are failing abysmally in the task of preparing poor children for college. High school graduation rates are extremely low in many inner-city schools -- 25-50%, and performance on verbal and math assessment tests are very low. So a very substantial number of inner-city, high-poverty children are not being given the opportunity

to develop their inherent abilities in order to move ahead in our society. This is true in Detroit (link), and much the same is true in Cleveland, Oakland, Miami, Houston, New Orleans, and dozens of other cities. (Here is a survey of the issues by Charles Payne in So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools. And here is a striking report from 1970 prepared by the HEW Urban Education Taskforce.) High poverty and poor education go hand in hand in American cities.

One important research question is whether there are behavioral or structural factors that predict or cause low performance by groups of students. Here is a fascinating graph of high school graduation rates broken down by freshman-year absenteeism (MDRC report). Important research is being done at the Center for the Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins on the dropout crisis in urban schools (link). (Here is an earlier post on CSOS and its recommendations for improving dropout rates from urban high schools.) The topic is important because research findings like these may offer indications of the sorts of school reforms that are most likely to enhance school success and graduation.

It is clear that finding ways of dramatically increasing the effectiveness of high-poverty schools is crucial if we are to break out of the multi-generational trap that Sharkey documents for inner-city America. Here is a specific and promising strategy that is being pursued in Detroit by the Skillman Foundation and its partners (link), based on small schools, greater contact with caring adults, and challenging academic curricula. This turn-around plan is based on a specific set of strategies for improving inner-city schools developed by the Institute for Student Achievement, and ISA provides assessment data that support the effectiveness of the plan in other cities. With support from the United Way of Southeast Michigan, several large high schools are being restructured along the design principles of the ISA model.

But the reality is that this problem is immense, and a few successful experiments in school reform are unlikely to move the dial. Somehow it seems unavoidable that only a Marshall Plan for addressing urban poverty would allow us to have any real confidence in the possibility of reversing the inequalities our cities reveal. And none of our political leaders -- and few of our taxpayers -- seem to perceive the urgency of the problem.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:14AM (-04:00)

System safety engineering and the Deepwater Horizon

Sunday, May 09, 2010



The Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion, fire, and uncontrolled release of oil into the Gulf is a disaster of unprecedented magnitude. This disaster in the Gulf of Mexico appears to be more serious in objective terms than the Challenger space shuttle disaster in 1986 -- in terms both of immediate loss of life and in terms of overall harm created. And sadly, it appears likely that the accident will reveal equally

severe failures of management of enormously hazardous processes, defects in the associated safety engineering analysis, and inadequacies of the regulatory environment within which the activity took place. The Challenger disaster fundamentally changed the ways that we thought about safety in the aerospace field. It is likely that this disaster too will force radical new thinking and new procedures concerning how to deal with the inherently dangerous processes associated with deep-ocean drilling.

Nancy Leveson is an important expert in the area of systems safety engineering, and her book, Safeware: System Safety and Computers, is a genuinely important contribution. Leveson led the investigation of the role that software design might have played in the Challenger disaster (link). Here is a short, readable white paper of hers on system safety engineering (link) that is highly relevant to the discussions that will need to occur about deep-ocean drilling. The paper does a great job of laying out how safety has been analyzed in several high-hazard industries, and presents a set of basic principles for systems safety design. She discusses aviation, the nuclear industry, military aerospace, and the chemical industry; and she points out some important differences across industries when it comes to safety engineering. Here is an instructive description of the safety situation in military aerospace in the 1950s and 1960s:

Within 18 months after the fleet of 71 Atlas F missiles became operational, four blew up in their silos during operational testing. The missiles also had an extremely low launch success rate. An Air Force manual describes several of these accidents:

An ICBM silo was destroyed because the counterweights, used to balance the silo elevator on the way up and down in the silo, were designed with consideration only to raising a fueled missile to the surface for firing. There was no consideration that, when you were not firing in anger, you had to bring the fueled missile back down to defuel.

The first operation with a fueled missile was nearly successful. The drive mechanism held it for all but the last five feet when gravity took over and the missile dropped back. Very suddenly, the 40-foot diameter silo was altered to about 100-foot diameter.

During operational tests on another silo, the decision was made to continue a test against the safety engineer's advice when all indications were that, because of high oxygen concentrations in the silo, a catastrophe was imminent. The resulting fire destroyed a missile and caused extensive silo damage. In another accident, five people were killed when a single-point failure in a hydraulic system caused a 120-ton door to fall.

Launch failures were caused by reversed gyros, reversed electrical plugs, bypass of procedural steps, and by management decisions to continue, in spite of contrary indications, because of schedule pressures. (from the Air Force System Safety Handbook for Acquisition Managers, Air Force Space Division, January 1984)

Leveson's illustrations from the history of these industries are fascinating. But even more valuable are the principles of safety engineering that she recapitulates. These principles seem to have many implications for deep-ocean drilling and associated technologies and systems. Here is her definition of systems safety:

System safety uses systems theory and systems engineering approaches to prevent foreseeable accidents and to minimize the result of unforeseen ones. Losses in general, not just human death or injury, are considered. Such losses may include destruction of property, loss of mission, and environmental harm. The primary concern of system safety is the management of hazards: their identification, evaluation, elimination, and control

through analysis, design and management procedures.
Here are several fundamental principles of designing safe systems that she discusses:

- System safety emphasizes building in safety, not adding it on to a completed design.
- System safety deals with systems as a whole rather than with subsystems or components.
- System safety takes a larger view of hazards than just failures.
- System safety emphasizes analysis rather than past experience and standards.
- System safety emphasizes qualitative rather than quantitative approaches.
- Recognition of tradeoffs and conflicts.
- System safety is more than just system engineering.

And here is an important summary observation about the complexity of safe systems:
Safety is an emergent property that arises at the system level when components are operating together. The events leading to an accident may be a complex combination of equipment failure, faulty maintenance, instrumentation and control problems, human actions, and design errors. Reliability analysis considers only the possibility of accidents related to failures; it does not investigate potential damage that could result from successful operation of the individual components.

How do these principles apply to the engineering problem of deep-ocean drilling? Perhaps the most important implications are these: a safe system needs to be based on careful and comprehensive analysis of the hazards that are inherently involved in the process; it needs to be designed with an eye to handling those hazards safely; and it can't be done in a piecemeal, "fly-test-fly" fashion.

It would appear that deep-ocean drilling is characterized by too little analysis and too much confidence in the ability of engineers to "correct" inadvertent outcomes ("fly-fix-fly"). The accident that occurred in the Gulf last month can be analyzed into several parts. First is the explosion and fire that destroyed the drilling rig and led to the tragic loss of life of 11 rig workers. And the second is the uncalculated harms caused by the uncontrolled venting of perhaps a hundred thousand barrels of crude oil to date into the Gulf of Mexico, now threatening the coasts and ecologies of several states. Shockingly, there is now no high-reliability method for capping the well at a depth of over 5,000 feet; so the harm can continue to worsen for a very extended period of time.

The safety systems on the platform itself will need to be examined in detail. But the bottom line will probably look something like this: the platform is a complex system vulnerable to explosion and fire, and there was always a calculable (though presumably small) probability of catastrophic fire and loss of the ship. This is pretty analogous to the problem of safety in aircraft and other complex electro-mechanical systems. The loss of life in the incident is terrible but confined. Planes crash and ships sink.

What elevates this accident to a globally important catastrophe is what happened next: destruction of the pipeline leading from the wellhead 5,000 feet below sea level to containers on the surface; and the failure of the shutoff valve system on the ocean floor. These two failures have resulted in unconstrained release of a massive and uncontrollable flow of crude oil into the Gulf and the likelihood of environmental harms that are likely to be greater than the Exxon Valdez.

Oil wells fail on the surface, and they are difficult to control. But there is a well-developed technology that teams of oil fire specialists like Red Adair employ to cap the flow and end the damage. We don't have anything like this for wells drilled under water at the depth of this incident; this accident is less accessible than objects in space for corrective

intervention. So surface well failures conform to a sort of epsilon-delta relationship: an epsilon accident leads to a limited delta harm. This deep-ocean well failure in the Gulf is catastrophically different: the relatively small incident on the surface is resulting in an unbounded and spiraling harm.

So was this a foreseeable hazard? Of course it was. There was always a finite probability of total loss of the platform, leading to destruction of the pipeline. There was also a finite probability of failure of the massive sea-floor emergency shutoff valve. And, critically, it was certainly known that there is no high-reliability fix in the event of failure of the shutoff valve. The effort to use the dome currently being tried by BP is untested and unproven at this great depth. The alternative of drilling a second well to relieve pressure may work; but it will take weeks or months. So essentially, when we reach the end of this failure pathway, we arrive at this conclusion: catastrophic, unbounded failure. If you reach this point in the fault tree, there is almost nothing to be done. And this is a totally irrational outcome to tolerate; how could any engineer or regulatory agency have accepted the circumstances of this activity, given that one possible failure pathway would lead predictably to unbounded harms?

There is one line of thought that might have led to the conclusion that deep ocean drilling is acceptably safe: engineers and policy makers might have optimistically overestimated the reliability of the critical components. If we estimate that the probability of failure of the platform is 1/1000, failure of the pipeline is 1/100, and failure of the emergency shutoff valve is 1/10,000 -- then one might say that the probability of the nightmare scenario is vanishingly small: one in a billion. Perhaps one might reason that we can disregard scenarios with this level of likelihood. Reasoning very much like this was involved in the original safety designs of the shuttle (Safeware: System Safety and Computers). But several things are now clear: this disaster was **not** virtually impossible. In fact, it actually occurred. And second, it seems likely enough that the estimates of component failure are badly understated.

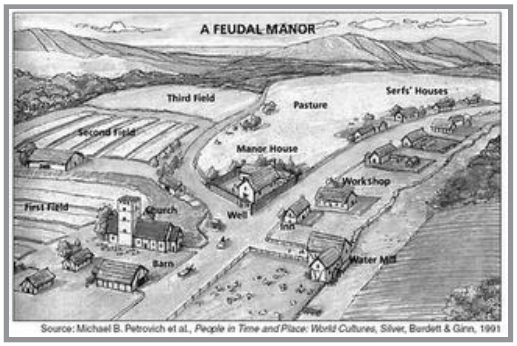
What does this imply about deep ocean drilling? It seems inescapable that the current state of technology does not permit us to take the risk of this kind of total systems failure. Until there is a reliable and reasonably quick technology for capping a deep-ocean well, the small probability of this kind of failure makes the use of the technology entirely unjustifiable. It makes no sense at all to play Russian roulette when the cost of failure is massive and unconstrained ecological damage.

There is another aspect of this disaster that needs to be called out, and that is the issue of regulation. Just as the nuclear industry requires close, rigorous regulation and inspection, so deep-ocean drilling must be rigorously regulated. The stakes are too high to allow the oil industry to regulate itself. And unfortunately there are clear indications of weak regulation in this industry (link).

(Here are links to a couple of earlier posts on safety and technology failure (link, link).)
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:35PM (-04:00)

Social theory and the empirical social world

Thursday, May 13, 2010



How can general, high-level social theory help us to better understand particular historically situated social realities? Is it helpful or insightful to "bring Weber's theory of religion to bear on Islam in Java" or to "apply Marx's theory of capitalism to the U.S. factory system in the 1950s"? Is there any real knowledge to be gained by applying theory to a set of empirical circumstances?

In the natural sciences this intellectual method is certainly a valid and insightful one. We gain knowledge when we apply the theory of fluid dynamics to the situation of air flowing across a wing, or when we apply the principles of evolutionary theory to the problem of understanding butterfly coloration. But do we have the same possibility in the case of the social world?

My general inclination is to think that "applying" general social theories to specific social circumstances is not a valid way of creating new knowledge or understanding. This is because I believe that social ensembles reflect an enormous degree of plasticity and contingency; so general theories only "fit" them in the most impressionistic and non-explanatory way. We may have a pure structural theory of feudalism; but it is only the beginning of a genuinely knowledge-producing analysis of fourteenth-century French politics and economy or the Japanese samurai polity. At best the theory highlights certain issues as being salient -- the conditions of bonded labor, the nature of military dependency between lord and vassal. But the theory of feudalism does not permit us to "derive" particular features or institutions of French or Japanese society. "Feudalism" is an ideal type, a heuristic beginning for social analysis, rather than a general deductive and comprehensive theory of all feudal societies. And we certainly shouldn't expect that a general social theory will provide the template for understanding all of the empirical characteristics of a given instance of that theorized object.

Why is there this strong distinction between physical theory and social theory? Fundamentally, because natural phenomena really ***are*** governed by laws of nature, and natural systems are often simple enough that we can aggregate the effects of the relevant component processes into a composite description of the whole. (There are, of course, complex physical systems with non-linear composite processes that cannot be deductively represented.) So theories can be applied to complicated natural systems with real intellectual gain. The theory helps us to predict and explain the behavior of the natural system.

The social world lacks both properties. Component social mechanisms and processes are only loosely similar to each other in different instances; for example, "fealty" works somewhat differently in France, England, and Japan. And there is a very extensive degree of contingency in the ways that processes, mechanisms, agents, and current circumstances interact to produce social outcomes. So there is a great degree of path dependency and variation in social outcomes, even in cases where there are significant similarities in the starting points. So feudalism, capitalism, financial institutions, religions,

ethnic conflicts, and revolutions can only be loosely theorized.

That is my starting point. But some social theorists take a radically different approach. A good example of a bad intellectual practice here is the work of Hindess and Hirst in Pre-Capitalist Modes Of Production, in which they attempt to deduce the characteristics of the concrete historical given from its place within the system of concepts involved in the theory of the mode of production.

Is this a legitimate and knowledge-enhancing effort? I don't think that it is. We really don't gain any real insight into this manor, or the Burgundian manor, or European feudalism, by mechanically subsuming it under a powerful and general theory -- whether Marx's, Weber's or Pareto's.

It should be said here that it isn't the categories or hypotheses themselves that are at fault. In fact, I think Marx's analysis and categories are genuinely helpful as we attempt to arrive at a sociology of the factory, and Durkheim's concept of anomie is helpful when we consider various features of modern communities. It is the effort at derivation and subsumption that I find misguided. The reality is larger and more varied than the theory, with greater contingency and surprise.

It is worthwhile looking closely at gifted social scientists who proceed differently. One of these is Michael Burawoy, a prolific and influential sociologist of the American labor process. His book, Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism, is a detailed study of the American factory through the lens of his micro-study of a single small machine shop in the 1940s and 1970s, the Allied/Geer factory. Burawoy proceeds very self-consciously and deliberately within the framework of Marx's theory of the capitalist labor process. He lays out the fundamental assumptions of Marx's theory of the labor process -- wage labor, surplus labor, capitalist power relations within the factory -- and he then uses these categories to analyze, investigate, and explain the Allied/Geer phenomena. But he simultaneously examines the actual institutions, practices, and behaviors of this machine shop in great participant-observer detail. He is led to pose specific questions by the Marxist theory of the labor process that he brings with him -- most importantly, what accounts for the "consent" that he observes in the Allied workers? -- but he doesn't bring a prefabricated answer to the question. His interest in control of surplus labor and coercion and consent within the workforce is stimulated by his antecedent Marxist theory; but he is fully prepared to find novelty and surprise as he investigates these issues. His sociological imagination is not a blank slate -- he brings a schematic understanding of some of the main parameters that he expects to arise in the context of the capitalist labor process. But his research assumptions are open to new discovery and surprising inconsistencies between antecedent theory and observed behavior.

And in fact, the parts of Burawoy's book that I find most convincing are the many places where he allows his sociological imagination and his eye for empirical detail to break through the mechanism of the theory. His case study is an interesting and insightful one. And it is strengthened by the fact that Burawoy does not attempt to simply subsume or recast the findings within the theoretical structure of Marx's economics.

(Burawoy addresses some of these issues directly in an important article, "Two Methods in Search of Science" (link). He advocates for treating Marxist ideas as a research program for the social sciences in the sense articulated by Imre Lakatos.)

So my advice goes along these lines: allow Marxism, or Weber or Durkheim or Tilly, to function as a suggestive program of research for empirical investigation. Let it be a source of hypotheses, hunches, and avenues of inquiry. But be prepared as well for the discovery of surprising outcomes, and don't look at the theory as a prescription for the unfolding of the social reality. Most importantly, don't look to theory as a deductive basis for explaining and predicting social phenomena. (Here is an article on the role of Marxism as a method of research rather than a comprehensive theory; link.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:22PM (-04:00)

Underdetermination and truth

Sunday, May 16, 2010



We say that a statement is underdetermined by available facts when it and an alternative and different statement or theory are equally consistent with that body of facts. It may be that two physical theories have precisely the same empirical consequences -- perhaps wave theory and particle theory represent an example of this possibility. And by stipulation there is no empirical circumstance that could occur that would distinguish between the two theories; no circumstance that would refute T1 and confirm T2. And yet we might also think that the two theories make different assertions about the world. Both statements are underdetermined by empirical facts.

Pierre Duhem further strengthened the case for the underdetermination of scientific theories through his emphasis on the crucial role that auxiliary hypotheses play in the design of experiments in The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory. Individual theoretical hypotheses -- "light is a wave," "people behave on the basis of their class interests" -- do not have definite empirical implications of their own; rather, it is necessary to bring additional assumptions into play in order to design experiments that might support or refute the theoretical hypothesis. And here is the crucial point: if an experimental result is inconsistent with the antecedent theory and auxiliary hypotheses, we haven't demonstrated that the hypothesis itself is false, but rather that at least one among the premises is false. And it is possible to save the system by modifying the theory or one or more of the auxiliary assumptions. As W. V. O. Quine put the point, scientific knowledge takes the form of a "web of belief" (The Web of Belief).

On the extreme assumption that both statements have precisely the same consequences, we might infer that the two theories must be logically equivalent, since the logical content of a theory is the full range of its deductive consequences and the two theories are stipulated to have the same deductive consequences. So it must be possible to derive each theory from the other. And if T1 and T2 are logically equivalent, then we wouldn't say that they really express different assertions about the world.

A more problematic case is one where two theories have distinct bodies of deductive consequences; but where the subset of deductive consequences that are empirically

testable are the same for the two theories. In this situation it is no longer the case that the two theories are logically equivalent but rather "empirically equivalent." And here it would be credible to say that the two make genuinely different assertions about the world -- assertions that cannot be resolved empirically.

A third and still weaker case is one in which T1 and T2 have distinct consequences for both theoretical statements and a specific subset of empirical statements; but they overlap in their consequences for a second body of empirical statements. And consider this possibility: Because a given level of instrumentation and inquiry limit the types of empirical statements that can be evaluated, this body of data does not permit us to differentiate between the theories. So we can distinguish between "currently testable" and "currently not testable". For this third case, we are to imagine that T1 and T2 have distinct implications for theoretical statements and for currently not testable empirical statements; but they have the same consequences for currently testable statements. In this case, T1 and T2 are currently underdetermined -- though advances in instrumentation may result in their being empirically distinguishable in the future.

It is worth noting how heroic is the notion of "determination" of theory by evidence. If we thought that science should issue in theories that are determined by the empirical evidence, we would be committed to the idea that there is one uniquely best theory of everything. This assumption of ultimate theory uniqueness might be thought to follow from scientific and metaphysical realism: the world has a specific and determinate structure and causal properties; this structure gives rise to all observations; well-supported theories are approximately true descriptions of this hidden structure of the world; and therefore there is a uniquely best scientific theory -- the one that refers to this set of entities, processes, and structures. And if an existing theory is false in description of this unobservable reality, then there must be observational circumstances where the false assumptions of the theory give rise to false predictions about observation. In other words, well-confirmed theories are likely to be approximately true, and the hidden structure of the world can be expected to create observations that refute out false theories.

However, this foundational approach is implausible in virtually every area of science. Our theories rarely purport to describe the most fundamental level of reality; instead, they are meso-level descriptions of intermediate levels of phenomena. Take the effort to understand planetary motion. The description of the orbits of the planets as ellipses generated by the gravitational attraction of the planet and the sun turned out to be only approximately true. Did this refute the pure theory of gravitation? Certainly not; rather, it raised the possibility of other causal processes not yet identified, that interfere with the workings of gravitational attraction.

So how do these general considerations from the philosophy of science affect the situation of knowledge claims in the social sciences?

It would seem that social science claims are even more subject to underdetermination than the claims of mechanics and physics. In addition to the problem of unidentified interfering causes and the need for auxiliary hypotheses, we have the problems of vagueness and specification. We commonly find that social science theories offer general statements about social causes and conditions that need to be further specified before they can be applied to a given set of circumstances. And there are almost always alternative and equally plausible ways of specifying the concept in a particular setting.

Take the idea of class conflict as a theory of political behavior. The theory may assert that "workers act on their material interests." Before we can attempt to evaluate this statement in particular social settings, we have to specify several things: how to characterize "material interests" in the setting and how to represent the cognitive-behavioral models the worker uses as he/she deliberates about action. Is retaining support from City Hall a material interest? Or are material interests restricted to wages and the workplace? Are workers thought to be rational maximizers of their interests, or do they also embody social commitments that modulate the dictates of maximization? And here is the crucial point: different specifications lead to different predictions about political behavior; so the general theoretical assertion is underdetermined by empirical observation.

This discussion seems to lead us into surprising territory -- not the limited question of underdetermination but the large question of truth and correspondence and the question of the rationality of scientific belief. Do we think that social assertions are true or false in the semantic sense: true by virtue of correspondence to the facts as they really are; or do we think that social assertions are simply ways of speaking about complexes of social phenomena, with no referential force? Is the language of class or ideology or ressentiment just a way of encompassing a range of social behaviors, or are there really classes and ideologies in the social world? And if we affirm the latter possibility, does the evidence of social observation permit us to unambiguously select the true theories?

I suppose one possible approach is to minimize the scope of "truth" when it comes to the social sciences. We might say that there is a limited range of social statements that are unambiguously true or false -- Jones robbed a store, Jones robbed a store because he was economically desperate, people sometimes commit crimes out of economic necessity -- but there is a broader class of statements that have a different status. These are more akin to interpretive schemes in literary criticism or to a set of metaphors deployed to describe a complex social situation. The language of class may fall in this category. And we might say that these statements are not truth claims at all, but rather interpretive schemes that are judged to do a better or worse job of drawing together the complex phenomena to which they are applied. And in this case, it seems unavoidable that statements like these are radically underdetermined by the empirical facts.

(See Kyle Stanford's essay on underdetermination in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:51PM (-04:00)

Red shirts as a social movement

Wednesday, May 19, 2010



The redshirts in Thailand have moved onto the world stage in the past several months. Massive protests in Bangkok have stymied the Thai government and have held the army and police forces at bay for months. Demands from redshirt leaders and posters include removal of the military-backed government of Prime Minister Abhisit and a commitment to prompt elections. In the background seems to be a demand for a shift in the playing field in Thailand, with meaningful attention to social inequalities. And

exiled former prime minister Thaksin plays a continuing role in the background, offering video messages at protest meetings and veiled instructions to redshirt demonstrators. Efforts at clearing the protest encampment led to dozens of deaths in April, and a major crackdown this week seems to have succeeded in breaking the protest in Bangkok with another handful of deaths and a great deal of arson in the center of the city. But there are indications that protests and violence may spread to other parts of Thailand.

What all of this implies is the presence of a major social movement in Thailand, supported by many thousands of rural and urban Thai people, mostly from the lower end of the socioeconomic order. This much is clear through the journalism that has developed around the current turmoil. What we haven't yet seen, though, is a careful analysis of the dynamics and processes of this movement. How is it organized? How are followers recruited? What resources are leaders able to call upon? What are the grievances that motivate potential followers? The time is ripe for a careful, analytical study of the movement. And intellectual resources exist for such a study, in the form of the extensive literature on social movements and contention that exists in the current social science literature. However, that literature largely focuses on social movements in the democratic West, and scholars in this tradition generally lack deep knowledge of the politics of Asian countries. So we need to find ways of crossing boundaries if we are to make use of social movement theory in the context of the Redshirt movement.

One of the most important voices in the current literature on social contention is Doug McAdam. His study of the black insurgency in the United States is a sophisticated and extensive analysis of the dynamics of the US civil rights movement in the South (Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970), and perhaps there are some parallels between the two movements. McAdam's work is entirely focused on examples of protests and mobilization in the United States. But in the introduction to the second edition of this work he provides a clear and powerful statement of the state of the field, and his synthesis of the best current thinking about how to analyze social movements is of general interest. So perhaps this is one place to begin the search for an empirically and theoretically informed study of the Redshirt movement.

Here are a few of McAdam's central points.

Increasingly, one finds scholars from various countries and nominally different theoretical traditions emphasizing the importance of the same three broad sets of factors in analyzing the origins of collective action. These three factors are: 1) the political opportunities and constraints confronting a given challenger; 2) the forms of organization (informal as well as formal) available to insurgents as sites for initial mobilization; and 3) the collective processes of interpretation, attribution and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action. (viii)
Or in short: ***political opportunities***, ***mobilizing structures***, and ***framing processes*** (viii-ix). Here are brief descriptions of each of these axes of analysis.

Expanding political opportunities. Under ordinary circumstances, excluded groups or challengers face enormous obstacles in their efforts to advance group interests.... But the particular set of power relations that define the political environment at any point in time hardly constitutes an immutable structure of political life. Instead, the opportunities for a challenger to engage in successful collective action are expected to vary over time. It is these variations that are held to help shape the ebb and flow of movement activity. (ix)

Extant mobilizing structures. ... By mobilizing structures I mean *those collective vehicles,*

informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action. This focus on the meso-level groups, organizations, and informal networks that comprise the collective building blocks of social movements constitutes the second conceptual element in this synthesis. (ix)

Framing or other interpretive processes. ... Mediating between opportunity, organization and action are the shared meanings, and cultural understandings -- including a shared collective identity -- that people bring to an instance of incipient contention. At a minimum people need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem. (ix-x)

So how can these basic sets of questions help in forming a careful analysis of the Redshirt movement? McAdam's general point is that these angles of analysis have emerged as key within dozens of studies of collective action and social movements. They represent an empirically informed set of theoretical perspectives on collective action. We shouldn't look at these three sets of factors as setting a blueprint for collective action; but it is a good bet that new instances of social movements will involve each of these factors in some way.

Putting the point another way: we can read McAdam's synthesis as posing a research framework in terms of which to investigate a new example of a social movement -- whether the Falun Gong in China, the monks' movement in Burma, the Maoist insurgency in India, or the Redshirt movement in Thailand. It is certainly possible that a given case won't fit very well into this set of questions; but McAdam's hunch is that this is unlikely.

So it would be very interesting to initiate a careful study of the Redshirt movement along these lines. Such a study would need to review the shifting circumstances of political power over the past ten years or so in Thailand, both at the national level and at the state level. Certainly the military overthrow of the Thaksin government created "ebbs and flows" of the sort to which McAdam refers. And the Yellowshirt demonstrations of 2008 also shifted the fields of power in Thailand. What openings did these various events create for Redshirt mobilization? Second, we would need to know a great deal more about the local and regional organizations through which Redshirt mobilization occurs. What are those organizations? What resources do they control? How do they manage to succeed in mobilizing and transporting many tens of thousands of rural supporters to the center of Bangkok? And how do they manage to continue to supply and motivate these supporters through several months of siege? Finally, and most importantly, we need to know much more about the mentality and social identities of the Redshirts. What do they care about? What are their local grievances? What are their most basic loyalties and motivations? McAdam points out that most studies of successful social movements have found that activists and supporters usually possess dense social networks and deep connections to their communities; will this turn out to be true for the Redshirt movement?

There is a cynical reading of the movement that would almost certainly not stand up to this kind of careful analysis: the idea that the Redshirts are simply the pawns of Thaksin, and that Thaksin's financial support to individual followers is sufficient to explain their behavior. This doesn't seem credible on its face; it makes the movement out to be an automaton controlled by a distant leader. Surely Thaksin plays a role; but equally certainly, leaders and followers have their own issues, agendas, and passions.

The kind of study suggested here does not yet exist, so far as I can tell. It would be necessary to pull together a great deal of local knowledge about the social constituencies and local organizations that are involved in the movement -- information that isn't

presented in any detail in the journalism that has been offered to date about events in Thailand. But once a researcher has pulled together preliminary answers to questions in each of these areas, he/she will be much better positioned to answer pressing questions of the day: will the movement survive the repression in Bangkok this week? Will it spread to other locations in Thailand? Will the government succeed in preserving the status quo? And schematic answers to these questions would provide a much more substantial basis for understanding the movement and its location within Thai society.

Here is one small contribution to the effort. McAdam emphasizes the importance of "identity shift" in the evolution of a social movement. He thinks that a very substantial part of a movement's strength and staying power derives from the new forms of collective identity that it creates. There is evidence of shifting identities along these lines within the Redshirt movement. Consider this interesting analysis of language from Thailand's Troubles:

ไพร่, which sounds like prai, was a dusty word which rarely saw the light of day. Now on every other t-shirt worn by people of the Red movement printed large and proud is prai.

Prai has perhaps a dozen meanings including cad, citizen, plebian and proletariat. In the context of the Red movement protest, which includes an element of class conflict and rebellion over inequality, prai frequently means commoner and peasant.
This sounds quite a bit like a shift of identity, from disregarded poor person to proud member of a movement.

(Several earlier posts have focused on events in Thailand. Here is a post from about a year ago on civil unrest in Thailand. See also the social movements thread in *UnderstandingSociety*.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:48PM (-04:00)

The dropout crisis

Thursday, May 20, 2010



The United States faces a huge dropout crisis. In some cities the high school graduation rate is less than 50% -- sometimes as low as 25%. And this means devastating poverty for the dropouts, as well as continuing social blight for their communities. We might say, though, that the graduation rate is only the *symptom* of the problem; the causes include high poverty neighborhoods and failed elementary and middle schools, and the effects extend far into the future.

So in a way, it is too simple to call it a dropout crisis; rather, it is a schooling crisis (extending back into the early grades) and a poverty crisis (extending forward for one or more generations for the young people who are affected and their eventual children). And it is a particularly serious national problem, at the beginning of a century where the most important resource will be educated people and talented creators. How can we be optimistic about the prospects for innovation and discovery in the American economy when we are wasting so much human talent?

The crisis itself is widely recognized (link). What we haven't figured out yet is a success strategy for resolving the current system of failure. Is it even *possible* to envision a system of public education in high-poverty cities that actually succeeds in achieving the 90-90-90 goal (90% graduation rate, 90% achievement at grade level, 90% continuation to post-secondary education)? Or are we forced to conclude that the problem is too great, and that 50% of inner-city children are doomed to lives of continuing poverty and social blight? If so, the future is dim for our county as a whole: rising crime, social problems, civil conflict, and increasingly gated communities are our future. And, inevitably, our economic productivity as a country will falter. So the whole country loses if we don't solve this problem.

The current environment for solving the schooling problems is unpromising. Urban school systems across the country face staggering fiscal crises -- a $300 million deficit in Detroit, $480 million in Los Angeles, and similar amounts in other cities. So school systems are forced into a cycle of cost-cutting, removing some of the critical resources that might have addressed the failure for their students. And the school systems themselves -- administrators, teachers, and unions -- are all too often resistant to change. The current Federal educational reform program, Race to the Top (link), is designed to stimulate new thinking and more successful reforms; but the jury is out.

The situation requires a whole-hearted commitment to solving this problem. Solutions will require the best available research on learning and schooling; they will require substantial resources; and they will require significant collaboration among a number of stakeholders. And the solutions can't be simply one-off demonstration projects; we need a national strategy that will work at scale. There are a million new drop-outs a year. We need to reduce that number by 80% in the next decade if we are to be successful.

These are pretty daunting challenges. So consider this proposed solution that seems to have the ability to satisfy each of these constraints. This is the Diplomas Now program that is becoming increasingly visible in education reform and the press (link). The program is a research-based strategy for helping children make academic progress at every step of the way. It recognizes the need for much more intensive adult contact for at-risk children. It acknowledges the need for providing a host of community services in high-poverty schools. And it places high academic standards at the center of the strategy.

The program is based on important research undertaken by Robert Balfanz at Johns Hopkins University (link). Balfanz finds that it is possible to identify high school drop-outs very early in their school experience. He identifies the ABC cluster of criteria as diagnostic of future high school failure: **a**bsenteeism, **b**ehavior, and **c**ourse performance. Sixth-graders who show any one of these characteristics have only a 25% likelihood of completing high school. So, he reasons, let's use these early warning signs and intervene with children when there is still an opportunity to get them back on track. This requires careful tracking of each child, and it requires that schools have the resources to address the problems these children are having in the early grades. But Balfanz argues that the payoff will be exactly what we need: these children will be back on track and will have a high likelihood of graduating from high school.

So what does the strategy need? First, it needs a good and well-implemented tracking system. Second, it needs teachers and principals who have the professional development needed to allow them to assist the progress of their students. But it needs two other things as well: it needs a corps of dedicated young people who will function as fulltime near-peer tutors and mentors for at risk children. And it needs a set of wrap-

around social and community services that are available to children and their families in the schools.

This is where community service and stakeholder collaboration come in. CityYear is a vibrant national youth service organization within Americorps (link). CityYear has always placed involvement in high-poverty schools at the core of its service agenda for the young people who give a year of their lives to change the world. Now CityYear has entered into agreements with the Diplomas Now program to support focused interventions in a growing number of schools in a number of cities. (Here is a CityYear report.) And Communities in Schools is a national organization that is able to provide the other piece (link). Communities in Schools provides several social work professionals and supervision for each DN school. Finally, the Talent Development program at Johns Hopkins provides training for DN teachers and administrators.

The Diplomas Now model has now been applied in a number of schools around the country, and the results are highly encouraging (link). Results for a sixth grade class in Feltonville School in Philadelphia are representative: from 2008 to 2009 absenteeism dropped by 80%, negative behavior dropped by 45%, and the number of students with failures in math or english dropped by about 80%. Participants and observers attribute the successes measured here to the synergies captured by the combined approach. But a key factor is the presence of caring young adults in the lives of these children. (video)

These are amazing and encouraging results. But we have to ask the question, what would it take to scale this solution for all of Los Angeles, Detroit, or Chicago? The answer is that it will require a major investment. But it will also return many times that amount in increased productivity and lower incarceration and social service costs.

Here are some estimates from CityYear planning for the challenge of scaling up the Diplomas Now solution. The goal the organization has adopted is an ambitious one: to have CityYear teams in all schools that generate 50% of dropouts in the city. In Detroit CityYear teams currently serve 8 schools and 4,600 students with 65 corps members. In order to reach the goal, CityYear Detroit will need to expand to 39 schools, serving 26,290 students, including 9,400 at-risk students, with 403 corps members. This expansion will be costly; federal, school, and private funding would increase from $3.8 million to $12.8 million. But the five-year return on investment is massive. A Northeastern University study estimates the benefit of converting one dropout into a graduate at $292,000, aggregating to a net social benefit of $686,000,000. The returns are enormous. Nationally the total annual cost of the CityYear program would be just under $200 million by 2016, with other program costs perhaps doubling this amount. But the value of success is a staggering number: net social benefits from reducing the drop-out rate estimated in the range of $10 billion.

So it seems that we now know that the skepticism that is often expressed about inner-city school failure is misplaced. There are intensive strategies for success that should work in any school. There is a cost to these programs. But there are many thousands of young people who are eager to pick up the responsibility. Their civic engagement and pragmatic idealism are inspiring. We need strong support from our government, foundations, and private sources in order to make school failure a thing of the past.

(Here are a couple of earlier posts on this topic; post, post, post.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:17PM (-04:00)

Doug McAdam on contentious politics and the social sciences

Saturday, May 22, 2010



Doug McAdam is hard at work shedding new light on the meso-dynamics of contention. What are the specific social and psychological mechanisms that bring people into social movements; what factors and processes make mobilization more feasible when social grievances arise? Recently he has done work on the impact of Teach for America on its participants, and he and his graduate students are now examining a set of environmental episodes that ***might*** have created local NIMBY movements -- but often didn't.

McAdam's most sustained contribution to the field of contention is his 1982 book on the dynamics of the struggle for racial equality, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970. The book was reissued in 1999 with a substantive new introduction, and it has set the standard for sophisticated sociological study of a large, complex movement. McAdam collaborated with Sidney Tarrow and Chuck Tilly in articulating a new vision of how to approach the politics of contention in Dynamics of Contention. And he has co-authored or co-edited another half dozen books on social movements and popular mobilization. So McAdam has been one of the architects of the field of contentious politics. Most importantly, he and his collaborators have brought innovative new thinking to the definition of problems for social research.

So it is valuable to dig into some of McAdam's thoughts and his sociological imagination as we think about how the sociology of the future might be shaped. I conducted an extensive interview with Doug earlier this month, and it opened up quite a few interesting topics. The full interview is posted on YouTube (link).

There are quite a few important turns to the conversation.

1. **Segment 1:** Why is the study of contention a central topic within the social sciences?
2. **Segment 2:** How can we approach contention without looking only at the successful cases? How about the moments where contention might have developed but did not? We can combine quantitative and qualitative methods -- perhaps in an order that reverses the usual approach. Maybe we can use quantitative studies to get a general feel for a topic, and then turn to qualitative and case studies to discover the mechanisms.
3. **Segment 3:** Another important theme: "We are voracious meaning-making creatures." Human beings have a cognitive-emotional-representational ability to attempt to represent meanings and their own significance within the larger order. Rational choice theory has too narrow a conception of agency. Why did the Black

community stay off the buses in Montgomery? Because people were strongly enmeshed in communities of meaning and commitment that framed the bus boycott in terms of meaning and identity.

4. **Segment 4:** The psychology of mobilization is complex. It's not just "rational incentives". Organizers and leaders use the affinities and loyalties of the community to bring about collective action. For example, an interesting strategy by SNCC to "shame" church leaders into supporting activists. Movements happen very suddenly; this seems to reflect a process of "redefining" the situation for participants. Another interesting issue: what is the right level of analysis -- micro, meso, or macro? Doug favors the "meso" level.
5. **Segment 5:** More on the meso level: disaggregated social activity. McAdam argues that government actions are themselves often at the meso level. And he makes the point that Civil Rights reform was strongly influenced in the United States by the issues created internationally through the tensions and ideological conflicts of the Cold War. This explains why it was Truman rather than Roosevelt who endorsed the need for Civil Rights reform. You can't explain the broad currents of the Civil Rights movement without understanding the international context that was influencing the Federal government. (This is an example of a macro-level effect on social movements.)
6. **Segment 6:** Now to mechanisms and processes. There are no laws of civil wars. So we need to look downward into the unfolding of the episodes of contention. Comparative historical sociology is a very dynamic movement today. Your work isn't quite as comparative as that of Tilly or McAdam. Doug indicates that he favors comparison; but he tends to choose cases that are broadly comparable with each other. Tilly often made comparisons at a much higher level of variation. Q: Would you have been comfortable framing your study of the American Civil Rights movement as a comparison with the Solidarity Movement in Poland? A: no. There is too broad a range of differences between the cases.
7. **Segment 7:** McAdam offers some interesting observations about the relationship between general theory and the specific social phenomena under study. An important point here is a strong advocacy for eclectic, broad reading as one approaches a complex social phenomenon. We can't say in advance where the important insights are going to come from -- anthropology, political science, history, sociology, ...
8. **Segment 8:** We can dig into the social features that make certain figures very successful in bringing a group of people into a readiness to engage together. Is social status a key factor? Is it that some people are particularly persuasive? Doug wants to break open the black box and get a lot better understanding of the meso-level processes and mechanisms through which mobilization occurs. A closing topic: what about protest and mobilization in Asia? Do you think these ideas about mobilization are relevant and illuminating in China or Thailand? Or has it developed in too specific a relationship to democratic societies? Does the current understanding of popular mobilization help us when we try to understand movements like the Redshirt movement in Thailand? Doug believes the framework is relevant outside the democratic West. The ideas need to be applied loosely and flexibly.
9. **Segment 9:** So the theory is really a "sketch" of the space of mobilization, rather than a set of specific hypotheses about how mobilizations always work. And in that understanding -- the field is very relevant to research on the Thailand movement.

(Note the strong connections between this discussion and a few of the earlier interviews -- Tilly, Tarrow, and Zald in particular (link). My interview with Gloria House about her experience with SNCC in Lowndes County is very relevant as well (link).)

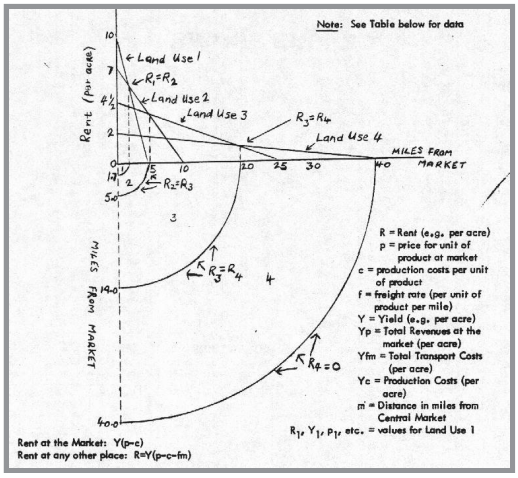
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:59PM (-04:00)

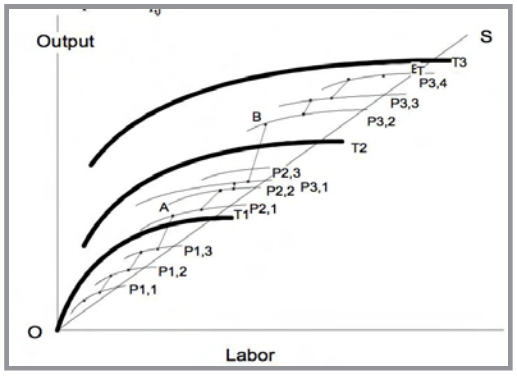
Varieties of economic progress

Tuesday, May 25, 2010



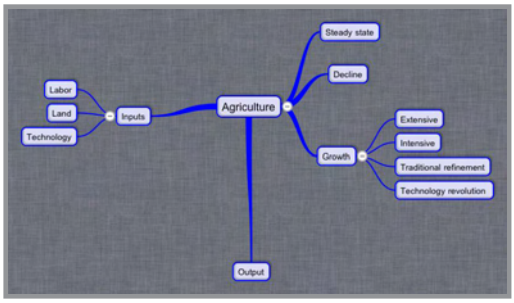
The study of economic history reveals a number of different patterns when it comes to agricultural production and the standard of living of a given population in a region. Let's think about the issue in very simple terms. Imagine that the standard of living for a population in a region is determined by the amount of grain that each household is able to acquire in a time period. Grain is produced on farms using labor and technology (water, traction, fertilizer, pesticides, harvest tools). Output is influenced by the existing agricultural technology and the quantity of labor expended in the farming process. At a given level of technology and a given practice of labor use, a certain quantity of grain Q can be produced for the population P (farmers and their families). If population is stable and if land area, technology, and labor use remain constant, then the total amount of grain produced remains constant as well and the standard of living remains level at Q/P.





Now several things can begin to change. First, consider a steady population increase over time. If land, technology and labor remain constant, then the standard of living falls, since Q remains constant while P increases. So how can this population sustain and perhaps improve its standard of living? It needs to increase the output of grain at a rate at least equal to the rate of increase in population. And this can be done in several ways.

First, the population can bring more land into cultivation. Population increase leads to more farm labor; more farmers can farm the additional land; and if agricultural technologies and practices are unchanged, then output will increase proportionally to the increase in population; so the standard of living will remain constant. This assumes, however, that the new land is of equal productivity to existing land; but as the physiocrats observed, generally new land is of lower productivity. So in this scenario, output would increase more slowly than population, and the standard of living would slowly decline. We might call this ***extensive growth***; technique and labor practices remain constant, but the arable land area increases (at the cost of deforestation and loss of common lands).



Second, more labor can be applied to the process of cultivation to increase output, using traditional farming practices. More frequent weeding and destruction of pests takes time, but it increases output. So if population is rising and land extent and productivity are constant, it is possible to offset the tendency for average output to fall, by applying more labor to the process. Family labor, including children, can be expended more and more intensively in order to achieve additional gains in output. But, of course, the marginal product of these additional hours of labor is small. This process is familiar from the history of agriculture; Chayanov calls it "self-exploitation" (The Theory of Peasant Economy) and Clifford Geertz calls it "agricultural involution" (Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia). The standard of living may remain fairly constant, but the work load for the farm family increases over time. Naturally, this process reaches a limit; eight hours a day of farm labor is sustainable; twelve hours is difficult; and eighteen hours is unsupportable. (Here is an explanation and application of Chayanov's theory to the circumstances of Sri Lanka; link.) We can call this ***involutionary growth or labor-intensive growth***.

A third possibility is somewhat more positive for the standard of living and quality of life. Intelligent farmers can recognize opportunities for improving and refining existing techniques and practices. A better kind of sacking material may do a better job of protecting the harvest from rats; a bicycle-powered irrigation pump may increase the amount of water available for crops, thus increasing the harvest; a different form of labor cooperation across households may permit more effective seeding during the appropriate season. So the traditional practices can be refined, permitting an increase of output with a constant quantity of land and labor. This is what Mark Elvin refers to as "***refinement of traditional practices***" in his pathbreaking analysis of the "high-level equilibrium trap" (The Pattern of the Chinese Past). It is an incremental process through which the productivity of the traditional farming system is increased through a series of small refinements of practice and technique. Improvement in productivity permits an improvement in output per person; but if population continues to increase, then soon these gains are erased and the standard of living begins to decline again.

A fourth possibility is even more dramatic. The fundamental technologies in use may be qualitatively improved: manure may be replaced by bean curd, which in turn may be replaced by chemical fertilizers; seed varieties may be significantly improved through selective breeding; electric-powered pumps may improve the availability of irrigation; small tractors may replace oxen and many person-hours of labor. This kind of improvement in productivity can be represented as a jump from one of the heavy curves above to a higher "production possibility frontier." And this enhancement of agricultural productivity can result in massive increases in the quantity of grain relative to the farming population -- thereby permitting a significant improvement in the standard of living for the farming population. This can be referred to as ***modern technological productivity growth***.

Two problems arise at this point, however. First is Elvin's fundamental point about Chinese agriculture: these significant technological improvements require a significant social investment in scientific and technical research. And if a population has already approached a subsistence trap -- a level of population at which intensive labor and existing farm technology only permits a near-subsistence diet for the population -- then

there is no source of social surplus that can fund this research investment. (This is the core of his theory of the high-level equilibrium trap: farming techniques and practices have been refined to the maximum degree possible, and population has increased to the point of subsistence.)

Another problem is equally important. The sorts of productivity improvements described here are "labor-expelling": the size of the labor force needs to fall (unless more land is available). So the standard of living may rise for the farm population; but there will be a "surplus population" that is excluded from this improvement in productivity. (This is a process that James Scott describes in Green-Revolution Malasia in Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance.) And at this point, the only hope for improvement of the standard of living for this segment of the population is for economic growth in another sector -- manufacturing or service -- where the labor of displaced farmers can be productively used.

So there are three large patterns, with several structural alternatives among the growth scenarios.

(See several earlier posts on farming, agriculture, and development; link, link, link.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:38PM (-04:00)

Prosperity based on commodities

Friday, May 28, 2010



An earlier post looked at economic prosperity and standard of living from the point of view of a grain-based agricultural economy. There I singled out intensive, extensive, and technology-based growth, and the effects these scenarios had on the standard of living for a farming population. This is a particularly simple case, since it equates standard of living with food availability per capita. (This is enough, however, to arrive at credible estimates of the standard of living over long stretches of Chinese history, as Bozhong Li has demonstrated in Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850.) This simplification leaves out markets, prices, and trade; so it doesn't shed much light on economies based substantially on the production of commodities (including farm products, but also including manufactured goods). So how does the situation change when we postulate production for exchange and consumption based on cash income?

Let's once again consider an isolated region, where all products consumed are produced in the region. So there is no interregional trade. And let's suppose there are three goods: grain, shirts, and beer. Every household needs some of each, and households acquire income through ownership of resources: land, capital, and labor power. The income available to a household is the net return it achieves through use of its resources. Goods are produced by "firms" and are bought and sold through competitive markets.

Now to estimate a household's standard of living we need to do a more complex estimation: we need to estimate the household's income and we need to estimate the

"purchasing power" of this income in terms of the baskets of goods this income can purchase at prevailing prices. So we need an income model and a price model for the three goods. (See Robert Allen's detailed efforts at answering these questions across Eurasia (link, link).)

Production requires access to resources. Each resource can be used in two basic ways: it can be used directly by its owner in production, or it can be "rented" to a firm for use by the firm in production. So there is also a competitive market for resources: rent for land, interest for capital, and wages for labor. And at any given time there is a specific distribution of resources across population; some households have dramatically more of each resource than others.

We can begin our thought experiment by taking as fixed the techniques of production that exist for the three basic commodities. In order to produce at a given level of output, the firm needs access to a known quantity of resources, in a specific proportion. Firms amd households with lots of resources can begin producing shirts, beer, and grain immediately. Poor firms and households will either rent access to more resources through promise of future rents; or they will rent out the resources they currently possess, including labor time. So landless, propertyless households have no choice but to sell their labor time; they become workers. So now let's picture our region as populated by firms and households producing commodities, and all persons functioning as consumers purchasing a bundle of commodities for life needs.

So far we've provided a scene very familiar from the classical political economists and Marx. Much of subsequent economic thought went into solving various parts of this story: what determines prices, what does the distribution of income look like, and how do innovation and organizational and technological change fit into this story? What does an equilibrium of production, consumption, and price look like with static technology? What are the dynamic processes of adjustment that occur when there is a substantial change in the process of production?

My question here is a limited one: what needs to occur in this scenario in order for there to be a rising trend in the average and median standard living for this society?

Let's define the standard of living as the size of the wage basket available to the ***median*** consumer: the sets of baskets of grain, shirts, and beer that the median income earner is able to purchase. In order for the standard of living to rise in this isolated region, there needs to be an overall increase in the efficiency and productivity of the production process for the three goods. And the money wage of the median consumer needs to rise. (Amartya Sen provides quite a bit of analysis of the meaning of the standard of living in The Standard of Living.)

Let's refer to the concrete production process at a given time as the current practice; this is the specific way that inputs are organized in order to create the output. As we saw in the graph of output against time borrowed from Mark Elvin (link), we can think of progress here in two ways. First, there is refinement of practice, as producers gradually recognize small modifications that permit removal of costs from the process. And, as Marx and Smith agree, firms and households producing goods for a market have a powerful incentive to seek out these improvements: they can continue to sell their products at the old price until the rest of the producers catch up.

Second, producers can introduce substantial, revolutionary changes in technology. They

may replace skilled sewing-machine operators with sewing robots that reduce each of the inputs into the good. Productivity takes a big stride forward.

There is a third mechanism of cost reduction available: the firm/household may speed up the labor process, lengthen the working day, or lower the wage. Volume I of *Capital* goes into detail on each of these mechanisms within a market-governed firm. And each of these approaches is negative for the quality of life of the working class.

Now let's get back to the question of the standard of living. Does the process of competition, rising productivity, and falling prices imply an improvement in the standard of living? Or, conceivably, does it lead to a paradoxical immiseration of the bulk of the population? Both outcomes are possible. Rising efficiency and productivity have permitted our little society to produce a rising quantity of beer, grain, and shirts. And this on the basis of a fixed level of basic resources. So in principle everyone may be better off. But it is possible as well that the benefits of rising productivity have been disproportionately captured by a small advantaged group. So income may have become increasingly concentrated at the top. The average wage basket will have increased. But the median consumer may have declined through that process of concentration.

What this story tells us is something fairly simple: the effects of productivity improvement within a commodity economy depend critically on the prior distribution of assets and the institutions through which income and the gains of efficiency are distributed. And this in turn suggests a point much like that of Robert Brenner: the social-property relations embedded within an economy are critical in determining the fate of the median person, and they are subject to profound political struggle (post).

It would be very interesting to use agent-based modeling software to represent a series of scenarios based on this description of a commodity-based economy undergoing growth. What do distributive outcomes look like when the prior distribution is relatively equal? How about when they are substantially unequal? How much difference does the timing of growth make on the eventual distributive and welfare characteristics of the scenario?

(Piero Sraffa's Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities : Prelude to a Critique of Economic Theory picks up some parts of this story in a neo-Ricardian way; Marxian economists have looked at Sraffa's work as also providing a novel basis for the labor theory of value. The framework provided here also leads into an argument for a new definition of exploitation by John Roemer in A General Theory of Exploitation and Class.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:09PM (-04:00)

Real Utopias

Tuesday, June 01, 2010

It is worth thinking a bit about the intellectual project of envisioning a utopia. By definition, a utopia is a vision of a social order that is profoundly different from the real historical circumstances and institutions in which we live. It would correct important flaws in the social world we currently inhabit. It is a social order that does not yet exist. And there is an implication that this better social order is not simply a marginal improvement over the





current world, but rather a sweeping revamping of the institutions and practices that create the social order. To be a utopian thinker is usually to have an intellectual disposition of impatience for small, gradual change. Mill was patient and gradualist -- and not utopian; Marx was impatient and revolutionary -- and utopian.

So to think about a utopia, we need to have a set of values that specify the features that we would like to see in the social institutions that govern us. Such a system of values provides the basis for social criticism. These might include moral equality of all human beings, or the freedom of all human beings, or the intrinsic importance of community, or a preference for a world in which each individual is in a position to realize his/her full human potential. As social critics, we hold up the values, and we measure the current functioning of social relations and institutions to see how well or badly they conform to the value prescriptions. How free or equal are individuals within these institutions? How good is the sense of community that actually exists? And we criticize the actual on the grounds of its divergence from our moral ideals.

So envisioning a utopia requires that we have a basis for social criticism, grounded in a social philosophy specifying some system of important values. But it requires something else as well: a credible argument for the feasibility of a concrete and specific set of institutions that do a better job with respect to the values -- without simultaneously creating new harms that are even more terrible. This is a call for a science of the hypothetical alternative: "Here is how this complex set of institutions should be expected to work if they were established and were populated by ordinary human beings." This is one part of the story where the social sciences can help; social scientists have a lot to say about how institutions work, and how alternatives might function as well.

Here is an example. A Chinese social critic in the 1930s might have observed tenant peasant farming in North China; he/she might have argued that the system was exploitative, unfair, and inefficient (three different social values); and he/she might have argued that the collective farm was a superior alternative, being more democratic, fair, and efficient. The collective farm might have been offered as a utopian alternative to tenant farming.

This is where careful institutional analysis is required, and the analysis needs to be rigorous and empirically and theoretically informed. What incentives would be established by the collective farm? How would authority be exercised? Who would make important decisions? And how would ordinary human behavior be conducted when it came to labor, consumption, and power relations? We might hope that this careful effort at analysis would have arrived at some important results:

"There will be a lot of 'easy riding' because of public goods problems; there will be a lot of

petty tyranny because of the vacuum created by the institutions when it comes to collective decision-making; and there will be chronic over-consumption because food is a common resource."
So the collective farm is likely not to be a utopian solution to China's rural problems in 1930. And in fact, subsequent history confirms this conclusion; the Great Leap Forward famine was the consequence of many of these institutional failures.

But let's say that our institutional analysis indicates that a given system of institutions would work as advertised. The next thing we need is a theory of a feasible pathway through which these institutions could be established; a pathway of how we might get from here to there. It may be that there is a stable equilibrium of stacked dominoes embodying a certain topological structure; stable simply means that, once established, the configuration will survive small shocks. But this isn't very useful information if there isn't any way to get the dominoes into that configuration through a series of incremental steps. So to engage in "real utopian" thinking, we need to have some theories of pathways of change that are realistic when applied to real people.

So utopian thinking requires critique; envisioning of alternatives; and discovery of pathways from here to there.

How can social theory and social research help inform our thinking about "utopian alternatives"? And what is a "real utopia"? The Real Utopias project has been going for almost twenty years now (link). And some of the most interesting thinkers writing today in social philosophy and criticism have been involved -- Erik Olin Wright, Josh Cohen, Joel Rogers, John Roemer, and Archon Fung, for example. One of the most recent titles to come out of the project is Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance (Real Utopias Project) (v. 4), by Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright.

Erik Olin Wright talks about the underlying rationale for the project in this fascinating interview by Valerio Bacak (link). Here is how Wright sets up the problem:

The Real Utopias Project is, in a sense, a response to a deep problem within the Marxist tradition. Here’s the issue: Marxism is, above all, an emancipatory critique of capitalism. It identifies an array of oppressions and harms generated by capitalist relations and dynamics and then makes the extraordinary claim that these harms could be eliminated if capitalism was radically transformed. This kind of system-level, radical critique of the basic structures of society requires a huge leap of imagination: how is it possible that the basic institutions of society, which seem so natural to most people, could be radically changed without generating chaos and massive perverse consequences?
And here is his preferred approach:

Develop a coherent, positive social scientific theory of feasible alternative institutions without attempting a prediction of their likely emergence. The idea is to explore alternative designs of institutions in terms of three criteria: first, to what extent would the institutional design, if implemented, contribute to the realization of emancipatory values of one sort or another; second, in what ways might the institutional design generate perverse side-effects and are their plausible strategies for countering these; and third, if implemented, is the institutional design sustainable, does it generate a social dynamic that reinforces rather than systematically undermines its own conditions of possibility. I refer to this strategy as envisioning real utopias: “utopias” insofar as the agenda is anchored in vision of emancipatory social change; “real” insofar as the analysis revolves

around institutional feasibility. This is a wide-open theoretical and empirical agenda. It involves explorations of theoretical proposals which have no immediate real-world exemplars as well as empirical cases in which efforts at constructing, not just envisioning, real utopias have occurred. The premise of this third strategy is that while there are real limits on the possibilities of emancipatory futures that cannot be breached simply by an act of will, those limits are not fixed independently of our beliefs about what is possible. While it is false that “where there is a will there is a way” it is nevertheless the case that without a “will” many “ways” become impossible, and envisioning real utopias is part of the process of creating a will for change.

What the Real Utopias project is aimed at validating, most fundamentally, is the idea of emancipatory agency: that it is possible for us humans to restructure our social institutions in a direction that fits our fundamental values better than the present institutions do. And it is worth underlining how important, but also how risky, this effort is: important, because it gives a basis for thinking that we can create a better world; and risky, because many of the worst historical experiences of modern memory came from "utopian" efforts to redefine society. (This is a point that James Scott makes in Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (link).)

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:50PM (-04:00)

What now for Michigan?

Monday, June 07, 2010



The Detroit Regional Chamber Leadership Conference at Mackinac has come and gone. Leaders from all sectors in Southeast Michigan participated in discussions about how the state might move forward and regain the vitality and quality of life that the state has lost in the past decade. All agree that the state faces very tough challenges. And solutions and strategies were put forward. Central themes included a range of strategies -- Create more jobs.... Improve K-12 schooling.... Create and retain more college graduates.... Improve the climate for business and entrepreneurs.... So there are ideas about what is needed, and there are organizations investing effort in achieving some of these goals.

So why might one board the ferry from the island with a sense of disappointment? For a few reasons. First, there are a number of critical social issues that got no public discussion at all: the persistence and depth of urban poverty in each of Michigan's cities, the continuing reductions the state is imposing on the social services budgets, the enduring inequalities the state accepts along racial lines, and the state's stubborn refusal to face up to its fiscal crisis, to list several. One might imagine that these problems would disappear if and when the state's economic crisis abates; but I'm not persuaded of that.

A more fundamental source of disappointment is the lack of serious, realistic analysis of the problems we face in the state and what interventions might actually succeed in addressing them. The lack of realism in these discussions is often truly staggering. There are exceptions, of course; for example, Lou Glazer's efforts at Michigan Future are data-driven (link), and the Citizens' Research Council has done great work on the fiscal crisis

of the state (link). But all too often various political and business leaders have picked out one small issue and have tried to present it as a comprehensive strategy. For example, leaders in state government tout the opportunity represented by alternative energy and the manufacture of windmills. But there is no honest calculation of the likely scope of labor force demand created by this sector; and to date, the numbers are tiny. The state has lost over 800,000 jobs in the past eight years, and windmill manufacture has the potential to employ a few thousands. So how can this be a realistic avenue for "putting Michigan to work again"?

Similar comments might be made about the idea that Michigan should focus on biotechnology. The state has assets in this field, to be sure, including world-class researchers in many of its universities. But how many states and regions have already declared themselves for the future of biotechnology (including Pittsburgh, several of whose leaders spoke at the conference); and how many are likely to succeed? So picking out alternative energy and biotech as the primary areas of growth in the state sounds sexy but unrealistic.

More credible is a broad strategy of improving the human capital and quality of life of the state. Logically, it makes sense that dramatic improvement in K-12 education, educational attainment, and college graduation will add a broad-based and fungible resource to the state's arsenal for productive activity in the future. And equally, it seems very logical that creating appealing, safe, and fun cityscapes will be conducive to productivity, quality of life, and business growth. (These are Richard Florida's central insights in the CreativeClass.) So investments in education and the urban environment seem to be very practical ways of increasing the prosperity of the state in the medium run. (The unemployment rate of baccalaureate adults is about 1/3 that of high school graduates in the state right now.)

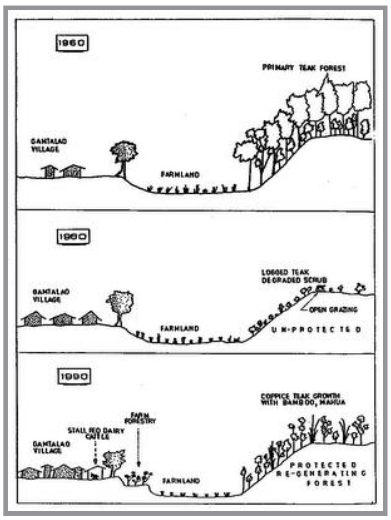
But significantly, each of these areas of public investment has declined in the past 8 years. State support for K-12 and post-secondary education has declined significantly over the past eight years. All cities and municipalities in Michigan are facing a current and severe fiscal crisis because of declining property values and revenue sharing, and this crisis will get dramatically worse in the next 5-10 years. So improving urban quality of life is not being supported either. (Proposal A makes matters worse, since it means that it will take many years for cities to regain the tax base they lost during the real estate meltdown in the past several years; link.) So the result is that Michigan is disinvesting in exactly the factors that hold out the greatest promise for improvement in the next 15 years.

It is possible that there is no intelligent solution to Michigan's crisis -- no smart strategy that could be pursued by public and private organizations that would do this set of things in order to bring about that set of good results. It is possible that regions come out of economic tailspins only through a lot of trial and error, and sometimes they come out in a much reduced state. Nothing guarantees that the end of this story will be a happy one, resulting in a prosperous society of 10-12 million people moving forward confidently. In other words, it may be that repairing deep economic and social damage is essentially beyond our ability. But one would want to think otherwise. We would want to think that there are investments and reforms that can be adopted now that will make recovery most likely and full. And we would want to think that it is possible to identify some of the broad structural obstacles to productive growth, and work to remove these. Each of these efforts is likely to bear fruit -- much as a baseball team increases the odds of success by recruiting and cultivating strong players, working on the essentials of teamwork, and removing the process issues that may be in the way of success.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:33PM (-04:00)

Social progress

Tuesday, June 08, 2010



What is involved in "making society better"? What do we have in mind when we aspire to improving society? I suppose there are several things we might mean by this idea. Superficially we might say that a society is better off when its members are better off; but is there more to the story? There seem to be several different lines of thought to pursue.

First, we might have a small number of dimensions of goodness in mind -- something like a social welfare function -- and we might understand social progress as ***aggregate improvement with respect to these dimensions of welfare***. Social progress is defined as "aggregate improvement in quality of life for the population" (income, health status, freedom), and it is achieved through a series of steps in which one or more of these measures is improved. This definition is potentially more complex than a utilitarian moral theory, but it shares the basic structure with utilitarianism. It defines the good of society as the sum of the goods of individuals in society. (We might also have a theory about the processes through which these improvements need to take place; for example, we might say that all improvements need to be Pareto-improving: making some better off without reducing the welfare of anyone.)

Second, we might have a list of specific current social defects in mind -- the widespread fact of urban homelessness, the incidence of childhood obesity, or the incidence of violence in society -- and we might define progress as the reduction or elimination of these defects. Social progress is the result of ***sequential reduction of social harms***.

Third, we might have a set of moral-structural theories in mind: fairness, equality, democracy, self-determination. And we might define progress as a reform of institutions that increases one or more of these features of society. We might be thinking here along the lines that Rawls suggests in talking about imperfect justice; improving society means ***reforming unjust institutions and practices***. Or it means reforming institutions that unnecessarily interfere with citizens' freedoms. Or it means reducing the ways in which institutions treat citizens unequally. This differs from the standard-of-living definition, in that it looks at the characteristics that need to be addressed as relational and systemic characteristics, not simply aggregates of the wellbeing of the individual members of society. A society is better when it is more just or more free. Here we might find ourselves in a position of saying that "Society A is in a better position than society B, even though citizens of B have a higher level of material wellbeing than those in society A." Apartheid was a particularly egregious example of a systemic defect in a society, and it required fundamental structural change to improve the apartheid society. Current discussions of democratic institutions fall in this category; the idea is that institutional reforms can create new procedures that better embody the ideals of democracy.

Fourth, we might have in mind the important point that social institutions and practices

work in very specific ways and have differential effects on different groups of people in society. So we might have in mind the idea of improving the workings of the basic institutions of society -- improve their ***effectiveness and efficiency***, or improve their ***equity*** in terms of their effects on different groups. This is analogous to the goal of "making the air transport system better": we look at the goals the system serves and the practices and procedures through which it does this, and we try to design better procedures to accomplish the goals of the system. We might notice that the environmental regulations governing the siting of hazards tend to disfavor poor people, and we might try to make them more democratic. Or we might notice that land-use permitting processes are very cumbersome in many cities, thus discouraging new and productive uses of land, and we might try to change them in the direction of greater efficiency. Each effort could be described as "making society better."

Fifth, we might try to locate "social progress" entirely in terms of the wishes and preferences of the members of society. This is a liberal and democratic definition of social wellbeing: the wellbeing of society, and what counts as an improvement in social wellbeing, is entirely specified once we know what the citizens prefer. So on this approach we might say that "social progress" is entirely procedural: a set of changes represent progress just in case they were arrived at through a ***fair and equal process of collective decision making***.

An important issue that arises in thinking about social progress is the question of myopia and design. Think of the analogy with the evolution of species: natural selection is a myopic process in which each change is fitness-improving, but there is no longterm plan for what the species will eventually look like. Coming up with a better bicycle, on the other hand, is usually the result of a far-sighted design process, in which the architecture of the bicycle is reconceived so as to achieve certain design goals. The thing about a myopic process of improvement is that it is possible to get trapped in a local maximum, unable to take one step back in order to achieve a higher nearby equilibrium. (Richard Dawkins describes this possibility in Climbing Mount Improbable.)

So what about social progress: should we think of social improvement as the net result of many small, myopic reforms; or should we think about it ideally as the result of a comprehensive policy design process? To what extent are we in a situation of improvement resulting from a large number of small adjustments, versus the possibility of large designed reforms leading to discontinuous jumps in quality and equity? The constraints of democracy strongly suggest the former rather than the latter. Building legislative and democratic majorities for change seems to imply piecemeal reform and a degree of myopia. It is difficult to see how a comprehensive, multi-decade plan for social reform could be implemented and sustained. (Adam Przeworski considers some of these issues in Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America.) So piecemeal and gradual reform on several fronts may be the best we can do.

Generically the concept of reform fits into these ideas very tightly. Reforms are intended to improve the social situation in one way or another; and the cumulative effect of an extended series of reforms may be a significant enhancement in equity, democracy, equality, and quality of life. But two things are usually true: first, reforms are generally selective and partial; and second, the cumulative effects of an extended series of reforms may lead to outcomes that were never anticipated. A reform process is not a utopian process: it is generally not guided by a comprehensive vision of what the ideal society ought to look like, and the results of reform are generally pragmatic and limited rather

than sweeping and socially transformative.

(The image above is drawn from a manual on forestry management in Karnataka, India (link). It depicts a sequence of social systems of land use governing farm land, cattle husbandry, and forests. The middle panel represents degradation of the system and the worsening of the standard of living of the population; the final panel represents the improvement of the system of land use and a major step forward in the standard of living as a result of a major legal reform, confined cattle and protected regenerated forests.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:25PM (-04:00)

Marx's relevance as a social scientist

Saturday, June 12, 2010



What was Karl Marx's enduring contribution to the social sciences? Does he deserve the status of being one of the founders of sociology, along with Durkheim and Weber? Did he put forward substantive hypotheses about the workings of the modern world that continue to illuminate our social world? Is there anything important for sociologists, political scientists, or economists of the current generation to absorb from Marx as they construct their own hypotheses about social processes and organizations?

Below are the concluding paragraphs of my 1986 book, The Scientific Marx. Here I tried to assess whether the theories and frameworks that Marx advanced in *Capital* and his other scientific writings were of continuing relevance today. The question for me in 1986 was this: does Marx still have important scientific and theoretical insights into the structures, institutions, and behavior of modern capitalism? And I came to a tentative conclusion: that Marx's most important insights were about the institutions and mechanisms of capitalism (not a formal economic theory), and that these insights continue to have some validity and importance today. Here is the conclusion:

Throughout this work I have examined the logical features of Marx's social science, not its correctness as an analysis of capitalism. In discussing Marx's use of empirical evidence, for example, I have not been concerned to discover whether the available evidence confirms or falsifies Marx's account, but rather the logical question, namely, whether Marx uses evidence in such a way as to permit him to empirically evaluate his account. Thus my primary endeavor has been to examine Marx's practice as a scientist and to determine whether his efforts at explanation, inquiry, and justification are reasonable ones within social science. It may be appropriate in closing, however, to offer a view of the status of *Capital* as a body of theory about a social and economic system that continues to dominate our lives in the West. Is *Capital* still capable of offering scientific insights into the nature of twentieth-century capitalism?

There is a sense in which Marx's own views would make him suspicious of the claim that an investigation of the social relations of production of nineteenth-century capitalism should remain valid for the social system that emerges from that mode of production over

a century later. For Marx is insistent on the historical specificity of the relations that define any mode of production. He raises this point in connection with cross-modal judgments of timelessness (for example, the idea that precapitalist modes of production must "really" have been based on bourgeois exchange relations). But the point is equally valid in application to the development of a single mode of production over time. To the extent that the social relations of production that define twentieth-century capitalism are significantly different from those that defined nineteenth-century capitalism, Marx's analysis must be modified before it can offer relevant commentary on the present.

There are unmistakable differences between capitalist property relations in 1850 and in the mid-1980s. On the side of capital, at least these changes have occurred: the accelerated separation of ownership and management, the increasing role of finance and credit within capitalist enterprises, the creation of the modem multinational corporation as the basic unit of capital, and the increased involvement of the state in the affairs of capitalist enterprises. Changes have emerged on the side of labor power as well: increasing government regulation of work conditions, the shift from industrial to service employment, the creation of effective units of organized labor in all capitalist countries, the rise of mass-based socialist parties with proletarian support in Western Europe, and the emergence of much more extensive social welfare systems in all capitalist systems. All these factors potentially may influence the dynamics of modem capitalism, and they all were of only minor importance in the economic structure Marx investigated.

At the same time there are substantial continuities between nineteenth-century and twentieth-century capitalism. (It is these continuities that justify our identification of the modern American or Western European economies as "capitalist.") The fundamental requirements of capitalist property still exist, namely, the effective separation between a minority class that owns and controls the vast majority of all productive wealth and a majority class that possesses no productive wealth and is obliged to sell its labor power. Capitalism remains a system of class power and privilege -- witness the uninterrupted power and influence of the minority class that owns and directs the productive wealth in each capitalist nation. Capitalism remains a system in which class power and privilege derive from ownership of wealth -- witness the sharp inequalities of wealth and income that persist to the present day. Moreover capitalism continues to depend on the accumulation of capital, and it continues to reflect a deep conflict of interest between owners and workers in the productive process. Finally -- in Marx's technical meaning of the term -- capitalism remains an exploitative system: The social surplus is still expropriated from the class of immediate producers by the class of owner of productive wealth.

Given these important similarities and differences between the property relations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century capitalism, it becomes a problem of continuing research -- of the sort Marx provided so extensively in *Capital* -- to determine whether the fundamental dynamic of contemporary capitalism should be predicted to resemble that of nineteenth-century capitalism. Only detailed empirical and theoretical analysis will permit us to determine whether the continuities are sufficiently fundamental to offset the alterations introduced by changes in the social relations of property and class. For we have seen that Marx's arguments for the "laws of motion" of capitalism depend essentially on assumptions about the details of capitalist relations of production, and those relations have not remained fixed.

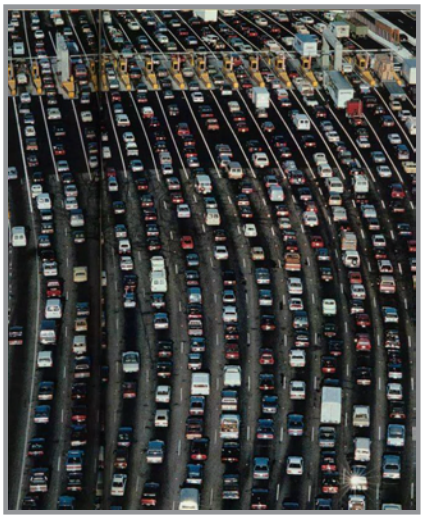
This finding suggests that the application of the findings of *Capital* to contemporary capitalism must be somewhat tentative; it is surely not possible to derive particular laws

of motion of contemporary capitalism from Marx's analysis alone. Rather, Marxist social scientists and political economists must provide the sort of detailed account of modem property relations and economic institutions that Marx provides for nineteenth-century relations and institutions. This is not to say that Marxist social science must begin de novo. The continuities between modern capitalism and nineteenth-century capitalism are crucial to understanding modem capitalist phenomena, and Marx's analysis of those basic features of capitalism remains profoundly illuminating. But it is necessary to supplement, modify, and extend his account to draw particular conclusions about the course of modem capitalism.

Significantly, contemporary Marxist social science conforms to this view of the relevance of *Capital* today. Thus Marxist political economists have put forward detailed studies of modem capitalist relations of production--e.g. Ernest Mandel's Late Capitalism and James O'Connor's The Fiscal Crisis of the State. Other Marxist social scientists have offered analyses of particular post-capitalist modes of production -- Rudolph Bahro's The Alternative in Eastern Europe or Donald Hodges's The Bureaucratization of Socialism, to name two. And Marxist political sociologists have refined and extended his treatment of class, property, and politics, for instance, Erik Olin Wright's Class Crisis & the State and Ralph Miliband's The State in Capitalist Society. What these works have in common is not pious deference to Marx's texts -- in *Capital* or elsewhere. Rather, they are unified in being vigorous attempts, using extensive contemporary data, to offer theoretical accounts of modem social institutions within a framework of analysis that is greatly indebted to Marx's treatment of capitalism. Contemporary Marxist social science is rooted in Marx's insights, but it is not confined to his conclusions or to the particular features he singled out for fine-grained analysis. Thus Marx's *Capital* established a research program for twentieth-century social science, and it is a program that has borne fine fruit indeed.
So how does Marx hold up in the first decade of the twenty-first century? And how does this assessment of my own, written almost twenty-five years ago, hold up as well?
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:09PM (-04:00)

Michigan's population loss

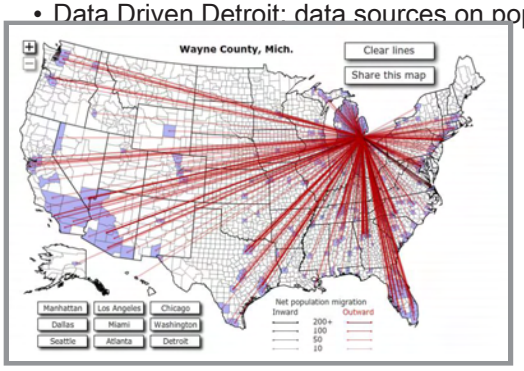
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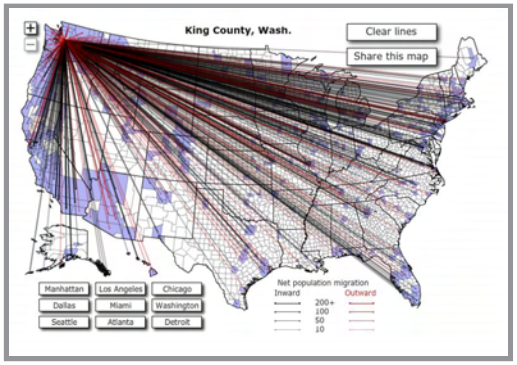


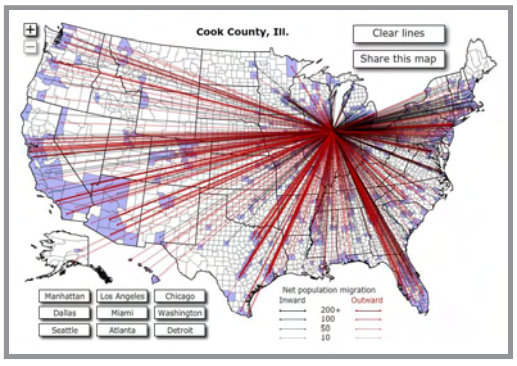
Earlier posts have raised the possibility that Michigan's jobs crisis will lead to significant population loss (link, link, link). The basic idea is this: Michigan has lost more than 800,000 jobs since 2002. Its population in 2002 was about 10 million. The current unemployment rate in the state is about 15%, or just under. In order to bring the unemployment rate back to the 2002 levels (~6%), roughly 800,000 jobs need to be created; or else the working population needs to decline by about that much. Assuming one dependent for each worker, that amounts to a loss of about 1.6 million people. Other combinations are possible; create 400,000 jobs and only 800,000 Michigan residents would leave; etc.

So what is the situation of out-migration today? Here are some recent reports over the past twelve months:

- Detroit News 4/2009: Eight-year population exodus staggers state (link)
- AnnArbor.com: 89,844 residents lost 2005-2008 link
- CrainsDetroit 12/23/09: population falls below 10 million; low birthrate and high out-migration responsible link
- Michigan State University report on population loss 12/09 link
- Toledo Blade: Michigan is tops in 1-year population loss 12/09 link
- Detroit Free Press: Rochelle Riley, City's rebirth at risk over lack of births link
- Data Driven Detroit: data sources on population in Detroit link







And where are Detroit metro families going? Here is a map Forbes published (link) showing the destinations in 2008:

Notice that almost all the lines are red, indicating out-migration. Compare that with the pattern of migration for Seattle:

And Chicago:

In other words, a significant amount of out-migration has already occurred in Michigan, and there is no indication that this process will slow down.

In fact, some observers have argued that Michigan's population losses have been less than expected in the past 18 months because of the generally bad economic conditions in other parts of the country (and because of the difficulty of selling a house). But if this is a factor, then we should expect an increase in out-migration when job creation takes hold in other parts of the country.

There is another worrisome part of this story: the fact that the best-educated and most talented people are likely to be the first to go. They are nationally competitive with skills that can bring value to employers in other parts of the country; so population loss is likely enough to be talent-drain as well.

It is hard to find any political or business leader in the state of Michigan who believes that it is possible to create 100,000 new jobs a year in the state over a prolonged period. This seems to imply chronic high unemployment in the state for a very long time, with all the features of poverty, poor health, and low quality of life that comes along with this scenario.

So is there a different possible future for Michigan that assumes a different paradigm: a smaller population; smaller cities; but a more robust and diverse economy and a higher overall standard of living? Is it time, perhaps, to be planning for a smaller but more

prosperous and healthy state?

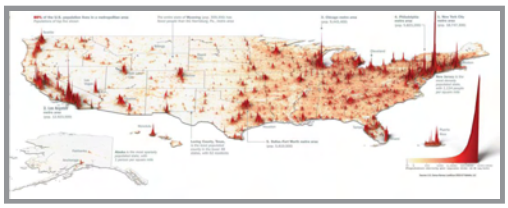
There are many serious challenges that this transformation would create. A declining population implies a declining tax base; so state and municipal revenues would decline as well. School systems were built for a certain level of capacity; take 15-25% of the children out of a school system and you have a funding crisis in the schools as well. Detroit's Mayor Dave Bing is grappling with the need to consolidate the land area of the population served by the city of Detroit, in order to achieve a balance between resources and needs. And, of course, the state would continue to lose representation in the House of Representatives. So designing a strategy for "smaller, healthier, wealthier" is not simple. But it may be time to begin thinking along these lines.

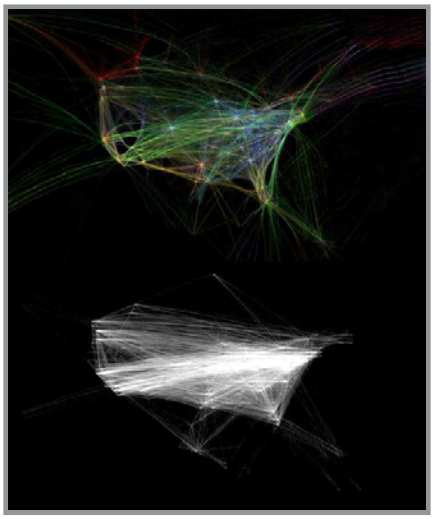
UPDATE December 28, 2010

The results of the 2010 census are now available, and Michigan is the only state in the country to have lost population since 2000. The country as a whole gained 9.6%, whereas Michigan lost .6% of its population -- roughly 60,000 people. Here is a news article from AP (link).
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:58PM (-04:00)

Spatial patterns in the US

Tuesday, June 15, 2010





Here are four interesting graphics representing different kinds of activity in the United States. The top panel represents population concentrations across the United State. The second image is air traffic across the country, and the third image is internet traffic across the country. The final image is a photograph of the United States from space at night, showing the concentration of lights across the country. Basically the images correspond to where people live; where they travel; and where they exchange data. Unsurprisingly, the maps line up very well. The most interesting question to consider is **not** the structure of the networks represented by air travel and internet activity. The nodes of both air travel and internet traffic line up exactly with the cities and metropolitan areas represented in the population map, and they align well with the concentration of lighted areas in the bottom frame as well. The patterns of both air travel and internet traffic take the form of a swath extending from the dense eastern corridor of the US (Boston to Washington) to California (San Francisco to San Diego), with Chicago standing out as a significant node in the middle of the country. This is entirely obvious and predictable; travel and communication follow population density.

Rather, the more interesting question is this: to what extent is there evidence of internet



and air traffic at a node that is **disproportionately greater** than would be expected given the population of that node? This is the kind of question that drives Saskia Sassen's classification of cities as local, regional, national, and global (The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo and Global Networks, Linked Cities). (Here is an earlier post on Sassen's work.)

Fundamentally, a city that originates 10 times the volume of internet traffic compared to other cities of similar size is worth looking at in detail. Its activity level suggest an exceptional concentration of organizations and people that are unusually integrated into global networks of communication and data exchange. It is a location for knowledge-intensive activity: high-end services, banking, universities; and it is a place with intensive relations to other nodes. Likewise, a city that originates 5 times as many air-travel passengers as comparably sized cities elsewhere is likely to be a specialized location for business and high-end service activity (or else a population of very dedicated tourists). In other words, the most interesting feature that these data sets might show us about the economic roles of US cities is not visible in the graphics presented here.

So it would be very interesting to be able to "divide" the activity levels represented by the middle two graphs by the populations represented by the top graph, so we could see which cities in the US are "super data exchangers" and "super travel generators". And this would give us an indication of the degree of high-end, knowledge-intensive activity that is concentrated in the place -- thereby providing a measure of its importance in the national and global economy. It is possible, for example, that Ann Arbor or Madison would show up as spikes of internet activity relative to their relatively small populations; and Raleigh-Durham might show up as a spike of air travel relative to population, reflecting an unusual concentration of high-end service businesses in this region. The above-average data and air-traffic nodes are perhaps the dynamic centers of 21st-century economic activity.

Likewise, it would be interesting to identify the cities that have lower-than-expected levels of travel or internet activity; this would suggest local economies that are somewhat more self-contained and less integrated into the national economy than other locations. And it would be interesting to see if there are significant pairings among locations for either kind of transaction; for example, is the volume of data exchange between Los Angeles and New York significantly greater than that between New York and Chicago or Boston? And would this serve as an indicator of the degree of economic and business integration between these specific locations?
These views of the United States are interesting because they allow us to see the country as an inter-connected system of places and activities. They serve as something like a dynamic CT scan of the brain: certain connections between places "light up", providing an indication of systemic activities that warrant further investigation.

(The middle panel was published in the Harvard Alumni Magazine (link). The population map comes from Urbanomnibus (link).)
Posted by Daniel Little at 06:50AM (-04:00)

More on jobs and people in Michigan

Thursday, June 17, 2010

Olivier Blanchard and Lawrence Katz did an important empirical study of regional adjustment to employment shock in 1992 (link). Here is their central conclusion:

"We have shown that most of the adjustment of states to shocks is through movements of labor, rather than through job creation or job migration." (54)

In other words, they find that the US labor market is fairly well integrated, and an extended period of unemployment and low wages leads workers to seek new opportunities in other regions. (Here is a recent book by Katz and a collaborator; The Race between Education and Technology.)

What implications does this have for Michigan? Let's say that Michigan's unemployment rate will adjust to approximately the national rate by 2020, and that the national rate will recover to 6% by then. This implies 6% unemployment for Michigan, compared to 14% today. Let's assume that less than half of the recovery comes from new and imported jobs. What does this imply for out-migration and population loss for the state?

The arithmetic is straightforward. There are currently about 4.2 million jobs in Michigan and 681,000 unemployed workers, for a labor force of about 4.9 million. (Here is a page of data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for Michigan; link.) What would it take to bring Michigan's unemployment rate down to 6% by 2020? Here is one solution: 150,000 new jobs and 250,000 out-migrants from the labor force. And assuming that each worker has one dependent on average, this means a loss of about 500,000 people from Michigan's current population of about 9.9 million--for a total population of 9.4 million in ten years.

This is a significant but not overwhelming loss of population -- about 5%. And the number of jobs required on this scenario is moderate and achievable -- 150,000 new jobs in ten years. This amounts to about 4% jobs growth per year. We can make some educated guesses about the demographics of the population that leaves the state -- they are likely to be young, they are likely to have children, and they are likely to be better educated than the general population. So the economic and social impact of this exodus is likely to be greater than their 5% share of the general population. But all of that conceded, it would appear that there is a reasonably achievable pathway for Michigan to dig itself out of its current crisis.

So let's get serious about preparing the ground for a healthy recovery; let's enhance K-12 education, extend the reach of university attainment, improve the quality of life in our cities, and get serious about redesigning our state's fiscal system.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:37PM (-04:00)

Short thoughts from Clifford Geertz

Saturday, June 19, 2010

Clifford Geertz was a frequent contributor to the New York Review of Books, and he succeeded remarkably well in bridging the gap between the university and the public in many of his "postings." (I think of these contributions as a pre-web version of a blog.) Many of these contributions are collected in a superb recent volume, Life among the



Anthros and Other Essays, edited by Fred Inglis. These range from his first contribution to NYRB in 1967, "Under the Mosquito Net," on Malinowski, to his last in 2005, "Very Bad News," a review of Jared Diamond, Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed and Richard Posner, Catastrophe: Risk and Response. A common theme across the essays is the often surprising and sometimes comic misunderstandings that have occurred across major geo-cultural cleavages, including especially the west and Islam.

Geertz had a splendid eye for making sense of ideas and meanings -- pulling out the figure from the ground. Here are a few lines on the significance of Foucault:

Foucault's leading ideas are not in themselves all that complex; just unusually difficult to render plausible. The most prominent of them, and the one for which he has drawn the most attention, is that history is not a continuity, one thing growing organically out of the last and into the next, like the chapters in some nineteenth-century romance. It is a series of radical discontinuities, ruptures, breaks, each of which involves a wholly novel mutation in the possibilities for human observation, thought, and action.... Under whatever label, they are to be dealt with "archaeologically," That is, they are first to be characterized acording to the rules determining what kinds of perception and experience can exist within their limits, what can be seen, said, performed, and thought in the conceptual domain they define. That done, they are then to be put into a pure series, a genealogical sequence in which what is shown is not how one has given causal rise to another but how one has formed itself in the space left vacant by another, ultimately covering it over with new realities. The past is not prologue, like the discrete strata of Schliemann's site, it is a mere succession of buried presents. ("Stir Crazy," 1978, 30)
This is a very concise, insightful statement of Foucault's position, and certainly more understandable than any particular stretch of The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language.

Or consider a key and enduring topic for Geertz: the difficulties that intrude on gaining a single, consistent, and fact-based representation of another culture. "In Search of North Africa" was published in NYRB in 1971, and poses many of the questions of plural interpretation and perspective that are hallmarks of Geertz's own meta-view of ethnography.
Academic monographs, social realism documentaries, and belletristic essays compete to develop a representational form in which Maghrebi society can be caught and communicated. The first result of the dawning realization that though society doubtless exists independently of the activity of sociologists, sociology does not, is a proliferation of genres. The second, still so faint as to be scarcely visible, is the development of the sort of radically experimental attitude toward modes of representation that set in so much earlier elsewhere in modern culture. (62)
Here Geertz raises the questions of objectivity and perspective that are unavoidable in the human sciences. "The document makers [of films and books] are, if anything, even more bound to the notion that social reality is presented to them directly and that the main thing is to look at it with sufficient care and the appropriate attitude." But, Geertz suggests, the relationships between social reality, representation, and knowledge are more complicated than this.

Here is one reason why the simplistic realism of the documentarian won't work:

North Africa doesn't even divide into institutions. The reason Maghrebi society is so hard to get into focus and keep there is that it is a vast collection of coteries. It is not blocked out into large, well-orgaized, permanent groupings -- parties, classes, tribes, races -- engaged in a long-term struggle for ascendancy. It is not dominated by tightly knit bureaucracies concentrating and managing social power; not driven by grand ideological movements seeking to transform the rules of the game; not immobilized by a hardened cake of custom locking men into fixed systems of rights and duties. (63)

Or, in other words, the business of choosing a conceptual scheme and then applying it objectively to Maghrebi society is doomed from the start; the social activities, groupings, and transactions themselves are fluid and ever-changing. "Structure after structure -- family, village, clan, class, sect, army, party, elite, state -- turns out, when more narrowly looked at, to be an ad hoc constellation of miniature systems of power, a cloud of unstable micro-politics, which compete, ally, gather strength, and, very soon, overextended, fragment again" (63). (This perspective converges closely with the ideas offered in the plasticity and heterogeneity threads here.)

And what about catastrophe? Geertz takes up Jared Diamond and Richard Posner in one of his last contributions to NYRB in 2005. Geertz acknowledges the bad news all around us, when it comes to the ways in which human society seems to be capable of destroying itself through its own activities. But he has a bone to pick with both of them: they really don't get down into the sociology, the psychology, and the cultural frames of the people who make up our modern societies. And yet these contextual, local details matter enormously in how a group responds to catastrophe. Here is Geertz's critique of both Diamond and Posner:

What is most striking about both Diamond's and Posner's views of human behavior is how sociologically think and how lacking in psychological depth they are. Neither the one, who seems to regard societies as collective persons, minded super-beings intending, deciding, acting, choosing, nor the other, for whom there are only goal-seeking individuals, perceiving and calculating rational actors not always rational, has very much to say about the social and cultural contexts in which their disasters unfold. Either heedless and profligate populations "blunder" or "stumble" their way into self-destruction or strategizing utility maximizers fail to appreciate the true dimensions of the problems they face. What happens to them happens in locales and settings, not in culturally and politically configurated life-worlds--singular situations, immediate occasions, particular circumstances. But it is within such life-worlds, situations, occasions, circumstances, that calamity, when it occurs, takes intelligible shape, and it is that shape that determines both the response to it and the effects that it has. (165)

In a word, Geertz puts it forward that even our largest concerns about our social futures require the kind of detailed, meaning-inflected and locally specific understandings that a certain kind of ethnographic imagination brings forward. We need "local knowledge" to navigate a global future.

This volume is a great example of the role that a certain kind of publishing can play in our intellectual lives: capturing and refreshing the insights of thinkers and observers over a period of decades. Geertz's ideas in this volume were the product of his evolving mind from the sixties to the end of his life; and it is enormously stimulating to keep that long evolution in front of our minds as we grapple with our own issues and innovations. We tend to think only of the most recent ideas and contributions as "cutting edge"; but there is a hugely important dimension of historical depth that we can discover by returning to the insights of earlier generations.

(See an earlier post on Robert Darnton that illustrates another important intellectual corpus laid out in the pages of decades of the NYRB. The image above is, of course, a photo of a Balinese cockfight, one of Geertz's ethnographic icons.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:35PM (-04:00)

Concrete sociological knowledge

Monday, June 21, 2010



Is there a place within the social sciences for the representation of concrete, individual-level experience? Is there a valid kind of knowledge expressed by the descriptions provided by an observant resident of a specific city or an experienced traveler in the American South in the 1940s? Or does social knowledge need to take the form of some kind of generalization about the social world? Does sociology require that we go beyond the particulars of specific people and social arrangements?

There is certainly a genre of social observation that serves just this intimate descriptive function: an astute, empathetic observer spends time in a location, meeting a number of people and learning a lot about their lives and thoughts. Studs Terkel's work defines this genre -- both in print and in his radio interviews over so many years. A particularly good example is Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do. But Studs is a journalist and a professional observer; does he really contribute to "sociological knowledge"? (See this earlier post on Studs.)

Perhaps a better example of "concrete, individual-level experience" for sociology can be drawn closer to home, in Erving Goffman's work. (Here is an earlier discussion of some of Goffman's work; link.) Here are the opening words of The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1956):

I mean this report to serve as a sort of handbook detailing one sociological perspective from which social life can be studied, especially the kind of social life that is organised within the physical confines of a building or plant. A set of features will be described which together form a framework that can be applied to any concrete social establishment, be it domestic, industrial, or commercial.

The perspective employed in this report is that of the theatrical performance; the principles derived are dramaturgical ones. I shall consider the way in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them. In using this model I will attempt not to make light of its obvious inadequacies. The stage presents things that are make-believe; presumably life presents things that are real and sometimes not well rehearsed. More important, perhaps, on the stage one player presents himself in the guise of a character to characters projected by other players; the audience constitutes a third party to the interaction -- one that is essential and yet, if the stage performance were real, one that would not be there. In real life, the three parties are compressed into two; the part one individual plays is tailored to the parts played by the others present, and yet these others also constitute the audience. Still other inadequacies in this model will be considered later.

The illustrative materials used in this study are of mixed status: some are taken from respectable researches where qualified generalisations are given concerning reliably recorded regularities; some are taken from informal memoirs written by colourful people; many fall in between. The justification for this approach (as I take to be the justification for Simmel's also) is that the illustrations together fit into a coherent framework that ties together bits of experience the reader has already had and provides the student with a guide worth testing in case studies of institutional social life. (preface)

Goffman's text throughout this book relies on numerous specific descriptions of the behavior of real estate agents, dentists, military officers, servants, and medical doctors in concrete and particular social settings. Here are a few examples:

[funerals] Similarly, at middle-class American funerals, a hearse driver, decorously dressd in black and tactfully located at the outskirts of the cemetery during the service, may be allowed to smoke, but he is likely to shock and anger the bereaved if he happens to flick his cigarette stub into a bush, letting it describe an elegant arc, instead of circumspectly dropping it at his feet. (35)

[formal dinners] Thus if a household is to stage a formal dinner, someone in uniform or livery will be required as part of the working team. The individual who plays this part must direct at himself the social definition of a menial. At the same time the individual taking the part of hostess must direct at herself, and foster by her appearance and manner, the social definition of someone upon whom it is natural for menials to wait. This was strikingly demonstrated in the island tourist hotel studied by the writer. There an overall impression of middle-class service was achieved by the management, who allocated to themselves the roles of middle-class host and hostess and to their employees that of maids -- although in terms of the local class structure the girls who acted as maids were of slightly higher status than the hotel owners who employed them. (47-48)

[hospitals] Thus, if doctors are to prevent cancer patients from learning the identity of their disease, it will be useful to scatter the cancer patients throughout the hospital so that they will not be able to learn from the identity of their ward the identity of their disorder. (The hospital staff, incidentally, may be forced to spend more time walking corridors and moving equipment because of this staging strategy than would otherwise be necessary.) (59)

[hotel kitchens] The study of the island hotel previously cited provides another example of the problems workers face when they have insufficient control of their backstage. Within the hotel kitchen, where the guests' food was prepared and where the staff ate and spent their day, crofters' culture tended to prevail, involving a characteristic pattern of clothing, food habits, table manners, language, employer-employee relations, cleanliness standards, etc. This culture was felt to be different from, and lower in esteem than, British middle-class culture, which tended to prevail in the dining room and other places in the hotel. The doors leading from the kitchen to the other parts of the hotel were a constant sore spot in the organization of work. (72)

So Goffman's sociology in this work is heavily dependent on the kind of concrete social observation and description that is at issue here. Much of the interest of the book is the precision and deftness through which Goffman dissects and describes these concrete instances of social interaction. This supports one answer to the question with which we began: careful, exacting and perceptive description of particular social phenomena is an important and epistemically valid form of sociological knowledge. Studs Terkel contributes to our knowledge of the social world when he accurately captures the voice of

the miner, the hotel worker, or the taxi driver; and a very important part of this contribution is the discovery of the singular and variable features of these voices.

At the same time, it is clear that Goffman goes beyond the concrete descriptions of restaurants, medical offices, and factory floors that he offers to formulate and support a more general theory of social behavior: that individuals convey themselves through social roles that are prescribed for various social settings, and that much social behavior is performance. (This performative interpretation of social action is discussed in an earlier post.) And this suggests that there is a further implicature within our understanding of the goals of sociological knowledge: the idea that concrete descriptions should potentially lead to some sort of generalization, contrast, or causal interpretation.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:50PM (-04:00)

Truth and reconciliation commissions

Thursday, June 24, 2010



When does a society need a process of "truth and reconciliation" along the lines of such processes in South Africa, El Salvador, and Argentina? Here are some recent examples of truth and reconciliation processes: the fate of the "disappeared" in Argentina (link); Indian Residential Schools in Canada (link); Korean War civilian casualties (link); Liberian civil conflict (link); lynchings in the US South (link); and, of course, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (link).

The general theory of TRC is that a society is sometimes grievously divided over events and crimes that have occurred in the past, and that honest recognition of those crimes may lay a foundation for reconciliation within the society. Here is a summary statement of the purpose of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission from the South African Ministry of Justice:

... a commission is a necessary exercise to enable South Africans to come to terms with their past on a morally accepted basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation.
But what more can we say about what facts might trigger the need for a TRC process?

First, such a process is only invoked when there is a serious history of injustice within the community, leading to a situation in which one group has been badly treated by other groups or powerful institutions. The stakes need to be high for current members of society in order to justify establishing a TRC.

Second, a TRC process seems to be most needed when the consequences of the past injustice persist into the present: the bad things that happened in the past continue to burden some groups in the present.

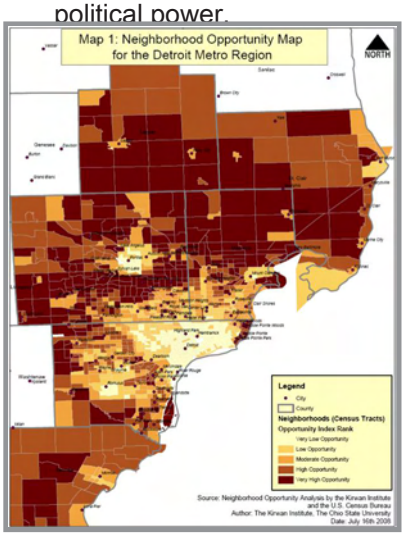
Third, there is an implication of abiding resentment and rancor within the current population. The injustice of the past continues to be a source of emotional division between members of the relevant groups. This is the reconciliation part of the agenda: by honestly confronting the facts about the past injustices, the groups subject to this

treatment may be in a better place to resolve their rancor. And more practically, honest recognition of the past may lead to concrete steps in the present to restore the interests and rights of affected groups.

Fourth, there is a common feature of violence and subjugation in the instances where TRC processes have been invoked to date: pogroms, mass killings, lynchings, and other forms of inter-group violence.

So what are some important examples of historical circumstances where TRC is called for? There are many:

- The expatriation of French Jews by the French government into the hands of the Nazis, leading to the deaths of thousands of people from this community.
- The Rwandan genocide.
- The Argentine military's policy of "disappearing" large numbers of its opponents, involving secret imprisonment, torture, and murder.
- White violence against black people in the American South, enforcing white power through lynchings, shootings, and violent intimidation.
- Organized ethnic cleansing and mass murder in Croatia, Bosnia, and Slovenia.
- The fact of slavery as practiced in the United States through Emancipation.
- The crimes of death squads in El Salvador in the 1980s, including a degree of US support and involvement.
- Robert Mugabe's use of ZANU-PF paramilitary thugs in Zimbabwe to maintain his political power.



Here is the immediate question of interest in this posting: how do the facts of northern race relations fit into the parameters of truth and reconciliation? In the Detroit area the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion is calling for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to honestly examine the history of race and residence in the region (link). The Roundtable states that --

The establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, inspired by the process that took place in South Africa, will allow us to develop an appropriate understanding of past injustices and to envision constructive remedies to create a new regional culture of fairness, equal opportunity and prosperity.

(Here is a link to the Facebook page for the organization in which the initiative is launched.)

So let's ask the crucial question: are the patterns of racial segregation and inequality of opportunity that are unmistakably involved in most US large cities an appropriate cause for a process of truth and reconciliation?

In many ways the answer appears to be "yes." Urban segregation was and is a source of massive injustice for black Americans. It embodied a quasi-permanent pattern of inequality of opportunity and outcome on African-American citizens. It was the result of specific but often hidden social practices that embodied a pattern of white privilege. And these practices sometimes involved actual and threatened violence. So entrenched discrimination and segregation constitute social harms that meet most of the criteria

mentioned above, and the truth about the underlying mechanisms is not widely known.

In short, most honest observers would probably agree that the history of racial segregation in Southeast Michigan reflects serious injustice and continues to inflict harms on people in the region today. These harms include disproportionate levels of poverty, unemployment, inadequate education, and differential health outcomes. And many would agree as well that social injustices of this magnitude need to be addressed openly and honestly.

The map of the Detroit metropolitan area below represents a measure of "neighborhood opportunity" across the region. It is published in an important report, "Opportunity for All," by john a. powell and the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University (link). What it documents in a very visual way is the current effects of past and present practices of residential segregation: the areas of high African-American population line up very precisely with the areas of low "neighborhood opportunity". (Here is a keynote address by john a. powell to the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion (link) that lays out the data in great detail.)

So a sustained and honest effort to uncover and disseminate the historical causes of these patterns of racial segregation in the region is a positive step forward.

What is perhaps more difficult to answer is the question of efficacy. Do these TRC processes actually work? Do they succeed in changing attitudes in the populations in which they operate? Do they help communities develop more harmonious and collaborative approaches to the problems they face? And does "truth" lead to "reconciliation" in a significant number of cases? The Michigan Roundtable conducted a survey of racial attitudes in Michigan in 2009, and one question in particular stands out. In 2009 56% of residents said that we will have racial equality "in 100 years" or "never," compared to 48% in 2008. In other words, well over half of all Michigan citizens despair of achieving racial equality within five generations. And 68% of African American citizens in Michigan expressed the same lack of hope. We need to do better than this at achieving real racial equality; the question is, whether the proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission can help us move forward in practical and effective ways.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:54PM (-04:00)

Public intellectuals in France and the US

Saturday, June 26, 2010

What is the role of the intellectual in France in 2010? And has that role declined in the past several decades? Have the media and the internet profoundly eroded or devalued the voice of the intellectual in public space? The *Nouvel Observateur* takes up these questions in a recent issue devoted to "Le pouvoir intellectuel" (link).

The line of thought is a complicated one. Jacques Julliard frames the question by proposing that the public imagination of the intellectual involves a narrative of precipitous decline since the active engagements of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus. There was a conception of the engaged intellectual who brought his/her ideas and convictions into opposition when state and society were going wrong -- Algeria, Vietnam, capitalism. And, Julliard suggests, the common view is that the current generation of intellectuals have not succeeded -- perhaps have not even attempted -- at bringing theory, critique, and value into the public sphere. Jean Daniel captures the idea in his editorial: "*Faut-il rire des*



'intellos'?"

But -- here is the complexity -- Julliard refutes this idea. The tradition of the public intellectual is ***not*** attenuated or corrupted in France; rather, the current generation of intellectuals are in fact engaged and involved. It is nostalgia for a golden age -- the age of Liberation, Communism, and Existentialism -- that foreshortens the reputation of the intellectual today. But the golden age is a myth.

Tout cela est faux, archifaux, et prouve seulement que Saint-Sulpice n'est séparé de Saint-Germain que par quelques enjambées et par la piété du souvenir. Et revenons aux faits. [All this is false, badly false, and only proves that Saint-Sulpice is only separated from Saint-Germain by a few steps and the piety of memory. Let us return to the facts.]

Julliard points out five salient facts. **First**, we sometimes confuse the intellectual and the literary artist. The artist is valued for the aesthetic quality of his/her works, whereas the intellectual is valued for the significance of the impact of his/her ideas. **Second**, the impact of Sartre and Camus on France's wars in Algeria or Vietnam was minimal, and later generations of French intellectuals have actually exercised greater influence. In fact, Julliard argues that Lévy, Glucksmann, and Finkielkraut were more effective in their own interventions about policy in Bosnia than Sartre or Camus on the colonial wars. **Third**, Julliard argues that modern media, including the blogosphere, have provided the contemporary intellectual with a much more powerful platform for disseminating ideas and values than was available to Zola, Sartre, or Camus. He cites debates on the Israel-Palestine conflict, global warming, immigration, European governance, and even philosophy and literature, as locations of debate where modern media have amplified the voices of intellectuals. **Fourth**, there is the question of designation: who decides who the "intellectuals" are? The media select their talking heads; what confidence can the public have that these are the best voices available? Julliard even suggests that there has been an inversion of quality; the telegenic pundit acquires reputation as a savant, rather than the savant being sought out as a pundit. And **fifth**, there was a tendency of the "engaged" philosophers of the generation of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Camus, to be engaged in service to a cause -- Communism, most commonly. So the positions offered by these intellectuals were often enough not "intellectual" at all; they did not follow from the principles, ideas, and methods of the thinker, but rather derived from the position of a party or camp. Today's intellectuals, Julliard suggests, are interested in ideas rather than ideologies. And with this commitment they have returned to the real vocation of the intellectual:

En rompant avec l'idéologie abstraite au profit de l'universel concret, les intellectuels, du moins les plus novateurs d'entre eux, sont revenus à leur fonction essentielle : la critique sociale, et d'abord la critique de leur propre pratique. [Dispensing with abstract ideology, today's intellectuals have returned to their essential function: social criticism, and especially criticism of their own practice.]

So Julliard's telling of the story expresses several key points: France needs public intellectuals; there are several overlapping generations of thinkers who are filling this role (and more to come); and in fact, the decline of ideology and the rise of media and the Internet makes the voices of intellectuals more effective rather than less. In his editorial in this issue Jean Daniel reaches a similar conclusion: "*En un mot: depuis que nous n'avons*

plus confinace dans des idéologies, nous avons un frénétique besoin des idées. C'est-a-dire des intellectuels." [In a word: since we no longer have confidence in ideologies, we have urgent need of ideas; which is to say, intellectuals.]
In continuing the theme, *Nouvel Obs* returns to the debate of 1980 by talking again with several of the young intellectuals it consulted in that year. Pascal Bruckner, Luc Ferry, and Gilles Lipovetsky offer their perspectives on the role of ideas and intellectuals in French society from the vantage point of 2010 (link). And there is a challenging interview-discussion with Alain Badiou and Alain Finkielkraut on communism (link). So *Nouvel Obs* is doing its part -- it is helping to bring to the fore debates and thinkers who can help France navigate into the twenty-first century.

There is one form of practical proof of the importance of intellectuals in contemporary France that is not so visible from the United States: the depth and pervasiveness of the presence of deeply thoughtful scholars and writers on French radio and television. For a taste of the breadth and depth of the voices of intellectuals in French society today, consult the list of podcasts made available from radio programming at *France Culture* (link). Particularly rich are *Les nouveaux chemins de la connaissance* (link) and *Repliques* (link). These programs exemplify serious voices, serious debates, and nuanced and extensive discussions.

In the United States it seems that the whole issue of the public intellectual plays out differently than in France. To begin -- the great majority of the "public" have virtually no interest in or respect for academic discussions of issues. Fox News, talk radio, and blistering political blogs fill that space.

Second, however, there is a subset of the American public that does have an appetite for more detailed and nuanced treatment of the issues that face us. Slate.com has between 5 and 8 million unique readers a month; the Huffington Post logged about 10 million visitors in December, 2009; and NationalReview.com logs about 4.5 million readers a month. The Facebook page for "Give me some serious discussion and debate about crucial issues!" could be huge.

Looking at the question from another angle -- the academic world in the United States is itself a meaningful segment of the workforce. There are about 1.5 million post-secondary teachers (professors and lecturers) in the United States, and the majority of these have doctoral degrees. Of these, a smaller number fall into traditional "intellectual" disciplines: English literature (74,800), Foreign literature (32,100), History (26,000), Philosophy and Religion (25,100), and Sociology (20,300), for a total of 178,300. In engineering, mathematics, and the sciences there are another 262,600 post-secondary teachers. (These data come from a Bureau of Labor Statistics snapshot for 2008 (link).) So a small but meaningful proportion of the US population have advanced degrees and intellectual credentials. They are a core segment of the audience for public intellectuals. And, of course, you don't have to be an academic to be an intellectual.

Further, there are a host of specialists and experts on specific crises -- environment, finance, globalization, war -- who are called upon to comment on specific issues, and there are specialized "think tanks" that promote and disseminate research on critical public issues. Moreover, voices like that of Bill Moyers have offered critical and nuanced perspectives on public television (link) (regrettably, now off the air). And the United States has a number of prominent academics who speak to a broad public -- Henry Louis Gates, Jeffrey Sachs, Martha Nussbaum, Cornel West, Michael Walzer, and James Gustave Speth, to name a few. So there is a domain of intellectual discourse that succeeds in

escaping the confines of the academic world and the limiting echo-chamber of cable television; this domain helps to create and feed an intellectual public.

Overall, it seems fair to say that public intellectuals have little influence on public opinion and public policy in the US today. Perhaps Richard Hofstadter's Anti-Intellectualism in American Life (1963) still has a lot of validity. But maybe, just maybe, it is also possible that the Internet is beginning to offer a bigger footprint for serious analysis and criticism for the American public and American policy makers. Perhaps there is a broadening opportunity for intellectuals to help define the future for the United States and its role in the world. And perhaps we can be more like France in this important dimension.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:18PM (-04:00)

The Chinese-American Left in the early 20th century

Thursday, July 01, 2010



There hasn't been much historical scholarship on the forms of political activism that existed within the Chinese-American communities in the US in the early part of the twentieth century. Historical research on the Chinese-American community has more often focused on poverty, discrimination, employment, immigration law, and racism. A very important exception to this is the life-long research of Him Mark Lai, collected in a fascinating recent book (Chinese American Transnational Politics, edited by Madeline Hsu). And, as Lai demonstrates, it is a fascinating and important story.

Lai was an independent scholar who devoted a lifetime to historical and archival research on the history of the Chinese communities in the United States. He was trained as an engineer and had a career as a mechanical engineer for Bechtel in San Francisco. But what he really cared about was history. And he became a founding pioneer in the field of Chinese-American studies. Here are several links to biographies and archives of Lai's contributions (link, link). Here is how Lai frames his analysis of the Chinese-American Left:

The different Chinese left movements from the later nineteenth through the greater part of the twentieth century were offshoots of important political and social movements of the West. Probably because the Chinese population constituted only a small minority in the United States, little scholarly attention has focused on the historical development of these movements among them. This essay strives to piece together information scattered among many publications and oral sources to reconstruct this history and the varying roles of the individuals involved. This essay emphasizes activities concerning Chinese people in America rather than interpreting the inner workings, conflicts, or ideological leanings of global left movements.

Two factors stimulated the emergence and rise of left-wing activities among Chinese in America: the desire to improve their status in America, where they faced exploitation and racial oppression, and the hope of modernizing China into an internationally respected nation. (53)

The topic of interest here is the political identities that began to emerge within Chinese-American communities in the 1920s and 1930s. This is interesting for several reasons: the fact of an indigenous left in the US during these decades, which poses the questions of influence and alliance within the American left and radical working class movement; and the fact of rapid political development for reform and revolution in China itself, which raises the question of influence of Chinese radical thought on American Chinese intellectuals and activists. Lai documents the appearance of anarchist, socialist, and communist thought in leaders and intellectuals in leading Chinese-American communities, and he attempts to tease out the intellectual and political influences that created this efflorescence of the Chinese left in the US. (Here is an interesting link to short texts referring to Chinese anarchists in the United States in the 1920s.)

One potential influence that conspicuously did **not** occur was deliberate recruitment of Chinese people by left labor organizations in the US. "Even the Socialist Party, despite its emphasis on the common interests of the proletariat regardless of race or nationality, was hostile toward Chinese labor" (53). Only the IWW was able to genuinely embrace the anti-racist principles of the theory of socialism; only the Wobblies made determined efforts to organize and mobilize exploited Chinese workers in the US.

A key influence on Chinese-American activists was the impact that had been created in China by exposure to socialist and anarchist critiques of modern society.

During this period, Chinese Marxists and anarchists were chiefly intellectuals and students who had gone abroad to study and become politically active reformers and revolutionaries. Through Japanese and European writings, they learned about the ideas of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Marx, Engels, and others. Many articles touching on these doctrines appeared in newspapers and periodicals established by reform and revolutionary organizations in Hong Kong and Japan (54).
(Here is an online review by Jason Schultz of Arif Dirlik's book, Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution. Dirlik gives a good representation of the thread of non-communist radicalism in China.)

These developments among Chinese activists and intellectuals diffused to the Chinese diaspora and concentrated Chinese populations abroad. "Around the turn of the twentieth century, first the reformers, then the Hongmen, followed by the revolutionaries, founded newspapers in major New World Chinese communities such as San Francisco, Honolulu, Vancouver, and New York City" (55). "The teachings of Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin gained in popularity as petty bourgeois Chinese intellectuals embraced the concept of committing acts of terrorism to help destroy the old order" (55). "Around 1907-08 the IWW recruited two Chinese sympathizers in San Francisco to translate some of their literature. In 1909 a Honolulu book club was already in existence and met periodically to discuss such works as 'A Critique of Socialism,' 'Scientific Socialism,' and 'Marx'" (55-56).

Some of these political-social theories began to have an influence on ordinary working people in the Chinese communities of the United States. "Immigrants from China, many influenced by anarcho-syndicalist philosophies, were active in labor issues among the Chinese population on the North American mainland. The widespread labor unrest in the United States and Canada that peaked during the years following World War I probably contributed to such developments" (58). "One of the first major labor organizing efforts occurred in Vancouver, with the founding of the Zhonghua Gongdang [Chinese Labour Association] in 1916 and that group's efforts to organize sawmill workers in the area. In

1918 and 1919 the association led successful strikes that won on such issues as shortening the workday from ten to eight hours" (58). "In the United States, Chinese spearheaded a major labor organizing effort in 1918, when Chicago waiters organized the Mon Sang Association to demand better working conditions. However, the largest group of Chinese organized workers was the Sanfanshi Gongyi Tongmeng Zonghui [Workers' League of San Francisco, or Unionist Guild], founded in 1919 in San Francisco, which at the time had the largest population of Chinese shirt-factory workers" (58).

Anarcho-syndicalist ideas appear to have the earliest appeal to Chinese-American activists; but Marxism soon came along as well. "Chinese in America showed interest in Marxism as early as December 1919, when Oi-won Jung, a KMT party member who had also been active in the Chinese Socialist Club, helped organize Xin Shehui [New Society] in San Jose, California, 'to study capitalism and communism and the radical politics of the New Russia'" (61). But, Lai argues, this influence did not reflect a connection between Chinese activists and the Communist Party of the United States of America; rather, the influence proceeded from debates occurring in China around the direction and strategies of the KMT. And the mortal split that eventually occurred between the KMT and the CCP forced division between radical Chinese groups in the US as well (70).

This summary only touches upon the complex and fascinating narrative that Lai constructs, interweaving the local grievances expressed by the Chinese-American community and the increasingly complex political relationships that evolved in China between KMT and CCP groups as China struggled towards revolution. It is a history well worth reading, and gives a good illustration of the power of "micro-history" as a way of discovering the underlying complexities of macro-level, world-historical phenomena -- revolution, ideology, racism, injustice, and resistance.

(And now, for something completely different -- Monty Python's version of anarcho-syndicalism:)

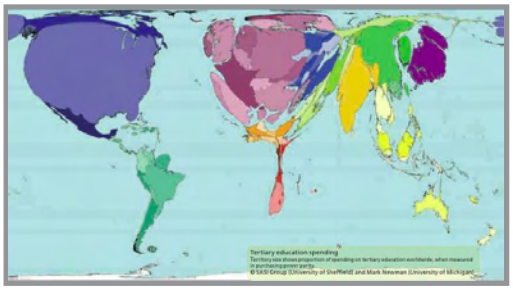
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:09PM (-04:00)

International social science

Sunday, July 04, 2010



Last month the International Social Science Council (ISSC) launched a major review of the status of the social sciences worldwide (link). The report was commissioned and partially funded by UNESCO. The full report is available as a PDF file, and it is an important piece of work. It includes review essays by leading social scientists and chiefs of social science research organizations in Europe, North America, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean, and it makes an effort to provide a fairly comprehensive snapshot of the current state of affairs in the institutions, funding, and patterns of collaboration that currently drive social science research programmes in almost all regions of the world. (It is interesting to observe that there is not a single mention of social science research in



Israel.)

The primary focus of the report is on the institutional settings within which social science research takes place globally: for example, funding systems, universities and institutes, peer review systems, and publication systems. To what extent are these institutions, in various regions of the world, succeeding in supporting and encouraging the kinds of social science research that will further the policy and informational needs of the publics they serve? And to what extent are there substantial differences across regions of the world with respect to the depth and effectiveness of these institutional supports for the social sciences?

Here are three high-level changes in the social sciences that are noted in the report:

Three changes in the environment of social science production are particularly likely to affect their content, role and function. These are first, globalization, leading to the parallel internationalization of some public concerns and of social science research itself; second, changes in the institutional and social organization of social sciences; and third, the increased role of new information technology (IT) in the production and dissemination of social sciences. (1)
A more pervasive finding that structures many chapters in the report is the idea of "divides" within and across the world's communities of social scientists. Most fundamental is the gap in resources and institutional capacity that exists between North and South with respect to social science research:

For any observer of social sciences worldwide, the most striking divide is between countries and regions. There is not much in common between a social science department in a well-endowed university of the global North and a social science research institute in a Southern country suffering from economic and political instability. (3)
(Here is a map indicating widely different levels of spending on tertiary education across the globe:)

But the report also highlights divides across the practices of the social sciences that reflect real differences in intellectual commitments:

From an epistemological point of view, social sciences have been diverse and are characterized by a multiplicity of methods, approaches, disciplines, paradigms, national traditions and underlying political and social philosophies. (3)
Before undertaking such a survey, it is necessary to have a working conception of the definition and role of the social sciences. The report takes a pragmatic approach; the social sciences are "the disciplines whose professional association is part of ISSC" (3). But here is the closest the report comes to framing the intellectual task of the social sciences:

The social sciences are concerned with providing the main classificatory, descriptive and analytical tools and narratives that allow us to see, name and explain the developments that confront human societies. They allow us to decode underlying conceptions, assumptions and mental maps in the debates surrounding these developments. They may assist decision-making processes by attempting to surmount them. And they provide

the instruments to gauge policies and initiatives, ‘and to determine what works and what does not’. (9)
Another organizing thread in the work of this large team of collaborators is the idea that the social sciences are most valuable when they make a contribution to the solution of important social and political problems. They specifically refer to a set of common challenges that are of concern to virtually all the regional research communities surveyed here:

Challenges such as environmental change, poverty, financial crisis and inequality, as well as trends affecting human societies such as ageing, marginalization and the rise of cities as strategic economic spaces in the global economy are occurring everywhere but take on different forms according to local contexts. The authors discuss a wide array of challenges and trends, but other challenges such as gender issues, public health concerns, security, food crisis, migrations, diversity and integration, and burning issues and trends could also have found a place in this section. (9-10)
The greatest value and interest of this report is the degree of detail it is possible to glean from the summary reports provided by the regional associations of the social sciences. This gives a cumulatively detailed impression of the ways in which the social sciences are framed in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America, as well as North America and Europe. Here is a nice example from Huang Ping's survey of the status of the social sciences in China, where Ping provides historical context for Chinese social science:

In terms of what we see today, the status of the social sciences in China can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the first generation of Chinese students and scholars returned from Western countries, mostly the UK and the USA, after completing their degrees or their research.

After the Second World War and since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, social sciences in China have developed along three traditions: Chinese scholarly academia, especially Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism; focusing on economics in line with Soviet influences and Marxist studies; and later, Western approaches.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), social sciences almost disappeared and were hardly taught. After the opening-up process initiated in 1978, social sciences, along with science and research in general, were resumed and given a mandate to support the reform process. The Soviet influence gradually disappeared, and Western, especially US, social science approaches became the most influential. Sociology, for example, had been banned since 1952 and was reintroduced in 1979. During the past decade, traditional Chinese academic traditions have been reintroduced in universities and have caught the interest of an increasing number of students. (73)
The report does not explicitly attempt to map the range and diversity of research priorities in different regions of the world; but it is possible to begin to do so by paying close attention to the surveys offered by the regional associations for social science research. Topics vary across regions. What is more difficult to assess is the degree to which epistemologies, theories, and intellectual frameworks vary as well -- though Sandra Harding's contribution points in this direction. (See an earlier posting discussing work by Gabriel Abend on "Styles of Epistemology" (link).)

Particularly interesting for me are short pieces by Saskia Sassen ("Cities in today's global age"), Craig Calhoun ("Social sciences in North America"), Akhil Gupta ("Construction of the global poor"), David Harvey ("A financial Katrina?"), Jon Elster ("One social science or many?"), and Sandra Harding ("Standpoint methodologies and epistemologies: A logic

of scientific inquiry for people").

In short, this is a genuinely interesting and detailed review of the status of the social sciences in the world today, and anyone with an interest in the "sociology of the social sciences" and the globalization of social knowledge will want to read it carefully.
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:32AM (-04:00)

Feasibility conditions on social reform

Tuesday, July 06, 2010



Several earlier posts have raised the issues of social change and social progress (post, post). People sometimes want society to be different (**change**), and they want it to be better (**progress**). But not all outcomes are possible, and some possible outcomes are not sustainable over time. So how should we think about sweeping prescriptions for social change? What constraints does social reality impose upon the reformer? And what kinds of moral and political constraints should be respected as we advocate for change?

Consider an analogy with the natural sciences and engineering. Physics and the natural sciences set the boundary conditions on what kinds of structures can be built and used. Engineering design involves acquiring a detailed knowledge of the natural properties of materials and structures, and then designing artifacts that satisfy human needs. The human-built world is not **determined** by the laws of physics, since there are countless different technologies that could have satisfied human needs consistent with physics; but it is **constrained** by the laws of physics. What is the corresponding relationship between the social sciences and social reform?

Let's begin by giving a schematic definition of a reform program. A program for reform consists of several things: a representation of the existing social world; a critique of some aspects of that world; a prescription for what the reformer believes would be a better social world; and a developed strategy for moving society from here to there. Reformers think that a specified set of changes will make for a better environment for some aspect of human life, for a group or for the population as a whole. The representation of the current social world may include several different kinds of elements: representation of typical social behavior, representation of existing institutions and practices, and representations of things like justice, power, inequality, and repression.

For example, suppose one was an anti-racist reformer in the US in 1850 or 1950. The diagnosis of the present may be that current institutions and majority attitudes, behaviors, and practices systematically repress, demean, and stunt members of the racial minority. The reformer's goal may be the creation of a society in which racial oppression, discrimination, and bias do not exist. And the strategy may be to create powerful coalitions of players in society who will work effectively and quickly to disassemble racist laws and institutions and to educate the public to leave behind their racist attitudes and beliefs.

So what are some of the basic conditions of realism and feasibility that a legitimate program of reform must satisfy? For a proposed reform agenda to be rationally supportable, its goals must be ***feasible*** and ***accessible***. The institutions, practices, and behaviors it postulates as an end state need to be consistent with what we know about how a society works. And there needs to be a possible pathway through which society can move from here to there.

In other words, the social reformer needs to demonstrate that --

- The described social arrangement can be **implemented**, given ordinary people and ordinary social processes and mechanisms; in other words, the social arrangement doesn't require a miracle to be achieved.
- The arrangement will have a significant likelihood of being **sustainable and self-reproducing**, given ordinary people and ordinary social processes. No miracles are needed to sustain the new society.
- There is a **feasible pathway** that can take us from here to there, consistent with ordinary people AND some set of moral constraints (democracy, commitment to legal processes, no illegal use of force).
- The described social arrangement will be **efficacious**: it will have the social effects that it is planned to have.

A little more specifically, the program of reform needs to be consistent with our best understanding of ***how ordinary human beings behave.*** It needs to create incentives that are consistent with ordinary human behavior; and the behaviors that result from these incentives need to reinforce the stability of the institutions that the program postulates. We don't need to offer a strong theory of universal human nature, in order to maintain that there are elements of motivation and psychology that are common among human beings and that will continue to drive their behavior in the future.

Second, the program needs to ***envision institutions that work correctly together***: they successfully coordinate behavior, motivate citizens, raise public revenues, and maintain order as a coherent system. For example, we could have little confidence in a theory of the future that postulated a wide range of public services and a fiscal model that depended entirely on voluntary contributions by citizens to society's coffers. And we would likewise be skeptical about a vision of the future that aggregated local functions like trash collection and building inspections to the national level.

Third, we would want to specify that we need to have a ***theory of democratic feasibility***: that there is a strategy of change that can be successfully executed within the constraints of a democratic society. No "dictatorship of the proletariat" on the road to a more just future; no use of violence by a minority party aiming to achieve its goals by force.

The social sciences can assist with each of these challenges. Consider first the "ordinary behavior" condition. Empirical studies of human behavior -- motivations, modes of reasoning, schemes of action -- provide a rich set of tools in terms of which to assess the likely behavior of individuals within a hypothetical social context. Ethnography, social psychology, applied rational choice theory, and the philosophy of action all have much to contribute on this issue.

Turn next to the "institutional workings" condition. One of the central tasks of the "new institutionalism" is to provide theories of the mechanisms and processes through which specific institutions interact with human actors to bring about social outcomes. So institutionalists from sociology, political science, and economics have many of the tools necessary to provide an assessment of the likely workings of a specified set of

hypothetical institutions.

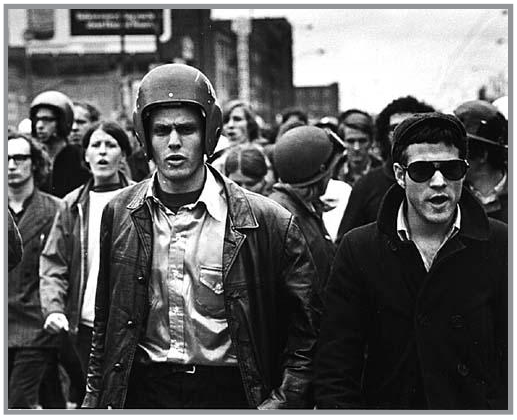
The social sciences are also relevant to assessing the democratic feasibility requirement. Policies are implemented by governments, and governments are subject to a variety of political constraints. Within a democratic electoral system governments are unavoidably concerned about the effects of various policies on the electoral blocks upon which they depend. We can reason in some detail, as Adam Przeworski does in Capitalism and Social Democracy, about the feasibility of maintaining an electoral majority in favor of a given reform program over the period of time that would be required.

There is an important implication in all of this. Envisioning a better future for our society is a good thing. But in order to have a defensible plan for creating that future, we need to make the very best use possible of the social sciences in order to assess the feasibility, stability, and efficacy of the ideas for which we advocate. Not all visions for the future can be realized; and some visions turn out to have unintended and unanticipated consequences that have proven disastrous.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:04AM (-04:00)

Protest and the politics of dissent

Thursday, July 08, 2010





There are several different moral and practical stances that people can take in relation to their social worlds. The scenes above depict one of these possibilities: vociferous protest and active opposition to specific social and political policies. Individuals and groups have ideas about justice and legitimacy. And they have specific material interests that are affected by state policies. When their values and interests are offended by the actions of their government or other collective actors, they may choose to mobilize around overt opposition and collective action. Street demonstrations, protests, boycotts, and destruction of property may be the result. Anti-globalization protests in Toronto in 2010, anti-war protests in 1968 and 2004, demands for aggressive AIDS policies in the 1990s, anti-racism protests in 1968, French protests against President Sarkozy's policies in 1999, and anti-NATO protests in Strasbourg in 2009 -- each scene represents an extensive movement against the actions of governments, international organizations, and social institutions.

What are some of the goals of public protests? One is obvious: to exert direct pressure on governments and other powerful organizations to change their policies and actions. Organizers and followers often have very concrete goals in mounting a protest, with an explicit theory of how the protest action will lead to the possibility of change of policy. This



is most evident in the demonstrations that took place in France in 2009 in opposition to the government's neo-liberal economic reform policies. Organizers, organizations, and unions had very specific notions about how mass protests in Paris, Dijon, Marseille, and Lyon could succeed in forcing the government to retreat. In this case the action is purposive and ***instrumental***: choose ***this*** strategy to bring about ***that*** result.



Another possible goal is more ***expressive*** than this description would suggest. People may mobilize around a demonstration out of their simple desire to express their moral dissent; to offer a moral example to the world of the wrongness of the targeted policy. Some strands of the US civil rights movement had this character; demonstrations served to cast a light on the fundamental injustice of US race relations and laws, and many supporters participated simply out of moral solidarity with these values.



A third possibility combines the expressive and instrumental types of collective action. Leaders and followers invested in a particular issue may want to publicize their values and their critique in order to persuade the broader public to share these values. So a goal of the demonstration is to illustrate the moral and political values that are involved, and to attempt to sway other citizens to share these values. This was part of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s theory of change: a strategy of non-violent protest could change attitudes throughout the country and eventually lead to very substantial change in law and practice. It also seems to be a part of the transnational movement of activists against neo-liberal globalization: help the mass of citizens of the developed world to see the harms created by the neo-liberal regime.



The occurrence of protest and demonstration is a commonplace. But it is also a central focus of scientific study by scholars such as Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, or Doug McAdam under the topics of social movements and social contention. Here are several important recent contributions. Tarrow and Tilly published Contentious Politics in 2006. Tarrow's New Transnational Activism focuses on the anti-globalization protests that have



occurred since Seattle's WTO meetings in 1999. McAdam's Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970 offers a detailed analysis of the mobilization processes that culminated in the US Civil Rights movement. Each of these works, and dozens of others, have offered careful insights and theories about the mechanisms of social mobilization.

Social scientists have focused on several aspects of protest movements: for example, motivations of the followers; social characteristics of followers; characteristics of leaders; the organizations that serve to mobilize and coordinate protest; the networks of information and other resources that link separate organizations together; the nature of the grievances that stimulate prolonged protest movements; and the efficacy of protest movements. Quite a few important ideas have come out of these research efforts. For example, Charles Tilly introduced the important idea of "repertoires" of protest, making the point that different communities have developed different scripts for presenting their protests to the public and to the government. And Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam have argued for an innovative approach to the study of contention, in the form of a methodology of the range of social mechanisms that can be identified in a variety of instances of mobilization.

One important fact that comparative study of protest movements and organizations demonstrates, is the common feature of ***diversity*** of purposes, goals, and strategies among the individuals and groups who support a movement. The US anti-war movement is a good example; the coalition that came together to create large demonstrations and public actions in various cities in the 1960s commonly represented a very wide range of political perspectives and goals, from Quakers to Progressive Labor activists. This range of political positions reflected significant disagreement about the goals of protest; but it also represented serious disagreement about the strategies of protest as well.

A crucial dividing line among anti-war organizations was the use of deliberate destruction of property as a tool of protest. Probably the majority of individuals and groups opposed the use of violence, whereas small organizations deliberately sought out opportunities for "trashing". The slogan, "Days of Rage," captures this perspective. This same divide was evident in the G20 demonstrations in Toronto last month, with Black Bloc activists deliberately finding opportunities for burning police cars and smashing shop windows. (Here is a manifesto from the Wombles on the subject of violence in demonstrations.) Peter Ackerman demonstrates in Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century that non-violent protest has a very wide range of strategies at its disposal, and that these mechanisms have often proven very effective in achieving the goals of the protest.

(Quite a few earlier posts have focused on examples of social mobilization and theories of how groups become engaged in collective action; these can be found in the collective action thread.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:56PM (-04:00)

Gabriel Tarde's rediscovery

Friday, July 09, 2010


LES LOIS
DE
L'IMITATION
ÉTUDE SOCIOLOGIQUE
PAR
G. TARDE
PARIS
FÉLIX ALCAN, ÉDITEUR
1911

Gabriel Tarde was an important rival to Emile Durkheim on the scene of French sociology in the 1880s and 1890s. Durkheim essentially won the field, however, and Tarde's reputation diminished for a century. Durkheim's social holism and a search for social laws prevailed, and the sociology of individuals and the methodology of contingency that Tarde had constructed had little influence on the next several generations of sociologists in France. In the 1990s, however, several important strands of thought were receptive to a rediscovery of Tarde's thinking; Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour each found elements in Tarde's thinking that provided intellectual antecedent and support for ideas of their own. In the past fifteen years or so there has been a significant revival of interest in Tarde.

An important volume edited by Matei Candea represents the most extensive reconsideration of Tarde's views of sociology to date. Contributors to The Social after Gabriel Tarde: Debates and Assessments provide highly provocative and stimulating discussions of various aspects of Tarde's philosophy of sociology, and the book represents an important contribution to new thinking about the social sciences. The introductory essay by Candea is very useful and is available for free as a sample of the Kindle edition. Bruno Latour's contribution to the volume is available on Latour's website (link), as are two short pieces on Latour's thoughts about Tarde (link, link).

Several aspects of Tarde's philosophy of sociology stand out. First is his rejection of Durkheim's holism. He was consistently critical of the idea of finished social wholes; instead, he recommended a focus on the components of social interactions and practices. This might be understood as a focus on the individual and his/her psychological properties (methodological individualism); but it also might be seen as a more radical disassembly of the social into sub- and supra-individual constructions. This is where Latour finds inspiration; he suggests that Tarde is an intellectual precursor to Actor Network Theory (ANT), which does not give ontological priority to ***either*** individuals or social wholes.

Another important feature of Tarde's philosophy of the social is his emphasis on heterogeneity and contingency within the social. He revels in the fact of variation among and within social processes, and he emphasizes the deep degree of contingency that characterizes social outcomes. Here is one example in Social Laws: "Science is the co-ordination of phenomena regarded from the side of their repetitions. But this does not mean that differentiation is not an essential mode of procedure for the scientific mind" (8).

The contributors to the Candea volume illustrate this deep contingency in a different way; they ask the question of how the science of sociology might have developed differently if Tarde's views had taken deeper root. Here is how Candea puts this point in the opening words of the volume:

Some theorists have intersected with history in such an odd way that they seem to require an introduction in the form of a thought experiment: What if Durkheimian

sociology had had, from the very beginning, a thoughtful and vocal opponent; one who queries the 'thingness' of the social and the holistic, bounded nature of societies and human groups; one who accused Durkheim of disregarding the contingency of history in the search for scientific 'structure'; one who proposed a radical reversal of the organic analogy, claiming that organisms are societies and not the other way around; one who foregrounded imitations, oppositions and inventions where Durkheim saw conformism to a rule as the key component of the social; one who had already found a way to dissolve the linked contrasts between individual and society, micro and macro, agency and structure, freedom and constraint -- Durkheim's main (and for many, troublesome) legacy to twentieth-century social science?
And, of course, that critic is none other than Tarde.

Here are a few of Tarde's ideas as expressed in his 1897 volume, Social Laws: An Outline of Sociology (translated into English in 1899).

Thus science consists in viewing any fact whatsoever under three aspects, corresponding, respectively, to the repetitions, oppositions, and adaptations which it contains, and which are obscured by a mass of variations, dissymmetries, and disharmonies. The relation of cause to effect, in fact, is not the only element which properly constitutes scientific knowledge. (9)
Here is a schematic philosophy of science -- an account of what sociology consists of. Tarde emphasizes the discovery of both regularities and variations:

These reflections were needed in order to show what sociology must be, if it is to deserve the name of science, and along what paths sociologists must guide its course, if they wish to see it assume, unchallenged, its proper rank. Like every other science, it will attain this only when it has gained, and is conscious of possessing, its own domain of repetitions, its own domain of oppositions, and its own domain of adaptations, each characteristic of itself and belonging wholly to itself. Sociology can only make progress when it succeeds in substituting true repetitions, oppositions, and harmonies for false ones, as all the other sciences have done before it. And in place of repetitions, oppositions, and adaptations that are true but vague, it must find others that become ever more exact as it advances. (10)
And on a central tenet of methodological individualism--the idea of the strict determination of the whole as a consequence of the characteristics of indistinguishable individual components:

I believe that none of the above-mentioned differences, including even the mere variety of arrangement and random distribution of matter throughout space, can be explained on the theory of exactly similar atomic elements—an hypothesis so dear to chemists, who are in this respect the real metaphysicians; I do not see that Spencer’s so-called law of the instability of the homogeneous explains anything. And hence, I believe that the only means of explaining this exuberant growth of individual differences upon the surface of phenomena is by assuming that they spring from a motley array of elements, each possessing its own individual characteristics. (15)
And rather than seeking out high-level generalizations and regularities about the social world, Tarde advocates for more specific and granular studies:

Fortunately, screened and sheltered from view by these ambitious generalizations, certain less venturesome workers strove, with greater success, to formulate other more substantial laws concerning the details. Among these should be mentioned the linguists, the mythologists, and above all the economists. These specialists in sociological fields

discovered various interesting relations among successive and simultaneous facts, which recurred constantly within the limits of the narrow domain they were examining. (18)
Tarde explicitly rejects John Stuart Mill's particular version of methodological individualism:

In some quarters the feeling has existed that we must look to psychology for any general explanation of the laws and pseudo-laws of economics, language, mythology, etc. No man held to this view with greater force and clearness than John Stuart Mill. At the end of his *Logic* he represents sociology as a species of applied psychology. Unfortunately he did not analyze the concept carefully enough; and the psychology to which he looked for the key to social phenomena was merely individual psychology—the branch which studies the interrelations of impressions and imagery in a single mind, believing that everything within this domain can be explained according to the laws of association of these elements. Thus conceived, sociology became a sort of enlarged and externalized English associationism, and was in a fair way to lose its originality. (19)
And here is an explicit rejection of a particular kind of Durkheimian social fact -- the idea of a national character:

Sooner or later, one must open his eyes to the evidence, and recognize that the genius of a people or race, instead of being a factor superior to and dominating the characters of the individuals (who have been considered its offshoots and ephemeral manifestations) is simply a convenient label, or impersonal synthesis, of these individual characteristics; the latter alone are real, effective, and ever in activity; they are in a state of continual fermentation in the bosom of every society, thanks to the examples borrowed and exchanged with neighboring societies to their great mutual profit. (27)
Here is how Bruno Latour summarizes his appreciation of Tarde in "Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social" (link):

And yet, I want to argue in this chapter, through a close reading of his recently republished most daring book, *Monadologie et sociologie* (M&S), that Tarde introduced into social theory the two main arguments which ANT has tried, somewhat vainly, to champion:

a) the nature and society divide is irrelevant for understanding the world of human interactions ;

b) the micro/macro distinction stifle any attempt at understanding how society is being generated.

In other words, I want to make a little thought experiment and imagine what the field of social sciences would have become in the last century, had Tarde's insights been turned into a science instead of Durkheim's. Or may be it is that Tarde, a truly daring but also, I have to admit, totally undisciplined mind, needed a rather different century so as to be finally understood.
Latour ends his contribution to the Candea volume with an intriguing section called "Digital traceability ... Tarde's vindication?". The key idea here is that the twenty-first century permits social scientists to go decisively and transparently beyond the primitive aggregative statistics that underlay Durkheim's approach to the "social whole." Tarde, and Latour, look at Durkheim's social whole as no more than a crude statistical aggregation of data; and, according to Latour, Tarde had envisioned a time when the statistics and quantitative data deriving from social behavior would be transparent and visible. This, Latour suggests, is becoming true. Today we can look at social data at a full

range of levels of aggregation, moving back and forth from the micro to the macro with ease. Here is Tarde's version of the vision:

If Statistics continues to progress as it has done for several years, if the information which it gives us continues to gain in accuracy, in dispatch, in bulk, and in regularity, a time may come when upon the accomplishment of every social event a figure will at once issue forth automatically, so to speak, to take its place on the statistical registers that will be continuously communicated to the public and spread abroad pictorially by the daily press.
And here is Latour's comment:

It is indeed striking that at this very moment, the fast expanding fields of "data visualization", "computational social science" or "biological networks" are tracing before our eyes, just the sort of data Tarde would have acclaimed. ... Digital navigation through point-to-point datascapes might, a century later, vindicate Tarde's insights.
This is only the briefest of samplings from Tarde's work, from one short book. But it is perhaps enough to give substance to the idea that Tarde is as much of an innovative founder of scientific sociology as Weber, Marx, or Durkheim; and he is a thinker from whom a new generation of sociologists can gain new ideas.
Posted by Daniel Little at 02:57PM (-04:00)

Knowing the population

Tuesday, July 13, 2010



At any given time there are huge areas of the unknown when it comes to the question, what do various members of our society care about? We have opinion research tools, of course. But we don't really have good answers to any of these questions:

- How do West Bloomfield teenagers think about their futures?
- Why do Kenyan truck drivers refrain from the most basic AIDS-prevention techniques?
- Are skateboarders disaffected from mainstream society?
- What does it mean when affluent suburban white kids wear hiphop gear?
- What do laid-off auto workers think about higher education for themselves?
- How do Mexican gang killers feel about their victims?

These questions fall in the general area of qualitative knowledge of social actors and groups. We want to know in some detail about the subjectivity of the members of these groups -- how they think, what they value, how they perceive the world. There can be a quantitative side as well -- once we have information about some people in a group we can ask about the distribution of these characteristics over the group.

But here is the key question at the moment: where within the disciplines of the social sciences does inquiry into these questions fall? And the simple answer is, none of them

and parts of all of them. Ethnography is relevant; but anthropologists usually seem to have larger theoretical apples to peel. Political scientists are interested in a small subset of these questions -- basically, they are interested in measuring political attitudes and preferences. And some branches of sociology have had an interest in this kind of concrete social description -- for example, Erving Goffman; but at present this kind of detailed inquiry into the lived experience of particular individuals and groups doesn't have much prestige in the field. It is hard to see AJS publishing a descriptive study of attitudes and values of West Bloomfield teenagers.

So two things seem to be true. First, there is an important kind of knowledge that we need to have in order to adequately understand society. And second, there doesn't seem to be a discipline in the social sciences that takes on this challenge.

So how should we think about the subjective experience and mental frameworks of a given social group? A group is defined by some set of characteristics -- people from a certain region ("midwesterners"), people with a certain occupation ("insurance adjustors"), people with a certain national origin ("Irish-Americans"), people from a particular age cohort (Generation X), or people with a certain religion or value scheme ("Protestants," "Populists"). So by construction, members of the group share a few characteristics in common -- the "nominal" characteristics of the group. But we also know that almost every group displays a great range of diversity with respect to other characteristics -- lifestyle, political attitudes, moral commitments, ... So how should we think about the problem of coming to better understand the distinctive features of consciousness as well as the range of diversity and similarity among members of the group? This raises a number of interesting questions. For example:

- Are there similarities that members of this group possess over and above the nominal characteristics of the group? Is there something distinctive about the experience and mentality of Gen X or "The Greatest Generation"?
- Are some groups more diverse than others with respect to a given set of social characteristics?
- Is it possible to explain some of the patterns of similarity that are discovered among members of the group?

Suppose we are interested in K-12 school teachers: what makes them choose this work, what are some of the social backgrounds from which they emerge, how do they feel about their work, are they idealistic or jaded in their work? How might we approach a subject like this from the point of view of social science research?

One possibility is to approach the task through survey research. We might design a survey intended to measure attitudes, background, degree of commitment, etc. The results of the survey can be presented as a set of descriptive statistics for each question, with standard deviations. We might have a theory of how the questions cluster, and we might classify individuals into sub-groups sharing a cluster of properties. Further, we might try to identify differences that exist among sub-populations (by race, age, or occupational group, let us say). And we would probably want to see whether there are interesting correlations among some of the recorded variables.

Another possibility is to approach the task through interviews and qualitative research. Here the investigator will work with a smaller number of cases; but he/she will get to know individuals well, and will come to see the nuance and detail of the multiple experiences that school teachers have of their work. Here we might imagine several different kinds of findings:

"There is no typical school teacher; rather, each has a different profile." This researcher may not be able to summarize or analyze his/her findings, but rather needs to provide a

descriptive narrative of a series of cases. This is perhaps the kind of knowledge that Studs Terkel produces (link).

Or: "A small set of common themes emerge from a number of the cases, so we can begin to classify teachers into a small set of similar groups."
It is also possible to code and aggregate the results of this sort of qualitative research. This may permit us to discover that there are some broad groupings among the population surveyed. We might find that there are fairly visible groupings among school teachers, with similar attitudes and commitments among individuals of group A that distinguish them sharply from individuals of group B. (For example: "Inner city teachers differ significantly from suburban teachers;" "teachers in their 50s differ significantly from teachers in their 30s;" "white and black teacher differ significantly from each other.") The researcher may then try to arrive at hypotheses about why the A's are so different from the B's: educational background, experience within a certain industry, gender or race characteristics, cohort-specific experiences, differences in the work-place environment. This represents a slide from qualitative inquiry to quantitative analysis; ethnographic and individual-level investigation is aggregated into analytical categories. Here the sociologically interesting question is that of social causation: what are the social influences that differently affected the two populations?
The key point here is that individuals have a rather specific socially constituted subjectivity -- a set of mental frameworks, concepts, modes of thinking, emotions, values, and aversions -- that distinguishes them from others. This subjective framework provides a basis for their actions, choices, and preferences. We also speculate, often, that there are important similarities in these frameworks within groups in dimensions that distinguish this group from that group. It appears to be a fundamentally important task for the social sciences, to have means of investigating these empirical realities. These questions are important, most fundamentally, because they give an indication of why people behave as they do. And yet the existing disciplines have little interest in pursuing these types of questions.

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:07PM (-04:00)

Methodological nationalism

Thursday, July 15, 2010



Are there logical divisions within the global whole of social interactions and systems that permit us to focus on a limited, bounded social reality? Is there a stable level of social aggregation that might provide an answer to the "units of analysis" question in the social sciences? This is a question that has recurred several times in prior postings -- on regions (link), on levels of analysis (link), and on world systems (link). Here I'll focus on the nation-state as one such system of demarcation.

We can start with a very compelling recent critique of current definitions of the social

sciences. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller offer an intriguing analysis of social science conceptual schemes in "Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences" (link). (Wimmer's Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity is also of great interest.) The core idea is the notion that the social sciences have tended to conceptualize social phenomena around the boundaries of the nation-state. And, these authors contend, this assumption creates a set of blinders for the social sciences that makes it difficult to capture some crucially important forms of social interaction and structure.

Wimmer and Schiller characterize the idea of methodological nationalism in three forms:

The epistemic structures and programmes of mainstream social sciences have been closely attached to, and shaped by, the experience of modern nation-state formation.... The social sciences were captured by the apparent naturalness and givenness of a world divided into societies along the lines of nation-states.... Because they were structured according to nation-state principles, these became so routinely assumed and 'banal', that they vanished from sight altogether. (303-4)

A second variant, typical of more empirically oriented social science practices, is taking national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories for granted, without problematizing themor making them an object of an analysis in its own right. Instead, nationally bounded societies are taken to be the naturally given entities to study. (304)

Let us now address a third and last variant of methodological nationalism: the territorialization of social science imaginary and the reduction of the analytical focus to the boundaries of the nation-state. (307)

The three variants of methodological nationalism ... are thus ignorance, naturalization, and territorial limitation. (308)
Their view is a complex one. They think that the social sciences have been trapped behind a kind of conceptual blindness, according to which the concepts of nation and state structure our perception of social reality but disappear as objects of critical inquiry. Second, they argue that there were real processes of nation and state building that created this blindness -- from nineteenth century nation building to twentieth century colonialism. And third, they suggest that the framework of MN itself contributed to the concrete shaping of the history of nation and state building. So it is a three-way relationship between knowledge and the social world.

"Nationalism" has several different connotations. First, it implies that peoples fall into "nations," and that "nations" are somewhat inevitable and compact social realities. France is a nation. But closer examination reveals that France is a social-historical construct, not a uniform or natural social whole. (Here is a discussion of Emmanuel Todd's version of this argument; link). Alsatians, Bretons, and Basques are part of the French nation; and yet they are communities with distinct identities, histories, and affinities. So forging France as a nation was a political effort, and it is an unfinished project.

Second, nationalism refers to movements based on mobilization of political identities. Hindu nationalists have sought power in India through the BJP on the basis of a constructed, mobilized (and in various ways fictional) Hindu identity. The struggle over the Babri Mosque, and the political use to which this symbol was put in BJP mobilization, illustrates this point. But "nationalist politics" also possess a social reality; it is all too evident that even fictive "national identities" can be powerful sources of political

motivation. So nationalist politics in the twentieth century were a key part of many historical processes. (Michael Mann's The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing illustrates this point.) And, of course, there may be multiple national identities within a given region; so the "nation" consists of multiple "nationalist" groups. Ben Anderson's Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism provides an extensive development of the political and constructed nature of ethnic and national identities.

What about the other pole of the "nation-state" conjunction -- the state? Here the idea is that the state is the seat of sovereign authority; the origin and enforcement of legal institutions; and the holder of a monopoly of coercive power in a region. A state does not inevitably correspond to a nation; so when we hyphenate the conjunction we make a further substantive assumption -- that nations grow into states, and that states cultivate national identities.

The fundamental criticism that Wimmer and Schiller express -- the fundamental defect of methodological nationalism -- is that it limits the ability of social scientists and historians to perceive processes that are above or below the level of the nation-state. Trans-national processes (they offer migration as an example) and sub-national processes (we might refer to the kinds of violent mobilization studied by Mann in the *Dark Side of Democracy*) are either invisible or unimportant, from the point of view of methodological nationalism. So the methodology occludes social phenomena that are actually of great importance to understanding the contemporary world. Here is how they suggest going beyond methodological nationalism in the field of migration studies:

Going beyond methodological nationalism in the study of current migration thus may require more than a focus on transnational communities instead of the nation and its immigrants. In order to escape the magnetism of established methodologies, ways of defining the object of analysis and algorithms for generating questions, we may have to develop (or rediscover?) analytical tools and concepts not coloured by the self-evidence of a world ordered into nation-states. This is what we perceive, together with many other current observers of the social sciences, as the major task lying ahead of us. We are certainly not able to offer such a set of analytical tools here. (323-24)

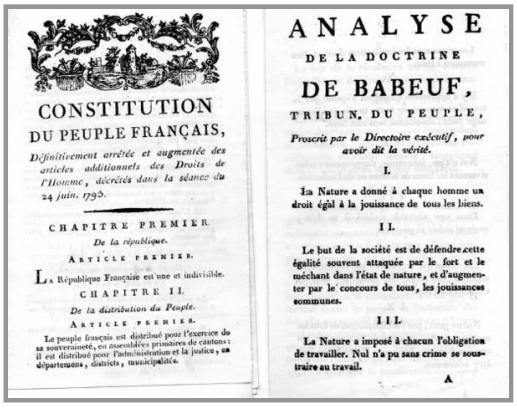
Wimmer and Schiller seem to point in a direction that we find in Saskia Sassen's work as well: the idea that it is necessary for the social sciences to invent a new vocabulary that does a better job of capturing the idea of the interconnectedness of social activity and social systems (for example, in A Sociology of Globalization; link). The old metaphors of "levels" of social life organized on an ascending spatial basis doesn't seem to work well today when we try to deal with topics like global cities, diasporic communities, or transnational protest movements. And each of these critiques makes a convincing case that these non-national phenomena are influential all the way down into the "national" orders singled out by traditional classification schemes.

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:38PM (-04:00)

Radicals, activists, and reformers

Sunday, July 18, 2010

Several posts have drawn attention to the acts of criticism of the present and advocacy for change. But both criticism and programs of advocacy have enormous variation when it comes to analytical and theoretical rigor. Babeuf's conspiracy of equals set the stage for radicalism during the French Revolution. But how good were his diagnosis of the



CONSTITUTION
DU PEUPLE FRANÇAIS,
Définitivement arrêtée et augmentée des articles additionnels des Droits de l'Homme, décrétés dans la séance du 24 juin. 1793.

CHAPITRE PREMIER
De la république.
ARTICLE PREMIER.
La République Française est une et indivisible.
CHAPITRE II.
De la distribution du Peuple.
ARTICLE PREMIER.
Le peuple français est distribué pour l'exercice de sa souveraineté, en assemblées primaires de cantons: il est distribué pour l'administration et la justice, en départemens, districts, municipalités.

ANALYSE
DE LA DOCTRINE
DE BABEUF,
TRIBUN, DU PEUPLE,
Proscrit par le Directoire exécutif, pour avoir dit la vérité.

I.
La Nature a donné à chaque homme un droit égal à la jouissance de tous les biens.

II.
Le but de la société est de défendre cette égalité souvent attaquée par le fort et le méchant dans l'état de nature, et d'augmenter par le concours de tous, les jouissances communes.

III.
La Nature a imposé à chacun l'obligation de travailler. Nul n'a pu sans crime se soustraire au travail.

A

present and his vision of a possible future? And what was he really trying to accomplish as a radical?

Criticism and advocacy can combine into several rather different stances -- think of Mill, Bakunin, and Lenin and the very different ways in which they combined reasoned thought and political activism. It is worth asking the question, what are the different states of mind and intentionality that characterize different kinds of social activists. Fundamentally, how do we distinguish between liberal reformers, radical activists, and revolutionaries? We might say that the difference parallels that between amelioration, opposition, and transformation; systemic change and piecemeal improvement; gradual and abrupt; but can we say more? Here are some sketches.

Radical activists are ... radical. They want largescale, rapid change in society. The radical opposition surveys the existing social world; identifies a set of institutions and practices that currently exist; judges that these institutions and practices are fundamentally flawed in some important way; and demands fundamental change or replacement for these institutions and practices. So the radical activist demands immediate, concerted action to bring this complex state of affairs about. The radical activist is not intellectually committed to proving the feasibility of alternatives; he/she is committed in the heart to the abolition of the present injustice.

The liberal reformer is a critic as well. There are feature of the existing social world that he/she strenuously rejects. But the liberal reformer accepts the reality of the present. He/she proposes a set of immediate and mid-range reforms that will work to modify the unacceptable features of the present and move society towards a more satisfactory set of institutions and practices in the future. Gradual transformation is the model of change for the liberal reformer. Having confidence in the feasibility of a given set of pathways of reform is the highest intellectual value.

The revolutionary is an architect of change, not just a radical activist. The revolutionary wants to sweep away the bad institutions and social relations of the present. And the revolutionary has a vision of the new society which the movement is aiming at creating. The revolutionary is intellectually committed to the achievement of a concrete social order that is better than the present; and this means he/she is committed to demonstrating the feasibility of the new order. So the revolutionary, like the liberal reformer, needs to be a social engineer making good use of historical insights and social analysis into the ways that social change works.

So one way of distinguishing the radical from the liberal is in terms of the scope of change that the critic demands. The radical demands sweeping change of a wide range of institutions; the liberal demands a more limited set of changes. The revolutionary is distinct from the activist as well, in that the revolutionary is intellectually committed to the feasibility of the new order.

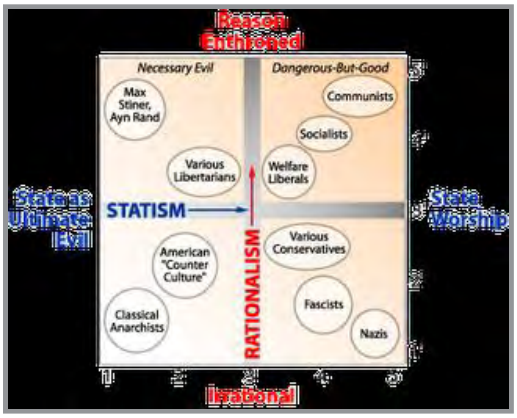
Here is another way of drawing the distinction -- in terms of pace and means of achieving change. The radical demands change in a very short period of change -- and therefore rejects "gradual reform and improvement".

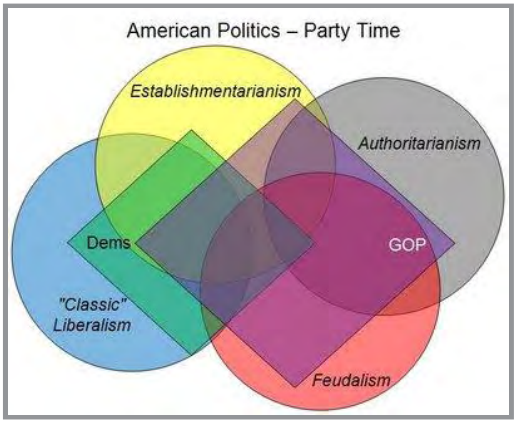
Here is yet another way of drawing the line between liberal reformers and activists and revolutionaries. The radical activist and the revolutionary sometimes advocate for means of social change that the liberal reformer would reject: the use of violence, dictatorship of the proletariat, authoritarian use of state power. The liberal reformer advocates for a process of change that takes place within existing institutions, over an extended period of time, perhaps leading to a less sweeping transformation of society.

The distinction between liberal, activist, and revolutionary is perhaps not as sharp as indicated here. The categories are not mutually exclusive. On the topic of racial justice, for example, we might say that the abolition of slavery was a radical demand, requiring profound and discontinuous change. The movement in the 1950s and 1960s for a raft of legal reforms in support of full equality for African-Americans was a liberal and gradualist strategy. So both radical and liberal steps were involved in the quest for racial justice in the United States. And each set of demands was crucial for the achievement of racial justice.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:44PM (-04:00)

The politics color wheel

Wednesday, July 21, 2010

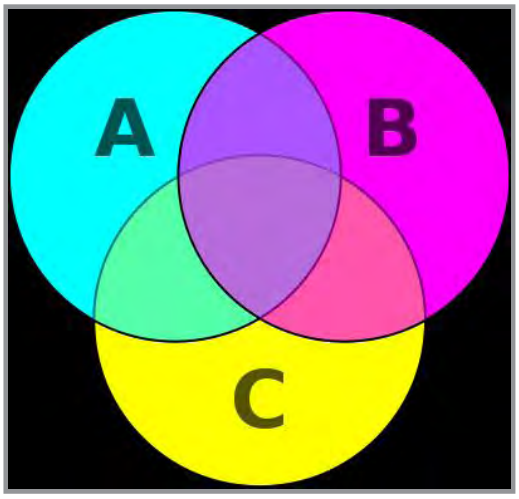


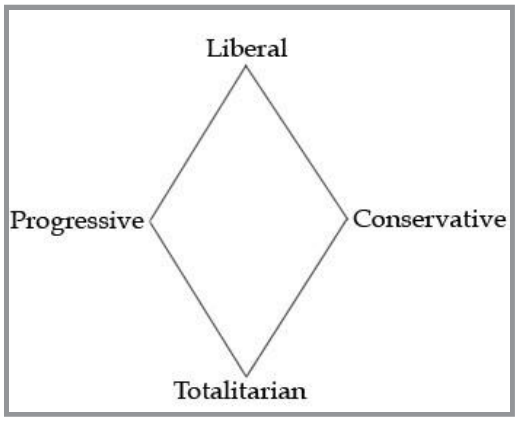


The problem of mapping or classifying people's political attitudes is more complicated than it looks. Placing people on a spectrum from left to right is convenient but over-simple. It assumes that there is a single dimension of political difference, ranging from conservative to liberal, and that everyone can be placed somewhere along that spectrum. But social and political attitudes aren't single-dimensional. So we'd like to have a way of mapping the space of attitudes that captures the separate dimensions that go into political attitudes.

Most of the schemes above take a step forward by hypothesizing two dimensions reflecting attitudes towards the involvement of the state in the economy and in individual social and moral life. An economic conservative opposes state involvement in the economy. A social liberal opposes state involvement in individual choices and lifestyle, while a social conservative favors intervention in individual behavior when it comes to certain "social" issues. A libertarian opposes both forms of state intervention and an authoritarian supports both.

This kind of classification is an improvement, but it doesn't fully satisfy. It doesn't really capture the substantive moral ideas that might underlie these attitudes, the political

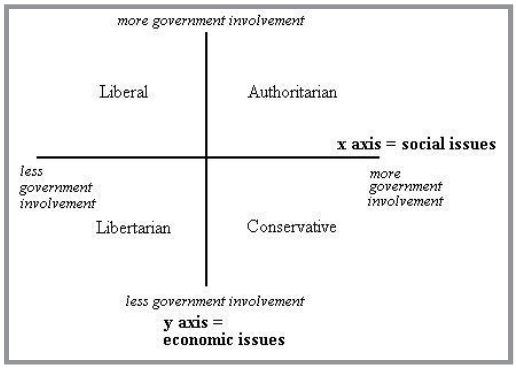


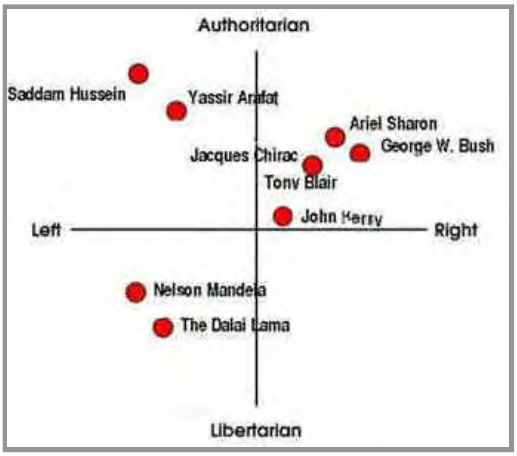


philosophy that might underlie political preferences.

A more substantive effort at classification might take the form of a cluster of values shared by various groups. Conservatives favor maintaining traditional values (religion and morality), maintaining an existing system of wealth, power, and prestige (market and social inequality), and limiting the use of state power to these functions. Progressives favor greater social equality and opportunity; they favor the free expression of individual life choices; and they favor using the authority of the state to increase the equality and freedom of ordinary people. Conservatives defend existing inequalities and oppose redistribution. Progressives condemn certain kinds of inequality and justify redistributive measures to redress these inequalities.

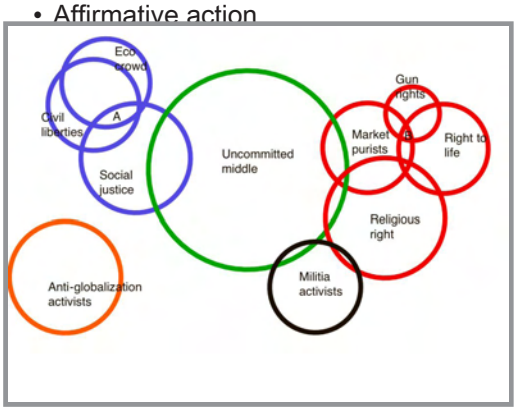
Yet another approach is to consider a diagnostic set of issues and classify the individual according to where he/she falls on these issues. For example:





	Pro- Tiger		Anti- Tiger		
Pro- Gvt.			A SLFP/EPDP/TMVP	B JHU/NFF	Pro-War
Anti- Gvt.	H: Elements of Tiger sympathizers	H: Elements of Tiger sympathizers	C UNP/TULF	D JVP	
Pro- Gvt.			G Elements of LSSP/CP/NLF	All-anti but pro-Gvt.	Anti-War
Anti- Gvt.	H: Elements of Tiger sympathizers	F: TNA/ peace NGOs /NLF	E UTHR/SLDF	All -anti	
	Ealam	Federalism	Pro-Devolution	Anti-Devolution	

- Guaranteeing a woman's right to choose
- Restricting the sale of assault rifles
- Carbon tax
- Inheritance tax
- Immigration reform
- Affirmative action



We might imagine grouping the population into a sort of Venn diagram. Suppose that each circle represents individuals who include the specific issue within his/her top five issues. Overlaps indicate the circumstance of individuals who share the issues of each overlapping circle. So region A represents individuals who rank civil liberties, social justice, and environmental issues in their top five; region B represents individuals who rank markets, guns, right to life, and religious fundamentalism in their top five priorities. On this diagram, there is no one who is a militia activist and a social justice advocate.

Several questions arise here: are there correlations across individuals with respect to these issues? Is there a set of philosophical principles that underlie the choices that individuals make within connected clusters? And do the clusters correspond to identifiable political groups?

Posted by Daniel Little at 11:52PM (-04:00)

A property-owning democracy

Sunday, July 25, 2010

John Rawls offered a general set of principles of justice that were formally neutral across specific institutions. However, he also believed that the institutions of a "property-owning democracy" are most likely to satisfy the two principles of justice. So what is a property-owning democracy?

In Justice as Fairness: A Restatement (2001) Rawls offered a more explicit discussion of this concept than was offered in A Theory of Justice: Original Edition (1971). Here are several important descriptions:

Let us distinguish five kinds of regime viewed as social systems, complete with their political, economic, and social institutions: (a) laissez-faire capitalism; (b) welfare-state capitalism; (c) state socialism with a command economy; (d) property-owning democracy; and finally, (e) liberal (democratic) socialism.

Regarding any regime four questions naturally arise. One is the question of right: that is, whether its institutions are right and just. Another is the question of design: that is, whether a regime's institutions can be effectively designed to realize its declared aims

and objectives. This implies a third question: whether citizens, in view of their likely interests and ends as shaped by the regime's basic structure, can be relied on to comply with just institutions and the rules that apply to them in their various offices and positions. The problem of corruption is an aspect of this. Finally, there is the question of competence: whether the tasks assigned to offices and positions would prove simply too difficult for those likely to hold them.

What we would like, of course, are just and effectively designed basic institutions that effectively encourage aims and interests necessary to sustain them. Beyond this, persons should not confront tasks that are too difficult for them or that exceed their powers. Arrangements should be fully workable, or practicable. Much conservative thought has focused on the last three questions mentionsed above, criticizing the ineffectiveness of the so-called welfare state and its tendencies toward waste and corruption. But here we focus largely on the first question of right and justice, leaving the others aside. (136-137)
(Notice that these four questions converge closely with the feasibility conditions on reforms mentioned in an earlier post.)

There is similar but less developed language in the original version of the *Theory of Justice*:
Throughout the choice between a private-property economy and socialism isleft open; from the standpoint of the theory of justice alone, various basic structures would appear to satisfy its principles. (TJ, 258)
Rawls argues that the first three alternatives mentioned here (a-c) fail the test of justice, in that each violates conditions of the two principles of justice in one way or the other. So only a property-owning democracy and liberal socialism are consistent with the two principles of justice (138). Another way of putting this conclusion is that either regime can be just if it functions as designed, and the choice between them is dictated by pragmatic considerations rather than considerations of fundamental justice.
Here is how Rawls describes the fundamental goal of a property-owning democracy:

In property-owning democracy, ... the aim is to realize in the basic institutions the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal. To do this, those institutions must, from the outset, put in the hands of citizens generally, and not only of a few, sufficient productive means for them to be fully cooperating members of society on a footing of equality (140).
Rawls isn't very explicit about the institutions that constitute a property-owning democracy, but here is a general description:

Both a property-owning democracy and a liberal socialist regime set up a constitutional framework for democratic politics, guarantee the basic liberties with the fair value of the political liberties and fair equality of opportunity, and regulate economic and social inequalities by a principle of mutuality, if not by the difference principle. (138)
This last point is important:

For example, background institutions must work to keep property and wealth evenly enough shared over time to preserve the fair value of the political liberties and fair equality of opportunities over generations. They do this by laws regulating bequest and inheritance of property, and other devices such as taxes, to prevent excessive concentrations of private power. (51)
And concentration of wealth is one of the deficiencies of a near-cousin of the property-owning democracy, welfare-state capitalism:

One major difference is this: the background institutions of property-owning democracy work to disperse the ownership of wealth and capital, and thus to prevent a small part of society from controlling the economy, and indirectly, political life as well. By contrast, welfare-state capitalism permits a small class to have a near monopoly of the means of production. (139) [also Collected Papers, p. 419]

The past thirty years have taken us a great distance away from the social ideal represented by Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. The acceleration of inequalities of income and wealth in the US economy is flatly unjust, by Rawls's standards. The increasing -- and now by Supreme Court decision, almost unconstrained -- ability of corporations to exert influence within political affairs has severely undermined the fundamental political equality of all citizens. And the extreme forms of inequality of opportunity and outcome that exist in our society -- and the widening of these gaps in recent decades -- violate the basic principles of justice, requiring the full and fair equality of political lives of all citizens. This suggests that Rawls's theory provides the basis for a very sweeping critique of existing economic and political institutions. In effect, the liberal theorist offers radical criticism of the existing order.

(Thomas Pogge's John Rawls: His Life and Theory of Justice has a good discussion of this topic.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 09:40PM (-04:00)

Area studies and social science theories

Wednesday, July 28, 2010



image: The ruins of Bagan, Myanmar

Understanding a particular place seems to involve a very specific kind of knowledge and research. It involves understanding the unique combination of historical circumstances, social processes, cultural formations, and unique institutions that give rise to the current complex social reality. And yet it also involves an effort to understand and explain the developments that are observed -- which implies some sort of appeal to social science theory. For the past four decades this space has been occupied by "area studies" -- Latin American studies, Asian studies, African studies.

Here is a nice 1998 paper by South Asian historian and former president of the Association for Asian Studies David Luddens on the epistemic foundations of area studies (link). Here is how Luddens formulates the issue:

The production of area-specific knowledge about the world has no firm theoretical foundation. It seems to be an intellectual by-product of modern state territorialism and of those state-supported institutions of area studies which became prominent during the heyday of the nation state, in the decades between 1945 and 1990. Area studies in the university find their official justification in itself because they effectively serve disciplines, professions, business and national interests. The rationale for area studies for itself derives from the need to understand the diversity of human experience, which is

increasingly embroiled in identity politics and debates about cultural pluralism. University administrators, legislators, and funding agencies now find the old rationale for area studies less compelling and institutional support for the production of area-specific knowledge depends more and more on its utility for academic globalization, as the university, like business and government, seeks to expand its operations around the world and to establish it own authority in global culture. Though scholars who produce area-specific knowledge are well endowed with talent and resources, they find it hard to adapt to this trend without sacrificing their old intellectual commitments, because they have such a weak theoretical justification for doing what they do. To sustain their enterprise, they need to theorize area-studies in relation to globalization. This is the first in a set of essays that work in that direction. It focuses on the institutional history of area studies in the long-term process of globalization. (1)
Here I'd like to focus on the relationship between area knowledge and disciplinary knowledge.

Area studies is in its nature an interdisciplinary assemblage, at two levels -- institutional and individual. For example, centers for Latin American studies commonly involve political scientists, anthropologists, literary specialists, art historians, and sociologists, each bringing a specific body of knowledge and inquiry to the collective effort. But furthermore, each individual area specialist is expected to show some degree of interdisciplinary knowledge in his or her research. This is the value-added provided by a center: individuals come together and gain insight from colleagues in other disciplines. It is commonly believed among area specialists that excessive focus on a single disciplinary perspective is likely to create a form of "aspect blindness" in the investigator -- the economic historian of China overlooks the cultural forces at work, the political scientist who studies Latin American populism may fail to see the influence of religious traditions, and so forth.

How should area studies specialists and historians employ general social theories in attempting to understand particular social and historical examples? How, for example, is social science theory pertinent to explaining the historical experience of India or Burma? In other words, how can we bring together the specific knowledge of area specialists and the more general knowledge of discipline-based social scientists?

Some theoretical frameworks -- the study of social movements, analysis of land tenure relations, analysis of local political power practices, analysis of local political traditions -- are plainly useful across studies of various societies. They offer good common questions -- so long as we recall that there are very different answers to these questions in different places and times. And they can provide suggestive ideas about the causal processes that may be underway in particular periods of social change.

One important goal of the use of social science theories is to help the researcher to arrive at descriptions of the particular institutions, traditions, mentalities, etc., through which various general factors are worked out -- to mediate the particular and the general. Social science theories provide developed conceptual schemes and vocabularies in terms of which to analyze the concrete social phenomena. What is a revolution? How does it differ from a coup or a fall of government? So social science theory is valuable as a source of ideas about how to organize and conceptualize the social given in a particular area.

Another critical contribution of the social sciences to area studies is the growing collection of common social mechanisms and processes that political scientists, sociologists, and economists have studied in detail. Social scientists aren't able to provide comprehensive

theories of society that can simply be "applied" to specific areas; there is no general theory of the state that would permit the Middle East specialist to understand and predict the behavior of the Syrian regime. But social scientists are able to identify mundane mid-level mechanisms that arise in politics, economies, and social movements; and these theories of specific mechanisms can be of great value to the area specialist. (This is a crucial contribution of Chuck Tilly's work; for example, Tilly and Tarrow, Contentious Politics.)

Consider one particular example -- the China area specialist who is trying to get a better understanding of changes in China's economic structure between 1980 and 2000. Findings having to do with the mechanisms of rent-seeking and corruption will probably shed important light on the developments; the mechanism of "bureaucratic clientelism" will be helpful; and mechanisms of social movements and labor mobilization will prove helpful as well. In one sense China's sudden economic transformation after the reforms of the early 1980s was *sui generis*. But it also consisted of a number of component processes that have been identified and studied in very different historical and cultural settings. (Jean Oi's State and Peasant in Contemporary China: The Political Economy of Village Government provides a good example.)

So there is an important sense in which the social sciences permit a basis for generalizing and explaining when we consider specific areas. But it is crucial to avoid the mistake of over-generalizing.

One such mistake is the idea that we can simply subsume a particular region's experience under a comprehensive general theory. In particular, we should avoid stereotyped contrasts and models of change: traditional-modern; capitalist-feudal; stagnant-dynamic. Constructs such as "modernization theory" are unhelpful, because they import a raft of unspoken presuppositions, they are teleological, and they are formulated at too high a level. Area specialists are better served by meso-level theories of social mechanisms. (Arturo Escobar offers a strong contemporary critique of modernization theory in Encountering Development.)

Another variety of faulty historical analysis is the intellectual error of Eurocentrism. It is critical that we not generalize from the experience of Western Europe in application to Asia or Africa. Consider the example of Asian politics. The polity of pre-colonial India was highly pluralistic, with a very wide and heterogeneous set of social relations, forms of power, ethnic conflicts, economic forms, and political and quasi-political arrangements. China, by contrast, was a more uniform political order, with a visible unified state. And neither of these states is well understood if we simply import the apparatus of political theory developed out of study of the modern European state. So there is great variety and originality in the political institutions of India, China, or Bali, and we cannot understand those institutions by simply attempting to find European analogies. (Bin Wong makes these points very powerfully in China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience.)

So area scholars have to aim for a delicate balance, between concrete, local knowledge and the application of relevant findings from the social sciences. But the social sciences certainly have a key role in understanding the institutions, mentalities, and behavior of particular places.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:11AM (-04:00)

Movements for social justice

Sunday, August 01, 2010



It was argued in an earlier post that social progress is best pursued through incremental, gradual steps that can be evaluated as we go along (post). It was also suggested that programs of change that are bent on achieving huge systemic change and the establishment of a complex new set of institutions are unwise, because of the contingency and unpredictability of social processes (post).

How should these ideas be tested against historical cases of large struggles for social justice -- for example, the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa or the Civil Rights movement in the early 1960s in the United States?

Several things are clear. First, both of these movements for racial justice aimed at -- and achieved -- large, discontinuous change in their home societies. Second, each involved strategies and struggles that were inherently risky: the probability of failure and suffering for participants was high. But third, the end state towards which these struggles aimed was not a highly complex, untested and novel set of institutions. Rather, each movement aimed at securing a system of law that treated black people equally and democratically -- a system whose properties we understand well. So no one could argue in 1955 in South Africa or Alabama that a system of democratic equality within a racially neutral system of law could have catastrophic unforeseen consequences.

In other words, the major civil rights struggles were risky with respect to strategies but low-risk with respect to possible outcomes. Racial equality is not a hazardous social reality.

But here is another salient point. Even if the range of possible outcomes of a struggle against apartheid or Jim Crow might include some social disasters, it is inconceivable that we would conclude that the black population should simply accept and endure its oppression. People who are subject to enduring injustice have a right to demand justice and to mobilize so as to bringing justice about.

One of the constraints I mentioned on social change in an earlier post is that we need to test proposed new institutions in terms of how they would work, given people as they are (post). But this is slightly questionable, in that it takes existing social consciousness as a given rather than being itself an object of change.

In particular, a successful outcome of either of these struggles entailed changing more than laws and institutions; each required a change of consciousness and morality in the white population of power-holders. If the majority of the white population had remained violently racist, then democratic racial equality may not have been a sustainable social order. (This is the kind of scenario that Michael Mann takes up in The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing.) So a strategy for change required changing both structures and consciousness. And this means that we have to be reflective about what sorts of factors we take as fixed rather than changeable.

This also implies a change of emphasis in the analysis of social progress argued previously. Some crucial advances in social justice have been anything but continuous and gradual; but have rather been daring, improbable, and crucial. Being deliberative about strategies of social change does not imply being slow to act or reluctant to take on large challenges.

The Real Utopias project has done really interesting and important work on new ideas about democracy and new thinking about ending economic exploitation and class power (link, link). What this project hasn't done yet is to address issues of racism and persistent racial inequity. And yet this is a pressing issue, in the United States and other countries. It would be great to see some of these activist-scholars turn their attention to racial progress.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:07AM (-04:00)

How many Geertz's?

Wednesday, August 04, 2010



Clifford Geertz's contributions are wide-ranging, in a couple of ways. He wrote about North Africa as well as Indonesia; and he touched on Islam as well as water systems. So there was both geographical as well as topical diversity in his research life. But here is another dimension of range: Geertz demonstrated a surprisingly wide variation of methodology and theoretical framework in his many studies of Indonesia. I am particularly struck by the conceptual distance between two important studies of Bali and Java. Both these studies are relevant to long processes of economic and social development. But the perspectives taken are quite divergent. (Geertz provides an appealing account of his early career in Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics.)
The first is Geertz's 1963 book, Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia, and the second is his 1981 book, Negara: The Theatre State In Nineteenth-Century Bali. The first is a close and detailed reading of agricultural practices in Java. Geertz examines the progression and the social and ecological settings of two major agricultural regimes -- *swidden* and *sawah* (slash and burn and rice paddy). It is a material ethnography, spending a great deal of effort on the nature of labor practices and the ecological setting of agriculture. It is historical, looking to identify the ways in which the Dutch colonial regime and rising population produced a distinctive social-cultural response in agricultural society. And it provides an enduring thought paradigm for understanding traditional agriculture, the idea of involution. This is basically the idea of a fine division of task to assure a place for every working adult within the farm economy.
With the steady growth of population came also the elaboration and extension of mechanisms through which agricultural product was spread, if not altogether evenly, at least relatively so, throughout the huge human horde which was obliged to subsist on it. Under the pressure of increasing numbers and limited resources Javanese village society did not bifurcate, as did that of so many other "underdeveloped" nations, into a group of large landlords and a group of oppressed near-serfs. Rather it maintained a

comparatively high degree of social and economic homogeneity by dividing the economic pie into a steadily increasing number of minute pieces. (Geertz 1963:97)

The productive system of the post-traditional village developed, therefore, into a dense web of finely spun work rights and work responsibilities spread, like the reticulate veins of the hand, throughout the whole body of the village lands. (Geertz 1963:99)

This is a strikingly materialist treatment of rural Javanese society, with essentially no symbolic interpretation. Here is how Geertz describes the book in 1991 (link):

The book was originally intended as a prolegomena to a general analysis of Indonesian society. But after I published it, such a project seemed premature, so I more or less set it aside and addressed myself to a series of other issues in Indonesian sociology. As a result, its very close relation to my work overall has tended to go unnoticed, and the book has become something of an orphan with a special history of its own.

The second book is very different. *Negara* is a thoroughly symbolic interpretation of Balinese politics and local life, and organizes its gaze through interpretation of the semiotics and history of the "theatre state." Here is one passage in which Geertz describes his view:

The expressive nature of the Balinese state was apparent through the whole of its known history, for it was always pointed not toward tyranny, whose systematic concentration of power it was incompetent to effect, and not even very methodically toward government, which it pursued indifferently and hesitantly, but rather toward spectacle, toward ceremony, toward the public dramatization of the ruling obsessions of Balinese culture: social inequality and status pride. (2)

This study is a great example of symbolic or interpretive anthropology; countless aspects of Balinese social life, behavior, and architecture are interpreted in terms of the ideas associated with the theatre state. But the book also gives a lot of attention to some of the social-material aspects of social life in Bali. Particularly interesting is Geertz's treatment of the control of irrigation water through a set of channels and gates. And this part is an exquisite example of micro-analysis of social coordination. Where the two narratives come together is in the role of symbolic hierarchy in organizing both systems.

One thing that I find interesting about the pair of books, beyond the detailed content, is the remarkable distance in thought frames that they represent. They almost give the impression of being the product of different authors. So what explains this distance? One piece of the answer is simply time. *Agricultural Involution* was researched and written in the 1960s, drawing on fieldwork from the 1950s, when Geertz was a young anthropologist. *Negara* was written in the 1980s, following the extensive development of Geertz's pathbreaking ethnographic ideas of the 1970s. So a part of the difference between the two books is simply the result of the growth and development of Geertz's ideas. But I think the two books support something else as well: that really great social scientists are not captive to their own intellectual presuppositions. It is possible for a Geertz or a Sahlins to treat a topic in a way that represents a fresh approach, an innovative set of ideas.

Another book of Geertz's that I find very interesting is Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia (1968). This work is different from each of these examples -- and again provides a strikingly original contribution to the task of thinking culture. Here again there is also a critical contribution that is useful in many areas of the social sciences: Islam is not a single, unified "thing" across the many Islamic societies and communities in which it exists. It is valuable to probe in specific detail some of the distinguishing characteristics of Islam in North Africa and in Indonesia; and the finding of heterogeneity is one that applies to a much wider swath of behavior, consciousness, and culture than simply religion.

Here is a superb archive of almost all of Geertz's corpus (link). (Thanks to Isaac for the

link!)

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:30AM (-04:00)

Links between literature and the social sciences

Saturday, August 07, 2010



Some novelists take as part of their task the description and evocation of certain social realities. James Baldwin captured one slice of African-American life in the 1950s and 60s. Tim O'Brien captured aspects of infantry life in Vietnam in The Things They Carried. And Tolstoy caught much about social attitudes and relations in elite Russia at a certain time and place. We could interpret these sorts of novels "realistically" and ask a range of questions about them: how accurate are they? Do they leave out important aspects of the picture? And what was the epistemic location of the author, such that he/she could claim to observe and portray accurately?

If we take this function of literature seriously, then it is natural to ask how this creative act relates to various areas of the social sciences. Does the knowledge offered by Baldwin complement the work of sociologists and historians of race in America? And, for that matter, can the realistically-minded novelist find valuable synergy in the research of historians and sociologists?

These questions are taken especially seriously by critics who are developing the framework of "critical realism", including especially Satya Mohanty. Particularly valuable is Identity Politics Reconsidered (Future of Minority Studies), edited by Linda Alcoff, Satya Mohanty and Michael Hames-Garcia. The topic is a core concern for the Future of Minority Studies project (link).

So, what about it? Can a work of fiction have realistic, referential content? Is a novel sometimes an empirical statement? Can a fictional character truthfully represent aspect of what it is like to be black in America, South Asian in Manchester, or gay in a suburban Illinois high school? For that matter, can a novel be faulted for "getting it wrong" -- for example, for representing an American Muslim as being completely oblivious to issues of racism? Or is "right" and "wrong" out of place when it comes to evaluating the relationship between a novel and the world?

Here is one possible answer: fiction is always fiction, and normally does not have empirical validity. If we want to make empirical statements about social relations, class attitudes, or typical social values of specific groups, we need to do so based on valid methods of social research: surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations of behavior. And we need to analyze the data we collect according to valid methods of aggregation and inference. That is what is required in order to arrive at **knowledge** about the social world.

Another very different response goes along these lines. Novelists are sometimes skilled

social observers, and some of these are also skilled "painters" or evokers of what they have seen. A great novelist can pull together his/her many insights and observations into a powerful description of a fictional world or experience that captures an important sociological truth about the society depicted. So these novelists do in fact gain knowledge of social life through observation, and they represent that knowledge through the fiction they produce. Both parts of this epistemic process are subject to criticism; but both are valid knowledge practices.

According to the second view, readers have the possibility of gaining real knowledge about the social world through the novel. Seen in this way, a novelist is somewhat akin to an ethnographer, trying to make sense of a complex system of behaviors and meanings and expressing his/her findings in a way that is truthful to the social reality observed.
It seems that one would have to be a pretty narrow-minded epistemologist to hold that there is only one kind of knowledge, and that literature necessarily falls outside its bounds. This might have been credible when the program of logical empiricism still seemed possible -- that there are observations that can be unambiguously arrived at, and that theories are evaluated through a specific logic of confirmation marshaling a domain of observations in support of hypothetical statements. But this epistemology doesn't work well even in the sciences. And within the framework of an anti-foundationalist epistemology, it seems reasonable enough to believe that literature has the potential of revealing important aspects of the social world.
This brings us back to the question of linkage between literature and the social sciences. If we think that *Platoon* or *The Things They Carried* express some important truth about the nature of the experience of that war for American soldiers, this suggests the possibility of framing other sorts of social-science investigations to probe the extent and variation of these characteristics on the ground. In other words, there is a simple kind of synergy that can exist between novelists, sociologists, and historians, when it comes to framing interpretations and explanations of a complex social reality, and designing further empirical studies to evaluate and qualify these findings.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:00AM (-04:00)

Rousseau the democrat

Tuesday, August 10, 2010



Rousseau's political philosophy probably represents the richest and most adequate view of the moral foundations of the state of any of the great figures in the history of political thought. But it is also complex and opaque. Rousseau is usually cast as falling within the social contract tradition, according to which the legitimacy of the state depends on the hypothetical consent of the governed. This puts him in discussion with Hobbes and Locke. But he had substantive and radical ideas about freedom and equality that separate him sharply from these British theorists. His ideas about freedom and equality made him a prime candidate for the title, "philosopher of the French Revolution". He offered a sometimes mysterious theory of the "general will" as the central focus of politics; but philosophers have offered wildly different interpretations of the

meaning of this concept. And, unlike Locke, Hobbes, or Mill, Rousseau had an elaborate theory of psychology -- the motivations that lead social actors to behave as they do and the processes of social construction through which they come to have these characteristics. This theory appears to fit into his social philosophy, but it isn't perfectly clear how.

It is for these reasons that Josh Cohen's recently published Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals is such an important contribution. The book is an exceptional achievement. Cohen offers a coherent, developed interpretation of Rousseau's theory; he provides clear statements of the central ideas and shows how they tie together; and he makes use of virtually all of Rousseau's enormous corpus to tease out Rousseau's intricate line of thought. Cohen demonstrates that Rousseau's theory is not simply a series of aphorisms, but is rather a detailed and subtle logical argument, with premises and inferences that can be rigorously reconstructed. It is a full philosophy of politics. Most basically, Cohen shows how philosophical principles, institutional assumptions, and psychological theories are intended to tie together into a coherent view of a democratic society.

This is an enormously difficult task to have accomplished. Just take the Social Contract as your starting point and you are inclined to emphasize chiefly the relations between institutions and freedom. Just take Emile or the Confessions as the point of origin and the emphasis will be on the individual's development. And if you begin with the more applied parts of Rousseau's work -- the constitution for Poland, for example -- and you are likely enough to get lost in a forest of institutional details. In other words -- three Rousseau's. Cohen has paid close attention to all these components of Rousseau's thought, and he has succeeded in showing how they all contribute to a single, coherent line of thought.

The key idea in Cohen's construction is the notion of a "free community of equals." (This is also the subtitle of the book.) Each part of the phrase demands analysis -- equality, freedom, and community, and unpacking them provides a basis for a nuanced and powerful political philosophy. The phrase also invokes the central problem of political philosophy, the contradiction between security and freedom: how is it possible to find personal security within a state (and therefore being subject to coercive laws), while fully maintaining one's freedom and autonomy? Here is how Cohen puts the solution he attributes to Rousseau:

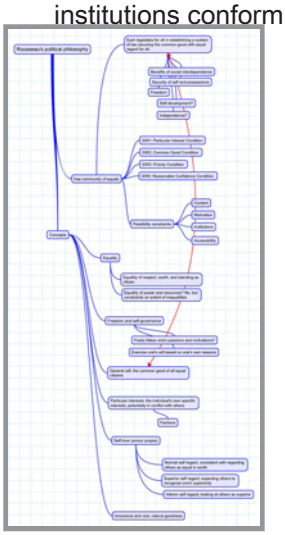
The essential point about content is that Rousseau's solution requires that individuals commit to regarding themselves as belonging to a political community whose members are committed to regarding one other as equals: acknowledging one another as political equals, with equal status in establishing the laws; recognizing one another as equally subject to the laws; and agreeing to regulate their association by reference to reasons of the common good, which gives equal weight to the good of each citizen. (Kindle loc 221) This formulation captures every element of the solution: equality, the common good, and a consequent situation of full autonomy. The citizen is autonomous (self-legislating) because he/she has willed the creation of exactly this system of law. The common good referred to here is the "general will"; and Cohen makes a good case for understanding that this concept is one that comes down to the individual perceiving and willing outcomes that serve the whole of the citizenry.

Citizens also have their own particular interests; so the situation described here, where all citizens give priority to the common good over their particular interests is one that requires a fairly specific bundle of institutions and motivations. And Cohen demonstrates

that Rousseau methodically explores these institutional and behavioral requirements.

Cohen analyzes the idea of a community as being regulated by the general will into a conjunction of four conditions:

- GW1 Particular Interest Condition [citizens have separate, particular interests]
- GW2 Common Good Condition [citizens publicly share a common understanding of the common good]
- GW3 Priority Condition [each citizen gives priority to reasons having to do with the common good over those concerning particular interests]
- GW4 Reasonable Confidence Condition [citizens can be confident that their institutions conform to their shared conception of the common good]



It is evident that these are strong conditions. So it is incumbent on Rousseau (and Cohen) to demonstrate that they are singly possible and jointly consistent. If these points cannot be established, then the idea of a general will is useless. If the conditions are possible and consistent, then there is a further question to investigate: what empirical conditions (institutions, processes of individual moral development) are needed to establish and sustain them?

Another fascinating line of thought in the book is Cohen's attempt to reconstruct Rousseau's argument for the "natural goodness" of the human being. It is a complex argument and one I found highly convincing as an interpretation of Rousseau. And the issue is simply crucial; if this argument cannot be made out, then the free community of equals is an impossibility.

Much of Cohen's work here is that of philosophical reconstruction: what were Rousseau's positions and reasons? This is descriptive work, and doesn't require that Cohen evaluate the theory. (In fact, we can ask the question whether this is simply a hypothetical reconstruction of a Rousseau-like theory, or whether we are to understand that Rousseau actually had these logical connections and explications clearly in mind.) But beyond the explicative work, it is plain that there is much in Rousseau's conceptions of equality, freedom, participation, and democracy that Cohen admires deeply and regards as fruitful for contemporary discussions of democracy. There are also a few important threads that he is distinctly not pleased by: in particular, the exclusion of women, of course, and Rousseau's sometimes incipient communitarianism. The latter makes for the possibility of an ethnically or nationalistically grounded community, rather than a community of simple moral equals. And Rousseau sometimes seems to suggest that only a highly uniform community is likely to satisfy the conditions above -- a discouraging finding for those of us interested in a creating a democratic, multicultural world.

There is a particularly important meta-level point that emerges from Cohen's book and that seems to be fully embedded in Rousseau's thought process: the importance of addressing the question of social justice in full detail from three interrelated perspectives. We need a convincing set of moral principles that help to define what the most important features of a just society are. We need an analysis of some of the institutional requirements that these principles present; an idea of the kinds of institutions that could satisfy the principles. And we need an analysis of human psychology -- both the fixed parts and the malleable parts -- that would either support or undermine these institutions and principles. In other words, social philosophy requires a concrete study of institutions and psychology if we are to succeed in arriving at convincing and practical models of a

good society. And Rousseau seems to have understood this imperative in greater detail than other contributors to the traditions of political philosophy.

Here is a schematic representation of major parts of Cohen's analysis of Rousseau:
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:34PM (-04:00)

Anthropology as a discipline

Thursday, August 12, 2010



Several posts have focused recently on the meandering pathways through which the social science disciplines have developed in the past century or so -- within and across nations (link, link). Anthropology is a particularly interesting example because of its proximity to power and empire. And Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Arturo Escobar's recent World Anthropologies: Disciplinary Transformations in Systems of Power (Wenner-Gren International Symposium Series) (2006) is a good place to start.

Ribeiro and Escobar are primarily interested in the question of "internationalizing" anthropology. The volume came out of an important conference on the topic sponsored by the the Wenner-Gren Foundation in 2003. The question of internationalization is relevant to anthropology in two separate ways: in terms of *content* (local or exotic), and in terms of *organizational structure* (a few core centers in the metropole, versus a large and diffuse research community across the globe). Ribeiro and Escobar are interested in incorporating the anthropological research traditions that have developed in the developing world into a more comprehensive and adequate world anthropology for the future. They are certainly right that there is much to be learned by looking in detail at some of the ways that social observers in Africa, Asia, or Latin America have sought to describe and theorize distinctive communities. And their premise of the non-linearity of the development of anthropology is exactly right as well. There is no "best" ethnography, methodology, or anthropological theory within which to organize observation and explanation of the social world.

Several chapters in the volume are particularly interesting; and none more so than Eduardo Archetti's detailed and nuanced telling of the story of anthropology and ethnography in France since roughly 1900. The inclusion of France in this volume's discussion of core and periphery in scientific anthropology is of course initially surprising; but it makes sense in context. Part of the story of France falls squarely in the core of the discipline; but another part falls in the periphery of the science. Archetti links his discussion to several important recent histories of anthropology that are interesting in their own right: Thomas Eriksen and Finn Nielsen (A History of Anthropology), Alan Barnard (History and Theory in Anthropology), and Robert Layton (An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology).

What Archetti finds is that there is a standard way of telling the story of French anthropology. It begins with Durkheim and Mauss and culminates in Levi-Strauss and Godelier; it is long on theory, and it interweaves periodically with the interests of the French colonial state. The standard account emphasizes the important role played by

French thinkers in constructing theoretical frameworks for comprehending cultures. And the standard history links French anthropology to the international concerns represented by France's colonial possessions. Archetti quotes Lévy-Bruhl's arguments to this effect on the occasion of the establishment of the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Paris in 1925 (117):

The first and most central of the natural resources is the indigenous population, because the other resources are dependent on it, above all in tropical regions. Does not there exist a capital interest in studying it, in a methodical way, in order to get an exact and deep knowledge of its languages, religions, and social organization, which it is not prudent to destroy irresponsibly? (Lévy-Bruhl 1925: 1)

But Archetti argues that this story of French anthropology is too simple by half. What it leaves out is crucial: the development of several traditions of regional and ethnic studies within France that were slighted with the label "folkloric." And it turns out that a number of figures within that group of traditions should be given much more attention in the history of anthropology than they have received to date. The presumption is that anthropology is concerned with the external and the exotic; and that the study of indigenous French traditions and communities is pedestrian and uninteresting. It is ethnology rather than ethnography. But this assumption is false.

Archetti singles out several figures for particular attention. Arnold van Gennep is one figure largely overlooked in the standard narrative, particularly when it comes to recognizing and extending his studies of French rural communities (114). Other figures who are marginalized are Louis Dumont, Michel Leiris, and Marcele Griaule. The latter two figures come in for more extensive treatment because of their "de-centered" treatment of anthropology (119). Griaule and Leiris were students of Mauss but did not define their efforts in terms of the formulation or elaboration of theoretical ideas. Leiris presented his African ethnographic work, *L'Afrique fantôme* in a literary form influenced by surrealism; it jarred against the ideal of dispassionate description. And Griaule's ethnography also had a deep thread of the subjective and the anti-general. Archetti quotes James Clifford's assessment of Griaule with approval: "One hears, as it were, two full chords of a Dogon symphony: a mythic explanation of the cosmos and a native theory of language and expressivity" (119). This implies that there is as much of Griaule as the Dogon in the treatment. But, Archetti suggests, both these French ethnographers captured themes of interpretation and styles of presentation that were to become important in later ethnography. "*L'Afrique fantome* is a powerful book precisely because it is centered on the explicit recognition of the subjectivity of the ethnographer" (121).

Dumont is important in Archetti's account, not for his studies of South Asia, but for his detailed studies of some specific French settings.

La Tarasque is a complex and unorthodox monograph consisting of ethnographic findings based on observations of the ritual of the feast of the dragon in the village of Tarascon, a detailed oral history of its legends, the results of exhaustive historical archival work, and a detailed iconographic presentation. (124)

Here is Archetti's explanation of Dumont's significance:

My main aim with this brief examination of *La Tarasque* is to contextualize the question of centers and peripheries with a focus on the anthropology of France and its internationalization. It is clear that the rich tradition of studies of France by ethnologists, ethnographers, and folklorists initiated before World War II remained "local" and was not integrated into the creation of an international discipline in which the "more exotic and

extreme non-European others" were privileged. (124)
Several points of interest come out of Archetti's discussion and the volume more generally. First has to do with the history of attempts to define the subject matter of anthropology through the focus on "exotic" non-western cultures. In hindsight, this is a distinction that makes no sense at all. The cultures, norms, religions, practices, and local preoccupations of an Alsatian village or a Detroit neighborhood are no more transparent than their counterparts in the Andaman Islands or the high Andes. And detailed observation and ethnographic investigation will reveal much of great interest in any of these locations. What is "exotic" is obviously a question of the familiar and one's initial perspective. So it is not in the least bit surprising that anthropology in the west has turned its attention to topics like "household practices in Soviet cities" or "nuclear weapons designers as a norm-driven community." Dissolving the notion of the exotic is a natural step.

Second, the notion that anthropology needs a few grand theories around which to organize its work is likewise bogus. The grand theories -- structural-functionalism, Freudianism, Marxism, rational choice theory -- simply can't be used as a formula in terms of which to understand a society or a culture as a whole. This isn't to say that theories are irrelevant to the investigation of communities; but they must be brought to bear in partial ways, not as general comprehensive schemes of interpretation.

Third, I suppose we might be just as skeptical about the availability of universal "ethnographic" methods. Once again, this isn't meant to doubt the need for intellectual rigor in observation and interpretation -- only to doubt that there is or should be a single best way of studying a human social groups. Objectivity qnd intellectual rigor cannot be defined simply as "adherence to the XYZ method of ethnographic observation." Ethnographic investigation can afford to be eclectic and multi-methodological; in fact, it can't afford anything else.

And finally, I think that Archetti's retelling of the story of French anthropology probably sheds light on the multiple nature of the development of scientific traditions everywhere. Many false starts, many promising avenues that were simply abandoned, and a real plurality of insightful approaches that don't cumulate to a simple, linear story.

(There is an interesting connection between this narrative of anthropology in France and the early relation of the *Annales* school to local histories of regions in France; link.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:15AM (-04:00)

Rawls on Rousseau 1973, 1975

Saturday, August 14, 2010

As noted in an earlier post, John Rawls delivered a fundamentally important course on the history of political philosophy at Harvard throughout much of his career. (See the earlier post for more about the course and for a set of notes on the section on Marx.) The 1973 course followed these main topics:



1. The nature of political philosophy
2. Natural law and contract theory. [kinds of natural law doctrines; Locke's account of political obligation; Hume's critique of contract theory; Rousseau's theory of the General Will]
3. The notion of the original position
4. Some principles of justice
5. J. S. Mill
6. Marx

Readers of my post on Josh Cohen's excellent recent book on Rousseau (Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals) may be interested in these course notes I took as a graduate student in Rawls's course. Cohen points out how important Rawls's lectures on this subject were for the formation of his own understanding of Rousseau. The notes are not detailed enough to give a full picture of Rawls's interpretation of Rousseau; but they give an idea of the issues he highlighted as well as an indication of how he related Rousseau's views to his own arguments in A Theory of Justice.

I attended the 1973 version of the course as a graduate student and served as a teaching assistant in the 1975 version of the course. So I have two sets of notes for most of the course, and it is interesting to compare them. (Here is a PDF document that presents the two sets of lectures side-by-side for easier comparison.)

Several things stand out upon reading both versions of the lectures. First is a very high degree of consistency between the two years. Rawls clearly worked from a very detailed lecture outline; the same topics occur in the same order, with the same breaking point between lecture 1 and lecture 2. Second, there is a great deal of consistency of content as well. Rawls's explanations of the general will, the well-ordered society, the central problem of the social contract, and the role of unanimity and voting are essentially the same in the two series. Even a somewhat puzzling statement in 1973 -- "The 'system' of the world has a general will; its object is the law of nature." -- recurs in 1975: "The law of nature is the general will of the universe." Third, both series indicate Rawls's interest in relating Rousseau's ideas to his own constructions in *A Theory of Justice*.

Finally, the availability of two independent sets of notes from different years gives some basis for judging Rawls's meaning at various points. For example, when Rawls asks, "What does the general will will?", he answers "the public good" and "justice". But Rousseau doesn't write that "the general will wills justice"; so we have to ask what Rawls means by this. The fact that he repeats the assertion in both years indicates that he has something specific in mind. And it would appear that the connection in his mind proceeds

through the idea of the well-ordered society (again, not a concept that Rousseau uses but one that is critical in Rawls's own thinking).
A synthesis of Rawls's lectures on the history of political philosophy over a number of years is provided in Samuel Freeman's edition of Rawls's lectures in Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy.

A core text for the course was Ernest Barker, ed., *Social Contract: Essays by Locke, Hume, and Rousseau*, which includes the full text of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Here is a link to the G. D. H. Cole translation of the *Social Contract*.

John Rawls, History of Political Philosophy, Phil 171, fall 1973 and 1975

[The following are notes taken by Daniel Little; they were intended to capture Rawls's formulations of the main points presented in the lecture. Text in red is from the 1975 lectures, and text in black is from the 1973 lectures.]

[Quoting Rawls:]

Rousseau. If inequalities are between property owners and non-property owners, giving rise to political differences, it is hard to see that the have-nots have equal opportunity. Especially if the contract view allows for entrenching of privileged class and restricts equality of opportunity.

Like Locke, Rousseau offers a complex view. We will look at one aspect of the Social Contract, with an explicitly narrow approach.

Rousseau, The Social Contract. The General Will. What is the general will the will of? Every association of people is held together by some common interest. (The "system" of the world has a general will; its object is the law of nature.) Within a political association each sub-association has a general will. This is a theory of associations as general-will-bearing agents. The general will is the general will of the political association. It is the will of the public person or body politic. When active, it is the will of the sovereign. An act of sovereignty is the declaration of the General Will. The general will is the will of the citizen -- i.e. as a rational person not determined by his particularity.

The general will. Here is a question: what is it the will of? Every human association has a general will. As long as people identify themselves as belonging to a group having a common aim, the resulting group has a general will. The law of nature is the general will of the universe. If we think of factions within associations, each of them has a general will also; but this is a particular will with respect to the whole association. Normally an association has procedures for making up its collective mind. The general will is the general will of the association established by the Social Contract of the body politic. The declaration of the General Will is the act of sovereignty.

The general will is the will of each person qua member of the association. It is the will that each person would have if they were rational, undeceived, unbiased, undistracted by private interests. We can identify three selves: self as member of political community, self as member of sub-association, and self as private individual.

What does the general will will? The common good -- i.e. the good of the public person, just as private will wills the private advantage. The general will wills justice (I.4.4 [perhaps a reference to TJ I.4, "The Original Position and Justification"]). It wills the

preservation of the whole and every part. In the social contract the person only alienates as much of his liberty as is necessary for the sovereign to rule.

Political economy (P114 [*perhaps a reference to TJ V.41, "The Concept of Justice in Political Economy"*]). The general will wills justice. *The Original Position.* To ascertain the general will, conditions lead each person to put himself in the place of all others. The general will is therefore the will of all, and applies to all. It must be general in purpose and nature: spring from all and apply to all.

The general will always extends to what is right (but it may be deceived or misinformed).

What does the general will will? It wills the common good, public interest, justice. The general will aims at the preservation and welfare of the whole and every part. This is related to the fact that in the social contract each alienates only so much of his liberty as relates to the community as a whole. This creates authority within limits. (2:4:3) The general will wills justice. It is the most just of wills. To be certain of following the general will it is enough to act justly. Why is the general will right even if not always enlightened? Happiness of everyone qua citizen is wished for by everyone.

In voting no one fails to take "each" to refer to himself. This proves a notion of rights derives from a predilection to oneself. (2:4:4) Qua rational citizens what we are to do is to adopt a certain general point of view. The general will wills justice from adopting the perspective of the citizen as citizen.

By what acts does the general will act? It acts and expresses itself through enactments of basic laws -- particularly through decrees that set up fundamental conventions. It can set up privileges, but it cannot decide who gets them by name. The object of the general will is general.

By what acts does the general will act? It acts in the form of general laws and enactments. These are enactments of a constitutional sort: basic legislative agreements; fundamental laws that regulate the form of a regime.

Book II, chapter iii (link). Institutional questions. Under what conditions is it likely that the general will will express itself? No large public interests affecting voting. No coalitions. A vote is a statement of opinion, not an expression of interest or desire. As a vote approaches unanimity it tends to come closer to the expression of the general will.

The original position is a way of articulating conditions for the expression of the general will. The book describes a well-ordered society.

Institutional expression of the general will. What each citizen would will if rational, etc. We want to work out what form of institutional expression would do this. Consider the contrast between the will of all vs. general will. Former: what everyone would will if their sectional or personal interests ruled. Optimal conditions for establishing the general will within an association:

1. No large sectional interests which affect general deliberations, and personal interests cancel out and leave the vote unaffected. 2:3:1-2
2. No communication or mutual influence in deliberation. No coalitions. 2:3:2
3. Rules of order ensure that the question is perfectly put. What is most of interest of this political association?
4. Assurance that we get expression of the general will comes from unanimity or

approximate unanimity.

5. Every vote has to be counted and no one is excluded. No classes are excluded by constitution.
6. People have to be reliably informed.

The more these conditions are satisfied, the greater our assurance that the outcomes of votes is an expression of the general will. The more important and serious the matter, the greater the need for unanimity. The social contract must be unanimous.

[continued on second lecture]

Last time: What would the conditions have to be for an enactment to represent the general will?

The general will is the will of persons qua citizen. How are we to determine this will? (1) No large private interests should determine action; rather, many small interests which cancel out (II:iii). The notion of the original position is designed to represent the same idea.

One can view the society of the original contract as a description of a well-ordered society. [*"A well-ordered society is one designed to advance the good of its members and effectively regulated by a public conception of justice" (TJ chap VIII, sect 69).*] What are the characteristics of this view in Rousseau? The general will is not historical, but rather a sociological fact. The conditions of the general will must be expressed in institutional form. Rousseau's society is a natural rights type of society.

What is the content of the general will? Rousseau doesn't say in sufficient detail what the general will wills. He depends upon social institutions and education to bring about the general will, rather than trying to sketch it out a priori. But one would like at least to know what the general principles are which govern the general will.

Describing a well-ordered society: an association having some conception of the common good which has public institutional expression. Public conception of justice, as expressed in institutional enactments.

We can supplement Rousseau by trying to see what these principles might be. The principles must satisfy a mutual advantage condition. Rousseau doesn't explore details, however.

What is Rousseau's special contribution to contract theory? It is clear in Rousseau that the social contract is not historical; not a sequence of actual agreements, as Locke seems to suggest. Rather, it represents conditions on any well-ordered society.

The general will as an interest that exists in every citizen. It is the basis upon which people decide how to vote or what is in the common interest. It is Rousseau's view that these conditions are realized and secure.

It is a natural rights view of some sort. Rousseau thinks of society as generating in people as they grow up a general will. That interest then determines their public reasoning. This leads them to act as the general will requires them to act, in conjunction with other interests. The society of the social contract is therefore stable. Rousseau does not discuss what the possible conceptions are of justice. Are they many or few?

Rousseau notes a hierarchy of interests: citizen qua citizen, citizen qua bourgeois, citizen qua individual. The object of the general will is the constitutional form, that of the particular is the individual's own private goals. The higher interests regulate the lower ones. These interests need to be articulated. There is no contradiction between say willing as citizen to establish a law and say willing as individual to avoid the application of the law in my own case. Rawls's four-stage sequence in Chapter 4 of A Theory of Justice is designed to provide much the same kind of articulation of interests.

Another notion in Rousseau is a hierarchy of interests. The self is not an aggregate of interests, but rather a structure. We have interests of different orders. Higher order interests are interests having other lower-order interests. E.g. an interest or desire not to have compulsive sensuous desires. To get rid of desire we might take specific actions. Higher order interests in some way regulate the growth of lower-order desires. How does Rousseau use this notion? The general will is the highest order desire. It is not necessarily the strongest; this is a logical characteristic rather than a measure of strength. Highest order desire is the most fundamental; it regulates all others.

We might now discuss Rousseau's fundamental problem: how to find an institutional form which protects the interests of each with the weight of all and yet also leaves each autonomous and as free as before. We may interpret his solution in terms of justice. (1) Each person alienates himself totally and his rights to the whole community and the public conception of justice. This means everyone gives himself absolutely to be regulated by the public conception of justice. (2) The giving of oneself is unconditional; no one is independent of the normative force of the public conception. (3) In giving oneself to the community, he gives himself to no one. There is no one in a superior relation to him; justice is mutual. (Book 1, chap 6, paragraphs 4, 6-8; link)

The central problem of the social contract may be thought to have the following solution. The problem: How to form an association which protects all without losing freedom. Each totally alienates all his rights and freedom to the whole association absolutely and without qualification. When the association conforms to the general will it is all right. If the association is seen as regulated by the common good, then what Rousseau says can be satisfied.

No one then has any rights except those defined by this conception of justice or the common good. Each person in giving himself to the community gives himself to no one. Everyone does the same, and everyone has the same rights. Giving oneself over to being regulated by the notion of the common good.

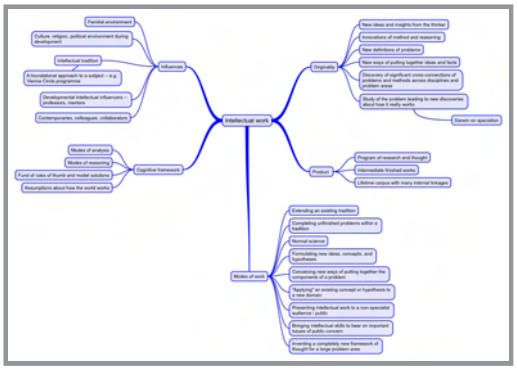
I-8: being forced to be free. This addresses a concern with the free-rider problem. People may agree that rules are fair but prefer to be an exception. They can be compelled to comply with fair rules. Justice defines rights and defines equal freedoms.

Posted by Daniel Little at 03:26PM (-04:00)

Intellectual work

Tuesday, August 17, 2010





It is interesting to think about the work that intellectuals do. Basically, they take on thought problems -- what is justice? How does a market economy work? Why do used cars sell for less than their real value? They gather the theories and hypotheses that they have encountered and studied. They look for a new avenue of approach to the problem. They make use of styles of analysis and reasoning they have acquired during their development and education. And they formulate and develop their own attempts at a solution to a problem.

There are some intellectuals -- Descartes, for example -- who present themselves as starting *de novo*; framing a problem in purely abstract, logical terms, and addressing it through first principles alone. Possibly the philosopher mathematician Gottlob Frege falls in this category as well. He asked, "What are the foundations of arithmetic?" And he presented a constructive logical account of how the truths of arithmetic can be derived from a small set of axioms. So these thinkers pretend to a "pure thought" approach to intellectual work. But in fact, this claim doesn't hold up even in these cases. Both Descartes and Frege existed within traditions of thought; the questions they posed had historical roots, and the methods they use were historically conditioned as well.

The diagram above represents a stylized description of intellectual work: influences, an embodied cognitive framework ("skill"), important elements of originality, and a product. The diagram also provides, at the bottom, a highly incomplete inventory of some of the ways in which intellectuals proceed in their work: extending and transforming existing frameworks, introducing novel elements, crossing intellectual domains, and bringing ideas into the public arena.

This puts intellectual work into a certain kind of frame: tradition and influences; problem formulations; invention and creativity; and a new intellectual product -- a theory of justice, a theory of general equilibrium, a market for lemons. It is "work" in the Marxian sense: it begins with certain materials; the materials are shaped and transformed according to the skills and plans of the worker; the worker's skills are themselves an historical product; and the results reflect both tradition and creativity.

This analysis doesn't cover every kind of intellectual work; it doesn't fit the creation of literature, for example. But it seems to fit philosophy, social theory, the early parts of the natural sciences, and even theology.

To the extent this scheme fits an area of thought, we can then address the question of a particular thinker's contributions from several angles: looking for influences, looking for specific modes of thinking, looking for flashes of genuine originality, and looking at

finished theories. In other words, we can think of the task of *intellectual biography* through the lens of this analysis of the mature thinker's work, and the arc of development that can be perceived in his/her lifetime corpus.
So, for the individual intellectual, we can ask questions at various points of entry. **First**, can we say what some of this thinker's fundamental cognitive assumptions are. Can we identify the modes of investigation, analysis, and reasoning that he/she pursued? **Second**, can we trace backwards to some of the difference-making influences that shaped the intellectual's agenda? What was the tradition of thought into which he/she was introduced through early reading and education? Who were some of the charismatic individuals who helped this intellectual to establish a perspective and an intellectual framework? **Third**, what can we discover internally to the corpus? Is there a visible evolution of thought over time? Are there ideas and assumptions that give the corpus coherence from beginning to end? Can the corpus be reformulated into a consistent and innovative approach to a large set of problems?

Several books recently discussed in other postings are relevant to this question of the development of an intellectual. One is Clifford Geertz's autobiographical essay in Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics. Another is the biographical essay of John Rawls provided by Tom Pogge in John Rawls: His Life and Theory of Justice. Geertz highlights many of the categories mentioned here: exposure to a few influential figures in his undergraduate years, the experience of World War II, his exposure to Indonesia as a graduate student, ... Geertz's work is highly original; nonetheless, we can go some ways towards teasing out some of the ways that his mature perspectives were influenced by his educational and personal experiences. And likewise, Pogge's essay on Rawls's development as a child, youth, and adult sheds a very interesting light on Rawls's intellectual style as a mature philosopher.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:11PM (-04:00)

Economics and the historian

Thursday, August 19, 2010



What are some of the important ways in which economic analysis is pertinent to historical research and explanation? This was the topic of a cutting-edge collection edited by Tom Rawski over ten years ago (Economics and the Historian), and it is still a unique contribution. Rawski is a good historian of China and a good economist (Chinese History in Economic Perspective, China's Transition to Industrialism: Producer Goods and Economic Development in the Twentieth Century), and the volume is genuinely useful today. The project began with a focus on Chinese history, but this volume takes a broader look at aspects of world history more generally. Here is the overriding goal:

Our book is rooted in the conviction that historians will find it useful to acquaint themselves with economics. The chapters that follow provide repeated examples of how

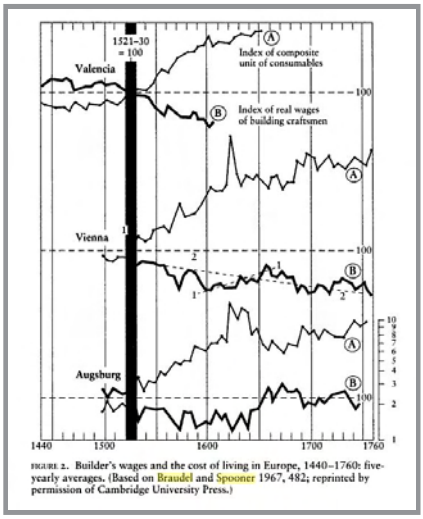


FIGURE 2. Builder's wages and the cost of living in Europe, 1440–1760: five-yearly averages. (Based on Braudel and Spooner 1967, 482; reprinted by permission of Cambridge University Press.)

standard items in the economist's intellectual arsenal extend the reach of historial source materials by revealing unexpected connections between different elements of market systems. (3) The point of the volume is not how to conduct "economic history", but rather how to bring economic data and analysis into many aspects of historical research.

So what are the important foundational insights that economics can bring to history? Here is Rawski's statement of the fundamental object of economic thinking:

Economic theory is built around the logical analysis of profit-seeking behavior by large numbers of well-informed, independent individuals in competitive markets governed by legal systems that enforce contracts and ensure the rights of private owners. (5)
But he also emphasizes that economic theory in the past thirty years has given much more extensive attention to ***institutions*** -- the sets of rules through which transactions take place within an economy and within society. Transaction costs and imperfect information fundamentally alter the logic of a pure market populated with rationally self-interested agents with perfect information. Rawski's approach, and that of many of the other contributors, is very sympathetic to the "new institutionalism in economics."

If the market system, including the whole penumbra of legal, financial, and other enabling institutions, operates within a broader socio-cultural matrix that helps to determine the course of economic evolution, then the study of any economy, past or present, must involve a range of knowledge that reaches far beyond the focal points of conventional economic theory. (11)
Rawski's substantive essay focuses on "trends" as an important historical phenomenon.

Here he presents data on the cost of living and the real wage in three cities in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. And he points out that these data suggest several very interesting stories. Valencia shows a steep downward trend in the real wage through 1620; but we have no data to answer the question whether this trend continues. Vienna shows a downward trend throughout the whole three-hundred year time period; but, as Rawski points out, between 1600 and 1650 shows the opposite trend -- a fifty-year rising trend in the real wage. So we have to be very specific in defining the time period over which we are investigating these movements, before we can say anything about the trends that exist. This implies an important point: that we can't look at a "trend" as objective feature of history, but rather as a feature that is dependent on the frame of analysis.

At the same time, the phenomena recorded in the three graphs raise an important and interesting set of questions for the historian: what are the causes that pushed the prices of the basket of consumable up so sharply in all three cities between 1550 and 1650? And equally important, what social consequences might these trends have had? Was family size affected? Were mortality statistics affected? Did the incidence of bread riots and other forms of civil unrest increase?

Rawski's essay provides a fine tutorial for the historian on the difficulties of calculating the

cost of living: index problems, data blind spots and data bias, and variation across a region. But he also makes a clear case for why this kind of analysis is so important for historians generally -- not just economic historians: the circumstances of life that are indicated by rising rice prices or falling wages are fundamental to behavior. So historians who want to understand how urban Austria in the 16th century or rural China in the 19th century developed in response to political and social changes need to have a good grasp of the material circumstances of the period as well. (Robert Allen's work on the cost of living across Eurasia is an outstanding example; link.)

Other topics covered in the volume include institutions (Jon Cohen), labor economics (Susan Carter and Stephen Cullenberg), neoclassical supply and demand (Donald Deirdre McCloskey), macroeconomics (Richard Sutch), money and banking (Hugh Rockoff), and international economics (Peter Lindert).

McCloskey's treatment of economic rationality is a good place to close:

To reduce the humans in the rice market to single-minded seekers after profit does not seem to accord with common sense. It does not. We see ourselves failing every day to make the best decision about which food to buy or whether to change jobs. Considering that most of us wander in a fog of indecision and emotion the bright sunlight in which the rational man strides toward his goal is difficult to credit. (143)
However, McCloskey does not think that this element of realism about real actors does not make economic reasoning based on rationality a pointless exercise:

An English farmer choosing a reaping machine did not need detailed engineering specifications for each of the dozens of machines available in order to make up his mind to buy. Nor did he need perfect foresight about the future price of harvest labor. A crude decision is rational if information to make a more subtle one is expensive. (143)
In other words: imperfect rationality is enough to get the economic theory enterprise going.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:42AM (-04:00)

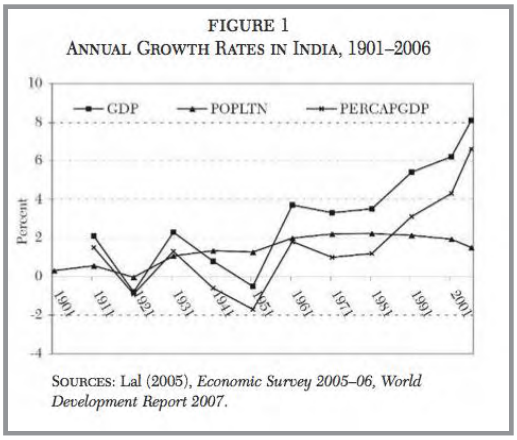
Village life in India

Tuesday, August 24, 2010



People sometimes describe India as undergoing an economic miracle in the past twenty years. After decades of indolent economic growth following independence, a number of sectors of the economy have taken off with high rates of growth and increasing income. Deepak Lal addresses this assumption in "An Indian Economic Miracle?" (link). Here is the crucial graph from Lal's paper:

As the graph indicates, starting in roughly 1980, both GDP and GDP per capita increased at a rising rate, greatly exceeding the disparaging "Hindu rate of growth" of the 1950s and 1960s. Lal's paper is worth reading. But the overall impression is that India is finally moving forward -- an impression reinforced by some of Tom Friedman's comments in The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century.



However, this impression is very misleading with respect to India's rural population; or so V. K. Ramachandran at the Indian Statistical Institute argues. (Here is an interview I conducted with Ramachandran in 2008.) Ramachandran and his collaborator, Madhura Swaminathan, have pursued an important program of research on village India under the rubric of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (link). They and their research teams have conducted a series of village studies over the past ten years that shed detailed light on the economic, social, and caste circumstances of rural India; and the picture they find does not conform to the idea of an "economic miracle." Instead, they find patterns of social inequality and social domination that are continuing and increasing; patterns of landlessness that have worsened in the past decade or so; and levels of poverty that continue to challenge the idea of a fully developed human life for many hundreds of millions of Indian rural people.

A recent publication summarizes their studies of several villages in Andhra Pradesh (Socio-Economic Surveys of Three Villages in Andhra Pradesh: A Study of Agrarian Relations), and it is worth reading in detail. This book synthesizes the detailed surveys conducted in three villages in 2005-06. The authors describe the goals of the Project on Agrarian Relations in India in these terms: to study and analyse ...

- village-level production, production systems and livelihoods, and the socio-economic characteristics of different strata of the rural population;
- sectional deprivation in rural India, particularly with regard to the Dalit and Scheduled Tribe populations, women, specific minorities and the income-poor; and
- the state of basic village amenities and the access of rural people to the facilities of modern life. (1)



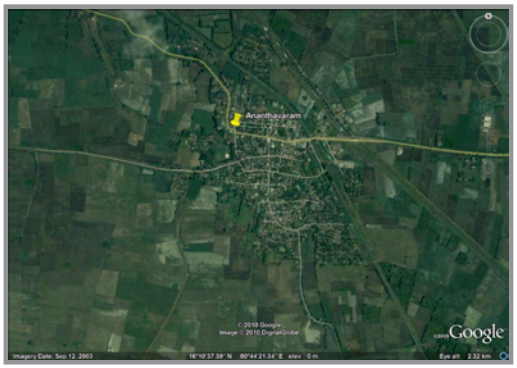
Here are the three villages included in the survey (Bukkacherla, Ananthavaram, Kothapalle):

View Andhra Pradesh in a larger map

The villages are small, ranging from 292 households (Bukacherla) to 667 households (Ananthavaram). Here is a zoom view of Kothapalle village (372 households):

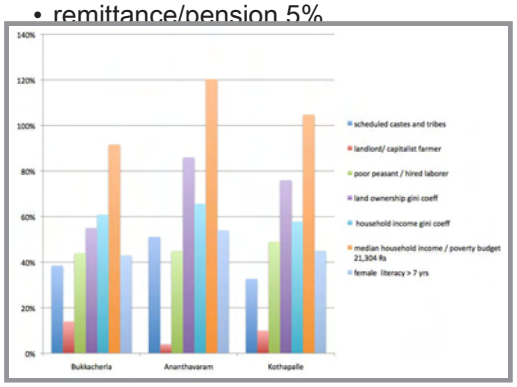
And here is Ananthavaram:

The surveys attempt to capture the important social and economic characteristics of the villages, including population, agricultural practices, social class composition, and caste composition. Class and caste are particularly important characteristics in the analysis. The researchers classify households as "landlord -- big capitalist farmer -- manual worker



-- peasant -- other" (chapter 2). Here is how this classification works out for Kothapalle village:

- landlord / big capitalist farmer 1%
- capitalist farmer / rich peasant 9%
- peasant: middle 13%
- peasant: poor 5%
- hired manual worker 44%
- artisan and work at traditional caste calling 1%
- business activity 8%
- rents / moneylending 1%
- salaried person 11%
- remittance/pension 5%



In other words, about 50% of households are in socially disadvantaged positions (poor peasants, landless workers, and artisans).

Here is a snapshot of the three villages extracted from the study with respect to several important socioeconomic characteristics: percent scheduled classes and tribes, percent landlord and capitalist farmer, percent poor peasant and hired laborer, land ownership Gini coefficient, household income Gini coefficient, medial household income as percent of poverty budget, and percent female literacy for persons seven years or older.

Several things are apparent from this summary. First, the distributions of land and household income are very unequal in all three villages, with a Gini coefficient of .86 for land distribution in Ananthavaram. The Gini coefficients for the distribution of income hover around .60 for all three villages -- a very high degree of income inequality by international standards (link, link)). And it is interesting to notice that Ananthavaram village enjoys the highest median household income and highest female literacy, but simultaneously the highest degree of inequality of property and income and the highest percentage of scheduled castes and tribes.

Second, all three villages represent a high degree of poverty among households. The income bar represents median household income as a percentage of a household poverty budget of 21,304 Rs. The median household in Bukkacheria falls short of this budget -- as do the 50% of households below the median, implying a poverty rate of more than 50%. The median household in Kothapalle is slightly higher than the poverty budget, and only Ananthavaram has a median income significantly higher than the poverty budget (120%). So the poverty rate ranges between 40% and 55% in all three villages --

very high.

Third, female literacy is often regarded as an important measure of overall human development in a poor region or country; and the rates observed by these surveys are quite low (42-47%), with a substantial gap to the rates for male literacy. Likewise, there are substantial variations in literacy across castes. Female literacy in Bukkacherla village is 43% for all households but is 28% for Dalit households; 37% for "backward class" households; and 53% for "other caste" households (160). In other words, the literacy rate for Dalit women is about half that of "other caste" women.

Put the point another way: these village surveys do not support the idea that social progress is occurring rapidly and broadly in India. Rather, these particular villages support the idea that inequalities in rural India are extensive and possibly increasing; that poverty is widespread; that class and caste continue to determine life prospects; and that human development is impeded by these conditions of inequality and poverty.

It is interesting to consider the question of representativeness that this volume raises. The studies provide data for only three out of thousands of villages in one Indian state. So it is productive to ask whether the findings provided here are "typical" of rural Andhra Pradesh -- let alone other parts of India. Ramachandran and Swaminathan have surveyed villages in a number of states, and will continue the project into the future. Plainly, it is important to bring these micro-studies into relation with other larger-scope studies in order to assess the degree to which these developments are typical of rural India. The authors do a good job of trying to make these connections using national and state social data sources; plainly, both methods are needed in order to arrive at justified conclusions about the state of Indian agrarian society.

Second, it is interesting to read this report as an exercise in empirical Marxist economics. The studies are highly empirical and data-rich. At the same time, the categories of analysis are drawn from Marxist economics: exploitation, class analysis, productive relations, and social relations of domination, extraction, and control. The report provides a powerful illustration of the analytical value of a Marxian sociology and political economy in this context; relations of power, privilege, and property plainly have a determining role in the processes of social change in rural India today.

(For the interested reader, Ramachandran's Wage Labour and Unfreedom in Agriculture: An Indian Case Study is an important contribution to the political economy of India.)

(Thanks to Vikas Rawal for corrections on the locations of the villages and images of Kothapalle and Ananthavaram.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:39AM (-04:00)

Mechanisms of contention reconsidered

Thursday, August 26, 2010

Social contention theorists Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly created a great deal of interest in the "mechanisms" approach to social explanation with the publication of their Dynamics of Contention in 2001. The book advocated for several important new angles of approach to the problem of analyzing and explaining social contention: to disaggregate the object of analysis from macro-events like "civil war," "revolution," "rebellion," or "ethnic violence" into the component social processes that

recur in various instances of social contention; and to analyze these components as "causal mechanisms." Here is how they define contentious politics:

By contentious politics we mean: episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants. Roughly translated, the definition refers to collective political struggle. (5)

Here is the way they characterize the distinctive nature of the analysis offered in their new work:

This book identifies similarities and differences, pathways and trajectories across a wide range of contentious politics -- not only revolutions, but also strike waves, wars, social movements, ethnic mobilizations, democratization, and nationalism. (9)

And here is how they want to make systematic, explanatory sense of the heterogeneous examples of social contention that the world presents: to identify and investigate some common social mechanisms that work in roughly similar ways across numerous different instances of social contention.

Social processes, in our view, consist of sequences and combinations of causal mechanisms. To explain contentious politics is to identify its recurrent causal mechanisms, the ways they combine, in what sequences they recur, and why different combinations and sequences, starting from different initial conditions, produce varying effects on the large scale.... Instead of seeking to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for mobilization, action, or certain trajectories, we search out recurrent causal mechanisms and regularities in their concatenation. (13)

They offer these definitions of the key analytical terms:

Mechanisms are a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations.

Processes are regular sequences of such mechanisms that produce similar (generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements.

Episodes are continuous streams of contention including collective claims making that bears on other parties' interests. (24)

They distinguish among environmental mechanisms ("externally generated influences on conditions affecting social life"), cognitive mechanisms ("operate through alterations individual and collective perception"), and relational mechanisms ("alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks") (25-26). And they offer a few examples of mechanisms: mobilization mechanisms, political identity formation mechanisms, and aggregation mechanisms.

The approach can be summarized in these terms:

Seen as wholes, the French Revolution, the American civil rights movement, and Italian contention look quite different from each other. ... Yet when we take apart the three histories, we find a number of common mechanisms that moved the conflicts along and transformed them: creation of new actors and identities through the very process of contention; brokerage by activists who connected previously insulated local clumps of aggrieved people; competition among contenders that led to factional divisions and re-alignments, and much more. These mechanisms concatenated into more complex

processes such as radicalization and polarization of conflict; formation of new balances of power; and re-alignments of the polity along new lines. (32-33)

This is roughly the conception of social ontology and explanation that was put forward in 2001, and it was a powerful challenge to a more positivistic methodology that insisted on looking for general laws of contention and uniform regularities governing things like revolutions and civil wars.

By 2007, however, Tarrow and Tilly found it necessary to reformulate their views to some degree; and this re-thinking resulted in Contentious Politics. So what changed between the theory offered in 2001 and that restated in 2007? The answer is, surprisingly little at the level of concept and method.

Tilly and Tarrow refer to three main lines of criticism of *Dynamics of Contention* to which they felt a need to respond:

Although that book stirred up a lively scholarly discussion, even specialists who were sympathetic to our approach made three justified complaints about it. First, it pointed to mechanisms and processes by the dozen without defining and documenting them carefully, much less showing exactly how they worked. Second, it remained unclear about the methods and evidence students and scholars could use to check out its explanations. Third, instead of making a straightforward presentation of its teachings, it reveled in complications, asides, and illustrations. (xi)

What did not change between the two formulations was the conceptual foundation. The key concepts of contentious politics, mechanisms, processes, and episodes are essentially the same in the 2007 book as in 2001.

Contentious politics involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics. (4)

Further, they analyze contention in the same basic terms in 2007 as in 2001:

For explanation, we need additional concepts. This chapter supplies four of them: the events and episodes of streams of contention and the mechanisms and processes that constitute them.

And their definitions of mechanisms and processes are unchanged:

By ***mechanisms***, we mean a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations. Mechanisms compound into processes. By ***processes***, we mean regular combinations and sequences of mechanisms that produce similar (generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements. (29)

One goal of the 2007 book is to simplify the discussion of mechanisms. The authors highlight three mechanisms as being particularly central to episodes of contention:

- ***Brokerage***: production of a new connection between previously unconnected sites
- ***Diffusion***: spread of a form of contention, an issue, or a way of framing it from one site to another
- ***Coordinated action***: two or more actors' engagement in mutual signaling and parallel making of claims on the same object (31)

Other mechanisms that are discussed include social appropriation, boundary activation, certification, and identity shift (34). And their key examples of processes are ***mobilization***

and ***de-mobilization*** -- each of which consists of a series of component mechanisms.

One difference between the two versions of the theory is more substantive. In 2007 Tarrow and Tilly give greater priority to the *performative* nature of contentious politics: contentious performances and repertoires have greater prominence in the story offered in 2007 than in the analysis of episodes provided in 2001. This is not a new element, since Tilly himself made extensive use of the ideas of performance and repertoire in his earlier analyses of French contentious politics; but the theme is given more prominence in 2007 than it was in 2001.

Overall, it seems reasonable to say that *Contentious Politics* expresses the same conceptual framework for researching and understanding contention as that found in *Dynamics of Contention*. There is no fundamental break between the two works. What has changed is more a matter of pedagogy and presentation. The authors have sought to provide a more coherent and orderly presentation of the conceptual framework that they are presenting; and they have sought to provide an orderly and systematic analysis of the cases, in order to identify the mechanisms that recur across episodes.

Where additional work is still needed is at the level of conceptualization of causal mechanisms. There is now a large body of discussion and debate about how to think about social causal mechanisms, and many observers are persuaded that the move to mechanisms is a very good way of getting a better grip on social explanation and analysis. But how to define a social mechanism is still obscure. The definition that MTT offer does not really seem satisfactory -- "*a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations.*" A mechanism is not an event (or a class of events); rather, it is a ***nexus*** between a cause and an effect; it is the ***pathway*** through which the cause brings about the effect. It is a materially embodied set of causal powers and their effects. But the specific formulation provided by MTT doesn't succeed in capturing any of these root ideas.

Various philosophers have attempted to specify more clearly the notion of a causal mechanism (Jon Elster, Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences; Hedstrom and Swedberg, Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory, my own Varieties Of Social Explanation: An Introduction To The Philosophy Of Social Science). We can give good examples of what we mean by a causal mechanism. But to date, it seems that we have not yet been able to come up with a fully satisfactory definition of a causal mechanism. (Here is a short conference paper by Tilly in 2007 that takes a different approach by linking the concept to Robert Merton's work; link.)

So the disaggregative approach that MTT advocate is a crucially important breakthrough in the study of complex social phenomena, and it seems convincing that it is "mechanisms" that disaggregation should lay bare. Moreover, the idea of mechanisms aggregating to processes and constituting episodes is an intuitively compelling notion of how complex social phenomena are constituted. These are genuinely important new ways of conceptualizing the complex social reality of contention and the task of providing descriptions and explanations of complex social episodes. Contentious Politics is a very good presentation of these fundamental ideas. What we don't yet have, however, is a fully convincing and fertile conception of the root idea, the notion of a causal mechanism.

(See other postings under the thread of causal mechanism for other discussions of the

topic.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:57PM (-04:00)

Criteria for assessing economic models

Monday, August 30, 2010

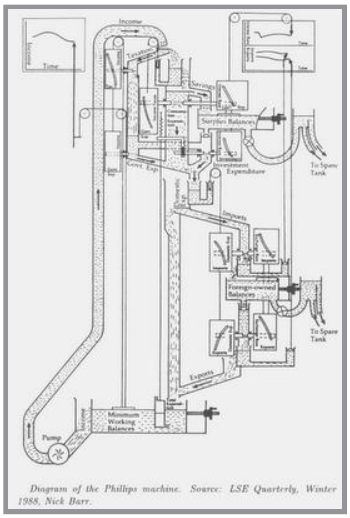


Diagram of the Phillips machine. Source: LSE Quarterly, Winter 1988, Nick Barr.

How can we assess the epistemic warrant of an economic model that purports to represent some aspects of economic reality? The general problem of assessing the credibility of an economic model can be broken down into more specific questions concerning the validity, comprehensiveness, robustness, reliability, and autonomy of the model. Here are initial definitions of these concepts.

- **Validity** is a measure of the degree to which the assumptions employed in the construction of the model are thought to *correspond to the real processes* underlying the phenomena represented by the model.
- **Comprehensiveness** is the degree to which the model is thought to succeed in capturing the *major causal factors* that influence the features of the behavior of the system in which we are interested.
- **Robustness** is a measure of the degree to which the *results of the model persist* under small perturbations in the settings of parameters, formulation of equations, etc.
- **Autonomy** refers to the *stability of the model's results* in face of variation of contextual factors.
- **Reliability** is a measure of the *degree of confidence* we can have in the data employed in setting the values of the parameters.

These are features of models that can be investigated more or less independently and prior to examination of the empirical success or failure of the predictions of the model.

Let us look more closely at these standards of adequacy. The discussion of realism elsewhere suggests that we may attempt to validate the model deductively, by examining each of the assumptions underlying construction of the model for its plausibility or realism (link). (This resembles Mill's "deductive method" of theory evaluation.) Economists are highly confident in the underlying general equilibrium theory. The theory is incomplete (or, in Daniel Hausman's language, inexact; link), in that economic outcomes are not wholly determined by purely economic forces. But within its scope economists are confident that the theory identifies the main causal processes: an equilibration of supply and demand through market-determined prices.

Validity can be assessed through direct inspection of the substantive economic assumptions of the model: the formulation of consumer and firm behavior, the representation of production and consumption functions, the closure rules, and the like. To the extent that the particular formulation embodied in the model is supported by

accepted economic theory, the validity of the model is enhanced. On the other hand, if particular formulations appear to be ad hoc (introduced, perhaps, to make the problem more tractable), the validity of the model is reduced. If, for example, the model assumes linear demand functions and we judge that this is a highly unrealistic assumption about the real underlying demand functions, then we will have less confidence in the predictive results of the model.

Unfortunately, there can be no fixed standard of evaluation concerning the validity of a model. All models make simplifying and idealizing assumptions; so to that extent they deviate from literal realism. And the question of whether a given idealization is felicitous or not cannot always be resolved on antecedent theoretical grounds; instead, it is necessary to look at the overall empirical adequacy of the model. The adequacy of the assumption of fixed coefficients of production cannot be assessed *a priori*; in some contexts and for some purposes it is a reasonable approximation of the economic reality, while in other cases it introduces unacceptable distortion of the actual economic processes (when input substitution is extensive). What can be said concerning the validity of a model's assumptions is rather minimal but not entirely vacuous. The assumptions should be consistent with existing economic theory; they should be reasonable and motivated formulations of background economic principles; and they should be implemented in a mathematically acceptable fashion.

Comprehensiveness too is a weak constraint on economic models. It is plain that all economic theories and models disregard some causal factors in order to isolate the workings of specific economic mechanisms; moreover, there will always be economic forces that have not been represented within the model. So judgment of the comprehensiveness of a model depends on a qualitative assessment of the relative importance of various economic and non-economic factors in the particular system under analysis. If a given factor seems to be economically important (e.g. input substitution) but unrepresented within the model, then the model loses points on comprehensiveness.

Robustness can be directly assessed through a technique widely used by economists, sensitivity analysis. The model is run a large number of times, varying the values assigned to parameters (reflecting the range of uncertainty in estimates or observations). If the model continues to have qualitatively similar findings, it is said to be robust. If solutions vary wildly under small perturbations of the parameter settings, the model is rightly thought to be a poor indicator of the underlying economic mechanisms.

Autonomy is the theoretical equivalent of robustness. It is a measure of the stability of the model under changes of assumptions about the causal background of the system. If the model's results are highly sensitive to changes in the environment within which the modeled processes take place, then we should be suspicious of the results of the model.

Assessment of reliability is also somewhat more straightforward than comprehensiveness and validity. The empirical data used to set parameters and exogenous variables have been gathered through specific well-understood procedures, and it is mandatory that we give some account of the precision of the resulting data.

Note that reliability and robustness interact; if we find that the model is highly robust with respect to a particular set of parameters, then the unreliability of estimates of those parameters will not have much effect on the reliability of the model itself. In this case it is enough to have "stylized facts" governing the parameters that are used: roughly 60% of workers' income is spent on food, 0% is saved, etc.

Failures along each of these lines can be illustrated easily.

1. The model assumes that prices are determined on the basis of markup pricing (costs plus a fixed exogenous markup rate and wage). In fact, however, we might believe (along neoclassical lines) that prices, wages, and the profit rate are all endogenous, so that markup pricing misrepresents the underlying price mechanism. This would be a failure of validity; the model is premised on assumptions that may not hold.
2. The model is premised on a two-sector analysis of the economy. However, energy production and consumption turn out to be economically crucial factors in the performance of the economy, and these effects are overlooked unless we represent the energy sector separately. This would be a failure of comprehensiveness; there is an economically significant factor that is not represented in the model.
3. We rerun the model assuming a slightly altered set of production coefficients, and we find that the predictions are substantially different: the increase in income is only 33% of what it was, and deficits are only half what they were. This is a failure of robustness; once we know that the model is extremely sensitive to variations in the parameters, we have strong reason to doubt its predictions. The accuracy of measurement of parameters is limited, so we can be confident that remeasurement would produce different values. So we can in turn expect that the simulation will arrive at different values for the endogenous variables.
4. Suppose that our model of income distribution in a developing economy is premised on the international trading arrangements embodied in GATT. The model is designed to represent the domestic causal relations between food subsidies and the pattern of income distribution across classes. If the results of the model change substantially upon dropping the GATT assumption, then the model is not autonomous with respect to international trading arrangements.
5. Finally, we examine the data underlying the consumption functions and we find that these derive from one household study in one Mexican state, involving 300 households. Moreover, we determine that the model is sensitive to the parameters defining consumption functions. On this scenario we have little reason to expect that the estimates derived from the household study are reliable estimates of consumption in all social classes all across Mexico; and therefore we have little reason to depend on the predictions of the model. This is a failure of reliability.

These factors--validity, comprehensiveness, robustness, autonomy, and reliability--figure into our assessment of the antecedent credibility of a given model. If the model is judged to be reasonably valid and comprehensive; if it appears to be fairly robust and autonomous; and if the empirical data on which it rests appears to be reliable; then we have reason to believe that the model is a reasonable representation of the underlying economic reality. But this deductive validation of the model does not take us far enough. These are reasons to have *a priori* confidence in the model. But we need as well to have a basis for *a posteriori* confidence in the particular results of this specific model. And since there are many well-known ways in which a generally well-constructed model can nonetheless miss the mark--incompleteness of the causal field, failure of *ceteris paribus* clauses, poor data or poor estimates of the exogenous variables and parameters, proliferation of error to the point where the solution has no value, and path-dependence of the equilibrium solution--we need to have some way of empirically evaluating the results of the model.

(Here is an application of these ideas to computable general equilibrium (CGE) models in an article published in On the Reliability of Economic Models: Essays in the Philosophy of Economics; link. See also Lance Taylor's reply and discussion in the same volume.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:23PM (-04:00)

Development economics in historical context

Wednesday, September 01, 2010



Hollis Chenery and T. N. Srinivasan published the Handbook of Development Economics in 1988. It was state-of-the-art in the late 1980s. It is interesting to look back at the *Handbook* twenty-two years later to see how it stands up today.

First, the contributors. The volume is a dream-team of development thinkers from the 1970s and 1980s: Amartya Sen, Arthur Lewis, Pranab Bardhan, Joseph Stiglitz, Peter Timmer, Nancy Birdsall, Paul Streeten, and Dwight Perkins, to name only a small subset of the authors. (There are 33 essays in volumes I and II.) Several currently important figures are not represented -- Arturo Escobar, Jeffrey Sachs, and Dani Rodrik, for example. Escobar's Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World appeared in 1994; Jeffrey Sachs's The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time didn't appear until 2005; and Dani Rodrik's One Economics, Many Recipes: Globalization, Institutions, and Economic Growth appeared in 2008. So it is certainly true that the field has moved forward with the emergence of new voices and perspectives since 1988. But it is also true that the volume represents a very deep body of knowledge about some of the dynamics and policy choices pertaining to economic development.

More important is the question of the range of perspectives on development represented in the volume. Development thinking has tended to swing from progressive to neo-liberal over the decades. Progressives have paid more attention to distribution, poverty, and social provisioning; whereas neo-liberals have focused on markets and "getting the prices right," with little appetite for redistribution, government subsidies, or serious efforts at poverty reduction. Gunnar Myrdal, Amartya Sen, and Arturo Escobar represent three generations of progressive development theorists; perhaps Peter Timmer, Malcolm Gillis, and Jeffrey Williamson fall closer to the neo-liberal end of the spectrum. I would judge that the *Handbook* does a pretty good job of finding the middle of the spectrum. Chenery's own emphasis on the importance of redistribution in development (Redistribution with Growth) places him closer to the progressive end, along with Pranab Bardhan, Irma Adelman, and Lance Taylor (each of whom has a contribution in the volume). The book pays attention to "alternative approaches" to economic development as well as poverty-related issues like health and nutrition. The book does a good job of combining a clear vision of the goals of economic development -- improvement of human welfare -- with technical economic analysis of growth, labor markets, and trade. And many of the authors explicitly recognize the point that development economics benefits from theoretical pluralism; the approach is not narrowly neo-classical.

Here are a few interesting observations from several contributors:

Pranab Bardhan:

Development economics as a separate branch of economics originated in a widespread perception of the limited usefulness of orthodox economics, and even though its pristine separatism has mellowed over the years it retains to this day its contrary, unruly, if

somewhat flaky, image in the eyes of mainstream economics. Standard neoclassical economics is mainly on the defensive in this terain and a number of alternative approaches clash and contend for our attention. (40)
Joseph Stiglitz:

The central questions facing development economics are: Why is it that some countries are so much poorer than others? What can be done to make them grow faster? Faster growth is needed if the gap in living standards is not to be widened even further. (94)
J.G. Williamson:

What explains the timing and the extent of the transition from a traditional rural to a modern urban society? Why does city growth speed up in early development and slow down in later stages? What role does migration play in the process, and do migrants make rational location decisions? Do urban labor markets serve to absorb urban immigrants quickly? Are rural emigrants driven by "push" conditions in the countryside or by "pull" conditions in the cities? Is the Third World "overurbanized"? (425)
T.P. Schultz:

The record of sustained modern growth in real per capita income cannot be accounted for by the accumulation of conventional units of physical capital or by the increased applicaiton of hours of labor per capita. The source of modern economic growth are sought instead in the changing quality of labor and capital, in the more comprehensive accounting of other inputs, and in change of organization, policy environment, or technology. ... Research on various aspects of the microeconomic relationshipb etween education and development has expanded rapidly, forging a consensus on questions for study and appropriate methodologies to address these questions. ... Studies across persons, households, farms, and firms have documented, first generally in the United States and then in many low income countries, strong empirical regularities between educational attainment of populations and their productivity and performance in both market and nonmarket (home) production activities. (544)
Jere Behrman and Anil Deolalikar:

Health and nutrition are important as ends in themselves and often are emphasized as critical components of basic needs in developing countries. In addition they may be channels through which productivity and distributional goals of developing societies may be pursued effectively if, as is often hypothesized, the productivity of low-income persons in work and in human- capital formation is positively affected by health and nutrition status. (633)
Several things are noteworthy in reviewing the contents and methods of the *Handbook* -- issues and perspectives that would now be regarded as crucial.

A phrase that does not occur in the volume is "Washington Consensus." This concept became current in the 1990s after being introduced by John Williamson in 1990 (link). Here is how Williamson puts his point: "The paper identifies and discusses 10 policy instruments about whose proper deployment Washington can muster a reasonable degree of consensus." He identifies ten policy goals as constituting the Washington Consensus: Fiscal Deficits, Public Expenditure Priorities, Tax Reform, Interest Rates, The Exchange Rate, Trade Policy, Foreign Direct Investment, Privatization, Deregulation, and Property Rights. It is apparent that this list is heavily tilted towards the neo-liberal end of the spectrum. By contrast, consider the Millenium Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2000 (link): End Hunger, Universal Education, Gender Equity, Child Health, Maternal Health, Combat HIV/AIDS, Environmental Sustainability, Global Partnership. The

Millenium Goals are focused on ending world poverty, while the Washington Consensus is focused on achieving effective market institutions and trading systems globally. The *Handbook* isn't a sourcebook or a polemic in support of the neo-liberal agenda; but neither is it emphatic in its treatment of poverty.

Another term that does not occur in the volume is "globalization." There are discussions of international trade, migration, capital flows, transnational corporations, and credit markets -- important components of contemporary debates about globalization. But the concept space involved in the idea of economic development had not yet fully highlighted the importance of global interconnectivity.

Third, the *Handbook* gives virtually no attention to sustainability, resource depletion, and the environment. These are now regarded as crucial aspects of the challenge of economic development. Taxation, trade, and governance come in for repeated treatments; but environmental sustainability is not raised as a significant issue.

Finally, the *Handbook* doesn't give central priority to the issues of poverty alleviation and inequality that were already becoming central for some development economists, including Amartya Sen. Sen's central ideas of functionings, freedom, and capabilities are expressed in his opening chapter to the volume. But the bulk of the contributions to the *Handbook* don't begin with poverty, but rather more specific questions about growth, modernization, trade, and population. The conceptual shift that Sen's writings would eventually bring to the field had not yet had full effect.

It is also interesting to examine the first and second editions of an important textbook on development economics that was roughly contemporary to the *Handbook*. Malcolm Gillis, Dwight Perkins, Michael Roemer, and Donald Snodgrass's Economics of Development was published a few years earlier than the *Handbook in* 1983 and 1987. There is a high degree of conceptual and organizational similarity between the two treatments of the economics of development, including topics, approaches, and models and methods. To get a sense for how the discipline of development economics has shifted since 1988, take a look at the topics and readings included in the course on Economic Development offered by Rohini Pande and Dani Rodrik (link). Addressing poverty is the central focus in this conceptualization of the field; there is lots of attention to the components of human wellbeing (health, education, nutrition); and the syllabus pays a good deal of attention to issues of institutions and governance within the development process.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:01PM (-04:00)

The public sphere

Friday, September 03, 2010

The current issue of *Social Science History* is devoted to a series of articles in honor of Charles Tilly (link), around the general theme of the "public sphere" (the theme of the Social Science History Association annual meeting in 2007). Tilly was an active presence in the Social Science History Association, and this issue recognizes Tilly's originality and influence. The volume contains contributions by several distinguished historical sociologists, including Tilly, Andreas Koller, Craig Calhoun, Andrew Abbott, and Elisabeth Clemens.

The concept of the public sphere isn't a subject to which Tilly gave a lot of explicit attention; in fact, there is very little research on the social reality of the public sphere



within comparative historical sociology quite generally. The most directly relevant discussion of some of these topics in Tilly's work probably occurs in his 2007 book, Democracy. But the topic is ripe for consideration by comparative and historical sociologists, and for this reason the current SSH issue is a welcome start.

Andreas Koller formulates the general research question about the public sphere in his introductory essay in these terms:

Despite its central relevance for the members of modern societies for determining the course of their own history through reasoned debate and public choice, the study of the public sphere is not an integrated research field. ... This introduction seeks to provide an overview of analytic and historical dimensions that enables one to decipher a number of discussions that are spread out over many disciplines and often proceed in multiple disciplinary terminologies. Such a quest for an integrative framework is a necessary condition for well-defined comparative and historical research. (262-63)

Before a comparative historical sociologist could begin to investigate a phenomenon such as the "public sphere," it is necessary to have a preliminary conception of what we are talking about. As Koller points out, most discussions of the concept begin with the ur-text in the study of the public sphere: Jurgen Habermas's 1962 book, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Here are some preliminary descriptions of the public sphere offered by several of the contributors to this special issue of SSH:

Andreas Koller: [The public sphere] refers to a public of speaker(s) and audience that organizes itself and determines its own future by the force of the better argument, and it refers to its object, the public good. (Koller, 263)

Charles Tilly: No one has so far developed crisp measures of the public sphere's expansion and consolidation in one regime or another. In that regard, comparative-historical research faces gigantic conceptual, technical, and empirical challenges. But surely one indicator worth tracing is change in the frequency and character of gatherings in which people make collective claims on others, including public authorities. (Tilly, 292)

Craig Calhoun: It is instructive to situate the idea of the public sphere in this context. This gives the influential account of Jurgen Habermas its central pathos: the public sphere arises as part of civil society, incorporating adults who have gained maturity and intellectual autonomy in another of its parts, the family. It is oriented to forming rational-critical opinion on matters of universal interest to citizens, and through this to informing state policy. But it is debased and corrupted when the state-society division collapses amid bureaucratization, organized interest-group politics, and mass society in the twentieth century. (Calhoun, 302)

Craig Calhoun: The notion of the political public sphere centered on the idea that private persons might come together through reasoned communication to consider public issues and inform public policy. (Calhoun, 303)

Andrew Abbott: In this article I take this last as my definition of public spheres: public

spheres are symbolic spaces within which a group's normative affairs are discussed in some sense for themselves.... So I shall take public spheres as an empirical possibility while making no detailed claims about their characteristics. (Abbott, 338)

Elisabeth Clemens: At the core of the philosophical legacy of the Enlightenment lies a vision of rational individuals governing themselves through collective deliberation. By means of critical discourse, self-interested or private individuals reflect on common concerns and discover the nature of the public good, justice, and truth. (Clemens, 374)
What these snippets have in common is the idea of a ***public*** consisting of deliberative ***individuals*** engaging in ***debate*** over ***policies*** and legislation, in relation to conflicting ideas of the ***public good***. (There is an evident connection between this definition and Rousseau's theories of the general will; link.) There is the idea here that a collectivity can arrive at a publicly shared conception of its good, through open and public debate. And, in common with theorists of deliberative democracy, there is the idea that public debate can transform individual citizens' conceptions of themselves and the public good. So debate is not merely expressive of current opinions and preferences; it is potentially transformative.

These ideas are expressed in the language of political philosophy and the theory of democracy. But the subject matter becomes an object of study for sociologists when we realize that each aspect of the definition refers to a social reality that is highly variable across time, space, and culture. So it is an empirical question, to consider to what extent Qing China, pre-revolutionary Iran, or medieval England had social realities that corresponded to any of these categories: the public intellectual, the engaged citizen, public debate, or public policy. Was there a Qing public? Were matters of common concern debated openly or publicly, or were they decided behind closed doors by an Imperial bureaucracy? Did subjects of the Qing state regard themselves as public individuals?

Tilly's essay in this volume focuses on one aspect of this sociological topic: to what extent did new forms of public debate and agitation begin to emerge in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? He treats this as an empirical matter:

My collaborators and I gathered the evidence to examine how the development of British capitalism, transformation of the British state, and popular political struggle itself shaped changes in the ways that ordinary Britons made collecdtive claims -- changes in their repertoires of contention. (292)
He finds that there was a marked increase in the frequency of contentious gatherings, which he attributes to a rise in mass-based organizations and a mass-based public media. (Much of this research is presented in his more extensive contribution to Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action, "Contentious Connections in Great Britain, Britain, 1828-34", with Lesley Wood.)

So this is one empirical approach that a comparative historical sociologist could take to the problem of trying to assess the scope and growth of the public sphere. A very different approach is offered by Andrew Abbott in his contribution to the SSH volume, "Pragmatic Sociology and the Public Sphere: The Case of Charles Richmond Henderson." Abbott moves from meso to micro in this piece. He too counts things in order to assess the scope of the public sphere. But in this case, what is counted is appearances in the *Chicago Tribune*. Abbott attempts to gauge Charles Richmond Henderson's prominence in the public sphere by counting and classifying Henderson's presence in Chicago's leading newspaper. How frequently does Henderson's name

appear in the *Tribune*, in comparison to other prominent professors?

Henderson was chaplain and professor of sociology at the University of Chicago between 1892 and 1915, and it turns out that he had a remarkably high level of visibility in the *Tribune*. He was a prominent public figure. Abbott attempts to make sense of the public persona of Anderson through a brief intellectual and professional biography of the man; and he tries to arrive at some judgments about the causes and impact of his prominence. "Over his quarter century at the University of Chicago, Henderson became one of Chicago's and even America's most visible reform figures" (342). And much of his prominence was deliberate: Henderson sought out opportunities for bringing his convictions to the attention of a broader public than the university. Clubs and conferences were a frequent venue; Henderson was deeply interested in bringing his ideas to the public through these venues. And Abbott makes the important point that Chicago consisted, not of one public, but of an **archipelago** of publics: business elites, religious communities, immigrant communities, professional groups, ... (351).

Both of these empirical studies of certain aspects of the public sphere are intriguing and engaging. Taken as a whole, the SSH volume provides a diverse palette of work, and it plainly does no more than scratch the surface of the kinds of sociological research that are suggested by the topic of the public sphere. Abbott, Calhoun, Tilly, and the other contributors give an intriguing sense of the kinds of investigations that can be undertaken; there is much work to do in this area. Consider this variety of questions that need to be posed about the public sphere from a comparative sociology point of view:

- How did the public sphere evolve in England between 1600 and 1900?
- How does the public sphere differ in France, Germany, and England?
- Did China have a public sphere in the late Imperial period?
- What are some important differences in repertoire and performance within the public spheres of different countries and periods?
- How do intellectuals participate in the public sphere in different times and places?
- What role does organized public protest play in the public sphere?

(The photo above captures two historical ends of the idea of the public sphere: the polis and the protest. It captures a major protest in Athens following the 2009 financial crisis of the Greek state.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 01:44PM (-04:00)

Goffman's programme

Monday, September 06, 2010

Erving Goffman has had wide influence on American and French sociology, and I find his work highly interesting. But it is hard to characterize, because it doesn't fit easily into the standard categories of sociological research and theory. It studies individuals, but it is not individualist. And it is evidence-based, but it is not empiricist. In earlier posts I've characterized it as a particular kind of local knowledge, a sort of ethnography for micro-sociology (link, link). But there is certainly more to say than that.

One key part of his work can be described as "close observation of individual behavior in social context." This has two ends -- individual behavior and social context. And Goffman wants to shed light on both poles of this description. In particular, he almost always expresses interest in the social norms that surround action -- the expectations and norms through which other people interpret and judge the individual's conduct.



Consider these programmatic statements from several of Goffman's books:

I mean this report to serve as a sort of handbook detailing one sociological perspective from which social life can be studied, especially the kind of social life that is organised within the physical confines of a building or plant. A set of features will be described which together form a framework that can be applied to any concrete social establishment, be it domestic, industrial, or commercial. (The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, preface)

By and large, the psychiatric study of situational improprieties has led to studying the offender rather than the rules and social circles that are offended. Through such studies, however, psychiatrists have inadvertently made us more aware of an important area of social life -- that of behavior inpublic and semipublic places. Although this area has not been recognized as a special domain for sociological inquiry, it perhaps should be, for rules of conduct in streets, parks, restaurants, theaters, shops, dance floors, meeting halls, and other gathering places of any community tell us a great deal about its most diffuse forms of social organization. Sociology does not provide a ready framework that can order these data, let alone show comparisons and continuities with behavior in private gathering places such as offices, factory floors, living rooms, and kitchens. (Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings, 3-4)

Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories. Social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there. The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his 'social identity' – to use a term that is better than 'social status' because personal attributes such as 'honesty' are involved, as well as structural ones, like 'occupation'. (Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity, 11)

Within the terms, then, of the bad name that the analysis of social reality has, this book presents another analysis of social reality. I try to follow a tradition established by William James in his famous chapter "The Perception of Reality," first published as an article in *Mind* in 1896. Instead of asking what reality is, he gave matters a subversive phenomenological twist, italicizing the following question: Under what circumstances do we think things are real? (Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, 2)

In 1945 Alfred Schutz took up James' theme again in a paper called "On Multiple Realities." ... Schutz's paper ... was brought to the attention of ethnographic sociologists by Harold Garfinkel, who further extended the argument about multiple realities by going on (at least in his early comments) to look for rules which, when followed, allow us to generate a "world" of a given kind. (Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, 5)

I have borrowed extensively from all these sources, claiming really only the bringing of

them together. My perspective is situational, meaning here a concern for what one individual can be alive to at a particular moment, this often involving a few other particular individuals and not necessarily restricted to the mutually monitored arena of a face-to-face gathering. I assume that when individuals attend to any given current situation, they face the question: "What is it that's going on here?" (Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, 8)

The study of face-to-face interaction in natural settings doesn't yet have an adequate name. Moreover, the analytical boundaries of the field remain unclear. Somehow, but only somehow, a brief time span is involved, a limited extension in space, and a restriction to those events that must go on to completion once they have begun.... The ultimate behavioral materials are the glances, gestures, positionings, and verbal statements that people continuously feed into the situation, whether intended or not. These are the external signs of orientation and involvements -- states of mind and body not ordinarily examined with respect to their social organization. (Interaction Ritual - Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior, 1)

There are several orienting themes among these statements and within Goffman's work -- frames, we might call them.

- There is the idea of face-to-face behavior, in private, in public, and in everyday life.
- There is focus on the social setting within which local behavior takes place -- the norms and constraints that are embodied in the group and constraining of the individual.
- There is emphasis on the particulars of the place -- the factory, the asylum, the hotel.
- There is the social-cognitive situation of the individual -- the way in which he or she answers the question, "What is going on here?"

So Goffman starts much of his work with fine-grained, detailed observations of behavior -- elements as subtle as the bodily signs of embarrassment in a conversation. Second, he wants to discover some of the structures of mental processing through which individuals act in social settings -- the frames, scripts, and rituals that guide social perception and action for individuals. Third, he wants to tease out the social judgments and norms that provide the normative and guiding context for the actor's movements -- the judgments surrounding "saving face," embarrassment, shame, pride, and proper performance.

There is also a psychiatric dimension of Goffman's work: "abnormal behavior" and the description and contextualization of unexpected patterns of behavior are frequent elements of Goffman's discourse. For example, in *Stigma*:

The term stigma and its synonyms conceal a double perspective : does the stigmatized individual assume his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them? In the first case one deals with the plight of the discredited, in the second with that of the discreditable. This is an important difference, even though a particular stigmatized individual is likely to have experience with both situations. I will begin with the situation of the discredited and move on to the discreditable but not always separate the two. (14)

And psychiatric examples permeate Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings as well.

The Erving Goffman Archive at UNLV has some very useful materials relevant to Goffman's intellectual project (link). The site is of great value and is worth studying in detail. Here is a link to one of Goffman's course reading lists from 1970. The list is titled, "The Ethnography of Symbolic Forms: Frame Analysis," and is dated Fall 1970. The list is very interesting, and particularly valuable is the first section on "Basic Materials." This

gives us an idea of some of the most important formative influences on Goffman. Included on the list are several phenomenologists (Husserl, Kockelmans); several ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel, Schutz); a handful of analytic philosophers (David Shwayder, J. L. Austin, Nelson Goodman), and a playwright (Pirandello).

The 1960 reading list is also of interest; link. This syllabus is titled Communication and Social Contact. Goffman describes the course in these terms:

This course deals with face to face interactions in natural settings. Interest will center on the components of the communicative act, the variables and models of interaction analysis, and the natural units of interaction for which a literature is available.

The syllabus breaks the course into a series of topics: Sign Processes, Expressive Behavior, Interaction, Substantive Areas, Conversation, Task Meetings, Two-Person Psychotherapy, Performances, Play-Games, Public Behavior, and Social Occasions. This list has some of the surprising conjunctions evident in the 1970 list as well; for example, there is a significant amount of attention to game theorists (Von Neumann and Morgenstern, Schelling, Luce and Raiffa), as well as Freudian psychology.

Here is how Pierre Bourdieu distilled Goffman's originality (link):

The work of Erving Goffman is the product of one of the most original and rarest methods of doing sociology -- for example, putting on a doctor's white coat, in order to enter a psychiatric asylum and thus putting oneself at the very site of the infinity of minute interactions which combine to make up social life.... Goffman's achievement was that he introduced sociology to the infinitely small, to the things which the object-less theoreticians and concept-less observers were incapable of seeing and which went unremarked because they were too obvious, like everything which goes without saying. These entomologist's minutiae were bound to disconcert, even shock, an establishment accustomed to surveying the social world from a more distant and more lofty standpoint. ("Erving Goffman, Discoverer of the Infinitely Small," *Theory Culture & Society* 2:1 1983, 112)

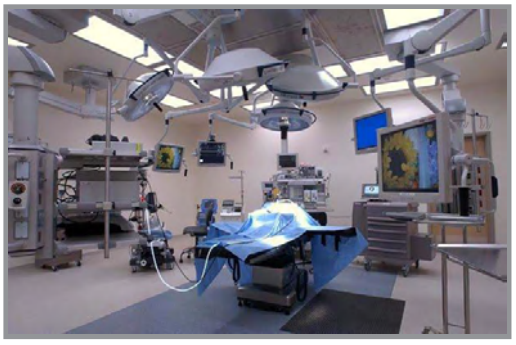
This is a nice description of Goffman's work. It leaves out an important dimension, however, namely, the social and contextual side of Goffman's gaze. Goffman was always interested in the nuances of social expectation, norm, and script within particular social settings. And this makes his work thoroughly sociological.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:48PM (-04:00)

System changes in healthcare

Sunday, September 12, 2010

One of the largest and most interesting processes of change going on in the United States today is the rapid redesign and adjustment of the American healthcare system. A key driver is this spring's passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), but the more fundamental causes are the twin crises we face for access and rising cost for health coverage. Somehow the country needs to find a way of including the whole population within the insured population, and we need to find ways of reducing the rate of growth of aggregate and per capita healthcare expenditures. PPACA is aimed at addressing both crises, and they are urgent.



Healthcare in the United States is provided through doctors, physician groups, and hospitals, organized into regional health systems. A given region typically has a number of hospital systems, non-profit and profit, and physician groups ranging in size from one to hundreds of physicians. And many experts describe existing health systems and hospitals as homebrew organizations that haven't changed fundamentally in thirty years. The current environment is forcing change for quality, health outcomes, and cost.

So who is forcing the changes? The requirements of the healthcare reform legislation (PPACA) are part of the answer. But other change drivers are large employers who are purchasers of healthcare services for their employees and the insurers who directly pay for services. A particularly important player is the Voluntary Employee Benefits Association trust (VEBA), a type of organization created by Federal law to administer large benefit pools. The United Auto Workers VEBA itself expends $4.6 billion annually in support of healthcare for its retirees, and it is actively managing plans and contracts so as to achieve sustainable spending for the 800,000 retirees in its pool (link). Health systems, hospital administrators, and physician group leaders are actively seeking ways of adjusting to the imminent future in the healthcare space.

The diagnoses of failure in the healthcare system often focus on a cluster of problems.

- Poorly aligned incentives for patients, physicians, and hospitals
- Incentives don't create behavior of all parties leading to greater health and lower cost
- Lack of focus on health rather than illness
- Lack of focus on the health of a population rather than a group of clients
- Lack of standardization of process within healthcare systems
- Lack of Electronic Medical Records
- Failure to involve the patient in responsibility for his/her health

The problem from the health system's point of view often comes down to reimbursement and revenue. Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement levels don't cover the costs of care, and hospital systems have large obligations for indigent (non-reimbursed) care. So hospital administrators and physician leaders face the imperative of squeezing costs out of their system while maintaining and enhancing quality and patient safety. More and more urban hospitals are approaching a critical financial status as a result.

Payers -- basically, the companies that pay for health insurance for their employees -- see the problem as one of rapidly rising costs and assuring quality. So their effort is to place pressure on providers and insurers to contain costs, to shift part of the cost to the employee, and to create effective wellness plans that incentivize employees to adopt healthier lifestyles. Payers and insurers are attempting to make highly focused use of data about providers, cost, and health outcomes to permit evaluation of health systems and doctors and their practices. That data is available in voluminous quantities, and it will allow payers to distinguish strongly between more and less efficient health systems.

So what are some of the strategies currently being pursued by system administrators to allow their systems to survive in the new fiscal and regulatory environment? The mantra

is the patient-centered medical home. Systems are seeking improvements in coordination of health care for the patient, quarterbacked by the primary care physician; a shift of emphasis towards wellness for the population rather than disease intervention; improvements in process efficiency; close attention to cost centers; competition for patients and referrals within the region; development of recognized specialty areas with higher margins and reimbursement rates; and implementation of the Electronic Medical Record and all the processes that need to surround this technology. Another visible strategy around the country is consolidation, as more successful hospitals absorb or merge with less successful ones. The goal is to create a system of "integrated and accountable care," achieving both goals of quality and cost effectiveness.

One of the current areas of focus is the concept of an "Accountable Care Organization," a concept introduced through the PPACA legislation but not explicitly defined. (Here is a 2009 discussion paper by the Urban Institute.) It is a level of organization that will figure crucially in the administration of future payment systems and regulations, and health systems are attempting to formulate their own ACOs. Here is a working definition:

An ACO is a group of providers working as a team taking fiscal responsibility for outcomes and costs for a defined population.
If one is interested in the fate of a particular regional healthcare system or hospital, now is the time to be paying close attention to the planning and reform its leaders and physicians are currently carrying out. The stakes are very high. Tthe business environment is changing rapidly and abruptly, and some community hospitals and health systems will not survive. Moreover, some experts expect a significant decline in the percentage of employers who offer health coverage -- bad news for currently insured workers.

So the next few years portend some very deep changes for almost all Americans when it comes to healthcare.

(Here's a link to a position paper by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Thanks to Maxine for the link.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:04PM (-04:00)

Proto-industrialization

Tuesday, September 14, 2010



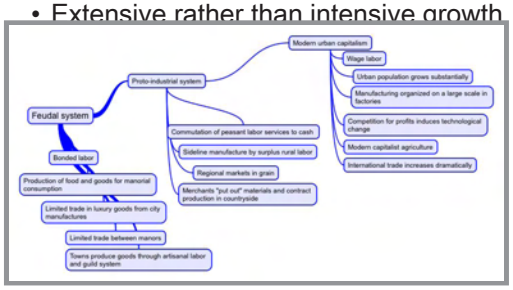
The concept of proto-industrialization became an influential one in economic history in the 1970s and 1980s. The term refers to a system of rural manufacture that was intermediate between autarchic feudal production and modern urban factory production. Variously described as rural manufacturing, domestic manufacture, cottage industry, and a "putting-out" system, it was a dispersed system of production that used traditional methods of production and extensive low-paid rural labor to produce goods for the market, both domestic and international. Unlike modern capitalist manufacturing, proto-industrialization did not depend on rising labor productivity as a source of higher profits; instead,

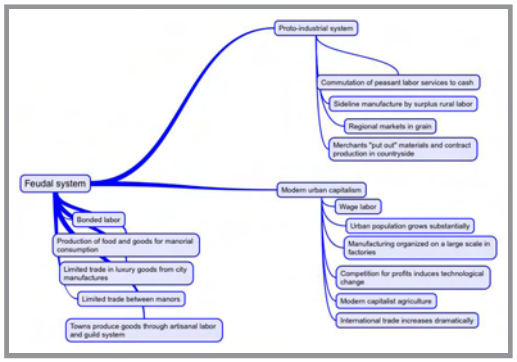
merchants increased the scale of their businesses by extending production to additional households and workers.

One of the first to use the term was Franklin Mendels in 1970 (link), who applied the concept to extra-urban manufacturing in Flanders in the eighteenth century. Peter Kriedte, Hans Medick, and Jurgen Schlumbohm's Industrialization Before Industrialization provided an extensive historical and theoretical treatment of the phenomenon in 1977.

It has long been known that industrial commodity production in the countryside for large inter-regional and international markets was of considerable importance during the formative period of capitalism. (1)
What are the chief economic characteristics of a stylized proto-industrialization system of production?

- Rural labor, often sideline activities beside agricultural work
- Production for a market, often through urban-based merchants
- Extremely low returns to labor -- squeezed labor
- Low technology, very low rate of technological change
- Extensive rather than intensive growth





In order for rural industry to develop on a large scale in a region, several factors needed to be present: extensive demand for manufactured goods by concentrated populations and developed patterns of trade; a concentration of merchant wealth; and a population of under-employed rural householders who could be recruited into sideline manufacturing employment. Peter Kriedte explained the regional pattern of emergence of proto-industrialization in terms of the different forms of power possessed by lords in different parts of Europe:

The power-constellations and their impact on the spatial expansion of industrial commodity production were different in east-central and eastern Europe. Peasants were more directly and more firmly dominated by their lords, and there was little room for the development of rural industries....

But whether a region developed rural industries or not was determined not so much by the extent of feudal charges as by the form in which peasants paid them. And the form of payment was determined not only by the social relationship in the narrow sense between the feudal lord and his dependent peasants but also by the overall relations of production. (18)
This argument is similar to that offered by Robert Brenner in his explanation of different courses that agricultural development took in different parts of Europe (link).

The regions where proto-industrialization developed earliest, according to Kriedte, were in western Europe:

The first regions of relatively dense rural industry had developed in England, the southern

Low Countries, and southern Germany in the late Middle Ages. The decisive thrust which brought about the phase of proto-industrialization came at the end of the sixteenth and in the seventeenth centuries.... Quantitative changes in supply and demand combined to produce a cumulative process which led to a new phase. (23)

Generally speaking, a region that has made the transition to commercial agriculture is barren soil for rural manufacturing, for the simple reason that commercial farmers earn a sufficient income through farming. However, some areas of commercial agriculture also became significant concentrations of rural manufacturing:

When proto-industrialization gained a foothold in a region of commercial agriculture despite these basic assumptions, special circumstances are usually responsible. First of all, commercial agriculture, generally, could only develop in a highly urbanized region. The concentrated demand of a large town or a whole network of towns was necessary in order to induce the self-sufficient peasant family holding to enter on the path of specialization. (27)

Hans Medick emphasizes the micro-side of the equation -- the economics of the peasant household in the late Middle Ages.

The central feature of the 'rationality' underlying the family economy is the fact that its productive activity was not giverned primarily by the objective of maximizing profit and achieving a monetary surplus. The maximization of the gross produce rather than the net profit is the goal of family labour. (41)

In other words, the peasant household is governed by the dynamic that leads to "self-exploitation" in the sense described by Chayanov -- use of family labor to the point approaching a marginal product of zero (The Theory of Peasant Economy). Under these circumstances, it is economically rational to expend some family labor on sideline manufacturing if there is some income associated with this activity -- no matter how low the wage.

PI is described as transitional because its economic possibility was created by the political situation of feudal cities -- specialized manufacture in cities under a regulated guild system, self-production in the countryside. And, it is sometimes claimed, proto-industrialization prepared the ground for a full modern systems of capitalist industry. The "transition" scenario might be framed along these lines:

But it is also possible that proto-industrialization was an **alternative** to capitalist development -- a cousin rather than a grandparent. Here the diagram would look differently:

Proto-industrialization is a significant historical phenomenon, we might say, because it represented a large and marked change in the organization and volume of production of goods from the medieval period to the early modern period. Towns and cities were already economically active locations, representing both concentrated demand and concentrated production. But the rural population was almost entirely involved in farming and sideline production for home use. The emergence of a significant level of production in rural hinterlands was a shift, and so it is worth asking why this change occurred in the circumstances in which it did. The change dynamics Kriedte, Medick, and Schlumbohm describe include population change; urban economic regulations; incentives for feudal rights-holders to transition to cash obligations; and the existence of inter-regional trade and markets that extend beyond the local village.

Several questions are especially pertinent to the study of this phenomenon.

- Was proto-industrialization indeed a step on the path to modern manufacturing and capitalism?
- What were the factors that led to the regional spread of rural manufacturing in parts of Europe?
- What factors explain the geographical distribution of rural industry in the early modern period in Europe?
- How did the economic and political institutions of the feudal order set the stage for the emergence of proto-industrialization?
- What role did demographic factors play in this period of economic development?
- Was PI a distinctive "system" or simply a predictable economic adaptation to rising demand for finished goods?
- What is the connection between PI and the "modern world system" of trade?

Here are some relevant causal factors that might be invoked in formulating answers to these questions:

- Rising population and population density
- Rising volumes of inter-regional trade
- Shifts in the political power of various collective actors
- Changes in political institutions -- central state, local civic arrangements
- Improvements in agricultural productivity
- Emergence of new technologies
- Persistence/change of the guild system
- ...

It is tempting to frame this problem in the terms offered by Thunen and early economic geographers in "modeling" the economic changes that would be predicted on a featureless plane populated by economically rational agents (VON THUNEN'S ISOLATED STATE an English Edition of Der Isolierte Staat). Imagine a sort of "SimCity" simulation that begins with a sprinkling of mid-sized towns and cities with given levels of production and trade regulated by guilds, located within a countryside consisting of manors with serfs and small peasant farms. There is trade between town and country, since the towns must import food for the urban population, and there are some goods needed in the countryside that cannot be produced there. But trade is limited, labor mobility is limited, and the market economy is only a small fraction of all economic production. The actors in this story are merchants, lords, bonded serfs, free peasants, and officials. Now postulate that the actors respond rationally to some set of changing circumstances. Which of various initial scenarios lead to a proliferation of rural manufacture?

We might postulate that merchants have only a few accessible strategies for achieving a return on their wealth. Investing in production and trade is one such strategy. Town-based production was heavily regulated, however, and the opportunities for profits were limited. A large under-employed labor force was available in the rural periphery of the towns. So a strategy of "putting-out" materials and paying low wages to rural producers was an attractive one.

This discussion relies heavily on a very specific set of historical and institutional characteristics -- the economic and demographic conditions of Western Europe in the early modern period. But it is interesting to compare these developments with some similar patterns in China's economic history. For example, consider Mark Elvin's description of merchant-based manufacturing in Ming China in The Pattern of the Chinese Past. It is also interesting to compare the very different analysis in Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin's World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization. Sabel and Zeitlin describe a different alternative to factory production:

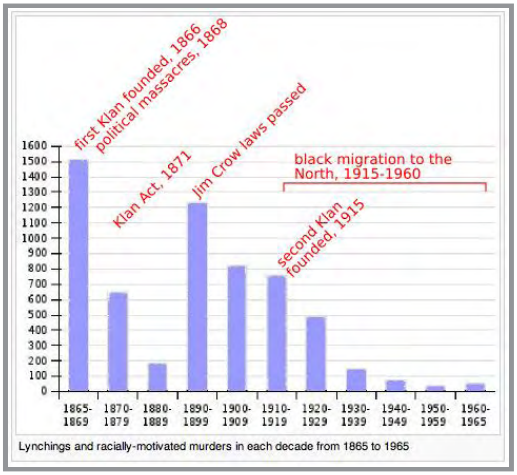
high wage, high return artisanal production, surviving well into the era of modern factory production.

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:28PM (-04:00)

Race and racism

Thursday, September 16, 2010





Race has been a fundamental fact in American society for centuries, since the sixteenth century with the arrival of African slaves. And many would observe that rac***ism*** has been a part of that history from beginning to end. These are distinct statements; it is possible for race to be a factor, without racism being present. But our history does not suggest this separation. Instead, the United States has embodied a pretty deep version of racial awareness, extending back to the period of slavery and its aftermath, and it continues to embody behaviors, attitudes, and outcomes that are best described as racist.

So what do we mean when we say that a society contains a substrate of racism? Can we observe and measure the social dimensions of racism? And can we say with any confidence that there has been change over time? Most fundamentally, a society is racist if members of one racial group despise, demean, mistreat, and discriminate against members of another racial group. Assertions of racial superiority and inferiority, patterns of treatment that discriminate across individuals within different racial groups, and outcomes that show a distinct advantage to members of a dominant racial group all represent the markings of racism within a society.

We might say that there are several important social factors that represent different aspects of the social reality of racism: attitudes, behaviors, institutions, and outcomes.

The **attitudes** of racism include a bundle of emotions and beliefs: a belief in the inherent superiority or inferiority of one race relative to another; feelings of hostility, suspicion, or antipathy towards members of a different racial group; a set of stereotypes about the characteristics of the other group; and a readiness to discriminate against members of other groups when one is in a position to assign benefits, opportunities, or hardships. There is such a thing as an "ideology" of race: a set of beliefs about people and the world that validates the assumptions of superiority and inferiority and the situation of privilege of the dominant group. It is possible to use survey methodology, focus groups, and individual interviews to probe attitudes of a population, and perhaps it is possible to "map" the variations in racial thinking throughout a society. So we might have some confidence

in the possibility of developing an aggregate measure of "degree of racist attitudes" in a given society, and with effort we could monitor the direction of change of this measure over time. This might give us a basis for concluding that "racial attitudes are improving (or worsening) during a specific period."

Behaviors have something to do with attitudes; we generally believe that people's behaviors derive in some way from their underlying attitudes and ideologies. But the evidence of racist behavior is more visible than inferences about attitudes. Particularly visible are facts about the incidence of racially motivated violence; facts about discrimination in employment and housing; and patterns of social behaviors in interactions between members of different racial groups. A situation in which members of a privileged group express dominance, superiority, and greater self-importance towards members of a different group is one that expresses behaviorally the logic of race relations in that society. So we can ask the question of a given society: to what extent do members of a privileged racial group engage in harmful and discriminatory behaviors towards members of another group? And we might attempt to estimate the degree of racism in a society by the relative frequency of racially motivated crimes over time (FBI hate crime statistics; link). Consider this graph of the frequency of lynchings in the United States between 1865 and 1965 (Wikipedia link):

We might speculate that decades in which there is an exceptionally high incidence of lynchings are also peak periods of racism more generally. (Though we might also explain the frequency of these acts of violence in more political-organizational terms.)

The third factor mentioned above is **institutions**: to what extent are the basic institutions in a given society "racialized"? That is, to what extent do the basic institutions automatically and systematically treat members of different races differently? The practices of real estate "steering" and mortgage redlining are clear examples of a racialized system for assigning home seekers to neighborhoods; and employment practices that disadvantage members of some racial groups are just as critical in the area of employment and wellbeing. For example, facts about residential segregation and the availability of transportation make it extremely difficult for African-American applicants to pursue job openings in the suburbs. So this is a system that discriminates against one group in favor of another -- even though the employer's personal attitudes may not be the cause of the discrimination. Here too it is plausible to imagine that we might arrive at some quantifiable judgments about the degree of discrimination and equality of basic institutions at a given time; and this would permit us to make comparisons over time as well.

The fourth factor is **outcomes.** The degree of racialization of a society might be measured by the breadth of the gap between races with respect to important life outcomes. If blacks and whites differ significantly in life expectancy, incarceration rates, health status, income, wealth, and education, we have good reason to believe that there are racialized social processes that are leading to these outcomes. So measuring the race gap with respect to important social outcomes is an important way of assessing the degree to which a given society is racialized; or in other words, to measure the degree to which racism is an important social factor in that society. Racial gaps with respect to important life outcomes can be measured; and it is meaningful to find that racial gaps have narrowed (or widened) during a given period of time.

The fundamental test of a non-racist society is this: there should be no difference in the availability of opportunities across racial groups, and -- given a reasonable assumption

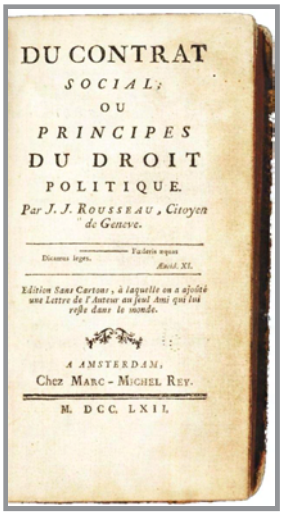
about the fundamental equality of human beings -- there should be no gap in outcomes across racial groups when it comes to factors like health, education, income, or wealth. In other words, a non-racist society is one whose basic institutions do not discriminate, consciously or unconsciously, across individuals from different racial groups.

The treatment of attitudes, behaviors, institutions, and outcomes offered here suggests that it is indeed possible to chart the degree of racial progress a society has made over a number of decades. We can measure attitudes and behaviors over time, using rigorous social-science tools (survey methodology). And we can assess the workings of institutions and the distribution of outcomes using the suite of tools available to the social historian more generally. What is genuinely surprising, however, is the relative paucity of social-science research on this topic.

There is of course the crucial question of the social dynamics of racist attitudes and behavior. Are there social or psychological factors that make the appearance of racist attitudes more likely? Are there features of human nature that lead naturally to a social psychology of "in-group, out-group" discrimination? Or is racism a purely contingent accident that results from some important historical events in the past -- the slave economy, for example? What are the factors in contemporary American social life that are either conducive or inhibiting to the formation of racist attitudes and behaviors in individuals?
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:03PM (-04:00)

Did Rousseau have a sociology?

Sunday, September 19, 2010


DU CONTRAT
SOCIAL;
OU
PRINCIPES
DU DROIT
POLITIQUE.
Par J. J. ROUSSEAU, Citoyen de Geneve.
A AMSTERDAM;
Chez MARC-MICHEL REY.
M. DCC. LXII.

Political philosophers ask a small number of core questions: for example, what constitutes the moral basis of political authority? How should the values of individual liberty and community wellbeing be balanced? And we might imagine that the most insightful political philosophers work on the basis of an astute understanding of the social world. Political philosophy, we might say, ought to be grounded in a good empirical understanding of how society works. As Rousseau himself puts a similar point in the opening pages of "Considerations on the Government of Poland":

Unless you are thoroughly familiar with the nation for which you are working, the labour done on its behalf, however excellent in theory, is bound to prove faulty in practice; especially when the nation in question is one which is already well-established, and whose tastes, customs, prejudices and vices are too deeply rooted to be readily crowded out by new plantings.
Rousseau had a distinctive political philosophy -- but did he also have a sociology? What did he understand about how a society works? And why should we expect that a political philosopher might have something like a sociological theory of the society in which he/she lives? For that matter, what were some of the main characteristics of French and Swiss society in 1750?

Rousseau's political philosophy is well known (link). Rousseau's conception of society in The Social Contract is grounded in a conception of the moral psychology of the individual

and the constitutive relationship that exists between community and the individual. Rousseau distinguished between the **natural** individual (motivated by direct natural emotions and desires, along the lines of Hobbes's conception of the individual); and the **moral** individual (constituted by an understanding of his relation to other moral beings). The former is outside of society; whereas the latter is integrally integrated within a set of social relationships. Rousseau is a theorist of freedom. But freedom has these same two aspects: natural freedom and moral freedom. And his conception of social relationships is simple: there is sovereignty (the relations of the polity) and there is property (the relations of the economy).

What this philosophy does not provide is anything like an empirical understanding of real, concrete social life in Rousseau's contemporary France or Switzerland: for example, the nature of the occupational segments of eighteenth-century French society, the ways in which the state exercises its power, the social practices of farming villages, or the ways in which wealth and power are accumulated by elites. There is very little concrete empirical social detail in Rousseau's writings.

The central models of social life that Rousseau possessed fall in a couple of categories:

- stylized examples of social behavior -- cooperation, for example
- stylized examples of a legislative process (the constitution of Poland)
- the romanticized example of the Greek polis
- popular elite conceptions of the French court
- stylized conception of the relation between the governed and the ruler; forms of government

So there is a political theory -- a theory of different forms of the state -- but not much of a theory of how social life works. There is very little social description in Rousseau's work. The only institution he describes in any detail is the process of legislation. And there are only infrequent instances of hypotheses about social processes -- how social organizations work, for example. So it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Rousseau did not have much of a sociological imagination or curiosity. Unlike Tocqueville a century later, he was not a sociologist in the making.

We might expect sociological description in his A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation Of The Inequality Among Mankind. But this isn't the case. He refers to the creation of property and the consequent emergence of inequalities of wealth; but he doesn't ask at all what the social processes are that preserve property. And there is nothing historically specific about his descriptions of property, wealth, and inequality; they remain apriori and general.

What might we want from a sociology from an observer like Rousseau? We would want a couple of fundamentals: an understanding of how power works in the contemporary society; an idea of how economic institutions work; an understanding of the major classes that exist in society -- and the forms of life and forms of social relations that exist within these. There is a descriptive aspect of this picture -- what are the main social groups and processes? And there is a theoretical part -- how do these institutions work? What are some of the causal processes that can be identified within society?

Moreover, we might say that a political philosophy is seriously hampered if it is not grounded in a fairly good understanding of how society works -- how individuals behave in institutional settings, how organizations work, how public opinion and shared social values influence individuals. Significantly, these are the sorts of concrete observations with which Tocqueville's work is filled (link).

We also find much more of a sociological eye in the writings of novelists. We get more of a descriptive sociology from many of the French novelists of the nineteenth century than is to be found anywhere in Rousseau. Balzac, Zola, and Stendhal all devote extensive attention to the lives and ways of the various segments of French society -- bourgeois, aristocrat, peasant, merchant, thief.

Robert Darnton describes a bit of sociological description in The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History in a fascinating chapter called "A Bourgeois Puts his World in Order: The City as a Text." The object of the chapter is a highly detailed description of Montpellier written during Rousseau's lifetime. Here is the opening paragraph of Darnton's essay:

If the grim folklore of peasants and the violent rituals of artisans belong to a world that seems unthinkable today, we might expect to be able to think ourselves into the skin of an eighteenth-century bourgeois. The opportunity arises thanks to another document, as extraordinary in its way as Contat's account of the cat massacre: it is a description of Montpellier written in 1768 by an anonymous but solidly middle-class citizen of the city. To be sure, the casual nonfiction of the eighteenth century was full of "descriptions," guidebooks, almanacs, and amateur accounts of local monuments and celebrities. What set our bourgeois apart from others who dealt in the genre was his obsession with completeness.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:15PM (-04:00)

Intangible services

Tuesday, September 21, 2010



Neoclassical economics presents a pretty simple theory of the equilibrium price of a manufactured good. This theory also extends to a theory of the wage for skilled and unskilled labor. We postulate production and demand curves, and the equilibrium price is the point where supply equals demand. The supply curve is influenced by factors governing the cost of production and therefore the level of profit created at a given production level and price, and the demand curve is influenced by subjective consumer preferences. An increase in demand for a good pushes up the price, thus triggering more production; and the price falls to a new equilibrium.

Wages are affected by this calculation because labor is a factor of production, and demand for labor at a given wage is influenced by the marginal product of labor. If the marginal product is greater than the wage the employer will hire another worker, increasing demand for labor and marginally increasing the wage. The equilibrium wage is the point at which the marginal product equals the wage.
Labor is not a homogeneous substance; the marginal product is affected by skill, intensity, and experience. So we should expect different wage curves for different segments of the labor force, with the wage rate for unskilled and inexperienced workers at the lowest level. But because specialized labor is somewhat elastic in supply (through additional training) we would expect some degree of convergence between skilled and

unskilled labor rates over moderate time periods.
How does this theory apply to intangible services where the quality of the product is difficult to measure? I'm thinking of a college education; how does a consumer decide between the education offered at a private university like Rice and the lower-cost alternative at UT-Arlington? But let's think of simpler examples -- for example, architectural services, family lawyers, or studio musicians. What are the factors that influence the price a supplier can charge in the marketplace? Why do each of these sectors embody significantly tiered price structures?

Take architectural services. There is a wide range of fees charged by architectural firms, ranging from one-person firms designing single-family homes to multi-city firms charging much higher fees. There is demand for architectural services regionally and nationally. There is good information about suppliers and rates at the national level. And the supply of services is somewhat elastic -- more students will enter architecture school when the incomes they can expect are high. So why doesn't the simple logic of supply and demand imply convergence of prices for this service that is reasonably consistent and related to the cost of production of the service? Why are some elite firms able to retain a significant and permanent price premium? In other words, why don't we witness the commodification of architectural services along the lines of the auto industry, where firms compete aggressively on price?

I suppose some of the factors that stabilize this sort of multi-tier price system in services are fairly obvious. These might include brand and reputation; quality and prestige of professional service providers within the various firms; and depth and quality of referral networks.

Consider this thought experiment. RUNOFTHEMILL is an architectural firm of 30 professionals in the Rustbelt. TOPOFTHELINE is a firm of 200 professionals in San Francisco. Detailed quality assessment by the XYZ consulting firm estimates that RUNOFTHEMILL completes a wide range of midsize projects at roughly the same level of quality as TOPOFTHELINE. However, TOPOFTHELINE charges roughly twice what RUNOFTHEMILL charges for a project of comparable size. What are the mechanisms that preserve the price differential between the two firms? Why are rational business organizations willing to pay the premium to have their buildings designed by TOPOFTHELINE?

First, it is possible that TOPOFTHELINE has succeeded in positioning itself in the marketplace as a provider of superior quality. By hypothesis, this is untrue; but if potential buyers are persuaded of the quality advantage, they may choose TOPOFTHELINE over RUNOFTHEMILL in spite of the premium. This seems to be an inverted version of the "market for lemons": because the actual quality of the good is difficult to measure, the purchaser is forced to turn to other indicators as possible signals of quality. And this may lead the purchaser to pay more for the service than necessary.

Second, TOPOFTHELINE may have pursued a deliberate and successful strategy of recruitment of architects from the most respected schools in the world, whereas RUNOFTHEMILL may pay lower fees and may recruit equally capable but less prestigious professionals. Prospective clients may take the prestige of the staff as an indicator of the quality of the product, and may therefore be willing to pay the premium. The observable prestige of the professional staff may serve as a surrogate for the inferred quality of the service.

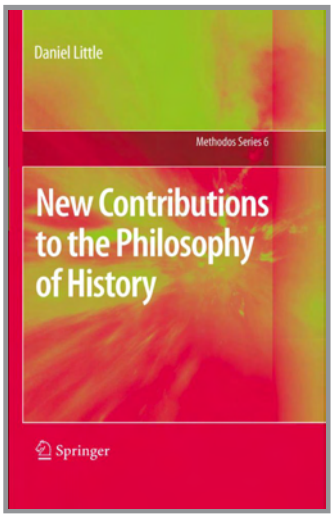
Third, TOPOFTHELINE may have a brand that conveys significant prestige on its projects. A company whose corporate offices are designed by TOPOFTHELINE may gain from that prestige, and the gain may justify the premium in spite of the additional cost.

Finally, it may be that the market for architectural services is highly segmented as a result of the networks of referrals that exist involving the two firms. TOPOFTHELINE exists in a network of premiere organizations, both providers and purchasers; and referrals and endorsements for TOPOFTHELINE support premium prices for its services. RUNOFTHEMILL has completed equally high-quality projects, but for a second tier of companies and consumers; so its referrals more or less automatically steer its services towards a tier of companies that are more likely to compete on price. So RUNOFTHEMILL's referrals generate lower average fees.

Several of these factors are inherently irrational grounds for accepting a price premium. If purchasers had full information about quality and price, they would not pay a premium for the pedigrees of the professional staff, and they would not restrict their purchasing horizon to suppliers recommended by other elite firms. Instead, they would go with the Walmart strategy: get the best product for the lowest price. So far, however, it seems that the markets for advanced and specialized services are fairly sticky when it comes to price, quality, and prestige.
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:24PM (-04:00)

New contributions to the philosophy of history

Thursday, September 23, 2010



I am pleased at the publication this month of a book I've been working on for quite a long time, New Contributions to the Philosophy of History (Methodos Series). (Here is a link to a digital version of the book on the Springer website.) The title is self-explanatory. The book is intended to jump-start a new round of conversations within analytic philosophy about the nature of history and historical explanation. The philosophy of social science and the philosophy of biology have contributed enormously to the progress of research in both these areas, and I believe that new discussions in the philosophy of history can be equally valuable.

The book was inspired out of the thought that reflections on history and historical knowledge have not been as prominent within philosophy as they once were; and yet the issues raised under this rubric are interesting and important. We need to have a better understanding of some of the conceptual and epistemic issues raised by the attempt to understand and explain human history. So it seems timely to reopen the domain of the philosophy of history with some new questions and new approaches.

The approach that I've taken in this book is to take very seriously the innovations and intellectual turns that gifted historians have brought forward in the past thirty years. Writers such as Philip Kuhn, Jonathan Spence, Robert Darnton, Simon Schama, Peter Perdue, and Michael Kammen have brought strikingly new perspectives to the writing of history; and often their innovations suggest new ways of formulating some basic issues in

the philosophy of history. Good historians are often deeply insightful philosophers of history as well. I've tried to approach the philosophy of history along the lines of how many philosophers have approached various of the special sciences (biology, psychology, physics, sociology, anthropology): to combine good philosophical analysis and reasoning with a careful and sympathetic reading of some of the best current research efforts in those disciplines. When Simon Schama or Albert Soboul wrestle with the question, "What sort of thing was the French Revolution?", we can learn a lot about how to think about historical ontology. And when Peter Perdue or R. Bin Wong propose a shift in thinking about Eurasia, we can get a much more precise understanding of the question of defining periods, regions, and civilizations.

The table of contents of the book gives a fairly good idea of the range of topics considered in the book: "History and Narrative," "Historical Concepts and Social Ontology," "Large Structures," "Causal Mechanisms," "History of Technology," "Economic History," "The Involution Debate," and "Mentalities." These discussions circle around three different master questions:

- How can we best define or conceptualize historical things (**ontology**)?
- What issues arise in our effort to provide knowledge about the past (**epistemology**)?
- What constitutes a good historical explanation (**explanation**)?

To these core questions, we can add another important one that emerges that perhaps falls closer to historiography than the philosophy of history:

- What are some innovative ways that contemporary historians have invented as a basis for representing the past?

One aspect of *New Contributions* is especially novel: the effort I've made to combine an intellectual process of traditional academic research and writing with the work I've been doing for the past three years on this blog, *UnderstandingSociety*. I announced in 2007 that "The blog is an experiment in thinking, one idea at a time," and *New Contributions* is my first effort to test out the viability of that idea. Most of the chapters in the book began as conference presentations designed to contribute eventually to this new approach to the philosophy of history. I had a book plan in mind as I wrote these papers and chapters over a ten-year period. After the book was accepted by the excellent editors of the Springer Methodos series, Daniel Courgeau and Robert Franck, I undertook a major rewriting of the full manuscript; and I realized that I was also writing quite a few posts on various aspects of the philosophy of history in the blog. So I undertook to integrate a lot of the new material into the manuscript. In the end, roughly 40 postings have been integrated into *New Contributions*, which amounts to more than a third of the book. So this is a fairly extended test run to evaluate the notion that it is possible to make significant intellectual progress on a subject through a series of separate blog postings.

Here are a couple of key paragraphs of the book; they give something of a feel for the kind of analysis I'm trying to offer.

Why do we need a better philosophy of history? Because we think we know what we mean when we talk about "knowledge of history," "explaining historical change," or "historical forces and structures." But -- we do not. Our assumptions about history are often superficial and fail to hold up to scrutiny. We often assume that history is an integrated fabric or web, in which underlying causal powers lead to enduring historical patterns. Or we assume that historical processes have meaning -- with the result that later events can be interpreted as flowing within a larger pattern of meaning. Or we presuppose that there are recurring historical structures and entities--"states," "cultures," and "demographic regions" that are repeatedly instantiated in different historical circumstances.

I do not say that these assumptions are entirely wrong. I say that they are superficial, misleading, and simple in a context in which nuances matter. Take the idea of recurring historical structures. Is there some state "essence" possessed in common among the Carolingian state described by Marc Bloch, the theatre state of Bali described by Clifford Geertz, and the modern Chinese party state described by Vivienne Shue? If so, what is this set of essential properties that states have? If not, what alternative interpretation can we provide to "state talk" that makes coherent sense? (2)
I certainly hope the book will wind up in enough libraries around the world to allow a range of readers to get a chance to consider it! And the digital version made available by Springer is certainly a help; it allows readers to examine some of it online (link).
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:00AM (-04:00)

Skilled synchronized cooperation

Sunday, September 26, 2010

One kind of social behavior that is particularly interesting to observe is what we might call "small group skilled cooperation." This kind of social action arises when --

- there is a recurring task to be performed by a small defined group of actors;
- success in the task requires effective performance of specialized actions by members of the group;
- success in the task requires close coordination in time of the actions of the specialized actors;
- success in the task requires extensive training of individuals and the group to enhance individual skill and inter-actor coordination.

Here is one example --

Here is another:

These examples come from athletics. But we could also think of examples from other time-sensitive, rapidly unfolding scenes of social coordination: fire fighting, jazz ensembles, urban warfare, and NASCAR pit crews provide others. In each case two kinds of skillful performance are needed. Each individual needs to be highly skilled at his/her assigned activity; and the individuals need to be skilled at coordinating with other actors and handing off assignments to each other at the right time. Here are the Boston Celtics showing both kinds of skill in a playoff game against the Pistons in 1987:

So the questions here are these -- How do groups or teams get good at this kind of coordination and skilled performance? And how common is this kind of coordination in everyday social life?

Part of the "how" question is fairly obvious. The purpose of repetition and training in sports is precisely to allow players to run through possible game scenarios and perfect their individual skills and their timing and coordination. The quarterback who throws well but consistently misjudges the speed of the receiver will not be successful; and through practice he can improve his timing of the flow of the play. Each member of the team is

expected to perfect his readiness to perform accurately and to do so at precisely the right moment. Determining the "right moment" requires having a good mental representation of the play as it is developing in real time, to permit the player to make the block or make his cut at the moment needed to complete the play. This emphasis on training and repetition seems to be uniform wherever a high degree of coordination is required; we don't rely on the spontaneous decision-making of the individuals, but instead try to lay down practiced routines that are invoked when the occasion arises. And this in turn suggests the need for a sort of phenomenology of skill; we would want to explore the awareness and mental capacities that are associated with high-performance teamwork.

The fact that a team depends on both kinds of skills -- individual and coordinative -- explains why All-Star teams are not very good at basketball and are better at baseball. All the players are highly skilled as individuals. But they haven't had the practice together that would be needed for them to function at a high level as a team: recognizing each other's particular strengths and accurately judging their likely behavior and speed in the next several seconds. In the Celtics video above, we see Dennis Johnson streaking to the basket before Larry Bird steals the inbound pass -- reflecting DJ's understanding of the game situation and his anticipation of the possibility of Bird's actions. This doesn't seem likely in a team of talented strangers. Baseball, by contrast, seems like a sport that reflects the sum of the talents of the individuals rather than a "value-added" component derived from close coordination of efforts. (The double play is an exception to this point, of course.)

The "how common" question is more difficult. I'm inclined to think that skilled time-sensitive cooperation is ***not*** very common in ordinary social life. There seem to be relatively few examples of cooperative activities that require the high degree of coordination and timing specified here. There is a lot of division of task in contemporary society, and therefore a lot of coordination and cooperation. But this rarely requires the second-by-second synchronization that is found in the examples offered here. Instead, a good sales team may depend on the individual talents of the members of the team, without requiring a high degree of coordination among them. Sales is more like baseball than basketball.

Perhaps the most common example of an area of common social action that requires this kind of training, skill, and coordination is in the field of emergency response: firefighters, emergency rooms and surgical suites in hospitals, and emergency responders in large cities. By contrast, a newsroom, a factory floor, and a department store each require skill and specialization of task at the individual level; but they require little temporally precise teamwork. The teamwork required in these examples is more conceptual and communicative: one person's work product needs to be aligned with the goals and needs of the other person's work product; and this requires leadership and communication.

(A couple of earlier posts are relevant to this topic: "Acting, Deliberating, Performing;" (link), "Habits, Plans, and Improvisation;" (link), "Being Clumsy" (link), and "What Kind of Knowledge does a Football Coach Have?" (link).)
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:51PM (-04:00)

Sociology in China

Tuesday, September 28, 2010


1966年8月，清华大学红卫兵在砸毁牌坊上的“清华园”题字。

Social investigation has a history in China that extends into the Ming-Qing dynasties and earlier, in the form of reports by scholar-officials on local conditions. Scholars undertook to provide descriptions of agricultural conditions, farming methods, famines, drought and flooding, the conditions of the poor, banditry, and many other topics of interest to the state or potentially of value to the people. These reports often show great attention to detail and concern for veracity, and they provide important sources of data for contemporary historians. They do not constitute “scientific sociology,” any more than the writings of Mayhew or the findings of Parliamentary commissions constituted a British sociology in the 18th century. They fall in the category of careful fact-gathering, with some efforts at diagnosing causes of some of the phenomena identified. We may also refer to the tradition called “evidential research” (kaoju), which emphasized “empirically rigorous methods” by historians and linguists to gather evidence for reconstructing China’s early history.

Sociology as a science involves several more specific ideas over and above simple descriptive reportage of social behavior: the idea of empirically rigorous methods of **data gathering and analysis**, the idea of providing **explanations** of the phenomena that are discovered, the idea of formulating **theories about unobservable social processes** or mechanisms, and the idea of identifying some level of **patterns or regularities** among and across groups of phenomena.

So what were some of the main turning points in the development of modern sociology in Chinese academic institutions in the twentieth century? How did sociology first appear in China? What were the primary influences? What assumptions about social theory and social research methodology were important, at what periods in time? When did the institutions of academic sociology develop—departments, associations, and journals?

As a European intellectual development, sociology took its shape in the 19th century as a result of several important currents of thought: the development of empiricism or positivism as philosophical theories of human knowledge, the development of “classical sociological theories” of modern societies (Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Tocqueville, Simmel); and the refinement of the methods of social description and analysis associated with public policy and reform efforts. Durkheim’s theories of social solidarity and cohesion, Weber’s theory of rationality and norms as causes of large historical developments such as the emergence of capitalism, and Marx’s theory of class conflict as the historical cause of social change—these classical theories constituted a first generation of sociological theory that twentieth century sociologists worked with in their efforts to deal with complex sociological phenomena. New theories in the twentieth century acquired classical standing as well: Parsons’ structural-functionalism as a general theory of social organization, the anthropologists’ formulation of theories of culture and language, and the Chicago School’s blend of pragmatism and policy provided a reservoir of theoretical ideas in the context of which more specific sociological inquiries could be framed.

Early in the twentieth century there were several important early Chinese sociologists who studied these theories in the west and brought them back to Chinese universities. There was a “founding group” of sociologists who studied in the US, in Chicago, California, and other universities in the 1930s and who created significant pockets of social research in China. The primary fields were rural development, ethnic groups, labor issues, gender and family. These founders published in English and Chinese. Yan Fu (1853-1921) was one of China’s first scholars of sociology, and translated Herbert Spencer’s *Study of Sociology* into Chinese in 1903). Quite a few Chinese students received Wisconsin, Columbia, USC, Chicago PhDs in the 1920s and 30s, and one students received a PhD from the University of Michigan in 1936.

Following the Communist Revolution, sociology went through several serious periods of crisis. In the 1950s the “socialist” character of the revolution led officials in China to ideological objections to the science of sociology. The view was that sociology had to do with addressing social problems. But this is a socialist society, so how can we have social problems? Therefore, we don’t need sociology. Departments of sociology were disbanded in the universities. A few went to the Labor Cadre School. Others went to statistics departments. Quantitative and statistical methods were acceptable; but sociological theory and applied research were not. This was described as “bourgeois science.”

In 1956-57 there was an attempt by some professors to revive sociological research. Prof. Ma Yinchu wrote an article addressed to Chairman Mao about population issues. He advocated for research on this question, arguing that population increase could interfere with China’s economic future. There was some openness to this research, and Chairman Mao invited open thinking and ideas. There had been an important meeting of a group of social scientists to re-start sociological research. All the participants in this meeting were identified as “rightist”. Participants included Yuan, Chen, Ma, and Fei. Yuan was identified as “ultra-rightist” because he had done some organizational work for this small informal group. He was sent to Northeast China for “labor re-education” in 1957.

Some opinions that emerged during the apparent thaw in 1956 were critical of one-party rule. There was an elite of scholars and officials from pre-1949 who were critical of one-party system. An important turning point was Wang Shengquan's “Big Character Paper” in 1956 or 1957. He criticized Leninism as contrary to Marxist theory. Marx believed that socialism could only occur when the world had developed to the point of socialism; not “socialism in one country. Lenin and Stalin deviated from this belief. Wang said that Lenin was untrue to Marxism. He was consequently labeled “rightist”.

The brief emergence of critical opinions among social scientists in 1956 led to a crackdown on “Rightist thinking” and the squelching of emerging social research. The emerging sociology and social science, social reform, political reform thinkers were all identified as rightists. Even criticism from the left—e.g. “The Party is not doing enough for peasants” was identified as rightist and counter-revolutionary. In the anti-Rightist campaign in 1957 about 100,000 people were labeled as “rightist”. There were quotas for institutions to identify a certain number of rightists among them. The anti-Rightist Movement by the CCP/Propaganda Department crushed the re-emergence of social science research at this time. The fear was that social research would turn to criticism and lead to calls for changing the political system.

The period of the Cultural Revolution was also an unpropitious period for sociology as a

discipline. The universities were closed for much of the period of 1966-76, and when they reopened, sociology remained a suspect discipline. It was only in the early 1980s that sociology began to regain its place in the university and in the field of social-science research in China. "In 1980 the Institute of Sociology under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was established with Fei Xiao-tong as director" (Zheng and Li, 461).

Important Chinese sociologists

A particular leader in Chinese sociology was Prof. Fei Xiaotong. He was educated in the 1930s and did field research in Jiangsu and Yunnan in the 1930s-1940s. He was the first president of the Sociological Society of China, and he was a leading figure in re-establishing sociology after 1979. He became a party official in a “democratic party”. He died in 2005. Prof. Fei was a major influence after the Cultural Revolution in reviving sociology in China. An important book in English translation is *Peasant Life in China: a Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley*, based on his field survey in a village in Jiangsu province in 1930s (Google Books link). Later he did field research in Yunnan. After 1979 his best work was field research on the rise and roles of small market towns after the collapse of the people’s communes, focusing on Jiangsu Province. (See David Arkush, Fei Xiaotong and Sociology in Revolutionary China.) Fei became the first President of the Sociological Society after the CR in 1979. Yuan became the second president. (Here are obituaries from the New York Times (link) and ChinaDaily (link).)

Chen Da took a PhD at Columbia and became a specialist on Chinese labor. He was a prominent sociologist in the 30s and 40s. He became a key influence on the development of sociology at Tsinghua University, becoming founding director of the General Census Center there in 1939. After the revolution he was prohibited from research and teaching and was eventually assigned to the Labor Cadre School. His areas of research included survey methodology and surveys of workers’ households. (Here is a brief history of sociology at Tsinghua University; link.)

Another important figure is Yuan Fang. He was educated at Kumming at Southwest Union University, a university that was relocated during the anti-Japanese War. He was a student of Chen Da. He taught quantitative methods at a time that this was dangerous; “bourgeois science”. Some professors disapproved of the workshops he organized. People who participated were told to “be critical from a Marx-Mao-Lenin point of view.” After the anti-Japanese War, he went to Tsinghua as professor. He then went to Peking University as chair of sociology in 1984.

Lei Jieqiong. USC 1932. She advocated for the five-city survey. Family and marriage. After the Cultural Revolution she became Vice Mayor of Beijing, representing a “showcase democratic party.” She was also a Peking University professor. Here is a ChinaDaily article on the occasion of her 105th birthday.

Pan Guangdan. Sociology/anthropology. He studied ethnic groups. He was a professor of Fei. He was the first translator of Darwin into Chinese and became China's leading promoter of eugenics.

Yan Yangchu [James Yen]. Another renowned sociologist in the 1930s. See Charles W. Hayford, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (Google Books link).

Li Jinghan. Ph.D. from Chicago (?) in the late 1920s. Social survey methods. Statistical study of household surveys. Both rural and urban. Major report of fieldwork: Dingxian

shehui gaikuang diaocha (a general social survey of Ding county); first published in 1934 and recently reprinted.

Wang Shengquan. Chen and Yuan educated him. His “Big Character Paper” in 1956 or 1957 was a precipitating incident leading to the Anti-Rightist Campaign. He was sent to the Cadre School.

A chronology

A History of Chinese Sociology, by Zheng Hang-sheng and Li Ying-sheng (China Renmin University Press) includes a fairly detailed appendix listing "Major Events in Chinese Sociology." Here are a few significant events from the early twentieth century:

- 1921 Xiamen University established the department of history and sociology -- first department of sociology in universities run by the Chinese
- 1922 Yu Tian-xiu set up "Association of Chinese Sociology" and started *Journal of Sociology*
- 1923 Shanghai started the department of sociology; stipulated that the teaching took the theoretical basis of Marxism and Leninism, i.e. historical materialism as its guide.
- 1924 The Fund Board of Chinese Education and Culture was established in Beijing and the Department of Social Survey was led by Tao Meng-he and Li Jing-han. Published a large number of findings reports, including *Rural Families in the Suburbs of Beiping*.
- 1926 Li Da published *Modern Sociology*.
- 1928 Chen Han-sheng conducted three large-scale surveys of rural areas in Hebei, Jiangsu and Guangdong Provinces through the early 1930s.
- 1930 The department of sociology in Yanjing University established an experimental base at Qinghe Town, where Xu Shi-lian and Yang Kai-dao directed students to survey the population trend, families, bazars, organizations of village and town in Qinghe Town (Google Books link)

The entry for 1957 is laconic:

1957 Inspired by the principle, "let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" set forth by the Central Committee of the CPC led by Mao Ze-dong, Fei Xiao-tong published an article A Couple of Words about Sociology in Wenhuibao. Chen Da, Wu Jing-chao and other distinguished sociologists also expressed their opinions about the restoration and reconstruction of Chinese sociology at Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences and in influential newspapers or journals in Beijing and Shanghai. The opinions of the former sociologists evoked big repercussions and attracted the attention of the leaders in departments responsible for the work. However, when the Anti-Rightist Campaign began, the opinions about restoring and reconstruction of sociology were criticized as part of the plot to restore capitalism, and a number of former sociologists were mistaken for rightists and were persecuted. From then on, sociology became a restricted academic zone.

The next entry is 1979, 22 years later.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:50PM (-04:00)

Opportunity index

Saturday, October 02, 2010



It would be very interesting if we had something we might call an "opportunity index" that could be applied to young children to estimate their probability of later success in life. The idea would go along these lines: Take some measure of adult success -- perhaps graduation from college or success in attaining a skilled job or career by the age of 30. Then identify a series of societal developmental factors that enhance the probability of the outcome. Finally, construct an index of these factors for each child that estimates the overall likelihood of success for that child. The logic is analogous to identifying risk factors for heart disease: given this set of factors, the individual's likelihood of O is p.

The positive opportunity factors might include things like this:

- Quality of schools
- Reading level at grade 5
- Presence of caring adults and mentors
- Quality of family environment
- Adequate nutrition
- Adequate housing
- Adequate family income
- Access to healthcare

There are probably redundancies here; public health professionals and education specialists would need to chime in. But suppose we've got some set of factors that can be scored 1-5, and suppose the index aggregates the factors to an overall estimate of probability of success. Maybe it goes along these lines: children with low scores in all factors (1) have only a 20% likelihood of success. (I.e. some children survive even crushing adversity; but it is only a small percentage who do.) Children with a 3 score have a probability of success of 75%. And children with the top scores have a probability of success of 95%. (I.e. students with good schools, high reading levels, great families, and affluent circumstances are almost certain to succeed.)

Just supposing we had such an index, what would it tell us when we applied it to a large population of children? The index collects societal factors that influence the child's likelihood of success, and the aggregate index is intended to correspond to the overall likelihood of success. So looking at the distribution of the likelihood of success over a population would be sort of a CT scan of the opportunity structure that is presented to children in different social locations: affluent suburb, poor inner city, declining suburb, farm community, ... And we could then look at the index as a way of measuring "opportunity equity."

My suspicion is that the result of this thought experiment would be pretty shocking. The factors that individually contribute to success are likely to covary by neighborhood,

income, and race. It is therefore likely that whole schools full of children are likely to have similar scores. This suggests that there are gross inequalities of probability of success by race and poverty status. And this would highlight what is really a glaring source of injustice in our country: the likelihood of life success varies enormously by race and affluence.

Further, since the factors mentioned here are external social factors which are simply presented to the children, there is no sense in which we could maintain that these differences derive from things the child is responsible for. So, in other words, these gross inequalities of opportunity and outcome are fundamentally unjustifiable.

I'm led to this set of thoughts as a result of spending some time with young people in Detroit. The high school and college graduates I've been acquainted with display a remarkable set of talents and aspirations. They are on their way to success in whatever way we choose to define that term. And yet their own stories demonstrate what a difficult road it has been for them, and how many of their peers have been left behind. Fewer than 50% of Detroit school children go on to graduate from high school. Violence, hunger, homelessness, indifference, and illiteracy have prevented so many of their brothers and sisters from achieving the same kind of success. These are system characteristics, not individual failings. And these are the objective obstacles to opportunity that simply must be eliminated.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:08AM (-04:00)

Rawls and economics

Tuesday, October 05, 2010

A topic of continuing interest to me is the role that serious engagement with economic theory played in the formation and development of John Rawls's thought (link). To what extent were important aspects of the theory of "Justice as Fairness" influenced by elements of economic theory?

I'm inclined to think that we can look at Rawls's major papers between 1955 and 1971 as a fairly reasonable sample of the intellectual influences that affected the development of his thought. His first major paper, "Two Concepts of Rules," appeared in 1955, and *A Theory of Justice* appeared in 1971. All of his major papers are included in Collected Papers, so this is a fairly convenient way of surveying his thought during this first portion of his career.

So what can we learn from these papers when it comes to the influence of the economists on Rawls?

Here is an inventory of Rawls's references to economists from 1955 to 1971, from the essays included in Collected Papers.

Two Concepts of Rules (1955)
- Lionel Robbins, The Theory of Economic Policy in English Political Economy (1952)

Justice as Fairness (1958)
- John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior (1947); R. Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa, Games and Decisions (1957) (56)
- IMD Little, A Critique of Welfare Economics (1957); KJ Arrow, Social Choice and

Individual Values (1951); JR Hicks, Value and Capital (1946); Tibor Scitovsky, Welfare and Competition (1952) [66]
- Jerome Rothenberg, The Measurement of Social Welfare; JC Harsanyi, "Cardinal Utility" (1953) and "Cardinal Welfare" (1955) [85]

The Sense of Justice (1963)
- WJ Baumol, Welfare Economics and the Theory of the State; RD Luce and Howard Raiffa, Games and Decisions [104]

Legal Obligation and the Duty of Fair Play (1964)
- KJ Arrow, Social Choice and Individual Values (1951)

Distributive Justice (1967)
- RD Luce and Howard Raiffa, Games and Decisions (1957) [133]
- Wilfredo Pareto, Manuel d'economie politique (1909) [135, 160]
- Nicholas Kaldor, An Expenditure Tax (1955) [143]

Distributive Justice: Some Addenda (1968)
- JC Harsanyi, "Cardinal Utility" (1953), "Cardinal Welfare" (1955) [173]

Justice as Reciprocity (1971)
- FY Edgeworth, "The Pure Theory of Taxation" (1958) [203]
- John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior (1947); Luce and Raiffa, Games and Decisions (1957) [205]
- RB Braithwaite, Theory of Games as a Tool for the Moral Philosopher (1955)
- IMD Little, Critique; KJ Arrow, Social Choice; JR Hicks, Value; JC Harsanyi, "Cardinal Welfare", Tibor Scitovsky, Welfare and Competition (1963) [217]

A couple of things are noteworthy in this inventory. First, Rawls's references are highly contemporary to the 1950s. He appears to have a reasonable level of acquaintance with what was happening in economics in that decade. And there are virtually no references to earlier figures in the history of economics; Pareto is virtually the only repeat entry in the index (Pareto principle).

Second, there is a decided focus on several areas: welfare economics, social choice theory, and game theory. Von Neumann and Morgenstern are cited several times, as are Luce and Raiffa; and Kenneth Arrow and John Harsanyi are repeat visitors as well. (Amartya Sen is cited in later essays, but not prior to 1971.) Keynes is not mentioned in these early articles, and only tangentially in TJ. And there is no mention of general equilibrium theory.

Third, none of these citations corresponds to a significant or substantive discussion of the economist's views. Rather, Rawls tends to illustrate a philosophical point by finding a relevant theoretical claim in one economist or another. This indicates a degree of familiarity with the contemporary literature, but a fairly low level of intellectual engagement with the debates and analytical approaches. In contrast to his treatment of utilitarianism, Kant, or Rousseau, Rawls's treatment of economic theory is brief and non-substantive.

Significantly absent from this inventory of references is any mention of the classical political economists. The index of *Collected Papers* contains no references to Ricardo, Quesnay, or Malthus, and only one reference to Adam Smith (ideal spectator theory; 201). John Stuart Mill is discussed in some detail, but always as a utilitarian philosopher, not an economist. Marx is mentioned briefly (Critique of the Gotha Programme; 252). The labor theory of value -- the central construct of classical political economy -- is not mentioned once.

There are a few references to Smith in *A Theory of Justice*, but they are superficial and

incidental: Smith as a utilitarian, the concept of the invisible hand (57), the moral sentiments (184, 479), and impartial spectator theory (263). There is nothing to suggest a careful or extensive reading of Smith, Ricardo, or Malthus in *A Theory of Justice*.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the history of economic thought played a limited role in Rawls's thought. Rawls was reasonably well acquainted with contemporary economics as of the 1950s and plainly found some aspects relevant to his philosophical agenda (Arrow, Harsanyi, von Morgenstern). But I don't find much reason to believe that Rawls's important philosophical insights on justice were very much shaped by a reading of the history of economics. Contemporary economists appear to have had greater influence -- decision theory, game theory, and social choice theory in particular.

(See an earlier entry on "Rawls and decision theory" for more on this; link.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 07:05AM (-04:00)

Rawls and the history of economics

Tuesday, October 05, 2010

What did John Rawls know about the history of political economy? In particular, how much did he know about classical political economy, including especially the theories of Smith, Ricardo, Malthus, Marx, or Mill?

It appears from his writings and lectures that he was generally familiar with the most basic theoretical positions and debates in classical political economy -- the labor theory of value, the invisible hand, the theory of land rent, and the simple theory of a competitive market. And beginning with the marginal revolution (Jevons, Pareto, and Marshall), he seems to have studied economic theory more carefully. But I don't find any evidence in his corpus of a careful reading of Smith, Ricardo, or Malthus. So what was the source of his knowledge of classical political economy?

One source of exposure to the history of economics occurred during his first two years of teaching as a lecturer at Princeton. Tom Pogge indicates in John Rawls: His Life and Theory of Justice that Rawls did significant reading and study of political economy during 1950-52:

In the fall of 1950, he attended a seminar of the economist William Baumol, which focused mainly on J. R. Hicks's *Value and Capital* and Paul Samuelson's *Foundations of Economic Analysis*. These discussions were continued in the following spring in an unofficial study group. Rawls also studied Leon Walras's *Elements of Pure Economics* and John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. (16)

So there is some direct evidence of Rawls's reading in economics. Another way in which he might have gained a speaking acquaintance of the history of economics is through secondary surveys of the field. Were there standard histories of political economy in Rawls's formative years from 1950 to 1965?

One of the great historians of economic thought during those years was Joseph Schumpeter. Schumpeter's Ten Great Economists appeared in 1952. This book focuses largely on post-classical political economy; after a long chapter on Marx, Schumpeter

provides short discussions of Walras, Menger, Marshall, Pareto, von Bohm-Bawerk, Taussig, Fisher, Mitchell, and Keynes. More important than *TGE* is Schumpeter's major contribution to the history of economic thought, History of Economic Analysis, which appeared posthumously in 1954. It is possible that Rawls used these books as a sort of intellectual guide to his understanding of the history of economic thought. The only reference to Schumpeter in Rawls's corpus is a single citation of Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy in *A Theory of Justice*. This doesn't preclude the possibility that he read Schumpeter's histories of economics. But is there any basis for supposing that Rawls was in fact acquainted with Schumpeter's work?

Here is a clue worth pursuing. Pogge notes that Rawls spent a final year of fellowship at Princeton in 1949-50, and that he spent part of this time in an economics seminar with Jacob Viner, a distinguished Princeton economics professor. (The other main area of study during that year was in the history of U.S. political thought with Alpheus Mason.) And this establishes a tenuous connection to Schumpeter and the history of economic thought. Viner was a significant contributor to economic theory and policy in the 1930s and 40s at the University of Chicago and Princeton, and he also had a sustained interest in the history of economic thought. In 1954 he wrote one of the first (and most prominent) reviews of *History of Economic Analysis* in *American Economic Review* (link).

So here is a hypothesis: it seems likely enough that part of the work that Rawls did in 1949-50 with Viner was concerned with the history of economic thought, and it seems likely as well that he would have learned of Schumpeter's ambitious research on the history of economics from Viner. Schumpeter's book existed only in extensive notes and drafts at the time of his death in 1950 and was edited for publication by his wife, Elizabeth Boody Schumpeter, following his death. Exposure to Schumpeter through Viner would have given Rawls the motivation to study *History of Economic Analysis* carefully when it appeared in 1954. Rawls was an assistant professor of philosophy at Cornell by that time, and Pogge emphasizes his discipline when it came to reading and reflecting on the materials that he found relevant to his philosophical work.

Two other books on the history of economic thought that appeared during the approximate time period are Mark Blaug's Economic Theory in Retrospect (1962) and George Stigler's Essays in the History of Economics (1965). There are two references to Blaug in *A Theory of Justice*, so Rawls was certainly familiar with this book. Maurice Dobb's Theories of Value and Distribution since Adam Smith: Ideology and Economic Theory (1973) appeared a few years later.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:29AM (-04:00)

French philosophy?

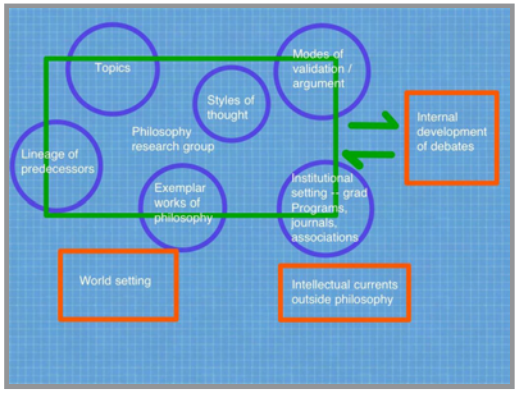
Friday, October 08, 2010

Is there such a thing as "French philosophy"? Or is philosophy a purely universal discipline, raising the same abstract questions no matter whether the philosopher is Chinese, English, French, or Brazilian? One way to address this question is to consider the collective intellectual practice of "philosophy" from the point of view of sociology -- that is to say, historically and empirically.

Jean-Louis Fabiani's book Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe français? (which was released in



France this week) addresses this question from the point of view of sociology, and it provides a fascinating and innovative approach to the history of philosophy. (Here is a link to Fabiani's academic bio.) Fabiani was a student of Bourdieu, and he approaches philosophy in something like the way that other sociologists have approached the study of science: as a socially situated intellectual activity which is amenable to sociological analysis and explication. The fact that it is ***intellectual*** implies that there is an internal logic to the development of the discourse; organized thinking moves it forward. And the fact it is ***situated*** implies that philosophy is conditioned and motivated by social circumstances external to the philosophical community.



Fabiani attempts to steer a highly original course between the idea that social context determines the content of a specific philosophical tradition, and the idea that philosophy develops wholly and solely according to its own internal intellectual logic. Crude sociology of knowledge falls in the first camp, and traditional history of philosophy often appears to fall in the second camp. Fabiani takes an approach that allows both for social influence on philosophy as well as critical, rigorous logical analysis and thought wielding its influence.

Here is a description that Fabiani provides of philosophy as an object of sociological study. (The passages quoted here are drawn from a pre-publication translation Fabiani provided in a visit this month to the University of Michigan.)

Philosophy is never limited to a collection of texts, knitted together by the threads of tradition. It also includes material objects, spaces and social practices. It includes all types of reception, including the less orthodox. As with any other type of work, philosophical texts imply different types of appropriation in space and time, and exist only through the successive pacts of reception that constitute them as valued objects in a particular culture.
He asks the questions, what is a sociology of philosophy and why is it needed? And here are some of his answers:

I wish to analyze philosophy just as what we now call science studies have analyzed processes and controversies in the various scientific disciplines. Science studies have questioned the great epistemological divide which reserved the study of contextual elements for sociologists (institutions, organizations, strategies, etc.) and removed the assertions, demonstrations and the quest for evidence from their purview (except if they are crudely determinist and seek to explain concepts entirely by contexts, to put it simply).

...

What could be interesting about a socio-historical analysis of philosophy? First, we have to suspend our belief -- at least for a while, because it is the habitual battleground of the activity -- in the existence of an abstract and universal frame for the philosophical debates, this the result of a venerable scholarly tradition. The « relocalization » of philosophical interactions is necessary in order to see that philosophical texts are also performances, not only embodiments and products of lifestyles but also their sources.

...

Studying philosophy by means of sociological methods would appear to be one of the most important challenges for the social sciences today. « The queen of disciplines,» as it is called in France (or the crown--or crowning as I once described it years ago) has long resisted any attempt at objectivation.

...

Although the most general objection to the ascription of social determinants in the shaping of social thought are now superannuated, the explanatory power of theories applied to the field of intellectual production still remains quite limited. The modes of categorization applied to products and to individual intellectual strategies are too crude and their use too poorly controlled; we no longer take for granted that society as such can be read (at least in a cryptic language) through symbolic production.
So what is in play when we ask whether philosophy (or any other intellectual discipline) is conditioned by its historical and social context? We might say that a national tradition of philosophy could be characterized according to several different criteria: topics, styles of thought, modes of validation, and lineage of predecessors. For example, British philosophy defined itself in terms of several core ideas -- the role of the senses in the acquisition and validation of knowledge, for example; and Hume, Locke, and Berkeley deployed recognizable forms of argument and styles of reasoning as well. Hume's treatises look and feel quite a bit different from Descartes' meditations. Here is a way of conceptualizing the situation of philosophical research and discovery:

The diagram is intended to be a way of visualizing a philosophy research tradition at a moment in time. The unit of production, the philosophy research group, is steeped in a conventional specification of the important **topics**; it is skilled in a specific set of **modes of argument**; it holds out a set of **exemplary philosophical works** from the history of the discipline as currently understood; it operates in a space that may include **other research groups** pursuing different topics and methods; and it functions within a **set of institutions** -- graduate programs, journals, tenure processes, associations, prizes -- that train, valorize, and rank various individuals and their products. Each aspect of these "internal" features is amenable to concrete historical and sociological investigation; we can seek to trace out the institutions, discover the order and rationale of the topics, etc.

External to these factors are circumstances in history and current social life (World War I, the Holocaust, the Civil Rights movement), and intellectual currents from outside the discipline (Freudianism, for example), that exercise influence on the development of philosophical positions and frameworks. The social context draws attention to (or away from) certain topics; context also sometimes provides institutional constraints that favor or disfavor some positions. (For example, McCarthyism and the Cold War created constraints and incentives that greatly deformed the course of research in the humanities and the social sciences.) The intellectual activities of the current research groups lead to a degree of development of the ideas, positions, and schools of philosophy at a given

moment in time. So the received setting, external environment, and application of modes of invention and argument drive forward new philosophical content, and the institutions of the profession attach credibility/lack of credibility and prestige/scorn to the results.

The diagram indicates as well several ways in which a philosophical tradition might possess a distinctive, national character. The list of valued topics may differ across national traditions; likewise the styles of reasoning and modes of argument; and different traditions may valorize very different bodies of predecessors as well. So it is fairly evident that Fabiani's question warrants a "yes" -- there are distinguishing characteristics or signatures across traditions of philosophy. And even when the topics and questions appear similar -- the focus on the conditions of knowledge in common between British and French philosophy in the 17th century, for example-- the styles of thinking, modes of reasoning, and examples of good solutions still differ widely.

Should we think of these differences as defining distinct *paradigms* of philosophy? I'm inclined to use a different term -- perhaps "*research tradition*" -- to suggest a high degree of variation within a national tradition of philosophy. Like other areas of humanities production, it seems to me that the standards and exemplars that hold together "analytic philosophy" or "hermeneutic philosophy" are much looser and less prescriptive than their counterparts in the natural sciences. So the term "paradigm" does not fit the framing of philosophy in context very well.

Fabiani's work rewards study and bears an interesting relation to other efforts to discover distinctive features of French intellectual life (the distinctiveness of French sociology (link), the development of French anthropology (link)). Johan Heilbron's work is relevant to these topics as well (The Rise Of The Social Sciences And The Formation Of Modernity). Here is the table of contents of Fabiani's current book:

Première partie L'institution d'une discipline
Chapitre premier – La philosophie en classe Chapitre 2 – Carrières et concepts Chapitre 3 – Les moments et les crises
Deuxième partie Une philosophie nationale? Chapitre 4 – Le rempart de la raison Chapitre 5 – Le spiritualisme français Chapitre 6 – Transferts conceptuels
Troisième partie Art, religion, science et philosophie Chapitre 7 – La religion ddans les limites de la simple raison? Chapitre 8 – Aux frontiers de la science Chapitre 9 – Le philosophe artiste et la tentation prophétique
(The photo above is of Alexandre Kojève. It is relevant to the current topic because of Kojève's complex philosophical heritage -- Russia, Germany, and eventually the leading *explicateur* of Hegel in post-war France.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:12PM (-04:00)

Strategies of economic adaptation

Sunday, October 10, 2010

Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin made a powerful case for there being alternative institutional forms through which modern economic development could have taken place in their 1985 article, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Industrialization" (link). In an important volume in 1997, World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization, they take the argument two steps further: first, that institutional variations were not merely



hypothetical, but in fact had an extended history in a variety of industries well into the twentieth century; and second, that the current situation of pervading uncertainty about our most basic economic institutions was characteristic of the earlier periods as well. The volume represents the work of an intensive seminar in economic history sponsored by the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. Contributors include a broad swath of researchers in economic history across Europe (not Asia!). Chapters take up the processes of mechanization, specialization, and mass manufacture in a variety of industries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries -- silk, cutlery, watch-making, metal-working, and ship-building. (Here is part of the very good introduction to the volume provided by Sabel and Zeitlin; link.)

Sabel and Zeitlin take the view that the history of business and technology can in fact shed quite a bit of light on the economic situation we face today -- from brand new sectors (Google, Facebook, Amazon) to the abrupt decline of old industries (the US auto industry) to speculation about the next big area of business growth (biotech, alternative energy). They highlight a couple of features of the business and economic climate in the late 1990s that seem equally applicable today -- an acute sense of economic fragility and institutional plasticity. They argue that these features were also the hallmarks of earlier periods of economic change as well. So they argue that we can learn a great deal for today's challenges by considering the situation of industries like glass-making or watch-making in 1880 or 1920.

The sense of fragility goes to the once commonsensical idea that progress would lead to the gradual consolidation of particular forms of economic organization, and hence to an ever more certain sense of how best to deploy technology, allocate labor and capital, and link supply of particular products to demand. Today ... it is commonsensical to believe that the way many of these things are done depends on constantly shifting background conditions whose almost insensible mutation can produce abrupt redefinitions of the appropriate way to organize economic activity.

The second experience is one of the recombinability and interpenetration of different forms of economic organization: the rigid and the flexible, the putatively archaic and the certifiably modern, the hierarchical and the market-conforming, the trusting and the mistrustful.

...

The central theme of this book is that the experience of fragility and mutability which seemed so novel and disorienting today has been, in fact, the definitive experience of the economic actors in many sectors, countries, and epochs in the history of industrial capitalism.

...

But this double perception of mutability and fragility ... has not led them to exalt catch-as-catch-can muddling through as the organizing principle of reflection and action. What we find instead is an extraordinarily judicious, well-informed and continuing debate within

firms, and between them and public authorities, as to the appropriate responses to an economy whose future is uncertain, but whose boundary conditions at lease in the middle term are taken to be clear.

...

Our purpose here is to show that most firms in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and the United States, neither mired in tradition nor blinded by the prospect of a radiant future, carefully weighed the choices between mass production and what we would now call flexible specialization. (2-3)

One of Sabel and Zeitlin's most basic arguments is the idea that firms are strategic and adaptive as they deal with a current set of business challenges. Rather than an inevitable logic of new technologies and their organizational needs, we see a highly adaptive and selective process in which firms pick and choose among alternatives, often mixing the choices to hedge against failure. They consider carefully a range of possible changes on the horizon, a set of possible strategic adaptations that might be selected; and they frequently hedge their bets by investing in both the old and the new technology. "Economic agents, we found again and again in the course of the seminar's work, do not maximize so much as they strategize" (5).

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, the silk merchants and weavers of Lyons carefully monitored but did not imitate the policies of design routinization, subdivision of labor and price competition pursued by their Spitalfields counterparts, preferring alternative strategies based on rapid style change, increasingly flexible machinery and the skillful exploitation of fashionable markets for high-value products. ... Much as they admired the efficiency of American methods, detailed accounts of the American system in trade journals and technical society proceedings typically emphasized that this efficiency depended on standardization of the product which was wholly incompatible with the current or expected organizations of their respective markets. (12)

In other words, specialized firms did not "resist change;" rather, they carefully assessed the full implications of one form of organization and one use of technology against another, and selected those innovations that represented the best match to their own business realities.

An interesting case study of an alternative way of organizing production is provided in the chapter by Peer Hull Kristensen and Charles Sabel, "The small-holder economy in Denmark." It was an example of cooperative-based agriculture and small-scale production that provided a durable alternative to private capitalism farming and manufacture:

Denmark was the exception. There in the decades before World War I peasant small holders built a technologically innovative cooperative movement that outcompeted estate-owners and urban financiers in virtually every segment of the dairy, egg and pork products industries. In so doing they created demand for particular kinds of capital goods that contributed to the modernization of the small-shop sector of industry as well. (345)

Alongside the agrarian republic there was another estate of small holders, the artisans and craftsmen. Their property was the knowledge of tools, materials, and techniques which made them independent of any one market or employer. By the outbreak of the First World War, they too had built institutions -- particularly a network of technical schools -- which allowed them to defend their place in Danish society by constantly renewing it. (365)

The history these activities in Denmark demonstrate that it was possible for voluntary

producers' cooperatives to manage the provision of specialized services, marketing services, and economies of scale to farmers and artisans that we sometimes believe can only be provided by the market. This system did not last forever -- though it proved economically durable for half a century, and it demonstrated much of the flexibility and organizational innovativeness that Sabel and Zeitlin emphasize in their introduction.

But some fifty years later, in the late 1950s, the cooperative core of this small-holder economy was coming visibly undone. First cooperative dairies, then the cooperative slaughterhouses began to combine into larger and larger units abandoning in the process many of their original constitutional features and becoming in fact and law corporations. The corporations in turn fought with one another and the remaining cooperative for control of their respective markets. (374)

I find the contributions to this volume interesting in exactly the way predicted by Sabel and Zeitlin in the introduction: for the models they illustrate of deft navigation of uncertain economic environments by firms, cooperatives, and individuals. The economic and business environment in the region where I live is unforgiving for a wide range of industries; for example, job shops and tool and die shops have largely disappeared in the Detroit metropolitan area. However, there are a number of mid-sized adaptable businesses that have continued to thrive, through exactly the kinds of intelligent, forward-scanning adaptation to new opportunities described by contributors to this volume. These businesses are in the engineering and advanced services sector, and they are innovative in two ways: they are constantly looking for new opportunities to apply existing and new technologies to new applications; and they are looking for customers in developing countries, including especially the Middle East from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia. Energy, solar power, building control systems, urban parking systems, and aviation maintenance can be found within the portfolio; and the leaders of these companies are systematically and strategically developing the relations abroad that are necessary to secure the next wave of contracts.

It is interesting to consider whether there is a difference between economic history and business history. One might say that the former has to do with the large features of economic organization, social regulation, and logistics that constitute an economic ***system***, whereas business history has to do with the tactical maneuvering and small-scale adaptations that individual firms undertake within the general framework of the existing economic structure. But I think Sabel and Zeitlin's answer would be a fairly decisive one: there is no fundamental distinction between the two levels of analysis. They frame the distinction in terms of the ideas of "epochs" and "crises"; this language distinguishes between long periods of institutional stability, and short periods of dislocation and change -- something like the theory of punctuated equilibrium. But Sabel and Zeitlin doubt the validity of this distinction. "The solution, we think, is to relax the distinction between periods of stability and periods of transition in the same way and for the same reasons that we relaxed the distinction between maximizing actor and constraining context" (29). Or, in other words, when we look closely, almost every period of economic activity is also a period that mixes elements of stability with deep and unpredictable change.

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:00PM (-04:00)

French economic inequalities

Tuesday, October 12, 2010



France is one of the more affluent countries in the OECD, but it continues to contain significant poverty and meaningful inequalities of income, wealth, and life outcomes. The past several years of rising unemployment have worsened these circumstances. A lot of this variation occurs across the lines of ethnicity and national origins; immigrant communities in France tend to have significantly higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and health disparities, often concentrated in the *banlieue* surrounding major cities. So how should concerned French citizens get a better understanding of these fundamental features of French society?

A research center and website that attempts to track these inequalities is the **Observatoire des inegalites**, directed by Louis Maurin. The website is found at inegalite.fr, and it is worthy of regular visits. The goal of the *Observatoire* project is to make sense of the social statistics of France and to communicate this information to the public in an understandable way. Right now the organization is focusing on recently released statistics on the rate of poverty on France. It would be very useful if there were similar sites in other countries, including the United States. (Here is a valuable source of information on poverty data provided by the United States Census Bureau; link.)

Two issues are particularly central when it comes to measuring poverty: first, how to define the poverty line (and how to interpret the poverty budget that this corresponds to); and second, how many people are poor in France by this criterion, and how this has been changing in the past several years.

On the first question, the official standard in France is pegged to a budget defined as half of the median income. This raises the first significant debate, because the EU pegs the poverty rate to the 60th percentile of income rather than the 50th percentile (median). Naturally, more people are classified as poor by the second criterion than the first. (In the U.S. the poverty line is calculated on the basis of an estimate of the income needed to purchase a specified "poverty budget" wage basket.)

Two features of the French definition of poverty are noteworthy. First, it is a relative rather than absolute definition of poverty; the index rises as economic growth occurs and median family rises. Rather than conceiving of poverty as absolute deprivation, it conceives of poverty in relation to the income levels of the rest of society. The poverty line will be different in Sweden and France. And the U.S. definition is more similar to an absolute definition: unless the contents of the poverty wage basket changes, people who are at the poverty line in 1970 will have the same purchasing power as people at the poverty line in 2000.

Second, this is a purely income-based criterion of poverty, rather than an all-round assessment of living standards. As Amartya Sen argues, poverty is not solely determined by low income. The poverty wage basket approach comes a bit closer to Sen's idea that it is the overall ability of the poor family's ability to satisfy its basic needs that determines its status as poor or not-poor. (The main component that Sen emphasizes in his overview of

quality of life as being overlooked by a pure income criterion of poverty is the provisioning of social services by the state; and France sets a fairly high standard with respect to this factor.)

So how does France measure up when it comes to poverty? Basically, the data suggest that the poverty rate is significant in France (7.1% in 2008, representing 4.3 million people), and, even more pressingly, it seems to have stabilized at that level. In 1970 the rate was 13.5%, falling to 7.2% in 1998. But during the next decade there was no significant change; there were 4.3 million poor people in France in 1998 and in 2008. (The poverty rate in the U.S. is estimated at a whopping **14.3%** for 2009 -- a striking increase over the previous decade (link), and an appalling counterpoint to the extreme increases that have taken place in the United States in the concentration of income at the top of the distribution.)

Measuring poverty is a very important step for any decent society. More difficult and more important is deciphering the economic mechanisms giving rise to poverty and creating the observed changes in the rate over time. Unemployment is one obvious factor, and France is experiencing high rates of unemployment along with much of the rest of Europe. But what about other mechanisms? What about discrimination in housing and employment, for example (as suggested in Didier Lapeyronnie's Ghetto Urbain). And what about the terms of the grand social compact -- the division of income and wealth among classes and educational levels? This is essentially what the conflict is about in France today, between unions and business, and between the Sarkozy government and large segments of society. And these are the mechanisms that generate inequalities of income and wealth, and they contribute to the macro-facts about poverty as well.

Another point established by data on the *Observatoire* is the fact that the mechanisms generating jobs and joblessness are very differently distributed across the map of France. The unemployment rate in France as a whole was 9.5% in 2009. But this rate encompasses a range of rates across regions of France, from 5.0% in Lozere to 13.5% and 13.6% in Herault and Aisne (link).

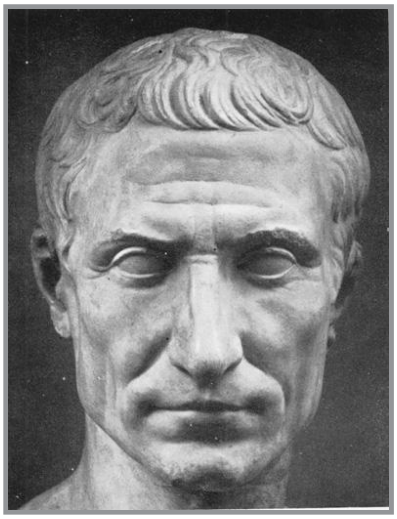
Also interesting on the site at present is an analysis of inequalities across social groups in terms of access to the baccalaureate degree; data provided here demonstrates sharp inequalities by group in terms of access to this valuable source of personal development and earning potential (link). Since education -- especially higher education -- is crucial to entry in higher-earning professions and occupations, the differential social processes at work here are also relevant to the distribution of income in the coming generation.

The *Observatoire* does a very good job of approximating the ideal of a transparent, understandable representation of the social data of a whole population. As such it is a very important experiment in "understanding society."
Posted by Daniel Little at 09:21PM (-04:00)

Lukes on power

Thursday, October 14, 2010

Steven Lukes's Power: A Radical View was a very important contribution when it appeared in 1974. Lukes emphasized several important points that became landmarks in subsequent discussions of the social reality of power: that power is a multi-dimensional social factor, that power and democracy are paradoxically related, and that there are very



important non-coercive sources of power in modern society. In the second edition in 2005 he left the 1974 essay unchanged, but added a substantive introduction and two new chapters: "Power, Freedom and Reason" and "Three-Dimensional Power". Also new in the second edition is substantially more attention to several other writers on the social context of power, including James Scott and Michel Foucault.

Lukes offers a generic definition of power along these lines:

I have defined the concept of power by saying that A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests. (37)

But this definition is too generic, and Lukes attempts to provide a more satisfactory interpretation by constructing a "three-dimensional" account of power.

What are the "dimensions" of power to which Lukes refers? He begins his account with the treatment of power provided by the pluralist tradition of American democratic theory, including especially Robert Dahl in 1957 in "The Concept of Power" (link). This is the one-dimensional view: power is a behavioral attribute that applies to individuals to the extent that they are able to modify the behavior of other individuals within a decision-making process. The person with the power in a situation is the person who prevails in the decision-making process (18).

Thus I conclude that this first, one-dimensional, view of power involves a focus on *behaviour* in the making of *decisions* on issues over which there is an observable *conflict* of (subjective) *interests*, seen as expressing policy preferences, revealed by political participation. (19)

The second dimension that Lukes discusses was brought forward in rebuttal to this pluralist theory; critics pointed out that it is possible to influence decisions by shaping the agenda, not merely by weighing in on existing decision points. Lukes quotes from Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz in their 1962 "Two Faces of Power" (link): "'to the extent that a person or group -- consciously or unconsciously -- creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power'" (20). So shaping the agenda is an important source of power that is overlooked in the pluralist model, the one-dimensional view.

The three-dimensional theory of power turns to a different problem -- the fact that people sometimes act willingly in ways that appear contrary to their most basic interests. So the third dimension is the set of ways in which the powerful transform the powerless in such a way that the latter behave as the former wish -- without coercion or forcible constraint -- for example, by creating a pervasive system of ideology or false consciousness. Both pluralists and their critics overlook an important point, in Lukes's view:

The trouble seems to be that both Bachrach and Baratz and the pluralists suppose that because power, as they conceptualize it, only shows up in cases of actual conflict, it follows that actual conflict is necessary to power. But this is to ignore the crucial point that the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place. (27)

And again:

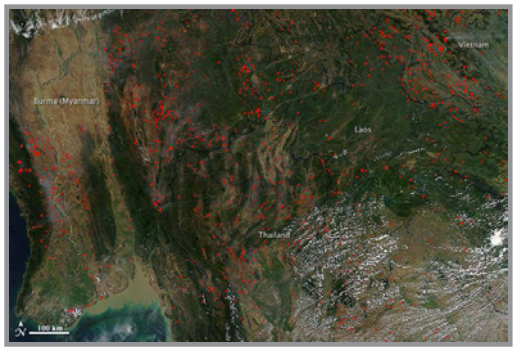
What one may have here is a latent conflict, which consists in a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the real interests of those they exclude. These latter may not express or even be conscious of their interests, but ... the identification of those interests ultimately always rests on empirically supportable and refutable hypotheses. (28-29)
When Lukes returns to the three-dimensional theory in the final essay in the second edition, he shifts the language slightly to refer to "power as domination." Domination can occur through explicit coercive means, but it can also occur through unconscious mechanisms. This allows Lukes to address the theories of people like James Scott (Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts) and Michel Foucault (The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction).

In hindsight, it seems a little dubious to refer to these as "dimensions" of power, rather than aspects or forms of power. To call them "dimensions" somehow suggests that overall power is a vector of quantities in three or more orthogonal dimensions, each of which can vary independently. The features that Lukes identifies as "dimensions" seem more like tools in a toolkit or strategies in a repertoire: exercise control by doing X or Y or Z. So the language of dimensions seems inappropriate in this context.

But here is a more basic concern that is visible with the advantage of hindsight: there is very little in Lukes's treatment that sheds light on the social mechanisms of power. What are the social features that enable one individual or group to wield influence in any of these ways? Through what sorts of institutional and individual facts are individuals enabled to exercise power over others? Lukes doesn't address this question; and yet it seems to be the heart of the matter. We would like to have a way of analyzing social relations that allows us to discern how it is that some groups gain the material and social resources necessary to prevail. Marxism offers one such theory -- power derives from class position; but this answer doesn't really satisfy in the contemporary social world. (Lukes devotes a few paragraphs to the debate between Nicos Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband on the right way of understanding the exercise of power within a capitalist society; 54-58.) But generally, it seems fair to say that Lukes comes closer to offering a semantic analysis of the use of the term "power" rather than offering a sociological analysis of the causal and structural reality of power.
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:00PM (-04:00)

Zomia reconsidered

Monday, October 18, 2010



An earlier post described James Scott's recent book on the segment of Southeast Asia that he refers to as Zomia (The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia). As noted there, Scott turns in his usual creative, imaginative, and innovative treatment of the subject matter; the book is an absolutely captivating argument about the push and pull between states and fugitive peoples. As such, it suggests the possibility of bringing some of the central ideas and analyses to bear on other geographies as well. But how accurate is Scott's reading of the primary

historical experience of these parts of Southeast Asia -- Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Cambodia, and Bangladesh?

This is the question posed by the current issue of the *Journal of Global History* (link), with essays by C. Patterson Giersch, Magnus Fiskesjo, Sarah Turner, Sara Shneiderman, Bernard Formoso, and Victor Lieberman. All the essays are fascinating, including the editorial introduction by Jean Michaud. But particularly important is Lieberman's essay. Lieberman is one of the leading contemporary historians of Southeast Asia, and he is a very fertile and imaginative thinker himself. So his responses to Scott's arguments are worth looking at closely. (His most recent volumes, Strange Parallels: Volume 1, Integration on the Mainland: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830 (v. 1) and Strange Parallels: Volume 2, Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830, are directly relevant to Scott's analysis.)

Lieberman begins by establishing the territory on which he agrees with Scott. First, he accepts the fact of a growing separation between lowland and highland peoples in Southeast Asia during early modern times, and he agrees about the importance of analyzing this pan-Southeast Asian phenomenon.

Another point of agreement is the fact of highlander agency. Lieberman agrees with Scott's insistence that highland peoples throughout Southeast Asia crafted their own social worlds in response to the political and natural environments that faced them. He writes:

Scott's basic thesis is that highland societies, far from living in isolation, have been profoundly and continuously moulded by their relation to plains-based kingdoms. (333)
He notes that Scott's approach turns the narrative of state-building on its head; highland peoples were defined in terms of state-avoidance. The lowland states had an interest in gathering manpower and taxes, and the highland peoples had a persistent interest in evading both. Lieberman writes:

Scott claims that these processes transformed Southeast Asia's mountainous interior into a vast "shatter zone," an area of flight, a sphere of asylum and marronnage for runaways from state-making projects in the plains. (334)

Scott's central achievement, then, is to bring hill peoples into the mainstream of regional history by uncovering their relation to lowland states and societies. (336)
So Lieberman acknowledges the importance and boldness of Scott's effort at providing a comprehensive historical study of Zomia. But Lieberman offers a series of important criticisms of Scott's historical case.

First, he finds Scott's documentation to be weak, in that it makes little use of Burmese-language sources. This has led, in Lieberman's opinion, to a number of errors of fact, some more significant than others. He cites estimates of literacy, for example; Scott says less than 1 percent of people were literate in Southeast Asia, and Lieberman documents 50 percent for Burma in 1800.

More significantly, Lieberman believes Scott over-estimates the importance of manpower as a determinant of military success in the region. The degree of maritime commerce was equally important, he argues. And this is critical to Scott's argument, since competition for manpower is one of the primary reasons Scott cites for the efforts of lowland states to

attempt to dominate the highlands.

Finally, and most important, Lieberman argues that there is little documentary evidence for significant population flight from lowland to highland (339). This is key to Scott's interpretation, and Lieberman argues the evidence isn't there to support the claim. After reviewing Scott's own evidence and some additional data of his own, he writes:

All in all, outside central Vietnam perhaps, this remains a rather limited record of displacement and flight. (341)
Moreover, Lieberman argues that Scott's interpretation of the highlands becomes so dependent on one causal factor, state oppression, that it neglects the processes of development that were internal to the highland societies themselves. "Ecological and cultural conditions that were intrinsic to the hills and that were substantially or completely divorced from the valleys receive little or no attention" (343).

This point is more important when we consider an example not included in Scott's analysis -- the highland peoples of Borneo/Kalimantan. Lieberman argues that these tribes had virtually all the characteristics of culture and agriculture displayed by Zomians, including swidden cultivation and a proliferation of local languages, and Scott interprets these traits as deeply defensive. Yet these features of highland life emerged in Borneo without the pressure if a surrounding predatory lowland state (345). And this casts serious doubt on Scott's anarchist, anti-statist interpretation of Zomia.

Lieberman's point isn't that Scott's interpretation of Zomia is unsupportable. Rather, his point is that it is a bold and substantive interpretation of a complex historical domain, and it requires serious, fact-based consideration. And this is exactly what the essays in this special volume of *Global History* promise to do.

This debate is interesting and important, in part, because it sheds light on the practical empirical research challenges that arise when we consider bold new interpretations of social data. A bold hypothesis is advanced, purporting to pull together the processes of development observed in a variety of places; and then there is the practical question of evaluating whether the hypothesis is born out when we do the detailed, local historical research needed to test its basic assertions. In this case, Lieberman is suggesting that several of the components of the theory are found wanting when applied to highland Burma.

(The image above is a satellite-based survey of fires across Southeast Asia (link), relevant to the practices of swidden farming.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:02AM (-04:00)

Toyota in Guangzhou

Saturday, October 23, 2010

I got a chance to visit Guangdong this week, and it's a pretty amazing place. You get a very vivid feeling for globalization when you see dozens of container ships lined up off Kowloon, preparing to off-load and reload in several container ports in eastern Guangdong and the lower Pearl River delta. I visited the district of Nansha in an eastern area of Guangdong that was primarily agricultural only five years ago. Now there has been extensive development, with the population going from 40,000 to 260,000 in just a few years.

One of the largest parts of the development in Nansha District is a large Toyota factory, opened in 2006 and now producing 360,000 cars a year. This plant is a joint venture with Guangzhou Automobile Group. The factory employs about 7,000 workers in two shifts, and it embodies one of the most recent examples of the Toyota production system. A vehicle passes by every 68 seconds, so a new Toyota exits to the test track every 68 seconds as well. 1,000 cars a day roll of one of the production lines and another 500 exit the second line. (Here is a 2004 news release on the venture from *China Daily*.)

But here is the first surprise. Every car produced in Nansha is headed for the domestic Chinese market -- along with the output of the other major Toyota factory near Beijing. Toyota plans to sell more than half a million cars in the domestic Chinese market in the coming year. Compare that to European and American production for China, and you get a sense of Toyota's worldwide ambition. Fiat just celebrated its millionth car sold in China. Toyota will exceed that number from just this factory every three years.

The factory is highly automated, with numerically controlled welding machines and other robotic assists, and it appears that the skill level of shop-level workers is low. Training is brief for the regular line worker. Workers are largely recruited from Guangdong Province, and the factory boasts of its conformance to the highest standards of worldwide vehicle quality. The company representative wasn't able to share information about workers' wages, but someone familiar with the local economy estimated a monthly wage somewhere around 3,000 RMB. That works out to an income of about $5,100 a year -- significantly higher than China's per capita income, but not a middle class lifestyle either. That's about $2.33 per hour, and it works out to about $87 in direct assembly labor costs per vehicle.

This is a fairly good factory environment, though it's a bit Chaplin-esque to watch hundreds of workers rushing to return to their stations after a 10-minute break during which the line is turned off. But it's no sweatshop, and it appears that workers are likely to be grateful for their jobs. Safety, efficiency, and quality seem to be the guiding management goals. The recent strike at a Honda plant in Guangdong makes it plain, of course, that Chinese workers have important demands. But realistically, this plant is good for China's goals of improving the standard of living for poor people. It seems a bit analogous to GM or Ford in Detroit in the 40s and 50s.

At the same time, the numbers here document the challenge faced by manufacturing companies in the US and Europe. A similar factory in Michigan would have direct labor costs per vehicle in the range of $450, and no amount of labor concessions can erase that difference. So to compete on price American producers need to find more efficient ways of handling the other cost components of the manufacturing process -- but those efficiencies are equally available to producers worldwide.

I suppose one way of reading the situation is to see Guangdong as one of the leading change points in a longterm evolution towards a common global wage for unskilled or semi-skilled labor. Wages and quality of life have certainly gone up for Chinese workers in Guangdong in the past 10 years -- just as they've gone down for industrial workers in the US. And the living standard gap that existed between Hong Kong and Guangdong has substantially narrowed in the past decade as well, according to longterm observers. And this makes the point about education and talent in a very pointed way: the only thing that commands a premium in the world labor market is talent, skill, education, and innovative capability. We are certainly not doing nearly enough in the US to take the

steps needed to prepare our population for this basic reality.

So what's next for Guangdong? Will the region be content to exploit its labor cost advantage and continue to gain market share as the world's low-cost manufacturer? I don't think so. The economic development official I talked with in Guangdong was eager to discuss the region's plans for the expansion of universities, increasing support for research and development, and moving into the industries of the twenty-first century. She specifically cited growing knowledge capacity in sustainable energy and electric vehicles, advanced logistics systems, electric battery breakthroughs, and information technology enhancements in life sciences and healthcare. The province and the central government want to make the investments in education and research that will position the region for a talent-based economy of innovation. And the infrastructure investments you can observe in the region -- new sea-water port facilities, major apartment complexes, new university facilities, extension of passenger rail -- suggest the region is taking the long view about its economic future.
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:45AM (-04:00)

The global talent race

Monday, October 25, 2010

We have a lot of anxiety in the United States about the quality and effectiveness of our educational system, particularly at the elementary and secondary levels. And the anxiety is justified. A large percentage of our school-age population lives in high poverty neighborhoods, and they are served by schools that fail to allow them to make expected progress in needed academic skills, including especially reading, writing, and math. And we have high school dropout rates in many cities that exceed 25% -- leading to the creation of large cohorts of young adults who lack the basic skills necessary to do productive work in our society. So at a time when personal and social productivity depends on problem-solving, innovation, and invention, many of our young people in the US haven't developed their talents sufficiently to make these contributions.

How does this problem look from an international perspective? Other countries and regions seem to have taken more seriously the macro-role that education and talent will play in their futures, and are preparing the ground for superior outcomes on a population-wide basis. Here is one example -- Hong Kong. Though part of the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong retains a degree of autonomy in its social policies, and education is one of those areas where Hong Kong government can take special initiatives.

There is a pervasive feeling in Hong Kong that educational success is absolutely crucial. School children are strongly motivated, their families support them fully, and the city is trying to ensure that all children have access to effective schools. And there is a lot of civic focus on the quality and reach of the Hong Kong universities as well. Business and civic leaders recognize the key role that well-educated Hong Kong graduates will play in the economic vitality of the city in the future. And university leaders are keenly interested in enhancing the quality of the undergraduate and graduate curricula Here is a valuable survey report by Professor Leslie N.K. Lo, director of the Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research at Hong Kong Chinese University (http://www.hkpri.org.hk/bulletin/8/nklo.html). The report documents the priority placed on quality of education by the authorities, even as it raises concerns about the effective equality of education in the city. Here is a report on the state of education research and reform in HK (http://www.springerlink.com/content/gt11u17672j34372/fulltext.pdf). The

report raises the possibility that Hong Kong's educational system is skewed by income and language: low-income families attending Cantonese-speaking schools may not get a comparable education to that provided to middle- and upper-income families in English-speaking schools. But it isn't easy to find detailed educational research that would validate this point.

One very interesting data point concerning the equality of access provided by Hong Kong education can be located in the distribution of family incomes among students in Hong Kong's elite universities. Basically the data indicate that the Hong Kong universities are reasonably well representative of the full income spectrum of the city. About half of students in the elite universities in Hong Kong come from families in the lower half of the income distribution (or in other words, the median student's family income is equal to the median family income of the city). This compares to a markedly different picture in selective public universities in the United States, where the median student family income is at about the 85th percentile of the US distribution of family income. In other words, universities in the United States are over-represented by students and families from the higher end of the income distribution; whereas the Hong Kong university student population is relatively evenly distributed over the full Hong Kong income distribution. (These data are based on a summary report prepared by researchers at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.)

This statistical fact gives rise to a suggestive implication: that students of all income levels in Hong Kong are roughly as likely to attend Hong Kong's elite universities. And this contrasts sharply with the situation in the United States, where attendance in elite universities is sharply skewed by family income (Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education (Thomas Jefferson Foundation Distinguished Lecture Series)).

The issue is important, because in the world-wide race for talent cultivation, those countries that do the best job of cultivating the talents of all their citizens are surely going to do the best in the economic competition that is to come. Countries that waste talent by denying educational opportunities to poor people or national minorities are missing an opportunity for innovation, creativity, and problem-solving that can be crucial for their success in the global environment. And if Hong Kong, China, and other East Asian countries are actually succeeding in creating educational systems that greatly enhance equality of opportunity across income, this will be a large factor in their future success.
Posted by Daniel Little at 04:51AM (-04:00)

China's confidence

Saturday, October 30, 2010

Traveling in China for the past two weeks has given me a different perspective on the country. The most powerful impression I've had is one of collective national confidence; the sense that China is on the move, that the country is making rapid progress on many fronts, and that China is setting its own course. We've known for twenty years about the unprecedented rate of economic development and growth in China since the fundamental reforms of the economy in the 1980s. China's manufacturing capacity is also well known throughout the world. But the story is bigger than that. What is perhaps not so well understood outside the country is the scope and purposiveness of the development plans the country is pursuing.

One aspect of this is the breadth of forms of capacity building that the country is investing

in. The nation is making long-term investments in a range of fundamental areas aimed at providing a foundation for long-term, sustained evolution. Transportation is one good example. The extension of the high-speed trains among China's important cities indicates a good understanding of the future importance of economic integration and mobility for future innovation and growth. But this high-speed rail system indicates something else as well: China's readiness to successfully design and build the most sophisticated engineering and technology projects on a large scale. The high-speed train between Hangzhou and Shanghai opened last week, with a sustained speed in excess of 350 km/hour; this brings the travel time down from 78 minutes to 45 minutes over the distance of 202 kilometers. Similar service will be completed between Beijing and Shanghai, providing 5-hour service between these key cities. So China will soon be leading the world in high-speed rail.

Higher education is another great example. The universities in and around Shanghai have built whole new campuses in the past ten years, reflecting a local and national commitment to improvement of the high-end talent base in the country. Universities in Beijing, Guangdong, Hangzhou, and Souzhou are making rapid and focused plans to enhance the quality of their faculties and the effectiveness of their curricula -- especially in the areas of mathematics, science, and engineering. My visit to the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou was a great example of this dynamism. There I saw many bright, talented students from all across China studying the fine arts, design, and multimedia on a beautiful urban campus serving 9,000 students. The student work is very good, and it gives a sense of the creative potential invested in the current generation.

A more intangible aspect of China's current confidence comes from a long series of conversations with Chinese faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. There is a real pride in China's cultural heritage -- new friends in Hangzhou and Souzhou were eager to explain the meaning of ceramics, paintings, and gardens in terms of the Chinese value systems they represent. And there is a sense of purpose and direction in many of these conversations -- as if people in their 60s and people in their 20s alike have absorbed China's history and its half-century of turbulence, and are now looking forward to consolidation and enhancement of the cultural and economic power of their country. There also appears to be a deep underlying fear of turbulence; the people we met want to see stable, continuous progress. There was sympathy for Liu Xiabo, but not much appetite for radical changes in rights and liberties. "China needs to maintain stability."

This sense of confidence is accompanied by a lack of "Western envy." There is very little sense that any of the people I talked with over these several weeks think that their country should emulate Europe or North America -- politically or culturally. "China can create its own way ." Some of the students I talked to were very clear in their criticisms of the policies of their own government -- from educational access and equality to internet access -- but none expressed the notion that China should simply follow the European or North American models in these areas. (I was asked, why do corporations have so much influence on the government in the US?) And more importantly -- many of these young people have the desire to study abroad; but they also express a very specific intention to return to China and have their lives and careers in China. And equally important, I met leading Chinese academics who have chosen to return to China from leading universities in the US.

So -- rapid, sustained economic growth; a broadly shared sense of China's distinctive values and history; successful incorporation of advanced, largescale technology systems; the world's fastest super-computer; integrated regional and national plans for the future;

and a degree of recognition of the importance of addressing China's social problems -- this is a powerful foundation for a China-centered future for this country and its 1.3 billion citizens.

Where is the place for social criticism in this picture? China faces a number of difficult social problems that will require decades to solve. Consider some of the hardest problems: Dealing with the needs of China's aging generation; providing quality healthcare to everyone; rapidly increasing incomes to China's poorest 40%; reining in the steadily rising pressures on air and water quality; reducing the prevalence of guanxi and corruption in business and daily life; and handling the challenges of rapid rural-urban transformation, to name just a few important problems. Many of these problems affect large segments of Chinese society, and their solution will require critical demands by these groups if the government is to take appropriate action. So allowing Chinese people a genuine voice in defining the problems the country needs to tackle is crucial.

Moreover, many of the policy choices that need to be made will affect different social groups differently. Expansion of the rail network or the power grid provides large gains for many people, but it imposes important costs on other people. And often the "losers" in these policy areas are poor people with little effective voice in the policy arena. If poor people don't have open avenues through which they can express their needs and sources of hardship, these needs will not be heard. So for both these types of reasons, it is crucial that China move in the direction of creating greater space for dissent and the expression of fundamental concerns and interests.

An important part of this evolution is the development of an institutionally protected investigative press. It is crucial in a modern society that the role of the news-gathering investigator be established and secured against the pressures of government. Investigations of corruption sometimes occur in the Chinese press. But there seem to be fairly clear limits to the depth and subjects that journalists can undertake. Investigators trying to establish culpability for school building collapses during the Sichuan earthquake quickly ran into government controls for going too far. And yet it is only when the spotlight falls on corruption that it can be addressed.

So the confidence that Chinese people currently have in their future is warranted. And the path will be more direct if the Chinese political system continues to develop more institutionalized ways of allowing citizens and groups to express their concerns, desires, and criticisms. There will be a distinctively Chinese polity in the future. And it needs somehow to solve the problem of facilitating citizen voice and deliberative social problem solving.
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:10AM (-04:00)

Fresh thinking about government

Monday, November 01, 2010

The eminent neo-Confucian scholar Tu Weiming argues for the importance of bracketing our Western-centric ideas about society, progress, and justice when we think about our global futures. (Here is an interesting article by Tu titled "Mutual Learning as an Agenda for Social Development"; link.) So for a moment let us put aside the familiar rhetoric about "democracy" that usually surfaces when we talk about how societies ought to be governed. Much of that language derives from Western political theorists like Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson, and Mill, and arguably shows the signs of times and places very

different from current social realities. Can we begin to rethink the task of collective governance in a way that might help frame current discussions more fruitfully? Is it possible to rethink democracy in a way that is less Western-centric?

In order to think carefully about the idea of government, we need two different sets of assumptions: first, what the social realities or conditions are within the context of which "government" needs to function; and second, a core set of value assumptions that define the standards to which government ought to conform.

What are the fundamentals? There are several basic social realities that are hard to seriously question, and there are a few normative ideas that have credibility but could be debated.

Large social groups require governance.

Let's define a large group as a population of greater than 50,000 people living in proximity to one another, involved in a range of interactions and exchanges with each other and sharing access to a set of resources. This establishes interdependence and mutual effects among persons.

Here are some core governance needs: Maintenance of public order, management of conflicts, provision of some set of public goods, establishment of a system of rules and laws, collection of taxes to support the activities of government.

Persons have interests and commitments that they care about.

People have interests, desires, and commitments, and these interests lead to competition and cooperation, predation and defense. They behave purposively and strategically to further their interests and protect themselves against predation.

There are perhaps other basic facts about individuals that would be important from the perspective of other civilizational values systems -- for example,

Persons are psychologically and socially defined by the social relationships within which they exist.

Here is another salient fact:

Governments take actions that affect different people differently.

And another fact:

The powers of government create opportunities for corruption, preferential treatment, and favoring of the powerful by government officials.

So citizens care deeply about the outcomes of governmental action, and they are especially concerned at the possibility that others may gain great advantages through corrupt influence on officials and agencies.

Now consider a few values that most people would probably accept.

- Government should pursue the public good, not the private good of officials or private individuals.

- Government should not favor some persons over others.
- Government should take the desires and needs of citizens into account when formulating rules, policies, and laws.
- Government policies and laws should reflect the preferences and interests of citizens.
- Government should establish a neutral framework of law and policy that is applied without regard to persons and private interests.
- Citizens should have the ability to express criticism and disagreement with government actions.

Designing government requires that we take account of these basic facts and do our best to embody the values we agree about. We need a set of institutions that will be durable, that will reinforce the fundamental values around which they are designed, and that will be difficult to distort when self-interested actors occupy roles within them. Most fundamentally, we need a set of institutions that embody pursuit of the public good; that reflect citizen preferences; and that secure a just system of law for all citizens.
So what kinds of governance institutions are compatible with this list of facts and values?

This is where the mechanisms of constitutional electoral democracy come in. Western political theorists argue that a constitution sets the regulative framework for governance -- the fundamental legal protections defining citizenship and the scope and role of government. And electoral democracy permits citizens to express their preferences and enforce good performance by officials. So policies are selected that correspond to the preferences of citizens; and they are implemented in good faith under the enforcement mechanism of representative electoral democracy.

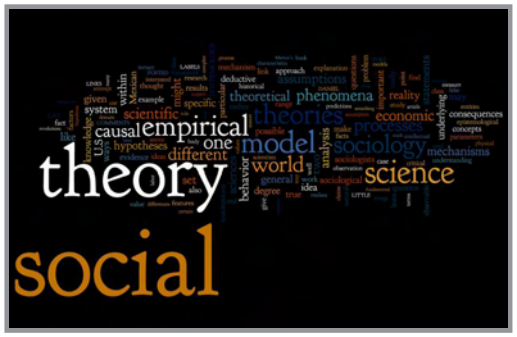
But here is the more challenging question: are there other institutional arrangements that might fit these facts and values about as well? In particular, could we imagine a Confucian single-party state with an energetic **anti-corruption office**, an energetic and **independent "investigative journalism" office**, and a robust **social survey office** that serves the functions of gathering citizen preferences and concerns? Could such a system genuinely embody the public good in a hypothetical modern Asian society? In other words, could we imagine an administrative-authority system that effectively embodied the public good and protections of the fundamental interests and preferences of citizens? Could the "checks and balances" represented by an electoral system be established through other means?

It is easy to see objections to this hypothetical possibility; they largely come down to the problem of independence and effectiveness when a regulative office finds it necessary to criticize powerful officials or private persons. But it's worth asking the question of alternative governance design, and it's not inconceivable that solutions to these problems could be created.

(Here is an interesting collection of Tu Weiming's writings; Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought.)
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:30AM (-04:00)

Three years of UnderstandingSociety

Wednesday, November 03, 2010



Today marks the end of the third year of publication of ***UnderstandingSociety***. This is the 481st posting, with prior posts covering a range of themes from "social ontology" to "foundations of the social sciences" to "globalization and economic development." In beginning this effort in 2007 I had envisioned something different from the kinds of blogs that were in circulation at the time -- something more like a dynamic, open-ended book manuscript than a topical series of observations. And now, approaching 500,000 words, I feel that this is exactly what the blog has become -- a dynamic web-based monograph on the philosophy of society. It is possible to navigate the document in a variety of ways -- following key words, choosing themes and "chapters", or reading chronologically. And it is also possible to download a full PDF copy of the document up through July, 2010; this will be updated in January 2011.

I find that the discipline of writing the blog has led me into ideas and debates that I would not have encountered otherwise. For example, the thread of postings on "***world sociology***" and the epistemologies and content of sociology in China, France, or Mexico opens up a new set of perspectives for me on the social context of the disciplines of sociology. Thanks to Gabriel Abend, Marion Fourcade, Céline Béraud and Baptiste Coulmont for a range of stimulating ideas on this subject. (These discussions can be located under the "disciplines" and "sociology" tags.)

I've also been pleased at the way that the ***social ontology*** topic has unfolded. The ideas of plasticity, heterogeneity, and contingency as fundamental features of social entities are crucial when we try to understand why social entities and processes are different from natural entities. They give a basis for understanding that the distinction between natural kinds and social kinds is a crucial one. And I don't think I would have come to the particular formulations and found here without the working canvas provided by the blog. (This thread falls under the ontology theme.)

And, of course, I've been led into a number of discussion areas that I wouldn't have anticipated: Michigan's economic crisis, practical strategies of stimulating regional economic development, analysis of the schooling crisis our major cities face, and current developments in China, for example.

The writing process here is quite different from that involved in more traditional academic writing. When a philosopher starts out to write a philosophical essay for publication, he/she plans to spend many days and weeks formulating a line of argument, crafting the prose, and critically revising until it is perfect. Likewise, writing a traditional academic book involves coming up with a "story-line" of topics and key arguments, turning that into a chapter outline, and methodically drafting out the full manuscript. Creative planning, writing, and editing occupy months or years before the ideas come into public view.

Writing an academic blog has a different structure. It is a question of doing serious thinking, one idea at a time. Each post represents its own moment of thought and

development, without the immediate need to fit into a larger architecture of argument. Eventually there emerges a kind of continuity and coherence out of a series of posts; but the writing process doesn't force sequence and cumulativeness. Instead, coherence begins to emerge over time through recurring threads of thinking and writing.

I've done each of these other forms of traditional academic writing -- dissertation, conference presentation, journal article, book, and book review -- and I find this current form particularly valuable and intellectually rewarding. It stimulates creativity, it leads to new insights, it permits rigor in its own way, and it leads to new discoveries within the vast literatures relevant to "understanding society" and the space of questions this domain presents.

Writing the blog is intertwined with the web in several deep ways that are worth calling out. First, of course, is the availability of a venue for publication and the possibility of gaining a world-wide readership. The web and the search engines made this kind of readership possible, and this was a unique new capability entirely absent in the world of print. But equally important for me has been the ubiquitous availability of knowledge and writing on the web, and the ease with which we can access this knowledge through search engines and other web-based tools. This means that the web-based scholar can quickly discover other materials relevant to the current topic, leading to unexpected turns in the argument. It means that the web-based scholar is not locked into the circle of his own study and the literatures that he/she has already mastered; rather, there is an open-ended likelihood of interaction with new and important ideas previously not part of the mix. So the task of writing is no longer that of formulating one's pre-existing ideas; it is simultaneously an act of inquiry and intellectual discovery. (For me a good example of this is the interest I've developed in the theory of *assemblage* and the writings of Deleuze, Delanda, and Latour. These ideas fall far outside my own analytic philosophy comfort zone, and yet they align well with my own thinking about micro-foundations and social contingency.)

I invite readers to take this opportunity to make suggestions or observations about this experiment in academic writing. Are there topics you'd like to see addressed in future postings? Do you have suggestions for how to make the presentation of the content more useable? Can you see possibilities for this kind of inquiry and writing in your own field?
Posted by Daniel Little at 07:40AM (-04:00)

Super-high-density Shanghai

Friday, November 05, 2010

Shanghai is a city approaching 20 million people, and it is arguably the most economically dynamic city in Asia. This concentration of population and economic activity surely has important long-term consequences. There was an interesting piece in the Shanghai Daily recently by Nate Stein, called "Sky's the limit for well planned city of Shanghai." Stein makes a really intriguing point about the Shanghai metropolitan region that seems very important. He argues that the "invisible boundary" of a city is a margin that is roughly 45 minutes from the city center; and that this boundary is moving out fast in the lower Yangtze River Delta. Improvements in transportation have brought a handful of mid-sized cities into the 45-minute zone, with the result that Shanghai is fast becoming the most populous high-density metropolitan area in the world.

Here is the heart of Stein's view:







After building a subway in 1995 that has quickly grown to the world's longest and most traversed, Shanghai's invisible border moved outward significantly and drastically increased its growth potential. Instead of surrounding dense urban development with sprawling suburban homes, Shanghai's residents live in apartment buildings that do not restrict the growth of a city like stand-alone homes do.

Being built upon a backbone of compact flats and public transit, rather than homes on large lots and personal automobiles, means that the population has no upper boundary or, in a very literal sense, the sky is the limit, depending on how many people can fit in one building.

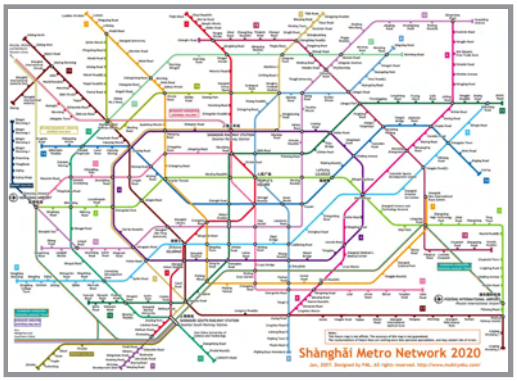
People are stacked on top of and below others as growth extends up, and not out. Concentrations of people make mass transit feasible and waste less fuel and energy. Efficiency greatly increases in compact cities and provide for the feasibility of small businesses staying in demand among residents without cars who need the convenience of small neighborhood shops.

The almost entirely urban design of Shanghai provides for impressively sustainable growth potential. The problem of overcrowding is on the horizon, but Shanghai has been effectively advancing its transit infrastructure. There is a two-level road tunnel under the Bund, the main portion of downtown, to prevent congestion and high-speed rail lines coming into existence that will further extend the reach of its invisible 45-minute boundary.

So Shanghai is a city with almost limitless density, in the sense that it can add population vertically rather than laterally and it can serve that population with a high-capacity rapid transit system.

Here is the Yangtze River Delta mega-region by night:
The transportation improvements that continue to transform the Shanghai urban landscape include both the subway system and the high-speed rail system connecting China's cities. Here is what the Shanghai Metro system looks like today:

And here is the plan for 2020:



The system currently consists of twelve lines, with new track being added rapidly. It handles something like five million passengers a day.

The other major improvement in transportation is the extension of the high-speed inter-city rail network. High-speed trains now connect Shanghai to Hangzhou and Suzhou, bringing those cities comfortably within the 45-minute radius of Shanghai. The high-speed train from Shanghai to Hangzhou takes only 25 minutes today. In practical terms, this means that there can be a tight integration among firms, knowledge workers, and universities throughout this region with a total population approaching 90 million people in the Yangtze River Delta Region. Professionals can live in Hangzhou or Souzhou and do their work in Shanghai.

Here is the intriguing question: does this development of a high-density, high-population metropolitan Shanghai have important implications for social and economic development? Is this mega-city going to represent a qualitative change in the world's urban history? Will Shanghai become a unique new kind of mega-urban place, with significantly higher growth potential than other world cities?

One reason for thinking that this may be true is the case that people like Richard Florida and Saskia Sassen have made for the synergies created by a densely interconnected urban area. Florida talks about the concentration of talent afforded by a high-density city, and Sassen focuses on the economic and informational networks that are stimulated by high-density cities. In each case there is the idea of non-linear interaction effects and positive feedback loops. Sassen's concept of a global city captures her core idea; a global city is one that has a large volume of connections to other cities around the globe, in terms of trade, services, telephone calls, internet traffic, and financial transactions (The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo.).

Shanghai is not the only large metropolitan area in the world, of course; but it appears to have features of urban system interconnectedness that take it out of the category of "sprawl" cities like Mexico City or Johannesburg.

Sassen puts some of her thinking into an interesting paper titled "Megaregions: Benefits Beyond Sharing Trains and Parking Lots?" (link). Here is how she frames her problem in the paper:

I have been asked to examine whether there are particular advantages to economic interactions at the megaregional scale and whether such interactions might play a role in enhancing the advantages of megaregions in today’s global economy. Familiar advantages of scales larger than that of the city, such as metropolitan and regional scales, are the benefits of sharing transport infrastructures for people and goods, enabling robust housing markets, and, possibly, supporting the development of office, science, and technology parks. Critical policy options identified by RPA in this regard would aim at strengthening the megaregional scale of economic interactions by investing in intercity and high speed regional rail, enhanced goods movement systems, and land use planning decisions. More complex and elusive is whether the benefits of megaregional economic interaction can go beyond these familiar scale economies and,

further, whether this would strengthen the position of such megaregions in the global economy.

And here is part of her answer:

One central argument I develop in this paper is that the specific advantages of the megaregional scale consist of and arise from the co-existence within one regional space of multiple types of agglomeration economies. These types of agglomeration economies today are distributed accross diverse economic spaces and geographic scales: central business districts, office parks, science parks, the transportation and housing efficiencies derived from large (but not too large) commuter belts, low-cost manufacturing districts (today often offshore), tourism destinations, specialized branches of agriculture, such as horticulture or organically grown food, and the complex kinds evident in global cities. Each of these spaces evinces distinct agglomeration economies and empirically at least, is found in diverse types of geographic settings –from urban to rural, from local to global. ***The thesis is that a megaregion is sufficiently large and diverse so as to accommodate a far broader range of types of agglomeration economies and geographic settings than it typically does today.*** This would take the advantages of megaregional location beyond the notion of urbanization economies. A megaregion can then be seen as a scale that can benefit from the fact that our complex economies need diverse types of agglomeration economies and geographic settings, from extremely high agglomeration economies evinced by the specialized advanced corporate services to the fairly modest economies evinced by suburban office parks and regional labor-intensive low-wage manufacturing. It can incorporate this diversity into a single economic megazone. Indeed, in principle, it could create conditions for the return of particular (not all) activities now outsourced to other regions or to foreign locations.

It would appear from a non-specialist's perspective, that Shanghai promises to have many of these multiple "agglomeration economy" dimensions, and from this we might expect that its economic growth will be accelerated with further densification.

Here is another interesting application of the idea of a global city to the case of Shanghai -- a conference paper by Professor Lin Ye, "Is Shanghai Really a 'Global City'?" (link). Ye's test involves examining three factors:

1. Central place in the national economy
2. Concentration nodes for global capital
3. Agglomeration sites to provide professional services (5)

Does Shanghai rate highly enough in these three areas to qualify as a global city?

Ye concludes that the data support a "yes" in each area. The Shanghai region represents a very significant percentage of the total Chinese GDP, and was increasing from 1992 to 2001 (7). It represented 5.16% of total GDP in 2001, with only roughly 1.5% of population. Second, Shanghai represented a significant concentration of China's foreign direct investment and exports during these years. Shipping and air traffic were concentrated in the metropolitan region as well. So Ye concludes that "Shanghai has become a strategic concentration node for global capital" (12). Finally, Sassen's most important criterion has to do with being a key node in the global network of professional services. He finds that here too, Shanghai measures up. So-called "tertiary" industries amount to 45.8% of employment -- dramatically greater than China's overall 27.7% rate (14). And the volume of financial services, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) business activity is very high as well. "Shanghai is leading the way to transform to an information-based professional service concentration place" (15). One important measure is the Globalization and World Cities Study Group assessment (link). GaWC singles out a list of 46 global firms (accounting, financial services, architecture, ...), and then ranks cities according to how many offices they possess of these firms. Ye notes that GaWC identified 55 global cities based on the concentration of global advanced producer service firms in each city, and Shanghai is on this list, with 27 offices out of the 46 global firms

(compared to 105 offices in New York). Ye concludes that Shanghai has "quickly adjusted from a traditional manufacturing center to a place that provides advanced professional services to the whole world" (17). It isn't yet in the top rank; but it is increasing its global interconnectedness rapidly.

These transitions from primary sector to tertiary sector businesses that Ye documents indicate that Shanghai is already well on its way to being a knowledge-centered global city. And the processes of densification described above should only amplify this process.

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:24PM (-04:00)

Merton's sociological imagination

Monday, November 08, 2010



Robert Merton began life as Meyer Schkolnick, son of impoverished Eastern European Jewish immigrants in Philadelphia, and he became one of the most influential American sociologists of his generation. He is most often associated with a couple of phrases that came to embody common knowledge in the social sciences -- "theories of the middle range," "unforeseen consequences," "focus group," and "standing on the shoulders of giants." But what, precisely, was his conception of sociology as a science? What sort of knowledge did he believe that sociology should aspire to? Did he offer anything like a "paradigm" for sociology as a body of research, theory, and explanation? And what does his work have to offer to today's generation of sociologists?

Craig Calhoun and others organized a conference at Columbia in 2007 involving a group of pathbreaking sociologists in a variety of sub-disciplines to consider the legacy of Merton, and the result is a highly interesting volume of essays, Robert K. Merton: Sociology of Science and Sociology as Science. Contributors include Craig Calhoun, Alehandro Portes, Charles Tilly, Robert Sampson, Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, Viviana Zelizer, Thomas Gieryn, Aaron Panofsky, Alan Sica, Ragnvald, Kallebert, Peter Simonson, Harriet Zuckerman, and Charles Camic, and jointly they consider a very wide range of themes and perspectives from Merton's work. The volume isn't presented as a *festschrift*; Gieryn provided just such a collection in 1980 during Merton's life (Science and Social Structure: A Festschrift for Robert K. Merton). Instead, this volume is conceived as a way of taking the measure of Merton's contributions to sociology as the field continues to develop, and to sound out ways in which Merton's theories and ideas have either flourished or declined in the decades since the most influential ideas were published. The volume therefore serves very well as an avenue through which to ask the analytical question: what defined Merton's sociological imagination?

In his introduction to the volume, Craig Calhoun presents one important part of Merton's work as being the job of "professionalizing" sociology. But he also believes that Merton's contributions were substantive and fundamental. He quotes Merton from "On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range" on the overall purpose of sociology:

Each to his last, and the last of the sociologist is that of lucidly presenting claims to

logically interconnected and empirically confirmed propositions about the structure of society and its changes, the behavior of man within that structure and the consequences of that behavior. (14-15)

This is a very focused statement about the nature of sociology; it involves **<empiricallyjustified> <theories>** about social **<structures>** and social **<behavior>**. It defines a method (empirical, fact-based research), a research product (a body of "logically interconnected statements"), and a subject matter (social structure and behavior). At the same time, it isn't a wholly informative statement. What falls under the topic of "social structure"? Is the theory of organizations a component of a theory of social structure? How deeply into the intricacies of social psychology should the sociologist go in researching social behavior? Calhoun makes it clear that he believes that Merton's "philosophy of sociology" becomes more concrete through his efforts to clarify the concepts and theories that sociologists advance. This is a move from the more abstract to the more concrete -- and very consistent with the idea of "theories of the middle range." And in fact, much of the value of the volume comes from the efforts made by the contributors to delve more deeply into some specific areas of research and theory formation in which Merton involved himself.

The sociology of science is certainly one of the important areas where Merton made a lasting contribution, and several essays in the volume are devoted to this field. Thomas Gieryn asks whether Merton formulated a ***paradigm*** for the sociology of science -- a good question, since Merton himself was one of the first (along with Thomas Kuhn) to use the word "paradigm" to analyze scientific and intellectual activity. Gieryn does a very useful job of collating the many things that Merton attributes to his core uses of the concept of paradigm throughout his work from 1968 to 2004 (115):

- assumptions
- problem sets
- problematics
- key concepts
- generalizable concepts
- central concepts
- conceptual apparatus
- logic of procedures procedures of inquiry
- scheme of analysis
- vocabularies
- postulates
- classification
- ideological imputations
- inference
- substantive findings
- inventory of extant findings
- types of pertinent evidence
- basic propositions
- interpretative schemes
- provisional agreement

Gieryn attempts to codify this list into three areas: "what we know about the social world ... ; how sociologists should study the social world ... ; prototheories that explain in causal fashion why society is the way it is" (115). (Another way of boiling these elements down would be along these lines: concepts and interpretive schemes; inference and evidence; broadly accepted substantive findings.)

Gieryn goes on to offer his own account of a paradigm for sociology as a series of

oppositions:

1. Science is social and cognitive
2. Science is cooperative and competitive
3. Science is institutionalized and emergent
4. Scientific objects in the world are real and constructed
5. Science is autonomous and embedded
6. Science is universal and local
7. Scientific knowledge is cumulative and ... not (120)

This formulation demonstrates one of the emergent values of a project like this one: inventive sociologists are led to push forward an important question ("What is a paradigm for sociology?") through careful consideration of Merton's work and its strengths and limitations.

An area where Merton is not so well known is in the area of "cultural sociology." In fact, "culture" seems entirely absent from the short definition quoted above. Merton is usually read as offering an abstract, structural-functional approach to the social world that pays little attention to cultural factors and meaningful behavior. Cynthia Fuchs Epstein and Viviana Zelizer take issue with this interpretation, however, in their chapters in the volume. Epstein puts her perspective in these terms: "Many of Merton's key concepts for the analysis of social life centered on the cultural domain, mated with structural variables" (79). And she thinks that a key part of Merton's approach to sociological thinking invokes a cultural interpretation of social life:

Learning to think like a sociologist, according to Merton, requires going beyond the individual as the unit of analysis, as is the focus of rational-choice theorists or mainstream psychologists today. The sociologist is required to consider the cultural web in which individuals are embedded, the social context that causes them to make certain choices and to act in concert with others because they share or are persuaded by social conventions that lodge them in institutional frameworks, which in turn circumscribe their options. (81)

Merton's sociology of science is perhaps a particularly clear example of Epstein's point here; Merton invokes the idea of the ethos of science, the norms and values that govern the choices of scientists, as one of the key sociological facts about science as socially embedded activity. And this ethos is plainly conveyed to scientists through concrete social arrangements of training and education.

Another area that is less familiar is "sociological semantics" and rhetoric -- basically, Merton's interest in tracing some of the metaphors and concepts that have been important in the ways that people have conceived of history and society. His book, On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript, traces the phrase "standing on the shoulders of giants" as a metaphor for the advancement of science. (He traces the lineage past Isaac Newton's usage of the phrase to Bernard of Chartres in the twelfth century.) Essentially, it is a phrase that captures the idea of cumulation and progress, incorporating and extending the body of knowledge received from prior generations. Charles Camic notes that Merton often insisted on a sharp delineation between the history of ideas and the sociology of ideas (275). But Camic argues that Merton actually pursued inquiries that crossed over this line repeatedly in his interest in tracing quotations, concepts, and metaphors through the history of science (278). His treatment of "serendipity" is a good example; and Camic argues that Merton regarded this kind of analysis as a serious exercise in sociological research.

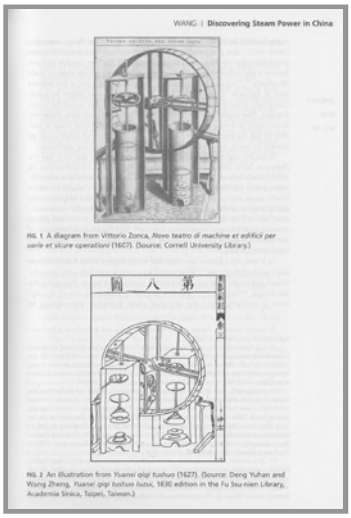
That Merton himself viewed these writings in light of a larger intellectual project, rather

than as occasional amusements, is something he made increasingly explicit, however. (279)
Merton summarized this area of interest under the heading of "Neologisms as Sociological Concepts: History and Analysis" and as a "study in sociological semantics" (279, 280). Camic quotes Merton as holding that "the frequency and nature of quotations in society [serve] as objects of study in themselves" (283), and he links this kind of inquiry to the study of propaganda and mass persuasion as well.

In short, Merton is a sociologist who repays careful, extensive review, and this volume is a very good start. It proves the notion that we can not only stand on the shoulders of giants, but can also gain insights that go beyond and beside those predecessors.
Posted by Daniel Little at 03:04PM (-05:00)

Transmitting technology

Friday, November 12, 2010



How do large technological advances cross cultural and civilizational boundaries? The puzzle is this: large technologies are not simply cool new devices, but rather complex systems of scientific knowledge, engineering traditions, production processes, and modes of technical communication. So transfer of technology is not simply a matter of conveying the approximate specifications of the device; it requires the creation of a research and development infrastructure that is largely analogous to the original process of invention and development. Inventors, scientists, universities, research centers, and skilled workers need to build a local understanding of the way the technology works and how to solve the difficult problems of material and technical implementation.

Take inertial guidance systems for missiles, described in fascinating detail by Donald MacKenzie in Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance. The process MacKenzie describes of discovery and development of inertial guidance was a highly complex and secretive one, with multiple areas of scientific and engineering research solving a series of difficult technical problems.

Now do a bit of counterfactual history and imagine that some country -- say, Burma -- had developed powerful rocket engines in the 1950s but did not have a workable guidance technology; and suppose the US and USSR had succeeded in keeping the development of inertial navigation systems and the underlying science secret. Finally, suppose that Burmese agents had managed to gain a superficial description of inertial navigation: "It is a self-contained device that tracks acceleration and therefore permits constant updating of current location; and it uses ultra-high precision gyroscopes." Would this be enough of a leak to permit rapid adoption of inertial navigation in the Burmese missile program? Probably not; the technical obstacles faced in the original development process would have to be solved again, and this means a long process of knowledge building and institution building. For example, MacKenzie describes the knotty problem posed to this technology by the fact of slight variations in the earth's gravitational field over the surface of the globe; if uncorrected, these variations would be coded as acceleration by the instrument and would lead to significant navigational errors. The solution to this problem

involved creating a detailed mapping of the earth's gravitational field.

This is a hypothetical case. But Hsien-Chun Wang describes an equally fascinating but real case in a recent article in Technology & Culture, "Discovering Steam Power in China, 1840s-1860s" (link). There was essentially no knowledge of steam power in Chinese science in the mid-Qing (early nineteenth century). The First Opium War (1839-1842) provided a rude announcement of the technology, in the form of powerful steam-driven warships on the coast and rivers of eastern China. Chinese officials and military officers recognized the threat represented by Western military-industrial technology, but it was another 25 years before Chinese industry was in a position to build a steam-powered ship. So what were the obstacles standing in front of China's steam revolution?

Wang focuses on two key obstacles in mid-Qing industry and technology: the role of technical drawings as a medium for transmitting specifications for complex machines from designer to skilled workers; and the absence in nineteenth-century China of a machine tool technology. Technical drawings were an essential medium of communication in the European industrial system, conveying precise specifications of parts and machines to the workers and tools who would fabricate them. And machine tools (lathes, planes, stamping machines, cutting machines, etc.) provided the tools necessary to fabricate high-precision metal parts and components. (Merritt Roe Smith describes aspects of both these stories in his account of the U.S. arms industry in the early nineteenth century; Harpers Ferry Armory and New Technology.) According to Wang, the Chinese technical culture had developed models rather than drawings to convey how a machine works; and the intricate small machines that certainly were a part of Chinese technical culture depended on artisanal skill rather than precision tooling of interchangeable parts.

So communicating the technical details of a complex machine and creating the fabrication infrastructure needed to produce the machine were two important obstacles for rapid transfer of steam technology from Western Europe to Qing China. But perhaps a more fundamental obstacle emerges as well: the fact that Chinese technical and scientific culture was as yet simply unready to "see" the way that steam power worked in the first place. When steam warships arrived, acute Chinese observers saw smoke and fire, and they saw motion. But they did not see "steam-driven traction", or the translation of kinetic energy into rotational work. (This is evident also in the drawing of the treadmill water pump above; the maker of the drawing clearly did not perceive from the Italian drawing how the motion of the treadmill was translated into the vertical pumping action.) Wang quotes a description from an observer in Guangzhou in 1828:
Early in the third month ... there suddenly came from Bengal a *huo lunchuan* [fire-wheel ship] .... The *huo lunchuan* has an empty copper cylinder inside to burn coal, with a machine on the top. When the flame is up, the machine moves automatically. The wheels on both sides of the ship move automatically too. (37)
And another observer wrote in Zhejiang in 1840:

The ship's cabin stores a square furnace under the beam from which the wheels are hung. When the fire is burning in the furnace, the two wheels turn like a fast mill and the ship cruises as fast as if it is flying, regardless of the wind's direction. (37-38)
The give-away here is the word "automatically"; plainly these observers had not assimilated a causal process linking the production of heat (fire) to mechanical motion (the rotation of the paddle wheels). Instead, the two circumstances are described as parallel rather than causal.

So the fundamental motive force of steam was not cognitively accessible at this point, even through direct observation. By contrast, the marine utility of paddlewheel-driven warships was quickly assimilated. Chinese commanders adapted what they observed in the European naval forces (powerful paddlewheels that made sails unnecessary) to an existing technology (human- or ox-driven paddlewheels), and large "wheel-boats" saw action as early as 1842 on Suzhou Creek (40).

Wang notes that several Chinese inventors did in fact succeed in discerning the mechanism associated with steam power by the 1840s. Ding Gongchen succeeded in fabricating a model steam rail engine 61 centimeters long and a 134-centimeter model paddlewheel steamboat; so he clearly understood the basic mechanism at this point. And Zheng Fuguang appears to have mastered the basic concept as well. But here is Wang's summary:

Ding's efforts show that despite the circulating writings of a few experimenters, the steam engine remained a novelty, which was difficult to understand and probably impossible to reproduce. Interested parties were discussing it, however, but attempted to grasp it in terms of their indigenous expertise alone rather than more broadly understanding the new Western technology. (45)

In 1861, during the Taiping Rebellion, a senior military commander Zeng Guofan created an arsenal in Anqing for ammunition, and also set about to create the capacity to build steam-powered ships. With the assistance of experts Xu Shou and Hua Hengfang, the arsenal produced a partially successful full-scale steamship by 1863, and in 1864 Hua and Xu succeeded in completing a 25-ton steamship, the *Huanghu*, that was capable of generating 11.5 kilometers per hour. The Chinese-build steamship had arrived.

Here is how Wang summarizes this history of technology adaptation over a 25-year period of time:

The path from the treadmill paddlewheel boat to the Jiangnan arsenal's steamers was a long journey of discovery. Qing officials experimented with the knowledge and skills available to them, and it took time--and trial and error--for them to realize that steamboats were driven by steam, that machine tools were necessary to turn the principle of steam into a workable engine, and that drawings had to be made and read for the technology to be diffused. (53)

So perhaps the short answer to the question posed above about cross-civilizational technology transfer is this: "transfer" looks a lot more like "reinvention" than it does "imitation." It was necessary for Chinese experimenters, officials, and military officers to create a new set of institutions and technical capacities before this apparently simple new technological idea could find its way into Chinese implementations on a large scale.

(The image at the top is one of the most interesting parts of Wang's very interesting paper; it establishes vividly the difficulty of transmitting technologies across different technical cultures. The Italian drawing dates from 1607, and the Chinese copy dates from 1627. As Wang points out, the Chinese version of the drawing is visually highly similar to the Italian original; it is a good copy. And yet it fails to designate any of the technical features of how this treadmill-operated water pump works. The pair of drawings are fascinating to examine in detail.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 05:13PM (-05:00)

Eurasian time

Sunday, November 14, 2010



Victor Lieberman is probably the leading historian of Southeast Asia writing in English today. His primary focus is Burma, and throughout his career he has done a masterful job of piecing together the political, cultural, and economic history of the succession of Burmese polities over a millennium, using materials in many local languages.

His current work broadens the canvas by looking at broad temporal patterns of consolidation and turmoil across the full expanse of Eurasia, including Russia, France, Japan, China, and Southeast Asia. In two volumes of Strange Parallels: Volume 2, Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830 (Studies in Comparative World History) he documents a degree of synchrony among widely separated polities that demands explanation. (Here is an earlier discussion of his programme in Volume One; link.)

Between 1240 and 1390 the principal realms of mainland Southeast Asia collapsed. The same was true of France and Kiev, whose political and economic travails merged with a general European crisis. (Kindle loc 512)
Here is how the pulsing of consolidation and disintegration looked in Southeast Asia:

In sum -- in lieu of four modest charter polities in 1240, 23 kingdoms in 1340, and 9 or 10 kingdoms in 1540 -- mainland Southeast Asia by the second quarter of the 19th century contained three unprecedentedly grand territorial assemblages; those of Burma, Siam, and Vietnam. (Kindle loc 799)
Lieberman defines consolidation as a broadening of scope of a polity, including territory, population, war-making capacity, and fiscal reach. And he notes that each of the world polities he studies shows a sequence of consolidation, followed by periods of turmoil and breakdown.

Along with territorial consolidation and administrative centralization, a third index of integration within each empire was a growing uniformity of religious and social practices, languages, and ethnicity. (Kindle loc 873)
And this was true as much in Burma as it was in 17th and 18th century France.

Moreover, and this is his key point, these periods show a remarkable degree of synchrony, from Kiev to Paris to Burma. So here is the central question: what kinds of global triggers or events could have created this synchrony?

Here are a few candidates that he considers. For the 10th-13th century, he considers the effects of global climate fluctuation, disease, Viking invasions, and the predations of Mongol armies from Inner Asia. And for the 17th and 18th centuries he considers the expansion of Eurasian trade, modern arms, and monetary uses of silver in Europe and Asia (Kindle loc 8745). Here is how the climate factor works:

Agriculture also exhibited long-term dynamism, the product of several influences. By increasing the reach and force of monsoon flows and minimizing droughts linked to El Nino events, the Medieval Climate Anomaly c. 800/850-1250/1300 contributed in some uncertain but possibly critical degree to that demographic and agricultural vigor, and associated institutional vitality, characteristic of the charter era, two of whose chief polities, Pagan and Angkor, lay in dry zones. (Kindle loc 1008)

Internal to each polity are factors that appear to be local in their effects: population change, agricultural improvements, new organizational forms in governance, military, and taxation, and the diffusion of literacy and national culture. Concerning the polities of Southeast Asia he writes:

My essential argument is this: Four phenomena -- expansion of material resources, new cultural currents, intensifying interstate competition, and diverse state interventions -- combined to strengthen privileged lowland districts at the expense of outlying areas. (Kindle loc 996)

But the logic of these processes does not imply any sort of global synchrony; so, once again, what would serve to link consolidation and disorder in France and Burma? Here is Lieberman's summary assessment.

Why, then, these loose, but increasingly close parallels over a thousand years? On current evidence, the synchronized florescence of Kiev, charter Southeast Asia, and Capetian France owed more to parallel social experiments and especially the Medieval Climate Anomaly than to long-distance trade. Political collapse in the 13th and 14th centuries reflected the intersection of institutional weakness with resource constraints caused by centuries of sustained growth, strains that were aggravated by post-1250/1300 climatic deterioration, shifting trade routes, Tai eruptions in Southeast Asia, and Mongol-Tatar mediations. The latter could be either military (in Burma, Angkor, and Kiev) or epidemiological (across Europe). Political revival after c. 1450 in all five realms reflected, in part, counterphasic trends: institutional responses to antecedent weaknesses, demographic recovery, and climatic amelioration. But post-1450 reintegration also relied on substantially novel technological and organizational factors, so that each polity started from a higher level than its 10th-century predecessor. (Kindle loc 9341)

This is world history you can get your teeth into. It is detailed, making use of the best available sources for each of the regions and polities considered. And it is bold in its effort to arrive at trans-continental, even global causes of these local developments.

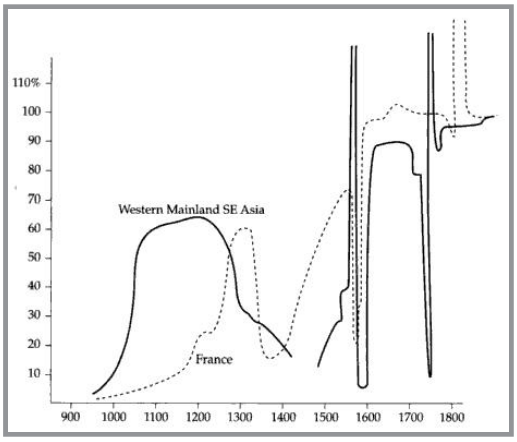
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:49AM (-05:00)

New modes of historical presentation

Wednesday, November 17, 2010

Victor Lieberman's Strange Parallels: Volume 1, Integration on the Mainland: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830 and Strange Parallels: Volume 2, Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830 represent about 1000 pages of careful, dense historical prose extending over two volumes. As previously discussed (link, link), the book reviews a thousand years of history of the polities of France, Kiev, Burma, Japan, and China, it documents a significant correlation of timing across the extremes of Eurasia, and it offers some historical hypotheses about the causes of this synchronicity. It is a long and involved story.

My question here is perhaps a startling one: Is it possible that some alternative modes of



presentation would permit the author to represent the heart of the historical findings much more efficiently in the form of a complex animated visual display? Could the empirical heart of the two volumes be summarized in the form of a rich data display over time? Is the verbal narrative simply a clumsy way of representing what really ought to be graphed? What would be gained, and what would be lost by replacing the long complex text with a compact series of graphs and maps?





This thought experiment is possible because Lieberman's argument lends itself to a quantitative interpretation. Essentially he is focusing on factors that can be estimated over time: degree of scope of a regime, degree of integration of institutions, economic productivity, agricultural intensity, rainfall, temperature, population level and density, mortality by disease, and transport capacity, for example. And he is looking for one or more factors whose temporal variations can be interpreted as a causal factor explaining correlations across the graphs. So we could imagine a master graph representing the factual core of the research, with six groups of graphs over time, representing the chief variables for each region over time. Here is Lieberman's initial effort along these lines, graphing his estimate of "scope and consolidation" of the states of SE Asia and France. And we can imagine presenting different data series representing his findings about agricultural productivity, mortality, population, climate change, etc., arranged around a single timeline.

We might imagine supplementing these superimposed data series with a series of dated maps representing the territorial scope of the states of the various regions, arranged along a timeline:

France T1 France T2 France T3
(A similar series would be constructed for the states of SE Asia.)

What this coordinated series of graphics represents, then, is the core set of facts that Lieberman has synthesized and presented in the book. By absorbing the social, political, and economic changes represented by this graphical timeline, the reader has gained access for the full set of empirical claims offered by Lieberman. And, one might say, the presentation is more direct and comprehensible than the verbal description of these



changes contained in the text. Moreover, we might expect that patterns will emerge more or less directly from these graphic presentations -- for example, the synchrony between state crisis and accumulating climate change.

As for what is lost in this version of the story -- several things seem clear. First, much of the narrative that Lieberman provides is synthetic. He attempts to pull together a wide variety of sources in order to arrive at a summary statement such as this: "The Capetian state increased dramatically in scope and administrative competence between 1000 and 1250." So the narrative serves to justify and document a particular inflection point in the long graph of "French polity". It provides the evidentiary basis for the estimate at this period in time.

Second, of course, the packet of graphs I've just described lacks the eloquence and vividness of the prose that Lieberman or other talented historians are able to achieve in telling their stories. It represents only the abstract summary of conclusions, not the nuance of the reasoning or the drama of the story. The prose text is inherently enjoyable to read, and it engages the reader to share the historical puzzle. But, one might argue, the epistemic core of the book is precisely the abstract factual findings, not the prose style. And the reasoning can be captured as a hypertext lying behind the graph -- a sort of annotated hyper-document.

Finally, this notion of arriving at an abstract, schematic representation of a history of something doesn't work at all for many kinds of historical writing. Michael Kammen's Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture is an inherently semiotic argument, working out the ways that public ceremonies and monuments work in the consciousness of a population. Robert Darnton's The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History is a deft interpretive inquiry, arriving at a complex interpretation of a puzzling set of actions. These examples of great historical writing are evidence-based; but they are not designed to allow estimation of a set of variables over time. And I don't see that there is the possibility of a more abstract and symbolic representation of the historical knowledge they represent.

One might say that what we have encountered here is an important fissure within contemporary historical writing, between "***cliometric***" research and knowledge (Reflections on the Cliometrics Revolution: Conversations with Economic Historians) and ***hermeneutic*** historical knowledge (Paul Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting). The former is primary interested in the processes of change of measurable human or social variables over time, whereas the latter is concerned with interpreting human actions and meanings. The former is amenable to quantitative representation -- graphs -- while the latter is inherently linguistic and interpretive. The former has to do with estimation and causal analysis, while the latter has to do with interpretation and narrative.

Often, of course, historians are involved in both kinds of interpretation and analysis -- both measurement and interpretation. So when Charles Tilly describes four centuries of French contention in The Contentious French, he is interested in charting the rising frequency of contentious actions (cliometric); but he is also interested in interpreting the

intentions and meanings associated with those actions (hermeneutic).
Posted by Daniel Little at 10:38PM (-05:00)

Consolidated quantitative history

Saturday, November 20, 2010

It is fascinating to browse through the sessions on the program at the Social Science History Association this month (link). SSHA is distinguished by its deep embrace of disciplinary and methodological diversity, and there are panels deriving from qualitative, comparative, and theoretical perspectives. But particularly interesting for me this year are the more quantitative subjects -- reflecting the cliometric impulse that led to the formation of the SSHA several decades ago. (Here are a few comments by Julia Adams, Elisabeth Stephanie Clemens, and Anne Shola Orloff, past and current presidents of SSHA, on this history.) There are panels on historical measures of the standard of living in different parts of Eurasia; on fertility, mobility, and population size in small and large regions; on longterm climate and atmospheric fluctuation over time (the year without a summer in mid-nineteenth century); levels of agricultural productivity over several centuries in several regions; the degree of inequality in landholding in Scania and North China; and many other fascinating studies of measurable social properties. And, of course, the papers offer time graphs of the variables that are the subject of the study.

So what if we had a goal of providing a unified and public measurement of factors like these over a large expanse of time and space? What if we set out to synthesize many studies currently underway and arrive at a common set of measures over time for these regions?

To an extent this is the goal of the Eurasian Population and Family History Project: to assemble a large set of research groups across Eurasia, measuring demographic data using comparable methods in the several locations (link). Though the project hasn't yet produced a synthetic volume summarizing all the results, we can hope that this kind of product will eventually be forthcoming. The researchers describe the project in these terms: “New data and new methods … have begun to illuminate the complexities of demographic responses to exogenous stress, economic and otherwise…. Combined time-series and event-history analyses of longitudinal, nominative, microlevel data now allow for the finely grained differentiation of mortality, fertility, and other demographic responses by social class, household context, and other dimensions at the individual level” (Tommy Bengtsson, Cameron Campbell, James Z. Lee, et al, Life under Pressure: Mortality and Living Standards in Europe and Asia, 1700-1900 (Eurasian Population and Family History), 2004, pp. viii-ix). Their goal is an ambitious one; it is to provide detailed, analytically sophisticated multi-generational studies of a number of populations across Eurasia. The studies are intended to permit the researchers to probe issues of causation as well as to identify important dimensions of similarity and difference across regions and communities. The most recent volume in the series appeared earlier this fall (Noriko Tsuya, Wang Feng, George Alter, James Z. Lee, et al, Prudence and Pressure: Reproduction and Human Agency in Europe and Asia, 1700-1900 (Eurasian Population and Family History)).

Suppose we wanted to go further and create an interactive Wiki site that permitted researchers to upload their findings for a specified set of variables; and suppose the underlying software created a dynamic set of time graphs and maps representing these data over time. And suppose that the data displays can be broken out at different levels

of scale -- North China, China, Eurasia. Finally, of course, we would want to specify that the data summaries are tagged with meta-data indicating the studies and methodologies leading to the graph. Could we say that this hypothetical site would then represent the meta-knowledge of the community of economic historians, climate scientists, and historical demographers? And could we speculate that this product would be an enormous benefit for historical researchers in a broad range of disciplines?

We can immediately predict some limitations to such a collective project. Most important is the unavoidable incompleteness of the data. We may have studies on farm productivity that document output for portions of North China and portions of the Yangzi Delta. But, of course, this doesn't tell us much about western China. So we can't realistically aspire to a full and complete representation of the variables full regions and periods.

Second, there is the problem of methodological inconsistencies across studies. Robert Allen is a leader in attempting to document standard of living across Europe and Asia (Robert Allen, ed., Living Standards in the Past: New Perspectives on Well-Being in Asia and Europe). And a central problem he faces is that multiple studies estimate consumption and wellbeing in different ways. So forming a composite representation requires an additional set of assumptions and models by the meta-study researcher.

Third, there is the question of defining the role for verbal analysis and reasoning in such a knowledge system. Are we to imagine this collective data set as a universal data appendix to a huge range of verbal historical narratives and analyses? Or might we come to think that the graphs speak for themselves, with no need for verbal analysis and inference?

All that said, I think the hypothetical Wiki site would be enormously valuable. It would provide us with birds-eye view of the large structural and material features that defined and constrained Eurasian history. And it has the potential of suggesting new avenues of research and new causal hypotheses about documented processes of change. For example, we may compare the time series of life expectancy and average temperature, and we may hypothesize that mortality and fertility were affected by abnormal climate conditions (through the medium of agricultural performance). But we may also be able to observe suggestive correlations between material variables and behavior -- for example, between ecological crises and the frequency of peasant uprisings. Or, conceivably, our eye might be led to a graph of sex ratios in a region and another of the incidence of banditry, and we might be led to a "bare sticks" hypothesis about social unrest: when there is an excess of unmarried young men, we can expect an upsurge of banditry and crime.

There are increasingly powerful tools available that permit scholars and the interested public to explore large public datasets such as the US Census or Bureau of Labor Statistics (link). It is perhaps not wholly unrealistic to imagine a platform that permits multiple researchers to contribute to a meta-dataset for economic and social history of the world.
Posted by Daniel Little at 12:47PM (-05:00)

Hobbes in context

Tuesday, November 23, 2010



We often think of Hobbes as being an originator in English philosophy, a strikingly innovative thinker who burst on the scene with the first formulation of a social contract theory of government. And we sometimes think of his justification of absolute sovereignty as a fairly direct reaction to the disorders Britain experienced during its Civil War and Glorious Revolution. Richard Tuck's Hobbes: A Very Short Introduction puts Hobbes into a much more nuanced position.

Fundamental to Tuck's approach as a historian of philosophy is to problematize the idea of "philosophy". Rather than assuming that the subject matter and methodology of philosophy were fixed once and for all by some traditional authority -- perhaps Aristotle and Plato -- Tuck takes the position that thinkers have defined themselves in ways that have eventually come to be described as "philosophy," but that nonetheless cover a very wide range of intellectual approaches and concerns. Here is a particularly striking set of ideas from Tuck's contextualization of Hobbes:

It is sometimes tempting to think that the heroes of the various histories of philosophy or ethics -- men as different as St Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, Luther, Hobbes, Kant, or Hegel -- were all in some sense engaged in a common enterprise, and would have recognized one another as fellow workers. But a moment's reflection reminds us that it is we who have made a unity of their task: from their own point of view, they belonged to very different ways of living and had very different tasks to perform. They would have seen themselves as intellectually kin to men who do not figure in these lists -- priests or scholars who had on the face of it no great philosophical interest. (1)

I think his point here is an important and insightful one: ***philosophy*** was reinvented in the Europe of the 16th and 17th centuries, and swerved dramatically away from ancient and medieval philosophy. It was a new project, motivated by different problems, assumptions, and goals.

Tuck gives a good deal of attention to Hobbes's biography, with the implication that these historical, social, and familial circumstances contributed to shaping the philosophical imagination of the maturing thinker. The situation of service as tutor and secretary to the household of William Lord Cavendish that occupied Hobbes for most of his life plays an important role in his intellectual development. It also provided him with direct access to some of the great intellectuals and scientists of France and Venice, including eventually Mersenne, Descartes, and Galileo.

A central intellectual theme in the air during Hobbes's early development was that of humanist skepticism about empirical and ethical knowledge.

The central feature of this literature was a pervasive scepticism about the validity of the moral principles by which an earlier generation had lived. (7)

The response of many of Lipsius's generation (he was born in 1547) was to give up strongly held and publicly defended beliefs of all kinds, and to retreat to a dispassionate and skeptical stance. (9)

Tuck argues that Hobbes defined his thought in terms of an effort to create a new, though

more modest, basis for knowledge in both empirical and ethical matters. In fact, Tuck leaves the impression that the philosophy of science is as important in Hobbes's work as the philosophy of politics. He was greatly influenced by the example and thinking of Galileo. Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief Systems of the World* appeared in 1632, and during 1634 Hobbes purchased a copy of the book for Newcastle. One of the key issues in the philosophical world was whether the senses deceive us; and Hobbes followed Descartes in holding that the observable features of the world (color, smell) should not be understood to directly correspond to real characteristics of the invisible reality of the object. Hobbes was interested in optics and mathematics -- the areas of science that appeared to be most relevant to the question of the real features of the world. And he sought to articulate a conception of knowledge according to which real properties in the world create phenomenal properties in the observer through "motions" (or causal processes).

Another core theme in Hobbes's itinerary is a visceral opposition to government religion -- religious requirements embodied in the state. Tuck shows with repeated examples why this issue was so important during the Civil War; the struggle between contending sides had very much to do with the scope of religious discipline to be imposed by the state. Hobbes was opposed to religious law and mandates of belief, and therefore found himself in roughly the camp of the Tolerationists.

The ecclesiastical regime put into place by the new republic after 1649 was very close to what Hobbes seems to have wanted on general grounds, and which he may well have enthusiastically preferred to traditional episcopacy. This is because, like almost all the most interesting 17th-century political theorists (including Grotius and Locke), he seems to have feared the moral and intellectual disciplines of Presbyterian Calvinism far more than anything else. (39)

Hobbes's primary object in arguing like this was to elevate the power of the sovereign over the churches -- bands of fanatics (in his eyes) who wished to enforce absurd opinions upon their fellow citizens, and whose activities were primarily responsible for the civil wars of Europe. They could only be controlled if the soverign was empowered to determine public doctrine and silence disputes. (85)

Tuck argues that Hobbes's earliest and most important influence on Hobbes in the area of moral and political philosophy was Hugo Grotius and his book, *The Laws of War and Peace*. Tuck describes this influence in these terms:

[Grotius] could play the same role for him as Galileo's *Dialogues* did for all members of the Mersenne circle, as a represntation for them of the kind of science which was to be put on their new, post-sceptical foundations. (25)

Tuck summarizes Grotius's core theory in two fundamental principles: "All men would agree that everyone has a fundamental right to preserve themselves, and wanton or unnecessary injury to another person is unjustifiable" (26). Tuck finds that these principles have counterparts in Hobbes's arguments in *Leviathan*.

So Tuck seems to be putting forward several important strands of interpretation that run against the grain of the customary telling of Hobbes's philosophy: first, that his philosophy of science and sensation plays a larger role than we might have thought; and second, that his most famous theory, the theory of unlimited sovereignty, has rather specific roots in Hobbes's immediate intellectual context (Grotius) and political environment (struggles over the extent of religious legislation). It is not the result of a purely abstract reflection on the situation of rational persons in a state of nature, but rather a complex argument that intertwines with England's own political tensions in mid-seventeenth century.

Steven Pincus's 1688: The First Modern Revolution is a nice complement to this line of thought, in that it offers a fundamentally new reading of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. Here is how Pincus describes his project:

England's Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 holds a special place in our understanding of the modern world and the revolutions that had a hand in shaping it. For the better part of three centuries scholars and public intellectuals identified England's Revolution of 1688-89 as a defining moment in England's exceptional history. Political philosophers have associated it with the origins of liberalism. Sociologists have contrasted it with the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions. Historians have pointed to the Revolution as confirming the unusual nature of the English state. Scholars of literature and culture highlight the Revolution of 1688-89 as an important moment in defining English common sense and moderation. All of these interpretations derive their power from a deeply held and widely repeated narrative of England's Revolution of 1688-89. Unfortunately, that narrative is wrong. (Introduction)

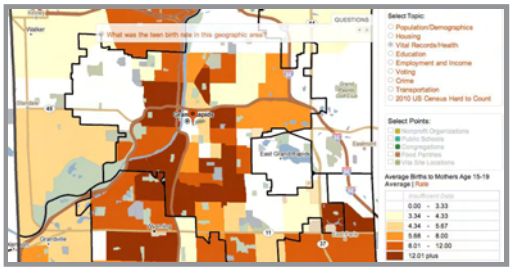
(Two articles in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on Hobbes's philosophy are worth reading (link, link).)

Posted by Daniel Little at 04:11PM (-05:00)

Urban and metropolitan problem solving

Thursday, November 25, 2010





The issues that almost all large American metropolitan regions and cities are facing are important and messy. Here is a short list: racial segregation, concentration of poverty, poor health and nutrition, poor schools, crime and violence, and disaffection of young people. These problems are important because they hold back the personal lives of millions of Americans living in poverty and degraded urban neighborhoods. And they are messy because they are multi-causal and interconnected. Each problem feeds into another, and it is generally difficult to say what kinds of policy changes and plans would lead to eventual improvement. These are "wicked" problems (link) that require planners to work with complex and unpredictable processes in an effort to improve Cleveland, Chicago, Oakland, Miami, Houston, Kansas City, and Detroit.

There is another reason why urban and metropolitan problems are hard to solve -- the lack of political will to seriously address the problems in a long-term and sustained way. State legislatures often have an anti-urban bias. Regions often embody conflicts of interest between suburbs and city. Jurisdictions are often more concerned about their own narrow interests than in finding workable regional solutions. And the Federal government often fails for decades to mount serious and realistic urban strategies. So the result is often stasis -- nothing happens.

One aspect of the challenge is the availability of timely, reliable data about a region's health and performance. City governments collect a lot of data about health status, land use, and crime; but they are often reluctant to make their information available to researchers and the public. Foundations and individual researchers undertake studies focused on one problem or another; but often the reports are difficult to find and difficult to compare.

So we might hypothesize that the situation would be improved if there were an active, well-resourced clearinghouse for regional data from a wide range of sources: census, municipal departments, academic studies, land use surveys, and environmental surveys. Ideally these data sets would be managed by a professional staff who are able to integrate the various sources into a query-based GIS system, and ideally the data sets themselves would be publicly available (subject to appropriate privacy conditions). this kind of regional data warehouse would not directly solve the problems the region faces; but it would give a clear understanding of the scope and distribution of the problems that need to be addressed; it would provide an empirical base for proposed policy solutions; and it would provide a baseline for eventually evaluating the policies that are adopted.

Fortunately, there are good examples of exactly this kind of effort underway in various regions around the country. One such effort is underway at the Community Research Institute, part of the Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University in Michigan (link). The Institute focuses primarily on several counties surrounding Grand Rapids, but it is also preparing to expand its coverage to other parts of Michigan. With a foundational database linking US Census data geographically, the Institute attempts to provide geographically linked data down to the neighborhood level. Here is an example of a map of the teen birth rate in neighborhoods of Grand Rapids (link). The Center has developed a general tool, MAPAS, that can serve as a platform for integrating and presenting a wide range of social data sources (link).

A similar effort is underway in the Detroit metropolitan region, under the rubric of Data Driven Detroit (link). D3 is attempting to create this kind of publicly accessible, spatially presented data warehouse for the city and the region, and the early results are promising. Here is a report on a recent study conducted by D3 on housing stock in Detroit (link).

So how can data sources like these be folded into good planning efforts for urban and metropolitan progress? The city of Detroit under the leadership of Mayor Dave Bing is just beginning an important planning effort that ties into the need to adjust the cityscape to the dramatically smaller population it now contains. This effort is called the Detroit Works Project (link), and it is explicitly committed to data-driven decision making and planning.

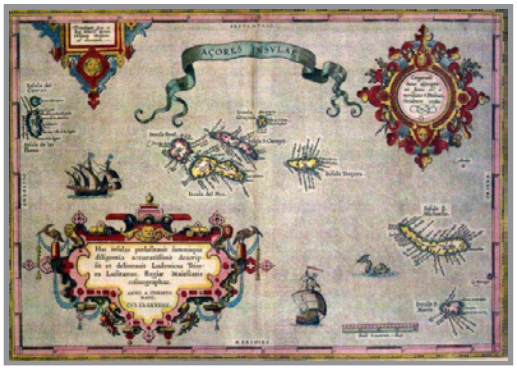
Another effort that is underway is the Integration Initiative within Living Cities (link, link). Detroit is one of the cities that has been funded within the program. Here is how Living Cities describes the national project of the Integration Initiative:
The Integration Initiative builds upon Living Cities' 20-year history of investing in cities. It acknowledges both the power and limitations of the neighborhood as a lever for change and seeks to drive a broader perspective that recognizes the role systems and regions must play in securing economic opportunity for low-income people.

The Integration Initiative will provide at least $80 million in grants, loans and Program-Related Investments (PRIs) to five regions to help them tackle the greatest barriers to opportunity for low-income residents, including education, housing, health care, transit and jobs. Living Cities and its members are making a total investment of $15 million in grants, $15 million in PRIs and $50 million in commercial debt. PRIs are flexible, low-cost loans provided at below-market rates to support charitable activity.
In order for a project like this to succeed, it needs to be based on solid empirical data. It is crucial for the progress of metropolitan Detroit, and other cities around the country, that the region succeed in creating a unified regional data source.

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:40PM (-05:00)

Merchant capital

Monday, November 29, 2010



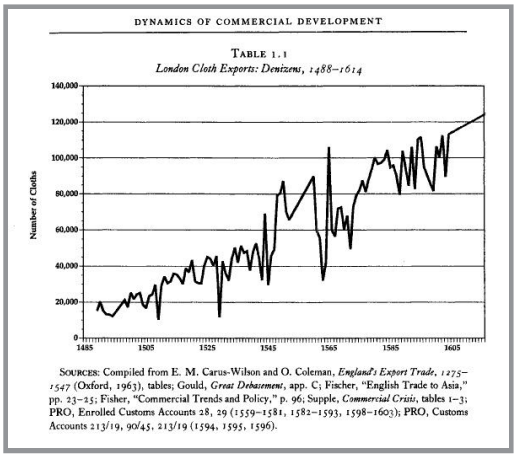

DYNAMICS OF COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

TABLE 1.1

London Cloth Exports: Denizens, 1488–1614

SOURCES: Compiled from E. M. Carus-Wilson and O. Coleman, *England's Export Trade, 1275–1547* (Oxford, 1963), tables; Gould, *Great Debasement*, app. C; Fischer, "English Trade to Asia," pp. 23–35; Fisher, "Commercial Trends and Policy," p. 96; Supple, *Commercial Crisis*, tables 1–3; PRO, Enrolled Customs Accounts 28, 29 (1559–1581, 1582–1593, 1598–1603); PRO, Customs Accounts 213/19, 90/45, 213/19 (1594, 1595, 1596).

Karl Marx was very interested in ***capital*** -- an abstract concept referring to society's wealth. And he was interested in the persons who owned and controlled capital -- the capitalists. But the primary focus of his lifelong analysis was upon one particular species of capital, what he referred to as "industrial capital." This is the form of wealth involved in the production process -- factories, mines, railroads. He had less to say about the aspect of capital that designated the exchange process -- what he referred to as "merchant capital" and finance capital. This selective focus reflected one of Marx's main historical opinions -- the idea that history moves forward through the development of the "productive forces," and that industrial capitalists (as well as the industrial proletariat) are the agents of this kind of economic change. Here is a brief description from *Capital* of the role of merchant's capital in his analysis.

The reason is now therefore plain why, in analysing the standard form of capital, the form under which it determines the economic organisation of modern society, we entirely left out of consideration its most popular, and, so to say, antediluvian forms, merchants' capital and money-lenders' capital. The circuit M-C-M, buying in order to sell dearer, is seen most clearly in genuine merchants' capital. But the movement takes place entirely within the sphere of circulation. Since, however, it is impossible, by circulation alone, to account for the conversion of money into capital, for the formation of surplus-value, it would appear, that merchants' capital is an impossibility, so long as equivalents are exchanged; that, therefore, it can only have its origin in the two-fold advantage gained, over both the selling and the buying producers, by the merchant who parasitically shoves himself in between them. It is in this sense that Franklin says, "war is robbery, commerce is generally cheating." If the transformation of merchants' money into capital is to be explained otherwise than by the producers being simply cheated, a long series of intermediate steps would be necessary, which, at present, when the simple circulation of commodities forms our only assumption, are entirely wanting. (*Capital I,* Chapter 5)

According to the labor theory of value, only the expenditure of living labor into the production process of a commodity can create new value; so only industrial capital includes a process that creates new wealth. Merchant capital plays no role in the production process, and it is therefore historically unimportant -- or so is Marx's view in *Capital*.

If we now look back on European history from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century, this assessment seems badly wrong as an historical observation. Merchants and their companies played key roles in the establishment of a world trading system; they actively facilitated the race for colonies by the European powers; and often they played a quasi-military role in suppressing resistance by locals in distant parts of the world. So "merchant capital" and companies established for the purpose of international trade seem to have played a key role in the creation of the modern world system.

Robert Brenner undertook to provide a detailed historical account of the role of merchants and their organizations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653 (1993). This is a departure from Brenner's important contributions to the agrarian changes associated with England's agricultural revolution in the sixteenth century (link), and it is also a much more detailed historical study than his previous works. Brenner is interested primarily in two topics: first, how did commerce evolve in the sixteenth century in England, both nationally and internationally; what were the institutions, organizations, and individuals that emerged as vehicles for pursuing individual and corporate interests by large merchants? And second, how did the emergence of large merchant fortunes and companies interact with the politics of the English state during this early modern period?

To offer a historical analysis of commerce, it is necessary to have extensive commercial data. Appropriately, Brenner's research depends heavily on good information about imports and exports throughout the period. Here is his compilation of London cloth exports 1488-1614:

So aggregation of voluminous historical economic data represents one important portion of Brenner's historical research here. The other important part, however, is at the other end of the scale -- detailed information about many of the individuals who played leadership roles in the commercial and political developments of the period.

Fundamentally the book is about the political power of the merchant class. Brenner makes the point that English commercial interests were deeply dependent upon English political and military strength in the competition for import and export markets.

English merchants found it feasible to establish the new trades in large part because of the weakening hold of Portugal and Spain over their commercial empires, as well as certain other favorable political shifts in the new areas of commercial penetration. Even so, they could successfully capitalize on the openings presented to them only because of the growing political, as well as economic, strength of English commerce and shipping in this period. (5)

The development of England's colonies was particularly important for English merchants:

During the first quarter of the seventeenth century, English traders, for the first time, sought systematically to establish commerce with the Americas. Important City merchants had opened up the new trades with Russia, Turkey, Venice, the Levant, and the East Indies that highlighted the Elizabethan expansion, and in each case, had had recourse to their favorite commercial instrument, the Crown-chartered monopoly company. (92)

This meant, in turn, that great merchants had great political interests, both in terms of military policies of the Crown and in terms of the privileges and monopolies upon which their profits depended. And much of Brenner's narrative is a careful parsing-out of the deliberate and purposive political alignments sought out by the great merchants and their companies.

The Levant Company's privileges were indispensable for its elaborate system of trade

regulation and, in turn, for the reservation of the profits of the trade to a restricted circle of merchants. As members of a regulated company, the individual Levant Company merchants traded for themselves with their own capital, but were required to adhere to rules and policies set by the corporation's general court. (66)
Political alignments were especially important during the century of conflict leading to civil war and revolution.

The political activities and alignments of London's merchant community both expressed and helped determine the character of City and national conflict in the period leading up to the outbreak of the Civil War. From November 1640, London politics and national politics became ever more inextricably intertwined, and ovesears merchants played key roles at both levels.... Civil war became inevitable when City and parliamentary conflicts became fully merged through the consolidation of alliances between the City radical movement and the opposition in Parliament, on the one hand, and the City conservative movement and the Crown, on the other. (316)

An overwhelming majority of company merchants ultimately fell into one of these two allied political categories [of royalist supporters]. But it is difficult to be sure how they were distributed between them ... because surviving evidence on the political orientation of large numbers of citizens is available only for the period beginning in July 1641. (317)
But on the other side:
The traders of the colonial-interloping leadership stood at the head of the City popular movement and played a critical role in connecting that movement to the national parliamentary opposition. The new merchants' continuing intimate ties with London's domestic trading community (from which many of them had come) put them closely in touch with a City parliamentary movement that was overwhelmingly composed of nonmerchants. Meanwhile, their activities in the colonial field gave them pivotal links with those Puritan colonizing aristocrates who constituted a key component of the national parliamentary leadership. (317)
If we wanted a single phrase to summarize Brenner's task in this work, it is the idea that much of England's politics in the early modern period were influenced or determined by the demands of the commercial sector. The great merchants wielded great political power. And so we need to have a fine-grained understanding of these companies and their networks if we are to understand the coalitions and policies of the period. Contrary to the view put forward by Marx above, merchant capital and its associated actors and organizations were indeed a potent historical factor in modern history.
A recent book by Stephen Bown, Merchant Kings: When Companies Ruled the World, 1600--1900, picks up the story of merchant capital from a different angle and with a very different level of resolution. Bown is particularly interested in demonstrating the active (and often violent) role that large merchant companies played in the development of the world trading system and the colonial relationships that emerged from the seventeenth century forward. Bown's central focus is on the individuals and the companies that created the colonial world: Jan Pieterszoon Coen and the Dutch East India Company, Pieter Stuyvesant and the Dutch West India Company, Sir Robert Clive and the English East India Company, Aleksandr Baranov and the Russian American Company, Sir George Simpson and the Hudson's Bay Company, and Cecil John Rhodes and the British South Africa Company.

Bown opens his book with the story of the Dutch efforts in the early seventeenth century to push English and Portuguese traders out of the East Indies (Indonesia). The central actor of this story is an employee of the Dutch East India Company and an experienced naval admiral, Pieter Verhoeven. The narrative of Verhoeven's assault on the Moluccas is

a good place for Bown to begin, because it brings together the themes of armed violence and commercial interest that are the core of his book. Verhoeven's instructions from the board of directors of the Dutch East India Company were explicit:

We draw your special attention to the islands in which grow the cloves and nutmeg, and we instruct you to strive after winning them for the company either by treaty or by force. (10-11)

Bown draws out a story of global competition between nations and trading companies that illustrates the brutality and self-interestedness of colonialism throughout the three-century period he traces. And the chief victims of this violence are non-European peoples from Indonesia to Alaska to South Africa. What the book doesn't provide is what is so evident in Brenner's book -- a detailed understanding of the political and organizational relationships that underlay these military and commercial adventures.

Both books have something to add to our own efforts to understand big business in the twenty-first century. On the evidence offered here, business organizations -- corporations and companies -- have their own interests and agendas, and states have a great deal of difficulty in constraining them to the public good. This is obvious in the failures of large financial institutions to safeguard the interests of the public in 2008 -- the harmful conduct of finance capital, but it was equally evident in the behavior of the Dutch East India Company or Brenner's opening example, the Company of Merchant Adventurers. The hidden hand does not assure us that markets, commerce, and private interest will bring about the common good.

Posted by Daniel Little at 10:54PM (-05:00)

Marx on a global wage

Wednesday, December 01, 2010



What is the longterm tendency in the wage for relatively unskilled labor? In the United States we've been thinking about this problem in the past three decades in the context of "outsourcing" and the flight of manufacturing jobs to low-wage countries. Moderate- and high-wage industrial jobs have left the country in large numbers. In the 1970s and 1980s apparel manufacture largely left the US for Latin America and Asia, and in the 1990s and 2000s heavy manufacturing jobs (in the auto industry in particular) were widely perceived to have fled to Asia.

What are the effects of these global shifts in manufacturing for the wage in all countries? It turns out that Karl Marx had some remarkably prescient ideas about this question in the 1860s that still seem important today. Here are some markedly current observations from Marx's *Capital* (link) on the wage in a competitive international context:

A writer of the 18th century, often quoted already, the author of the "Essay on Trade and Commerce," only betrays the innermost secret soul of English capitalism, when he declares the historic mission of England to be ***the forcing down of English wages to the***

level of the French and the Dutch. [37] With other things he says naively: "But if our poor" (technical term for labourers) "will live luxuriously ... then labour must, of course, be dear.... When it is considered what luxuries the manufacturing populace consume, such as brandy, gin, tea, sugar, foreign fruit, strong beer, printed linens, snuff, tobacco, etc." [38] He quotes the work of a Northamptonshire manufacturer, who, with eyes squinting heavenward moans: "Labour is one-third cheaper in France than in England; for their poor work hard, and fare hard, as to their food and clothing. Their chief diet is bread, fruit, herbs, roots, and dried fish; for they very seldom eat flesh; and when wheat is dear, they eat very little bread." [39] "To which may be added," our essayist goes on, "that their drink is either water or other small liquors, so that they spend very little money.... These things are very difficult to be brought about; but they are not impracticable, since they have been effected both in France and in Holland." [40] (*Capital I*, chap. 24)
And the footnote amplifies:

[40] Today, thanks to the competition on the world-market, established since then, we have advanced much further. "If China," says Mr. Stapleton, M.P., to his constituents, "should become a great manufacturing country, I do not see how the manufacturing population of Europe could sustain the contest without descending to the level of their competitors." (Times, Sept. 3, 1873, p. 8.) The wished-for goal of English capital is no longer Continental wages but Chinese.
In other words, Marx's view in 1867 was that there is an inevitable competitive pressure on British firms (high wages) to seek out manufacturing locations in other countries where labor costs are lower; and, of course, this movement brings competitive downward pressures on the domestic manufacturing wage. So the British manufacturing wage falls as low-wage European competitors (eventually Chinese competitors) are able to produce commodities at lower unit cost. This has a long-term global result: the unskilled manufacturing labor market becomes global, and the wage approaches a global equilibrium that is significantly lower than the present.

One thing is striking about this observation in 1867 is the reference to China. Mr. Stapleton's observations in 1873 were highly speculative; China was a century from becoming a great manufacturing country. But Marx's eye was focused on the long-term patterns; and he (and Mr. Stapleton) correctly noted the inherent logic of global competition for low-wage labor. The long-term result, apparently unavoidably, is that production processes that involve low-skill labor will be involved in a rapid race to the bottom, leading to an equilibrium wage across nations that is barely sufficient for subsistence.
Another major force operating on the level of the wage for unskilled labor that Marx emphasizes is the rapid introduction of technology and innovations enhancing labor productivity -- leading to a reduction in the demand for labor and putting more downward pressure on the wage. Writing after the American Civil War about English cotton manufacture, he writes:
The instrument of labour strikes down the labourer. This direct antagonism between the two comes out most strongly, whenever newly introduced machinery competes with handicrafts or manufactures, handed down from former times. But even in Modern Industry the continual improvement of machinery, and the development of the automatic system, has an analogous effect. "The object of improved machinery is to diminish manual labour, to provide for the performance of a process or the completion of a link in a manufacture by the aid of an iron instead of the human apparatus." [119] "The adaptation of power to machinery heretofore moved by hand, is almost of daily occurrence ... the minor improvements in machinery having for their object economy of power, the production of better work, the turning off more work in the same time, or in supplying the

place of a child, a female, or a man, are constant, and although sometimes apparently of no great moment, have somewhat important results." [120] "Whenever a process requires peculiar dexterity and steadiness of hand, it is withdrawn, as soon as possible, from the cunning workman, who is prone to irregularities of many kinds, and it is t)laced in charge of a peculiar mechanism, so self-regulating that a child can superintend it." [121] "On the automatic plan skilled labour gets progressively superseded." [122] "The effect of improvements in machinery, not merely in superseding the necessity for the employment of the same quantity of adult labour as before, in order to produce a given result, but in substituting one description of human labour for another, the less skilled for the more skilled, juvenile for adult, female for male, causes a fresh disturbance in the rate of wages." [123] "The effect of substituting the self-acting mule for the common mule, is to discharge the greater part of the men spinners, and to retain adolescents and children." [124] The extraordinary power of expansion of the factory system owing to accumulated practical experience, to the mechanical means at hand, and to constant technical progress, was proved to us by the giant strides of that system under the pressure of a shortened working-day. But who, in 1860, the Zenith year of the English cotton industry, would have dreamt of the galloping improvements in machinery, and the corresponding displacement of working people, called into being during the following 3 years, under the stimulus of the American Civil War? A couple of examples from the Reports of the Inspectors of Factories will suffice on this point. A Manchester manufacturer states: "We formerly had 75 carding engines, now we have 12, doing the same quantity of w***ork.... We are doing with fewer hands by 14, at a saving in wages of £10 a-week. Our estimated saving in waste is about 10% in the quantity of cotton consumed."*** "In another fine-spinning mill in Manchester, I was informed that through increased speed and the adoption of some self-acting processes, a reduction had been made, in number, of a fourth in one department, and of above half in another, and that the introduction of the combing machine in place of the second carding, had considerably reduced, the number of hands formerly employed in the carding-room." Another spinning-mill is estimated to effect a saving of labour of 10%. The Messrs. Gilmour, spinners at Manchester, state: "In our blowing-room department we consider our expense with new machinery is fully one-third less in wages and hands ... in the jack-frame and drawing-frame room, about one-third less in expense, and likewise one-third less in hands; in the spinningroom about one-third less in expenses. But this is not all; when our yarn goes to the manufacturers, it is so much better by the application of our new machinery, that they will produce a greater quantity of cloth, and cheaper than from the yarn produced by old machinery." [125] Mr. Redgrave further remarks in the same Report: "The reduction of hands against increased production is, in fact, constantly taking place, in woollen mills the reduction commenced some time since, and is continuing; a few days since, the master of a school in the neighbourhood of Rochdale said to me, that the great falling off in the girls' school is not only caused by the distress, but by the changes of machinery in the woollen mills, in consequence of which a reduction of 70 short-timers had taken place." [126]
(*Capital I*, Chapter 15)
The note is important as well:

[126] l. c., p. 109. The rapid improvement of machinery, during the crisis, allowed the English manufacturers, immediately after the termination of the American Civil War, and almost in no time, to glut the markets of the world again. Cloth,' during the last six months of 1866, was almost unsaleable. Thereupon began the consignment of goods to India and China, thus naturally making the glut more intense. At the beginning of 1867 the manufacturers resorted to their usual way out of the difficulty, viz., reducing wages 5 per cent. The workpeople resisted, and said that the only remedy was to work short time, 4 days a week; and their theory was the correct one. After holding out for some time, the

self-elected captains of industry had to make up their minds to short time, with reduced wages in some places, and in others without.

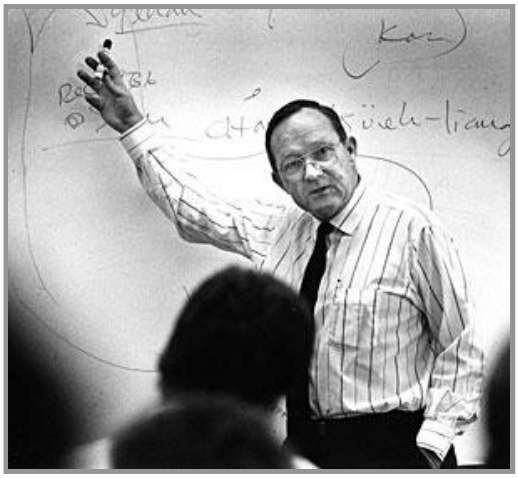
So is there any way out for the worker? Is there any scenario where ordinary working people can earn a moderate to high wage and corresponding standard of living? There is, through education and skill. The only way of maintaining a high wage for workers is on the basis of a given workforce possessing the ability to accomplish production tasks on the basis of non-generalized knowledge and skill. When labor is a commodity that is interchangeable in Karnataka, Guangdong, and Detroit, the wage will approach something like a low-level equilibrium. But when workers are able to add exceptional value to the process through their skills, talents, and knowledge, they will share in that productivity in the form of higher wages and a higher standard of living.

This observation converges with several themes already discussed in earlier postings: the attractiveness of the "high-skill" alternative to mass manufacturing that is highlighted by Chuck Sabel (link), and the current urgency that we should all feel about making sure that all young people have the opportunity to complete a tertiary degree (link).

Posted by Daniel Little at 06:00PM (-05:00)

Re-reading Chalmers Johnson

Thursday, December 02, 2010





Chalmers Johnson, one of the key contributors to Asian studies since the early 1960s, died on November 20, 2010. (Here are several notices -- link, link, link.) Johnson has been an important contributor to Asian studies since the appearance of his first book in 1962, Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945, based on his doctoral dissertation at Berkeley. The book created a long debate about the causes of the Chinese revolution -- patriotism or class? -- which shed new light on the nature of Communist mobilization.

Johnson was a brilliant thinker who was exceptionally attuned to language -- both in his own writing and in the importance of making nuanced use of Chinese and Japanese sources in studying Asian history. And he was a figure who seemed to relish controversy, from this early debate about the Revolution to his focus on American empire in the past half dozen years (Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope).

Here is a posting on the debate about

Johnson's theory of peasant nationalism and current thinking about the Chinese Revolution that I provided for ChinaBeat.

Chalmers Johnson, co-founder and president of the Japan Policy Research Institute at the University of San Francisco and long-time professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley and University of California, San Diego, died on November 20, 2010. (Here are several notices -- link, link, link.) In the past ten years or so Johnson has become widely known for his critical books about American empire (Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire (2004), The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic (2005), Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic(2008), and Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope (2010)). The bulk of his career, however, was devoted to the study of China and Japan, and this posting examines one of his most notable contributions to these areas.

His earliest contribution to China studies was his 1962 book, Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945. The core of the book was written as a Ph.D. dissertation at Berkeley, making use of archives of secret Japanese wartime materials collected by Robert Scalapino. (Johnson describes the origins of the book in "Peasant Nationalism Revisited: The Biography of a Book"; link.) The book was one of the early efforts to provide a more systematic explanation of the success of the Chinese Communist Party in mobilizing mass support during the Anti-Japanese War. The book became one of the linchpins of later debates about the Chinese Revolution. As a political scientist, Johnson was mindful of the inherent unlikelihood of a successful revolution anywhere, and this seemed particularly true in China in the 1920s and 1930s. Large-scale mobilization is inherently difficult to sustain, and local discontents rarely escalate to national scale. (Lucien Bianco made this point about China, writing in Peasants Without the Party: Grass-Roots Movements in Twentieth-Century China that "The essential difference between chronic peasant agitation and revolutionary action is that the latter is deliberately offensive in nature, whereas the former resembles the defensive reaction of a beleaguered organism. If peasant agitation was chronic ... , it was because the occasions for such conduct were endemic in rural China" (4).)

Johnson's book is based almost entirely on secret Japanese archives, and Johnson takes special care to attempt to validate these sources as legitimate indications of the nature of events in China during these war years. He believed that the fact that these documents were "secret" gave them an evidentiary status they would lack if they had been produced for the sake of propaganda or political influence by the army or other officials; but rather than representing an effort to spin events in one direction or another, they were intended as "realistic appraisal of military and political developments in China by Japanese leaders" (x). So Johnson is emphatic in arguing that these secret wartime archives provide a valid window of knowledge into both Japanese and Chinese strategies and actions.

So what structural or institutional factor was present in China that permitted mass mobilization by the Communist Party during this period? According to Johnson, it was nationalist identity and a patriotic desire to resist the Japanese invaders on the part of millions of rural Chinese people. The Communist Party was able to offer itself as the most effective force available to achieve the patriotic goals of defeating the Japanese and restoring China's peace and security. The central thesis of the book, then, and the element that generated the greatest controversy, is Johnson's view that the Communists succeeded in the crucial period because they mobilized a mass following around patriotic resistance to the Japanese invaders.

On the basis of a study of wartime resistance in China, the view advanced here is that the Communist rise to power in China should be understood as a species of nationalist movement. (ix)

It is the thesis of this study that the rise to power of the CCP and YCP [Yugoslav Communist Party] in collaboration with the peasantry of the two countries can best be understood as a species of nationalism. (19-20)

Johnson's definition of nationalism is what he labels "functionalist". What he means by this, however, is not a Mertonian "structural-functional" analysis; rather, it is closer to a behavioral-causal analysis. "This study employs a functional definition of nationalism -- in other words, one which identifies specific physical pressures that by acting upon given political environments give rise to nationalist movements" (ix). He draws largely from Karl Deutsch's Nationalism And Social Communication: An Inquiry Into The Foundations of Nationality (1953) in laying out a definition of nationalism and mass mobilization. Johnson identifies social mobilization of the masses around a national myth as the heart of modern nationalism. This is what nationalism is, according to Johnson; and the causes that brought it about in China were Japanese invasion and subsequent harsh treatment of rural people, and skillful mobilization of the countryside by Communist political officers in enhancing a sense of shared cause.

In essence, the Party is seen as the leader of a war-energized, radical nationalist movement.... The Chinese masses, the peasants, were unified and politicized as a concomitant of the drastic restructuring of Chinese life that accompanied the Japanese conquest of north and east China.... This wartime awakening became the basis for a new order in China following Japan's collapse. (ix-x)

Since patriotic nationalist mobilization is primary, then radical mobilization around peasant interests must be secondary. So Johnson is particularly concerned to refute the idea that it was economic issues and class exploitation that led to peasant support. (Mark Selden's The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China (1971) was a central advocate of this position.) Johnson expressly rejects the idea that the Communist Party's overall strategy depended on a class appeal to poor peasants during these years. One key argument to this conclusion is the markedly different fortunes of the Communist movement in China in the 1920s versus the wartime years. The Communist movement in the 1920s was plainly based on a mobilization strategy around revolution and social change, and, according to Johnson, it failed in achieving mass following. The Japanese invasion and subsequent brutality in attempting to govern the rural areas, however, coincided with a massive increase in the movement's following in the countryside; and, according to Johnson, the mobilization rhetoric of Communist leaders of that period was about patriotic self-defense rather than social upheaval.

Although the Communists were in effective control of various small enclaves in the Chinese countryside from 1927 on, their painful efforts during that period to set up rural "soviets" were incomparably less successful than their activities during the blackest period of the Sino-Japanese War. (1)

During the Anti-Japanese War period the Party abandoned the radical land program altogether and carried out a policy designed to create maximum unity for national defense. All plans for agrarian reform were abrogated during the war while a mild policy of rent reduction and general rationalization of debts was carried out. (19)

Later historians have largely taken a critical view of this central theoretical argument. Some historians -- notably Donald Gillin in a 1964 review in the *Journal of Asian Studies* (link) -- have argued compellingly that Johnson mis-estimates the importance and persistence of class strategies during the period. (Johnson had harsh words for Gillin in his retrospective article in *China Quarterly* (link).)

Probably the most consistent line of response to Johnson's peasant nationalism theory in the intervening years is that it is too comprehensive and couched at too high a level. The concept of nationalism paints too broad a brush when applied to tens of millions of

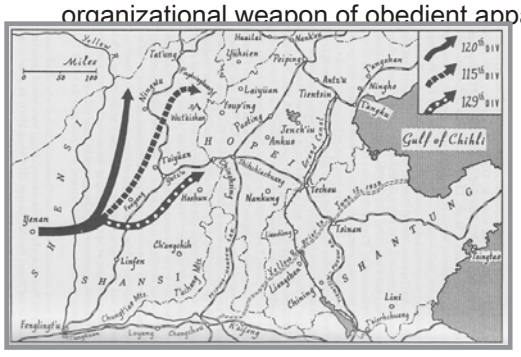
Chinese rural people in many different settings. Conditions varied across the many base areas where the CCP held power, and subsequent historians have concluded that patriotism and village self-defense played a highly variable role across China. As Odoric Wou writes, "In a recent article, Tony Saich called our attention to the fact that the Chinese Communist revolution was a series of 'local revolutions.' Unless we go deeply into the localities, carefully examining the social structure and networks, patterns of elite dominance, and local politics of these communities, it is not likely that we can obtain a clear picture of the actual process and dynamics of the Communist base building and the reasons behind the success in its revolutionary mobilization" (link).

Subsequent historians such as Chen Yung-fa (Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937-1945), Odoric Wou (Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan), Pauline Keating (Two Revolutions: Village Reconstruction and the Cooperative Movement in Northern Shaanxi, 1934-1945), and others have argued instead for a more differentiated and local approach to the success of Communist mobilization in the 1937-1949 period. Tony Saich summarizes much of this consensus in these terms:

Writing on the Chinese revolution has always attracted proponents of the "Grand Theory." This is not surprising, for the revolution itself was on a grand scale in both time and space. New research has made the field more hesitant to put forward bold ideas to encapsulate the majestic sweep of the revolution and has contented itself with compiling details and hammering away at previously held explanations. The debate between those who argued that the Communist success was primarily a result of its nationalist appeal in the anti-Japanese war and those who stressed the CCP's capacity to mobilize the peasantry through its socio-economic programmes, while stimulating, has been left behind by recent research. There is now an infinitely more complex picture of the Party's policies and its relationship to the different social forces in China than was possible previously. (link)

Joseph Esherick puts some of the current understanding of the Chinese Revolution into a series of theses (link), and several are particularly important in the context of Chalmers Johnson's argument:

1. The triumph of the CCP was the product of a series of contingent events.
2. The revolution was produced by a conjuncture of domestic and global historical processes among which the worldwide depression and Japanese imperialism were particularly important.
3. The larger structures of China's state and society did not make revolution inevitable, but they imposed significant constraints on the agents of revolution and counterrevolution.
4. The CCP was a social construct of considerable internal complexity, not an organizational weapon of obedient apparatchiks commanded by the Party Center.



So the nationalist hypothesis has not prevailed as a comprehensive explanation of Communist success at mobilizing revolution. In fact, even the project of providing a single theoretical framework for explaining this success has largely been abandoned.

What is not often recognized, however, is the fact that *Peasant Nationalism* also contains a substantial empirical historical core that is valuable whether or not we accept the overriding nationalism interpretation.

First, Johnson provides a detailed accounting of Japanese military-political strategies and

failures that could not have been conceived of without Johnson's deep and extended immersion in the Japanese secret archives. He makes sense of the very complex and confusing story of Japanese invasion and occupation of north and east China, with multiple military commands and a difference of opinion within high leadership about the best way of defeating Communist opposition.

Equally interesting and important is his lengthy narrative of Communist military and political strategies during the period. This narrative takes up almost half the book, and it is still one of the most detailed and clear expositions of this complex story. (There is also some detail on Guomindang strategies as well.) Johnson pieces together the complicated military movements of Communist armies in north and central China in a masterful way.

In short, Johnson's narrative of military and political developments of the Anti-Japanese War is an important permanent contribution.

So we might say that the theoretical framework of the book has run its course; whereas the empirical and historical findings continue to be an important source of knowledge about the period. And in an ironic way, this suits rather well Johnson's later polemics against rational choice theory and his insistence on the primacy of close, factual research in area studies. (These arguments are found in "A Disaster in the Making: Rational Choice and Asian Studies" (with E.B. Keehn) (link) and "Preconception vs. Observation, or the Contributions of Rational Choice Theory and Area Studies to Contemporary Political Science" (link).) Here is how he characterizes these issues in a 2005 interview with Hidenori Ijiri:

What we mean by areas studies, however, it seems to me, is simply empirical, inductive research about other cultures. Not research that is theoretically driven but driven by knowledge of the culture and a proficiency in the language. In that sense, it is mor einthe classical anthropological mode of trying to understand a culture that is alien to you by personally, inductively getting inside of it, reading the main classics in the field, being able to talk with felllow scholars in the area, and in some cases, doing field research in a particular topic for which your research may very well have theoretical implications. But such research was not driven by a theoretical issue at first. (link)

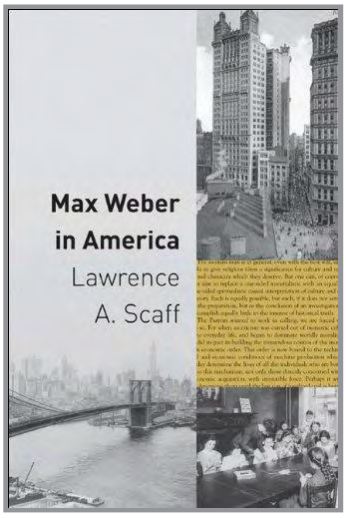
The more serious challenge to area studies -- one that I have been deeply involved in fighting against and that has affected above all my own field of political science -- is the influence of mathematical economics. The charge is that area studies are un-theoretical, that they do not partake of grand systems of theory. Moreover it is argued that the amount of time spent learning a language like Chinese or Japanese is a waste of time. According to this fad, what a good scholar needs is an education in abstract theory. If he understands theory he can study any place.... Today, political science departments have very elaborate models, often mathematical, and formal ones from which you can supposedly deduce outcomes.... A political science Ph.D. today has been increasingly defined in terms of an ability in rational choice theory, game theory, the manipulation of economic models, and the formal creation of models in which the mode of analysis is deductive rather than inductive. (link)

The central point here is that theory can only be a support for concrete historical and social research, not a substitute. But this is no less true in the study of Communist mobilization in China than in Japanese technology policies. And perhaps there is a larger point here as well: Chalmers Johnson did a great job of "area studies" in his Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945, ***in spite of*** his adherence to the single theoretical framework of nationalism.

Posted by Daniel Little at 01:30PM (-05:00)

Weber in America

Saturday, December 04, 2010



Lawrence Scaff offered a fascinating preview of his forthcoming book, Max Weber in America, at a sociology seminar in Ann Arbor this week. Scaff has written extensively on Weber in the past, and this current research is particularly intriguing and stimulating. The book offers a careful reconstruction of Weber's visit to the United States in 1904, and it then goes on to provide a brilliant interpretation of the "discovery" of Weber in the United States in the 1940s and forward.

Let's start with the obvious: it is startling for those of us who are not Weber experts to learn that Weber spent time in the United States at all. It's weirdly dissonant for me to imagine this quintessentially German sociologist, wandering the streets of Chicago and the plains of Oklahoma. What did he make of Chicago 1904? How did it influence his development as a sociological thinker?

It's even more eye-opening to learn that Weber met W. E. B. Dubois during his visit, and may have shifted some of his later thinking in fairly important ways as a result of his exposure to some of Dubois' ideas about race in America. (Dubois' The Souls of Black Folk appeared in 1903.)

Scaff also writes quite a bit about the intellectual connections between Weber and William James during this period. He explores important parallels between The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature and The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. This is significant, because the first part of *The Protestant Ethic* was written and presented for publication just before the trip to America, whereas the second part was written after the visit.

Scaff seems to have done a great job of piecing together archival materials to arrive at a new telling of the story of the trip to America with Marianne. So this addition to the biography of Weber is of great value all by itself. (Marianne Weber's biography of Max provides only limited information about the trip; Max Weber.)

But even more important is the effort that Scaff makes to get inside the developing sociological imagination of the thinker. This is what is most intriguing about the book, and what makes me most eager to read it when it appears in early winter.

Scaff makes a point that I find really intriguing about the way in which "Weber" was constructed as the founding sociologist we now summarize in courses on sociological theory. This falls generally into the topic of the sociology of knowledge: how did concrete historical and institutional processes influence the construction of "sociology" or "physics"? Scaff argues that much of our current representation of Weber derives, not from Weber directly, but from the ways in which Weber was appropriated and "re-broadcast" by American sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s, including especially Talcott Parsons. (Ironically, Scaff argues that the "Weber" who became important in German sociology in the 1960s was this American version, not a systematic re-reading and re-thinking of Weber's corpus. Weber was more or less forgotten in German intellectual circles during the Nazi period.) So this standardized version of Weber's sociology reduces the rich sociological thought of the thinker over a long career to a few standard

theses.

One of Scaff's goals, then, is to "blow up" the sociology expressed across Weber's writings and try to see how the parts might be fitted together in other ways. Can the canonical Weber be interpreted in significantly different and more nuanced ways? This is a particularly interesting and fertile question, and it contributes directly to the important project of trying to rethink the making of modern sociological imagination and frameworks.

Several members of the Ann Arbor seminar commented on the fact that there are some parallels between Weber's interpretation of the "American difference" (chiefly a higher level of civic involvement than in Germany) and the main lines of Tocqueville's observations of America in Democracy in America. Scaff shared that two things are known about this question -- first, that Weber never refers to Tocqueville anywhere in his corpus; and second, that he read *Democracy in America* in French at some point, since an edition of the book annotated in his hand is contained in his book collection in Heidelberg. (Klaus Offe comments on this parallel in Reflections on America: Tocqueville, Weber and Adorno in the United States, based on the Adorno Lecture that he presented in Frankfurt in 2003. Here is a limited Google Books view (link).)

This is all really important material for those of us who are interested in the contingent development of modern sociology. So Scaff's book is one that I'm eagerly anticipating when it appears in January.

Here is the table of contents for the book.

MAX WEBER IN AMERICA

Lawrence A. Scaff

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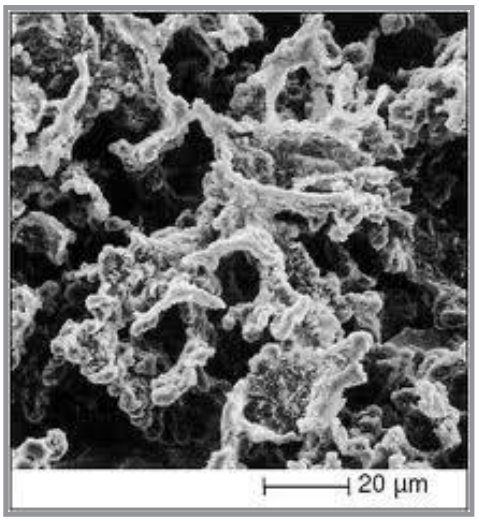
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Posted by Daniel Little at 03:47PM (-05:00)

Granularity

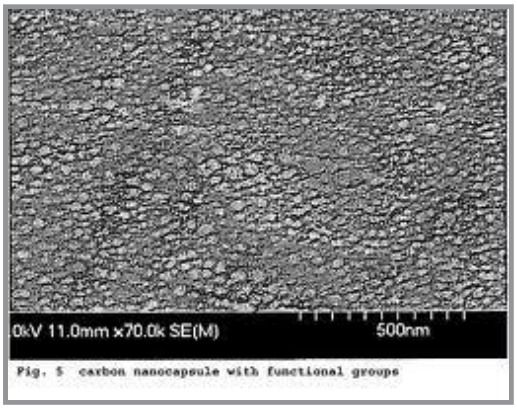
Monday, December 06, 2010





If we think back over the history of sociology and political science since 1800, one thing that is striking is the trend away from the most macro-level frameworks of thought in the direction of more situated and proximate social and political arrangements. There was a tendency among the founders -- Montesquieu, Spenser, Comte, for example -- to pose their questions at the civilizational level. The largest social constructs were identified as worthy of study -- religions, kinds of governments, cultures. By the time we get to writers like Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill in mid-nineteenth century, we have thinkers approaching modern social life with a more limited gaze. They are more interested in particular, differentiating social and political arrangements, and they are interested in the particulars of human behavior within those arrangements. And they are much more interested in the empirical details, rather than general philosophical theories of democracy or religion.

Twentieth century thinking in the social sciences has generally continued this trend. What makes social science "scientific" is rigorous attention to empirical characteristics of the social world. There is generally even less patience with large philosophical theories of society and history. A good theory isn't of much interest unless it can be closely tied to particular bodies of empirical observation. It is hard to think of a 20th-century sociologist who took up the Comtean project of comparing the course of civilizations. And there is a growing consensus that the focus of social research needs somehow to capture the behavior of situated actors within socially specific arrangements -- in other words, a refinement of focus towards the more particular arrangements.



Pig. 5 carbon nanocapsule with functional groups

A partial exception to this trend is the field of comparative politics (Lichbach and Zuckerman, eds., Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure). This is a paradigm that undertakes to discover similarities and differences in large political institutions across settings -- with the implication that there is some reason to expect that "developmental states" will have some important similarities whether in Brazil, Nigeria, or Syria. How does "electoral competition" work in the United States, Mexico, and Poland? Hw do anti-corruption regimes work in Indonesia, Singapore, and Hong Kong? Comparative politics specialists have accepted the need for careful empirical investigation, to be sure, and they are mindful of differences as well as similarities. But the field is more macro than many other areas of contemporary social science.

Another exception seems to be "world systems theory", which locates social-historical analysis at the global level. But as argued earlier (link), Wallerstein was in fact sensitive to historically specific "granularities" within the world system. Here's what I concluded there:

But Wallerstein's practice as a sociologist is far more defensible than this language would suggest. He was in fact sensitive to causal heterogeneity, contingency, and variation in the systemic relations he meant to capture -- particularity as well as universality. So he doesn't actually treat the modern world system as if it were analogous to a set of gravitational objects governed by fixed laws of nature.

So we might say that two of the large features of modern social science research paradigms are these: the conviction that a researcher needs to formulate questions that permit careful empirical observation and assessment; and the idea that the scope of research should be tailored to capture social behavior and organization at an intermediate level. We need to formulate research questions that capture enough social behavior to be interesting, while at the same time permitting careful, rigorous empirical investigation and assessment.

This is where the metaphor of granularity comes in. It suggests the idea of a deliberate choice of levels of analysis, a deliberate selection of the zone of focus we choose for the investigation. Go too fine and you lose sight of the structures that will turn out to be interesting. Go too gross and, once again, those structures disappear. Then there is the important idea of heterogeneity -- the idea that stuff is not uniform in structure all the way down (link); so it matters what level we choose to focus on.

The scanning electron microscope image above (center) is illustrative of this fact with regard to the natural world. Carbon appears uniform at a gross level (anthracite), and it is also uniform at an atomic level. But there is an intermediate level of resolution where there are structures that are very important for the physical properties of the stuff; and we won't find these structures unless we look at this intermediate level.

Something very much like this seems to be true about the social realm as well. If we ask questions about "citizens" or "consumers", we have characterized the actor in a highly abstract way, with no indication or recognition of the more specific circumstances in which the actor conducts his/her life. If we provide more institutional, organizational, and

motivational context, however -- that is, if we increase the level of resolution in our depiction of the social actor -- we are likely to find more illuminating features of behavior, and we are likely to find discriminating explanations for differences in behavior.

Perhaps an illustration is found in the kinds of social action that Erving Goffman investigates -- the stylized behaviors and interactions of restaurant workers, for example (link). Go too deeply into the personal stories of the persons involved and you lose what is distinctive about the social context of the restaurant. Aggregate facts about service workers everywhere, and once again, the distinctive behaviors disappear. And, if we abstract too severely from the specifics of the social setting of the restaurant worker -- that is, if we zoom our microscope out to the level of pure rational choice theory -- then we will overlook the differentiating social circumstances that influence behavior in real hotels and restaurants.

We might say that all of this is pointing towards a certain kind of sociological research that focuses on the proximate social settings within which people act and interact. This takes us towards what I call methodological localism (link). But it also conforms to the sociological frameworks of the new institutionalism (link, link) and even with the emerging emphasis on explanations based on social causal mechanisms (link).

In seeking out the concept of granularity here, I've actually invoked several different contrasts: abstract to concrete, apriori to empirical, and macroscopic to microscopic. If we put all these together, we might say that a "granular" approach to a social phenomenon is one that achieves a degree of specificity in conceptual definition, a robust degree of empirical detail, and an intermediate analytical and representational perspective that permits discovery of the mid-sized structures that influence the behavior of the whole.

(This issue has come up previously under the topic of "macro, meso, micro" (link).)
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:30PM (-05:00)

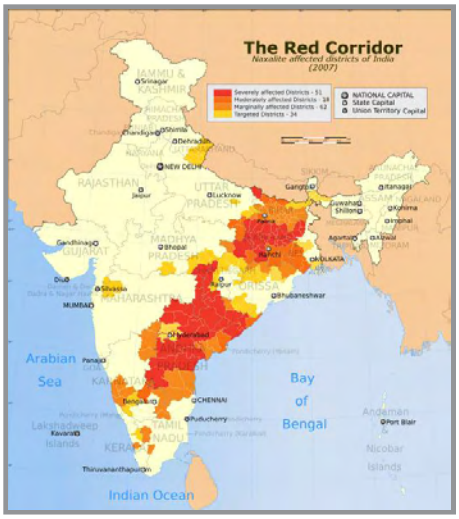
India's Naxalites

Sunday, December 12, 2010



India is the world's largest democracy. It also is home to one of the more persistent and deadly Maoist insurgencies in the world, the Naxalite movement in eastern India (Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI/M)). The Naxalites were a splinter group that separated from India's Communist Party in the 1960s, and their hallmarks have been a commitment to violent revolution and a determined effort at mobilizing India's most disadvantaged rural people. Here is a review article about the movement from *The Economist* in 2006 and a review in the *New York Times* in 2009, and here are several updates from *The Economist* (link, link, link). (*The Hindu* provides frequent coverage of the Naxalite insurgency; for example, here.)

The 2006 *Economist* article was occasioned by a deadly attack against a police camp by Naxal guerillas in Chhattisgarh State. The attack signalled the fact that this movement



continued to possess organization, followers, and deadly intent. This map (reproduced from the Wikipedia article on the Naxalites) indicates the regions where the Naxalites currently have organizational presence; it is a large swath of rural India. Estimates of the number of active fighters range from 14,000 to 20,000, with several times these numbers of local supporters and militias.

Naxalite attacks have continued since 2006. Here is a chronology of attacks since 2006 compiled by NDTV (link). Particularly widely noted in the world press was an April 2010 attack against Central Reserve Police Force, killing 75 police personnel, also in the forests of Chhattisgarh (link). And the insurgency appears to be growing; in 2009 just under 1000 people were killed in Naxalite attacks -- almost triple the 2008 figures.





The leadership of CPI(M) has focused its mobilization efforts almost exclusively at the poorest of the poor and the most disadvantaged people within the caste system; and they have had particular success among tribal people living in India's forests. But extending back to the 1960s the movement also has had some appeal to educated elites in cities and universities -- people on the left who believe that India has made no serious efforts to ameliorate poverty or caste.

What is surprising about this 40-year history is the fact that a violent revolutionary movement has managed to survive and conduct operations within the interstices of a democratic India. Atul Kohli provided some context for this question in his 1991 Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability. Here is how Kohli summarized his assessment twenty years ago:

India is still, of course, a functioning democracy, but increasingly it is not well governed. The evidence of eroding political order is everywhere. Personal rule has replaced party rule at all levels -- national, state, and district. Below the rulers, the entrenched civil and police service have been politicized. Various social groups have pressed new and ever more diverse political demands in demonstrations that often have led to violence. The omnipresent but feeble state, in turn, has vacillated; its responses have varied over a wide range: indifference, sporadic concessions, and repression. Such vacillation has fueled further opposition. The ineffectiveness of repression, moreover, has highlighted the breakdown of the civil machinery intended to enforce the law and maintain order. Inorder to protect themselves, citizens in some parts of the country have begun organizing private armies. The growing political violence has periodically brought the

armed forces into India's political arena, whereas the armed forces were considered apolitical. (3)
The main national parties in India, Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have contested for control of the national government. But India's states have consistently demonstrated a wider range of parties and politics. West Bengal has been governed for decades by the Communist Party Marxist (CPM). Kerala has been governed through left-coalitions including the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). Both these parties have renounced revolutionary violence and pursue a poverty-oriented set of economic and political policies. Other states are governed by right and center-right coalitions, with a rhetoric that is much more focused on Hindu nationalism and pro-market ideology.

Kohli's study of governability focuses on West Bengal, Gujarat, and Bihar, and his goal is to identify some of the political and social processes that have led to a national and regional governability crisis. Kohli finds substantial inter-state variability in governability across the three states he studies.

The situation of total breakdown of order in Bihar, for example, has resulted from corrosion of the authority vested in the social structure and absence of cohesion in political structures. Increasing power struggles in the society and a highly factionalized elite have provided a combustible political mixture that ignites periodically, and in Bihar even the forces of repression are ineffective. Political violence in Gujarat has had a more purposive quality than in Bihar. It results not primarily from a breakdown of social order but from the calculated mobilization strategies employed by competing elites.

In contrast to the situations of these two states, the case of West Bengal demonstrates how the presence of a cohesive party can bring stability even in a highly mobilized political environment: Strong leaders and disciplined ruling parties -- forces that can impart a degree of cohesion to state structures -- can help moderate the impact of corrosion of authority in the social structure. The emergence of incoherence in both state and social structures, however, is a sure recipe for a breakdown of order. (15)
So how is it possible for a violent rural insurgency to survive and grow in a modern democracy? There seem to be several primary factors. One is the familiar fact that insurgents establish their bases of operations in remote, lightly-policed regions. The Naxalite movement has managed to secure its "base areas" in forests and other poorly developed rural areas.

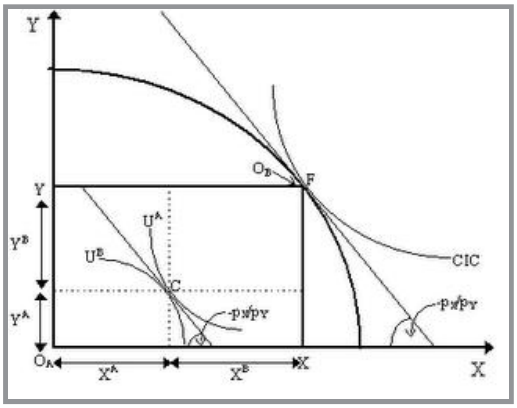
(The Hindu) A second factor is the fact that Indian rural society is generally only lightly policed by professional police forces. India is a "weak state" when it comes to local presence in the countryside. The local presence of police is very thin on the ground, and easily overrun by trained guerillas. Third, the Naxalites direct their mobilization efforts to the most disadvantaged and disaffected segments of rural Indian society; so their anti-state message is relatively well received. And, finally, it would appear that the ideology of class and class antagonism has its own resonance in Indian political culture, far beyond the violent extremism of the Naxalite party. This movement was a splinter from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), which now governs West Bengal on the basis of its electoral successes (at least up until the present). But CPM rhetoric sounds many of the same themes of anti-capitalism and anti-globalization that the Naxalites advocate. So it is possible for elements of the left to become frustrated with the electoral program of CPM and develop new resonance with the radical program of the Naxalites.

The consensus view seems to be that the national and state governments in India have

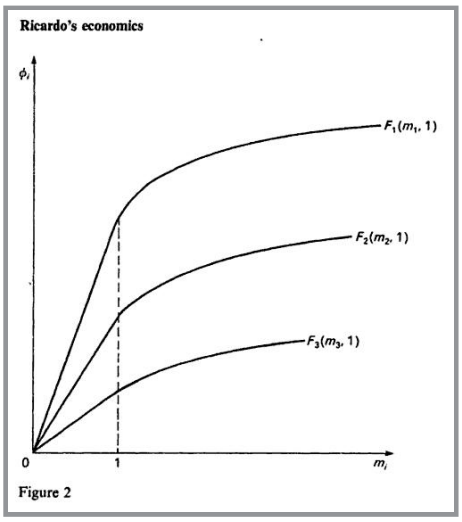
failed in efforts to suppress the Naxalite insurgency to date out of a failure of will, a degree of conflict of political interests in several states, and a failure to arrive at a winning strategy of police and military force combined with significantly more successful delivery of rural development successes. Villages that lack roads, clean water, education, and health clinics are certainly more likely to find a radical program of change more appealing, and India's states have had little success in improving the quality of life for India's poorest rural people.
Posted by Daniel Little at 11:45AM (-05:00)

Diagrams and economic thought

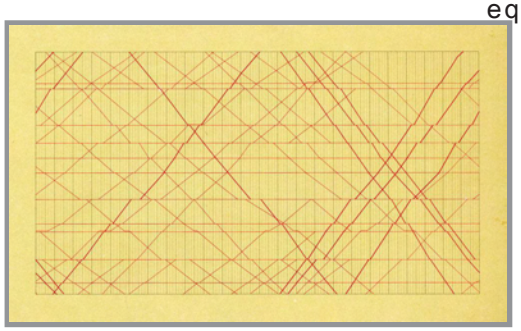
Monday, December 13, 2010



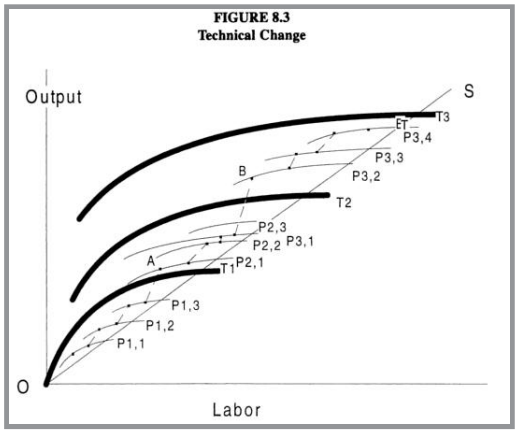
source: The Paretian System (link)
The most vivid part of any undergraduate student's study of economics is probably the diagrams. Economists since Walras, Pareto, and Marshall have found it useful to express their theories and hypotheses making use of two-axis diagrams, allowing for very economical formulation of fundamental relationships. Supply-demand curves, production functions, and a graph of diminishing marginal product all provide a way of making geometrical sense of a given economic principle or hypothesis. They allow us to visualize the relationships that are postulated among a set of factors.



Mark Blaug has made a long and fruitful career out of his remarkable ability of placing economic thought into its context (Economic Theory in Retrospect (1962), The Methodology of Economics: Or, How Economists Explain (1992)). Now he has collaborated with Peter Lloyd to produce Famous Figures and Diagrams in Economics (2010), and the book is a marvelous contribution.



The book is organized into several large sections: Demand and supply curve analysis; Welfare economics; Special markets; General equilibrium analysis; Open economies; Macroeconomic analysis; and Growth and income distribution. Experts have been recruited to write short, technical but accessible essays on some 58 topics, including discussion of about 150 diagrams. The figures that the book considers pretty much reproduce the history of modern economic thought. And, indeed, some figures have been repeatedly rediscovered; Blaug attributes the "Marshallian cross" to Cournot (1838), Rau (1841), Dupuit (1844), Mangodt (1863), and Jenkin (1870). Almost



all the examples are drawn from the history of orthodox neo-classical economics; rare exceptions are Joan Robinson's "graph of discrimination" and August Losch's "market areas". The main insights of classical economics are equally amenable to presentation through diagrams, so it is interesting that the classical economists (including Marx) were not particularly inclined to use them. Here is a diagram not included in the book, representing Michio Morishima's effort to express some of Ricardo's central economic intuitions:

source: Michio Morishima, Ricardo's Economics: A General Equilibrium Theory of Distribution and Growth, p. 38

It is worth thinking a bit about what a diagram is, from a cognitive point of view. To start, it is not a data graph; a diagram does not generally provide a summary of actual economic variables over time, such as unemployment. But generally an economic diagram is not simply a graph of a given mathematical function either, plotting the value of a function over part of the domain of the independent variable. We need more than a graphing calculator to create a useful economic diagram.

Rather, an economic diagram is a stylized representation of the behavior and interaction of (often) several variables in a range of interest. Take the most fundamental diagram of neoclassical economics, the supply-demand diagram. We are asked to consider "supply" and "demand" over a range of "price". One curve represents the quantity of the good that will be produced at a low price through high price; the other curve represents the quantity of the good that will be purchased at the range of prices. The intersection of the curves is the point of interest; it is the equilibrium at which quantity demanded equals quantity supplied. The shape of the curve is significant; a straight line represents the view that supply and demand are linear with respect to price, whereas a curved line represents a non-linear relation between quantity and price. (Each increment in price stimulates a smaller change in quantity.)

Here are some of the uses of diagrams in economics that Blaug and Lloyd mention in their introduction:

Figures and diagrams have been used in economic theory in several ways. They have been used as a device to discover economic results; theorems or properties of models; or comparative static propositions and dynamic propositions. They have been used to prove some results. And they have been used as an expository device. (5)

They go on to quote Marshall:

It happens with a few unimportant exceptions all the results which have been obtained by the application of mathematical methods to pure economic theory can be obtained independently by the method of diagrams. Diagrams represent simultaneously to the eye the chief forces which are at work, laid out, as it were, in a map; and thereby suggest results to which attention has not been directed by the use of methods of mathematical analysis. (5)

We might imagine that economic diagrams are purely mathematical constructs, and we might suppose that we have little choice in the way that a diagram is constructed. But Edward Tufte has quite a bit to say on this subject in a series of books beginning with The Visual Display of Quantitative Information. Essentially Tufte's message is that quantitative ideas can be conveyed in better and worse ways, and that much of the communication we do about quantities is misleading. Conveying a quantitative relationship through a diagram can be done more or less insightfully; it is up to the

economist to find a concise way of representing the relationships he/she is interested in exploring.

source: EJ Marey's train schedule, Paris to Lyons, in Edward Tufte, The Visual Display of Quantitative Information

Blaug and Lloyd take some note of the "presentation aesthetics" of economic diagrams when they discuss modern methods of presentation:

In many areas of economic theory, the way in which economists understand economic concepts and propositions is through figures and diagrams. What teacher of economic theory has not seen the dawn of understanding come over students when, failing to understand an exposition of some complex model in algebra or calculus, they are presented with a simple illustration? ...

One can comprehend relationships among a number of variables (as in the box diagrams) or the effects of shifting curves or multiple equilibria more readily than in the corresponding algebra. This advantage has been increased by modern technologies. Textbooks today use multi-coloured diagrams to great effect and the delivery of diagrams in classroom from computer-based programs allow overlays and other graphical techniques that aid the exposition of complex ideas. (8-9)

One of my favorite economic diagrams is the one introduced by Mark Elvin to represent his theory of a high-level equilibrium trap in agricultural development in The Pattern of the Chinese Past.

This diagram represents several different kinds of historical change in one compact figure: gradual technical progress along a production curve, shift of production curves through technical innovation, and the maximum production possibility curve that lies above each of these. The axes represent "total output" and "rural population." The concave shape of each curve has a very specific economic and demographic meaning: as population grows within a given mix of techniques, output grows more slowly; so average output per capita approaches the subsistence line OS. The HLET is graphically and laconically indicated on the upper right quadrant of the graph; there is no further room for technical improvement, and population has increased to the point where there is no surplus to fund radical technological innovation. (Elvin's theory of the high-level equilibrium trap is discussed in my Microfoundations, Methods, and Causation; link.)

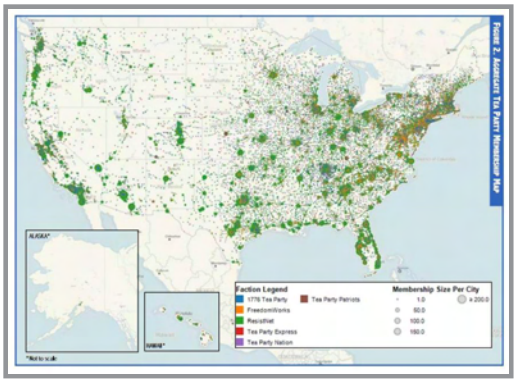
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:17PM (-05:00)

Hate as a social demographic

Saturday, December 18, 2010



Every democracy I can think of has a meaningful (though usually small) proportion of citizens who fall on the extreme right by any standard: racist, White supremacist, hateful, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, nativist, nationalist, or violently anti-government individuals and groups. In the United States we have many, many organizations that are basically racist and potentially violent hate groups. They provide a basis for cultivating, recruiting and mobilizing like-minded followers, and they are sometimes co-opted by opportunistic politicians for their own narrow purposes. The Southern Poverty Law Center (link) and the Anti-Defamation League (link) do a great job and a needed service in tracking many of these organizations. (For example, SPL



monitors 26 hate groups in the state of Michigan; link.) The umbrella term for these organizations and individuals is "hate groups" -- individuals and organizations who organize their views of the social world around intolerance of other groups and a motivation to harm or subordinate those other people.

A recent report by the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (link) provides a detailed snapshot of how some of these racist groups have shown up in the Tea Party movement (link). The NAACP made a very careful statement about racist statements and provocations that had occurred at Tea Party protests in 2009 and 2010 (link), including the egregious incident that occurred in Washington in which Representatives Emanuel Cleaver, John Lewis, and Barney Frank were showered with vitriol. And this temperate and careful statement was derided by Tea Party leaders. The IREHR study goes a long way to document the concerns raised in the NAACP statement.

The maps of Tea Party membership are genuinely interesting. Here is an aggregate map including six factions of Tea Party organizations around the country (p. 14):

Here is a summary finding from the IREHR report:

Tea Party organizations have given platforms to anti-Semites, racists, and bigots. Further, hard-core white nationalists have been attracted to these protests, looking for potential recruits and hoping to push these (white) protestors towards a more self-conscious and ideological white supremacy. One temperature gauge of these events is the fact that longtime national socialist David Duke is hoping to find money and support enough in the Tea Party ranks to launch yet another electoral campaign in the 2012 Republican primaries. (7)

What I find really worth considering is the question of the fact of the very existence of these pockets of virulent racists and anti-semites in our society. I'm not thinking here of garden-variety racial stereotyping and prejudice, which is surely much more widespread, but of a kind of racism that extends to overt hostility and sometimes violence against the other group. It is hard to estimate the percentage of our society that falls in this category, though there are some public opinion surveys that help us make a crude estimate (Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo, Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations, Revised Edition and Schuman and Bobo, "Survey-Based Experiments on White Racial Attitudes towards Residential Integration" (link); Pew Research Center, "Race, Ethnicity & Campaign '08" (link)).

But here is the important question: why do a certain number of people in modern societies have these attitudes in the first place? Is it just a sort of basic fact about our population that a certain percentage of us fall in this mindset? Are there specific features of our informal system of acculturation that creates this minority of hate-disposed people? Are these the result of a sort of sub-culture of militia encampments, prison gangs, and biker groups who are somehow able to promulgate their hatred to new recruits? Is it ignorance, disaffection, and economic uncertainty that brings out these qualities in otherwise decent people? In short -- is it the organizations that produce the hate in some people, or is it the hateful individuals who create the organizations?

Michael Mann's The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing is one kind of empirical study of a related question, the occurrence of murderous ethnic cleansing. Here are a few of his hypotheses.

Murderous cleansing is modern, because it is the dark side of democracy. Let me make clear at the outset that I do not claim that democracies routinely commit murderous cleansing. Very few have done so. Nor do I reject democracy as an ideal – I endorse that ideal.Yet democracy has always carried with it the possibility that the majority might tyrannize minorities, and this possibility carries more ominous consequences in certain types of multiethnic environments. (2)

Ethnic hostility rises where ethnicity trumps class as the main form of social stratification, in the process capturing and channeling class-like sentiments toward ethnonationalism.

The danger zone of murderous cleansing is reached when (a) movements claiming to represent two fairly old ethnic groups both lay claim to their own state over all or part of the same territory and (b) this claim seems to them to have substantial legitimacy and some plausible chance of being implemented. (2-9)
These are political-structural theories of the conditions that stimulate outbreaks of hate-based mobilization and murderous ethnic cleansing. But actually, Mann never addresses my question head-on: what accounts for the existence of a certain small percentage of haters in a given society. Mann is interested rather in the behavior and the occurrence of mass mobilization for ethnic violence in certain times and places -- the involvement of thousands of citizens in acts of violence and murder against their fellow citizens. And he doesn't believe that the actors are exceptional; rather, the circumstances elicit the terrible violence from people much like all of us. Here is how he categorizes the perpetrators:

There are three main levels of perpetrator: (a) radical elites running party-states; (b) bands of militants forming violent paramilitaries; and (c) core constituencies providing mass though not majority popular support. (9)
And he doesn't think there is anything distinctive about the third group:

Finally, ordinary people are brought by normal social structures into committing murderous ethnic cleansing, and their motives are much more mundane. To understand ethnic cleansing, we need a sociology of power more than a special psychology of perpetrators as disturbed or psychotic people – though some may be. (9)
This "ordinary people as killers" theory (c) doesn't really seem to do justice to the problem at issue here. And the political opportunists who play the hate card aren't too hard to understand (a). It's really the people Mann includes under (b) that are of concern to me -- the true believers, the extremist White supremacists or virulent anti-Semites who become the local activists and paramilitaries that I'd like to understand better. And this population seems to be defined by the attitudes, motives, and ideologies that they bring with them, rather than the inter-group dynamics and political opportunism that Mann focuses on. So, once again, where does this mentality or psychology of activist hatred come from in our society (or in other contemporary societies)?

The easy answers are ready to hand. We might postulate a strand of political culture and thought in American society that reproduces hate and racism in some of the young people who are exposed to it. (Hate on the Internet falls in this category.) Or we might postulate a recessive "racist personality" type that is a portion of the human psyche (along the lines of the theory of the authoritarian personality). Or we might postulate that lack of opportunity and an enduring situation of defeated expectations pushes some

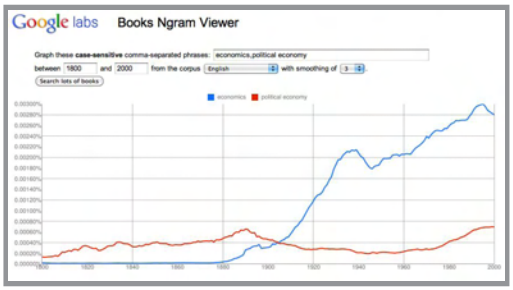
young people into hate (skinheads in Britain or Germany).
But I don't find any of the theories very convincing by itself. So we seem to have an important theoretical issue here that is unresolved: where does "hate" come from?

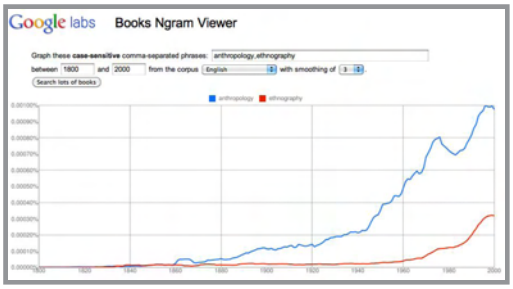
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:28PM (-05:00)

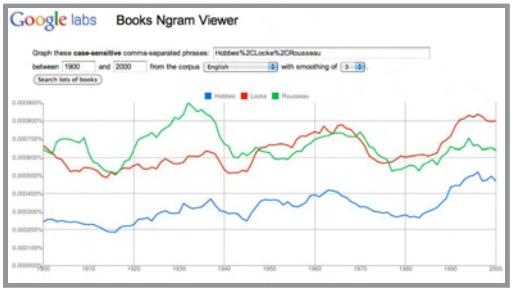
A new tool for intellectual history

Monday, December 20, 2010





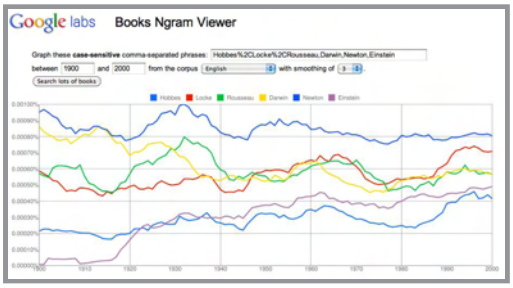




Google's NGram Viewer is a really amazing new tool for researchers in literature and the humanities (link, link, link, link). What is perhaps not quite so evident is the power it may have for people interested in the evolution of the social science disciplines.

Basically the concept is a simple one. The Google Book project has now scanned and OCR'd millions of books published over the past several centuries. With the announcement of NGram Viewer, Google has shared a vast indexed database of words and phrases included in this full corpus. And its Viewer tool allows users to provide specific phrases and see a graph of the frequency of that phrase over time (1800-2000 by default). It is important to bear in mind that the project measures the frequency of the phrase, not the absolute number of occurrences; so as the volume of words increases decade by decade, a phrase with a .005% share has an increasing number of occurrences.

Now consider this: to what extent is it possible to track themes, concepts, and theories in the social sciences by making use of the tool and a well-chosen list of terms or phrases? For example, the classical economists (Smith, Ricardo, Marx) referred to their science as "political economy," whereas the economists defining the marginalist revolution (Jevons, Walras, Menger) tended to refer to their work as "economics." Classical economists operated under a fairly distinctive set of assumptions, including the labor theory of value, that differed sharply from the assumptions associated with the marginalist revolution and the creation of neoclassical economics. So is it possible that we can we track the decline of classical economics and



the rise of neoclassical economics by tracking "political economy" and "economics"? Here is what that graph looks like:

The "political economy" line shows a gradually rising trend from 1800 to 1890, and then declines through about 1950. Only in the 1980s does the term become more popular again -- perhaps corresponding to a resurgence of interest in the classical foundations of economic thought (Smith, Ricardo, Marx, Sraffa). The term "economics" has virtually no use prior to 1880; it then begins to increase in frequency, passing "political economy" in frequency in 1910, and climbing rapidly into the 1980s. The frequency of "economics" appears to be roughly eight times the frequency of "political economy" by 1980.

So how about other areas of the social sciences? We might take a look at the development of anthropology using this approach; for example, how have the terms "anthropology" and "ethnography" changed in frequency in books during the past two centuries? Here's the graph:

Through 1860 both terms are very infrequent. After 1860, however, "anthropology" takes off, and "ethnography" continues at a low level through 1960, roughly at the time when Geertz and other path-breaking anthropologists began redefining the field in the direction of "local knowledge" or ethnography. From that point on both terms increase in frequency (with a large dip for "anthropology in the 1970s), with anthropology remaining a 3:1 favorite.

So now let's try out a somewhat more general question: how did political theory develop during the twentieth century? We might probe this question by picking out a few important political theorists and examine the pattern of frequency that they demonstrate throughout the century; perhaps this will tell us something about them individually, as well as something interesting about the waxing and waning of interest in political theory more generally during the period. Suppose we look at Hobbes, Rousseau, and Locke as the central founders of modern political theory. Here's what that graph looks like:

This is interesting in many ways. First, individually: Rousseau comes on very strongly in the 1930s, whereas Locke is fairly flat during the period. Second, comparatively: Locke and Rousseau are consistently more frequent in the book literature than Hobbes -- in spite of our tendency to think of Hobbes as the ultimate founder of modern political theory. ("Life in the state of nature is nasty, brutish, solitary, and short.") And finally, there is a striking periodicity in the three graphs. There are long waves of rise and fall of frequency over the century, and even more surprisingly, these waves are fairly closely correlated. This implies one of two things: either political theory as a field waxed and waned through the century, with the frequency of references to the founders following along; or else this correlation is a symptom of a large artifact of the method itself. We could test this latter idea by examining a larger set of authorities, including other areas of intellectual work. So let's look at a final graph, including the three political theorists as well as Darwin, Newton, and Einstein:

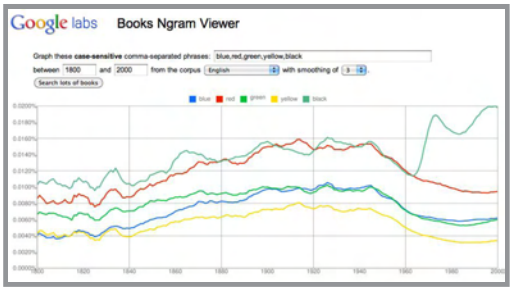
Naturally enough, Einstein starts slowly in the early twentieth century, but then begins to rise in frequency after 1918 or so. He passes Hobbes for good in 1938 or so. Darwin,

surprisingly enough, shows a falling trend through the century, recovering a bit after 1975. But we were looking for evidence of artifact, and this graph seems to provide it; to the eye, there is a similar periodicity in the frequency of all these authors throughout the century, with a low point in 1945 (the end of World War II), and for all but Newton, another peak around 1965 followed by a trough around 1980. So it isn't "political theory" that is oscillating in the ocean of words included in the universe of books, but intellectuals, philosophers, and scientists generally. And this suggests that there's something going on that may have more to do with the measurements than the reality; more investigation is needed.

In short, it seems promising to think that there are some very interesting patterns to be teased out using this tool, and they are patterns that never could have been identified without the databases that Google has created. A new form of our ability to probe and represent the growth of knowledge is made possible.
Posted by Daniel Little at 05:59PM (-05:00)

Ngram anomalies

Wednesday, December 22, 2010



Now that I've played with the Google Ngrams tool a little, I continue to think it's a powerful window into a lot of interesting questions. But I also see that there are patterns that emerge that are plainly spurious, and surely do not correspond to real changes in language, culture, or collective interest over time. It is easy to find examples of search terms that very plainly indicate that there is some kind of "instrument error", an observation that emerges because of an artifact of the method rather than a real pattern in the underlying behavior.

Fortunately it is possible to probe these areas of anomaly with the goal of figuring out what they mean. So let's see what happens when we pick out a set of common words that are not freighted with a lot of culturally specific significance. This will let us see more clearly how the instrument itself works.

Consider the color words red, green, yellow, blue, black. Let's graph the frequency of these terms in American English from 1800 to 2000. Before looking at the Ngram graph, let's consider what we would expect ex ante. Color words occur in books to designate -- color. Color terms are common words, so we might expect that they would remain fairly constant in frequency over time. So here is the null hypothesis about the frequency of common color terms: without a change in culture about color, we should expect the color words would remain roughly constant in frequency (flat curve). And the usage patterns for each term should be independent from the others. So we should expect a degree of independent random fluctuations in the frequencies of each color word, where "blue" bumps up in frequency in a given year and "red" bumps down.

(Why should we expect a degree of independence in the random fluctuations between "red" and "blue"? Because, fundamentally, there is no common mechanism that would link their behavior.)

Here are some ways in which the actual behavior of color terms might deviate from the null hypothesis. Some colors may be more in style than others at a time -- there may be a cultural preference for red over blue, so the frequency of red may be greater than the frequency of blue. And the frequencies may change as cultural preferences change; so blue may become more frequent than red in a later generation. More generally, literary taste may change by becoming more descriptive overtime -- with more frequent use of color terms -- or more formal, with less use of color terms. So it would be possible to explain persistent differences in frequency of color terms; shifting frequencies across different color words; and even a longterm rise or decline in the whole family of color words.

So ex ante, for this group of common color words we would expect a graph of flat lines for the five terms, with uncorrelated fluctuations in each line.

Now let's look at the actual graph of these word frequencies (link).

Here we can see behavior that flatly contradicts these reasonable ex ante expectations. First, there are stretches of time in which the color words covary extremely closely, to the extent that the graphs look identical in shape. This is true, for example, in the neighborhood of 1820. This is impossible to explain as anything else than an artifact of some sort. It is impossible to believe that the frequencies of several color words would fluctuate up and down with this degree of synchrony.

Here is another aspect of the graph that is also suggestive of artifact: the long wave of rise and fall in the frequency of all the color words between 1810 and 1920. It is not impossible that "color" became more important in literary language and then declined; but that seems improbable. So this long wave coordinated behavior of the color words seems to be more likely the effect of a database anomaly than a manifestation of a real trend.

Is there any reliable information in this graph? Yes. There is one feature of this graph that appears to have real significance, and that is the change in the behavior of "black" after 1960. Prior to that year the term behaves pretty much like all the other color words. After that year it takes off on a very different trajectory. And this abrupt and accelerating increase in the frequency of "black" seems to have everything to do with a real social and cultural change in the 1960s and forward -- the abrupt increase in those decades in the salience of race. There is a similar divergence between the behavior of "black" and all the other color words in 1860; the frequency of the word increases for a few years following the American civil war.

More tantalizingly, it may be significant that "blue" moves up from "yellow" to "green" in frequency over time. This is one element of the graph where the terms are not correlated with each other; instead, "blue" changes its position relative to other color frequencies.

This example shows that we need to be careful about the inferences we draw from the patterns that appear from Ngram searches. We need to always ask: "Does this pattern really correspond to a fact about underlying collective linguistic behavior, or is it the result of an artifact?" More fundamentally, we need to understand the sources of the artifacts we are able to detect -- spurious correlations, inexplicable long-wave changes in frequency, and others still to be discovered. And, finally, we should seek out techniques that can be applied to the results that serve to filter out the artifacts and focus on the real variations the data contain. We need some signal processing here to separate signal from noise. The Ngram tool is powerful, but we need to use it critically and intelligently.

Posted by Daniel Little at 08:32AM (-05:00)

Thinking cities darkly

Tuesday, December 28, 2010



Image: frame from *West of the Tracks*

Cities capture much of what we mean by "modern," and have done so since Walter Benjamin's writings on Paris (link). But unlike the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, much of our imagining of cities since the early twentieth century has been dark and foreboding. A recent volume edited by Gyan Prakash, Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City, offers a collection of recent work in cultural studies that attempts to decode some of this dark imagery.

Several things are particularly interesting about the volume. Most basically, it represents an interesting conjunction of humanities perspectives and sociology. The articles are individually very good. And as a group they pose a series of important questions. How does a film set in Los Angeles or Shanghai serve to depict the city? Is there sociological content in a film that can contribute to a better sociology of the city? But also -- what can we say about the cultural currents that produce a particular vision of the city? Are there post-modern sensibilities and fears that lead filmmakers to turn the ambience dark?

The volume treats cities and their depictions in many parts of the world -- China, South Africa, Mexico, India, Europe, and the United States. What is unusual about the volume is the fact that it is not a collection in "film studies" or in "urban studies", but rather a series of contributions taking seriously representation and the represented. Moreover, there is no effort to force the perspectives taken into a common theory of "noir representation"; there are common themes that emerge, but each contributor brings forward a singular perspective, informed by the specifics of the region and genre that he/she studies. It is a project on the nexus between imaginative representation and existing social realities.

Prakash's excellent introduction begins with these observations:

As the world becomes increasingly urban, dire predictions of an impending crisis have reached a feverish pitch. Alarming statistics on the huge and unsustainable gap between the rates of urbanization and economic growth in the global South is seen to spell disaster. The unprecedented agglomeration of the poor produces the specter of an unremittingly bleak "planet of slums." Monstrous megacities do not promise the pleasures of urbanity but the misery and strife of the Hobbesian jungle. The medieval maxim that the city air makes you free appears quaint in view of the visions of an approaching urban anarchy. Urbanists write about fortified "privatopias" erected by the privileged tow all themselves off from the imagined resentment and violence of the multitude. Instead of freedom, the unprecedented urbanization of poverty seems to promise only division and conflict. The image of the modern city as a distinct and bounded entity lies shattered as market-led globalization and media saturation dissolve boundaries between town and countryside, center and periphery. From the ruins of the old ideal of the city as a space of

urban citizens there emerges, sphinx-like, a "Generic City" of urban consumers.

As important as it is to assess the substance of these readings of contemporary trends in urbanization, it is equally necessary to examine their dark form as a mode of urban representation. This form is not new. Since the turn of the twentieth century, dystopic images have figured prominently in literary, cinematic, and sociological representations of the modern city. In these portrayals, the city often appears as dark, insurgent (or forced into total obedience), dysfunctional (or forced into machine-like functioning), engulfed by ecological and social crises, seduced by capitalist consumption, paralyzed by crime, wars, class, gender, and racial conflicts, and subjected to excessive technological and technocratic control What characterizes such representations is not just their bleak mood but also their mode of interpretation, which ratchets up a critical reading of specific historical conditions to diagnose crisis and catastrophe. (1)
All the essays are interesting and insightful, but I was particularly interested in the Asian contributions -- India, China, and Japan.

First is Li Zhang's treatment of some current treatments of the dark side of Chinese cities (Shanghai and Shenyang) in "Postsocialist Urban Dystopia?". She treats the Sixth Generation and New Documentaries movements in contemporary Chinese filmmaking, focusing on two recent works (Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks*, about the decline of a rust-belt city in the Northeast, and Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*, about the lives of poor and disaffected people in Shanghai).

Both works serve as powerful examples of "noir urbanism" in a Chinese context. *West of the Tracks* is a nine-hour documentary capturing the lives and declining prospects of working class people in Shenyang following the reform of Chinese industry in the 1990s. (C. K. Lee describes this process in Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt.) Here is a link to *West of the Tracks*, well worth viewing. And *Suzhou River* captures some of the gritty, squalid aspects of life in contemporary Shanghai, but also dwells on the moral shift that China is undergoing, towards a consumerist, wealth-oriented corrupt society. Here is a clip from *Suzhou River*:

Zhang combines her own anthropological fieldwork in Chinese cities with her reading of these films, giving her essay a multiple sense of authority. Here is a brief description of *West of the Tracks* that illustrates the intersection of criticism and fieldwork:

While capturing the "raw and the real" experiences of workers, *West of the Tracks* offers a subtle yet powerful critique of the postsocialist state and its neoliberal turn. What is so striking in the story told here is the lack of government help and the indifference of society toward workers' dilemmas. (137)
She refers to the bleak setting of the break room at the factory:

In their daily conversations in the break room, smelting workers frequently talk about how the managers and cadres of the factories steal public money to line their own pockets by taking kickbacks at the expense of the enterprise. The management and bosses rarely appear in the film. The longest presence is a banquet gathering at a local restaurant where factory managers and cadres talked about the imminent total privatization. They are well dressed in leather and wool coats with fur collars. (137)
So there are several key themes here: First, there is a critical perspective on the rising inequalities and dispossession of ordinary people that have followed from China's growth

policies; this is the documentary aspect of the films she discusses, and plainly reflects the filmmakers' interest in capturing an important and disturbing contemporary social reality in China. And second, there is a critical vision of the moral dislocations that China has undergone, from Maoist egalitarianism to capitalist and consumerist pursuit of wealth. Zhang captures this element of contemporary China in her discussion of both films, but especially in *Suzhou River*. There is squalor and poverty, to be sure, but more pervasive is the sense of moral ungroundedness.

Moneymaking, market exchange, and pleasure-seeking are the dominant forces of everyday life. For example, the power of money erodes Mardar's blossoming love for Mudan and eventually destroys her, the symbol of innocent, unpolluted love. Human greediness corrupts souls and drives violent acts such as kidnaping and murder. (139)
Zhang's summary is explicit:

During market liberalization, Chinese society has irrevocably changed into a mass consumer society in which money increasingly controls people's lives and determines their lifestyles. (139)
Another fine contribution to the volume shifts focus to India's cities. Ranjani Mazumdar's "Friction, Collision, and the Grotesque: The Dystopic Fragments of Bombay Cinema" focuses on the mental urban landscape -- the way in which an Indian city is perceived by its residents, and the ways in which the residents are impaired by the city. Mazumdar discusses three "urban fringe" films, *Dombivli Fast*, *Being Cyrus*, and *No Smoking*. Here is a clip from *Dombivli Fast*:

Dombivli Fast is quite different from the films discussed by Zhang. It is reflective of the current social realities of Mumbai -- meaningless work, endless commuting on super-crowded trains. But it is more personal and introspective than the Chinese works, in that it focuses on one man and his family; it attempts to reveal his inner anxieties and thoughts. The dystopia here is not crushing poverty -- Madhav Apte and his family live a middle-class life in Mumbai. Here the dystopia is the pressure, stress, and callous injustice of society that drives Madhav to the breaking point.

Madhav Apte does not go back home for three days after he explodes. Armed with a cricket bat, Apte acquires a menacing persona as he moves through a city that is almost fated to collapse because of corruption, inequality, and indifference. In his journey across Bombay's deadly streets, Madhav becomes an active figure whose rage makes him see the city with a heightened perception. (159)
(There are clips from *Being Cyrus* and *No Smoking* on Youtube as well. This is one of the fascinating realities of reading the volume: it is possible for us non-specialists to view segments from most of the films that are discussed.)

David Ambaras takes up Tokyo in its cultural representations in "Topographies of Distress: Tokyo, c. 1930." He too highlights the discrepancy between official, ideological expressions of the city, and the underlying grinding reality that modern cities often represent.

Yet despite this ebullience, to many contemporaries, urban modernity signaled the destruction of Japanese social values by Western materialism and individualistic hedonism, of which the modern girl served as the prime example. (188)
Ambaras doesn't work through cinema, but rather what he calls "slum discourse" and

graphic pictorial representations of urban life. He highlights the popular and journalistic literature of the 1870s through the early 1900s as a barometer of the anxieties Tokyo residents experienced about their changing city. Stories of disease, child murder, beggars, and abject poverty permeate this literature.

These various forms of representation, ... had combined to produce in the Iwanosaka case a set of images that both shocked the sensibilities of readers and investigators and were necessary to their understanding of themselves as part of a modern metropolitan social formation. They reinforced the sense, common to many interpretations of the modern condition, that modernity was best apprehended through contrasts -- between, for example, utopian promise and dystopian reality -- or in terms of dark mysteries concealed beneath the surface of social relationships, and that the modern (urban) subject was compelled to navigate anxiously between these two positions, ever unsure as to which was the "truth" or in which direction he/she was being led. (210-11)

It is worth sorting out the different perspectives on social knowledge represented in this volume. First, there is the question of knowledge of the object, the contemporary city. Does cinema shed light on the current social realities of Shanghai or Mumbai? Can cinema contribute to urban sociology? Second is the question of the mentality of a place and time; the way that contemporary Mumbai-ers or Shanghai-ers think of themselves and their society. Can cinema accurately capture some strands of social consciousness and anxiety that are real threads in the social landscape? Is cinema a legitimate form of ethnography? And third is the mentality and intentions of the creative class itself -- the filmmakers. Can the critic discover threads in the filmmaker's work that sheds important light on the preoccupations of this slice of contemporary society?

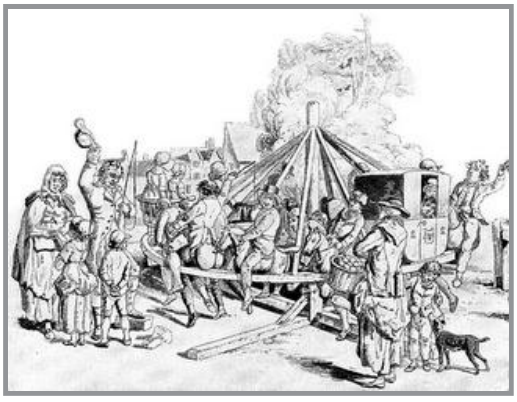
Finally, we can ask the question of perspectivalism: how many Shanghai's are there? Zhang refers to the Maoist preference for social realism or socialist romanticism; there are the entertainment-oriented Shanghai thrillers; there is the global Shanghai as an exotic backdrop to drama; and there is the noir representation of the social problems of the city. Can we say that one depiction is more veridical than the other? Or perhaps, can we say that several of these perspectives are compatible with the truth of Shanghai; and that optimism and pessimism are equally distorting frames for social perception?

(I note that several of the essays refer to Mike Davis's Planet of Slums; this is worth reading.)

Posted by Daniel Little at 12:55PM (-05:00)

The standard of living across time and space

Thursday, December 30, 2010



A very basic question for historians is how to measure and compare the standard of living experienced by people in different historical settings. Is it possible to arrive at credible estimates of the standard of living in the Roman Empire, medieval Burgundy, nineteenth-century Britain, and twentieth-century Illinois? Can we say with any confidence that Romans had a higher (or lower) standard of living than a twelfth-century Burgundian?





Figure 5.5. Labourers' Real Wage, 1727-1913
England and Japan

One part of the problem is conceptual. What do we mean by the standard of living? Is there a specific set of characteristics that are constitutive of the standard of living -- say, nutrition, income, access to health remedies and education, quality of housing, personal security? And how should we take account of the unequal distribution of these characteristics across a given population? Should we be content with an estimate of an average level of nutrition -- even though this may reflect a misleading impression of the circumstances of the poorest segment of society? Should we hope to be able to arrive at an estimate of the standard of living of certain typical social actors -- landless workers, skilled laborers, merchants?

The second major problem we must confront is the availability and quality of historical data about wages, prices, and consumption. The series of wages and prices that are available in different countries are, of course, incomplete. And, more importantly, the commodities that satisfy basic nutritional needs are different in different countries and regions. So it is necessary to make assumptions about the nutritional equivalents in different cultures before we can begin to arrive at estimates of relative standard of living.

Different approaches to these problems have been offered in the past fifty years. One logical approach is to consider a list of "necessities of life" and to estimate the degree to which these necessities are available to people of various stations in various times and places. Nutrition, housing, and clothing are close to the core for much of the history of humanity, and for much of that time, these goods have been available largely through the market at a price. So a standard approach has been to define a wage basket; measure the prices of the goods in the basket; and measure the typical earnings of people in historical settings of interest. This allows us to calculate the subsistence rate -- the percentage of the population whose income is more than sufficient to purchase the items in the wage basket. What this leaves out is "self production" (for peasant farmers, for example) and state provision. Another logical approach is to look at the human results -- the overall health status of people at various times and places. This can be estimated by contemporary data -- height, longevity, and age information collected by the military, for example -- or by analysis of skeletal evidence centuries later. (Amartya Sen's The Standard of Livingreviews many of the complexities of defining the standard of living and offers his own rationale in terms of capabilities and functionings.)

An important step forward is now possible in our ability to estimate and compare historical living standards, thanks to the research by an international group of scholars in Living Standards in the Past: New Perspectives on Well-Being in Asia and Europe, edited by Robert Allen, Tommy Bengtsson and Martin Dribe. The introduction to the volume by Allen, Bengtsson, and Dribe does a great job of providing an overview of the issues. All the essays are first-rate, and particularly noteworthy are contributions by Kenneth Pomeranz, Li Bozhong, and Robert Allen. (Here is a link to the table of contents of the

volume, which gives an idea of the breadth and rigor of the research.)

This group has concentrated their efforts around the current controversy about European and Asian growth patterns in the early modern period. This has several parts: first, careful comparison to determine whether there was a significant difference in the standard of living between Europe and Asia (as held by Smith, Malthus, and Marx); and second, to attempt to determine the timing and causes of differences as they emerged. The editors describe the group's purposes in the introduction in these terms:

How did the standard of living in Europe and Asia compare in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? (Kindle loc 230)

The main concern of this book is to assess when the gap between the East and the West emerged and to not only take economic perspectives into consideration but social and demographic ones as well. (Kindle loc 159)

The researchers bring three methodologies to bear on these questions: economic analysis of prices and wages to estimate the real wage; demographic analysis of biometric features such as height, longevity, and fertility to estimate relative standard of living; and historical population analysis to observe the severity of adaptation (mortality, fertility, migration) created in a population by shortterm economic stress, including especially food prices. Here the reasoning is that a population that is close to the edge of subsistence in normal times may be expected to have higher mortality, lower fertility, and greater out-migration than a population with a more comfortable standard of living. So demographic change can be used as an indirect measurement of a population's standard of living. Using these three reasonably independent instruments of observation, it is reasonable to expect that we will gain a fairly accurate idea of the standard of living in a region and how it compares to other regions. The last approach is probably the most innovative:

There were demographic responses ... to high food prices. In the worst case, high prices caused death for those unable to buy enough to eat. In less extreme situations, people resorted to demographic strategies in response to high food prices. These included postponed marriages, migration, and delayed births. Studies of the correlation of death, migration, marriage, and childbearing with food prices, therefore, provide a new approach to the measurement of the standard of living. When aggregate data show that high food prices raised mortality or reduced fertility, one can conclude that the bulk of the population had a low standard of living. (Kindle loc 288)

Cameron Campbell and James Lee make use of this approach in their contribution, "Living standards in Liaoing, 1749-1909: Evidence from demographic outcomes," to assess the standard of living of the bulk of the population in Liaoning in northeast China. They find that the mortality and fertility responses to changes in rice prices essentially disappeared in the north and south of Liaoning in 1780-1850 -- which leads them to infer that the standard of living and nutrition had risen over the past century. (James Lee and others return to this kind of reasoning in Prudence and Pressure: Reproduction and Human Agency in Europe and Asia, 1700-1900, by Noriko Tsuya, Wang Feng, George Alter, and James Lee.)

Robert Allen attempts to establish something like an empirical baseline for the real wage in different parts of Europe and Asia in his contribution, "Real wages in Europe and Asia: A first look at the long-term patterns". He compiles a large dataset of wage data for a number of European cities, and he makes careful inferences about comparable data for India, Japan, and China.

Wages reveal the standard of living if they are compared to the price of consumer goods. This is the interpretation that matters in assessing the prosperity of Asia vis-a-vis Europe. Provided low Asian wages were matched by low consumer goods prices, the standard of living of workers could have been the same at both ends of Eurasia even though Asian manufacturers had a competitive advantage in the textile industry. (Introduction to "Real Wages")

Allen notes that it is necessary to make a number of adjustments in order to estimate the cost of a wage basket in Asia, because of large differences in diet. Allen stipulates 143 kgs/year of rice for the Asian basket versus 208 kgs/year of bread in the European basket. And he converts prices and wages into silver to permit comparison of prices across Europe and Asia. Here is one of Allen's summary graphs comparing laborers' real wages in Japan (farm), Kyoto, England (farm), Oxford, and London.

The graph indicates a significant premium for laborers' wages in London, whereas Japanese and English farm wages are fairly similar throughout most of the period. And it indicates a "take-off" for London laborers' wage beginning in the mid-nineteenth century -- not paralleled by a similar take-off in Kyoto.

Here are Allen's conclusions:

The wage comparisons undertaken in this paper support several important conclusions about living standards in pre-industrial Europe and Asia.

First, wages expressed in grams of silver were lower in China and India than in Europe. The views of the eighteenth century observers cited by Parthasarathi are confirmed. This is important since it was the proximate cause of Asia's competitive advantage in textiles and luxury manufactures and was, thus, the basis for Asian-European trade in the early modern period. Why these differentials persisted for hundreds of years is an important question in international and monetary economics that must be addressed to explain the dynamics of the world economy in this period.

Second, low Asian silver wages were matched by low Asian prices with the result that living standards in Asia were similar to those in many parts of Europe. Farm workers in Europe and urban workers in central and southern Europe did not enjoy higher living standards than their counterparts in Asia.

Third, some parts of Europe did generate higher real wages than we find in Asia. When real wages were at their peak following the Black Death, most Europeans had a higher standard of living. But this was a transitory condition for most of the continent. High wages persisted only in the commercial centres of the northwest – London and the Low Countries generally. During the eighteenth century, the provincial towns of England were drawn into the same high wage orbit, but agriculture was left behind. This dynamic, urban economy was the engine of growth in early modern Europe, and Asia appears to have had no counterpart. It is possible, of course, that a more extensive Asian database would reveal a parallel: the absence of information on urban Chinese wages is particularly troubling in this regard. However, neither the Japanese cities nor the capital of the Moghul Empire had particularly high wages. The evidence at hand suggests that Asia lacked Europe's engine of growth. (Conclusion of "Real Wages")

Contributions by Kenneth Pomeranz and Li Bozhong take up the issue of the supposed backwardness and stagnation of the Chinese rural economy at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the

Modern World Economy Pomeranz argued that England and the Yangzi Delta region had roughly comparable levels of productivity and similar levels of standard of living for poor people (laborers and peasants). In his contribution to this volume he pushes this argument forward with more empirical analysis of the standard of living in China. He attempts to handle the "commensurability" problem mentioned above by converting subsistence food commodities to calorie equivalents. He finds that Chinese data for seventeenth century laborers indicate a daily diet of 2,800 calories for adults in the eighteenth century (Kindle loc 532).

Overall, then, the food component of the standard of living seems generally comparable in eighteenth-century China and Europe, and in the most advanced regions of both. (Kindle loc 626)
So Pomeranz's research here broadly confirms the view he advanced in *The Great Divergence*, that the standards of living in comparable regions of Europe and China were roughly the same; and he also confirms a significant decline in the standard of living for the bulk of the Chinese population in the nineteenth century.

Li Bozhong takes up the stagnation issue from a different point of view, a careful consideration of farm labor productivity in the Lower Yangzi region. This extends his important work in Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850. And his central finding is an important one as refutation of the standard involution interpretation of China's economic history; he finds that agricultural productivity rose from 1620 to 1850.

The central theme of this chapter is that labour productivity on farms did improve in Jiangnan between 1620 and 1850. The region of Jiangnan, located in east China and consisting of eight late Imperial Chinese prefectures in the Yangzi Delta, has been the most economically and culturally advanced area in China for centuries. ... In some sense, this region is the best 'window' through which we can clearly see economic changes in China before the arrival of the modern west. (Kindle loc 1038)
The issue of productivity is key to an assessment of the standard of living, because flat or declining productivity in a region with a rising population implies a falling standard of living -- the general "theorem" of Malthus. So Pomeranz's finding would be difficult to support if we were forced to conclude that agricultural productivity was constant or falling. But Li's careful and data-rich analysis indicates, to the contrary, that there was substantial gain in productivity from the Ming to the mid-Qing.

The 'trinity pattern' is the optimal pattern in the Jiangnan peasant economy because under this pattern higher yields per mu can be achieved with lower inputs. As I point out above, in the early seventeenth century, a farm ran, on average, 15 mu of cultivated land with a multi-cropping index of 140%, the second crop being wheat. The yield per mu was 1.7 shi for rice and 1 shi for wheat. If all the 15 mu of land were planted in rice, this farm would harvest 26 shi of rice and 6 shi of wheat, together equivalent to 30 shi of rice. In contrast, in the mid-nineteenth century, the average farm size was 9 mu with a multi-cropping index of 170&. Per mu yield was 2.5 shi of rice and 1 shi of wheat. Farm output was 23 shi of rice and 6 shi of wheat, totalling 27 she of rice, 10% below the early seventeenth-century figures. However, if we calculate labor productivity according to the number of workers, output per worker would be 15 shi of rice in the early seventeenth century and 27 shi of rice in the mid-nineteenth century respectively. That is, the figure for the late Ming period is only 55% of the mid-Qing figure. (Kindle loc 1160)
So labor productivity had risen significantly from 1650 to 1850. Li's conclusion is clear:

Since labour productivity and the standard of living are inseparably linked, the rise in farm

labour productivity in Jiangnan implies an increase in the peasants' standard of living. ... There is little doubt, therefore, that real incomes of peasants did improve considerably in Jiangnan at this time. Second, the quality of the peasants' diet also improvied in Jiangnan during the period. Fang Xing suggested that ordinary Jiangnan peasants ate more fish, meat, and tofu, drank more tea and wine, and consumed more sugar than ever before. ... The improved standard of living can also be seen in the increase in consumption, not only of 'ordinary goods' like cotton cloth, but also of 'luxury goods' such as silk, wine, tobacco, and opium. (Kindle loc 1221)

What is most valuable about this project is the empirical grip it provides on these important questions: What have been the dynamics of the standard of living across Eurasia from the middle ages to the twentieth century? And, eventually, what economic and demographic forces account for the inflection points and persistent differences in different regions that are documented? And, as all the contributors agree, one of the key discoveries is the fact of variation at every level, from regions of England to regions of Europe to the ends of Eurasia.

The contributions of this book show the highly complex and diverse pattern of the standard of living in the pre-industrial period. The general picture emerging from these studies is not one of a great divergence between East and West during this period, but instead one of considerable similarities. These similarities not only pertain to economic aspects of standard of living but also to demography and the sensitivity to economic fluctuations. In addition to these similarities, there were also pronounced differences within the East and within the West -- differences that in many cases were larger than the differences between Europe and Asia. This clearly highlights the importance of analysing several dimensions of the standard of living, as well as the danger of neglecting regional, social, and household specific differences when assessing the level of well-being in the past. (Kindle loc 455)

Posted by Daniel Little at 02:07PM (-05:00)

CPM in West Bengal

Saturday, January 01, 2011



One thing that is interesting about Indian politics is the fact that states have a great deal of autonomy, and there are parties based in various states that are distinct from both Congress and BJP. One of those parties is the Communist Party of India, which has evolved into a pro-poor, anti-capitalist electoral party that has renounced violent revolution, following a split in CPI in the 1960s. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM or CPI(M)) emerged in the 1960s as a serious electoral party, and it has governed directly or through left coalitions in West Bengal and Kerala since the late 1970s. CPM gains between 5% and 6% of the national vote, and currently there are 46 CPM MPs in Parliament (out of 790). (The Wikipedia entry on CPI(M) provides a detailed timeline of the party's role in India since the 1960s. Here is a link to the *People's Daily*, one of CPM's key publications.)

Here is a table of seats won in elections between 1952 and 1987 in West Bengal:

Table 10.1. *Seats won by major political parties in West Bengal assembly elections, 1952–87*

Party[a]	1952	1957	1962	1967	1969	1971	1972	1977[b]	1982	1987[c]
Congress	150	152	157	127	55	105	216	20	49	40
CPM	28	46	50	43	80	113	14	177	174	187
CPI	—	—	—	16	30	13	35	2	7	11
Forward Bloc	14	8	13	13	21	3	0	25	28	26

[a]The other significant parties that have come and gone and are not listed here include the Bangla Congress, the Praja Socialist Party, and the Revolutionary Socialist Party. The latter continues to be significant; it won 20, 19, and 18 seats in the 1977, 1982, and 1987 assembly elections, respectively.
[b]The newly formed Janata party won 29 seats in 1977, only to vanish completely in the 1982 elections.
[c]Data from *India Today*, April 15, 1987.
Source: Computed from the reports of the Election Commission.

(source: Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*, p. 274)
Many progressive Bengalis looked at the party as a pro-poor, progressive force in West Bengal during the 1980s. But substantial and rising criticism has developed in the past five years. So where is CPM today?

First, consider the positive view. Distinguished American political scientist Atul Kohli treated West Bengal in detail in his The State and Poverty in India (1989), and he credits CPM for much of the improvement of the status of the poor over a 20-year period in West Bengal.

It is argued that the capacity of the CPM to initiate a systematic attack on rural poverty

stems from its political and class characteristics. The type of leadership, ideology, and organization the CPM regime brings to bear on the operation of political power enables it to perform two essential tasks: first, penetration of the countryside without being captured byt he landed classes; and second, controlled mobilization and incorporation of the lower classes to buttress state power as a tool of social reform. ... To gain an understanding of the CPM regime in West Bengal, one must begin by analyzing the nature of its leadership, ideology, and organization. The important thing to note about the leadership is that is neither concentrated in the hands of an individual nor, as one might expect, in the party alone. While the party wields great influence, leadership is shared by the three "wings" of the CPM, namely, the party organization proper, the Kisan Sabha (the peasant wing) and the parliamentary wing. (96-97)

Kohli gives an overview of CPM in West Bengal in his 1991 Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability:

The Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM), has repeatedly been elected to office in West Bengal since 1977. The party is communist in name only and is essentially social-democratic in its ideology, social program, and policies. The party's disciplined, effective organization has minimized the debilitating elite factionalism and the related elite-led mobilization and countermobilization so common in some other states. The CPM has also consolidated a coalition of the middle and lower strata by implementing some modest redistributive programs. That systematic incorporation of the poor has reduced the attractiveness of populism and its emphasis on deinstitutionalization. And finally, the CPM has adopted a nonthreatening approach toward property-owning groups, whose roles in production and economic growth remain essential for the long-term welfare of the state. (267)

Here is Kohli's summary assessment in 1991:

After having been one of India's most chaotic states in the late 1960s, West Bengal has emerged in the 1980s as one of India's better-governed states. Surely there are lessons in this turnaround for any study of India's growing crisis of governability. For purposes of this concluding discussion, these lessons can be broadly divided into prescriptive and analytical.

The prescriptive lessons are limited. What has worked in West Bengal may not work in other states in India -- and is even less likely to provide an all-India model. The emergence of the CPM as a disciplined ruling party in West Bengal is a product of an unusual sociopolitical configuration -- its long regional traditions of elite radicalism and centralized organization, the weakness of caste as a principle for political organization, and the historical weakness of the Congress party....

In spite of the limited utility of the West Bengal case for generating any direct prescriptions, the analytical implications ... are very important. The West Bengal case highlights the significance of a well-organized reformist party for generating political order. The roots of the political chaos between 1967 and 1977, though complex, were mainly two related political conditions: the fragmentation of the state itself, and virulent elite-led mobilization.

The emergence of the CPM as a ruling party tamed many of the conflicts within West Bengal. As a well-organized party with a clear electoral majority, the CPM was able to create a cohesive government and fill the existing power vacuum. Organizational discipline also enabled the CPM to limit elite factionalism and the debilitating elite-initiated political conflicts that often follow. Thus, organizational cohesion at the heart of

the state was crucial for taming political chaos.

The CPM's reformist orientation has enabled it to pursue some redistributive programs without fundamentally alienating property-owning productive groups. The CPM's performance in West Bengal has by no means been spectacular; it has left quite a few problems unresolved, and it has created some new problems. At the same time, however, it is undeniable that a reform-oriented, disciplined party has generated moderately effective government in West Bengal. (295-96)

So Kohli's assessment of CPM is quite favorable, at least through the early 1990s. Land reform and policies favorable to landless workers had a significant impact on poverty in West Bengal. Now move forward to the early 2000's up to the present. Indian journalism suggests a high degree of discontent with CPM today. There are three large areas of criticism: cronyism and corruption; the use of political violence to silence opponents; and an economic development strategy that is too friendly to international business. And, for the first time in decades, the party is losing electoral support in West Bengal. Here is a fairly representative current critique of CPM in West Bengal (link). Here are a few key criticisms by Pratap Bhanu Mehta:

The governance failures of West Bengal, on virtually every indicator that matters -- roads, health, education, nutrition, poverty, infant mortality -- have recently been well documented in searing report by my colleague Bibek Debroy and his co-author Laveesh Bhandari. Even the much touted success in growth in agricultural productivity and decline in rural poverty has been tapering off for years. There is no question that West Bengal is ripe for a paradigm shift in its development model.

There is also no question that the local CPM has become a huge obstacle to the progress of the state. No matter how much Bengali intellectuals, out of a sense of misplaced nationalism, sanitise the issue, the CPM’s implication in violence, intimidation and coercion is extensive. It is now deeply implicated in the political economy of petty corruption in the state. It has virtually destroyed intellectual life in main institutions of the state.

One particular point of controversy has to do with the attempt to establish Special Economic Zones in West Bengal (link). Here is a searing criticism of CPM's use of political violence against peasants from *Mainstream* in an effort to push forward with its plans to create a Special Economic Zone in Nandigram, involving largescale land confiscations:

The irony is that even though the CPI-M has become pro-capitalist, it has little respect for democratic norms or rule of law. So, even before the State Government machinery, centred in Kolkata, actually made any formal requests to peasants for taking over of their lands, a local party bigwig and a Member of Parliament from adjoining Haldia (it is a port town and is apparently booming) deemed fit to send out a circular stating that lands of villagers in quite a few villages will be taken over for the purpose of creating an SEZ. That created a furore among the villagers and a resistance started; they vowed that they will not part with their land which they have tilled for generations. The State Police tried to break the peaceful resistance of the villagers on March 14, and the deaths of innocent peasants led to a plethora of protests from the Opposition political parties and groups and also from independent intellectuals of Kolkata and beyond. Even Gopal Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi’s grandson and the present Governor of West Bengal, found the killings to be a horrific incident and himself tried to visit the place where the deaths happened but was stopped mid-way by the CPI-M cadres.

The criticism is two-fold: that CPM's current economic policies are too favorable to

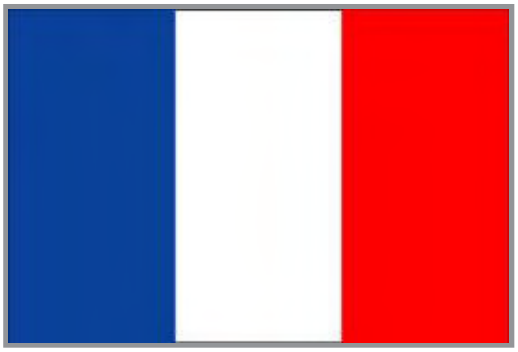
international businesses; and that the government has been reckless in its use of force against peasants and critics.

Here is a rebuttal to these criticisms from *LeftVoice*. The document is interesting because it provides a defense of CPM's current policies and actions (link).

The primary political and developmental strategy of the Left Front had two inter-related components – land reform and decentralisation of political power from the state bureaucracy to institutions of local government (i.e. to panchayats and municipalities in rural and urban areas respectively). Right from the start, it was the contention of the Left Front, that refoming the way land was owned in the rural areas, where the bulk of the poor lived, was crucial to tackling the problems of poverty and under-development in the state. In this article we shall see what kind of property relations existed in the state before the Left Front came to power in 1977, how these relations created conditions of massive rural poverty, how the Left Front attempted to undertake land reforms to alter these property relations, how it realised that decentralisation of political power to local government institutions was the best way to undertake such reforms and how this whole strategy reduced rural poverty and also politically empowered the poor in the state to a degree not seen in other states of India.
So the hard question today is this: has CPM maintained the political commitments and integrity it evidently possessed in the 1970s and 1980s, so that it remains a positive force for social reform in West Bengal? Or has it devolved into "party politics", leading to behaviors that have more to do with personal gain and party electoral success than social progress?

France as Theodore Zeldin saw it

Wednesday, January 05, 2011



Histories of France have been written from many points of view. Emmanuel Todd's The Making of Modern France: Ideology, Politics and Culture (1988), Eugen Weber's Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914 (1976), and Robert Darnton's Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France (1968) have all brought a distinctive perspective to their interpretations of France. Each provides an approach that minimizes the goals of traditional narrative and instead focuses on the problematics of identity and culture.

Theodore Zeldin's writings on France are equally original and provocative (A History of French Passions 1848-1945: Volume I: Ambition, Love, and Politics, France, 1848-1945: Politics and Anger). Like these other scholars, he is not an historian who focuses on a

chronicle of events. Instead, he wants to capture some threads of emotion, personality, and ordinary social life that begin to add up to something "French". Here is how he frames the project in the preface to the first volume, *Ambition and Love* (the second volume is titled *Politics and Anger*):

France 1848-1945 may be read in the same way as one would a series of novels, each of which tells the story of a family or a community from a different point of view. Each chapter and each volume may be read independently. Each has its own surprises, for I aim to show that France was not what it seemed to be; each has its own constellation of heroes or anti-heroes, because I do not see France as dominated by one man, one class or one set of principles. Taken as a whole, however, these portrayals of the many faces of the French are designed to make it possible to judge anew, and less partially, the idiosyncracies, the poses and the torments of a nation that has always irritated its neighbours, even when it has won their admiration and sometimes indeed their affection. (vii)

Since I believe that behaviour is muddled and obscure, and cannot be presented truthfully as simply a search for some ideal, like glory, justice or liberty, and since I do not presume to be able to prove anything when it comes to discussing human motivation, I have not written a general national narrative, held together by a more or less plausible string of causes. Instead, I have made the individual my starting-point, and have tried to show him beset by a multitude of pressures, internal as well as external. I have grouped his struggles around six passions: ambition, love, anger, price, taste, and anxiety. (vii)

My method is to hold up a multitude of mirrors around the French, so that they may be seen simultaneously from different angles; and my other volumes pursue these themes into other recesses of their personalities. To adapt to the kaleidoscopic vision I offer, the reader must, of course, be willing to put aside temporarily the expectations that he has of history, in the same way as he must put aside his traditional expectations when looking at the paintings of the Impressionists or the Cubists. I hope the experience will modify his attitude to the French, and to the past, but also that it will tell him something he did not know about himself. (viii)

So it is the ordinary individual rather than the iconic powerful leader; and it is the emotional setting rather than the deliberative process, that most interest Zeldin. But Zeldin also thinks that this study leads to the discovery of important commonalities across the French -- "the common beliefs, attitudes and values of Frenchmen, which often cut across ideological and class lines" (2). So there is an historical point to writing about "the French" which will lead to different findings than "the British" or "the Germans." Careful study and interpretation permits the historian to tease out a "style" or "persona" that distinguishes various national groups.

Zeldin clarifies this goal in these words:

I do not mean by this that I am seeking to define the immutable French soul, mind, or character. But this is something many people talked about and I have tried to investigate why they came to believe that there was such a thing. (3)

This goal runs squarely up against the historiography of difference that Emmanuel Todd advocates in considering the French; Todd's view is that France was constituted through a very specific and intentional process of identity shaping (post), and that there was great diversity of thought and institution across the territory that became France. But the two perspectives are not flatly contradictory; instead, Zeldin's approach can be understood as a kind of historical ethnography, while Todd's approach emphasizes processes and

structures of nation formation.

Is this goal of discovering characteristic ways of thinking and feeling for a national population a credible one? I think it is, once we take a material and institutional view of the formation of personality. The human being is socially constructed; this means that his/her psychology and mental and emotional frameworks are inflected by specific institutions and experiences. And it is entirely believable that there might be enduring differences in the traditions and institutions through which English school boys and girls and French children absorb formative ideas about -- family, morality, anger, comportment, and nation.

How does Zeldin turn this historiographic goal into a workable program of research? One key strategy that he pursues is to identify a handful of central categories of actors in French society -- doctors, notaries, the rich, bankers, industrialists, bureaucrats, peasants, workers -- and to trace out the specifics of how these categories functioned in France. How were doctors educated? How were they compensated? How did they compete for clients? What level of prestige did they enjoy? Zeldin believes that each of these social categories represents a distinctive matrix of characteristics, relative to the analogous social groups in other countries. So by taking the measure of these great social groups, Zeldin believes that he is also able to delineate some of the distinctive elements of French attitudes and social relations.

And what about the most numerous group -- the peasants? How were they regarded in the nineteenth century? Zeldin argues that peasants were essentially invisible to cultivated French society:

The peasants are not studied in Balzac's universal portrait of French society. Though he called one of his novels *Les Paysans* and devoted several volumes ostensibly to painting scenes of rural life, Balzac could not describe the peasants, because he was full of contempt for them. They were savages, like Fenimore Cooper's Red Indians, and he was concerned with them only as subjects for his schemes to improve them. (131-32)

So contempt is one French attitude towards the peasant; another is the romanticized view that seems to trace back to Rousseau:

The romantics, the Catholic revivalists, the believers in a conservative and hierarchic order, all held him up as a model of a human unspoilt by progress. George Sand wrote books about him or rather books about how she would have liked him to be, inaugurating a whole genre of rustic novels. ... Napoleon III inaugurated his reign with an inquiry into popular poetry forgotten 'because of a thoughtless contempt by our rather too worldly literature'. Folklore societies were formed. (133)

After surveying these elite attitudes towards peasants, Zeldin turns to an extended effort to decipher some of the social reality of the peasant in the nineteenth century. And he finds that the stereotypes that French society applied to the peasant, from left to right, were unfounded.

These generalisations about the innate conservatism of the pesant need to be interpreted carefully in the context of French history. The observance of traditional routines, agricultural and social, should not obscure the fact that conflict was part of those routines, and that the pressures involved in preserving them add up to a situation which is far from being one of stagnation. The peasants were neither satisfied nor contented. They were constantly trying to improve their lot, to enlarge their farms, to raise their status. Their world was torn by deep divisions, and by animosities both of interest and of pride. (135)

The sense of community depended also on the way the land was worked. The common generalization that the peasants were innately individualistic and independent is another bourgeois myth. It is important to remember that though individual peasant property had developed before the Revolution, ownership did not imply complete liberty to work the land as one pleased. When the strips and plots were tiny, it was essential to co-operate in sowing and reaping. No man could reach his plot without going through those of his neighbours. (139)
Much of this material on the professions and the major social groups falls under the heading of "ambition" -- competition and striving for one's betterment. This first volume ends with an extended discussion of "love" -- the family and children.

The family, as organised in France in these years, had an effect on people's lives as profound as any political regime or any economic force. It was a powerful institution which resisted change with remarkable vitality. (285)
But here again, Zeldin finds that the realities of nineteenth-century France contradicted the common stereotypes of marriage, family, and children.

Zeldin's writing makes one think of a gifted interpreter of literature or art, more than of a traditional historian. He is very sensitive to telltale nuances, and very creative in building an interpretation of the French based on a series of such insights. In this regard it is "humanities-inspired history" rather than "social-science history." Zeldin appears to affirm this point in saying that his historical writing does not aspire to the "objectivity" and neutrality of the sciences:
Historical study is a personal experience, and the subjective elements in it deserve to be valued, when so many other branches of knowledge are becoming largely technical. To admit that historians solve their problems of colour and light, that they create their compositions for reasons which are ultimately subjective, because these seem to them to be coherent and true, is not to admit a fault, but to assert that each individual historian can express himself in his work. (7)
So Zeldin's project is a broad one: to attempt to discern some of the important strands of mental and emotional framework through which historical French men and women thought and experienced their history. It is a kind of personality psychology for a whole historical population. And Zeldin affirms, as a literary critic would do as well, that there alternative tellings of this story.

Historical GDP estimates for early modern China

Thursday, January 06, 2011



Li Bozhong is one of China's most influential economic historians, and he is undoubtedly the most internationally connected. Much of his work in the past several decades has been devoted to constructing a detailed economic history of the lower Yangzi Delta (for example, Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850). His findings have been crucial empirical contributions to the "involution" debate (link, link, link) about whether the Chinese economy was stagnant and significantly less productive than the European economy. Thanks to his research we now have a much more informed understanding of the economic dynamics of the Lower Yangzi region in the early modern period (1620-1850). And his research largely supports the "no involution, significant productivity growth" interpretation. (Ken Pomeranz has a nice review of *Agricultural Development in Jiangnan, 1620-1850* here.)

Li's most recent book has now appeared in Chinese, and it takes an important step forward in terms of methodology. (The cover and title are included above. The book includes an extended summary in English, which allows non-Chinese speakers to get the highlights of method and findings.) The important step that Li introduces here is a first effort to apply the methodology of historical national accounts to China. Essentially this method allows the researcher to use the discipline of GDP accounting to arrive at systemic and internally validated estimates of economic activity in a region over a period of time. (Jan-Pieter Smits, Edwin Horlings, and Jan Luiten van Zanden provide an extensive and detailed description of the method in "Dutch GNP and its Components, 1800-19193" (link). Olle Kranz describes the method in application to Sweden here.)

Li's current book is a massive effort (over 600 pages), but it is itself only a pilot project for a more ambitious study to come in future years. Li has selected one limited district within his previous area of study in the lower Yangzi Delta (Huating-Lou), and attempts to apply the method of historical GDP to this limited region for a single period of time (1823-29). His goal is to determine whether the discipline and method of historical GDP can shed new light on the scattered economic statistics and materials that more traditional economic histories have assembled. The results are highly interesting, and they challenge several key assumptions that have been made about the early Qing economy.

Li hopes for two advantages from this approach. The first is that it provides a unified framework within which to organize and validate existing economic data. "Because the methods of the GDP study are quite elaborate and standardized, they can provide a

coherent macroeconomic framework covering the whole economy" (603). And the second is to provide a consistent basis for comparison with other historical regions where the same methods have been utilized. This means that the kinds of comparisons suggested by recent work in Eurasian economic and demographic history will be enhanced as other scholars apply the methodology to European regions.

Huating-Lou is roughly a single county, Songjiang County, with an area of 870 square kilometers and a population in 1816 of 563,052. (From the maps it appears that the county falls squarely within the current city of Shanghai.) So the area covered by Li's study is a microcosm of the larger economic region in which it is lodged; Jiangnan had a population of roughly 36 million in the mid nineteenth century. Li makes use of the same kinds of data sources he has used in earlier works: gazetteers, agricultural handbooks, and modern field investigations of the region (in particular, the Japanese South Manchurian Railway Company studies from 1937-41). Essentially Li proceeds by transforming the variety of data provided by these sources into a uniformly formatted table of national accounts.



今日上海市行政区图

The method involves attempting to estimate the magnitude of economic activity in several sectors by assessing production, expenditure, and income. The idea is that the data for these three aspects of the economy are fairly independent; but they should be expected to lead to similar estimates of overall economic activity. (If production estimates indicate a region is producing 10 million yuan of goods, but income estimates indicate only 2 million yuan of income, we can be assured that there is an important data inconsistency.) The method involves making use of the System of Historical National Accounts to provide a unified framework for collecting and presenting the economic data. (See also a paper by Frits Bos describing the use of national accounts as a tool for economic history (link).)

Here is a description of this method as implemented by Luiten van Zanden and colleagues for the Netherlands (link):

Our main method is to gather specific information on annual output and added value in each of the most important economic branches, following the System of National Accounts (SNA) used in contemporary economic-statistical research. The starting point is the production approach; the branches that are being reconstructed include agriculture, herring fisheries, peat extraction, production of textiles, sugar and paper, to name but a

few. Weights will be derived from a reconstruction of the structure of the labour force in three moments in time: 1510/14, 1670/80 and around 1800. Combined, the chronological series and the data on the structure of the labour force will serve as a basis for estimating developments in the level and structure of national income.

Li's results are fascinating. First, he finds that production, income, and expenditure estimates for Huating-Lou in 1823-29 all converge on an estimate of about 13.5 million taels of silver. The production estimate is 13.5 million taels, the income estimate is 13.3 million taels, and the expenditure estimate is 13.9 million taels. So the three systems of accounting all point to approximately the same level of economic activity. This amounts to an estimate of GDP per capita of about 24 taels of silver.

Table 1: Value Added, the Huating-Lou area, 1823-29

	Value Added (1,000 taels of silver)	%
Primary Sector		
Agriculture	4,002	30
Fisheries	166	2
Total primary	4,168	31
Secondary Sector		
"ordinary"	546	4
Textile	1,270	9
"manufacture"	2,666	20
Total secondary	4,482	33
Tertiary Sector		
Commerce	1,727	13
Service	277	2
Finance	486	4
External trade	907	7
Water transportation	251	2
Education	358	3
Government	856	6
Total tertiary	4,862	36
GDP	13,501	100

Second, the sectoral composition of the Huating-Lou economy is genuinely surprising (as indicated in table 1). We commonly think of China's Ming-Qing economy as largely rural and agricultural. But the primary sector, including agriculture and fisheries, amounts to only 31% of the local economy, while the secondary sector (manufactures and textiles) contribute 33% and the tertiary sector (commerce, service, government, etc.) contributes 36%. The prior expectation we might have had of the early modern Chinese economy as largely agricultural is flatly refuted for this region by the 1820s. This finding is corroborated by Li's analysis of the structure of employment in the region; only 27% of employment was in the primary sector, with 56% in the secondary and 16% in the tertiary sectors.

Third, Li points out that the composition of income is also somewhat surprising. Wages represented 61% of the Huating-Lou economy; rent 11%; interest 3%; profit 20%; and depreciation 6%. What is surprising about this estimate is the unexpectedly low percentage of all income that derived from rent -- contradicting the idea that the Chinese economy was a rent-dominated one. (Earlier work by Victor Lippit (Land Reform and Economic Development in China: A Study of Institutional Change and Development Finance) sought to estimate the total surplus created by the Chinese rural economy; he estimates 10.7% of income from rent, 3.4% of income from farm business profits, and 2.8% from rural interest payments. See Understanding Peasant China: Case Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science, pp. 121-22, for more discussion. Li's estimates of rent and interest are about the same as Lippit's, whereas Li's estimate of profits is substantially higher than Lippit's.)

All of this is highly interesting, though (as Li emphasizes throughout), it is based on only one small region during one limited time period. So it will be very interesting to see whether it is possible to perform this kind of analysis for larger parts of the historical Chinese economy.

Estimating economic activity was one of the goals of this research. The other was to establish a consistent basis for comparison across different parts of Eurasia. Li takes up the comparison with the Netherlands that is made possible by the work mentioned above by Jan-Pieter Smits, Edwin Horlings, and Jan Luiten van Zanden (link). And indeed, the comparisons are very interesting. Here is the comparison of the sectoral composition of Huating-Lou and the Netherlands:

Table 9: Comparison of the structure of GDP (%)

	Huating-Lou 1823-39	The Netherlands 1807
Primary sector	30.8	24.6
Secondary sector	33.2	29.1
Tertiary Sector	36.0	46.3
Total	100	100

And here is the comparison for the structure of employment:

Table 10: Comparison of the Structure of Employment (%)

	Huating-Lou 1823-39	The Netherlands 1807
Primary sector	27	43
Secondary sector	56	26
Tertiary Sector	16	31
Total	100	100

The one comparison that Li does not highlight (in the English summary, anyway) is the GDP per capita comparison between Huating-Lou and the Netherlands. This comparison raises some of the issues involved in a recent discussion here of the standard of living (post), since the Dutch analysis is denominated in guilders and the Chinese work is denominated in taels of silver. Smits, Horlings and van Zanden estimate a Dutch population size of 2,163,092, implying a GNP per capita of 227 guilders per capita. Recall that Li estimated a per capita GNP of 24 taels.

So what is the conversion of tael to guilder? Here I have to go beyond my own specialized knowledge and speculate a bit, so this calculation shouldn't be taken uncritically. The guilder was defined in 1840 as equivalent to 9.45 grams of fine silver (link). A tael was equivalent to 37.3 grams of silver, according to Li. So in silver equivalents, the Dutch GDP per capita was 227*9.45 grams of silver, and the Chinese GDP per capita was 24*37.3 grams of silver -- 2,145 grams versus 895.2 grams. By this estimate, the early nineteenth-century Dutch economy produced a silver equivalent per capita over two times that of the Chinese economy. However, the purchasing power of silver was significantly greater in China than Europe; so this estimate overstates the disparity in real wage between the two regions. In "Real Wages in Europe and Asia: A First Look at the Longterm Patterns" Robert Allen estimates the wage basket for China at 247.3 grams of silver, versus 579.7 grams of silver in England (link, pp. 180, 182). If we took the wage basket as the basis of a cost-of-living deflator, then the disparity between the Netherlands and China essentially disappears. The Dutch GDP per capita PPP-

adjusted product is 3.7 against a 3.6 per capita PPP-adjusted product for China, using the wage basket as deflator. This would indicate that the Dutch economy was marginally richer than the Chinese economy in the lower Yangzi region -- but not by much.

Li finishes this comparison by raising the question of traditional versus modern economies. Both economies considered here contradict the assumptions of a "traditional" economy -- largely rural, largely agricultural, and largely stagnant. Instead, these comparisons indicate a surprisingly urban, manufacturing- and service-based economy in the second decade of the nineteenth century, and Li argues that we can appropriately describe each of them as a "modern" economy.

Li's book is an important new contribution to Chinese economic history, and the historical GDP method seems to be a highly fruitful innovation. It is a really valuable new analytical perspective on the Chinese economy. I hope the book will be translated into English as quickly as possible.

Deciphering French society

Sunday, January 09, 2011



Louis Maurin recently published a valuable book on contemporary French society, Déchiffrer la société française, which is intended to shed light on the social realities of France in a way that is genuinely accessible to the public. There are chapters on population, the family, schooling, immigration, unemployment, consumption, and social values, among other important topics (link). The book is intended to capture and encapsulate some of the data that is available through French sources that will make the basic outlines of France more transparent to the public. (There is a companion website for the book as well.) Denis Clerc provides the preface for the book -- another voice in French society calling for greater transparency about inequalities.

Maurin believes that there is a wide gap between the rhetoric that French elites and journalists use to characterize contemporary French society, and the social realities. In order for France to successfully address the social problems it faces, it is important for the public to have a better understanding of the background and the current realities. So the goal of this project is straightforward:

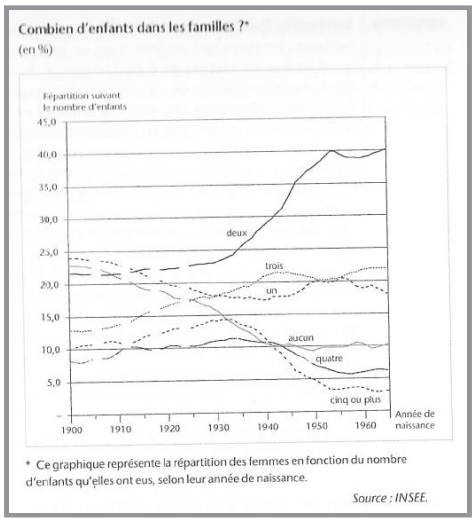
À l'encontre de ce mouvement, ce livre vise à dresser un état de lieux et à expliquer certains mécanismes du fonctionnement de la société française. Il s'agit bien d'abord de «déchiffrer», car l'objectif est, autant que faire se peut, de mesurer et d'analyser des évolutions. Sans fétichisme du chiffre, il devient indispensable de mettre sur la table des

données pour sortir de la rhétorique française où chacun se paie de bons mots. Ce qui permet à tout le monde d'avoir raison en même temps, faute de pouvoir être départagé par les faits. Dans la mesure du possible, nous essaierons de présenter des séries sur longue période, pour élargir les perspectives. L'objectif est aussi de « déchiffrer » des phénomènes qui ne sont pas tous immédiatement perceptibles. De dégager des tendances pour mieux comprendre l'évolution de la société dans un monde où l'avenir semble, pour beaucoup, très incertain. Sur la plupart des phénomènes présentés, vécus au quotidien, chacun a sa petite idée, qu'il s'agisse de famille, d'école, d'immigration, de chômage… Toute la difficulté de la démarche et son intérêt consistent à échapper aux expériences personnelles pour analyser le comportement d'un ensemble. (Avant-propos)

[To counter this trend, this book aims to develop a baseline description and to explain some mechanisms of how French society functions. It is indeed a first effort, because the goal is, as far as possible, to measure and analyze trends. Without making a fetish of data, it is necessary to provide tables of facts in order to escape the rhetoric to which everyone pays lip service. Without facts, everyone can claim to be right at the same time. Wherever possible, we attempt to present a series of data over a long period, to broaden the perspective. The goal is also to "decipher" phenomena that are not immediately obvious. We seek to identify trends in order to better understand society in a world where the future for many is very uncertain. For most of the phenomena presented, each individual has his/her own perspective, whether it concerns the family, schooling, immigration, unemployment, ... The challenge is to separate out one's personal experiences in order to analyze the behavior of the larger group.]
Each topic is a fundamental one -- population, nuptiality, family, schooling, immigration, employment, consumption. And the data that Maurin summarizes are often striking and unexpected.

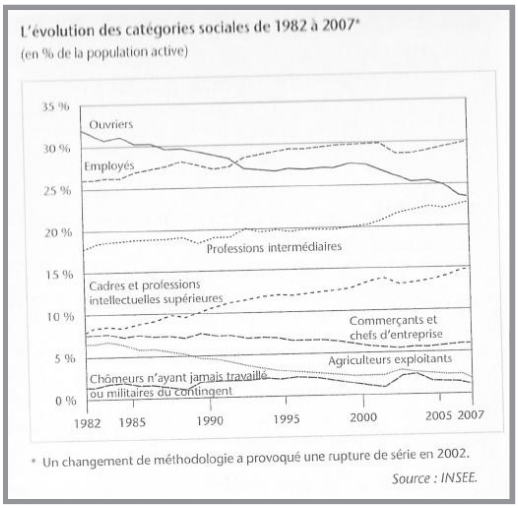
Here is a striking graph of the absolute number of marriages and divorces since 1960, and a graph of family size changes between 1900 and 1970. The marriage rate increased sharply in the 1960s into the early 70s; it then went into a steep decline.

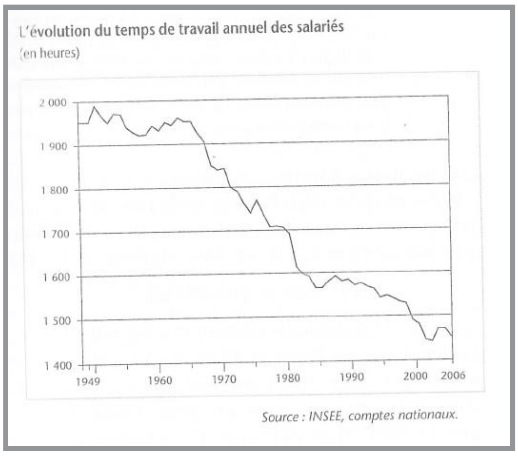


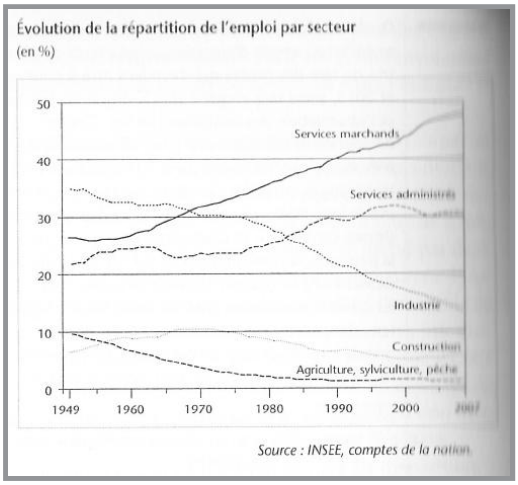


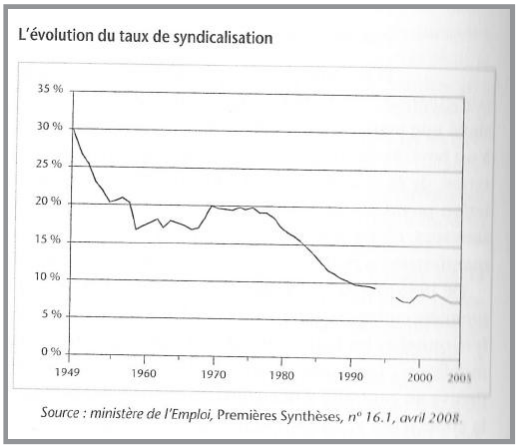
Here are several graphs representing economic and social changes in the past thirty years. The first tracks the percentage of adults in different socio-economic groups: workers, managers, professionals, executives, farmers, and permanently unemployed. The second tracks the fairly steep decline in the number of hours worked annually by a worker, from under 2000 to under 1500. The third tracks the shifting composition of the

workforce, documenting a dramatic decline in industrial labor from 35% to 15%. And the fourth graph tracks union membership, from a high of 30% in 1949 to a low of 8% in 2005. This is surprising for Americans who think of the French workforce as being highly unionized.

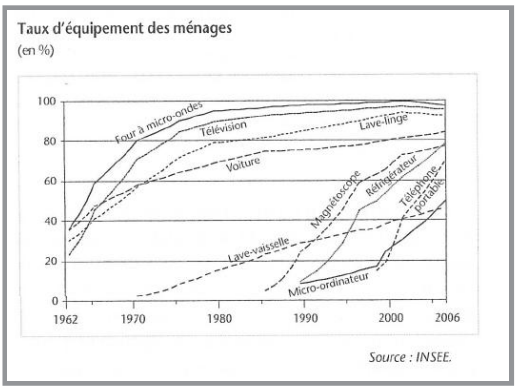




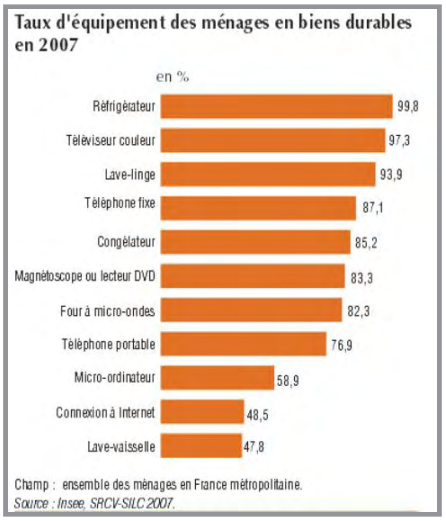




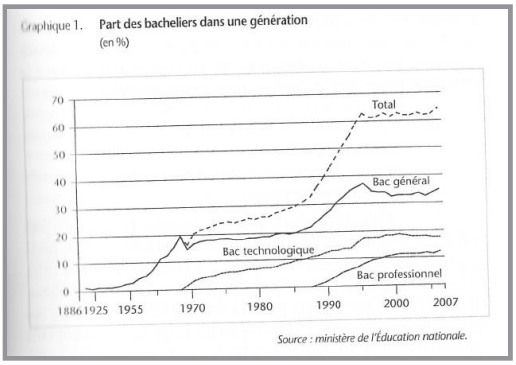
Here is an indication of how French consumption has evolved over the past sixty years. Television and washing machines started early; home computers and mobile phones came in the decade of 1990-2000. (It appears that several labels may be switched on this graph; it's hard to believe that microwave ovens became common well before refrigerators. And in fact the 2007 snapshot from INSEE suggests that these two labels have been switched.)



Here is a snapshot from INSEE for household items for 2007:



And what about education? Maurin draws attention to the progress of the *bac* over the past 60 years. The creation of the *bac technologique* and the *bac professionnel* in 1968 and 1988 respectively conjoined with growth in the *bac general* to produce rapid increase from the mid 1980s through 1990s; and the total has remained flat since the 1990s.



Maurin expresses a certain amount of disappointment with the discipline of academic sociology in France for its failure to provide a "public" sociology -- an empirical and theoretical research program aimed at shedding light on the most pervasive patterns in French society today. ("Malgré des progrès récents, le monde scientifique — la sociologie, en particulier — ne semble plus vraiment chercher à dresser ce portrait social de la France;" avant-propos.) And here again in the conclusion:

La statistique n'est pas seule en cause : la recherche laisse de côté de très nombreux domaines, pourtant indispensables à la compréhension du monde contemporain, quand bien même les données existent. Les sociologues qui travaillent sur des sujets aussi essentiels que les revenus, la mobilité sociale ou la consommation ne sont qu'une poignée. Dans certains domaines, comme l'exclusion ou l'immigration, ils se comptent par dizaines… Personne ne conteste la nécessité de ces travaux. Il n'en demeure pas moins que, pour partie, la sociologie française s'attache aux «dominés », oubliant que, pour analyser les processus de domination, il faut aussi regarder vers le haut. (Conclusion)

[The data are not the only cause. Researchers leave to the side many domains that are indispensable to comprehending the contemporary world, even when the data exist. Sociologists who work on such essential subjects as income, social mobility, or consumption are only a handful. In some domains, such as exclusion or immigration, they are fewer than dozens. No one can disagree about the necessity of this work. Instead, the French sociologists prefer to focus on the "dominated", forgetting that it is necessary to look at the top in order to understand the processes of domination. (Conclusion)]
In short -- French society is as complicated as any other, with its own history and current social forces. And many of the social realities the French currently face are obscure in their causes and their distribution across regions and classes. So it is particularly important for authors like Maurin to help pull back the curtain from some of these basic social facts.

(Each chapter offers a short list of key internet sources that allow the reader to pursue the data questions of the chapter directly. A few key resources on population, labor, poverty, family, immigration, and education include --

- Eurostat (Service statistique de l'Union européenne link)
- INED (Institut national d'études démographiques link)
- INSEE (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques link)
- CNAF (Caisse nationale d'allocations familiales link)
- Ministère de la Justice link
- Secrétariat d'état à la Famille link
- Cité nationale de l'immigration link
- Gisti (Groupe d'information et de soutien des immigrés link)
- Ministère de l'éducation nationale link
- CEE (Centre d'étude de l'emploi link)
- Céreq (Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications link)
- IRES (Institut de recherches économiques et sociales link)
- Ministère de l'emploi link
- Observatoire des inégalités link
- Observatoire national de la pauvreté et de l'exclusion sociale link
- Crédoc (Centre de recherche pour l'étude et l'observation des conditions de vie link)
- Iresco (Institut de recherche sur les sociétés contemporaines link)
- Cevipof (Centre de recherches politiques de Sciences-Po link)

There is a volume of valuable data available from these sources.)

Media and political culture

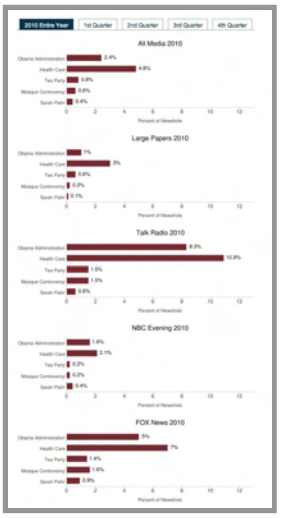
Tuesday, January 11, 2011



How are people's political beliefs, concerns, and passions influenced within a modern mass society? There are many mechanisms, certainly: family, school, place of worship, place of work, and military service, to name several. But certainly the various channels of the media play an important role. Newspapers, television and radio, social media, and blogs have a manifest ability to focus some parts of the electorate on one issue or another.

So it seems worthwhile to ask whether it is possible to perform some empirical study of the content and value systems associated with various media channels. (Here is a textbook by Klaus Krippendorff on the use of content analysis in journalism and the media; Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology.) This question falls into several parts: first, are there important differences in content and tone across various media channels? And second, what effects do these configurations of content and tone have on the users of the media?

The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellent Journalism offers a window into the first of these questions with a fascinating new tool (link). The "*Year in the News Interactive*" tool is the front end of a valuable database that codes various media streams according to content. The database is then searchable so that the user can produce reports on the percentage of the "newshole" devoted to a particular issue or person in a particular medium. Here is a sample of what the tool produces:

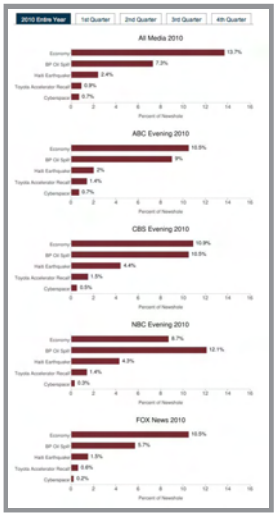


This chart repays close examination. It picks out five segments of media -- "All Media," "Large Papers," Talk Radio," "NBC Evening News," and "Fox News," and it compares these outlets with respect to five issues: Obama Administration, Health Care, Tea Party, Mosque Controversy, and Sarah Palin. These are highly politicized issues, so it is

interesting to see how the patterns of treatment differ across different segments of the media.

If we consider "All Media" as a benchmark -- representing the average amount of attention given by the media as a whole to various issues -- we see that Talk Radio and Fox News show a few remarkable patterns. Both sources give the mosque controversy more than twice the percentage of the newshole; likewise the Tea Party gets twice as much attention with Talk Radio and Fox News as with All Media. Fox News gives Sarah Palin over twice the exposure she gets from All Media -- and nine times the exposure she gets from Large Papers. Both Talk Radio and Fox News give an inordinate amount of air time to Health Care and the Obama Administration.

Now take a different cut: the network news programs and Fox News with respect to a much less political list of topics -- BP Oil Spill, Haiti Earthquake, Toyota Accelerator Recall, and Cyberspace.



Here the main contrast that seems evident is that Fox News devotes significantly less time to the non-political issues. Fox devoted about half the percentage of its newshole to the BP Oil Spill compared to NBC news; Haiti got roughly a third the amount attention on Fox; and the Toyota Accelerator Recall got less than half the exposure as it received on NBC news.

At a minimum, this shows something pretty interesting: the regular viewer or listener to Fox News and Talk Radio will get a very different view of the world from the person exposed to All Media or Large Papers. These media channels give an inordinate amount of airtime to "hot button" issues that have the potential of inflaming their viewers. And these channels spend much less time that the other media on non-political issues -- Haiti, Toyota recall, or Cyberspace.

What would be particularly interesting in today's environment is an additional dimension of content analysis, reflecting antagonism, intolerance, and hostility. It would be very useful to have a few years of data on the percentage of the newshole devoted to incendiary reporting about issues, individuals, and the government. Many observers have the definite impression that this kind of language has increased dramatically; it would be very useful to have quantifiable data on this topic.

(As we think about the tenor and extremism of some of the voices in political media today, it is sobering to remember the role that "hate radio" played in the Rwandan genocide; link.)

Rawls on political liberalism

Friday, January 14, 2011

Long after the transformative impact Rawls brought to social and political philosophy with A Theory of Justice: Original Edition (1971), Rawls continued to wrestle with the question of how a just society ought to work. One major part of this question is how a just society ought to encompass major disagreements among its citizens about values and "conceptions of the good;" and much of his thinking is reflected in his 1993 collection of essays, Political Liberalism. Here is how he formulates the central problem:

A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all, citizens. Political liberalism assumes that, for political purposes, a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime. Political liberalism also supposes that a reasonable comprehensive doctrine does not reject the essentials of a democratic regime. (xvi)

So, to start, Rawls recognizes that modern society is not based on consensus around the major values or issues; rather, individuals differ in their commitments about rights, justice, and the good human life. How in the context of this pluralism of important value systems, is it possible for a modern society to nonetheless possess the features of civility and stability that we would desire?

Here, then, is what Rawls calls the problem of political liberalism:

How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines? Put another way: How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime? What is the structure and content of a political conception that can gain the support of such an overlapping consensus? (xviii)

One prior thought we may have had about a liberal society is that the state establishes no more than a neutral system of law, within the context of which individuals can pursue their own separate and incompatible conceptions of the right and the good. So the liberal state is a neutral state -- one that gives no privilege to one conception of the good over another.

Neutrality is certainly part of the ideal of a liberal state; but it isn't quite enough. The reason is that some conceptions of the good and the right require the intervention of the state for enforcement. If the Alpha group believe that fetal stem cells are nascent human beings and therefore should never be used for the purpose of scientific research, while the Beta group believe that fetal stem cells are no more than useful compounds of organic molecules that can relieve human misery; then both sides of the debate want to

prevail through legislation -- either to prohibit stem cell research or to permit stem cell research. Each side sees its position as being driven by a moral imperative -- and therefore not to be compromised without an unacceptable loss of moral integrity on the part of the losing group.

To overcome this contradiction, neutrality is not enough. We need to add a commitment to democratic, constitutional procedures as being the moral trump card when it comes to legislation about areas of conflict based on fundamental disagreements about the right and the good. Essentially this comes down to a second-order commitment that every citizen needs to share: When policy issues arise that lead to profound disagreement among blocs of citizens, the right solution is the procedurally correct solution arrived at through legitimate democratic processes. In other words, all citizens need to put their commitment to legitimate democratic procedures ahead of their commitment to a particular conception of the good and the right. Democratic values supersede religious, political, and moral convictions when there is no choice but to legislate an issue. Citizens are entitled to argue their case for or against proposed legislation; but they are then morally obligated to accept the democratically chosen outcome as a legitimate resolution of the issue.

Rawls captures this conundrum with the idea of ***toleration***: the idea that citizens must tolerate and respect the strongly-held convictions of their fellow citizens, even while participating in a political process that leads to legislation that is inconsistent with those convictions. This means that if the Alphas prevail through the political process, the Betas need to accept the outcome as morally legitimate -- even though it contradicts their own firmly held moral convictions. But why would one accept the moral necessity of toleration? Doesn't this mean sacrificing one's own moral convictions to the will of a contrary majority? And doesn't this imply that one's own convictions are tentative and conditional?

The answer seems to go along something like these lines. When one is a member of a society, one recognizes the inevitable fact of the kind of fundamental pluralism Rawls has described here. This means that society will sometimes legislate about issues concerning which reasonable citizens disagree, based on fundamental moral convictions on both sides. So the citizen is asked to bracket his/her particular moral convictions when considering outcomes, even as he/she is free to vigorously argue on the basis of those convictions during the process leading up to legislation. The citizen is asked to take a double perspective on his/her own moral convictions: first-person, that these are my convictions and they seem binding and justified from my point of view; and third-person, that there is disagreement about these matters, and the only defensible process for resolving the issue is the democratic process in which each person's reasons count as much as every other person's. This is something like Thomas Nagel's understanding of altruism in The Possibility of Altruism; the individual is asked to recognize the moral reality of other persons and not to assign a privileged role to his/her own perspective.

A key part of Rawls's own solution to this problem of democratic pluralism is the idea of an "overlapping consensus" among citizens. Here is how he defines that idea:

Such a consensus consists of all the reasonable opposing religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines likely to persist over generations and to gain a sizable body of adherents in a more or less just constitutional regime, a regime in which the criterion of justice is that political conception itself. (15)

In such a consensus, the reasonable doctrines endorse the political conception, each from its own point of view. Social unity is based on a consensus on the political conception; and stability is possible when the doctrines making up the consensus are affirmed by society's politically active citizens and the requirements of justice are not too much in conflict with citizens' essential interests as formed and encouraged by their social arrangements. (134)

So the ideal here is the notion that some set of constitutional arrangements may be acceptable from all points of view -- from Christian to libertarian to Muslim to socialist. This hope seems to rest on the idea that a neutral, democratic set of political institutions give the best opportunity for the adherents of any particular theory of the good to pursue their interests; so each of the "reasonable opposing religious doctrines" may have good reason to endorse the neutral democratic constitution. (This is a kind of "original position" argument, applied to opposing comprehensive doctrines.)

What makes this a consensus of any kind is ***not*** the notion that there is an overlapping set of values that persist across all the comprehensive doctrines; rather, it is the hope that there will be at least one political arrangement that can serve as the consensus choice of all the incompatible comprehensive doctrines.

The preceding account says that the consensus goes down to the fundamental ideas within which justice as fairness is worked out. It supposes agreement deep enough to reach such ideas as those of society as a fair system of cooperation and of citizens as reasonable and rational, and free and equal. As for its breadth, it covers the principles and values of a political conception ... and it applies to the basic structure as a whole. (149)

So -- what is a political liberal, according to Rawls? It seems to boil down to this. It is a moral individual who has his/her own conception of the good and set of fundamental doctrines; who recognizes nonetheless that he/she is a member of a polity that is fundamentally plural when it comes to conceptions of the good; who recognizes that there is no basis for insisting on privilege for one's own conception of the good; and who recognizes the moral legitimacy of constitutional democratic procedures when it is necessary to decide among policies that involve conflicting conceptions of the good. It is a person who puts civic commitment to constitutional democratic processes ahead of one's one fundamental convictions when necessary. And it is a person who is fully committed to ensuring the neutrality of the state across fundamental convictions. Neutrality of law across persons and conceptions of the good, full recognition of fundamental pluralism within a modern society, respect for the equal worth of all other citizens, and a recognition that one's own beliefs have no basis for being privileged over those of other citizens -- these are the fundamental commitments of a political liberal.

We can now give a fairly simple explication of illiberal thinking as well. It is moral, religious, or political fundamentalism -- the idea that one's own moral convictions are so compelling that no democratic process could legitimately override them. It is the idea that the individual has a persistent right to oppose the state when the state's actions are inconsistent with one's own moral convictions. It is authoritarian -- it endorses the idea that one's own group or party has the right to override the majority's will when the state contradicts one's fundamental convictions. And it is, of course, a position that is fundamentally disrespectful of democracy and of the equal dignity and worth of one's fellow citizens.

National values on racial equality

Monday, January 17, 2011



Today the country celebrates the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Most of us think of Dr. King as a genuinely important American thinker, and one whose life and actions permanently changed some important values and thought processes in this country when it came to racial equality and affirming communities in the United States. His death by assassination at the age of 39 cut short a life of influence from which our country could have benefited greatly in the intervening decades.

How much have we changed in our thinking about race since 1968? Is it possible to assess the degree of influence that Dr. King has had on current American attitudes about race and about what needs to be done? How would we assess the nature and depth of changes that have occurred in American attitudes towards race, equality, and community since 1968? What were some of the mechanisms of value transmission through which those changes took place? And how would we attempt to sort out the elements of those changes that can be traced back to Dr. King?

One part of the mechanism of influence is pretty obvious. Dr. King was a visible and influential leader from the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 to the month of his assassination in Memphis in 1968. He gave hundreds of speeches, he had a meaningful and visible footprint on television and radio, and he reached a mass audience during those years. White and black Americans probably heard his messages differently, but there is no doubt that King influenced millions of Americans during his lifetime. So this is a very direct form of influence -- people who were exposed to the struggles of the Civil Rights era and to the speeches and actions of Dr. King, and who absorbed a new set of attitudes about racial equality and social progress from those experiences.

It is an interesting and difficult question to assess how much of that direct first-person influence persisted into the next generation of children and adults. But here again, mechanisms of transmission are easy enough to identify. Many of those persons who were directly influenced during the Civil Rights generation had children of their own, whom they influenced through their example and their speech, and a certain number of them became teachers and broadcasters and health care providers -- each creating his/her own avenue of influence on others. So the primary contemporary effects of Dr. King's teachings and actions had a second- and third-generation echo.

Another form of influence during his lifetime was more focused. Dr. King was an elite civil rights leader and strategist, and he stood in a central position within networks of activists and leaders, both black and white. He was successful in positioning his own rhetoric and strategies in nodes of influence within these networks and organizations. His own views didn't always prevail -- but they did often enough to permanently influence debates about racial justice and strategy within the next generation of influencers. So King's philosophy and vision found vivid expression by the next generation of leaders and influencers both nationally and regionally. And these leaders in turn influenced future debates and many millions of people through their own political actions and leadership.

A third mechanism of influence stems from historical tragedy -- the assassination itself. The traumatic impact on American consciousness of King's assassination surely had an impact on the degree to which his philosophy and vision penetrated the American psyche. It was a visceral warning for all of America about the virulence and violence of racial hatred. It served as an unforgettable signal that these conflicts must be resolved and that we must find ways of ending American racism. And Dr. King's message was a promising one: we can be better than this, we can move beyond slavery and discrimination to a world of equal love and respect.

All these pathways of influence contributed to other large changes as well, including especially the effort to broaden school curricula to include issues of race and racial equality. Those curricular innovations were certainly influenced by Dr. King's example; and millions of American children from the 1970s through the present were exposed to positive ideas about equality and the value of diversity in language that had very much in common with Dr. King's vision of the future. So it is reasonable to expect that young people's attitudes towards race in the 1970s through 1990s were very different from those of children educated in the 1940s and 1950s.

So how much change has there been in fundamental attitudes since 1954 (the year of the Supreme Court school desegregation decision, Brown v. Board of Education)? And how much of MLK's stamp do current American attitudes bear? Howard Schuman and other scholars have attempted to investigate this question empirically (Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations, Revised Edition, Black Racial Attitudes: Trends and Complexities). Schuman and his colleagues work carefully through the main political events of the 1940s through 1960s, and attempt to synthesize public opinion data to assess the changes that occurred within the population over a fifty-year period.

It certainly appears that American attitudes towards race, and towards a racially just society, have changed dramatically since the 1950s. The Civil Rights struggle itself -- the struggle by African-American men and women to overcome systematic discrimination and racism -- is surely the largest part of this change. And there certainly were other visions and voices among civil rights leaders who helped to shape the debate. But Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s voice seems to have had the most pervasive and enduring impact on mainstream America when it comes to racial justice and an inclusive community. Dr. King offered a unique combination of realism and optimism that seems to have worked very well with other deep American values. Here is some realism, from "A Testament of Hope" included in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr..

Whenever I am asked my opinion of the current state of the civil rights movement, I am forced to pause; it is not easy to describe a crisis so profound that it has caused the most powerful nation in the world to stagger in confusion and bewilderment. Today's problems are so acute because the tragic evasions and defaults of several centuries have accumulated to disaster proportions. (313)

And here is some of his finest optimism, concluding the same essay:

A voice out of Bethlehem two thousand years ago said that all men are equal. It said right would triumph. Jesus of Nazareth wrote no books; he owned no property to endow him with influence. He had no friends in the courts of the powerful. But he changed the course of mankind with only the poor and the despised. Naive and unsophisticated though we may be, the poor and despised of the twentieth century will revolutionize this era. In our "arrogance, lawlessness and ingratitude," we will fight for human justice, brotherhood, secure peace and abundance for all. When we have won these -- in a spirit of unshakable nonviolence -- then, in luminous splendor, the Christian era will truly begin. (328)

Violent rhetoric and violent behavior

Thursday, January 20, 2011

Is there a possible causal relationship between an increasing occurrence of violent political rhetoric in broadly available media channels and the occurrence of violent political behavior? How would a social scientist investigate this hypothetical relationship? (Here is a pretty worrisome timeline of events, statements, and actions over the past several years involving violent rhetoric against the government and violent actions.)

Much of the debate since the Tucson shootings has focused on what seems like the wrong question: was there a direct influence from the extremist rhetoric of the past two years to the violent actions of this particular assailant? Sometimes the answer to this kind of question is "yes" -- Timothy McVeigh was directly inspired by the violent ideas and passions associated with the right-wing militia movement. But the harder question is that of ***indirect*** and diffused influence: is it possible for a pattern of virulent media communications to create a ***culture*** of violent attitudes that leads through indirect mechanisms to political violence directed against individuals and institutions?

In order to think carefully about this set of issues, we need to think through the ways in which individuals are led to commit violent actions. We might model the potentially violent person along these lines: Anger and hatred are **emotional states** that motivate violent attacks. **Social inhibitions and processes of self-control** work in most people to inhibit acting on hateful, violent impulses. Some social and physiological influences have the effect of **weakening inhibitions**. Individuals are most likely to engage in violence when hateful emotions are strongest and inhibitions are weakest. They are most likely to direct violence against symbols or representatives of the object of their anger and hatred.

Media and public discourse can affect each of these three factors. Angry speech can increase feelings of anger in the listener. This is very much the purpose of the speech; it is aimed at whipping up the passions of the viewer. Second, it can focus angry impulses towards a specific group. Again, this is the goal; it is to focus anger on government, or government officials, or other groups. And it can lower inhibitions by positively valorizing violent action. "Your peers will admire you for taking action; other people have done so too. You are justified."

We might model the media ranters as involved in a game of escalation, competing against each other for greater shock value and virulent language. They have an interest in generating a committed audience, and they are competing with other voices for that audience. They have an interest in escalation. "Shock radio" is intended to shock.

It doesn't appear that direct psychological research has yet been done on this question. But there is a related question that has been very extensively studied, and that is the effect of dramatized television violence on children's propensity for aggression. It appears that there is fairly strong evidence in the social psychology and developmental psychology literatures for a causal link between exposure to television violence in children and increased aggression. Here is a paper in *Developmental Psychology* by L.

Rowell Huesmann, Jessica Moise-Titus, Cheryl-Lynn Podolski, and Leonard Eron (link), where the authors find a significant link between childhood exposure to TV violence and adult aggression.

Over the past 40 years, a body of literature has emerged that strongly supports the notion that media-violence viewing is one factor contributing to the development of aggression. The majority of empirical studies have focused on the effects of watching dramatic violence on TV and film. Numerous experimental studies, many static observational studies, and a few longitudinal studies all indicate that exposure to dramatic violence on TV and in the movies is related to violent behavior (Huesmann & Miller, 1994; Huesmann, Moise, & Podolski, 1997). Furthermore, a substantial body of psychological theory has developed explaining the processes through which exposure to violence in the mass media could cause both short- and long-term increases in a child's aggressive and violent behavior (Bandura, 1977; Berkowitz, 1993; Eron, 1963; Huesmann, 1988, 1998; Zillmann, 1979). Long-term effects with children are now generally believed to be primarily due to long-term observational learning of cognitions (schemas, beliefs, and biases) supporting aggression (Berkowitz, 1993; Huesmann, 1988, 1998), whereas short-term effects with adults and children are recognized as also due to priming (Huesmann, 1998), excitation transfer (Zillmann, 1983), or imitation of specific behaviors. Most researchers of aggression agree that severe aggressive and violent behavior seldom occurs unless there is a convergence of multiple predisposing and precipitating factors such as neurophysiological abnormalities, poor child rearing, socioeconomic deprivation, poor peer relations, attitudes and beliefs supporting aggression, drug and alcohol abuse, frustration and provocation, and other factors. The evidence is already substantial that exposure to media violence is one such long-term predisposing and short-term precipitating factor. The current longitudinal study adds important additional empirical evidence that the effects of childhood exposure to media violence last into young adulthood and increase aggressive behavior at that time for both males and females. (201)

And here is a 2003 article from *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* by Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Huesmann, Johnson, Linz, Malamuth and Wartella summarizing research leading to similar conclusions (link). Here is their abstract:

Summary—Research on violent television and films, video games, and music reveals unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both immediate and long-term contexts. The effects appear larger for milder than for more severe forms of aggression, but the effects on severe forms of violence are also substantial (r = .13 to .32) when compared with effects of other violence risk factors or medical effects deemed important by the medical community (e.g., effect of aspirin on heart attacks). The research base is large; diverse in methods, samples, and media genres; and consistent in overall findings. The evidence is clearest within the most extensively researched domain, television and film violence. The growing body of video-game research yields essentially the same conclusions.

Short-term exposure increases the likelihood of physically and verbally aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts, and aggressive emotions. Recent large-scale longitudinal studies provide converging evidence linking frequent exposure to violent media in childhood with aggression later in life, including physical assaults and spouse abuse. Because extremely violent criminal behaviors (e.g., forcible rape, aggravated assault, homicide) are rare, new longitudinal studies with larger samples are needed to estimate accurately how much habitual childhood exposure to media violence increases the risk for extreme violence.

Well-supported theory delineates why and when exposure to media violence increases

aggression and violence. Media violence produces short-term increases by priming existing aggressive scripts and cognitions, increasing physiological arousal, and triggering an automatic tendency to imitate observed behaviors. Media violence produces long-term effects via several types of learning processes leading to the acquisition of lasting (and automatically accessible) aggressive scripts, interpretational schemas, and aggression-supporting beliefs about social behavior, and by reducing individuals' normal negative emotional responses to violence (i.e., desensitization).

Certain characteristics of viewers (e.g., identification with aggressive characters), social environments (e.g., parental influences), and media content (e.g., attractiveness of the perpetrator) can influence the degree to which media violence affects aggression, but there are some inconsistencies in research results. This research also suggests some avenues for preventive intervention (e.g., parental supervision, interpretation, and control of children's media use). However, extant research on moderators suggests that no one is wholly immune to the effects of media violence.

Recent surveys reveal an extensive presence of violence in modern media. Furthermore, many children and youth spend an inordinate amount of time consuming violent media. Although it is clear that reducing exposure to media violence will reduce aggression and violence, it is less clear what sorts of interventions will produce a reduction in exposure. The sparse research literature suggests that counter-attitudinal and parental-mediation interventions are likely to yield beneficial effects, but that media literacy interventions by themselves are unsuccessful.

Though the scientific debate over whether media violence increases aggression and violence is essentially over, several critical tasks remain. Additional laboratory and field studies are needed for a better understanding of underlying psychological processes, which eventually should lead to more effective interventions. Large-scale longitudinal studies would help specify the magnitude of media-violence effects on the most severe types of violence. Meeting the larger societal challenge of providing children and youth with a much healthier media diet may prove to be more difficult and costly, especially if the scientific, news, public policy, and entertainment communities fail to educate the general public about the real risks of media-violence exposure to children and youth. (81)
Significantly, both reviews single out mechanisms that appear relevant to hateful and violent language by widely disseminated media commentators. Here are some of the important psychological mechanisms cited in these two survey articles:

- long-term observational learning of cognitions (schemas, beliefs, and biases) supporting aggression
- imitation of specific behaviors
- priming existing aggressive scripts and cognitions
- increasing physiological arousal
- triggering an automatic tendency to imitate observed behaviors
- reducing individuals' normal negative emotional responses to violence (i.e., desensitization)

These articles seem to go some ways towards framing an answer to the question posed above: can exposure to violent speech in the media create indirect causal influences leading to more violent behavior by individuals? The psychological literature appears to support the plausible prior belief that exposure to extreme and violent language in the political media can make individuals somewhat more disposed to aggressive behavior. And this effect doesn't need to proceed through the direct "true believer" mechanism; virtually everyone who has a television or a computer is exposed to this kind of speech, and the literature suggests broad and diffused effects on behavior as a result.

Here are a few possible mechanisms that seem relevant today when we consider the possible causal connections from over-the-top political rhetoric to the occurrence of acts of political violence:

- Exposure to violent language directly motivates some individuals to become "***true believer***" violent actors.
- Exposure to violent language causes some unstable individuals to ***focus their aggression*** against a specific range of targets.
- Exposure to violent language gradually ***reduces inhibitions*** against violence, leading to more readiness to commit violent acts.
- Exposure to violent language influences groups and networks of individuals to be ***more favorable*** to the use of violence.

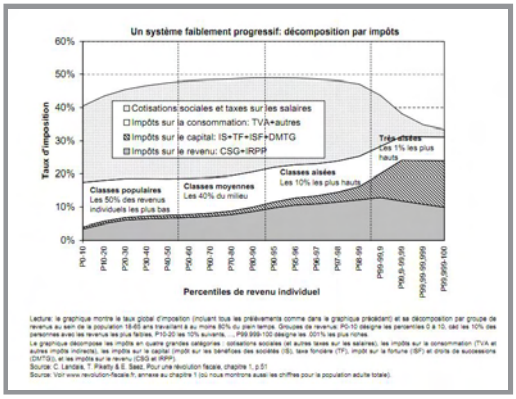
So these seem to be fairly strong empirical reasons for being very concerned about the inflammatory language that has become increasingly common in political discourse and media rants. The issue isn't simply the value of political civility; it is the very real possibility that extremist rants can influence a small number of listeners to be more prone to engage in acts of political violence, and even people who aren't listeners can be influenced by those who are.

New ideas about taxes in France

Saturday, January 22, 2011

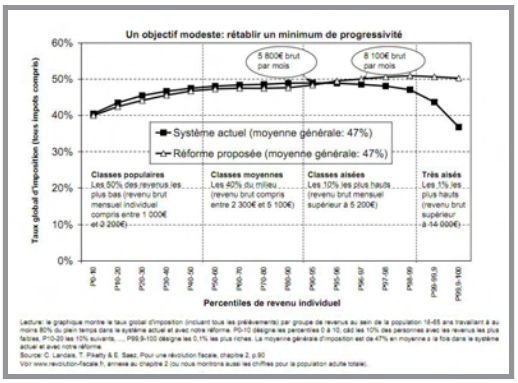
The structure of the tax code in France is getting new attention these days. President Sarkozy has made fiscal reform a key issue in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2012. The Nouvel Obs has a very good section this week on a recent book by Camille Landais, Thomas Piketty, and Emmanuel Saez, economists with long expert knowledge of the French fiscal system. The book is Pour une révolution fiscale: Un impôt sur le revenu pour le XXIe siècle, and it offers a stringent critique of the existing system and a set of proposals for a reformed system. The book has a companion website here.

In a word, these experts conclude that the existing tax structure in France is seriously unjust because it is anti-progressive at the very high end of the income distribution -- the top 1 percent decline steeply in the percentage of their income that is collected in the form of the several tax vehicles. Only 20% of the state' revenues derive from taxes that are truly progressive (*Nouvel Obs*, 2411, p. 18).



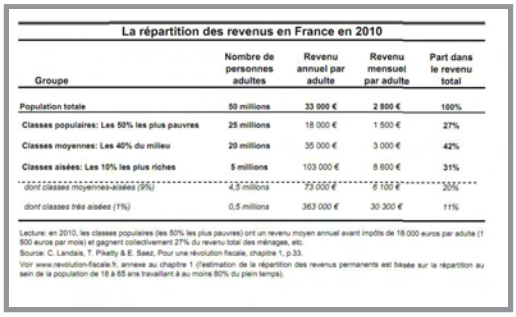
As we can see from the graph, the total tax burden of the top 1 percent of income earners declines sharply from 48% to about 32%. And the reason for this is the portion of the French tax system devoted to funding social services (*Cotisations sociales et taxes sur*

les salaires). This assessment is roughly flat from the 30th percentile to the 99th percentile, and then it declines rapidly. (The other components of taxes represented here include the income tax, a tax on returns on capital, and taxes on consumption including the TVA.)
Here is what the distribution of tax burdens would look like on the basis of their proposals:



So what is their proposal? It is to significantly revamp the income tax and the *cotisation*. The *cotisation* needs to be progressive rather than regressive; and the income tax needs to be higher. Their proposal is revenue-neutral in this particular sense: the median tax payer today bears a 47% tax burden, and this remains the same under the reform.

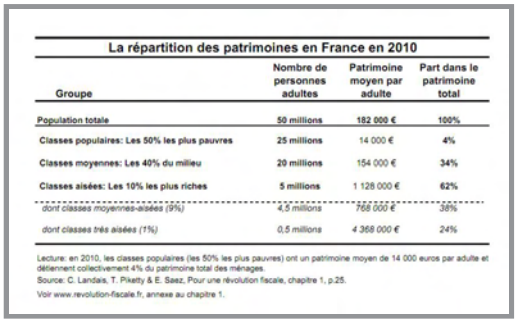
Ce livre plaide pour une revolution fiscale précise et opérationnelle, dont tous les détails sont chiffrés au grand jour. Nous proposons en particulier la création d'un nouvel impôt sur le revenue, remplaçant un grand nombre de taxes existantes, notamment la contribution social généralisée (CSG), l'actuel impôt sur le revenu (qui, sou sa forme actuelle, serait purement et simplement supprimé), le prélèvement libératoire, la prime pour l'emploi et le bouclier fiscal. Ce nouvel impôt sur le revenu, payé par tous les Français et socialement adapté a la France du XXIe siecle, sera entièrement individualisé, prélevé directement a la source sur les revenus du travail et du capital. (18)
Also of interest are the summary graphs that the authors provide of the distribution of income and wealth in France:



La répartition des revenus en France en 2010

Groupe	Nombre de personnes adultes	Revenu annuel par adulte	Revenu mensuel par adulte	Part dans le revenu total
Population totale	50 millions	33 000 €	2 800 €	100%
Classes populaires: Les 50% les plus pauvres	25 millions	18 000 €	1 500 €	27%
Classes moyennes: Les 40% du milieu	20 millions	35 000 €	3 000 €	42%
Classes aisées: Les 10% les plus riches	5 millions	103 000 €	8 600 €	31%
dont classes moyennes-aisées (9%)	*4,5 millions*	*73 000 €*	*6 100 €*	*20%*
dont classes très aisées (1%)	*0,5 millions*	*363 000 €*	*30 300 €*	*11%*

Lecture: en 2010, les classes populaires (les 50% les plus pauvres) ont un revenu moyen annuel avant impôts de 18 000 euros par adulte (1 500 euros par mois) et gagnent collectivement 27% du revenu total des ménages, etc.
Source: C. Landais, T. Piketty & E. Saez, Pour une révolution fiscale, chapitre 1, p.33.
Voir www.revolution-fiscale.fr, annexe au chapitre 1 (l'estimation de la répartition des revenus permanents est biaisée sur la répartition au sein de la population de 18 à 65 ans travaillant à au moins 80% du plein temps).



La répartition des patrimoines en France en 2010

Groupe	Nombre de personnes adultes	Patrimoine moyen par adulte	Part dans le patrimoine total
Population totale	50 millions	182 000 €	100%
Classes populaires: Les 50% les plus pauvres	25 millions	14 000 €	4%
Classes moyennes: Les 40% du milieu	20 millions	154 000 €	34%
Classes aisées: Les 10% les plus riches	5 millions	1 128 000 €	62%
dont classes moyennes-aisées (9%)	*4,5 millions*	*768 000 €*	*38%*
dont classes très aisées (1%)	*0,5 millions*	*4 368 000 €*	*24%*

Lecture: en 2010, les classes populaires (les 50% les plus pauvres) ont un patrimoine moyen de 14 000 euros par adulte et détiennent collectivement 4% du patrimoine total des ménages.
Source: C. Landais, T. Piketty & E. Saez, Pour une révolution fiscale, chapitre 1, p.25.
Voir www.revolution-fiscale.fr, annexe au chapitre 1.

Two things are particularly striking in this discussion. One is how significantly different the French fiscal system is from the U.S. system. Income tax is less than 10% of income for all income levels. And the *cotisation* is a substantially larger share of total taxes than the Social Security tax in the U.S.

But the other striking thing is the significantly different perspective that these authors take on taxes, compared to almost all discussions of taxes in the U.S. They are fundamentally

concerned about the fairness of the tax burden; they care about progressivity; and they are concerned to prevent the ability of "les tres aisées" to exercise political influence in order to reduce their share. "Fiscal rigor" doesn't mean severe budget reductions and elimination of the social security net for French citizens; it means creating a tax system that is adequate to the spending commitments of the French state, and that is fair in its distribution of tax obligations across the whole of society.

I think most observers of French politics doubt that this kind of progressive and sweeping fiscal reform is in the cards in the coming decade. But it is at least encouraging that the issues are being raised.

The politics of cultural despair

Friday, January 28, 2011



The last century gave us far too many examples of the rise of extremism in mass societies -- both democratic and authoritarian. Some of the political mechanisms of extremist seizure of power are well known -- paramilitary force, extremist organizations, demogogic leaders, hyper-heated rhetoric, appeals to nationalism and racism, and inflammatory mass media. But it's also worth asking -- what is the cultural basis for the rise of various extremisms? What factors in the ideas, thoughts, and emotions of a population have sometimes led to the rise of extremist states -- fascism, ethnic cleansing, murderous nationalism, or deranged communism such as the killing fields of Cambodia? Does philosophy play a role in the rise of extremism?

For observers born since 1930 a natural place to raise this question is the rise of National Socialism in Germany. How could a party dedicated to an explicit programme of racism, repression, and murder have gained mass support and control of the state in Germany?

A particularly important early effort to answer this question was Fritz Stern's pathbreaking The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology (1961), now fifty years old. The book is a careful intellectual history; but it is more than that. It is an effort to link a set of philosophical ideas to a series of political developments that involved increasingly wide circles of German citizens. So it serves as one example of how we might think about the relationship between large cultural ideas and currents, and more specific developments in politics.

Stern opens the book with these words:

This is a study in the pathology of cultural criticism. By analyzing the thought and influence of three leading critics of modern Germany, this study will demonstrate the dangers and dilemmas of a particular type of cultural despair. Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck--their active lives spanning the years from the middle of the past century to the threshold of Hitler's Third Reich--attacked, often incisively and justly, the deficiencies of German culture and the German spirit. But they were more than critics of Germany's cultural crisis; they were its symptoms and victims as well. Unable to endure the ills which they diagnosed and which they had experienced in their own lives, they sought to become prophets who would point the way to a national rebirth. Hence, they propounded all manner of reforms, ruthless and idealistic, nationalistic and utopian. It was this leap from despair to utopia across all existing reality that gave their thought its fantastic quality. (1)
These three figures were important cultural voices in Germany, even though they were undistinguished within the academic world. Paul de Lagarde (1827-1891), Julius Langbehn (1851-1907), and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (1876-1925) were intellectual and cultural precursors for the ideology of National Socialism. They were harsh, vitriolic critics of modern German social life; they were anti-Semites; and they were wedded to a discourse of passion and hatred as devices for influencing their readers.

The central focus of this cultural criticism was the fact of ***modernity*** -- liberalism, secularism, Manchesterism, consumptionism, and individualism. These were conservative critics; they favored an earlier time that was more traditional, moral, hierarchical, and religious. They preferred villages and towns to cities; they preferred cultivated thinkers to merchants and professionals, and they feared the rise of the proletariat.

By liberalism they meant to encompass several ideas: individualism, self-interest, parliamentary government, and glorification of commerce and the market. And their criticisms were unswerving: they hoped to turn back all of the liberal democratic and industrial transformations that modern Europe was undergoing.

The movement did embody a paradox: its followers sought to destroy the despised present in order to recapture an idealized past in an imaginary future. They were disinherited conservatives, who had nothing to conserve, because the spiritual values of the past had largely been buried and the material remnants of conservative power did not interest them. They sought a breakthrough to the past, and they longed for a new community in which old ideas and institutions would once again command universal allegiance. (7)

The conservative revolutionaries denounced every aspect of the capitalistic society and its putative materialism. They railed against the spiritual emptiness of life in an urban, commercial civilization, and lamented the decline of intellect and virtue in a mass society. They attacked the press as corrupt, the political parties as the agents of national dissension, and the new rulers as ineffectual mediocrities. The bleaker their picture of the present, the more attractive seemed the past, and they indulged in nostalgic recollections of the uncorrupted life of earlier rural communities, when men were peasants and kings true rulers. (9-10)
In addition to their critique of a rising liberalism in Germany (and Europe more generally), these critics were also united in a virulent anti-Semitism. Their denunciations of the Jews became a common thread in Nazi propaganda in the 1920s and 1930s.

Stern makes the important point that these three writers depended on the emotions and

the passions rather than reason and argument to express themselves. "All three wrote with great fervor and passion. They condemned or prophesied, rather than exposited or argued, and all their writings showed that they despised the discourse of intellectuals, denied reason, and exalted intuition" (4). Here is a particularly important observation of the nature of this cultural criticism that appears to be relevant in our own time as well. Julien Benda, a liberal thinker, noted that political discourse "began to play the game of political passions.... Our age is indeed the age of the intellectual organization of political hatreds" (6).

Stern has two fundamental aims in this study. First, he hopes that the study of these three cultural critics will illuminate an important current of history: Germany's drift towards extremism and anti-Semitism.

This study, then, takes up the origins, content, and impact of an ideology which not only resembles national socialism, but which the National Socialists themselves acknowledged as an essential part of their legacy. But it will also point to another link, admittedly less tangible--to wit, that the Germanic critics in the peculiar tension between their lives and their ideological aspirations anticipate the type of malcontent who, in the 1920's, found a haven in the idealism of the Hitler movement. ... We may not have sufficiently reckoned with the politically exploitable discontent which for so long has been embedded in German culture. (5)

But second, the book is interested in popular culture as well. How did ordinary Germans fall prey to mobilization and propaganda based on nationalism, violence, and anti-Semitism? Stern tries to show through a detailed study of the cultural framework expressed by these thinkers, that we can also attempt to reconstruct the modes of popular consciousness that percolated through German society in these decades. These ultra-conservative currents helped to make even ordinary people susceptible to the efforts at mobilization that were directed towards them by the National Socialists.

Are there parallels in twentieth-century America? Stern thought there were, in 1961.

Cultural pessimism has a strong appeal in America today. As political conditions appear stable at home or irremediable abroad, American intellectuals have become concerned with the cultural problems of our society, and have substituted sociological or cultural analyses for political criticism. ... There is a discontent in the Western world that does not stem from economic want or from the threat of war; rather it springs from dissatisfaction with life in an urban and industrialized culture -- a dissatisfaction that the three critics discussed in this book felt and fostered. (13, 14-15)

Two elements seem especially relevant in today's political culture: the willingness of some voices in the political sphere to engage in the emotional hyperbole and hatred that were the stock-in-trade of these German critics; and the extremist language surrounding the rejection of "liberalism" that is to be found in the airwaves today. Today too we are confronted with a virulent rejection of many aspects of a "liberal" world, and an apparent yearning for an earlier (mythical) time when there was one defining moral-religious framework to which all of society subscribed.

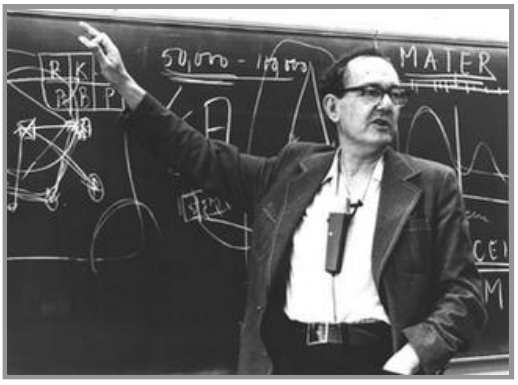
One of the greatest failures of German liberals and academics in the 1920s and 1930s was their inability -- perhaps even their unwillingness -- to make the positive case for a modern, liberal society. The values of justice, equality, citizenship, and mutual respect embodied through decent economic and political institutions need to be defended; and German thinkers fell short in this historical task in the early twentieth century. It is certainly important for Americans in the early twenty-first century to be more successful in

making this case.

(Here is Fritz Stern on Fora.tv:)

Herbert Simon's satisficing life

Sunday, January 30, 2011



Herbert Simon was a remarkably fertile thinker in the social and "artificial" sciences (The Sciences of the Artificial - 3rd Edition (1969, first edition)). His most celebrated idea was the notion of "satisficing" rather than "optimizing" or "maximizing" in decision-making; he put forward a theory of ordinary decision-making that conformed more closely to the ways that actual people reason rather than the heroic abstractions of expected utility theory.

Essentially the concept of satisficing takes the cost of collecting additional information into account as a decision maker searches for a solution to a problem -- where to eat for dinner, which university to attend, which product to emphasize in a company's short-term strategy. And the theory commends the idea that we are best served overall by accepting the "good-enough" solution rather than searching indefinitely for the best solution. Rather than attempting to inventory all possible choices available at a given point in time and assigning them utilities and probabilities, the satisficing theory recommends setting parameters for a problem of choice, and then selecting the first solution that comes along that satisfies these parameters. It means searching for a solution that is "good enough" rather than optimal.

And why not go for the optimal solution? Because the cost of collecting the additional information associated with a broader choice set may well exceed the total benefit of the current decision. This is obvious in the case of the decision of which restaurant to go to; slightly less obvious in the case of the decision of which university to attend; and perhaps flatly unpersuasive in the case of decisions where the outcome can influence life and death.

I've described the theory of satisficing in a little detail here for an unexpected reason: Simon took some interest in the art of autobiography, and it turns out that he interprets his own life as a series of satisficing decisions. His autobiography Models of My Life appeared in 1996, and it's an interesting narrative of the intellectual and personal choices that led Simon from Milwaukee to Pittsburgh and beyond.

The idea is particularly apt for Simon's view about how a life unfolds. He rejects the idea

that one's life has an overriding theme. He discusses the fact that the title of the book is a plural noun -- "*Models* of My Life".

There is a further reason for using the plural [models]. It is a denial -- a denial that a life, at least my life, has a central theme, a unifying thread running through it. True, there are themes (again the plural), some of the threads brighter or thicker or stronger than others. Perhaps clearest is the theme of the scientist and teacher, carrying on his persistent heuristic search, seeking the Holy Grail of truth about human decision making. In my case, even that thread is woven of finer strands: the political scientist, the organization theorist, the economist, the management scientist, the computer scientist, the psychologist, the philosopher of science. (xviii)

Rather than one underlying theme that underlies a person's biography and career, there are multiple choices, directions, and emphases -- that add up to a woven lifetime of contribution when the choices work out well.

Simon accepts the implication that this vision of a life presents: that there is no single "self" underlying all these changes and choices:

Which of the wanderers through these different mazes will step forward at the call for the real Herbert Simon? All of them; for the "real" self is an illusion. We live each hour in context, different contexts for different hours.... We act out our lives within the mazes in which Nature and society place us. (xviii-xix)

The analogy between daily decision-making and living a life is a direct one: instead of setting upon a course with very specific goals and objectives, and then taking the steps necessary to bring about the achievement of that system of goals, Simon is recommending a more local form of life decision-making. Build capacities, recognize opportunities, take risks, and build a life as a result of a series of local choices. It is a form of bounded rationality for living rather than an expression of a fully developed life plan. So we might say that Simon's "philosophy of living" is entirely consistent with his theory of bounded rationality.

There are a few real surprises in the book -- for example, a conversation between Simon and Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina in 1970. Simon was fascinated by Borges' use of the idea of a labyrinth in his novels, and wanted to find out from Borges how he was led to this family of metaphors. Simon himself was drawn to the idea of a series of choices as a maze -- incorporating the insight that there are always unexplored outcomes behind the avenues not taken. So a labyrinth is a good metaphor for choice within uncertainty and risk.

I have encountered many branches in the maze of my life's path, where I have followed now the left fork, now the right. The metaphor of the maze is irresistible to someone who has devoted his scientific career to understanding human choice. (xvii)

Here is a snippet of the conversation between Simon and Borges as quoted in the book:

SIMON: I want to know how it was that the labyrinth entered into your field of vision, into your concepts, so that you incorporated in your stories.

BORGES: I remember having seen an engraving of the labyrinth in a French book -- when I was a boy. It was a circular building without doors but with many windows. I used to gaze at this engraving and think that if I brought a loupe close to it, it would reveal the Minotaur.

SIMON: Did you see it?

BORGES: Actually my eyesight was never good enough. Soon I discovered something of the complexity of life, as if it were a game. In this I am not referring to chess.

...

SIMON: What is the connection between the labyrinth of the Minotaur and your labyrinth, which calls for continual choice? Does the analogy go beyond the general concept?

BORGES: When I write, I don't think in terms of teaching. I think that my stories, in some way, are given to me, and my task is to narrate them. I neither search for implicit connotations nor start out with abstract ideas; I am not one who plays with symbols. But if there is some transcendental explanation of one of my stories, it is not for me to discover it, that is the task of the critics and the readers.

And a final surprise -- it emerges from the conversation that Borges had read "a very interesting book" early in his life, Bertrand Russell's Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy -- not exactly the most predictable influence on the creator of magical realism. And Russell's mathematical logic was likewise a formative influence for Simon, at a comparably early age.

There is an interesting short section where Simon discusses one of the directions he did ***not*** take in his own personal career maze -- the step of trying to become a college president at Carnegie Mellon or elsewhere (262 ff.). Simon writes briefly about the reasons why this might have been a realistic aspiration for him -- a history of administrative competence at the department level and a stellar academic record. But he decided not to pursue the presidency at CMU:

However that may be, I did not seriously consider taking on the context. ... I have never regretted the decision, especially in view of Dick's stellar performance on the job, a performance made possible by a "deviousness" that our colleague Leland Hazard admiringly attributed to him, and that I surely did not possess. (263)

He adds that he didn't have the personality needed to cultivate the community of wealthy businessmen whose support would be essential to Carnegie: "In fact, the close association with the business community that is essential for effective performance as president of a university such as Carnegie Mellon would have been uncomfortable for me" (263).

But here is the way this discussion strikes me (as a person whose career ***did*** take him in that direction). Simon gives no evidence here of understanding even the most basic facts about this domain of choice: what the job of president actually is; what the qualities of personality and leadership are that would lead to success; and what the intellectual satisfactions might be in the event that he became a university president. He seems to be working from a very shallow stereotyped view of the job of university president. In other words, Simon had ***none*** of the information that would be needed to make an informed career choice about this option. And this suggests that his decision-making on this issue was narrowly bounded indeed -- driven by a few stereotyped assumptions that were probably a poor guide to the reality.

(Here is a lecture by Herbert Simon on organizations, public administration, and markets:)

Decision-making in complex systems

Tuesday, February 01, 2011



source: The Financial Ninja (link)

How should we make intelligent decisions in contexts in which the object of choice involves the actions of other agents whose choices jointly determine the outcome and where the outcome is unpredictable? Robert Axelrod and Michael Cohen address these issues in Harnessing Complexity: Organizational Implications of a Scientific Frontier. They define a complex adaptive system in something like these terms: a body of causal processes and agents whose interactions lead to outcomes that are unpredictable. So the interactions among agents often have unpredictable consequences; and the agents themselves adapt their behavior based on past experiences: "They interact in intricate ways that continually reshape their collective future." Here is how Axelrod and Cohen put their question:

In a world where many players are all adapting to each other and where the emerging future is extremely hard to predict, what actions should you take? (xi)

This book is about designing organizations and strategies in complex settings, where the full consequences of actions may be hard -- even impossible -- to predict. (2)

Complexity and chaos are often used interchangeably; but Axelrod and Cohen distinguish sharply between them in these terms:

Chaos deals with situations such as turbulence that rapidly become highly disordered and unmanageable. On the other hand, complexity deals with systems composed of many interacting agents. While complex systems may be hard to predict, they may also have a good deal of structure and permit improvement by thoughtful intervention. (xv)

Here is a simple current example -- an assembly of 1000 Egyptian citizens in January 2011, interested in figuring out what to do in light of their longstanding grievances and the example of Tunisia. Will the group erupt into defiant demonstration or dissolve into private strategies of self-preservation? The dynamics of the situation are fundamentally undetermined; the outcome depends on things like who speaks first, how later speakers are influenced by earlier speakers, whether the PA system is working adequately, which positions happen to have a critical mass of supporters, the degree to which the government can make credible threats of retaliation, the presence of experienced organizers, and a dozen other factors. So we cannot predict whether this group will move towards resistance or accommodation, even when we assume that all present have serious grievances against the Egyptian state.

The fact of path dependence comes into this understanding of complexity, in that the

order of actions by the agents can influence the outcome. So we could run the Egypt scenario forward multiple times and arrive at different outcomes repeatedly. We might imagine a tool along the lines of a Monte Carlo simulation that models the range of possible outcomes; and in the sorts of systems Axelrod and Cohen are interested in, the range of outcomes is very wide with no "modal" and most probable outcomes at the core.

The difficulty of prediction in the future development of a complex system derives in part from the adaptiveness of the agents who make it up; but it also derives from the fact of non-linearity of causation in complex systems. Small influences can have large effects; there is often a discontinuity between the magnitude and direction of a cause and its effect.

What makes prediction especially difficult in these settings is that the forces shaping the future do not add up in a simple, systemwide manner. Instead, their effects include nonlinear interactions among the components of the system. The conjunction of a few small events can produce a big effect if their impacts multiply rather than add. (14)

Decision theorists distinguish between situations of parametric rationality and strategic rationality. In the former the decision maker is playing against nature, with a fixed set of probabilities and causal properties; in the latter the decision maker is playing against and with other rational agents, and the outcome for each depends upon the choices made by all. Game theory offers a mathematical framework for analyzing strategic rationality, while expected utility theory is advanced as a framework for analyzing the problem of choice under risk and uncertainty. The fundamental finding of game theory is that there are equilibria for multi-person games, both zero-sum and non-zero-sum, for any game that can be formulated in the canonical game matrix of agents' strategies and joint outcomes. Whether those equilibria are discoverable for ordinary strategic reasoners is a separate question, so the behavioral relevance of the availability of an equilibrium set of strategies is limited. And here is the key point: neither parametric rationality nor equilibrium-based strategic rationality helps much in the problem of decision-making within a complex adaptive system.

The situation that Axelrod and Cohen describe here is an instance of strategic rationality, but it doesn't yield to the framework of mathematical game theory. This is because we can't attach payoffs to combinations of strategies for the separate agents; this follows from the unpredictability assumption built into the idea of complexity. And, second, complex adaptive systems are usually in a dynamic process of change, so that the system never attains an equilibrium state.

Axelrod and Cohen are hoping to provide counsel for how decision makers can "harness" complexity -- that is, how they can design policies and strategies that perhaps push a complex situation in a favorable direction, or that insulate an organization from the worst outcomes that the complex system may produce.

Harnessing complexity ... means deliberately changing the structure of a system in order to increase some measure of performance, and to do so by exploiting an understanding that the system itself is complex. (9)

Axelrod and Cohen make use of three high-level concepts to describe the development of complex adaptive systems: variation, interaction, and selection. Variation is critical here, as it is in evolutionary biology, because it provides a source of potentially successful innovation -- in strategies, in organizations, in rules of action. The idea of adaptation is central to their analysis -- in this case, adaptation and modification of strategies by agents in light of current and past success. Interaction occurs when agents

and organizations intersect in the application of their strategies -- often producing unforeseen consequences. (The strategy of open-source software development is one example that they look at, and the interactions that occurred as open-source innovations encountered closed-source innovations.) An organization or a population is best served, they argue, when there is a regular source of innovations (variations); when these innovations are implemented in the form of variant strategies; and when it is possible to cultivate more successful variations and to damp out less successful (selection). Here is how they summarize their view:

Agents, of a **variety of types**, use their **strategies**, in **patterned interaction**, with **each other** and with **artifacts**. **Performance measures** on the resulting events drive the **selection of agents** and/or **strategies** through processes of error-prone **copying** and **recombination**, thus changing the **frequencies** of the **types** within the **system**.

And they arrive at eight rules of thumb for "harnessing complexity" when it comes to organizations and social policies:

- Arrange organizational routines to generate a good balance between exploration and exploitation.
- Link processes that generate extreme variation to processes that select with few mistakes in the attribution of credit.
- Build networks of reciprocal interaction that foster trust and cooperation.
- Assess strategies in light of how their consequences can spread.
- Promote effective neighborhoods.
- Do not sow large failures when reaping small efficiencies.
- Use social activity to support the growth and spread of valued criteria.
- Look for shorter-term, finer-grained measures of success that can usefully stand in for longer-run, broader aims. (156-158)

So how should we understand these heuristics as a conclusion to this analysis? They function as an "operating manual" for leaders and policy makers attempting to bring about good effects within a population of agents demonstrating adaptive complexity. And perhaps these are plausible meta-strategies for intervening within a complex social system.

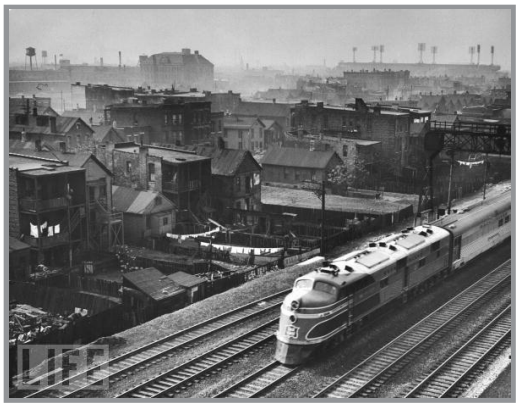
What is worrisome, though, is the implicit functionalism that seems to underlie the book: the idea that agents of good will and having the longterm best interests of the population in mind are making the rules. But what happened to the predators -- the organized crime figures, the drug lords, the conspirators, the predatorial businesses, the anti-democrats? Won't they too be looking to exploit (harness) the workings of complexity? Axelrod's earlier work on repeated prisoners' dilemmas explicitly took into account the availability of strategies designed to exploit the cooperators; and his work on cooperation emphatically makes the point that cooperation is often deployed for anti-social and predatory purposes (cartels, extortion rackets, ...) (The Evolution of Cooperation: Revised Edition). Shouldn't this counter-social agency be incorporated into this analysis of complex adaptive systems as well? As Charles Tilly points out, crime and piracy also depend upon "trust networks" and innovative forms of predation (Trust and Rule).

During the 1980s the Reagan administration wanted to create a "Star Wars" anti-missile shield, and some of their policy makers argued that we could solve the technical challenges because the U.S. had succeeded in putting a man on the moon. But critics of this military space strategy rejoined, "But the moon didn't fight back;" whereas Soviet scientists and engineers were fully capable of adapting their ICBM technologies to evade the defensive characteristics of a missile shield. There seems to be something of the same blind spot in this analysis of social complexity; predation and the common good are

in competition with each other, and neither has a decisive advantage.

Persistent racial inequalities in America

Thursday, February 03, 2011



Historian Thomas Sugrue is a national expert on the state of persistent racial inequalities in our nation today. His The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit set the standard for the field of recent urban history when it appeared in 1996. His most recent book, Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race, provides a vivid statement of his current views. The title refers to William Faulkner's line in *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is not dead. In fact it's not even past." It is a particularly apt metaphor for the status of race in America today.

The book addresses the often-heard view that President Obama's election demonstrates that we live in a post-racial society. The argument is that if the United States is able to elect an African-American president, then surely issues of racial prejudice are in the past. However, Sugrue provided current data on disparities of income, employment, education, residence, health, and wealth that demonstrate that structures in our country continue to reproduce grave racial disparities. By any measure, we are not post-racial.

Here are a few factual findings from the book:

The most persistent manifestation of racial inequality in the modern United States has been racial segregation in housing and education. From 1920 through 1990, patterns of black white segregation hardened in most of the United States, despite shifts in white attitudes about black neighbors, and despite the passage of local and state antidiscrimination laws and the enactment of Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act (1968) which prohibited housing discrimination nationwide. (101)

Persistent residential segregation compounded educational disparities. Beginning in the late 1970s, when courts began a thirty-year process of abandoning the mandate of *Brown v. Board of Education*, school districts around the country resegregated by race, especially by black and white. (103)

African Americans are far more likely than whites to be economically insecure. The statistics are grim. In 2006, the median household income of blacks was only 62 percent of that of whites. Blacks were much more likely than whites to be unemployed (black unemployment rates have remained one and a half to two times those of whites since the

1950s). (104-5)

Social scientists have documented employers discriminating against job applicants with comparable credentials when one has a "black" name or has a place of residence in a known "black" neighborhood. (105)

The starkest racial disparities in the United States are in wealth (a category that includes such assets as savings accounts, stocks, bonds, and especially real estate). In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau calculated that white households had a median net worth of $74,900, whereas black households had a median net worth of only $7,500. (105)

Another important indicator of quality of life is health. ... The racial and ethnic gaps in health and life expectancy are stark. The life expectancy of whites in 2004 was 78.3; for blacks, it was 73.1. ... In 2003, infant mortality rates were nearly 2.5 times as high for blacks as for whites. (107)

A couple of empirical sources are particularly central to Sugrue's argument. One is the 2007 book by William Julius Wilson and Richard Taub, There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial, Ethnic, and Class Tensions in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and Their Meaning for America, which provides quite a bit of empirical data about neighborhood racial attitudes in Chicago. Another crucial piece of empirical evidence that plays a large role in Sugrue's findings is a major ongoing social-science research project coordinated by the Russell Sage Foundation, the *Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality* (link). There are separate volumes on Detroit, Boston, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, and there is a synthesis volume that tries to draw conclusions from all the studies (Urban Inequality: Evidence from Four Cities (Multi City Study of Urban Inequality.)). The introductory chapter by Alice O'Connor is available on the website; link. Here are a few passages from the introduction:

Nowhere are these intertwined problems more vividly captured than in the complex economic, gender-based, and racial and ethnic divisions of contemporary urban America. In major cities nationwide, overall economic growth is accompanied by higher than average rates of unemployment and poverty, concentrated especially in low-income, working-class minority neighborhoods that have only recently begun to show signs of recovery following decades of steady decline (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 1999). Still, the low-skilled urban workforce, greatly expanded by the “end of welfare,” has little access to local jobs that provide living wages, employment security, and adequate benefits. (1)

Explaining these economic, spatial, and racial divisions is the central purpose of the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality, a unique inquiry launched in the early 1990s by an interdisciplinary team of social scientists with sponsorship from the Russell Sage and Ford foundations. Based on surveys of households and employers in the metropolitan areas of Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles, the study affords a comprehensive and systematic look at the roots of inequality in labor markets, residential segregation, and racial attitudes. (2)

The significance of race in urban inequality is to be found not in any single place but in various aspects, and at multiple levels, of social experience: in discriminatory behavior, policies, and institutional practices; in the structural segmentation of labor markets and residential space; and in the attitudes, stereotypes, and ideological belief systems through which people make sense of broader social conditions and determine their own policy preferences. Race has a deep and enduring historical significance as well, still visible in residential color lines constructed by years of racial exclusion, violence, and

overtly discriminatory policies; in the persistent racial gaps in education, skills, and capital that stem from opportunity denied; and in the mistrust between minorities and local law-enforcement agencies that has once again erupted around the issue of racial profiling. And race has significance as the basis of a color-coded sense of social hierarchy that affects individual attitudes and behavior, and that is embedded in social structure as well as in shared cultural norms. (5)

The essays in this volume do not tell a simple story. They point to intergroup attitudes, residential and industrial location, discriminatory practices, and the declining prospects for low-skilled workers as important, interlocking sources of inequality across metropolitan America. But they also point to several conclusions about race, both as a shaping force in the distribution of opportunity and as a variable in social scientific analysis. While not offered as a statement of consensus, they do advance the ongoing debate about race and inequality in important ways. (27)
This is careful social scientific research, and it contributes to a much better understanding of the mechanisms that produce and reproduce urban poverty and persistent racial gaps. These mechanisms are both structural and ideational; the processes that lead to discrimination in employment, for example, include both structural factors like urban transportation, and ideational factors such as racial stereotyping by recruiters.

So race continues to be a determining fact of life for many millions of Americans. But here is the other part of Sugrue's story: our public discourses, and our political process, are virtually silent about these facts. We simply do not honestly confront the realities of race, whether in electoral competition, in the media, or in other forms of public debate. And we need to.

Bourdieu's "field"

Saturday, February 05, 2011

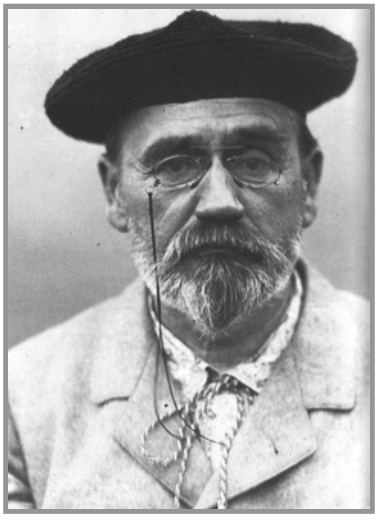


image: Emile Zola, 1902
How can sociology treat "culture" as an object of study and as an influence on other sociological processes? This is, of course, two separate questions. First, internally, is it possible to treat philosophy or literature as an embedded sociological process (a point raised by Jean-Louis Fabiani in his treatment of French philosophy (link))? Can we use

the apparatus to pull apart the sociology of the fashion industry?

And second, externally, can we give a rigorous and meaningful interpretation of "bringing culture back in" -- conceptualizing the ways that thought, experience, and the institutions and mental realities of culture impact other large social processes -- e.g. the rise of fascism (link)?

The problem here is to find ways of getting inside "culture" and decomposing it as a set of social, material, and semiotic practices. We need an account of some of the culture mechanisms through which voices develop, acquire validation, and are retransmitted. And we need concrete accounts of how this culture activity influences other socially important processes. Culture cannot be thought of as a monolith if we are to explain its development and trace out its historical influences; rather, we need something like an account of the microfoundations of culture.

One of the fertile voices on this question is that of Pierre Bourdieu. His core contribution is the idea of cultural life and production being situated in a "**field**." So what does Bourdieu mean by a field? Is this concept genuinely useful when we aim at providing a sociology of a literary tradition or a body of ideas like "cultural despair"?

One place where Bourdieu provides extensive analysis and application of this construct is in a collection published in 1993, The Field of Cultural Production, and especially in the title chapter, originally published in 1983. Here Bourdieu is primarily interested in literature and art, but it seems that the approach can be applied fruitfully to a wide range of cultural phenomena, including American conservativism and early twentieth century German colonialism. (George Steinmetz makes extensive use of this concept of the field in his analysis of the causes of specific features of German colonial regimes; The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa.)

The heart of Bourdieu's approach is "**relationality**" -- the idea that cultural production and its products are situated and constituted in terms of a number of processes and social realities. Cultural products and producers are located within "a space of positions and position-takings" (30) that constitute a set of objective relations.

> The space of literary or artistic position-takings, i.e. the structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in' the field -- literary or artistic works, of course, but also political acts or pronouncements, manifestos or polemics, etc. -- is inseparable from the space of literary or artistic positions defined by possession of a determinate quantity of specific capital (recognition) and, at the same time, by occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital. The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces. (30)

This description highlights another characteristic feature of Bourdieu's approach to social life -- an intimate intermixture of objective and subjective factors, or of structure and agency. (This intermixture is also fundamental to Bourdieu's theory of practice in Outline of a Theory of Practice.) Bourdieu typically wants to help us understand a sociological whole as a set of "doings" within "structures and powers." This is captured in the final sentence of the passage: a "field of forces" but also a "field of struggles". The field of the French novel in the 1890s established a set of objective circumstances to which the novelist was forced to adapt; but it also created opportunities for strategy and struggle for aspiring novelists. And in fact, Emile Zola, pictured above, did much to redefine aspects

of that field, both in ideas and in material institutions.

Fundamental to Bourdieu's view is that we can't understand the work of art or literature (or philosophy or science, by implication) purely in reference to itself. Rather, it is necessary to situate the work in terms of other points of reference in meaning and practice. So he writes that we can't understand the history of philosophy as a grand summit conference among the great philosophers (32); instead, it is necessary to situate Descartes within his specific intellectual and practical context, and likewise Leibniz. And the meaning of the work changes as its points of reference shift. "It follows from this, for example, that a position-taking changes, even when the position remains identical, whenever there is change in the universe of options that are simultaneously offered for producers and consumers to choose from. The meaning of a work (artistic, literary, philosophical, etc.) changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader" (30).

This fact of relationality and embeddedness raises serious issues of interpretation for later readers:

One of the major difficulties of the social history of philosophy, art or literature is that it has to reconstruct these spaces of original possibles which, because they were part of the self-evident givens of the situation, remained unremarked and are therefore unlikely to be mentioned in contemporary accounts, chronicles or memoirs. (31)

Here is how Bourdieu describes the intellectual field within which philosophy proceeds in a time and place:

In fact, what circulates between contemporary philosophers, or those of different epochs, are not only canonical texts, but a whole philosophical doxa carried along by intellectual rumour -- labels of schools, truncated quotations, functioning as slogans in celebration or polemics -- by academic routine and perhaps above all by school manuals (an unmentionable reference), which perhaps do more than anything else to constitute the 'common sense' of an intellectual generation. (32)

This background information is not merely semiotic; it is institutional and material as well. It includes "information about institutions -- e.g. academies, journals, magazines, galleries, publishers, etc. -- and about persons, their relationships, liaisons and quarrels, information about the ideas and problems which are 'in the air' and circulate orally in gossip and rumour" (32). So the literary product is created by the author; but also by the field of knowledge and institutions into which it is offered.

Another duality that Bourdieu rejects is that of internal versus external readings of a work of literature or art. We can approach the work of art from both perspectives -- the qualities of the work, and the social embeddedness that its production and reception reveal.

In defining the literary and artistic field as, inseparably, a field of positions and a field of position-takings we also escape from the usual dilemma of internal ('tautegorical') reading of the work (taken in isolation or within the system of works to which it belongs) and external (or 'allegorical') analysis, i.e. analysis of the social conditions of production of the producers and consumers which is based on the -- generally tacit -- hypothesis of the spontaneous correspondence or deliberate matching of production to demand or commissions. (34)

A key aspect of Bourdieu's conception of a field of cultural production is the material facts of power and capital. Capital here refers to the variety of resources, tangible and intangible, through which a writer or artist can further his/her artistic aspirations and achieve "success" in the field ("book sales, number of theatrical performances, etc. or honours, appointments, etc." (38)). And power in the cultural field is "heteronomous" -- it is both internal to the institutions of the culture field and external, through the influence of the surrounding field of power within which the culture field is located. Here is an intriguing diagram that Bourdieu introduces to represent the complex location of art

activity within the broader field of social power and the market.

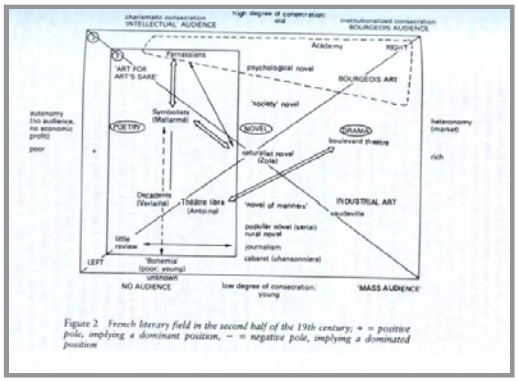


Figure 2 French literary field in the second half of the 19th century; + = positive pole, implying a dominant position, – = negative pole, implying a dominated position

These comments give us a better idea of what a "field" encompasses. It is a zone of social activity in which there are "creators" who are intent on creating a certain kind of cultural product. The product is defined, in part, by the expectations and values of the audience -- not simply the creator. The audience is multiple, from specialist connoisseurs to the mass public. And the product is supported and filtered by a range of overlapping social institutions -- galleries, academies, journals, reviews, newspapers, universities, patrons, sources of funding, and the market for works of "culture." It is also important to observe that we could have begun this inventory of components at any point; the creator does not define the field any more than the critic, the audience, or the marketplace.

I see some similarities between Bourdieu's conception of a field and the broad ideas of paradigm and research tradition in the history and sociology of science. Both ideas encompass a range of different kinds of things -- laboratories, journals, audiences, critics, and writers and scientists. Here Lakatos and Kuhn are relevant, but so are Bruno Latour and Wiebe Bijker. In each case there is some notion of rules of assessment -- explicit or tacit. And in each case we are given breadth enough to consider the social "determinants" of the cultural product at one end -- economy, institutions of training and criticism -- and some notion of the relative autonomy of the text or object at the other (truth and warrant, beauty and impact).

The point mentioned above about the validity and compatibility of both internal and external analysis of a work of art is equally important in the sociology of science: to identify some of the social conditions surrounding the process of scientific research does not mean that we cannot arrive at judgments of truth and warrant for the products of scientific research. (This point has come up previously in a discussion of Robert Merton's sociology of science (link).)

This is a very incomplete analysis of Bourdieu's concept of the field; but it should give an idea of the leverage that Bourdieu provides in framing a scheme of analysis for culture and ideas as concrete sociological factors and objects of study. Certainly Bourdieu's writings on these subjects -- especially in The Field of Cultural Production -- repay close reading by sociologists interested in broadening their frameworks for thinking about culture. (Jeremy Lane's Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction is a good introduction to Bourdieu's sociology, though it doesn't give much attention to this particular topic.)

Social Science History Association call for papers

Sunday, February 06, 2011



SSHA CALL FOR PAPERS Macrohistorical Dynamics Network

36th Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association
Boston, Massachusetts 17-20 November 2011
Submission Deadline: 15 February 2011

"Generation to Generation"

We invite you to take part in Macrohistorical Dynamics (MHD) panels of the 36th annual meeting of the Social Science History Association, November 17-20, 2011 in Boston. For more information on the meeting as well as the call for proposals, please refer to the SSHA website:
www.ssha.org
The deadline for paper and/or panel submissions is **February 15, 2011**.
The members of the Social Science History Association share a common interest in interdisciplinary and systematic approaches to historical research.
The thematic topic of the 2011 annual meeting is “Generation to Generation” – a theme that works very well with the research interests of many of the scholars involved in the Macrohistorical Dynamics network.
Macrohistorical Dynamics (MHD) is an interdisciplinary social science research field that focuses on problems of large-scale, comparative historical inquiry. Contributors to the field have brought perspective on a wide variety of problem areas, including Eurasian comparisons; macro- and historical sociology; comparative histories; world history; world-system analysis; comparative study of civilizations; philosophy of history; and studies of long-term socio-ecological, technological, demographic, cultural, and political trends and transformations. The Macrohistorical Dynamics network brings a rigorous perspective to bear on questions having to do with “large” history.
Possible topics that illustrate some of the general themes of Macrohistorical Dynamics

include …

- Comparative Methods in Macrohistory
- Eurasian comparisons
- Large-scale historical causes: climate, population, geography
- Cultural and National Identities in Large-scale Historical Change
- Theory in Macro-history: Are There Successful Macrosociological Theories?
- Macro-, Meso-, Micro- in Historical Explanations
- Empires and Peoples
- Globalization and World Cities
- Social Evolution and Systemic Transformations in World History

The list of MHD panel themes for 2011 is open, and we encourage you to submit proposals for paper topics or panel themes.

SSHA requests that submissions be made by means of its web conference management system. Paper title, brief abstract, and contact information should be submitted on the site www.ssha.org, where the general SSHA 2011 call for papers is also available. (If you haven't used the system previously you will need to create an account, which is a very simple process.) Here is the direct link for submissions:

http://conference.ssha.org/

The online system is now accepting submissions. If you have any questions, please contact either of the MHD co-chairs (Peter Perdue, James Lee, Dan Little).

NOTE: There is an SSHA rule concerning book sessions. For a book session to proceed, the author (or at least one of multiple authors) MUST be present. Proposals for book sessions should only be submitted if there is high confidence that the author will be able to travel to Boston November 17-20, 2011.

Visit the SSHA Facebook site at http://www.facebook.com/pages/Social-Science-History-Association/146259262094506?ref=ts&v=wall.

Feel free to contact the MHD network organizers for further information.

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History of economic thought and the present

Monday, February 07, 2011



What is the relationship between the history of economic thought and contemporary economics? There are polar views on this issue. At one extreme, it is sometimes held that the history of economics, like the history of physics, is irrelevant to contemporary theory and analysis. Alfred North Whitehead is quoted with approval: "A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost" ('The Organization of Thought'. *Science*, 1916(22) : 409–19). Where useful analytical or theoretical insights were put forward in the past, they have been incorporated into more general theories; and the fine grain of how Marshall or Pareto constructed his economics is simply not pertinent to contemporary economics. This position does not necessarily dismiss the value of the discipline of the history of economic thought (though it is interesting to note how uncommon it is for research departments of economics to include faculty lines in the history of economic thought). It simply says that this discipline is irrelevant to contemporary knowledge of how an economy works. Put brutally: there is nothing to learn from the history of economic thought for improving our understanding of contemporary economic realities.

A position at the other end of the spectrum holds that the history of economic thought is indeed relevant to contemporary economic theory and analysis. In particular, we can gain new insights into the contemporary global economy by reconsidering and developing theories that fall in the category of "alternative economics" -- e.g. Marx, Polanyi, Georgescu-Roegen, or even Malthus. The rationale here is that economics is an open-textured field of thought today, with some threads of analysis deeply and fully developed, others left fallow, and yet others still undiscovered. If the scientific challenge of economics is to provide hypotheses, theories, and modes of analysis that permit us to understand the behavior of a modern economy – then modesty and recent experience should convince us that there are major gaps in our knowledge.

This in turn suggests that it is likely enough that there are large perspectives within the history of economic thought that have not been adequately developed and assessed. There is a great deal of path dependence in the development of economics as a discipline and profession (link); and there are identifiable turning points where we can judge with confidence that themes that were eliminated at a certain time would have led to a substantially different intellectual system had they persisted. So careful work in the history of economic thought is indeed relevant to improving our current understanding of a complex economy. (See several earlier posts that illustrate these points; link, link.)

A limited way of taking this latter position to heart is to return to some of the early economists in order to reformulate their basic insights in more adequate theoretical and mathematical ways. Pierro Sraffa did some of this work with regard to Ricardo in Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities : Prelude to a Critique of Economic Theory. Michio Morishima illustrates this approach in his books on Ricardo (Ricardo's Economics: A General Equilibrium Theory of Distribution and Growth) and Marx (Marx's Economics: A dual theory of value and growth). And John Roemer does similar work by returning to Marx's theory of exploitation and finding alternative analytics leading to essentially the same conclusions that Marx reached in A General Theory of Exploitation and Class. In each case, modern economic analytical tools are used to reformulate the theories and insights of the earlier economist.

The harder question, though, is whether a reconsideration of the history of economic thought can lead to fundamentally ***different*** frameworks of thought for economics. Is there a place for "political economy" in our contemporary discipline of economics? What about a Polanyian economics? Should we reconsider the relevance of ethnography for economic theorizing? And, of course, are there parts of Marx's economics which are once again relevant to our understanding of contemporary economic institutions?

This issue comes up in other areas of the social sciences as well, of course. Paul Adler addresses the issue of the relevance of the history of the social sciences for contemporary research in his introduction to The Oxford Handbook of Sociology and Organization Studies: Classical Foundations (link). Adler makes a strong case for why the classics of sociology remain relevant for the discipline and, indeed, provide a powerful resource for trying to understand the most current social processes. Here is a description which works equally well for the history of economics:

This trend bodes badly for the intellectual development of organization studies. As Jeffrey Alexander (1987), Art Stinchcombe (1982), and others have argued, social sciences—as distinct from natural sciences—are considerably enriched by rereadings of their classics. (5)
An important point that Adler makes is that the social sciences have historically defined their research topics in close relationship to important contemporary social problems; whereas there is a tendency for contemporary social science research to define research agendas around a more "academic" set of priorities. Attention to the history of the social sciences can lead us back to a better set of research priorities.

The contributors to this volume share a concern that organization studies reconnect with broader social issues. Since ours is a society of organizations, many of these big issues are directly organizational, as evidenced by the headlines of the daily news: globalization, outsourcing, the pressure of financial markets on industrial firms, new technologies that obsolete old organizations, the fate of the individual, and the possibility of collective agency in the face of massive systemic forces of change, and so on.

The discrepancy between this list and the list of topics in recent organization studies research is both saddening and troubling. Saddening, because it represents a narrowing of scope, ambition, and concern compared to the founders of the field. Troubling, because this narrowing saps the vitality of the field. A field that hides its head in the sand when its ostensible subject matter is undergoing such massive turbulence is a field that risks losing any credibility. Moreover, it risks losing its ‘franchise’, its legitimacy as a key discipline in the broader public’s effort to make sense of these changes. (6)
These comments seem equally relevant to contemporary economic research as well.

Persistent high unemployment, for example, is both a huge social problem and an unresolved theoretical issue -- whether in Milan in the 1950s or in Detroit in 2011.

So -- given the richness of debates and theories that have taken place in the past two centuries of economic reasoning; given the variety of approaches to economic institutions and mechanisms that have been put forward during that history; and given the unresolved challenges we face in understanding and guiding a complex modern economy -- surely the careful study of the history of economic thought will repay the effort we give it.

Is there a revolution underway in Egypt?

Wednesday, February 09, 2011



source: *Guardian*, February 8, 2011

Is what is going on in Egypt today a "revolution"? What about Tunisia? And how about the Georgian "Rose" Revolution (2003) or the Philippine Yellow Revolution of 1986? Do these social and political conflicts and outcomes add up to a "revolution" in those societies? Are they analogous in any way to other revolutions in the post-World War II period -- e.g. Cuba, Nicaragua, Zimbabwe?

In the case of Tunisia, the world witnessed several things: large, sustained street demonstrations by tens of thousands of people demanding the resignation of Tunisia's president; tactics of repression and intimidation by the state intended to quiet the protests; an unexpected ability of the population to sustain its demonstrations; and the eventual flight of the president from the country. We also witnessed the establishment of an interim government that was nominally committed to free elections within a reasonable timeframe -- though we don't yet know how that process will unfold. So we saw a popular movement aiming to topple a dictator and demanding institutional changes in government; we saw the downfall of the dictator; and we saw an apparent commitment to establish the institutional reforms that had been demanded. Does all of this add up to a "revolution"?

This is as much a conceptual question as it is an empirical one. What do we mean by "revolution"? Is there a reasonably clear and uncontroversial definition that would allow us to classify various uprisings and changes as governments as "revolution" or not? Let's look at the way that a number of recent theorists have dealt with the concept of revolution. Here are three, with rather different approaches: Samuel Huntington, Theda Skocpol, and Jack Goldstone. Each of them seems to capture something important about the way we think about the idea of revolution.

Samuel Huntington offers a very clear definition of revolution in "Revolution and Political Order", collected in Jack Goldstone's Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies:

A revolution is a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activity and policies. Revolutions are thus to be distinguished from insurrections, rebellions, revolts, coups, and wars of independence. (39)

A full-scale revolution thus involves the rapid and violent destruction of existing political institutions, the mobilization of new groups into politics, and the creation of new political institutions. The sequence and the relations among these three aspects may vary from one revolution to another. (40)
In Huntington's view, revolution usually unfolds from collapse of the state to the emergence of a new political group or elite capable of seizing and institutionalizing power.

If no group is ready and able to establish effective rule following the collapse of the old regime, many cliques and social forces struggle for power. The struggle gives rise to the competitive mobilization of new groups into politics and makes the revolution revolutionary. Each group of political leaders attempts to establish its authority and in the process either develops a broader base of popular support than its competitors or falls victims to them. (41)

The two prerequisites for revolution are, first, political institutions incapable of providing channels for the participation of new social forces in politics and of new elites in government, and secondly, the desire of social forces, currently excluded from politics, to participate therein, this desire normally arising frlom the group's feeling that it needs certain symbolic or material gains which it can achieve only by pressing its demands in the political sphere. (45)
Huntington's approach to revolution, then, emphasizes the grievances and demands of the population and the rigidity or flexibility of political institutions, and it highlights the sweeping character of the changes, political, social, and ideological, that resulted.

Next, consider Theda Skocpol conception of a "social revolution" in States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China:
Social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below. Social revolutions are set apart from other sorts of conflicts and transformative processes above all by the combination of two coincidences: the coincidence of societal structural change with class upheaval; and the coincidence of political with social transformation. In contrast, rebellions, even when successful, may involve the revolt of subordinate classes -- but they do not eventuate in structure change. Political revolutions transform state structures but not social structures, and they are not necessarily accomplished through class conflict. And processes such as industrialization can transform social structures without necessarily bringing about, or resulting from, sudden political upheavals or basic political-structural changes. What is unique to social revolution is that basic changes in social structure and in political structure occur together in a mutually reinforcing fashion. And these changes occur through intense sociopolitical conflicts in which class struggles play a key role. (4-5)
Several things are evident in this paragraph. First, Skocpol is not offering a general

definition of revolution here, but rather a sub-category, the "social revolution." A ***social*** revolution involves both significant transformation of political structure and major change of social structure. It is both political (having to do with the institutions of the state) and social (having to do with the basic relations of property and class that exist in society). She does presuppose that there is such a thing as a purely political revolution; but she indicates that she is not particularly interested in this category of change. Second, she postulates that social revolutions derive from a duality of types of grievances as well: grievances about the economic structure (property, class, and inequality) and the political structure (the institutions through which a dominant group exercises power and coercion over the rest). So a social revolution derives from demands for social as well as political change, and it results in largescale structural changes in both social and political institutions.

Jack Goldstone is a historical sociologist who has written very extensively on revolution in the past decade or so. His Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World (1991) offers an innovative interpretation of several modern revolutions -- the English Revolution, the French Revolution, and state breakdowns in the Ottoman Empire and Ming-Qing China. So let's look at Goldstone's way of conceiving of revolutions.

It turns out that Goldstone doesn't really place much weight on "revolution." Instead, he gives conceptual priority to the idea of "state breakdown" over the more complex concept of revolution.

I shall refer to the revolutions and rebellions examined in this book as cases of state breakdown. By state breakdown I mean a particular combination of events, but not quite a revolution. (7-8)
He frames his intellectual task as that of explaining why there were waves of periods of state breakdown in modern European and Asian history. Revolution is a consequence of state breakdown rather than an event having its own historical dynamic. So what is state breakdown? Goldstone doesn't give a developed analytical discussion of this concept; but it presumably encompasses fiscal breakdown (inability to collect sufficient taxes to maintain the state's actions); military and police breakdown (inability to marshall sufficient manpower to quell foreign and domestic enemies); and ideological breakdown (inability to maintain the loyalty and adherence of the subject population).

Here is Goldstone's definition of the state:

By "the state" I mean the institutions of centralized national-level rule-making and rule-enforcing power, including the individuals who controlled those institutions when acting in their official capacities. (4)
And "breakdown":

State breakdown generally involved the collapse of the central authority's ability to dominate in a confrontation with other politically powerful actors, rather than the breakdown of all political institutions. (4-5)
So -- what about Tunisia and Egypt? It seems that none of these three conceptual frameworks for revolution would classify Tunisia and Egypt as revolutions. Neither is a "social revolution" by Skocpol's definition. There is no indication of major change in the system of property and class, either demanded or forthcoming -- even if there are economic reforms that make life a little better for poor people. And the anti-government popular movement does not seem to have been largely driven by under-class interests; rather, the demands seem largely to be centered on grievances about the misuse of

government power and corruption of the state that are of interest across almost all segments of society.

Second, neither appears to represent the situation of "state breakdown" in Goldstone's sense. Up until the street demonstrations began to grow and to represent a credible and sustainable social movement of opposition, no expert observer would have said that Tunisia or Egypt was suddenly losing its ability to control society, collect taxes, or run the government's operations. So the dramatic political events in Tunisia and Egypt did not result from "state breakdown."

Finally, Tunisia and Egypt do not appear to fit Huntington's definition either. These movements have not been particularly violent -- instead, they depend on "people's power" for their political force. And they don't seem to have resulted in the kinds of sweeping changes of social, political, and ideological structures that Huntington postulates either. We don't know precisely where things will end up in either Tunisia or Egypt; but the case of the Philippines is well known, and only fairly superficial political institutional changes have persisted, with virtually no change in the basic social-property relations that govern ordinary people's lives. What is more congruent to Tunisia and Egypt is Huntington's observation about the rigidity of certain political systems: in neither Tunisia nor Egypt was there an avenue for effective political expression and change for non-elites, over a three-decade period. So these regimes were neither inclusive nor accountable; as a result, they had no way of containing the growing discontent in the population.

Perhaps the most we can say about Tunisia and Egypt is fairly descriptive: these were instances of governmental change forced by a largely spontaneous social movement that erupted into the streets, with very little organization or leadership. Promises of political reform were made in response to the demonstrations, and if these promises are kept, then the movement will have produced some degree of political reform in addition to the successful ouster of the dictator. So popular movements can push the governments of Tunisia and Egypt in the direction of more inclusive democratic political institutions. But this process, and these limited outcomes of political change, seem to fall far short of the idea of "revolution." And, along with the realism that Huntington often expresses about this sort of process, it is entirely possible that these transformations will be hijacked by other groups as events unfold, so that their progressive political goals will be frustrated.

Unfortunately, though, we don't have a convenient umbrella term for this kind of political transition. The closest I can come is something like this: these are people-powered processes of forced political reform, intended to lead to institutions that are more inclusive and more accountable than the dictatorships they replace. They are "people-power" political transformations, not revolutions.

Democracy in a polarized society

Sunday, February 13, 2011



What are some of the institutional arrangements that can work to preserve a functioning democracy in a society with extensive inequalities of wealth and power?

This is a key question in part because we can easily see the factors that work against the democratic outcome. A Berlusconi in Italy is capable of dominating the political institutions in his country through his wealth and control of a media empire. An Abhisit in Thailand is able to maintain his political power through his reliance on the support of the armed forces and their willingness to use force against popular movements like the Redshirts (link). And the sham democracy resulting from elections rigged by Burma's junta last fall demonstrates how the generals can exert their rule through and behind ostensibly "electoral" legislative institutions.

These questions are most relevant today because of the people's movements in Tunisia and Egypt. But they are also relevant in many of the "semi-democracies" in the world today -- for example, Putin's Russia, Georgia, and Uzbekistan. In each case a strongman and his political organization are able to intimidate opponents and govern through a charade of elections. There are some of the trappings of democracy -- elections, parties, legislatures -- but there is the reality of authoritarian rule backed ultimately by the threat of violence -- against journalists, against the opposition, and against the people if they bring their politics into the street. And behind all is the reality of the plutocrats -- the wealth holders whose property originates in privileged access to the state and depends on the state for its continuation.

An idealized conception of democracy might go along these lines. The population as a whole is entitled to decide the basic issues confronting the nation. Individuals have an unencumbered right to form and express their opinions about the issues of the day. Individuals have the right to join and support political organizations (parties) whose program they wish to support. Individuals and organizations have the right to compete for political office, legislative and executive. An elected legislative body has the authority to enact legislation. All parties in society are fundamentally committed to supporting the constitutionally defined democratic processes, whether or not their preferences prevail. No party has the ability to overturn the outcomes of democratic competition. And no group has such a concentration of resources that it is able to dominate political outcomes.

These assumptions are idealized in a variety of ways, but I think they capture our general intuitions about a functioning democracy.

These are simple assumptions. But they are incredibly demanding in the context of many historical circumstances. It is almost always true that there are groups that have very

strong material interests in one set of outcomes over another and have access to resources that would permit them to go extra-constitutional. They may use money to corrupt the process; they may support paramilitary organizations and militias to protect their interests; and they may form alliances with the military and police to gain their will. (El Salvador in the 1980s is a terrible but apt example.)

So given these class-based factors that threaten to destabilize and undermine an emerging democracy, what countervailing factors exist that can help to secure an emerging democracy? There seem to be several.

First, an independent press (and Internet news and communications world) can serve as a check on anti-democratic and corrupt usurpation of the democratic process.

Second, a broadly shared public commitment to constitutional procedures can help to reduce the likelihood of anti-democratic seizure of power, whether by leaders or the military.

Third, a strong ethical conviction within the officer corps of the need for constitutionality in the conduct of the military can reduce the likelihood of intervention in politics by the army.

Fourth, a tradition of a neutral and independent judiciary can constrain the emergence of anti-democratic leaders.

Fifth, and most important, the citizenry can remain vigilant and courageous in the face of corruption and anti-democratic actions by government, legislators, and power-holders. Citizens can return to the streets when their government deviates from constitutionality and democracy.

None of this makes it seem as though the creation of a functioning democracy is easy work or a process that inevitably leads to success. In fact, it suggests the contrary: that polarization, severe inequalities of wealth and power, and the existence of a military with entrenched economic interests in an authoritarian society make the attainment of a genuinely citizen-centered democracy inordinately difficult.

The best hope for a democratic Egypt, it seems, is the existence of far-sighted groups of democratic activists who can help create the institutions of individual participation and governance that democracy requires; and who can use the tools available to them (including the publicity of the Internet and political organizations of the masses of Egyptians) to create a working constitution and the institutions and loyalties that will support it.

These questions fall within what might be called "applied theory of democracy" rather than ideal theory. Adam Przeworski is a political scientist who has made particularly incisive contributions to this aspect of the study of political institutions, especially in the context of emerging democracies. Particularly useful are Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government (2010) and Capitalism and Social Democracy (1986).

Thinking about disaster

Tuesday, February 15, 2011



Charles Perrow is a very talented sociologist who has put his finger on some of the central weaknesses of the American social-economic-political system. He has written about corporations (Organizing America: Wealth, Power, and the Origins of Corporate Capitalism), technology failure (Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies), and organizations (Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay). (Here is an earlier post on his historical account of the corporation in America; link.) These sound like very different topics -- but they're not, really. Organizations, power, the conflict between private interests and the public good, and the social and technical causes of great public harms have been the organizing themes of his research for a very long time.

His current book is truly scary. In The Next Catastrophe: Reducing Our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters he carefully surveys the conjunction of factors that make 21st-century America almost uniquely vulnerable to major disasters -- actual and possible. Hurricane Katrina is one place to start -- a concentration of habitation, dangerous infrastructure, vulnerable toxic storage, and wholly inadequate policies of water and land use led to a horrific loss of life and a permanent crippling of a great American city. The disaster was foreseeable and foreseen, and yet few effective steps were taken to protect the city and river system from catastrophic flooding. And even more alarming -- government and the private sector have taken almost none of the prudent steps after the disaster that would mitigate future flooding.

Perrow's analysis includes natural disasters (floods, hurricanes, earthquakes), nuclear power plants, chemical plants, the electric power transmission infrastructure, and the Internet -- as well as the threat of deliberate attacks by terrorists against high-risk targets. In each case he documents the extreme risks that our society faces from a combination of factors: concentration of industry and population, lax regulation, ineffective organizations of management and oversight, and an inability on the part of Congress to enact legislation that seriously interferes with the business interests of major corporations even for the purpose of protecting the public.

His point is a simple one: we can't change the weather, the physics of nuclear power, or the destructive energy contained in an LNG farm; but we can take precautions today that significantly reduce the possible effects of accidents caused by these factors in the future. His general conclusion is a very worrisome one: our society is essentially unprotected from major natural disasters and industrial accidents, and we have only very slightly increased our safety when it comes to preventing deliberate terrorist attacks.

This book has been about the inevitable inadequacy of our efforts to protect us from major disasters. It locates the inevitable inadequacy in the limitations of formal

organizations. We cannot expect them to do an adequate job in protecting us from mounting natural, industrial, and terrorist disasters. It locates the avoidable inadequacy of our efforts in our failure to reduce the size of the targets, and thus minimize the extent of harm these disasters can do. (chapter 9)

A specific failure in our current political system is the failure to construct an adequate and safety-enhancing system of regulation:

Stepping outside of the organization itself, we come to a third source of organizational failure, that of *regulation*. Every chapter on disasters in this book has ended with a call for better regulation and re-regulation, since we need both new regulations in the face of new technologies and threats and the restoration of past regulations that had disappeared or been weakened since the 1960s and 1970s. (chapter 9)

The central vulnerabilities that Perrow points to are systemic and virtually ubiquitous across the United States -- ***concentration*** and ***centralization***. He is very concerned about the concentration of people in high-risk areas (flood and earthquake zones, for example); he is concerned about the centralized power wielded by mega-organizations and corporations in our society; and he is concerned about the concentration of highly dangerous infrastructure in places where it puts large populations at risk. He refers repeatedly to the risk posed by the transport by rail of huge quantities of chlorine gas through densely populated areas -- 90 tons at a time; the risk presented by LNG and propane storage farms in areas vulnerable to flooding and consequent release or explosion; the lethal consequences that would ensue from a winter-time massive failure of the electric power grid.

Perrow is an organizational expert; and he recognizes the deep implications that follow from the inherent obstacles that confront large organizations, both public or private. Co-optation by powerful private interests, failure of coordination among agencies, lack of effective communication in the preparation of policies and emergency responses -- these organizational tendencies can reduce organizations like FEMA or the NRC to almost complete inability to perform their public functions.

Organizations, as I have often noted, are tools that can be used by those within and without them for purposes that have little to do with their announced goals. (Kindle loc, 1686)

Throughout the book Perrow offers careful, detailed reviews of the effectiveness and consistency of the government agencies and the regulatory legislation that have been deployed to contain these risks. Why was FEMA such an organizational failure? What's wrong with the Department of Homeland Security? Why are chronic issues of system safety in nuclear power plants and chemical plants not adequately addressed by the corresponding regulatory agencies? Perrow goes through these examples in great detail and demonstrates the very ordinary social mechanisms through which organizations lose effectiveness. The book serves as a case-study review of organizational failures.

Perrow's central point is stark: the American political system lacks the strength to take the long-term steps it needs to in order to mitigate the worst effects of natural (or intentional) disasters that are inevitable in our future. We need consistent investment for long-term benefits; we need effective regulation of powerful actors; and we need long-term policies that mitigate future disasters. But so far we have failed in each of these areas. Private interests are too strong, an ideology of free choice and virtually unrestrained use of property leads to dangerous residential and business development, and Federal and state agencies lack the political will to enact the effective regulations that would be necessary to raise the safety threshold in dangerous industries and developments. And,

of course, the determined attack on "government regulations" that has been underway from the right since the Reagan years just further worsens the ability of agencies to regulate these powerful businesses -- the nuclear power industry, the chemical industry, the oil and gas industry, ...

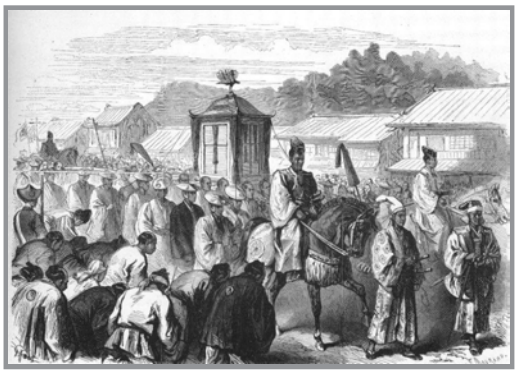
One might think that the risks that Perrow describes are fairly universal across modern societies. But Perrow notes that these problems seem more difficult and fundamental in the United States than in Europe. The Netherlands has centuries of experience in investing in and regulating developments having to do with the control of water; European countries have managed to cooperate on the management of rivers and flood plains; and most have much stronger regulatory regimes for the high risk technologies and infrastructure sectors.

The book is scary, and we need to pay attention to the social and natural risks that Perrow documents so vividly. And we need collectively to take steps to realistically address these risks. We need to improve the organizations we create, both public and private, aimed at mitigating large risks. And we need to substantially improve upon the reach and effectiveness of the regulatory systems that govern these activities. But Perrow insists that improving organizations and leadership, and creating better regulations, can only take us so far. So we also need to reduce the scope of damage that will occur when disaster strikes. We need to design our social system for "soft landings" when disasters occur. Fundamentally, his advice is to decentralize dangerous infrastructure and to be much more cautious about development in high-risk zones.

Given the limited success we can expect from organizational, executive, and regulatory reform, we should attend to reducing the damage that organizations can do by reducing their size. Smaller organizations have a smaller potential for harm, just as smaller concentrations of populations in areas vulnerable to natural, industrial, and terrorist disasters present smaller targets. (chapter 9)
If owners assume more responsibility for decisions about design and location -- for example, by being required to purchase realistically priced flood or earthquake insurance -- then there would be less new construction in hurricane alleyways or high-risk earthquake areas. Rather than integrated mega-organizations and corporations providing goods and services, Perrow argues for the effectiveness of networks of small firms. And he argues that regulations and law can be designed that give the right incentives to developers and home buyers about where to locate their businesses and homes, reflecting the true costs associated with risky locations. Realistically priced mandatory flood insurance would significantly alter the population density in hurricane alleys. And our policies and regulations should make a systematic effort to disperse dangerous concentrations of industrial and nuclear materials wherever possible.

Steve Pincus on revolution

Saturday, February 19, 2011



Steve Pincus offers a sweeping and compelling reinterpretation of the English Revolution in 1688: The First Modern Revolution. Along the way he provides a review of existing theories of revolution -- Skocpol, Huntington, Barrington Moore, and Goldstone, in particular (chapter 2). Pincus's definition of revolution goes along these lines:

Revolutions thus constitute a structural and ideological break from the previous regime. They entail changes to both the political and socioeconomic structures of a polity. They involve an often violent popular movement to overturn the previous regime. Revolutions change the political leadership and the policy orientations of the state. And revolutionary regimes bring with them a new conception of time, a notion that they are beginning a new epoch in the history of the state and its society. (kindle loc 549)

Pincus criticizes each of the prevailing theories of revolution. Fundamentally Pincus's criticism is that these theories share a common error of conceptualization: they work on the assumption that revolutions are the outcome of a conflict between a rigid, conservative, and exhausted state, on the one hand, and a movement of modernizers, on the other. Tocqueville embodies this assumption in his own history of the French Revolution -- the defenders of the *Ancien regime* are defeated by economic and social reformers (Ancien Regime and the French Revolution). But Pincus argues that the historical reality was quite different, in France, Russia, China, the Ottoman Empire, and England.

In all cases the old regime had ceased to exist before the revolution. Revolutions, then, do not pit modernizing elements against defenders of the traditional order. Instead revolutions occur only after the regime in power has set itself on a modernizing course. State modernization itself cannot occur without prior socioeconomic modernization. But that socioeconomic modernization is a necessary though not a sufficient cause of state modernization. It is for that reason that revolutions are the often-violent working out of competing state modernization programs. (kindle loc 613)

So it is fissures and catalysts created by the state's own processes of modernization that create the impetus towards revolution, according to Pincus. But what is modernization? Here is Pincus's brief account:

By state modernization I mean a self-conscious effort by the regime to transform itself in fundamental ways. State modernization will usually include an effort to centralize and bureaucratize political authority, an initiative to transform the military using the most up-to-date techniques, a program to accelerate economic growth and shape the contours of society using the tools of the state, and the deployment of techniques allowing the state to gather information about and potentially supporess social and political activities taking place in a wide range of social levels and geographical locales within the polity. (kindle loc 613)

But not all modernizing states result in revolution; so what factors make revolution more likely? Pincus mentions Sweden, Denmark, and Meiji Japan as historical examples of

societies with modernizing states and no revolution. Pincus thinks the answer lies in the degree to which the modernizing state is able to keep credible control of the apparatus of social order.

Revolutions are more likely in situations in which the modernizing regime is not clearly perceived to have a monopoly of the forces of violence.... When the modernizing state quickly demonstrates its control of resources and disarms the opposition, as in seventeenth-century Denmark and Sweden or late-nineteenth-century Japan, revolutions do not occur. (kindle loc 699)

So the causal narrative the Pincus offers goes along something like these lines:

- The state initiates a process of reform and modernization.
- There are multiple visions of what "modernization" ought to look like for the polity, both within the state and outside the state.
- These multiple visions have the capacity to create advocates and processes of collective mobilization outside the state within civil society.
- One or more parties in civil society gain the intention and the resources to challenge the state.
- The state marshalls its forces to repress opposition.
- If it lacks sufficient capacity to intimidate or repress opposition, revolution occurs.

What this narrative discounts is quite a bit of what other theories of revolution place in the foreground -- under-class revolt, state breakdown, demographic change, ideological conflict, the disruptive social effects of war, and fiscal crisis, to name several. Pincus is too good a historian to truly overlook these factors, and they all come into his narrative of the English Revolution. But when it comes to offering a "theory" of revolution, Pincus is led down the same rhetorical path as the authors he criticizes: he wants to identify a single factor that "explains" the occurrence of revolution. Within the viewpoint of that single factor, he is willing to interweave the "secondary" factors mentioned here; but there is an intellectual desire to identify a single, most-important factor. And this seems misguided.

Better is the approach taken by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly in Dynamics of Contention. Fundamentally, they reject the impulse towards any kind of single-factor theory of revolution or any other kind of contentious politics. They argue that these large social outcomes are the result of the concatenation of a diverse range of social mechanisms and processes, none of which is paramount.

To call the events of 1789 "contentious politics" may seem to demean a great revolution. This book aims to demonstrate that the label "contentious politics" not only makes sense but also helps explain what happened in Paris and the rest of France during that turbulent summer. ... Further [the book] shows how different forms of contention -- social movements, revolutions, strike waves, nationalism, democratization, and more -- result from similar mechanisms and processes. It wagers that we can learn more about all of them by comparing their dynamics than by looking at each on its own. Finally, it explores several combinations of mechanisms and processes with the aim of discovering recurring causal sequences of contentious politics. (4)

Revolution is an instance of what McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly call "transgressive contention" (7), but there are important examples of transgressive contention that are not revolutionary -- for example, the American civil rights struggle, cycles of protest in Italian cities, the Mau Mau rebellion, and other examples.

So *Dynamics of Contention* offer a serious methodological alternative to all of the theories of revolution mentioned here: rather than looking for a small number of structural

characteristics that "cause" or "inhibit" revolution, we are better served by moving down to the meso- and micro-levels of mobilization, claim-making, repression, state building, tax collecting, and ideological competition that constitute the real causal stuff of revolution and contention.

It is worth observing, further, that the *Dynamics of Contention* approach -- identifying discrete mechanisms and processes of contentious politics -- offers vastly better resources for investigating and explaining the wave of revolts, uprisings, and popular movements that are taking place today across the Middle East than any single theory of revolution would provide. The processes of grievance-making, group mobilization, communication, escalation, brokerage, and state tactics of repression that MTT describe are of obvious relevance in trying to understand the last few months of unrest in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, and other countries. In particular, none of the macro-theories -- class conflict, state breakdown, or crises of the modernizing state -- seem to shed much light on these events. What is occurring seems to be much more akin to the path-dependent, multi-causal kind of process that McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly describe.

(McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly have been discussed several times here, including link, link.)

New thinking about the Red Guards

Tuesday, February 22, 2011

Andrew Walder has spent almost all of his academic life, on and off, studying the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In Fractured Rebellion: The Beijing Red Guard Movement (2009) he offers some genuinely new insights into this crucial and chaotic period of China's revolutionary history. Some historians have focused on the political motivations of Mao and other top leaders in the party; others have examined the economic and social cleavages that existed in China only a decade and a half into its Communist Revolution. Walder is interested in a much more grass-roots question: what were the motivations, calculations, and states of mind of the "foot soldiers" of the CR, the Red Guards in the earliest years of the upheavals? And why did the political activism of the CR devolve almost inevitably into intense ***factionalism*** between groups whose ideologies seemed virtually indistinguishable -- loyalty to Mao, defense of the revolution, attacks on treacherous leaders? Walder is a political sociologist, and he wants to understand the dynamics of mobilization and affiliation that led to the group violence and inter-group factionalism in the early years of this period.

Here is an example of the kind of factionalism that most interests Walder:

Chapter 8 examines the puzzling disintegration of the rebel movement in January 1967, soon after the decisive victory over its opponents. Why did the victorious rebel coalition rapidly split into two opposing camps? In their earlier attacks on ministries and commissions, rebels stayed within separate bureaucratic hierarchies. Work teams were dispatched down these hierarchies to the schools under them, and the pursuit of work teams led rebels directly back up this hierarchy to the ministry or commission that sent them. When these rebels moved to seize power in national and municipal agencies, however, they crossed into different bureaucratic hierarchies. Rebel groups from different schools who went to the same organs of power turned quickly from allies into competitors. These competitive rivalries were exacerbated by deep splits that had earlier developed among rebel forces in the two largest and most important campuses, Beijing and Quinghua universities. The splits at Beida and Qinghua served as a wedge to divide

rebel forces citywide, as factions of different schools aligned themselves with one or another faction at these two large campuses. The resulting split between "Heaven" and "Earth" factions crippled the student movement and frustrated the CCRG until the very end. (26-27)

Walder suggests that earlier scholars have sought to understand the motivations and factions of China's young people in terms of the class position of the participants and the pervasive political indoctrination of youth that had been ubiquitous in the 1950s and 1960s. Factions existed, according to this line of thought, either because different groups had different interests, or they had different political theories and ideologies ("conservative" and "radical"). Walder finds these explanations unsatisfactory, since they apply equally to both sides in all the factions -- and so he wants to identify some other feature of the political landscape that would explain the behavior and the factionalization. And, unlike the scholars of the 1970s and 1980s who had to largely speculate about these issues, Walder takes advantage of primary sources that allow the researcher to get a great deal of information about the participants in their own words, and in their relationships to other activists.

Walder also questions the relevance of the core assumptions of social mobilization theory for the Cultural Revolution -- the idea that social movements need to be understood in terms of grievances, resources, and the state's ability to resist group demands. Fundamentally his objection is that this theory doesn't help to explain the early months of the Cultural Revolution because all the postulated conditions were present in 1966, and mobilization did in fact occur (14). But it occurred in a very distinctive way that resource mobilization theory seems not to prove a basis for explaining -- the constant fissioning of a group of activists into two or more factions, bitterly opposed to each other. It appears, then, that resource mobilization theory lacks the tools necessary to explain this specific pattern of mobilization -- radicalization followed by bitter factionalism.

Walder's explanation is a novel one. He argues that factionalization was a consequence, not of class differences or ideological disagreements between individuals, but simply of the early choices that various individuals made early in the period. A central feature of this period was the fact of denunciation -- denouncing past or current leaders for disloyalty to the revolution or other ideological errors. And these denunciations within the universities were highly consequential: "by mid-July 55 percent of all university party first secretaries and 40 percent of all general branch secretaries had been labeled anti-party reactionaries and placed in category 4" (57). The rapid proliferation of denunciations meant that persons close to the denounced leader needed to decide -- should they join the denunciation or should they refrain? The work teams that were sent into Beijing's elite universities in June 1966 (Peking University, to begin with) were forced to make choices in light of radical students' denunciation of top university officials; lower officials had to make similar choices; and activist student leaders had to decide whether to support or oppose the activities of the work teams. And, Walder argues, this choice was fateful and enduring. It meant that the individual would be shunted into this group or that group, with further decisions cementing the affinity with the group.

Another way of stating the argument is that factional identities and the common interests that define them are the product of political interactions rooted in specific contexts whose properties must be researched, not simply assumed. Individual decisions -- to join factions, to oppose or support a work team -- are not the product of prior socialization or social ties but are actdively shaped by political encounters. The focus is on the interactions that generate choices and outcomes, not the prior statuses of individuals or their preexisting social and political ties. These processes determine when prior social

statuses or network ties are activated in a conflict, and when they are not. (13)
In other words, Walder argues that the fact of pervasive factionalization in the Cultural Revolution does ***not*** reflect fundamental underlying disagreements or contradictions between the factions; it does not reflect prior sociological distinctions among the participants; but rather reflects the emergence of separate networks of political affiliation from which there was no exit.

Chapter 3 describes how the work teams split university power structures into warring factions, with a focus on the issues that bred conflict between work teams and militant students. Only in rare and fleeting circumstances were the issues of contention about attacks on the incumbent power structure -- a question that might distinguish "conservative" from "radical" political orientations. Instead, they were usually about the work team's authority over student actions and the physical control of officials held for interrogation, and about heavy-handed work-team punishment of students who proved hard to control. (24)
This is a fascinating micro-sociology of a crucial span of a few months of violent upheaval in a single city. It helps to explain a particularly pervasive feature of a broad and chaotic period of political unrest in China -- the constant factionalism that occurred at virtually every level of conflict. It introduces an innovative model of political behavior (path-dependent choices by individuals leading to a durable configuration of political affiliations). And it provides a new avenue through which the methods of network analysis can be fruitfully used to explain complex social processes. It is a valuable contribution to the new wave of scholarship that is currently underway about the Cultural Revolution. (Other contributions to this new scholarship are included in Esherick, Pickowitz, and Walder, eds., China's Cultural Revolution As History.)

A side note, not crucial to Walder's argument but interesting nonetheless, is the apparently simple question of when the Cultural Revolution took place. It is conventional by many historians to date the CR to the years 1966-1976. In 1966 the Red Guard movement erupted with wall posters and virulent activism in Beijing, among high school and university students. And in 1976 Mao died, the Gang of Four were arrested, and the disruptions of the decade were decisively put aside. But Walder dates the CR to a much shorter period, 1966-68, beginning with the same Red Guard explosion that occurred in 1966 but ending in 1968 when Mao unleased the military to put down the radical activists: "Not until August 1968 were the flames of China's Cultural revolution extinguished by the imposition of a harsh regime of martial law" (1).

Spartacus, Kitty Genovese, and social explanation

Friday, February 25, 2011

What is most interesting in paying attention to social life is noticing the surprising outcomes that often materialize from a number of uncoordinated choices and actions by independent individuals. We want to understand why and how the aggregate-level social fact came to be: was it a set of features of the individual actors' preferences or decision-making? Was it the unintended result of strategic choices by various actors? Was it simply the path-dependent and contingent outcome of a serial interactive process? Was it brought about by structural conditions -- power, wealth, race -- within the context of which actors made their choices? And what were the ***mechanisms*** of constraint, aggregation, contagion, and escalation through which actions and processes at the more proximate

level came together into the outcome at the distal level?

Consider a pair of examples. Kitty Genovese is attacked by an assailant over an extended period of time in a dense neighborhood in Queens, many people observe the crime, and no one intervenes. The woman is eventually murdered. The question here is, why was there a total absence of intervention by any individual or group in this crime? And a parallel surprise: General Marcus Licinius Crassus, having trapped the rebellious slave army of Spartacus, announces that the slaves will be spared death if they give up Spartacus for crucifiction. Spartacus rises to his feet to say, "I am Spartacus." And in minutes the army of men rise as well, all declaring "I am Spartacus." Here the question is the reverse: why do these men expose themselves to death to stand in solidarity with Spartacus? In each case, there is an occasion for action presented to a group of individuals, in which members of the group can attempt to save the life of another person. The collective behavior is fundamentally different in the two cases. Why so? What are the mechanisms, psychological and social, that led to non-intervention in the first case and fatal solidarity in the second?

We might form a number of hypotheses about both of these cases in order to explain the very different outcomes. In the Kitty Genovese case, we might cite anomy and anonymity as possible causes of the lack of response by bystanders. With a low level of civic bonds, perhaps city dwellers have such a low level of emotional involvement with each other that even the slightest effort is unjustified. Or perhaps it is the fact that each potential responder is anonymous to the others that leads to the result; he/she can make the decision to refrain from offering aid without fear of criticism from others. Or perhaps collective behavior is strongly influenced by the actions of the first few, with later observers mimicking earlier non-aiders. So the outcome might have been highly different if the first or second witness had intervened; others might have followed suit. In the case of Spartacus, we might hypothesize that the bonds of solidarity forged by a history of fighting the Roman army gave the soldiers the moral motivation to support Spartacus; or perhaps it is the publicity of the scene, or the early example of the first few supporters, that spread to the behavior of the others. Or perhaps it is an expression of fundamental mistrust by the soldiers of the good faith of Marcus Crassus; "he will kill us anyway." With nothing to lose, the army makes its symbolic statement of rejection. These are each social psychological hypotheses, concerning the ways that individuals choose to involve themselves in an emergency and a situation of potential sacrifice.

Each of these hypotheses represents a social mechanism that can be incorporated into a narrative explaining the aggregate outcome. In order for such a story to be scientifically compelling, we need to have some way of using empirical evidence to evaluate whether the postulated mechanism actually works in the real world of human behavior. Is there empirical evidence for a social psychology of mimicry? Do we have evidence to suggest that members of a crowd are more likely to do X or Y if a few others have already done so? Is there empirical support for a theory of solidarity as a social motivation: do combat teams, groups of deep-ground miners, or emergency room doctors develop a higher willingness to conform their behavior to the good of the group or of other individuals in the group? These examples of social mechanisms all fall in the category of putative behavioral regularities, and it should be possible to investigate them experimentally and statistically.

The challenge of explanation for any social outcome, we might say, is that of constructing an interpretation of the states of minds of a set of actors; the constraints and opportunities within which they choose a course of action; and the interactions that are

created as they act within a common environment, leading to the outcome in question. This is what we can refer to as an ***aggregative explanation***, and it lies at the heart of Thomas Schelling's methodology in Micromotives and Macrobehavior. As Schelling points out, sometimes the explanation turns on specific features of agency (the actors' preferences or their modes of decision-making), and sometimes it turns on the specifics of the environment of choice (the fact that the outcome of action is a public good). But in general, explanation proceeds by showing how agents with specific features, acting within a social and natural environment with specific characteristics, bring about specific kinds of outcomes.

This, in a nutshell, represents a simple but powerful statement of a philosophy of social explanation. It also represents the rudiments of a social ontology: higher-level social features are composed of the actions and states of agency of a set of actors within the context of locally embodied rules, norms, and expectations. This is what I refer to as "methodological localism":

This theory of social entities affirms that there are large social structures and facts that influence social outcomes. But it insists that these structures are only possible insofar as they are embodied in the actions and states of socially constructed individuals. The “molecule” of all social life is the socially constructed and socially situated individual, who lives, acts, and develops within a set of local social relationships, institutions, norms, and rule. (link)
Social explanations derive their force from empirical research into the nature of the actor, the nature of the locally embodied social environment, and the processes of aggregation through which actions by multiple actors coalesce into social outcomes. The explanation satisfies us when it demonstrates the pathways through which individuals, constituted as they are found to be, located in institutions of the sort described, contribute to collective outcomes of the kinds described.

Searle on social ontology

Sunday, February 27, 2011



Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language made a big impression on the field of the philosophy of language when it appeared in 1969. But its author, John Searle, thinks the theory of speech acts has a much broader scope than simply the philosophy of language; he thinks it provides a foundation for the philosophy of mind, and -- of particular interest here -- for the philosophy of society. Two books in the past decade or so have pushed this programme forward -- The Construction of Social Reality (1995) and Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization (2010). So -- how much

insight into the social world can we get from the ideas underlying speech act theory?

Fundamentally, Searle's interest is in the nature of social ontology:

[The philosophy of society is] the study of the nature of human society itself: What is the mode of existence of social entities such as governments, families, cocktail parties, summer vacations, trade unions, baseball games, and passports? (MSW, kindle loc 161)
His answer is categorical and dogmatic; there is precisely one human intentional activity that underlies all of social reality:

Humans have the capacity to impose functions on objects and people where the objects and the people cannot perform the functions solely in virtue of their physical structure. [E.g. a five-dollar bill can't be physically transformed into a grande latte.] The performance of the function requires that there be a collectively recognized status that the person or object has, and it is only in virtue of that status that the person or object can perform the function in question. (kindle loc 194)
Status functions are fundamental, according to Searle, because they are the bearers of rights, obligations, and norms -- what he refers to as "deontic powers." As a member of the American Philosophical Association, I have a right to attend the annual conference, and this right is embodied in the states of intentionality of other actors who recognize that status and the associated right. "So status functions are the glue that holds society together. They are created by collective intentionality and they function by carrying deontic powers" (kindle loc 225).

Searle thinks that rules, institutions, and collective intentions are the fundamental "atoms" of social phenomena; and -- this is the dogmatic part -- he thinks that these all depend on one mental action, which he refers to as a Status Function Declaration. He holds that we cannot understand the working of a rule, a socially embodied obligation, or a socially embodied right, without postulating a commonly recognized Status Function Declaration that establishes that practice. And, sure enough -- a status function declaration is a form of a speech act.

All institutional facts, and therefore all status functions, are created by speech acts of a type that in 1975 I baptized as "Declarations".... With the important exception of language itself, all of institutional reality, and therefore, in a sense, all of human civilization, is created by speech acts that have the same logical form as Declarations.... Institutional facts are without exception constituted by language, but the functioning of language is especially hard to see. (kindle loc 253, 282, 1683)
So speech acts, and the linguistic intentionality that they express, are the foundation of all social phenomena. "All of institutional reality is created by linguistic representation" (kindle loc 313). Voila.

What this all seems to boil down to, is three points: (1) Social interactions always involve language, both internally in thought and externally in communication. (2) The idea of a norm is an inherently social idea that needs to be embodied in the beliefs and attitudes of the individuals in the group through linguistically framed mental representations. (3) Norms need to be shared and publicly articulated if they are to be socially real. Searle represents these three common ideas in a more technical vocabulary: individuals have individual and collective intentionality; individuals have deontic commitments; and deontic commitments result from status function declarations -- speech acts of a specific kind.

Let's consider each of the points. Is intentionality inherently linguistic? Of course adult

human intentionality is -- we can always paraphrase a state of consciousness as a linguistic declaration of some sort, and it is common to think of "thought" as internal speech. But is it possible to imagine purposiveness and intentionality in a non-linguistic species? Can we find examples of non-human cooperation that appears to presuppose intentionality without language? The answers to these two questions appear to be affirmative. Examples of primate problem-solving, group hunting, and simple cooperation in which the behavior of members of a group are oriented to the behavior of others all appear in the animal behavior literature. (Here is an earlier post on current research on human cooperation that appears to contradict the assumption that intentionality requires language; link. The post draws on the work of Michael Tomasello and colleagues in Why We Cooperate.)

Is it possible for a group of humans to embody a set of norms of behavior that are not explicitly formulated in language? Again, it seems that we have good empirical and theoretical reasons for thinking that "implicit norms", conventions, and practices exist. Searle himself gives some attention to what we would call "norms by convention", but only to argue that these examples are on their way to full-fledged status function declarations ("pre-institutional examples of the same logical form") (kindle loc 404, 449). But David Lewis's extensive work on the topic in Convention: A Philosophical Study (which Searle does not discuss) gives substantial support for the idea that conventions can emerge within a human group without formal linguistic articulation, and they can persist as a basis for organizing group behavior without requiring "codification" through a speech act. Here is a simple example:

In my hometown of Oberlin, Ohio, until recently all local telephone calls were cut off without warning after three minutes. Soon after the practice had begun, a convention grew up among Oberlin residents that when a call was cut off the original caller would call back while the called party waited. Residents usually conformed to this regularity in the expectation of conformity by the other party to the call. In this way calls were easily restored, to the advantage of all caoncerned. New residents were told about the convention [deontic speech act!] or learned it through experience [no deontic speech act required!]. It persisted for a decade or so until the cutoff was abolished. (43)
So, according to Lewis, coordination through tacit or implicit convention is a common feature of social life, and it does not require a deontic speech act for its effectiveness. (In fact, Lewis argues that the arrow points the other direction: language presupposes conventions rather than being a necessary condition to the possibility of a convention.) Lewis's analysis is responsive to condition (3) above as well; Lewis has demonstrated how a practice can become "common knowledge" and effective in regulating coordinative and cooperative behavior, without ever having been expressed through a deontic declaration.

So it seems that Searle's insistence on the inescapable role of language and performative speech acts goes beyond what is justified by the facts. The social is not reducible to a set of logical characteristics of language. That said, it is of course true that human social life -- coordination, planning, strategizing, conspiring, cooperating, and competing -- is enormously dependent on our species' ability to use language to express our thoughts and intentions. But we don't gain very much by paraphrasing social action in the language of speech acts; the real challenge for the social scientist is to explain social outcomes, not to redefine them.

Most fundamentally, we would hope that the philosophy of society or the philosophy of social science will help to formulate better theories and better research questions in the

social sciences. The hard part of the social sciences is not arriving at a logical analysis of how institutions and norms can be defined in terms of something else; it is rather the difficult challenge of sorting out real human behavior within a set of institutions and explaining outcomes on that basis. But because of its single-minded focus on a single logical hypothesis, *Making the Social World* doesn't really do that. It is a formal treatment of the supposed relationship between institutions and speech acts that unfortunately does not provide substantive insight into the workings of real social institutions or human behavior.

England's Glorious Revolution

Tuesday, March 01, 2011



Earlier posts have remarked upon the interesting fact that large historical events are often significantly reconsidered and re-understood through the passage of time. China's Cultural Revolution is one such example (link), as are the revolutions of 1848 (link).

A truly stunning example of this kind of historical recasting of something that we think we've fully understood is Steve Pincus's 1688: The First Modern Revolution. Pincus sets up his argument beautifully: there has been a dominant and eventually unquestioned narrative about the English Revolution of 1688-89, and in detail and in broad outline -- this narrative is incorrect. Here is the thrust of the standard story:

> Men and women all over the English-speaking world once knew what happened in England's Revolution of 1688–89. In 1685, the Catholic King James II inherited the crown of England. In 1689 the English people agreed to replace him with the Protestants King William III and Queen Mary II. In the intervening years, James II gradually and myopically alienated the moderate and sensible English people. He did this in a series of well-known missteps. In late 1685 he overreacted to the romantic but hopeless rebellion of his nephew, the Protestant Duke of Monmouth, by judicially murdering hundreds of humble inhabitants of the English West Country in the Bloody Assizes. Determined to improve the social and political status of his Catholic coreligionists, James then ran roughshod over English law. He insisted on his right to defy parliamentary statute and awarded Roman Catholics military and naval commissions. In 1687 he used his newly formed and illegal ecclesiastical commission to force England's Protestant universities to accept Roman Catholic fellows. When the fellows of Magdalen College Oxford resisted their king's demands, he had the dons stripped of their fellowships, turning the institution into a Catholic seminary.

According to this dominant story,

The revolution was unrevolutionary. Unlike other subsequent revolutions, England's revolution was ***bloodless, consensual, aristocratic, and above all sensible***. The English had no desire to transform their polity, their society, or their culture. Instead they worried that James II had intended to do just that. Second, the revolution was Protestant. James II had tried to reinstitute Catholicism in England. The revolution insured that England would remain a Protestant polity. Third, the revolution demonstrated the fundamentally exceptional nature of English national character.... Fourth, there could have been no social grievances undergirding the Revolution of 1688-89 because English society had changed little in the modern world. (kindle loc 134)

According to Pincus, this account fundamentally misrepresents the nature of the transformation that 1688 represented in English history, and it defines the scope of the historical question incorrectly in profoundly misleading ways. Pincus wants to tell a more accurate and revealing story; and he also wants to provide a political historiography that attempts to explain how these misrepresentations have come to define the dominant view of this revolution -- the political ins and outs of Establishment Whigs, Conservatives, and Opposition Whigs in the ensuing century and a half of debate and historical interpretation.

His own approach to the historical problem is to start over: to reassess the materials and archives that exist today that allow the historian to gain fragmentary glimpses into the complex social reality that 1688 represented. As he points out, there are substantial materials available today that were not available in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries when the master narrative was pieced together. But he also observes that even materials available to Macaulay and Trevelyan can be read to a very different conclusion from those drawn by the eighteenth and nineteenth century historians.

Pincus's interpretation disagrees with the standard narrative in every major respect. First, he believes that the English Revolution was "the first modern revolution" -- the result of conflicts created by the process of state modernization that James II had undertaken. Second, he believes that the English Revolution was fundamentally located within a European context -- not a purely *sui generis* English affair.

The Revolution of 1688-89 is important not because it reaffirmed the exceptional English national character but because it was a landmark moment in the emergence of the modern state. (kindle loc 184)

Just as in the French and Russian Revolutions, there was extensive and violent crowd activity. And just as in other modern revolutions, the revolutionary events resulted not in consensus and compromise but in deep ideological cleavages. (kindle loc 3450)

Third, fourth, and fifth, Pincus refutes the idea that the revolution was "bloodless, aristocratic, and consensual". He documents that mass mobilization and violence were just as striking in England, Scotland, and Ireland as in the first year of the French Revolution (chapter 9), that segments from all levels of society were actively involved in these conflicts (chapter 8), and that the Revolution and its aftermath involved deep and abiding disagreements about the directions that the English state and society should take (chapter 10). So -- not bloodless, not aristocratic, and not consensual.

Instead Pincus tells a new story:

In this book, then, I retell the story of the Glorious Revolution, but I retell it in significantly new ways. Instead of a story of triumphant English exceptionalism emphasizing the far-seeing actions of a few men, I tell a story about a wide range of actors reacting not only

to developments in English high politics and in the English church but to changes in society, in the economy, and on the broader European scene. (kindle loc 210)

The Revolution of 1688-89, then, like all modern revolutions, was a struggle ultimately waged between two competing groups of modernizers. The revolution did not pit defenders of traditional society against advocates of modernity. Both Whigs and Jacobites were modernizers. It was the Tories who wished to defend a version of the old order. The Tories were placed in the unpalatable position of having to choose between two very imperfect political outcomes. (kindle loc 7542)

So how is it that a great historical event could be so fundamentally mis-construed and mis-remembered? Pincus refers to a number of factors that have distorted the historical understanding of the English Revolution over intervening centuries. One is an English belief in "English exceptionalism." There was a powerful desire on the part of English intellectuals -- for example, Burke and Hume -- to see England as being very different from France -- more civil, more consensual, and more constitutional. Second is the intellectual framework of "revolution as conflict between a decaying traditional state and a challenging modernist opponent" (see an earlier post on this conception of revolution). This led historians to narrow the focus of the events they highlighted, and to give primacy in their accounts to the debates and positions of the great figures inside and outside of government.

Third and most important is a feature of English political ideology, as expressed in the political conflicts between Tory and Whig parties and between establishment and opposition Whigs.

Walpole and his political allies now claimed that the revolution had instantiated parliamentary rather than popular sovereignty and that it had established a constitution rather than a blueprint for further reform. (kindle loc 310)

Opposition Whigs insisted that the revolution's principles should continue to drive a reformist agenda. In short, by the 1720s the establishment Whigs were emphasizing the immediate tyrannical *causes* of the events of 1688-89, whereas the Opposition Whigs were highlighting *long-term* structural causes and the revolutionary *consequences* of 1688-89. (kindle loc 394)

The works of Burke, Macaulay, and Trevelyan reasserted the establishment Whig interpretation of the revolution. ... Their interpretations became hegemonic not because they had uncovered new, irrefutable historical evidence but because in the face of contemporary political events their interpretative opponents had abandoned the field. .... Burke, Macaulay, and Trevelyan did not so much refute the arguments of the Opposition Whigs as assume that in the contemporary political climate their claims were irrelevant. (kindle loc 470)

These passages perhaps represent the key to Pincus's own perspective on the English Revolution -- we might argue that the book contributes to an unfettered "***Opposition Whig***" account of the revolution. And Pincus seems to support this interpretation: "It is now time to find answers to the questions that the Opposition Whigs raised in the eighteenth century" (kindle loc 503).

So we have the makings of a partial answer to the historiographic question -- why did several generations of historians so badly misunderstand the nature of the English Revolution? Ideology played a role; mental frameworks about "being English" played a role; and concrete political conflicts about what the state should do played a role. And, of

course, these sorts of factors are still with us.

Education a leveler?

Friday, March 04, 2011



The role of education in social inequalities is difficult to assess, because it seems to have contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, improving access to education at all levels -- from elementary school to graduate school -- levels the playing field because it enhances the ability of everyone affected to realize their human talents and to pursue their goals with a greater foundation of cognitive and mental skills. Closing the literacy gap, the numeracy gap, or the technology gap across all of society gives the previously disadvantaged population a better chance to compete for success in seeking employment or creating other economic and social benefits for themselves and their families. Traditional sources of social inequality -- positions of privilege in social hierarchies, privileged access to political benefits, disproportionate ownership of land and other forms of productive property -- are to some extent blunted by a greater degree of equality of access to good schooling and the knowledge and skills it provides. So we might say that improving the quality and reach of a society's educational system should be expected to reduce existing inequalities.

On the other hand, access to education amplifies everyone's talents -- elite and disadvantaged alike. And more importantly, education proceeds through specific, concrete social institutions -- schools and universities -- and the quality and effectiveness of these educational institutions varies enormously across the face of a complex society. It is possible -- perhaps likely -- that these variations in quality will correspond to populations and neighborhoods in ways that align with patterns of prior advantage and disadvantage. So it is likely that we will have high-quality, effective schools providing education to advantaged groups; and low-quality drop-out factories providing education to the disadvantaged institutions. In this case, the education system might actually have the effect of deepening and entrenching the social inequalities that exist across groups.

I've put this point in hypothetical terms. But we know that across much of the United States, this isn't simply a hypothetically possibility. It is largely a fact on the American cityscape that schools vary in quality by race, poverty, and social status at the K-12 level. Affluent people are often served by good public schools, and they have the financial ability to choose good private schools if they are unsatisfied. Poor people are usually served by schools with severe disadvantages -- under-resourced, dilapidated, endemic management crisis, disaffected teachers and principals. So it is hard to make the case that American public education is a powerful force for decreasing social inequalities.

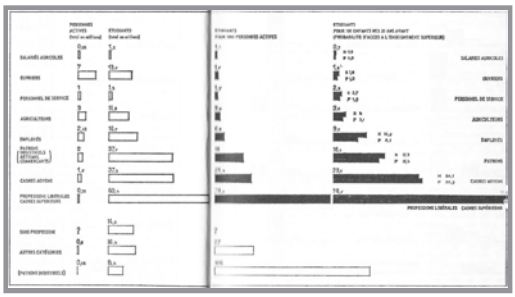
So what about American universities? Here the picture is more favorable. High school graduates who have gained the intellectual abilities required for succeeding at the university level -- admittedly, often a minority of all graduates -- have a range of choices that can genuinely erase most of the disadvantages of birth. A first-generation freshman from a low-income family can nonetheless gain a great engineering education or a great education in art history at an affordable public university; and this undergraduate success in turn positions him or her for future successes in graduate school or employment. So American universities do in fact deliver much of the promise of the theory of democratic education: broad access without regard to status or income, and substantial enhancement of life prospects as a result.

That said, American universities continue to reproduce a more specific form of elite advantage. Here is a January 2011 *Newsweek* review of America's elites and their university degrees. The snapshot it provides is a familiar one; elite positions in our society are disproportionately held by graduates of elite universities. Think of the number of US presidents and members of Congress with Ivy League degrees. Plainly our political elite was disproportionately produced by an elite set of universities (link). But similar results seem to obtain in the business world as well. The same *Newsweek* story reports that elite universities also produced the largest bloc of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, with Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania leading the list, and Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio State providing a significant number of CEOs as well. Put the point this way: entry into an elite university greatly increases an individual's likelihood of becoming a member of the political and business elites in America. It is true, of course, that talented young people attend these universities, and it is predictable that they will be successful. But there seems to be more at work here than simply "elite schools educate the most talented young people of their generation."

Rather, it seems likely that the pathways that lead to career success are themselves facilitated by the social resources created for the graduate by his or her university: networks of alumni, the prestige of the degree, and the classmates and their families whom they come to know. The density of elite social networks seems to be a key part of the story; avenues into elite careers are facilitated by these contacts and social advantages. Contacts in government, politics, journalism, business, and Wall Street are richly available to the rising elite university graduate. An elite university provides a great reserve of social capital for the graduate. and this is unrelated to the actual level of achievement and talent that the graduate possesses.

Here are two empirical studies that complement these suspicions -- one in France in the 1960s and the other in the United States in the 1990s. Both studies are interested in essentially the same question: to what extent do universities (French or American) provide equitable opportunities across social groups? To what extent are the universities in these countries effective agents for bringing about greater social equality?

First, France. One of Pierre Bourdieu's earliest works is a study (with Jean-Claude Passeron) of the social inequalities that are reproduced by the French educational system (Les Héritiers : Les étudiants et la culture, 1964). Essentially Bourdieu and Passeron provide empirical data from 1961-62 that demonstrate that the population of French university students was highly unrepresentative of the social categories of the larger population. The likelihood of attending university was many times higher for some economic classes than others. Here is a graphic that captures the heart of Bourdieu and Passeron's findings:



In spite of the pre-Pixar graphics, I think Edward Tufte would approve; the graph displays very economically the fundamental relationship that the authors want to highlight in the data. The left panel of the graph represents the sizes of the populations associated with various social groups as well as the number of students whose background stems from the group. The right panel aggregates these data by computing the percentage of students from each who enroll in a university. For children from the humble social categories, including workers and farmers, the likelihood of attending university was very small, ranging from .7% to 3.6%. Higher social categories had substantially greater rates of attendance, ranging from 16.4% for the children of the owners of businesses to 29.6% and 58.5% for the children of lesser and higher civil servants and professionals. From top to bottom, then, the disparity of odds for different social groups is staggering. The children of professionals and high civil servants were 85 times more likely to attend university than hired farm workers, and they were 42 times more likely to attend than the children of blue collar workers. They also look carefully at academic success and choice of professions by the social class of the students' parents -- a perspective which continues through the present. Naturally, these findings are specific to a point in time -- 1961-62. No doubt these disparities have narrowed in the fifty years since Bourdieu and Passeron did this research. But they asked the right questions, and they established a perspective on French education that has continued to guide research in France.

And second, the United States. William Bowen, Martin Kurzweil, and Eugene Tobin provide a careful, empirically detailed and historically nuanced treatment of these issues in Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education (2005). One chapter of *Equity and Excellence* is particularly relevant to the question here. In "The Elite Schools: Engines of Opportunity or Bastions of Privilege?" the authors consider a large data set of admissions and outcomes at 19 selective colleges and universities (94). It is a fascinating analysis.

Their conclusion is a nuanced one:

By providing an increasingly straight path to entry and graduation for academically talented students from all socioeconomic strata, these prestigious institutions are fulfilling their historical promise to serve as "engines of opportunity." On the other hand, the disproportionately large number of graduates of these schools who come from the top rungs of American society indicate that they also remain "bastions of privilege." Vigorous recruiting notwithstanding, the applicant pools of these schools contain only a small number of well-prepared students from families of modest circumstances. This is the "controlling reality." (135)

They also find that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic origins are severely underrepresented in the elite institutions included in their study (parallel to the Bourdieu-Passeron findings):

Students whose families are in the bottom quartile of the national income distribution represent roughly 10 to 11 percent of all students at these schools, and first-generation college students represent a little over 6 percent of these student populations.... Both

groups are heavily underrepresented at the institutions in our study. ... When we combine the two measures of SES, and estimate the fraction of the enrollment at these schools that is made up of students who are both first-generation college-goers and from low-income families, we get a figure of about 3 percent. Nationally, the share of the same-age population who fell into this category was around 19 percent in 1992, making this doubly disadvantaged group even more underrepresented than students with just one of the two characteristics. (98)

This looks at the issue from the point of view of "probability of attendance" -- the focus of the Bourdieu-Passeron analysis. What about the outcomes of students from different socioeconomic groups who have successfully graduated from the elite institutions that Bowen et al survey? Does SES status influence career success? Bowen and his colleagues find that it does. First, a very crude measure: "The average income in 1994 or 1995 of a former student from the bottom income quartile was over $67,000; former students from the middle two quartiles had average incomes of between $73,000 and $75,000; and those from the top quartile had average earnings of nearly $86,000" (123). And an even more telling statistic when it comes to the sociology of American elites: "Just under 2% of former students from the bottom income quartile had a very high income 15 years out of college, while almost 6 percent of former students from families in the highest income quartile were themselves already in the top income category" (123). So socioeconomic background makes a difference all the way through; high SES graduates are three times as likely to have very high income than their equally qualified classmates from low SES circumstances. This certainly suggests that elite universities fail in the democratic ideal of leveling the playing field for persons of talent.

So it isn't really possible to answer the simple question with a simple answer: do modern educational systems in democracies level inequalities or increase inequalities? It would seem that they do some of both; they provide access to disadvantaged people who can then leverage success for themselves and their families, and they also create mechanisms of recruitment into elite organizations that are anything but egalitarian.

Democracy and contentious politics

Sunday, March 06, 2011



Democracy and contention are back on the front page, thanks to the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). As always, Chuck Tilly provided some important insights into today's events based on his depth analysis of several hundred years of contentious politics. The relevant work on the intersection between democratization and

contention is Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650-2000 (2004). As the history of contentious politics demonstrates, nothing in the nature of social contention leads necessarily to a demand for greater democracy; in fact, nineteenth century observers tended to believe that "revolutionary contention" and democracy were antithetical to each other. So democratization and contention are interweaving subjects rather than different aspects of the same process.

As always, Tilly is interested in using historical comparisons to shed light on the processes of contention and democratization, and the history that they focus on in this volume is that of modern France and Britain.

To explain similarities and differences in French and British experience since 1650 constitutes a reasonable start toward more general explanations of variation within Europe as a whole. Since European polities and their immediate transplants originated most of the contemporary institutions we recognize as democratic, furthermore, any explanation that gets right the last few centuries of European involvement in contention and democracy offers some promise of helping to identify likely origins of democracy elsewhere. (7)

So comparison is one key methodological pillar. The other is the framework of mechanisms and processes that he and his colleagues developed in Dynamics of Contention and in other subsequent works. "[This book's] claim to attention resets instead on the identification of mechanisms and processes that promote, inhibit, or reverse democratization" (ix). This places Tilly's approach in direct opposition to several other theories of largescale social change -- theories that look for common structural factors that explain large outcomes such as democracy or revolution, and theories that look primarily to the intentions of the actors.

My inquiry guesses, furthermore, that the social world’s order does not reside in general laws, repeated large-scale sequences, or regular relationships among variables.We should not search for a single set of circumstances or a repeated series of events that everywhere produces democracy. Nor should we look for actors having democratic intentions, seeking to discover how and when they get chances to realize those intentions. We should look instead for robust, recurrent causal mechanisms that combine differently, with different aggregate outcomes, in different settings. (9)

If we are to attempt to understand the factors that are conducive to (or inhibitive of) greater democracy, we need to have a fairly specific idea of what we are thinking of under the concept of democracy. Tilly provides this definition of democratization:

Democratization means increases in the **breadth and equality of relations** between governmental agents and members of the government’s subject population, in **binding consultation of a government’s subject population** with respect to governmental personnel, resources, and policy, and in **protection of that population** (especially minorities within it) **from arbitrary action by governmental agents**. (13-14)

Remarkable in this definition is the fact that Tilly does not chiefly highlight institutions such as representative voting or separation of powers, but rather several more general features of a polity: **equality** between government and the subject population, **binding consultation** of the subject population, and **protection** of the subject population from arbitrary action. Each of these dimensions has a strong theoretical relationship to the concept of democracy; the equal worth of citizens favors the first point, the idea that citizens should contribute to the formation of government's policies finds expression in "binding consultation"; and the idea of the rule of law is expressed in the idea of protection from arbitrary action. Greater democratization means increasing one or more

of these three dimensions in the given society. Tilly refers to this as a "political process" approach to the conceptual problem. And he folds this definition into a substantive historical hypothesis:

Only where positive changes in trust network integration, inequality insulation, and the relevant internal transformations of public politics all intersect does effective, durable democracy emerge. Most changes in public politics, on the contrary, produce undemocratic outcomes. (17)

So what are the high-level factors that work on the state's side to influence the state's ability to crush popular contention? And what external factors might bring about abrupt changes in these factors? Tilly refers to a state's command of "coercion, capital, and commitment" as a measure of its ability to enforce its will -- including the ability to repress popular movements demanding social and political change. Coercion has to do with the apparatus of the military and police, and the administrative infrastructure through which these are controlled. Capital has to do with the amount of wealth the state is able to summon to its purposes. And commitment has to do with the networks of committed partners the state can call upon throughout the population within its scope of control -- what he refers to as the "trust networks" of the state. When the state's ability to marshall these forms of power is great, contentious movements are unlikely to succeed. But specific, concrete social factors can work to undermine each of these aspects of the state's power. Those factors can be internal -- a food crisis that greatly undermines the loyalty of the state's agents, for example -- or external -- the stresses of international efforts by the state. In particular, he singles out revolution, conquest, confrontation, and colonization as large stresses for the state that can significantly change its ability to enforce its will (40). And all of this leads Tilly to a fairly strong hypothesis:

Regional variation in the accumulation and concentration of coercion, capital, and commitment strongly affected the sorts of governmental institutions that formed in different parts of Europe through the centuries, but the presence of certain sorts of regimes in a region shaped what kinds of regimes formed later. (45)

These factors give some insight into how a regime can be more or less capable of resisting contentious challenges; but what factors influence the likelihood of such challenges themselves? Tilly's analysis takes an important step towards greater specificity through his construction of three tables of concrete mechanisms in these areas of political process: "mechanisms segregating categorical inequality from public politics," "mechanisms integrating trust networks into public politics", and "mechanisms increasing breadth, equality, enforcement and security of mutual obligations between citizens and government agents" (18-20). Examples from each group of mechanisms are highly relevant to the processes currently underway in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya:

- Adoption of devices that insulate public politics from categorical inequalities; for example, secret ballots, payment of officeholders, and free, equal access of candidates to media forward formation of cross-category coalitions (18)
- Disintegration of existing segregated trust networks; for example, decay of patrons' ability to provide their clients with goods and protection promotes withdrawal of clients from patron-client ties (19)
- Central co-optation or elimination of previously autonomous political intermediaries; for example, regional strongmen join governing coalitions, thus becoming committed to governmental programs (20)

These tables amount to a detailed micro-analysis of mechanisms and processes that can occur more or less independently, and that have impact on the democratic issues of categorical inequalities, consultation, and protection. Here is a causal model in which Tilly attempts to capture the meso-level causality that he finds in the comparison of British and

French contentious politics over three centuries:

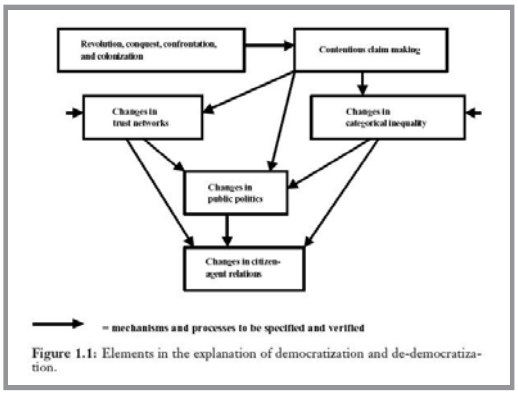


Figure 1.1: Elements in the explanation of democratization and de-democratization.

Tilly encapsulates his key findings in these thirteen hypotheses:

1. *Differing combinations of coercion, capital, and commitment in various regions promote the formation of significantly different kinds of regimes, and different directions of regime change, within those regions.*
2. *Trajectories of regimes within a two-dimensional space defined by (a) degree of governmental capacity and (b) extent of protected consultation significantly affect both their prospects for democracy and the character of their democracy if it arrives.*
3. *In the long run, increases in governmental capacity and protected consultation reinforce each other, as state expansion generates resistance, bargaining, and provisional settlements, on one side, while on the other side protected consultation encourages demands for expansion of state intervention, which in turn promote increases in capacity.*
4. *At the extremes, where capacity develops farther and faster than consultation, the path to democracy (if any) passes through authoritarianism; if protected consultation develops farther and faster than capacity and the regime survives, the path then passes through a risky zone of capacity building.*
5. *Although the organizational forms – elections, terms of office, areal representation, deliberative assemblies, and so on – adopted by democratizing regimes often emulate or adapt institutions that have strong precedents in villages, cities, regional jurisdictions, or adjacent national regimes, they almost never evolve directly from those institutions.*
6. *Creation of citizenship – rights and obligations linking whole categories of a regime's subject population to governmental agents – is a necessary but not sufficient condition of democratization.*
7. *In high-capacity regimes, nondemocratic citizenship sometimes forms, and with extensive integration of citizens into regimes even reduces or inhibits democracy.*
8. *Nevertheless, the prior presence of citizenship, other things equal, generally facilitates democratization.*
9. *Both creation of citizenship and democratization depend on changes in three arenas – categorical inequality, trust networks, and public politics – as well as on interactions among those changes.*
10. *Regularities in democratization consist not of standard general sequences or sufficient conditions but of recurrent causal mechanisms that in varying combinations and sequences produce changes in categorical inequality, networks of trust, and public politics.*
11. *Under specifiable circumstances, revolution, conquest, confrontation, and*

colonization accelerate and concentrate some of those crucial causal mechanisms.

12. *Almost all of the crucial democracy-promoting causal mechanisms involve popular contention – politically constituted actors' making of public, collective claims on other actors, including agents of government – as correlates, causes, and effects.*
13. *In the course of democratization, repertoires of political contention (arrays of widely available claim-making performances) shift from predominantly parochial, particular, and bifurcated interactions based largely on embedded identities to predominantly cosmopolitan, modular, and autonomous interactions based largely on detached identities. (7-8)*

Here is what France's political history looks like, according to Tilly's analysis of its path through the space of "governmental capacity" and "protected consultation":

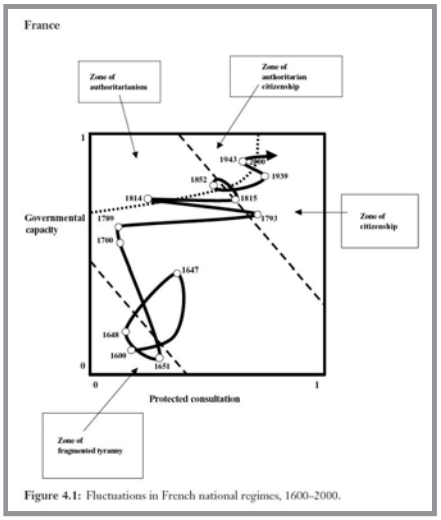


Figure 4.1: Fluctuations in French national regimes, 1600–2000.

Some readers might be disappointed at the complexity of the analysis Tilly offers here. But that is inherent in his foundational assumptions: that there are many relevant mechanisms and processes, that these mechanisms interact in multiple complex ways, and that there are many pathways to democracy and dictatorship. So even the most systematic tracing of possible scenarios will result in a highly complex "phase diagram" of a polity as it moves through its political processes over time.

* * *

In light of the recent post about Steve Pincus's reinterpretation of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89, it is interesting to pull out a few of Tilly's observations about the same period.

- The Glorious Revolution that brought William and Mary to power wrought enduring effects, but at a price. Considering the British Isles as a whole, the settlement of 1690 produced a higher capacity government than had ever existed before. It did so, for the time being, at the expense of protected consultation. (144)
- The new regime likewise brought the rise of party politics and Dutch inspired fortification of public finances (Braun 1975: 290–94, 't Hart 1991; Kishlansky 1996: 290; Scott 2000: chapter 21). Creation of a Bank of England (1694) coupled with parliamentary control over governmental indebtedness to produce a relatively secure national debt, heavy involvement of London financiers in the funding of that debt, and widespread investment of the wealthy in government securities (Armitage 1994; Muldrew 1998: 328–29). (145)
- As military forces exploded during the 18th century, moreover, Parliament's

> authorization of taxation and expenditure added weight to parliamentary decisions, beginning a decisive shift of power from the royal administration to Parliament (Brewer 1989; Stone 1994; Tilly 1997). (147)

These points converge closely with Pincus's points about the modernizing state, and the role of financial elites in the changes of the period. But it is also interesting that Tilly treats the earlier part of the English seventeenth century as being more crucial for the process of British democratization. The "Glorious Revolution" plays a secondary role in his analysis.

Social justice and democratic stability

Wednesday, March 09, 2011



One thing I find interesting about the sustained demonstrations and protests in Madison, Wisconsin is the fact that people on the streets do not seem to be chiefly motivated by personal material interests. Rather, the passion and the sustainability of the protests against Governor Walker's plans seem to derive from an outrage felt by many people in Wisconsin and throughout the country, that the Governor's effort is really an attempt to reduce people's **rights** -- in this case, the right to come together as a group of workers to bargain together. This is a well established right in the private sector, protected by the National Labor Relations Act, and the rationale is substantially the same in the public sector.

So when the Governor attempts to eliminate the right to collective bargaining for public employees, he offends the sense of justice of many citizens in Wisconsin and elsewhere -- whether or not they are directly affected, whether or not they themselves are members of unions. Restricting established social rights is a very serious thing -- well beyond the specific calculation of interests that people might make. It's morally offensive in the way that state efforts to roll back voting rights would be offensive. And this moral offensiveness can be a powerful motivator of collective resistance.

So this seems to provide an intriguing clue about political mobilization more generally. To what extent is moral outrage, a perception of injustice, an important motivator of individual political engagement and activism?

When we look at the MENA rebellions, even from a great distance, it seems that concerns about social and political justice have as much prominence as more material motivations -- demands for food subsidies, demands for state-sponsored jobs programs, etc. Egyptians, Tunisians, and Libyans interviewed on the BBC talk more frequently

about the outrage of dictatorship and arbitrary state power than they do about material demands. And really, it's hard to see an economic interest in forcing a certain kind of food subsidy program being strong enough to create enough of a political motivation to lead a person to stand up against fighter jets and attack helicopters.

This is an insight that James Scott expressed a generation ago in The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia, and E. P. Thompson a generation before that in Customs in Common, in the theory of the ***moral economy***. In its essence, the theory holds that the fact of sustained violation of a person's moral expectations of the society around him or her is a decisive factor in collective mobilization in many historical circumstances. Later theorists of political activism have downplayed the idea of moral outrage, preferring more material motivations based on self-interest. But the current round of activism and protest around the globe seems to point back in the direction of these more normative motivations -- combined, of course, with material interests. So it is worth reexamining the idea that a society that badly offends the sense of justice of segments of its population is likely to stimulate resistance.

This basic and compelling idea has an important implication for sustainable social and political stability in a political regime. If citizens react collectively to sustained injustice, then a regime that wants to rule sustainably needs to respect the demands of justice. It is important for a social order to arrive at a rough-and-ready shared understanding about the rights and obligations that citizens have, and it is important for the state to conduct itself in ways that honor those expectations.

This sounds like a social contract theory, and it certainly has something in common with that normative theory. But its relevance here is more sociological. It is the basis of a prediction about what social and political circumstances will elicit sustained protest and resistance, and which kinds of arrangements are likely to be accepted indefinitely by the population. And it leads to a policy recommendation for any regime that wants to create a stable, ongoing polity: work hard to make sure that social arrangements and institutions treat citizens fairly, and don't gratuitously violate their deeply held convictions about their rights and about the general features of justice.

So what moral expectations do American citizens have about how society ought to work? Several things seem fairly clear. Americans care about equality of opportunity. We are deeply rankled by the idea that the good opportunities in society are somehow captured by an elite of any sort. Second is the idea of equal treatment of all citizens by the institutions of the state. Teenagers and persons of color rankle at being singled out for special attention by the police. Women rightly seethe at the persistence of institutions in the workplace that continue to treat them differently. Arab Americans rightly resent special scrutiny at airports. We don't accept status inequality easily -- especially in our own cases. And third, we are very sensitive about the inviolability of our rights -- our right to vote, right to go where we want, right to speak our minds and associate with whomever we want to.

What Americans don't yet seem to have is a specific moral sensitivity to extreme inequalities of income and wealth. The fact of the accelerating concentration of income at the top doesn't seem to produce the moral outrage in the US that perhaps it would in France or Germany. And maybe this comes from another element of our moral economy -- the idea that inequalities are all right as long as they are fairly earned. But more information about bonuses on Wall Street and the banking industry may begin to erode that tolerance.

It is intriguing to have widely separated examples of social mobilization going on right now. Surely there are sociologists and political scientists working right now to interview leaders and followers in Egypt, Madison, or Benghazi trying to sort out the motivations and social networks through which these movements arose and solidified. As a theoretically informed prediction, it seems likely that moral motivations like resentment of arbitrary power, violations of strongly held rights, and persistent status inequalities will be found to have played a role.

Social brains

Saturday, March 12, 2011

Here is a foundational question that is worth asking periodically in the philosophy of social science: what is the relationship between the evolutionary history of the human species and our current social and cultural behavior? The sociobiologists had one answer to the question: many of our current social behaviors are an expression, through the medium of the evolved central nervous system, of the compounding of a set of social instincts that were favored by natural selection. E. O. Wilson describes the intellectual agenda of sociobiology in these terms in In Search of Nature:

Much of the new effort falls within a discipline called sociobiology, which is defined as the systematic study of the biological basis of social behavior in every kind of organism, including man, and is being pieced together with contributions from biology, psychology, and anthropology. There is nothing new about analyzing social behavior, and even the word "sociobiology" has been around for years. What is new is the way facts and ideas are being extracted from their traditional matrix of psychology and ethology (the natural history of animal behavior) and reassembled in compliance with the principles of genetics and ecology. ... With genetic evolution always in mind, sociobiologists search for the ways in which the myriad forms of social organization adapt particular species to the special opportunities and dangers encountered in their environment. (76)

This view sometimes takes the form of a very direct connection from hardwired disposition to behavior. And sometimes it takes the form of a more mediated connection, from selection-favored capacity to complex mental state to behavior. The response we have to a smiling baby falls in the first category, and the "good Samaritan" impulse falls in the latter.

The view at the other end of the spectrum holds with the (relative) autonomy of human thought and action. Human beings are natural biological organisms, to be sure, and our mental capacities are embodied in neural circuitry that has a specific evolutionary history. But what evolution provided us was an all-purpose "reasoning, acting, interpreting" machine that is capable of creating and embodying all cultural and behavioral systems. Much as a computer can embody any algorithm (program), a human brain can incorporate any system of cultural rules. Much as a human child can acquire any human language, so too any human child is a voracious "culture-acquisition device," primed to absorb the cultural rules and meanings around him or her. And once absorbed, it is the cultural program rather than the evolutionary instincts that rule behavior.

These are the polar views of the relation between evolution and culture. I think philosophers and anthropologists may prefer the second story over the first -- philosophers because it creates space for an all-purpose reasoning engine and anthropologists because it gives maximum autonomy to the symbolic and normative workings of freely created culture systems. For both there is the idea that humanity has

kicked away its biological origins and limitations. And both are reflexively opposed to the apparent reductionism of the first position.

It seems to me that there is a sturdy intermediate position that incorporates some of both extremes and does a superior job of capturing the truth about human behavior and mind than either. Certainly human cognitive and behavioral capacities have an evolutionary history. But equally, it is plausible that there is a great deal of plasticity and multiple-realizability that has been built into these systems -- with the result that there is no one-to-one relationship between biological origins and current behavioral patterns. Culture is a powerful intervening structure.

Concerning the first point: the evolutionists are surely correct in believing that there is a great deal of brain structure that is responsive to the fundamental situations of human sociality -- family relations, cooperation and competition within small groups, and coordination. These elements of human daily life are too ever-present and too consequential not to have had implications for the evolution of the brain. Moreover, we know that there are highly evolved neural systems for non-social activities and challenges -- finger dexterity, for example, or simple problem solving. And, finally, we have the example of language, which involves both the kinds of latent linguistic structures that Chomsky postulates and the universality of application that results. So it would be surprising if evolution had not shaped the brain around these features of the human condition.

So acknowledging the likelihood of neural structures specific to social life seems pretty compelling. But what specifically? Almost certainly not determinate behavioral routines or dispositions. We surely don't have a gene for "promise-keeping". More credibly, we may have an abstract behavioral disposition for generalized reciprocity; and this may be invoked by a particular cultural system and set of value specifications that give a concrete moral motivation to keep one's commitments and promises.

This is where another important stylized fact about human society comes in: behavior differs widely and persistently across societies, and the best explanation of that fact is the causal efficacy of cultural and value systems that are reproduced within communities of human beings.

We know that those normative and symbolic systems are somehow embodied in persistent human neurophysiology, since all psychological states depend on the brain. But from the variety of human symbolic, cultural, and normative systems we also know that the neurophysiology that underlies culture necessarily possesses a high degree of plasticity. Along with the sociobiologists, we can look with favor on the notion that there may be important and contingent features that all human culture systems possess -- at some level of abstraction -- that are the result of constraints in the brain created by our evolutionary history. But along with the cultural autonomists, we can work on the basis of the hunch that the human brain embodies enough plasticity and capacity for learning to make the role of culture and social norms a credible source of behavioral variation.

(These topics have been considered in earlier posts on human nature (link) and moral psychology (link).)

Basic institutions and democratic equality

Monday, March 14, 2011

Modern societies seem to produce persistent social inequalities that are contradictory to many of the values we espouse when it comes to the idea of democratic equality. We continue to find wealth and income inequalities, inequalities of educational and health outcomes, inequalities of political power and influence, and these disparities seem to increase over time. Is this a residual defect in these specific societies, or is it rather a natural result of the logic of the institutions that define a market economy and an electoral democracy in the circumstances of extensive existing inequalities of wealth and power?

Consider these polar views:

- Modern market democracies work to narrow social and economic inequalities over time.
- The institutions of modern market democracies work to increase economic and political inequalities; the rich and powerful become more so through their privileged positions within existing institutions.

Which of these views is correct?

We would like to think that it is possible for a society to embody basic institutions that work to preserve and enhance the wellbeing of all members of society in a fair way. We want social institutions to be **beneficent** (producing good outcomes for everyone), and we want them to be **fair** (treating all individuals and groups with equal consideration; creating comparable opportunities for everyone).

There is a fundamental component of liberal optimism that holds that the institutions of a market-based democracy accomplish both goals. The economic institutions of the market create efficient allocations of resources across activities, permitting the highest level of average wellbeing. Free public education permits all persons to develop their talents. And the political institutions of electoral democracy permit all groups to express and defend their interests in the arena of government and law.

But social critics cast doubt on all parts of this story, based on the role played by social inequalities within each of these sets of institutions. The market embodies and reproduces a set of economic inequalities that result in grave inequalities of wellbeing for different groups. Economic and social inequalities influence the quality of education available to young people. And electoral democracy permits the grossly disproportionate influence of wealth holders relative to other groups in society. So instead of reducing inequalities among citizens, these basic institutions seem to amplify them.

On this line of thought, market and electoral institutions both create and reproduce social inequalities even when they are working correctly; inequality is built into them at a very basic level. The institutions are tilted in favor of privileged groups, and it is no surprise when corporations wield substantial influence in Washington and Paris and tax policies are enacted that favor the richest percent of American income earners. These aren't abnormal anomalies; they are instead precisely what we should expect when we analyze the basic institutions carefully.

What remedies are available to help move a modern society towards greater democratic equality for ***all*** of society? Several large institutional variations have been tried in the past century -- social democracy, small self-sufficient communities, local economies based on

cooperatives, etc. Jon Elster surveyed some of these alternatives in Alternatives to Capitalism over twenty years ago -- at a time when there was more openness to the idea of fundamental institutional reform. Tamas Bauer opens his essay, "The unclearing market," with these words:

The well-functioning market of textbooks brings about general satisfaction. Under market-clearing prices, goods and factors offered for sale are sold; the demand of each agent is satisfied by supply by others. Wage earners are paid wages that more or less correspond to their marginal contribution. Etc., etc. ... Life is, of course, much different. (71)

The social-democratic solution to these tendencies was developed in the early twentieth century. It was recognized that market institutions create unacceptable inequalities and leave some citizens in circumstances of insecurity, deprivation, and indignity; and it was argued that the institutions of the state needed to correct these tendencies through the establishment of a strong social safety net. The majority of a society would have the electoral strength to create and maintain strong protections of the interests of ordinary working people through a combination of positive economic rights. (Gosta Esping-Andersen reviews this history in The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism.)

The triumph of social and economic conservatism -- Thatcher, Reagan, and other conservative European leaders and their political parties -- took this theory of the role of the state off the public agenda, and the past thirty years have witnessed the systematic disassembly of the institutions of social democracy in most countries. And the consequences are predictable: more inequality, more deprivation, more severe disparities of life outcomes for different social groups.

What is truly surprising is that there has been so little continuing exploration of alternatives in the intervening two decades. Democratic theorists have explored alternative institutions in the category of deliberative democracy (link), but there hasn't been much visioning of alternative economic institutions for a modern society. We don't talk much anymore about "economic justice," and the case for social democracy has more or less disappeared from public debate. But surely it's time to reopen that public debate.

New ideas about structure and agency

Saturday, March 19, 2011

The social sciences have chosen up sides around a number of dichotomies -- quantitative versus qualitative research methods, macro versus micro, ethnographic versus causal. A dichotomy that spans many of the social sciences is the opposition of structure versus agency. "Structures" are said to be the objective complexes of social institutions within which people live and act. "Agents" are said to be human deliberators and choosers who navigate their life plans in an environment of constraints. If structure and agent are considered to be ontologically distinct levels, then we have a series of difficult questions to confront. For example: Which has causal priority? Are structures determinative of social outcomes, with agents merely playing their roles within these structures? Or are agents the drivers of social causation, and structures are merely secondary effects of individual-level actions and states of consciousness? Are features of structures reducible or explicable in terms of the actions and characteristics of individuals? Or, possibly, are the behavioral characteristics of individuals merely the consequence of the social structures they inhabit?

The contrast goes back to the founders, including Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. And authors such as Anthony Giddens, Maurice Godelier, and Pierre Bourdieu provided

second-generation refinements. But new ideas have come forward in the past decade that merit reconsideration.

Some of this new thinking is contained in Peter Martin and Alex Dennis, eds., Human Agents and Social Structures. Here is a thumbnail of the approach taken by this group of philosophers and sociologists.

[The current book's] aim is to be an intervention which seeks to make the case that structural, system, or holistic approaches to the understanding of social life and the explanation of human action are fundamentally misconceived -- as, equally, are efforts which rest on individualistic assumptions. In essence, our view is that human social life is conducted in and through patterns of collaborative interaction: sociologically, our interest is thus not in the subjectivity of individuals but in the ways in which intersubjectivity is achieved and maintained. (7)

This group of researchers addresses the contrast between agency and structure; but really their goal is to help to dissolve the distinction. They want to show that "structures" do not exist in any strong sense (including the senses associated with critical realism), and that a proper understanding of "agency" involves both subjective and objective features of the individual's actions, thoughts, and situation. Social relationships are densely intertwined with reasons, emotion, commitments, beliefs, and attitudes -- the aspects of consciousness that make up agency and action.

Here is a representative statement about social structures:

The collective concepts (such as family, state, organisation, class and so on) -- which have often been seen as fundamental to sociological analysis -- have often encouraged 'the temptation to reify collective aspects of human life' (Jenkins 2002a:4); that is, to treat them as if they were real entities, independent of the human beings who constiTute them. (7)

Their affirmative theory of agency -- now stripped of the notion that it is a polar opposite to structure -- has much in common with the traditions of micro-sociology -- Goffman, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenological sociology. The idea here is to emphasize the very concrete ways in which each of these traditions succeeds in identifying the agent, the social actor, as both subjective and objective. He/she is a subject, in the sense that the agent possesses thoughts, emotions, desires, aversions, allegiances, and the like, which in turn contribute to the actions and lives they live. But the agent is objective, in the sense that he/she is embedded and developed within a concrete set of social relationships and institutions.

Thus each of these approaches develops in its own way the idea that human social life is carried out through processes of interaction among real people in specific situations, and each seeks to avoid the reification of collective concepts -- there are no such 'things' as social 'structures,' 'classes', or indeed 'societies', yet terms such as these are indispensable, not only for sociologists but for the purposes of everyday communication. (14)

Martin and Dennis quote Anthony King with approval: "human agency is a collective product, germinated with others and dependent upon the social networks in which we al exist. Human agency is better understood as the collective product of social relations ... than as an autonomous individual power" 14).

So is there space within this view of sociology for investigation of "macro" features of society? They argue that there is, but not as an autonomous domain:

There is nothing in the perspective developed here that would prevent the investigation of social phenomena conventionally described in terms of 'macro' structures. But what we are suggesting is that, for example, the 'class structure' must be conceived as the outcome of stratifying processes and practices, many of which -- like the grading of students' work or the awarding of educational credentials -- may appear to be routine and mundane. This interactionist sociologists have investigated the processes through which social class differences in educational attainment are produced. (15)

One reason I'm intrigued by the approaches taken to this aspect of social ontology by the contributors to *Human Agents and Social Structures* is that these approaches seem to converge with the ideas about "***methodological localism***" that I've been drawn to as a bottom-level description of social ontology (link). On this approach, neither "structure" nor "agent" can be specified in its own terms alone; rather, we need to base our social concepts on the socially situated and socially constituted individual, located within a set of locally manifest social relations (link, link). So we cannot separate agency and social location (structure); rather, the fundamental unit of social activity involves both aspects.

Andreas Glaeser on agency

Sunday, March 20, 2011

Andreas Glaeser is another gifted contemporary sociologist who takes a different approach to providing a sociological analysis of agency. Glaeser's most recent scholarship is a careful and detailed study of the end of communism in the German Democratic Republic. This research appears in a book that is just now being published, Political Epistemics: The Secret Police, the Opposition, and the End of East German Socialism. (Glaeser provides several chapters and related materials here on his research page at the University of Chicago.) The work is concrete, historically situated, and close to the ground in the sense that it pays close attention to the ideas, emotions, and mental frameworks of the various actors as expressed in Glaeser's interviews with them. But along the way he develops a powerful framework for understanding some of the fundamental concepts and theoretical frameworks that are employed by sociologists when they attempt to understand individual and collective behavior. Here is the publisher's description of the book:

What does the durability of political institutions have to do with how actors form knowledge about them? Andreas Glaeser investigates this question in the context of a fascinating historical case: socialist East Germany's unexpected self-dissolution in 1989. His analysis builds on extensive in-depth interviews with former secret police officers and the dissidents they tried to control as well as research into the documents both groups produced. In particular, Glaeser analyzes how these two opposing factions' understanding of the socialist project came to change in response to countless everyday experiences. These investigations culminate in answers to two questions: why did the officers not defend socialism by force? And how was the formation of dissident understandings possible in a state that monopolized mass communication and group formation? He also explores why the Stasi, although always well informed about dissident activities, never developed a realistic understanding of the phenomenon of dissidence.

Out of this ambitious study, Glaeser extracts two distinct lines of thought. On the one hand he offers an epistemic account of socialism's failure that differs markedly from existing explanations. On the other hand he develops a theory—a sociology of understanding—that shows us how knowledge can appear validated while it is at the

same time completely misleading.
And here is the abstract that Glaeser provides for the first chapter at the link above:

ABSTRACT: On the basis of ethnographic data gathered during 11 months of field study in two east German police precincts, four processes of identity construction are analysed which link selves to space and thereby to one of the main aspects of material culture. These processes are (1) the tropic (as opposed to literal) reading of space, producing a complex web of identifications through a play of metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, ellipsis and hyperbole; (2) the writing of space as a material inscription of self in small spatial contexts such as neighbourhoods, cities and regions; (3) the placement of self into larger spatial wholes such as neighbourhoods, cities and regions; (4) the anchoring of life-stories and narrated life experiences in significant time-space combinations or chronotopes. The paper argues that identities are not only constructed in interaction with other actors but also in "dialogue" with material culture and spatial practices. It argues also that the spatial dimension of identity brings to the fore the fact that identities are not only knowable, but that they can be experienced. Through space, identities become sensualised.
The topic of "agency" comes out of this research very directly and immediately: why did the various actors choose to live and act as they did? Why were Stasi agents so complex in their behavior -- neither passive puppets of the regime nor hidden activists within the state? What were the "epistemics" on the basis of which they and other social actors acted -- the assumptions about themselves and the world that framed their choices? These questions lead Glaeser to attempt to arrive at a better and more satisfying account of the forms of consciousness, locatedness, and feeling that create the individual's field of choice.

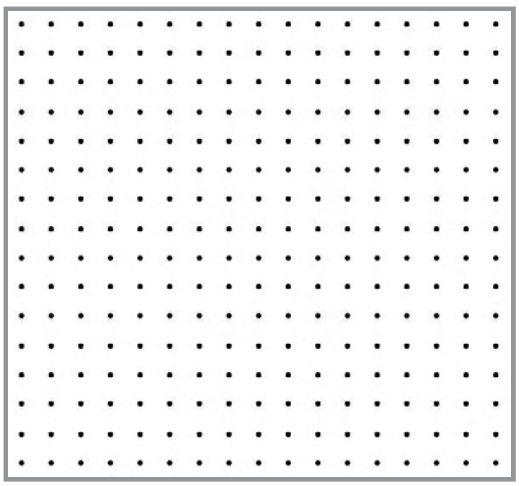
Here is how Glaeser describes his current thoughts about agency and the questions that will guide his next program of research:

I have begun researching and writing a third book with the working title *Agency, Institutions and Understanding: A Sociology of Liberation*. With it I aim to offer a fundamental critique of the schizoid contemporary social imaginary that flip-flops between ontological individualism categorically asserting persons' power to act on the one hand and structural determinism which pays no heed to individual actors in whatever form or shape on the other. Instead I aim to show how agency does not only vary historically and situationally but how it can be cultivated by individuals and collectivities from within a realistic understanding of the operation of institutional arrangements. Thus I aim to rejuvenate and reposition an older normative understanding of the task of the social sciences as a reflexive enterprise in the service of emancipatory politics.
Against the "schizoid" opposition of pure subjectivity of the individual actor and pure objectivity of social structures, Glaeser prefers a stance that allows him to weave together the social situatedness of the actor -- in very concrete spatial and social-relationship terms -- with the thoughts, motives, and impulses that lead them to act as they do. Here is a nicely concrete description of how he proceeds to investigate these states of social consciousness:
The social arenas I have chosen to study identity formation through acts of identification are two police precincts in what used to be East Germany. The first is Precinct 66 (southern Kopenick) in the southeastern corner of Berlin, the second is Potsdam in the state of Brandenburg just outside Berlin . The ethnographic material on which this paper is based was collected during 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork, consisting chiefly in participant observation of all sorts of police practices (patrol car shifts, neighbourhood beat patrols, administrative work, social events , etc.). Another important source of data

was open-ended tape-recorded biographical interviews. The rationale for choosing the Berlin police is that identity is a hotly contested issue between former West Berlin and former East Berlin police officers, who have had to cooperate after the unification of Germany into one unified All-Berlin police corps. The second fieldsite was primarily chosen to establish a backdrop for Berlin, which is in many ways a special case. (link, 8) Like the arguments of Martin and Dennis considered in an earlier post, Glaeser is led to a position that negates the traditional strong distinction between agent and structure. Like them, his work brings him into close relationship to the micro-sociologies of ethnomethodology, phenomenological sociology, and interactionist sociology. Unlike rationalist approaches that exclusively emphasize discursive states of mind -- reasons, beliefs, goals -- Glaeser positions his actors in terms of their discursive, emotional, and kinesthetic representations of their situation.Glaeser refers to his approach as hermeneutic. The work is ethnographic in detail; but the goal is plainly sociological. He wants to provide a detailed analysis of the modes of understanding that constitute the position from which concrete individuals construct their activities and choices. And he wants to understand the complex social world that was East Germany at the end of socialism.

Connecting the dots

Saturday, March 26, 2011



There isn't very much transparency about the deep structure of almost any complex modern society. For most people their primary impressions of the society's functioning comes from the mass media and their own personal experiences. We each see the limited bits to which we are fairly directly exposed through our ordinary lives -- the newsroom if we happen to be a beat reporter, the university if we are professors, the play-and-learn center if we are in the business of preschool education. We gain a pretty good idea of how those networks of institutions and organizations work. But it's very difficult to gain a birds-eye picture of the social system as a whole.

The most basic goal of Marx's economic programme was to demystify the workings of the political economy of capitalism. He wanted to sweep aside the appearances that capitalism presents and to lay bare the underlying social relations of inequality and exploitation that really constituted the causal core of the system. (This is the point of his theory of the fetishism of commodities; link.) And he believed that active systems of

ideology and false consciousness conspired to conceal these workings from ordinary participants. In particular, he wanted to demonstrate the process through which wealth is created within capitalism, and the relations of inequality through which its benefits are distributed. It is a class-based analysis, and Marx proposes to the proletariat (and the rest of us) that we look for the class mechanisms of our ordinary economic experiences.

What is unsatisfying about Marx's theory in the current context is that in the end it isn't really very much of an empirical demonstration. It is an abstract model of how the theorist thinks capitalism works, rather than a detailed empirical exposure based on rigorous and diverse data that demonstrates the flows that he postulates. It offers a schema for connecting the dots of our ordinary experience, but it doesn't actually carry out the effort.

Other researchers have done so, of course; researchers who demonstrate the widening inequalities of income and wealth that market democracies contain, the consequences of these inequalities for people at both ends of the divide, the often degrading conditions of work that the majority of the working population experience, and so forth. So on the dimension of wealth, income, and privilege, it isn't too difficult to gather the information we need to better understand our current economic realities based on information that is readily available; but most Americans don't seem to bother to do so. The ease with which the right has succeeded in setting the terms of popular ideas about organized labor, racial inequalities, and immigration bears that out. Lies and slogans replace honest factual argument.

And what about the other large determinant of outcomes in modern society, the workings of political power? Here too there are founding theorists who sought to lay bare the "real" workings of power in a market democracy. Foucault is one; Domhoff and Mills sought to do so a generation earlier. The goals of C. Wright Mills (The Power Elite; link) and G. William Domhoff (Who Rules America? Challenges to Corporate and Class Dominance; link) were similar to Marx's, but in the sphere of political power within a democracy. They wanted to demonstrate how the language of pluralism and representative democracy works to conceal a system of power and influence that was anything but egalitarian. They wanted to shred the ideologies and obscurantist narratives that conceal these political realities.

But, like Marx to some extent, their writings too remained schematic. They offered a framework for thinking about political power that was radically different from that of the pluralists. But they didn't really provide a detailed empirical exposure of the workings of this system in real time. So here again, we'd like to have an organized way of connecting the dots within the contemporary world. How do corporations use lobbying firms and campaign PACs to shape policy and legislation to their liking? How is it going on today? And, as is the case of the domain of economic inequalities, there are plenty of sources today shedding light on aspects of these processes. But these political realities seem if anything, even more difficult to perceive.

The blog Naked Capitalism approximates the kind of dot-connecting that I'm describing, with specific application to the financial industry. Here a group of very expert observers are taking the trouble to track the complexities and the hidden interests involved in the financial industry, and to try to make sense of what they find in an honest way. I. F. Stone was a one-man dot-connector in the 1960s when it came to the Indochina War (Best of I. F. Stone). The opening chapter of Frances Fox Piven's Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America does a good job of sketching out the influence systems that set the planets in motion in American democracy. And Bob Herbert's last column for

the New York Times does it as well (link). We need exactly these kinds of effort in other areas too -- defense contracting, influence peddling, the pharmaceutical industry, news media, ... We need help connecting the dots of how our society works, who pulls the strings and who benefits.

Blogging, critical journalism, and crusading thinkers like I. F. Stone and Frances Fox Piven can help a lot. And, by the way, it must be done in a way that is committed to high standards of empirical fidelity; it needs to inspire the kind of trust that Stone was able to do fifty years ago. And maybe, with the makings of a more truthful shared understanding of how our society actually works, we will succeed in creating a politics that transforms it.

Why peasant activism?

Sunday, March 27, 2011



I have long been interested in peasant struggles as an historical phenomenon -- for example, the causes and outcomes of the peasant rebellions in China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Understanding Peasant China: Case Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science). But it is also true that peasant movements are still visible in contemporary politics in a number of countries. For example, mobilization by peasants and landless workers in West Bengal against the state's proposed development of a Tata factory led to the project's relocation to Gujarat (link). In some instances and issues, peasants and other disadvantaged people come together as a mass organization to press their interests and concerns; in other apparently similar instances they do not. How are we to understand this variation?

People are generally careful about their active political investments, especially when their choices can lead to serious personal consequences. Are there good reasons for poor people to form and support organizations that seek strategies for expressing their needs and interests? Should they consider supporting demonstrations, strikes, and protests? What is the likelihood that social mobilization of the poor majorities in India, Egypt, or Brazil might lead to improvement in their daily lives?

A first point is fairly obvious. As a low-income society undertakes policies and strategies for growth, there are choices to be made. These choices have differential effects on different social groups. And poor people and peasants are often at a severe disadvantage in competing over the terms of these choices within the formal institutions of government. China's decision to create the Three Gorges Yangtze River dam system created many winners; but it also created many millions of low-income losers whose homes and livelihoods were destroyed in the process (link). Largescale social and

economic change is a time when the stakes are exceptionally high, and having a voice is crucial.

A second point has more to do with the "normal" workings of power in a developing state. Poor people's interests are almost always overlooked or undervalued by official power-holders in developing societies -- a point made thirty years ago by Michael Lipton in Why Poor People Stay Poor: Urban Bias in World Development (1977). And this is often true even within parties that are ostensibly devoted to the poor, like the Congress Party in India. Corruption by leaders and powerful organizations is endemic, and landlords, business owners, and the military almost always wield disproportionate influence in the corridors of power. So if nothing is done to disturb this "tilt" in the political system, then the outcomes will be unfavorable to poor people.

Third, it is plain that the organized efforts of under-class people can be powerful. Women's organizations advocating for environmental protection or property rights for women can push state and national authorities towards policies they would not otherwise have chosen. (Bina Agarwal has documented these processes in India; for example, here.) Organizations of landless agricultural workers can pressure the state into adopting reforms and programs that provide some relief for their poverty. Mass mobilization is almost the only way to assert the material interests of the people.

Debal Singha Roy considers these issues in detail with regard to rural India in Peasant Movements in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilization and Identity. Here is how Roy puts the point:

Social movements have always been an inseparable part of social progression, and through organized protests and resistance against domination and injustice they pave the way for new thoughts and actions that rejuvenate the process of change and transformation in society. They bring forth for public scrutiny the hard and hidden realities of social dynamics. (8)

So, according to Roy, popular movements -- e.g. peasants' movements -- can lead to measurable change in favor of the dispossessed. They do so by making injustice visible to the broader society; pressing effectively for social changes that improve the condition of one's group; giving voice to segments of society who are almost always invisible to the middle classes; and asserting one's own agency as a fundamental aspect of being human. These are all reasons for thinking that social activism and social movements are important.

What about the rest of us? Is activism important in a modern market democracy? Frances Fox Piven argues that these points do indeed apply in modern market democracies as well. In her recent book, Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America, she lays out this case through a new analysis of American policy history.

This book argues that ordinary people exercise power in American politics mainly at those extraordinary moments when they rise up in anger and hope, defy the rules that ordinarily govern their daily lives, and, by doing so, disrupt the workings of the institutions in which they are enmeshed. (kl 23)

Piven's basic view is that the structural inequalities of property and power in market democracies mean that electoral processes are usually tilted against the interests and concerns of poor and middling people. Electoral competitions are generally won by enough candidates reflecting the interests and world views of the powerful, that the perspectives of the poor and disadvantaged in American society rarely prevail in the

statehouse or the Congress. The exceptions occur, she believes, when poor and disadvantaged people find ways of expressing their interests through avenues that threaten to disrupt "business as usual" -- boycotts, strikes, demonstrations, and other activities outside of formal politics. Rights of speech and association underlie many of these strategies, and they express a different aspect of democracy. And these in turn depend upon a combination of mobilization and a moment in time when such collective actions have the potential of creating significant disruption -- when French farmers block roads to protest milk prices, for example.

So it seems that democracy almost requires a dynamic tension between formal representative politics and informal, nonviolent popular politics. What goes on in the state house needs what goes on in the streets of Madison if outcomes fair to ordinary working people are likely to occur.

Pincus re-presented

Wednesday, March 30, 2011





Several earlier posts have discussed aspects of Steve Pincus's 1688: The First Modern Revolution (link, link). The book provides a major rethinking of the events and significance of England's Glorious Revolution, and it has already made a deep impression within English studies (link). Pincus tells a large, complicated story, spread out over a period of several decades and including important actions, persons, and events in England, Scotland, Ireland, France, and the Netherlands.

Much of the interest of his account is how fundamentally it differs from the received narrative, its novel use of familiar and new resources, and the author's strong ability to link to current work in some areas of the historical social sciences. But here I want to raise a different sort of question: how could we propose to make this story more vivid and comprehensible for the reader? The book is organized as a fairly traditional academic argument, with chapters on Catholic modernity, pre-Revolution policy change, and aspects of the Revolution itself. Pincus marshalls his evidence to tell a significantly different story from the received one. And as an academic work, it is highly readable and logical. But it is from beginning to end a complex canvas, and it is difficult for a non-specialist reader to keep it all in mind. How might an author -- or a producer -- more fully engage the reader's historical imagination in these complex events? How might the material be presented in a way that gives the reader a more comprehensive apprehension of this history of the English Revolution?

One possibility is a very well produced and very long film. A dramatization could serve to give the viewer a more vivid sense of acquaintance with the central actors -- James, Monmouth, William. Dramatic reconstruction and enactment certainly gives the viewer a more visceral grasp of the historical personnages. But another value of dramatization could be to give the viewer a better grasp of the mass politics of the events -- skirmishes with brigades, vandalism against Catholic churches and property, and a few major battles in Ireland -- and perhaps even a sense of the motives and passions that moved people. Viewers of *Battleship Potemkin* (link) certainly come away with a more intense set of representations of the Russian revolution of 1905 and some of the personalities than they do from reading Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution.

But the film described here would be very long -- even Sergei Eisenstein's canvas would fall short. (I seem to recall reading a long time ago that Eisenstein once proposed to produce a seven-hour film based on Marx's *Capital*.) And the academic historian has specific cognitive goals -- to present a narrative of the period, to refute common assumptions ("no mass underclass violence in the Glorious Revolution"), and to present some compelling evidence for the interpretation. So a film probably wouldn't be a satisfactory platform for Pincus's academic goals. He wants to present new knowledge, not an abbreviated and highly selective sketch.

Another possibility that appeals to me is a mutimedia production that is integrated with the existing book. A core element might be an interactive map that the reader can manipulate -- "what was happening in Essex at this time?" -- and that is keyed to the text itself so the reader always has a sense of the geography of the events. This hypertext "rich" document might also include significantly more graphics -- reproduction of key pieces of archival evidence, contemporary paintings and engravings of events, graphs of important population and trade statistics, a snippet of Youtube video in which another major historian of the period offers an alternative reading. (Here is Simon Schama on Anne Boleyn (link)).

Here the idea is that the historian needs some new tools of representation for better conveying to the reader a grasp of the complex, multidimensional argument and narrative. This suggests the value for academic historians of taking very seriously the potential of "rich" media as an integrated platform for conveying arguments and knowledge. And here I'm not thinking simply of pedagogy -- how to get these complexities across to the lay reader -- but new ways of presenting the historian's central ideas and arguments. Perhaps this kind of rich document could actually be a better way of making the case based on narrative, multimedia components, interactive maps, graphics, etc.

One difficulty with this notion is the fact that historians are trained as narrative writers. They have learned to organize their thoughts into arguments, narratives, and chapters, and they expect their readers to do the work of putting it together into an integrated historical presentation. The skills possessed by an Eisenstein or a David Simon, executive producer of *The Wire*, are substantially different -- more graphical, more attuned to the audience (viewer/reader), and more able to encapsulate their story into a handful of scenes of drama that permit the viewer to connect the dots and arrive at an interpretation of the full story. These are skills that are entirely foreign to PhD training in history.

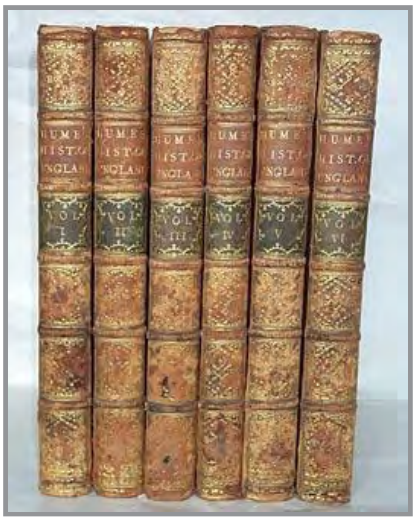
I suspect that not many academic historians would be especially receptive to these ideas, and sometimes for good reasons. (Simon Schama may be an exception; his efforts with the BBC to put together a serious multi-episode history of Britain indicates a willingness

to experiment with new forms of presentation of history; link.) A central part of the resistance from traditional historians might reasonably reflect their core views of what a "history" of something needs to accomplish. The academic historian's primary goals are cognitive and epistemic: offering interpretations, drawing inferences, and providing evidence for their views. Part of the task of a narrative is to distill the complex whole into a comprehensible set of events. Another part is to categorize actions and occurrences. It is to provide a more abstract analysis of the events. And sequential narratives may be thought to be a more-or-less ideal form for this kind of logical, cumulative argument.

All this said, it does seem clear that there are tools for the presentation of knowledge that may prove more helpful than the printed page for synthesizing a large complex story, and it would be very interesting to see what happens when a few innovative academic historians begin thinking along these lines.

Hume as historian

Friday, April 01, 2011



David Hume is probably the greatest British philosopher of his century or the next one. He set the framework for empiricist theories of knowledge, causation, and induction, as well as providing trenchant writings about religion, psychology, and the self. And he appears to have been an appealing personality as well, with the courage of his convictions when it came to his atheism and his stocism in the face of impending death.

So he was a truly brilliant and original philosopher. But he was best known during his lifetime for his million-word history of England, The History of England, Volume I (1754-62), in six long volumes. The work covers Britain from the Saxon kings through the Glorious Revolution of 1688. As such, it intersects to some extent with a topic discussed several times before, Steve Pincus's recent 1688: The First Modern Revolution. So it is worth taking a quick look at a bit of the history, in order to get an idea of how Hume thought about historical knowledge and how to present it.

The final section of volume I treats the reign of Charles II. (I'm using the Kindle edition; A Short History of England.) This is a key period in Britain's modern history, following the Civil War, the execution of Charles I, and the brief rule of Cromwell. And, of course, it

leads up to the revolution that led to the flight of James II and succession by William and Mary. So how did Hume synthesize this period of history? What factors did he select for inclusion? How did he structure his narrative? And to what extent did he offer large interpretations or explanatory judgments about the period?

The book went through some 50 editions during the century following Hume's death; it was a stunning success with the British reading public. That said, it reads as a pretty pedestrian piece of historical writing today. The prose is inviting and clear; but there is very little to stimulate the reader's intellect.

Content. Hume opens the volume with extensive description of the personality and character of Charles II himself. The focus on the personalities of the period takes a high proportion of the text. Second, he describes the diplomacy and military affairs of the monarch's court in some detail. (He shows a particular interest in naval battles.) He introduces some of the important turning-points of the period and provides some details about their how's and why's. Third, he goes into some detail about the politics of religion and the jockeying of Catholics and Protestants for power and freedom of political and religious activity. Fourth, he gives substantial attention to the politics and actions of Parliament and the King's relations with Parliament.

What is almost wholly lacking is any detail or attention to the social or economic context of the period. There is no mention of common people, villages, agriculture, hunger, or popular religious beliefs. The resolutions of the new King's finances are discussed, but there is no sustained discussion of the fiscal system or the reforms that were enacted. The "modernizing" efforts of this regime that are so important in the account Pincus offers are invisible in this history.

The one exception to this observation comes in the final dozen pages of volume I, following without break his account of the ascension of William and Mary. There he takes a very different approach. He provides a brief summary of the fiscal realities of the Crown, military and naval affairs, England's state of commerce and manufacture, England's colonies, the advancement of science and technology, and the state of letters and literature. This chapter is wholly exceptional; it is a synthetic summary rather than a linear narrative, it is topically organized rather than chronological, and it looks much more like a multi-threaded history than the succession of actions, wars, plots, and trials that precedes.

Structure. The history takes the form of an entirely linear narrative, down to section breaks for successive years (1660, 1661, 1662, ...). Hume structures his task as one of organizing the facts of each year into a story that incorporates the main details of person, event, and political action. There are no synthetic chapters that attempt to rise to a higher level of historical abstraction. The narrative proceeds from court to parliament to war to plots to trials and executions, with virtually no commentary on the sequence.

Explanations. Hume's explanations in this part of the history, at least, are essentially biographical and interpretive. He explains outcomes as the result of the goals and intentions of the elite actors. But he does not offer anything like the large interpretive schemes offered by his contemporary, Edward Gibbon, in his history of the Roman Empire. Hume does not find systemic causes of change during this dynamic period of British history, and he does not attempt to offer a big-picture schema for the period. The character of the king is relevant, as are the motives and loyalties of dozens of other characters. But there is nothing in the way of reference to historical forces or trends.

So Hume's history is NOT a number of things. It is not a precursor to "history from below"; it is not a history of state or social institutions; it is not an interpretive history with a "big-picture" theme of interpretation. And really, it is not particularly interesting from a historiographic point of view.

This assessment leaves us with something of a puzzle to unravel: how is it that such a brilliant and penetrating philosopher would have devoted so much of his life to such a plodding historical book? Why did he not perceive the need for inclusion of some of the factors mentioned here? And why did he so assiduously avoid anything remotely resembling an explanatory hypothesis about the sources and dynamics of change during the period? Is it simply that the parameters of historical writing in the first half of the eighteenth century were so limited that even a great and original mind could not transcend them?

And the mystery deepens when we arrive at the synthetic section mentioned above. This section demonstrates that Hume was fully aware of these other topics, and had interesting views about them. So he could have written a history that incorporates social, economic, and institutional context. He therefore must have made a conscious decision not to do so. Why not?

I suppose there is a case to be made for the idea that Hume's philosophical beliefs themselves were partially responsible for the limitations of his history. Take causal explanation, for example. Given Hume's skepticism about "real" causes, and given the absence in history of strong regularities, perhaps it is unsurprising that Hume refrained from offering a causal hypothesis about the twists and turns of the period. And given his insistence on the primacy of "facts" that can be observed and documented, perhaps this comes close to implying the necessity of a historical narrative that simply chronicles the facts. If it can't be observed, then it is pure speculation; and it has no place in empirical historical writing. On this line of thought, it is Hume's fundamental empiricism that leads to the fundamental flatness of his historical writing.

This doesn't provide a complete explanation -- it doesn't explain Hume's deliberate exclusion of social questions or ordinary people in history, for example. But maybe it suffices to explain the flatness and linearity of the narrative and the absence of explanatory themes.

(It is interesting to note that Hume sometimes uses the language of cause in a very untroubled way -- for example, in this passage about the Great London Fire:

The causes of this calamity were evident. The narrow streets of London, the houses built entirely of wood, the dry season, and a violent east wind which blew; these were so many concurring circumstances, which rendered it easy to assign the reason of the destruction that ensued. (kl 867)
This is remarkably realist language about causation for the great skeptic on this subject.)

Studying the socially constituted agent

Monday, April 04, 2011

We think we know quite a bit about being an "agent". It is to be an intervener in the world: a being capable of changing things around him or her through physical action; a subjectivity (consciousness, feelings, thoughts, desires); a user of language for thought and for communication. We also think we are well prepared when it comes to recognizing the diversity of the subjectivities on which agents act and live. We are familiar with important cultural differences; we know that people have different sets of values and commitments; we know that people from different backgrounds see and experience the world differently. Perhaps even, like Benjamin Whorf, we may think that different language systems and grammars give their users fundamentally different categories in term of which to analyze the world (link).

So we seem to know a lot. But in fact, this is the part of the social sciences and humanities that is the least developed and the least adequate to the complexity of the facts. What we lack most basically is a useable meta-framework in the context of which to characterize and analyze -- and to study -- the workings of these features of agency. We're not even clear about what to call these personally realized features of subjectivity and vision -- Mentalities? Conceptual frameworks? Value systems? Worldviews? Depth grammars of social cognition?

One reason for this under-development is the intangibility of these sorts of characteristics. They are features of the subjectivity of the individual; they are unobservable; they are difficult or impossible for the agent herself to articulate. So it is easier for the social sciences to proceed on the basis of highly schematic "models" of the agent -- e.g. the rational-choice model of preferences and beliefs, or the traditionalist's model of roles and norms. But these models aren't adequate. Worse, they lead us to paraphrase features of novel agency into the stylized forms of the model. They erase the differences.

The topic is important, because ultimately, all social phenomena are the result of agents acting for their own reasons, and we need to understand the varieties of their thought processes. So the social sciences need detailed understandings of the varieties of human subjectivity -- agency. We need to understand in concrete detail what it means to say that the subject is socially constructed, and through what concrete social mechanisms this construction takes place. We need to know how differences in culture produce systemically different world views or mental frameworks. And we need to be able to investigate these differences in detail and rigorously.

A few concrete examples are helpful:

- How did French and Chinese legal systems think differently about "property"? How did these differences influence differences in judgment between French and Chinese officials?
- How does the idea of an after-life influence worldview, action, and behavior for believing Christians and Muslims?
- In what ways do Balinese people have a non-individualistic conception of the individual person?
- Is it true that Japanese workers have a deeper affinity with team and group than American workers?
- Was the "Greatest Generation" really different in significant ways having to do with

values and social perceptions than the next generation?

There are research vehicles through which to conduct this kind of research -- ethnography, careful study of texts, literary analysis, interviews in depth about political perceptions, the methods of phenomenological sociology, and perhaps the tools of cognitive and personality psychologists. Particularly interesting is Robert Darnton's reconstruction of the specific and surprising mentality of the 18th-century printer's apprentices in the The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History. And his interpretation is based on rigorous analysis of varied documents and practices (link). It is good social science and good discovery of subjectivity.

But before we are likely to make a lot of progress on framing a research agenda around "mentality", we need a better and more commonly understood vision of the goal of the study. And I would say this means trying to formulate a meta-theory of subjectivity and agency, into which our findings about value systems, cognitive frameworks, moral ideas, and the like can be fitted.

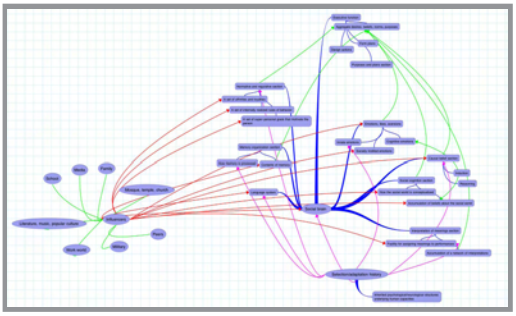
There are some meta-frameworks that might be considered at the outset. The idea of a scientific paradigm or research programme is one; here philosophers of science have tried to get concrete about the specific presuppositions and concepts in terms of which the community of physicists understand theory and the laboratory bench. The idea of a cultural tradition is likewise a fairly concrete idea, where anthropologists try to use the statements, speeches, and artifacts of a community to help decode the subjectivity that underlies.

This topic is important in many areas of the social sciences, but none more so than in comparative research across civilizations. When we consider economic and political institutions in Europe and Asia, as Bin Wong does in China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience, the fact of massive differences in starting points, presuppositions, fixed values, and moral perceptions of the populations involved loom enormous. But without more refined tools for analyzing these differences, it is difficult to treat them in a satisfying way.

This seems like an ideal place for an interdisciplinary research group of social scientists, psychologists, philosophers, and humanists to begin charting new ground.

Picturing social consciousness

Wednesday, April 06, 2011



Here is a schematic effort at capturing some of the main factors involved in the socially constituted agent. There are the "influencers" that impact the development of the person

and his/her "social brain" -- that is, the neurophysiological infrastructure we have evolved through our evolutionary history for gaining knowledge, representing the world, interacting with other people, etc. I've singled out media, family, school, religion, peers, popular culture, work, and the military as primary social and cultural influencers. And the red arrows indicate the schematic notion that these institutions and structured experiences affect the development of multiple aspects of the social agent's mental system. The idea is that each of these institutions creates an environment and a set of experiences that lead the young person into a specific "grammar" of interpretation and action.

Second, there is a marker in the diagram for the evolutionary history of the human "social brain" -- the neurophysiological systems we have evolved to support cognition, language, dexterity, cooperation, ... This part of the diagram represents a whole set of fields of interdisciplinary research, from neurophysiology to animal ethology to the study of morality embodied in human practices.

Third, there are the "sections" of the fully developed actor -- memory, emotion, meaning, purposes, norms, affinities, and social and causal beliefs. And there is an "executive" department that aggregates these action-relevant inputs into actions and plans. Each of these departments is itself the subject of development and influence by the "influencers"; and many interact with each other. In particular, memories and emotions may mutually interact. Adherence to a cause may be amplified by a set of memories and a set of emotions. And so forth.

I don't put this forward as a serious effort in the "science of the mind", but rather as a way of providing an inventory of the various aspects of consciousness and agency that we recognize as going into the social constitution of the actor; and a sketch of some of the various ways in which these aspects are influenced by social experience and culture.

To me the interesting part of the diagram is that it suggests many avenues of empirical and hermeneutic investigation. For example, how exactly are the memory system and its contents influenced by social experience? How does this system in turn influence social perception, choice, and action? Or the emotions: how are the emotions and passions shaped by social and cultural experience? And how do they in turn influence action? It would seem that there is ample room along each of the "arrows" of influence provided here for extensive empirical and interpretive investigation.

Structures and structuration

Friday, April 08, 2011

Several recent posts have focused on new thinking about how to characterize "agency". Much of that thinking is aimed at dissolving the distinction between agency and structure. So what remains to be said about "structure"? Has the structure side of the debate developed much in the past decade or so?

One of the important exponents of a structure-centered approach to social theory is Anthony Giddens. His 1979 book, Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis, is one place where his views on structure are expressed. He separates himself from earlier versions of "structuralism," including Saussure and Levi-Strauss; but he advocates for the reality of social structures and the methodological appropriateness of attempting to arrive at empirically based theories of

social structures in sociology and other areas of the social sciences. He emphasizes the fact of process rather than static organization in his theory of structures; to capture the "verbiness" of a process view, he prefers the language of "structuration" rather than "structuralism." This distinction having to do with the location of things in time -- a static snapshot versus a continuous process -- extends to his treatment of action as well:

'Action' or agency, as I use it, thus does not refer to a series of discrete acts combined together, but to a continuous flow of conduct. We may define action... as involving a 'stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world'. (55)

A recent and unapologetic treatment of the reality of social structures is presented in Dave Elder-Vass's The Causal Power of Social Structures (2010). Elder-Vass accepts the point that agency and structure are inseparable; neither functions as a solely sufficient cause of social outcomes. But he argues strongly for the idea that social structures have causal powers that are not reducible to facts about individuals. He places his analysis generally within the tradition of critical realism (Bhaskar, A Realist Theory of Science). And he relies heavily on the theory of supervenience to solve the riddle of how structures can be composed of individual-level activity and yet possess autonomous causal powers (Kim, Mind in a Physical World: An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental Causation).

Elder-Vass rejects the ontology of methodological individualism, which he regards as a species of reductionism: social properties need to be reducible to features of individuals. And yet he fully and unambiguously embraces the obvious fact that social structures must be **composed** of individuals in relations to each other. His way out of this apparent contradiction is to argue that social structures possess **emergent** causal powers: causal characteristics that pertain to the whole but not to the parts or their ensembles. Here is how he characterizes emergence:

A thing ... can have properties or capabilities that are not possessed by its parts. Such properties are called emergent properties. (4)

And later:

An emergent property is one that is not possessed by any of the parts individually and that would not be possessed by the full set of parts in the absence of a structuring set of relations between them. (17)

It is obvious and unexceptional that there are "emergent" properties in this limited sense. However, I'm not sure it captures the full concept of emergence. It would appear that holists have another idea in mind as well: the idea that the properties of the whole cannot be derived from knowledge of the properties of the parts and their relations to each other. ((E-V discusses this angle under the topic of "eliminative reductionism"; 24, 54.) A square figure is composed of four lines; the figure possesses area, whereas the lines do not. Sugar is sweet, but its component parts -- carbon, hydrogen, oxygen -- are not. So is "sweetness" an emergent property? Apparently it is not; because the sweetness of the compound can in fact be explained by the knowledge we have of the chemistry of the components, their molecular bonds, and the human sensors that register "sweetness." The property of sweetness can be **derived** from knowledge of the basic chemistry and the workings of the sensory system. So sweetness can be "reduced" to facts about the molecule and the sensor. It is not a novel causal power.

Here is why Elder-Vass thinks the concept of emergence is valuable in the context of social structures:

The value of the concept of emergence lies in its potential to explain how an entity can have a causal impact on the world in its own right: a causal impact that is not just the sum of the impacts its parts would have if they were not organised into this kind of whole. (5)
But really his central insight is that composites may have causal powers that are relatively *autonomous* from the powers of their parts:

Reductionist thinkers have argued that if we can explain how a causal power works in terms of lower-level forces, the original power itself becomes redundant to any explanation of its effects. By contrast, I argue in chapter 3 that when we explain a causal power, we do not explain it *away*. (6)
And here is his central point:

I shall argue that social entities [structures] are causally effective in their own right, with causal powers that are distinct from those of human individuals. But I shall also examine the mechanisms that underpin these causal powers, thus recognizing the contributory role that human individuals make to the functioning of social structures. (6)
(This last point is what I and others refer to as providing "microfoundations" for claims about social causation.)

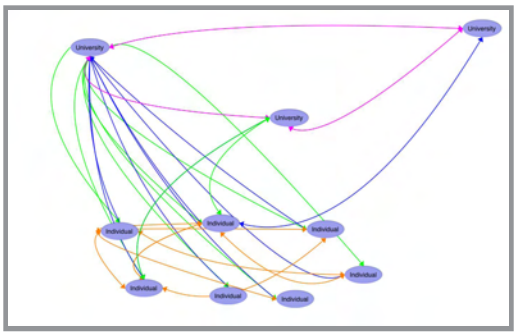
So this seems to be Elder-Vass's core ontology of structures: structures are composed of individuals in relation to each other; structures have "emergent" causal powers that are not simply the sum of the causal powers of the component individuals; these emergent powers derive from the relations between the components; and for any particular causal power of the structure it must be possible to provide an explanation of the power in terms of mechanisms involving the individuals and their relations.

The bulk of the book takes the form of an effort to work out this view in detail with respect to two important types of social structures: organizations and normative circles. A bank is an organization (which in turn fits into a web of other organizations). A normative circle is a set of overlapping sets of individuals who both embody and conform to a normative rule or ideal. (E-V traces the idea here back to Durkheim and Simmel.) More on this later!

I suggested above that the concept of explanatory autonomy might work better than emergence. So what is a good definition of "relative autonomy" of causal powers at one level or another, with respect to the underlying entities? I think there are many areas of the sciences where we identify a set of causal processes that are sufficiently regular and predictable, that we don't feel obliged to drop down to the next level in order to achieve an adequate explanation. A level is "explanatorily autonomous" if entities at that level conform to a regular set of causal relations. Thinking of the brain as a computing system is an example. If we analyze the visual system in terms of a set of receptors, aggregators, detectors, analyzers, etc., and if this model allows us to explain and predict the organism's perceptual capacities (including mistakes), then we don't need to have a full theory of the neurophysiology that underlies. On this example, "perception as computational system" is relatively autonomous with respect to the underlying neurophysiology.

University as a causal structure

Thursday, April 14, 2011



An earlier post laid out a case for a modest social holism, in the form of a set of arguments for the idea that there are social forces and causal powers that are relatively autonomous from the features of the individuals who constitute them (link). These ideas parallel some of those offered by Dave Elder-Vass that were discussed in a recent post. I hold that this modest holism is compatible with the ideas of methodological localism (link) and the requirement that social causes require microfoundations (link, link). At the same time, it helps make sense of the fairly obvious point that social institutions, norms, and linguistic communities exercise powerful influence over the thoughts and behaviors of individuals.

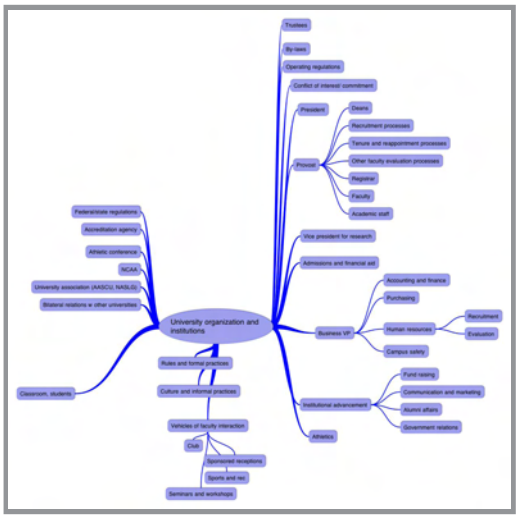
The causal processes linking institution and individuals appear to be fully two-directional, with reinforcing feedback loops. The institution consists of a set of rules, processes, and role-players. The rules are both formal (laws, standard practice guides, by-laws) and informal (long-standing and widely recognized practices and norms governing specific kinds of activity). Some of the role players have the role of enforcing the rules and incentivizing the desired behaviors. These "enforcers" may act on the basis of a range of levels of understanding and commitment; so enforcement itself is variable. Ordinary participants within the institution are subject to the incentives and sanctions created by the rules and the enforcers; so their behavior is to some extent responsive to the rules. And ordinary participants in turn have internalized some understanding of the core processes and regulations of the institution -- and are (in varying degrees of involvement) prepared to encourage or sanction the behavior of their peers based on their understanding of the rules.

This description raises a number of theoretical issues. (1) What social processes establish the relative degree of continuity of the rules and practices of the institution? What prevents "drift" away from the rules of a given moment? (2) What social and agentic processes lead individuals to conform to the rules, and under what circumstances do individuals subvert or evade the rules? (3) What social processes ensure a reasonable degree of commitment by "agents" (officers, managers, directors) of the institution to its foundational rules and practices? How is an alignment between rules, agents, and participants established and maintained?

We might imagine that there are "tipping points" when it comes to adherence to the institution's norms, rules, and practices. When a sufficient number of agents or participants sincerely endorse the rules and adhere to them, this leads other agents to do so as well. When rule evasion is perceived to be common, this probably leads to a precipitous decline in rule adherence. So widespread conformance is itself a causal factor in the persistence of the rules into the next time period.

But how do we go beyond these general statements about structural causation? It may

be helpful to think through a familiar example -- the ways in which a specific institution like a university both shapes and influences the behavior of many individuals, and the ways in which its own internal functions and culture are themselves constituted by the behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and morés of the individuals who fall within its ambit. Here is a sketch of the functional organization of a fictitious university:



The diagram has place-holders for formal, explicit rules and procedures (by-laws and operating regulations) and informal norms and practices; it has a sketch of some typical processes and transactions within which actors need to make various performances (tenure evaluation processes, research account oversight, purchasing decisions); and it identifies core "enforcer and incentivizer" roles -- CFO, provost, dean, auditors ... The actions that take place within the university generally fall within the scope of one or more of these regulations and norms. Actors (faculty members, front-line staff, administrators) are generally aware of the procedures that regulate their actions, and they either conform or deviate from the procedures. If they conform, generally things go well for them; if they deviate (submit false receipts for travel reimbursement) they are often detected and punished. So behavior of actors within the institution shows a measurable level of conformance with regulations and norms. And there are direct forms of oversight, reward, and punishment that serve to reinforce compliance. Finally, to close the circle -- the enforcers and incentivizers themselves fall within a circle of appraisal and accountability; so if their behavior deviates from what the standards and norms of the institution require, there is a likelihood of discovery and remedial action by others.

Outside the scope of the formal and informal norms of the institution, there are a variety of strands of institutional culture. Faculty, for example, find themselves in specific social settings within the university -- department meetings, faculty clubs, research seminars, etc. -- in which they gain exposure to local attitudes and values. And, as anyone who has spent much time in a university knows, these experiences often lead up to a fairly stable institutional culture among faculty -- in a department or division, or in the university as a whole (link). The faculty in a liberal arts college have a rather different culture from that of the faculty at a large research university. And liberal arts college faculties differ among themselves as well in this respect.

There is another kind of causal influence that is indicated in the first diagram above -- the fact that universities also have relations of influence with other universities. So if University A is looking to refine or modify its employee benefits policies, it is likely to examine the best practices of University B and C as well; and it is likely to adopt a few of those best practices. So the network of learning and emulation that exists across institutions is another form of causal influence at the level of the social structure. Here

again, it is not difficult to disaggregate this causal mechanism into specific individual-level actions -- attendance at an ACE conference, a site visit to University B by several representatives of University A, the drafting of a new policy by those individuals when they return home for consideration by a deliberative body, and the ultimate selection of the new policy by the president of the university.

So it isn't difficult to specify the ways in which the institution and its components exercise "macro" causal impact on the behavior of individuals within a university. An organization develops specific arrangements to solve problems of coordination, incentives, and rule enforcement; and these social arrangements have a strong influence on the behavior of the individuals who live within the institution. But likewise, it is not difficult to specify how these rules, norms, and enforcement mechanisms are embodied in the actions and mental states of a set of individuals. The people who occupy positions of influence within this organization have been "trained" by the organization to do their jobs; the skills learned through this training (and through their experience in the position over time) are embodied in their cognitive systems as "managerial skills"; and their motivations and behaviors themselves are subject to a degree of institutional control. (A dean who refuses to accept the responsibility of maintaining fiscal balance in his or her unit will soon be removed.) This causal system is indeed cyclical: both the organizational components and the participants have history and skills developed by past experience that allow them to function adeptly within the system. The participants have learned their university "habitus" from prior experience of the university; and the university's rules, norms, and procedures are in turn embodied in the present in the habitus of the current members of the university, and the embodied traces of its norms and rules in the form of written regulations.

Academic freedom and faculty email

Friday, April 15, 2011

There have been several efforts recently by partisan groups in Michigan and Wisconsin to gain access to faculty email messages on subjects that fall within the scope of the faculty member's research or personal political opinions. These groups have made use of state Freedom of Information laws, on the basis that faculty members are "state officials" and their communications are therefore "business records" of the university.

This is an alarming intrusion into the zone of academic and personal freedom of the faculty member, and it threatens to create a chilling effect on the faculty member's ability to freely communicate his or her ideas with colleagues without fear of retaliation or punishment, or premature disclosure of ideas not yet fully developed. It is vital that universities think very carefully about these issues before complying.

Once a scholar's ideas are published, they are in the public forum and are readily available to anyone who is interested, including the partisan groups who are now attempting to gain access to private emails. But before the scholar chooses to publish his or her ideas, she needs and deserves to have a zone of private conversation and expression through which she can test and refine her ideas. This is part of being a human being. It is a key reason why academic freedom is so important, to allow the free expression and refinement of ideas through intellectual interaction. And being able to control the publicity or privacy of one's thoughts is essential for this process, and is very close to being a human right.

So accepting the principle that a faculty member at a public university is a state official

and his/her communications about research ideas or social and political opinions are "business records" represents a huge erosion of academic and personal freedom. Academic freedom requires a zone of untrammeled private expression and discussion through which the individual can develop and refine her ideas.

If public universities are to be successful in maintaining their commitment to academic freedom for their faculty, they need to draw a bright line between **business records** and **intellectual, critical, and creative documents.** Freedom of information laws pertain to the former but should not require disclosure of the latter.

So what is the distinction? Here is one way of drawing the distinction. **Business activities** have to do with decision making about material issues within the organization. They have to do with concrete decisions involving such issues as purchasing, contracting, personnel decisions, hiring, and other material administrative actions. **Intellectual, critical and creative documents** are those that express the faculty member's ideas, thoughts, judgments, and hypotheses about subjects of interest. Transparency about business deliberations and decisions is essential in order to prevent conflict of interest, favoritism, and other improper business activities within any institution. But privacy with regard to "intellectual, critical, and creative documents" falls outside the scope of business activity, and should be protected.

The argument is sometimes made that professors are hired to think and do research; therefore their writings, even in email, are part of their employment work; therefore these writings are business records. But this line of thought is incorrect. The faculty member is hired to teach courses. An expectation of their work is that they will be active intellectuals and scholars. They will exercise their talents, it is expected, in an autonomous and self-directed way, to arrive at their own original results. But the content and product of their intellectual works are not themselves paid work products. Evidence of this, in part, is the fact that the university does not claim ownership of the copyright on faculty writings. Originality, autonomy, independence, and creativity are key to intellectual work, including faculty work. And this in turn underlines the importance of the zone of privacy within the context of which their intellectual and personal thinking and expression take place.

There are extreme and untenable results that ensue if you take this paradigm to its limit. Right now the FOIA requests are for a range of emails delimited by a list of keywords. But if the principle is accepted that the faculty member's intellectual products, in whatever form, are a business record, then preliminary drafts of scholarly work, laboratory notebooks, the jottings of a creative writing professor in preparation of a short story or novel -- all these products ultimately lead to a research result, which is a part of the expectations of the faculty member's work. And therefore, by this paradigm, they would be discoverable. Therefore it would be possible to FOIA a poet working for a public university to make available preliminary drafts of a poem. Likewise, paintings, drawings, and sculptures are the work of faculty in the arts. By this same principle, it is hard to see a basis for denying a FOIA request for drawings, sketches, and clay models.

On the subject of the expression of political and social opinions, observations, and judgments: Clearly this set of ideas and expressions by the faculty member does not fall within the scope of faculty employment under any description. The university does not hire faculty members to have political opinions. Rather, as citizens they may or may not have such opinions, and it is entirely within their rights to hold and express them. Further, neither the state nor the university has a right or an interest to surveilling or observing or criticizing or delimiting their expressions of political opinion. So any emails that are

primarily expressive of political opinions or judgments are not part of their work, do not have business content, and should not be provided under the scope of a FOIA request, even though they are expressed by a faculty member hired by a public university.

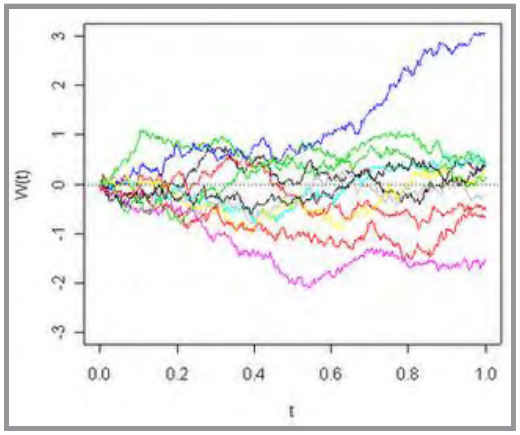
These FOIA requests, it should be noted, do not depend on the issue of whether the email account is owned by the university or is a private account. FOIA requires university officials to provide emails that have business content relevant to a particular subject, without regard to the platform on which these messages were transmitted. If the judgment were to stand that the faculty's intellectual products are in fact business records, then it wouldn't matter whether they are expressed in an email owned by the university or a private account.

Background

Here is a story in TPM about the Mackinac Center FOIA request in Michigan (link). Here is a summary of Michigan's FOIA law. Here is a posting from Inside Higher Education that describes the decisions the University of Wisconsin administration made with respect to requests for some of history professor William Cronon's email (link). And here is a thoughtful piece from the Center for Free Speech on Campus on the issues (link).

Scenario-based projections of social processes

Sunday, April 17, 2011



As we have noted in previous posts, social outcomes are highly path-dependent and contingent (link, link, link, link). This implies that it is difficult to predict the consequences of even a single causal intervention within a complex social environment including numerous actors -- say, a new land use policy, a new state tax on services, or a sweeping cap-and-trade policy on CO2 emissions. And yet policy changes are specifically designed and chosen in order to bring about certain kinds of outcomes. We care about the future; we adopt policies to improve this or that feature of the future; and yet we have a hard time providing a justified forecast of the consequences of the policy.

This difficulty doesn't only affect policy choices; it also pertains to large interventions like the democracy uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. There are too many imponderable factors -- the behavior of the military, the reactions of other governments, the consequent strategies of internal political actors and parties (the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) -- so activists and academic experts alike are forced to concede that they don't

really know what the consequences will be.

One part of this imponderability derives from the fact that social changes are conveyed through sets of individual and collective actors. The actors have a variety of motives and modes of reasoning, and the collective actors are forced to somehow aggregate the actions and wants of subordinate actors. And it isn't possible to anticipate with confidence the choices that the actors will make in response to changing circumstances. At a very high level of abstraction, it is the task of game theory to model strategic decision-making over a sequence of choices (problems of strategic rationality); but the tools of game theory are too abstract to allow modeling of specific complex social interactions.

A second feature of unpredictability in extended social processes derives from the fact that the agents themselves are not fixed and constant throughout the process. The experience of democracy activism potentially changes the agent profoundly -- so the expectations we would have had of his/her choices at the beginning may be very poorly grounded by the middle and end. Some possible changes may make a very large difference in outcomes -- actors may become more committed, more open to violence, more ready to compromise, more understanding of the grievances of other groups, ... This is sometimes described as endogeneity -- the causal components themselves change their characteristics as a consequence of the process.

So the actors change through the social process; but the same is often true of the social organizations and institutions that are involved in the process. Take contentious politics -- it may be that a round of protests begins around a couple of loose pre-existing organizations. As actors seek to achieve their political goals through collective action, they make use of the organizations for their communications and mobilization resources. But some actors may then also attempt to transform the organization itself -- to make it more effective or to make it more accommodating to the political objectives of this particular group of activists. (Think of Lenin as a revolutionary organization innovator.) And through their struggles, they may elicit changes in the organizations of the "forces of order" -- the police may create new tactics (kettling) and new sub-organizations (specialized intelligence units). So the process of change is likely enough to transform all the causal components as well -- the agents and their motivations as well as the surrounding institutions of mobilization and control. Rather than a set of billiard balls and iron rods with fixed properties and predictable aggregate consequences, we find a fluid situation in which the causal properties of each of the components of the process are themselves changing.

One way of trying to handle the indeterminacy and causal complexity of these sorts of causal processes is to give up on the goal of arriving at specific "point" predictions about outcomes and instead concentrate on tracing out a large number of possible scenarios, beginning with the circumstances, actors, and structures on the ground. In some circumstances we may find that there is a very wide range of possible outcomes; but we may find that a large percentage of the feasible scenarios or pathways fall within a much narrower range. This kind of reasoning is familiar to economists and financial analysts in the form of Monte Carlo simulations. And it is possible that the approach can be used for modeling likely outcomes in more complex social processes as well -- war and peace, ethnic conflict, climate change, or democracy movements.

Agent-based modeling is one component of approaches like these (link). This means taking into account a wide range of social factors -- agents, groups, organizations, institutions, states, popular movements, and then modeling the consequences of these

initial assumptions. Robert Axelrod and colleagues have applied a variety of modeling techniques to these efforts (link).

Another interesting effort to carry out such an effort is underway at the RAND Pardee Center, summarized in a white paper called Shaping the Next One Hundred Years: New Methods for Quantitative, Long-Term Policy Analysis. Here is how the lead investigators describe the overall strategy of the effort:

This report describes and demonstrates a new, quantitative approach to long-term policy analysis (LTPA). These robust decisionmaking methods aim to greatly enhance and support humans' innate decisionmaking capabilities with powerful quantitative analytic tools similar to those that have demonstrated unparalleled effectiveness when applied to more circumscribed decision problems. By reframing the question "What will the long-term future bring?" as "How can we choose actions today that will be consistent with our long-term interests?" robust decisionmaking can harness the heretofore unavailable capabilities of modern computers to grapple directly with the inherent difficulty of accurate long-term prediction that has bedeviled previous approaches to LTPA. (iii)

LTPA is an important example of a class of problems requiring decisionmaking under conditions of deep uncertainty—that is, where analysts do not know, or the parties to a decision cannot agree on, (1) the appropriate conceptual models that describe the relationships among the key driving forces that will shape the long-term future, (2) the probability distributions used to represent uncertainty about key variables and parameters in the mathematical representations of these conceptual models, and/or (3) how to value the desirability of alternative outcomes. (iii)
And here, in a nutshell, is how the approach is supposed to work:

This study proposes four key elements of successful LTPA:

- *Consider large ensembles (hundreds to millions) of scenarios.*
- *Seek robust, not optimal, strategies.*
- *Achieve robustness with adaptivity.*
- *Design analysis for interactive exploration of the multiplicity of plausible futures.*

These elements are implemented through an iterative process in which the computer helps humans create a large ensemble of plausible scenarios, where each scenario represents one guess about how the world works (a future state of the world) and one choice of many alternative strategies that might be adopted to influence outcomes. Ideally, such ensembles will contain a sufficiently wide range of plausible futures that one will match whatever future, surprising or not, does occur—at least close enough for the purposes of crafting policies robust against it. (xiii)

Thus, computer-guided exploration of scenario and decision spaces can provide a prosthesis for the imagination, helping humans, working individually or in groups, to discover adaptive near-term strategies that are robust over large ensembles of plausible futures. (xiv)
The hard work of this approach is to identify the characteristics of policy levers, exogenous uncertainties, measures, and relationship (XLRM). Then the analysis turns to identifying a very large number of possible scenarios, depending on the initial conditions and the properties of the actors and organizations. (This aspect of the analysis is analogous to multiple plays of a simulation game like SimCity.) Finally, the approach requires aggregating the large number of scenarios to allow the analysis to reach some

conclusions about the distribution of futures entailed by the starting position and the characteristics of the actors and institutions. And the method attempts to assign a measure of "regret" to outcomes, in order to assess the policy steps that might be taken today that lead to the least regrettable outcomes in the distant future.

It appears, then, that there are computational tools and methods that may prove useful for social explanation and social prediction -- not of single outcomes, but of the range of outcomes that may be associated with a set of interventions, actors, and institutions.

Social networks as aggregators

Thursday, April 21, 2011



We think of social phenomena as "relational" in some important respect. Individuals contribute to social outcomes through structured and dynamic relationships with other individuals. So outcomes are not just heaps of aggregated individual behavior; rather, they are the filigreed result of interlinked, coordinated, competitive and sometimes unintended actions of people who have intentional and structural relationships to each other. And we think of these relationships, often, in terms of the metaphors and analytics of social "networks." So it is worthwhile giving some thought to how the machinery of social network theory can help us in better understanding the ways that social processes unfold. Here is a nice passage from Mario Diani's introduction to Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action.

It is difficult to grasp the nature of social movements. They cannot be reduced to specific insurrections or revolts, but rather resemble strings of more or less connected events, scattered across time and space; they cannot be identified with any specific organization either, rather they consist of groups of organizations, with various levels of formalization, linked in patterns of interaction which run from the fairly centralized to the totally decentralized, from the cooperative to the explicitly hostile. Persons promoting and/or supporting their actions do so not as atomized individuals, possibly with similar values or social traits, but as actors linked to each other through complex webs of exchanges, either direct or mediated. Social movements are in other words, complex and highly heterogeneous network structures. (1)

This passage emphasizes quite a few themes that have been important throughout *UnderstandingSociety* -- the heterogeneity of social phenomena, the difficulty of formulating a clear understanding of social ontology, and the challenge of representing the processes of aggregation through which individual social actions contribute to mid- and large-scale social outcomes.

So how do the analytical resources of network theory contribute to a better understanding of the ways that actions aggregate into outcomes? Diani emphasizes several ways in which network analysis has contributed to the study of contentious politics.

Network analysis as it is best known developed with reference to a 'realist' view of social structure as networks which linked together concrete actors through specific ties, identifiable and measureable through reliable empirical instruments. This view represented an alternative to both views of social structures as macro forces largely independent from the control of the specific actors associated with them ...., and views of structure as aggregates of the individual actors sharing determinate specific traits (5).

So if we take it as a plain fact about the social world that individuals have a range of meaningful and material relationships with other individuals, both proximate and distant, then it is plainly important to understand the effects that those relationships have on their consciousness and behavior. These causal relationships are likely to extend in both directions -- from the network to the actor, and from the actor back into the network.

What kinds of social relationships are most relevant to understanding social processes like contentious movements? Particularly important are "personal ties linking prospective participants to current activists or dense counter-cultural networks affecting rates of mobilization in specific areas" (3). Diani mentions "personal friends, relatives, colleagues, and neighbours; ... people who share with prospective participants in some kind of collective engagement, such as previous or current participation in other movement activities, political or social organizations, and public bodies" (7). To this list we might add membership and interaction within the kinds of civic and communal organizations that Robert Putnam emphasizes in Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.

Here is the key point: different people find themselves in very different networks of social connections, and these relationships contribute to their social and political consciousness in diverse ways. If we are interested in the spread of militant civil rights activism, as Doug McAdam is in Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970, or in the spread of fascist activism and mobilization in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, as Michael Mann is in Fascists, it is highly relevant to discover the relationships and organizations through which individuals come into contact with each other and with the ideas of the nascent movements. Likewise, if we are interested in the proliferation of support for the Deacons of Defense in the American South in the 1950s and 1960s, as Lance Hill is in The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement, then it is important to identify the personal and organizational linkages through which ordinary people became aware of this response to white supremacy and violence. Communication of ideas and political emotions requires a mechanism connecting the "signallers" and those to whom the messages eventually percolate, and this is not a depersonalized, homogeneous process.

Recruitment and mobilization is one aspect of contentious politics where social networks are plainly important. Relationships in the workplace, the neighborhood, or the church or mosque are a likely location for the diffusion of a range of socially relevant material -- news, gossip, indignation, shared views about politics. And these relationships are a potential vector for the recruitment of followers and activists for a range of new political ideas -- from civil rights to Tea Party to fascism.

Identifying coalitions of collective actors is another area of current research. Once a topic has gained some degree of visibility and salience, it is likely enough that multiple groups will begin to focus on it. Anti-tax activism is a good example -- dozens of "citizen-based" organizations emerged in California in the 1950s and 1960s with the overall goal of

limiting property and income taxes in the state, and it is useful to track the emerging relationships that developed among these organizations and their activists.

Diani also highlights the role that concrete social networks play in "framing and tactical adaptation of action repertoires" (4). Framing has to do with the ways that issues are understood by the participants; so this topic unavoidably has to do with culture and social interpretation. But the ways in which cultural frames are conveyed to people through a population are material processes that can be studied empirically. And social networks play a key role in these processes. As people interact with their friends and associates, they develop their political and social representations of the society around them. These interactions are the direct embodiment of their social networks. Diani singles out "communitarian and subculture networks" for particular attention: "communitarian ties operate at a minimum to strengthen the identity and solidarity among movement activists and sympathizers. At the same time, though, they provide the specific locus of social conflict in those cases where the challenge is eminently on the symbolic side and where, in other words, the definition of identities and the preservation of opportunities for the enactment of alternative lifestyles are mainly at stake" (9). These features of identity-based mobilization, through networks of like-minded individuals, are important in Michael Mann's analysis of the rise of fascism in Fascists as well:

The fascist core consisted everywhere of two successive generations of young men, coming of age between WorldWar I and the late 1930s. Their youth and idealism meant that fascist values were proclaimed as being distinctively “modern” and “moral.” They were especially transmitted through two institutions socializing young men: secondary and higher education, encouraging notions of moral progress, and the armed forces, encouraging militarism. Since the appeal was mainly to young men, it was also distinctly macho, encouraging an ethos of braggart, semi-disciplined violence, in peacetime encouraging militarism to mutate into paramilitarism. The character of fascism was set by young men socialized in institutions favorable to moralizing violence and eventually to murder. Yet the similarity of values between paramilitarism and militarism always gave fascism a capacity to appeal to armed forces themselves, not to the extent of inducing military rebellions but to the extent of generating sympathy there that at its most extreme could immobilize the army. (26)

“Fascists” were not fully formed at the moment they entered the movement. People may formally sign up for a movement and yet possess only a rudimentary knowledge of it – sympathy for a few slogans, respect for a charismatic F¨uhrer or Duce, or simply following friends who have joined. Most recruits joined the movement young, unmarried, unformed, with little adult civilian experience. On them, fascist parties and paramilitaries were especially powerful socialization agencies. These movements were proudly elitist and authoritarian, enshrining a pronounced hierarchy of rank and an extreme cult of the leader. Orders were to be obeyed, discipline to be imposed. Above all, they imposed a requirement of activism. Thus militants experienced intense emotional comradeship. Where the movement was proscribed, clandestinity tightened it. Many activists lost their jobs or went into prison or exile. Though this deterred many of the more fainthearted, among those remaining active such constraints further tightened the movement. (28)

The social processes that Mann describes here have to do with all three aspects -- recruitment, mobilization, and framing; and they depend on the networks of relationships through which the core fascist values and worldviews were transmitted to new recruits. Institutions were key in this transmission -- the military, the workplace, the youth organization -- and a large part of their influence was their ability to create a significant cohort of young men with a specific set of set of social relationships.

The lens of social networks, in short, seems to be a very powerful tool for understanding

the processes of aggregation -- upward, downward, and lateral -- through which ideas, grievances, and actors come together into major social upheavals and movements.

What is perhaps more difficult to see, though, is how to engage in empirical research on the concrete networks of social relationships that have important effects on outcomes we care about. As the United States moved towards civil war in 1860 and 1861, there were hundreds or thousands of individuals in the U.S. Army officer corps who had antecedently mixed loyalties -- Southern birth, family still residing in the South, but a tradition of education and service within the U.S. Army. So what accounts for the choices that were made by various officers when they had to decide -- North or South? It is intuitively plausible that each officer's concrete social network played an important role in his decision -- appeals from family and friends, business relationships in Virginia, long-standing relationships with senior Northern officers, an education and cohort at West Point. But it is not entirely clear how to turn this plausible view into a feasible research plan.

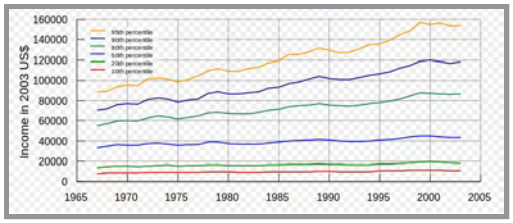
This is one reason why the Diani volume is such a worthwhile contribution. Most of the contributors focus their work on specific empirical problems in the field of social contention. Maryjane Osa looks at activist networks in the Polish People's Republic; Christopher Ansell looks at community activism in the San Francisco Bay environmental movement; Jeff Broadbent looks at social networks in the Japanese environmental movement; and Chuck Tilly and Lesley Wood look at networks in contentious episodes in British history around 1828. These are concrete, empirical-historical efforts to take the guiding ideas of network analysis and discover some substantive insights into the specific ways that a variety of protest movements unfolded. And they give a better understanding of the contribution that social network analysis can offer to concrete historical research.

Inequalities and the ascendant right

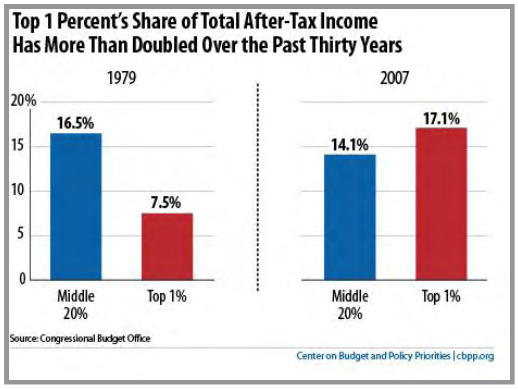
Saturday, April 23, 2011

The playing field seems to keep tilting further against ordinary people in this country -- poor people, hourly workers, low-paid service workers, middle-class people with family incomes in the $60-80K range, uninsured people, ... 75% of American households have household incomes below $80,000; the national median was $44,389 in 2005. Meanwhile the top one percent of Americans receive 17% of total after-tax income. And the rationale offered by the right to justify these increasing inequalities keeps shifting over time: free enterprise ideology, trickle-down economics, divisive racial politics, and irrelevant social issues, for example.

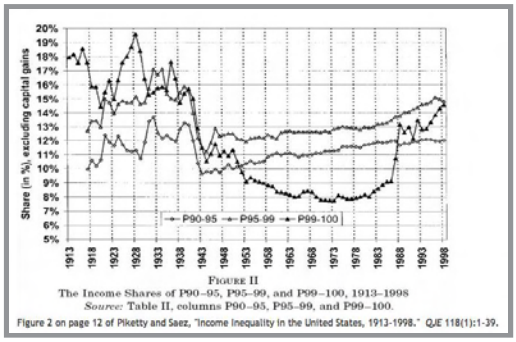
Here is the trajectory of US income by quintile since 1965 (link); essentially no change in the bottom three quintiles over that 40-year period. Plainly the benefits of growth and productivity change in the national economy have benefited the top 40% of the population, and disproportionately have flowed to the top 5%.



Just consider what has happened to income to the "middle" class versus the top 1% in the US economy. The 40-60% segment of earners have declined from 16.5% to 14.1% of after-tax income, while the top 1% has more than doubled its share, to 17.1%.



And here's a very graphic demonstration of the rapid increase in the percent of income flowing to the top percent of US income earners since the Reagan revolution (thanks to benmuse):



Meanwhile, the power of extreme wealth in the country seems more or less unlimited and unchallenged. Corporations can spend as much as they want to further candidates -- as "persons" with freedom of speech rights following Citizens' United v. Federal Election Commission (link). Billionaires like the Koch brothers fund the anti-labor agendas of conservative governors. Right-wing media empires dominate the airwaves. Well-financed conservative politicians use the language of "budget crisis" as a pretext for harshly reducing programs that benefit ordinary people (like Pell grants). Lobbyists for corporations and major economic interests can influence agencies and regulations in the interest of their clients, more or less invisibly. And billionaire lightweights like Donald Trump continue to make ridiculous statements about President Obama's birth status.

The political voice of the right, and the economic elite they serve, has never been louder. And it is becoming more reckless in its attacks on the rest of society. Immigrants come in for repressive legislation in Arizona and other states. Racist voices that would never have been tolerated a generation ago are edging towards mainstream acceptability on the right. Self-righteous attempts to reverse health care reform are being trumpeted -- threatening one of the few gains that poor and uninsured people have made in decades. And the now-systematic attack on public sector unions is visibly aimed at silencing one of the very few powerful voices that stand in the political sphere on behalf of ordinary working people.

The big mystery is -- why do the majority of Americans accept this shifting equation without protest? And how can progressive political organizations and movements do a better job of communicating the basic social realities of our economy and our democracy to a mass audience? Social justice isn't a "special interest" -- it is a commitment to the fundamental interests and dignity of the majority of Americans.

Quiet politics

Tuesday, April 26, 2011



image: *Conspiracy*, Edward Biberman (cover illustration, *Quiet Politics*)

Pepper Culpepper's Quiet Politics and Business Power: Corporate Control in Europe and Japan sheds some very interesting light on one key question in contemporary western democracies: how do corporations and business organizations so often succeed in creating a legislative and regulatory environment that largely serves their interests? And, for that matter, why do they sometimes fail spectacularly in doing so, even while spending oceans of money in the effort to influence public policy?

The book is a careful comparative study of the development of corporate governance laws and institutions in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Japan. It offers special focus on the institutions governing hostile corporate takeovers (very different across the four examples), but also takes on other issues of current interest, including executive pay. But though the cases and issues considered in the book are fairly esoteric and specialized, Culpepper's analysis is intended to provide a broadly useful tool for understanding how corporate influence is exercised in a democracy.

Culpepper wants to know what political and situational factors explain the divergent course that corporate governance has taken in these four contemporary democracies, from more permissive to more restrictive. Do elected officials determine the broad outlines of the governance regime? Are differences across states the result of differences in the platforms of large political parties in these states? Or are the outcomes driven by something else? Culpepper thinks that it is usually something else:

In this book, I argue that the outcomes observed in these four countries result not from variations in government partisanship or from different interest coalitions, but from differences in the political preferences of managerial organizations. In all four countries, the rules favored by the managers of large firms are those that triumphed, often against substantial political opposition. (3)

Or in other words, the outcomes are those favored by the business elites rather than

elected officials or mass-based political parties. And differences in outcomes are explained by differences in the business environment in the four countries. This is the "business power" part of the question, and Culpepper's fundamental empirical finding is that businesses elites generally have proven successful in creating the institutional and regulatory regimes in their polities that they prefer. But how do they succeed?

Here Culpepper's central finding is encapsulated in the other half of his title: these corporate governance issues usually fall in the domain of what he refers to as "quiet politics." Noisy politics arise around the issues that generate significant and sustained interest by large numbers of voters; these issues have "***high salience***" to the electorate, and parties and elected officials find it in their interest to adjust their positions around voter preferences on these salient issues. Quiet politics arise in the context of issues with "***low salience***" -- issues to which the mass of voters are largely indifferent. "The political salience of an issue refers to its importance to the average voter, relative to other political issues" (4). In the context of "low salience" issues that matter to the interests of high-level business managers and elites, it is possible for these elites to deploy an arsenal of influential tools that succeed very well in bringing about the legislative and regulatory outcomes that the managerial elites prefer. Most fundamental is an information asymmetry between managers and policy makers:

> The managerial weapons of choice in quiet politics are a strong lobbying capacity and the deference of legislators and reporters toward managerial expertise. The political competitors of managers, be they liberalizing politicians or crusading institutional investors, lack access to equivalent political armaments, so long as voters evince little sustained interest in and knowledge about an issue. (4)

Culpepper unpacks the political advantage residing with business elites and managers in terms of acknowledged expertise about the intricacies of corporate organization, an ability to frame the issues for policy makers and journalists, and ready access to rule-writing committees and task forces. These factors give elite business managers positional advantage, from which they can exert a great deal of influence on how an issue is formulated when it comes into the forum of public policy formation. Culpepper refers to British Cadbury Committee, tasked to develop "best practices" in corporate governance (9), as an important example of an occasion where high-level managers had a very powerful ability to write the rules that would govern their behavior. Vice President Cheney's energy committee during the Bush administration is another great example (link). Informal working groups, containing a significant representation of managerial elites, have an ability to set the agenda for a regulatory regime that allows them to privilege positions they prefer and to protect their organizations from worst-case outcomes.

> As in the case of direct lobbying, the power of managers in this context is the power to set the terms of the debate in an environment that is established with an explicit eye to protecting their interests. (9)

Here is one of many detailed examples that Culpepper studies in the book: the Peters Committee in the Netherlands in 1997, tasked to "establish a voluntary code of best practice in corporate governance" (100). He notes that the Peters Committee was very similar in structure to the Cadbury Committee. It was chaired by a former CEO, and had representation from the VEUO (Dutch Association of Securities-Issuing Companies), pension funds, and the Amsterdam Stock Exchange. Unions were not represented. And, Culpepper reports, the forty recommendations of the Committee were essentially ignored by the Dutch corporate actors.

Scholars of corporate finance point to the Peters Committee as a textbook example of the failures of self-regulation of business without any legal enforcement. Yet from the viewpoint of the managerial interests that dominated the committee, its results were consistent with their highest political priority: to defend protection mechanisms [against hostile takeovers]. (101)
In other words: from the point of view of Dutch corporate elites, the committee was not a failure, but rather a demonstration of their ability to shape the agenda and secure a near-term environment that enabled their freedom of action.

So essentially Culpepper's empirical-institutional argument is that top business managers (CEOs and their teams) have a very powerful set of tools on the basis of which they are able to influence legislation and regulation. This tool set leads to an impressive win percentage when it comes to legislation and regulation affecting the business environment.

But he also finds that these tools are really only decisive in the context of "low salience" issues -- issues that have not engaged the voting public with any intensity. When a hitherto boring and technical issue of corporate governance suddenly jumps into high salience -- for example, the conflicts of interest faced by accounting firms involved in the Enron debacle -- these weapons of quiet influence essentially lose their ability to shape the outcomes.

The more the public cares about an issue, the less managerial organizations will be able to exercise disproportionate influence over the rules governing that issue. (177)
Parties, political entrepreneurs, legislative committees, and elected officials become interested in the issue; it becomes worthwhile for business journalists to learn the technical details; and the public demands solutions that may be contrary to the preferences of the business elite. And Culpepper works through one of these examples in detail as well: the public and public policy debates that have flared up concerning executive pay (chapter 6).

In addition to its substantive political-institutional findings, the book is interesting for its methodology. Culpepper explicitly favors the "causal mechanism" approach to social research and investigation. He treats cases comparatively; and he attempts to "process-trace" the paths through which outcomes came about. He depends extensively on interviews with pivotal actors in some of the cases studied. He does a very good job of aligning his analysis against its main competitors -- median voter theories and coalition politics analysis. Finally, the book is explicitly comparativist; he want to understand in some detail the situations and factors that lead to different outcomes with respect to corporate governance, and the rules governing hostile takeovers, in the four countries he studies. So the book does an admirable job of sketching out some of the microfoundations of corporate influence in existing democracies. As such, it is a very useful contribution -- it helps to connect the dots (link).

The math of social networks

Saturday, April 30, 2011

A social network is constituted by a number of units (nodes) that are connected to each other by a defined relationship -- for example, "x cites y", "x sends 5 email messages a week to y", "x and y belong to an organization in common." There are a few wrinkles -- the units may be persons, organizations, cities, journal articles, or other types of entities;

the relationships may be uni-directional or bi-directional; and the linking relationships may represent categorical relationships or intensity relationships. "x and y are friends" is a bi-directional relationship; "x and y are close friends" is a bi-directional relationship recording intensity.

Some of the basic questions about a social network are easy to formulate but difficult to assess. Basically, we would like to know what groups of individuals are unusually closely interconnected with each other, relative to the average for the population as a whole. Here are a few basic questions that we may have about networks of people.

- Who is connected to whom?
- Are there a subset of persons who are unusually well connected?
- Are there sub-groupings of individuals who are more closely connected to each other than they are to others in the network?

This last point may be put into the language of "communities": are there communities of individuals that can be identified on the basis of mathematical features of their positions within the graph of relationships defined by the data recording pairwise connections?

This question is especially important for sociologists because it goes to the heart of the reason why network maps are of sociological interest in the first place: we think that the social relationships among individuals explain important features of social action -- readiness to mobilize for a political cause, for example; this intuition derives from the idea that individuals influence each other through the exchange of information and the observation of each other's behavior; and so subgroups of persons with especially dense social connections with each other may have distinctive social characteristics as a group. So identifying the "communities" within a social network is an important sociological discovery.

This is where the mathematics of network graphs comes in. We need to have justifiable procedures for partitioning a network into sub-networks. These procedures need to make sense in terms of the intuition that there are often subgroups of nodes more closely related to each other. The procedures need to be non-arbitrary. They should be robust with respect to where we begin -- it shouldn't matter whether we begin analysis with this node or that node. And they need to be consistent with the fact that all the nodes are related to everyone else at some degree of separation. Neighborhoods that are entirely detached from the rest of the population are a trivial case; normally network ties extend transitively throughout a whole society.

Greek mathematician and social scientist Moses Boudourides is focused on this problem in his current work. (Follow him on Twitter at link.) Boudourides is deeply sensitive to the sociological importance of the questions, so his work does a great job of bridging the two fields of thought. Some of his current work is available online, and it is very useful for people who want to understand more about the mathematics of social networks. It falls into the field of graph theory in mathematics, and it serves as a good tutorial to current thinking about the mathematics of social networks.

Worth reading first is "An Introduction to Community Detection in Graphs" (link). Here Boudourides offers a clear exposition of the mathematical problem of identifying a set of neighborhoods within a complex graph and lays out three approaches that have been taken.

Our aim here is to present an introductory and brief discussion of the formal concept of community in the context of the theory of complex networks (and social network analysis)

and to describe (mostly by examples) a few of the many computational techniques which are commonly used for the detection of communities in a graph-theoretic background. (1) Here is his definition of a community in the context of a network graph:

By a community structure of such a graph, we mean a partition of the set of nodes into a number of groups, called communities, such that all nodes belonging to any one of these groups satisfy a certain property of relative cohesiveness. Note that one may consider partitions, which are not necessarily strict, i.e., one may allow the case of overlapping communities, when there exist graph nodes belonging to more than one groups (communities) of the partition. (1)

The three iterative techniques he describes for analyzing a complex network into sub-communities are --

1. Betweenness -- Centrality-based community detection
2. k-Clique percolation
3. Modularity maximization

In each case the analysis proceeds by working through the graph iteratively, identifying notes and links with certain characteristics, and arriving at a series of stages of community definition. This process can proceed from above (divisive) or from below (agglomerative).

The "betweenness" approach derives from an application of the idea of "betweenness centrality" of edges: "the number of shortest paths between pairs of nodes that run through that edge" (3). On this approach, edges are ranked by their betweenness measure; the highest ranked edge is removed; and the process is repeated for the reduced graph. This is a divisive method.

The k-clique model is an agglomerative approach, or what Boudourides refers to as a "local community-finding approach" (6). And modularity maximization approach begins with the graph as a whole and looks for regions that are locally higher in density than the graph as a whole. Boudourides' explanation of each of these methods is technical and clear. He indicates that the MM approach is most widely used; but that it falls in a class of particularly intractable optimization problems like the traveling salesman problem (NP-complete). Consequently it is necessary to design heuristic algorithms on the basis of which to arrive at approximate solutions. (As I understand the point, however, there is no guarantee that the approximate solution will be close to the ideal solution.)

With these tools at hand, he offers a detailed example: analysis of a data set of individuals who participated in peace demonstrations against the war in Iraq and the organizations and issues with which they were associated. Data on these activists are included in the International Peace Protest Survey (IPPS). And the resulting neighborhood maps are fascinating. These results are described in detail in a detailed research report on "Communities in the IPPS Survey Data" [link] and a theoretical paper on "Why and How Culture Matters in Community Interorganizational Structure" [link]. These presentations show the real power of mathematical network theory, in that they bring out social relationships among individuals within this population of activists that couldn't be discovered otherwise. Here are a pair of network graphs for 972 activists in Italy presented in "Culture Matters":

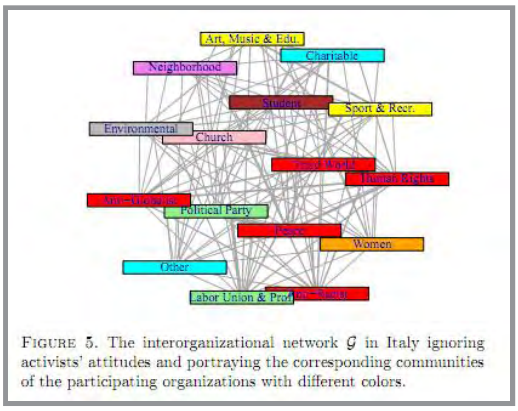


FIGURE 5. The interorganizational network $\mathcal{G}$ in Italy ignoring activists' attitudes and portraying the corresponding communities of the participating organizations with different colors.

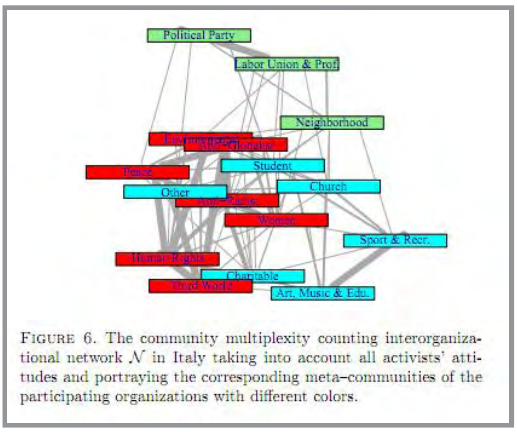


FIGURE 6. The community multiplexity counting interorganizational network $\mathcal{N}$ in Italy taking into account all activists' attitudes and portraying the corresponding meta–communities of the participating organizations with different colors.

Boudourides' particular goal here is to demonstrate the difference it makes to incorporate "cultural" affiliations into the structural analysis of the first figure. Incorporating attitudes permits simplification of the community structure of this network, from nine communities in figure 5 to four communities in figure 6. But more generally, the analysis demonstrates the analytical gain that is possible through this analysis, allowing us to discover important patterns of affiliation among these 900+ activists. And this, in turn, appears very relevant when we come to trying to understand their behavior within a complex process of collective action. It allows us to give some rigorous detail to the idea that a social movement has a refined micro-structure underlying its macro-level actions and demands.

What is especially useful about these papers is the help they offer us non-specialists in understanding the mathematical techniques on the basis of which we can extract sociologically meaningful information from a network graph. This is a bit analogous to the gain we get from using statistical techniques to analyze and summarize a large data set. The statistical techniques allow us to winnow the data into a few statistical measures. And the techniques of graph theory that Moses Boudourides demonstrates allow a similar analytical power for the task of making sociological sense of a large network of connected individuals. In both cases it is necessary for us to understand the basics of the mathematical techniques if we are to use the tool appropriately.

Social media and social cohesion

Sunday, May 01, 2011



The current topic on the UnderstandingSociety blog poll is a proposition about social cohesion:

THE INTERNET IS HELPING TO CREATE NEW PATHWAYS OF SOCIAL COHESION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY.

The poll is still open, but as of today 70% of respondents somewhat or strongly agree that the Internet creates a basis for new forms of social cohesion, while only 16% somewhat or strongly disagree. On its face, a large majority of readers are optimistic about the ability of the Internet to contribute to a stronger national community. What the poll question doesn't reveal is the respondents' underlying thinking as the basis of their judgment. So let's see what some of the considerations might be.

First, what do we mean by "social cohesion"? Along with Durkheim, we can approach the concept by relating it to the bonds of morality and loyalty that lead members of a society to adapt their behavior to the perceived needs of society. A willingness to sacrifice in times of crisis, a willingness to defer to the common good, a willingness to conform to widespread social norms -- these are the sorts of things that go into the concept of social cohesion. A society that lacks all bonds of social cohesion is one in which individuals care only about their own interests; who pay attention only to their own individual ideas about morality; and who find the idea of sacrifice for the greater good to be for the gullible. (Interestingly, this is a state of affairs that Durkheim describes as "anomie", and it is the factor that he believes conduces to a heightened rate of suicide in a population; Suicide.) (Here is a nice contemporary survey of the sociological literature on social cohesion by Noah Friedkin; link.)

Where would the social basis of this kind of cohesion come from? Ferdinand Tönnies characterizes a traditional society with a strong basis for social cohesion in terms of the idea of "*gemeinschaft*"; whereas he describes a modern liberal-market society in terms of the idea of *gesellschaft* (Community and Society: (GEMEINSCHAFT AND GESELLSCHAFT)). According to Tönnies, traditional societies maintain social cohesion through traditional social mechanisms: face-to-face relations in a village, common religious institutions, and other institutions representing and inculcating collective values. And as these traditional mechanisms have lost traction in modern civil society, the intuitive idea is that modern societies are generally declining in the level of social cohesion that they reflect.

So how might the mechanisms of social connection provided by the Internet potentially influence the facts about social cohesion in a twenty-first century society? How might Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and webpages have effects that are either favorable or unfavorable for social cohesion? It seems that these capabilities of the Internet have the potential for working in both directions -- both undermining cohesion and enhancing cohesion. So overall, it is very difficult to assess the net impact of these capabilities.

First, consider a few tendencies in the negative direction. Much as Internet-based news sources have fragmented the audience for the network news -- and thereby have reduced the degree of commonality citizens have through their regular interactions with Walter Cronkite -- we might speculate that the Internet facilitates a fragmentation of social groups into smaller and smaller segments. So instead of a set of attitudes that bind citizens together as part of American society, we get micro-sets of attitudes that bind individuals together into micro-constituencies. This would seem to be a force working against social cohesion at the level of the population as a whole.

A related point stems from the evident ability of Internet tools to create ever-more strident groups of people around very specific issues and concerns. If each issue has its own website, Facebook page, Twitter feed, social media management strategies, and the like, individuals are drawn into greater engagement with ever-smaller groups of like-minded individuals. So it is increasingly difficult for politicians to create mass-based constituencies around a core set of values; there is a declining basis for a social consensus in a world in which individuals gravitate towards divisive social and political advocates.

These points suggest that the Internet has effects that are corrosive of social cohesion. What are the tendencies of the Internet that point in the other direction? The example of the use of Facebook during the democracy demonstrations in Egypt provides one positive indication. It would appear that activists were able to gain strong support from thousands of interested Egyptians through the real-time communication and social expression that Facebook pages enabled. This was a process of agglomeration rather than fragmentation for some period of time -- a process through which a broader and broader group of individuals became actively engaged with the values and current happenings associated with the pro-democracy movement.

Second, a little more generally, it is possible that social media like Facebook or YouTube may facilitate the development of more other-oriented interest on the part of the people who use them. If the United Way of Chicago or San Francisco can begin to attract tens of thousands of followers to a Facebook page with powerful, current information about the social needs of other Chicagoans or San Franciscans, we can imagine that there might be a rising level of willingness to get engaged in United Way fundraising and community efforts throughout the community. So YouTube and Facebook can become a contemporary alternative to the face-to-face relationships that Durkheim and Tönnies highlighted.

Third, several recent national elections have demonstrated that millions of people are willing to get involved in presidential and congressional campaigns through social media -- including the act of making online political contributions. The success of these efforts since 2006 suggests the faint possibility that online communities may begin to regain some of the pervasiveness that a fragmented television audience has lost. Perhaps this capability for aggregating large numbers of citizens around online communities of political interests suggests that the Internet can begin to help citizens build a broader consensus.

These considerations suggest that social media and the Internet have tendencies in both directions -- fragmentation and agglomeration -- with the result that its overall influence on cohesion may be neutral. In fact, we might speculate that social media enhance small group cohesion while undermining national cohesion.

In short, I'm inclined now to change my vote in the poll. I had supported the idea that the Internet is mildly favorable to increasing social cohesion. I now think that it's a wash, with negative as well as positive tendencies at work at the same time.

Causality and Explanation Conference Call for proposals

Monday, May 02, 2011



CALL FOR ABSTRACTS:CaEitS2011: CAUSALITY AND EXPLANATION IN THE SCIENCES www.caeits2011.ugent.be 19-21 September Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Ghent University Blandijnberg 2, Ghent, Belgium

This is the sixth conference in the Causality in the Sciences series of conferences. **Organizers**: Phyllis McKay Illari, Federica Russo, Jon Williamson, Erik Weber, Julian Reiss

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS
Henk de Regt, Daniel Little, Michael Strevens, Mauricio Suarez and James Woodward.

INTRODUCTION

Causality and causal inference play a central role in the sciences. Explanation is one of the central goals of scientific research. And scientific explanation requires causal knowledge. At least, these are well-known tenets in present-day philosophy of science.

In this conference, we aim to bring philosophers and scientists together to discuss the relation between causality and explanation.

Even though the view that explanation requires causal knowledge is widespread, some accounts of explanation present themselves as a-causal or even as non-causal. Kitcher's unificationism had it that causal relations are epistemically dependent on explanatory relations, not vice versa. In the mechanistic framework, interlevel explanation is said to be constitutive, not causal. Other accounts of explanation are primarily functional. What is the precise relation between causal and a- or non-causal accounts of explanation?

Relatedly, one of the close relatives of explanation is understanding. But what is the precise relation between explanation and understanding? And what is the role of causation herein?

But wait a minute. There is no consensus as to what causation is. Probabilistic, mechanistic, interventionist, and other accounts are available on the market and it is still an interesting and open question how precisely they relate to each other and how this bears upon the problem of scientific explanation.

Are causality and explanation the same across scientific disciplines? Is causality in physics the same as in psychology? Is causal discovery in biology the same as in economics? And is explanation in geology the same as in chemistry? Mathematics seems to be devoid of causation. Does that mean that it is also devoid of explanation? And is there a place for causation in technological explanation?

Our explanatory practices are partly determined by pragmatic considerations. What precisely do we want to explain, and what do we want to use our explanatory knowledge for? Do these pragmatic considerations influence our search for causal relations? Do they play a role, either implicitly or explicitly, in our algorithms for automated causal discovery (such as algorithms based on causal Bayes nets)?

We welcome contributions addressing these and other questions.

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

- How is causality related to explanation? Is all explanation causal?
- Which accounts of causality best fit which accounts of explanation?
- Do different sciences demand different notions of causality and explanation?
- Which case studies shed most light on the uses of causality and explanation in the sciences?

TIMETABLE

15 May: deadline for submission of titles and abstracts of papers for presentation

- 500 words
- To be emailed to CaEitS2011@UGent.be
- Please write "ABSTRACT SUBMISSION" in the Subject header of your mail
- A notification of receipt will be sent shortly after 15th May
- All abstracts will be carefully refereed

15 June: notification of acceptance of papers for presentation. 1 July: deadline for registration to attend the conference

- Instructions for registration will be listed on www.caeits2011.ugent.be in due course
- Please also send an email to CaEitS2011@UGent.be to say that you will be attending
  (with "REGISTRATION" in its Subject header)

19-21 September: conference

The drop-out crisis (II)

Thursday, May 05, 2011

We've talked about "wicked problems" before -- problems that involve complex social processes, multiple actors, and murky causal pathways (link, link). A particularly important example of such a problem currently confronting the United States is the high school dropout crisis. The crisis is particularly intense in high-poverty areas, but it is found in all states and all parts of urban, suburban, and rural America. (Here is an earlier discussion of these issues; link.)

The consequences of this crisis are severe. More than a million high school students a year drop out of high school. Over 50% of these dropouts come from fewer than 20% of high schools. These young people have virtually no feasible pathways to a middle class life or a job in the 21st-century economy. And this in turn means a permanent underclass of unemployed or underemployed young people. This in turn has consequences for crime rates, social service budgets, incarceration rates, and a serious productivity gap for our economy as a whole. So the problem is an enormously important one. (The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national organization devoted to tracking this issue; link. Another important resource is Building a Grad Nation ((link) from the America's Promise Alliance.)

Changing this current situation requires change of behavior on the parts of many independent parties -- teenagers, parents, teachers, principals, elected officials, and foundation officers, to name only some of the most obvious participants.

There are many social actors who have an interest in this problem and a commitment to trying to resolve it. Teachers, principals, school boards; mayors and governors; non-profit organizations; foundations; universities and schools of education; citizens' groups -- there are committed and concerned actors throughout the country that are highly motivated to attempt to solve the problem.

But it is very, very hard to marshal these actors into effective attacks on the causes of this crisis. One part of the problem is strategic -- what are the interventions that can work on a large scale? How can a school system introduce changes in behavior and organization that really change the outcomes in a measurable way?

Another part of the problem is a coordination problem. How can we succeed in gaining commitment and cooperation across this range of actors, even if we have some credible strategies at hand? It often seems that every actor has a different theory of the problem, and often it is difficult to gain concerted action across diverse actors. A foundation has one strategy; a school board has a different theory; and the teachers themselves work on the basis of a different understanding of the problem as well. All are well motivated; but there is a clash of efforts.

In this context the Diplomas Now initiative is particularly encouraging. It is focused on a national initiative to target the "drop out factories" through a clear theory of how to create turn-around schools. It is referred to as a civic Marshall Plan. It is based on careful empirical research. It has developed a clear theory about how interventions with children through the schools can impact persistence through graduation. It has mobilized a strategic group of partners -- CityYear, Communities in Schools, and Talent Development at Johns Hopkins. And it has an ambitious and effective national strategy that is already being implemented.

And the most impressive fact is that Diplomas Now is beginning to work. There are DN schools in some of the toughest urban contexts in America; these schools are showing real measurable progress; and the example is spreading to other cities and systems. Concrete evidence of these successes is highlighted by a wide range of committed leaders, academics, and corps members at the CityYear National Leadership Conference in Washington (link).

So maybe we can have some cautious optimism that our wicked problems can be solved, with sufficient commitment and persistence from a range of actors.

Taxes on business

Saturday, May 07, 2011

What is a fair level of taxation for businesses in a state? How much should businesses pay relative to individuals in supporting the services provided by government? How should we even begin to answer this question?

The question is easier for individual taxation, since there are only a few possible alternatives: a flat rate income tax or a graduated income tax; more reliance on income taxes or consumption taxes; a tax system that attempts to shelter the most vulnerable in society or a tax system aimed at stimulating profitability and economic growth, ... For individuals, the fundamental principle is clear: each individual should pay a share of the costs of government based on income, perhaps moderated by a graduated rate.

But with businesses the issues don't seem as clear. Businesses in a state have a clear economic interest in the services provided by government, from fire and police protection, to preservation of the environment, to provision of a skilled and well-educated workforce. Business should pay its fair share in supporting the necessary costs of the state; but what is a fair share? And what is "necessary" when it comes to state services?

The situation is even more complicated when we bear in mind that business activity is itself an important source of good for citizens. More business activity means more employment and income. More jobs and wages mean more demand for services and products of all kinds -- and more income for people employed in those goods and service industries. Business disinvestment leads to significant hardship for citizens. A tax system that discourages business activity is harmful to the economic wellbeing of the state and its citizens. So business tax rates ought to be high enough to support a fair share of the costs of government, but not so high as to discourage business investment.

And the latter point in turn requires comparison with other feasible locations for business activity. If Michigan and Ohio assess business income at significantly different rates, we should expect some flow of investment from one to the other.

The state of Michigan is an interesting current example. Michigan's governor, Rick Snyder, has proposed a major change in the structure of business taxes in the state. He proposes abolishing the Michigan Business Tax, enacted only a few years ago, and replacing it with a 6% corporate income tax that applies only to the largest businesses and corporations in the state. This reform is promoted as one that is needed to simplify the tax obligations of businesses and to improve the business attractiveness of the state for future investment, and it has been welcomed with enthusiasm by the business community. (According the the Tax Foundation's State Business Tax Climate Index, Michigan ranked 17th in 2010 and 2011 in the Tax Climate Index overall and ranked 48th on the corporate tax index, based on the existing Michigan Business Tax; link.)

Often tax reforms are put forward under the banner of "revenue neutrality" -- the rules are changed and simplified, but the "before" and "after" rules collect the same amount of revenue. This reform in Michigan is distinctly **not** revenue-neutral. In 2009 businesses in Michigan paid $2.6 billion under the Michigan Business Tax. Sales taxes collected $8.8 billion, and personal income taxes collected $6.0 billion. (These data are presented in a 2011 report of the Citizen's Research Council in Michigan; link.) In 2013 it is projected that the flat corporate income tax, when fully implemented, will collect only $749 million -- a decline of over 1.2 billion dollars in tax revenues for the state compared to the $2.0 billion estimated under the Michigan Business Tax if applied in that year. (These estimates are provided in a February 17, 2011 report issued by the Michigan government; link.) This amounts to a greater than **60% reduction in the taxes** paid by businesses in support of the general fund. And this shortfall is being addressed in the state's fiscal plan through adjustments in the structure of individual taxes: pensions would be taxed for the first time and Michigan's Earned Income Tax Credit would be abolished. In other words, a billion dollars of tax reductions for business are being paid for by sacrifices by pensioners and poor people.

So here is a question worthy of discussion: are Michigan businesses being asked to pay their fair share under the revised business tax policies? Is 6% enough? Were businesses significantly over-taxed under the Michigan Business Tax? Should the corporate income tax be applied only to the small subset of businesses in the state that qualify, or should it be applied more broadly? And is a 6% corporate tax rate competitive with other states?

Let's look at the competitiveness question. It is broadly asserted by leading business organizations in Michigan that businesses pay too much taxes for the state to be competitive, and that 6% is about as high as the rate can go without losing investment to other states. But the facts appear to be otherwise. The Tax Foundation provides annual

data on corporate income rates by state (link). Here is the Tax Foundation data, ranked by the highest bracket. (A number of states have a graduated rate, so small businesses pay lower rates.)

State corporate income tax rates (ranked by hightest bracket) source: Tax Foundation http://www.taxfoundation.org/taxdata/show/230.html **StateRatesBrackets(a)Rank** Iowa 12.00% $250K 1 Pa. 9.99% $0 2 D.C. 9.98% 0 3 Minn. 9.80% $0 4 Ill. (c) 9.50% $0 5 Alaska 9.40% $90K 6 N.J. (b) 9.00% $100K 7 R.I. 9.00% 0 8 Maine 8.93% $250K 9 Calif. 8.84% $0 10 Del. (a) 8.70% $0 11 Ind. 8.50% $0 12 N.H. (a) 8.50% $0 13 Vt. 6% 8.50% $25K 14 W.Va. 8.50% $0 15 Md. 8.25% $0 16 Mass. 8.25% $0 17 La. 8.00% $200K 18 Wis. 7.90% 0 19 Nebr. 7.81% $100K 20 Idaho 7.60% $0 21 N.M. 7.60% $1M 22 Ore. 7.60% $250K 23 Conn. 7.50% $0 24 N.Y. 7.10% $0 25 Kans. 7.00% $50K 26 Ariz. 6.97% $0 27 N.C. 6.90% $0 28 Mont. 6.75% $0 29 Ala. 6.50% $0 30 Ark. 6.50% $100K 31 Tenn. 6.50% $0 32 Hawaii 6.40% $100K 33 N.D. 6.40% $50K 34 Mo. 6.25% $0 35 Ga. 6.00% $0 36 Ky. 6.00% $100K 37 Okla. 6.00% $0 38 Va. (a) 6.00% $0 39 Fla. 5.50% $0 40 Miss. 5.00% $10K 41 S.C. 5.00% $0 42 Utah 5.00% $0 43 Colo. 4.63% $0 44 Nev. 0.00% 45 S.D. 0.00% 46 Wash. (a) 0.00% 47 Wyo. 0.00% 48 Mich. (a) Ohio (a) Tex. (a) Note: In addition to regular income taxes, many states impose other taxes on corporations such as gross receipts taxes and franchise taxes. Some states also impose an alternative minimum tax. (a) Michigan, Ohio, Texas, and Washington do not have a corporate income tax but do have a gross receipts tax with rates not strictly comparable to corporate income tax rates. (c) On January 12, 2011, Illinois increased its corporate income tax from 7.3% to 9.5%, retroactive to January 1, 2011. Illinois's rate includes two separate corporate income taxes, one at a 7% rate and one at a 2.5% rate. Source: Tax Foundation; state tax forms and instructions.

The 6% rate proposed for Michigan falls at the bottom end of this ranking; 35 states have higher rates, extending to 12% in Iowa; four states have a 6% rate; and nine states have a lower rate. It would appear that a 7% or 7.5% rate would still leave Michigan in a competitive position when it comes to the corporate income tax. This would result in an additional $200 million in revenue -- and would permit significant dollars for the Earned Income Tax Credit. So a larger share from business would permit a better outcome for poor and working people.

But the really difficult question is the "fair share" question: how should the costs of government be allocated across individuals and businesses? What principles of equitable contribution are helpful in addressing these issues? And how would we try to judge whether Michigan's corporate tax reform plan results in a fair allocation of the costs of government across individuals and business?

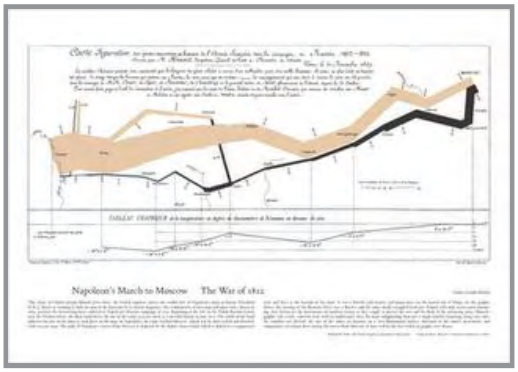
(Here is an interesting post by Donald Barrett and James Steele on "Are Corporations Paying Their Fair Share of Taxes?". In a word -- no!)

Flood courses of the Mississippi River

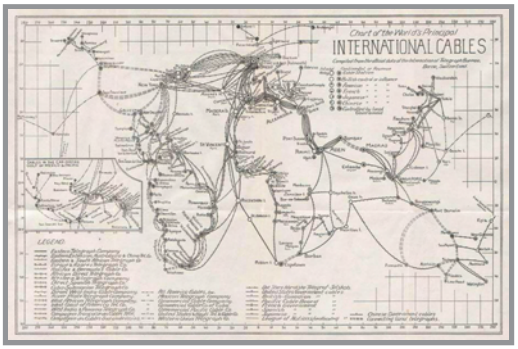
Sunday, May 08, 2011



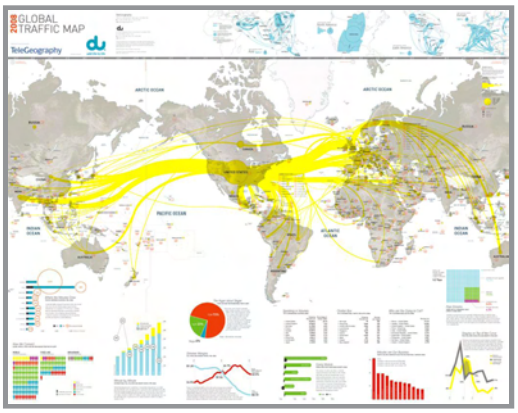
This fantastic map of the historical twists and turns of the Mississippi River near Cairo, Illinois, was drawn in 1944. It is reproduced in the *New York Times* today (link). In an age of digitally produced information displays, it is fascinating to see the density of historical information represented in this hand-drafted map. It is reminiscent of the maps Edward Tufte highlights in The Visual Display of Quantitative Information. Here is Charles Joseph Minard's 1869 map of Napoleon's invasion of Russia that Tufte made famous:



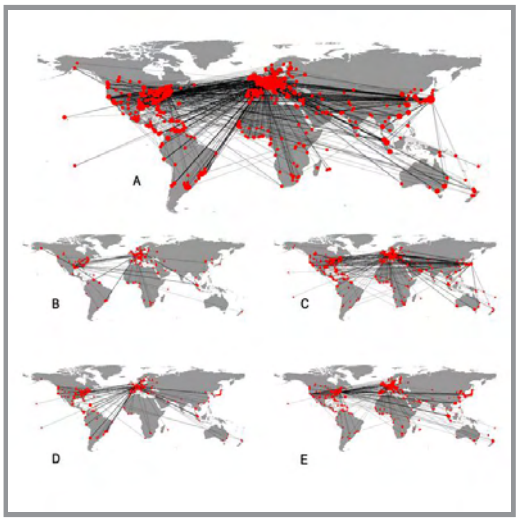
While on the subject of great maps, here is one by George Abel Schreiner in 1924, representing the structure of the world's telegraph cable system (link).



Here is a contemporary graphic representing global Internet flow:



And here is a graph of global cities connections, produced by R. Wall and B. v.d. Knaap in "Sustainability within a World City Network" (link).



What these images have in common is a very simple point: the power of graphical representation to capture complex sets of inter-related data.

Aggregation dynamics

Saturday, May 14, 2011

The social world starts with social individuals. So how do we get more complex social outcomes out of the actions and thoughts of independent individuals? How do the actions and thoughts of individuals aggregate into larger social happenings? How did the various religious, political, and relational attitudes of rural Kenyans aggregate to widespread ethnic violence a few years ago? What sorts of conditions lead to interactions that bring about unexpected outcomes? And, of course, how do larger social happenings impinge upon individuals, leading to characteristic kinds of socialized behavior?

These are questions I've usually addressed from the other angle -- the "dis-aggregation" angle. I've asked how large social entities and processes can be disaggregated into actions and relationships pertaining to socially situated individuals. This is what we're aiming at when we ask for **microfoundations** for things like state power or the changing impact of Islam. Here, though, let's look at the upward-facing processes.

Here are some examples of the kinds of happenings and situations that we might be interested in:

- **collective social behaviors**: riots, uprisings, boycotts, protests, panics, runs on the bank
- **coordinated actions by differentiated but organized groups**: design of a new model vehicle at General Motors, movement of a tank squadron through a battle zone, actions by squads of fire fighters in a large forest fire
- **shifts of valuations and attitudes:** styles, slang, inter-ethnic attitudes, diffusion of religious beliefs, dissemination of rumors through a population
- **preservation of stable organizations and structures:** maintenance of the rules governing shop-floor behavior in a factory, sustaining command authority within a military organization, keeping a sustainable level of parent involvement in a cooperative childcare center, keeping a reasonably high level of taxpayer compliance within a mass society

How do the reasonings, thoughts, and choices of socially situated individuals aggregate and link together in ways that constitute these higher-level phenomena?

Some social outcomes are essentially **agglomerative**. A riot sometimes occurs when a small group of people have a grievance and a provocation; a larger group share sympathy with the original rioters; others see the behavior and join for their own reasons; and in a few hours thousands of people are breaking windows, setting cars on fire, and blocking the streets.

Second, some outcomes are the result of **strategic behavior** by a number of individuals. Competition leads agents to tailor their actions in such a way as to take advantage of the expected behavior of others; cooperation leads individuals to attempt to coordinate their behavior so as to bring about an outcome that the group prefers. These are the kinds of aggregative processes that Thomas Schelling describes in Micromotives and Macrobehavior; and, of course, some of the outcomes of both competitive and cooperative behavior are paradoxical with respect to the interests and intentions of the individuals who take part in them.

Third, some outcomes come about because individuals have constituted themselves as **collective agents**; they have come to identify themselves as members of a group and they behave deliberately out of consideration for what other members in the group will do. Their behavior is oriented to the behavior and intentions of the others in the group. They specifically strive to coordinate their actions with others through a shared set of social goals, identities, and attitudes. Raimo Tuomela explores this perspective in The Philosophy of Sociality: The Shared Point of View.

Other outcomes are largely structured by **imperatives** (rules or commands) conveyed through delineated social relationships from a group of decision makers to a group of agents. This is the key subject matter of the study of organizations and institutions. The Midwest account manager for a national bank issues instructions to loan officers throughout the region to do this or that; communications are sent out, supervisors are instructed to observe compliance, and loan officers change their behavior. This process too works through the incentives and purposes of a set of dispersed agents; but in this case there is a substantial degree of top-down coordination that is secured through communication channels and a supervisory structure.

The dynamics of competition and cooperation are well understood; the ideas of a

prisoners' dilemma, tragedy of the commons, and race to the bottom capture some of the logic of independent individuals each seeking to maximize their own interests (Mancur Olson, The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups, Thomas Schelling, Micromotives and Macrobehavior). But cooperation too has its logic; even when a group of individuals are seeking to find a common strategy to further their group interests, it is easy to spot the organizational obstacles that stand in the way: lack of consensus, imperfect communication, etc. These are aggregation dynamics that derive from the logic of individual agency.

And the dynamics of organizations and systems of rules likewise have some obvious characteristics. Costs of enforcement mean that an institution's rules are only imperfectly enforced. Conflicts of interests among powerful actors lead to inefficient behavior within the organization (e.g. ministry of steel and ministry of railroads). Well known organizational shortfalls like the principal-agent problem, imperfect and costly communications transmission, and costly information all lead organizations to fail in somewhat predictable ways. Robert Bates (Markets and States in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Policies) and Charles Perrow (Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies, The Next Catastrophe: Reducing Our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters) each capture some of the imperfections of organizations in their works. These are aggregation dynamics that derive from more structural features of systems of rules, roles, and actors.

Let's look at an example of an aggregate-level phenomenon a bit more closely. Take style change over space and time. There are several different types of actors: street-level people who wear clothes with some degree of intentionality (want to look cool); street-level innovators (the first person to wear droopy jeans); clothing designers who want to influence the market for clothes through innovations that will be adopted by the public; "cool" finders who are looking for emerging innovations in hot places; marketers who specifically design strategies for proliferating new designs at Banana Republic or Abercrombie and Fitch. In this space of actors, consumers, and creators it sometimes happens that a new fashion emerges and quickly spreads to a larger population; how does this occur? What are the mechanisms of diffusion and adoption that lead to the success of a new look in denim jackets deriving ultimately from Seattle skateboarder culture? Stan Lieberson looks at some of these surprising dynamics in A Matter of Taste: How Names, Fashions, and Culture Change.

I won't try to catalogue here all the pathways through which individual actors aggregate into larger social happenings. But it seems clear that several factors are key to any such discussion: communication channels, organizations, and social networks.

France 1848

Tuesday, May 17, 2011



The revolutions of 1848 have gotten renewed attention in light of this year's "Arab Spring" uprisings. (The amazing photo above depicts the barricades in Paris, 1848.) The parallels are obvious -- uprisings in a number of countries, similar grievances across countries, and a degree of cross-communication among the movements and leaders. And, of course, widespread optimism among progressives and activists about the prospects for fundamental social and political reform. The outcomes of 1848 were discouraging to progressives -- repression and authoritarian governments were usually successful in turning back the progressive tide. So one hopes that the prospects for democracy and equality are better in the MENA uprisings.

Particularly interesting, of course, is the example of France. So it is intriguing to look back at the causes and processes of demonstrations and resistance in May and June, 1848, in Paris and in other parts of the country. Roger Price's Documents on the French Revolution of 1848 (Documents in History Series) is worth reading for a number of reasons. First, it provides an astute analysis of the economic, social, and political situation of France in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the events that unfolded into the revolution of 1848. But second, it is a genuinely interesting book from an historiographical point of view. The analytical text takes up roughly 50 pages of an introductory essay. The remainder of the book consists of short extracts from primary documents of the period. The extracts are selected and ordered according to the author's conception of the factors and turning points that were historically central to the moment; so they constitute a narrative of an unusual kind. Price presents his analysis and framing of the events entirely through the extracts he provides; the participants tell the story.

Price's framing essay begins with the point that France was a backward country in the first part of the nineteenth century, compared to Britain. The population was overwhelmingly rural, the economy was primarily agricultural, and the infrastructure of roads and railroads was underdeveloped. Industry was in the most embryonic state of development, and markets were primarily local because of the weakness of the transport system.

The great weakness of the system, however, lay in its transport infrastructure. Communications by water and, particularly, road were slow and costly. Only the first unconnected lines of the future railway network had been constructed before the 1850s. (12)

And, unlike Britain, there were few signs of an emerging proletariat in large factories and industrial cities, along the lines of the Manchester documented decades earlier by Engels:

The typical French worker would be the artisan working in a small workshop rather than the factory worker. This was true in Paris, for example, where the majority found work in industries catering for the material needs of the population -- food, clothing, furniture and housing -- or in the typically Parisian luxury industries, all traditionally operating on a small scale. (18)

These factors had social consequences. Hunger in the countryside was a recurring possibility. Landlords and gentry had great power over the rural population. Social inequalities in both town and countryside were visible and extreme. And neither peasant nor urban worker had a strong social basis for resistance.

The contrast in the living standards of rich and poor that daily greeted the eyes of the urban populations, especially in the larger towns, was often extreme. For as long as such a contrast was felt to be inevitable, it could be accepted only with resignation, or with a resentment that might burst out in violence. But new ideas and the diffusion of a more critical outlook were bound to erode this attitude. (20)

At the same time as economic inequalities were increasing the power of a small sector of elites was increasing as well.

The grand notables -- landowners, financiers, major industrialists, but also politicians and administrators -- collaborated in extending their economic power and safeguarding their social and political authority. This was a group given unity not simply by shared material interests, but by an entire style of life. (23)

Of course it is clear that this is one particular framing of the historical episode, and another historian would have highlighted other issues and other turning points. So the book doesn't serve as a broad repository of documents, potentially relevant to many different interpretations; instead, the documents have been specifically selected to serve as waypoints on a particular path through Price's interpretation. That said, the documents are fascinating to read, from observations by elite participants, to government announcements, to confessions by activist leaders and followers.

Was this a social revolution? Some of the goals of the activists involved radical social transformation; but these goals were entirely unsuccessful. The balance between the propertied and the property-less did not change in any meaningful way. Was it more successful as a political revolution? Again, not really. Universal suffrage was established before the June repression; but what followed was autocratic rule and eventually the election of yet another dictator, Napoleon III. So it is hard to see that the revolution of 1848 in France had much effect on the conditions of freedom and well-being of the majority of the poor in France.

It would be very interesting to have a similar compilation of documents and framing social descriptions for Egypt, 2011. I'm sure that researchers and observers in Cairo have been collecting interviews, posters, and other kinds of documents that will shed more light on the social and political grievances offered by ordinary Egyptians as they participated in the demonstrations and collective resistance that led to the fall of Mubarak. And, likewise,

it will be valuable to document the timeline of reaction by the state during these crucial several weeks, including repression, accommodation, and eventually capitulation by the ruling circles in favor of -- the army.

Garfinkel on social competence

Thursday, May 19, 2011



Harold Garfinkel made highly original contributions to the field of micro-sociology in the form of his program of ethnomethodology, and the fruits of these contributions have not been fully developed. His death a few weeks ago (link) has led quite a few people to look back and re-assess the importance of his contributions. This renewed attention is very much warranted. Studies in Ethnomethodology (1967) is the primary place where his ideas reached a broad public, so let's take a look at some of the ideas advanced there.

The interest that I take in his work flows from the idea of agent-centered sociology that I've found so appealing -- the idea of the situated actor, the idea that we need to have a substantially richer set of concepts in terms of which to characterize the actor's thought processes, and the idea that current conceptions of the rational actor or the cultural actor are inadequate (link). In order to provide a basis for explanations of social outcomes deriving from the interactions of purposive agents, we need a developed and nuanced set of ideas about how agents tick. And theorists like Garfinkel and Goffman provide substantial resources in this area. (Here are discussions of Goffman; link, link.)

Here is a key statement of Garfinkel's research goals in *Studies in Ethnomethodology*:

The following studies seek to treat practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study, and by paying to the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events, seek to learn about them as phenomena in their own right. (1)
A central empirical interest of Garfinkel's is the nuance of the ordinary knowledge -- commonsense knowledge -- that people use to navigate their daily lives and tasks. What presuppositions about actions and motives do jurors rely on as they reach judgments about truth and falsity of testimony? What ellipses occur in ordinary conversations that are nonetheless intelligible to the participants because of unspoken background knowledge? What implicit beliefs and standards do coders for the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center use to classify unexpected deaths (11 ff.)?

Here is Garfinkel's explication of a conversation between husband and wife about their son's putting a penny in the parking meter:

An examination of the colloquy reveals the following. (a) There were many matters that the partners understood they were talking about that they did not mention. (b) Many matters that the partners understood were understood on the basis not only of what was actually said but what was left unspoken. (c) Many matters were understood through a process of attending to the temporal series of utterances as documentary evidences of a developing conversation rather than as a string of terms. (d) Matters that the two understood in common were understood only in and through a course of understanding work that consisted of treating an actual linguistic event as "the document of," as "pointing to," as standing on behalf of an underlying pattern of matters that each already supposed to be the matters that the person, by his speaking, could be telling the other about. (39-40)

Garfinkel devised an experimental method for probing presuppositions that he referred to as "breaching" experiments: interactions with subjects that deliberately challenged their conversational or practical expectations. For example, a subject was invited to play the game of tic-tac-toe; and the researcher erased the subject's first move and placed the subject's mark in another location. The subject was incensed. Another example:

My friend said to me, "Hurry or we will be late." I asked him what did he mean by late and from what point of view did it have reference. There was a look of perplexity and cynicism on his face. "Why are you asking me such silly questions? Surely I don't have to explain such a statement. What is wrong with you today? Why should I have to stop to analyze such a statement? Everyone understands my statements and you should be no exception!"

Garfinkel takes the discomfort and irritation expressed by the subjects in these experiments to be an indicator of their expectations about normal social interaction. Here is one of his reflections about this dynamic:

Despite the interest in social affects that prevails in the social sciences, and despite the extensive concern that clinical psychiatry pays them, surprisingly little has been written on the socially structured conditions for their production. The role that a background of common understandings plays in their production, control, and recognition is, however, almost *terra incognita*. (49)

Here is a summary statement of Garfinkel's goals:

I have been arguing that a concern for the nature, production, and recognition of reasonable, realistic, and analyzable actions is not the monopoly of philosophers and professional sociologists. Members of a society are concerned as a matter of course and necessarily with these matters both as features and for the socially managed production of their everyday affairs. The study of common sense knowledge and common sense activities consists of treating as problematic phenomena the actual methods whereby members of a society, doing sociology, lay or professional, make the social structures of everyday activities observable. (75)

The way that I would like to paraphrase Garfinkel's work is that he is offering an empirical research program designed to fill in a rich theory of the human actor's "competence" in engaging in ordinary social interactions. What does the actor need to know about immediate social relationships and practices in order to get along in ordinary social life? And how can we study this question in empirically rigorous ways? The program of ethnomethodology is intended to focus attention on the knowledge of rules and practices

that ordinary people employ to make sense of their social surroundings.

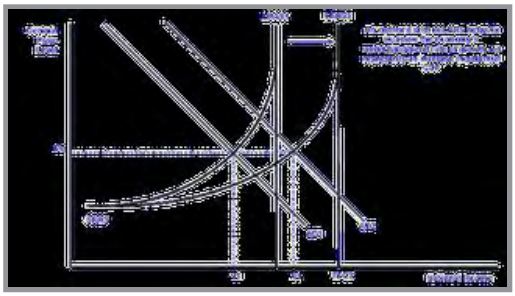
One objection that some purists might offer of this formulation is that it puts the object of investigation "inside the head," rather than in the behavioral performances -- primarily conversations and classificatory tasks -- that Garfinkel primarily studies. It is thought that Garfinkel's method is formal rather than mentalistic. It is true that he says repeatedly that he is not interested in getting inside the head of the individuals he studies. But the logic of his findings still has important implications for the cognitive systems of the individuals, and this is in fact the only reason we would be interested in the research. So I want to understand his research along the lines of a Chomskian linguist: making inferences about psychologically real "competences and capacities" on the basis of analysis of non-mental performances (utterances).

On this approach, Garfinkel did not pretend to offer a full theory of agency or actor consciousness; instead, his work functioned as a sort of specialized investigation of one aspect of social cognition -- the competences, rules, and practices we can attribute to specific actors on the basis of careful analysis of their observable performances.

(John Heritage's Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology is generally recommended as a highly insightful survey and discussion of Garfinkel's work.)

More on figures and diagrams in economics

Sunday, May 22, 2011



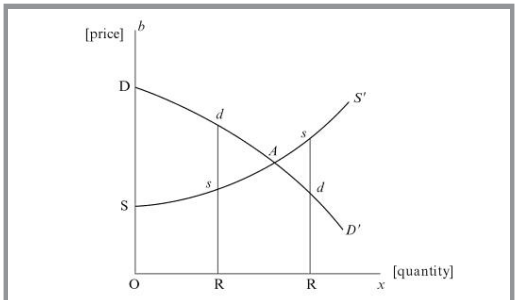
Mark Blaug and Peter Lloyd's Famous Figures and Diagrams in Economics is a genuinely interesting perspective on the development of modern economics. Each diagram illustrates a single analytical point; but there is a cumulative logic to the exposition of the various diagrams that reproduces the main turns in the development of modern economic theory. So reading the book cover-to-cover is an excellent way of working through the logic of the discipline. (Here is an earlier post on the book.)

A core question that needs to be addressed in this book is the question of proof: does a good diagram prove a principle or truth of economics? Blaug and Lloyd address this question directly. “The use of figures and diagrams as a vehicle of proof has a chequered history. Mathematicians have always warned of the danger of proving propositions by geometry” (6). The problem, they observe, is that a diagram consists of curves of a particular shape; and there is always the possibility that the result obtains as a consequence of particular and non-generalizable features of the specific curves that are chosen. The authors illustrate this possibility with the law of diminishing returns. “One statement of the Law, the textbook by Stonier and Hague [London: Longmans, 1957] – which was widely used in the UK and elsewhere at that time – contended that the Law of

(everywhere) Diminishing (marginal) Returns holds if the production function is linearly homogeneous. The proof is geometric. But it is false. They had drawn their isoquants as strictly concave from above … and with positive marginal products, without realizing that linear homogeneity plus these assumptions suffice but linear homogeneity alone does not" (6). The authors' suggestion, then, is that the geometrical features of economics diagrams are an unreliable foundation for proving an economics proposition; rather, a formal mathematical derivation with clearly specified axioms and principles is preferable. The diagram serves to illustrate the point; the mathematical proof establishes the point. "Thus algebra has advantages of being more general and more precise" (8).

The authors draw attention to the interesting fact that many of these foundational diagrams were "discovered" multiple times by independent researchers. Following the sociologist of science Robert Merton (The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations), they argue that multiple discovery is a very common feature in the history of the sciences (14). They note a number of diagrams in the current volume that have appeared multiple times in the development of economics: "the Slutsky equation, the kinked oligopoly demand curve and monopolistic and imperfect competition" (14). The fact of multiple discovery suggests that some ideas are floating around within the community of researchers before they find expression in writing -- much as natural selection was in the air for scientists like Darwin and Wallace to incorporate into their pathbreaking books on evolution in the mid-nineteenth century.

It is worth considering several diagrams in particular here. In his article on "Marshallian cross diagrams" Thomas M. Humphrey describes the history and logic of what is arguably the most fundamental of economic diagrams in neoclassical economics, the intersecting curves of supply and demand by price. "The diagram achieves much with little. It illustrates how parametric shifts in its two curves caused by changes in tastes, incomes, technology, factor prices and prices of related goods operate to alter a good's equilibrium price and quantity…. For all its simplicity, it is a powerful and flexible tool" (29). Humphrey notes that the diagram did not originate with Marshall. Instead, Cournot was the first to represent a supply-price diagram for a single good in 1838. Humphrey notes further that a German economist, Hans von Mangoldt, introduced formally similar diagrams into his economics work in 1863, evidently without influence from Cournot. All told, he finds five figures in the history of economic thought who made use of this schema, almost always without influence from one to the other. "Had [Marshall] never published, later economists probably would have discovered the work of his predecessors or invented the diagram themselves" (36).



Source: Marshall, *The Pure Theory of Foreign Trade*, p.16, fig. 22a, http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3113/marshall/foreigntrade.pdf

Figure 1.1 Marshall's diagram

A second fundamental diagram is the Edgeworth box (1881), with an entry by John

Creedy to explain the logic and history of this influential contribution to welfare economics (233). The Edgeworth box models the behavior of price-taking utility maximizers who barter two goods with each other, and allows discovery of the contract curve defined by the shape of the indifference curves of the two traders. The points within the box represent the quantities of each of two goods that the two actors hold. Each individual has a set of indifference curves through the space of quantities of the two goods: individual A is indifferent between one allocation with more of X and less of Y, and another allocation with less of X and more of Y. The box diagram is provided as a way of analyzing the conditions of barter between two persons and two goods. “The contract curve is the locus of points of tangency between traders’ indifference curves” (233). Creedy situates the importance of the Edgeworth box in terms of this important result: “a price-taking equilibrium is Pareto-efficient” (237). In other words, at this point it is not possible to make one person better off without making the other person worse off. This is referred to as the “First Fundamental Theorem” of welfare economics. “Edgeworth was thus able to clarify the sense in which a competitive equilibrium is ‘optimal’, fully recognizing that it is just one of many (Pareto) optimal points” (233). Creedy explicates the idea of equilibrium in these terms: “Equilibrium is a situation in which no individual’s plans are frustrated, that is where there are no excess demands or supplies. In the present context this must imply that both individuals plan to consume at precisely the same point in the Edgeworth box” (236). (Here is a Youtube video explaining the Edgeworth box.)

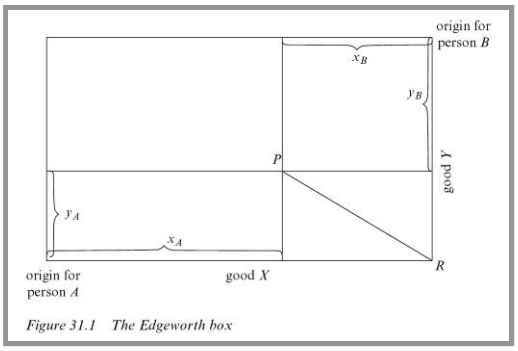
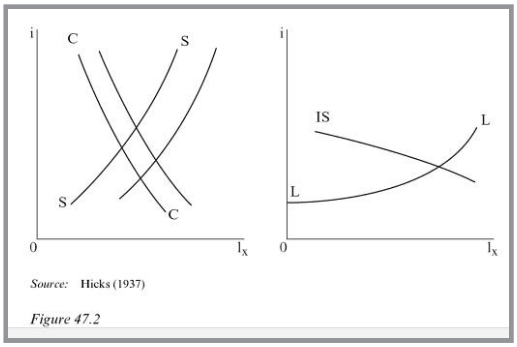


Figure 31.1 The Edgeworth box

Now consider a fundamental diagram in macroeconomics, the IS-LM diagram deriving from John Hicks’ work in 1936 and 1937. The diagram (or series of diagrams) serves as an important step in the effort to make rigorous economic sense of Keynes’s theory of money and capital. Warren Young provides an article on this topic (348). This diagram is often regarded as a crucial contribution to the assessment and interpretation of Keynesian economics. The diagram is designed to analyze the relationship between capital investment, savings, liquidity, and the interest rate. Young’s article is more developmental than most contributions to the volume, in that he attempts to track the development of Hicks’ concept through several important stages in 1936 and 1937. Alvin Hansen built on Hicks’ 1937 IS-LL diagram by introducing the IS-LM diagram in 1949. Hansen also introduced consumption into the representation. Young concludes that “the plasticity of the approach and its extension into augmented forms has enabled the diagram to become the basis for more sophisticated diagrammatic approaches such as AS-AD, which even include endogenous (rational) expectations, thus making the approach more acceptable to those of non-Keynesian predilection” (354).



Source: Hicks (1937)

Figure 47.2

One persistent impression that emerges from the discussion of most of the figures and diagrams in the book is that economic theory is often an area of pure mathematics, not an empirical investigation of human behavior. It is a precise, rigorous and mathematical exploration of the mathematical implications of a set of assumptions about rational consumer and producer behavior. There is no empirical content in many of these theories whatsoever. This part of modern economics, anyway, looks more like Euclidean geometry than natural history. This feature raises the important question of the empirical status of economics: is it an empirically-based science describing and explaining human behavior, or is it largely a formal exploration of certain mathematical premises about "rationality"? (Or, perhaps most plausibly, it is both, with more empirical studies being located in specific sub-disciplines such as development economics and consumer economics.)

It is also interesting to consider whether the use of diagrams and figures is as intellectually and theoretically important in other areas of the sciences. There are iconic diagrams in physics, biology, and psychology; but it does not appear that these devices played as important a role in those areas of the sciences as they have done in economics. And it is plain that diagrams and figures do not play anything like this role in other areas of the social sciences, including political science and sociology.

Practical mentality

Friday, May 27, 2011

How should we try to characterize the mental processes of the real human actor as he or she proceeds through life activity? One individual decides to stop by a retirement home to visit an elderly friend; another individual breaks into a car to steal a briefcase; another has an argument with her boss and decides to quit her job. What sorts of thinking go into these choices and innumerable others?

These are all actions that are to some extent deliberate and considered; and yet they are also complicated responses to shifting circumstances and events that have prudential and emotional meanings to the actors in question. Here I'm not asking the question, "What sorts of factors motivate people, and how do they process their motivations?", though these are interesting and important questions. Rather, I'm asking a more basic question: what categories and concepts should we use in attempting to analyze deliberate action in the first place? What features of mental experience need to be highlighted? Should we expect there to be a best framework of analysis of the components of practical mentality? Or is this fated always to be an open question?

Think of the range of vocabulary that is relevant to our discourse about the kinds of

examples mentioned above: decision, belief, desire, emotion, fear, habit, norm, obligation, reason, impulse, weakness of will .... These terms and others constitute something like a mental ontology, a set of concepts that we attribute to the agent as he/she acts. And some of them bring presuppositions that are debatable. Take "decision," for example. Did the thief "decide" to break into the car? Or was the action an impulse, prior to thought and deliberation?

Here is one way of approaching the issue. What are the questions we would like to answer about the human actor?

- What motivated the action?
- What was the actor thinking?
- What was the actor feeling?
- What beliefs were highlighted in the actor's conscious thoughts?
- What memories played a role in the actor's decision?
- What rules of thumb did the actor make use of?
- What emotional stream occurred?
- How did the actor process emotions?
- What scripts were salient?
- What unconscious biases and impulses were operative?

Our ordinary "folk psychology" provides a range of simple theories available of the agent's mentality.

- Desire-belief-opportunity
- Emotion-dynamics of psychology-action
- Habit/practice-context-performance
- Environment scan-rules of thumb-action

And we might incorporate all these factors into a large composite model: desires, beliefs, habits, emotions, past experience, and moral conviction all play a role. But the key point is this: we need to have richer modes of representation of consciousness and agency than we currently have. Further, it seems that novelists like James Joyce or Henry James do as good a job of conceptualizing these processes as any philosopher has done.

One influential set of ideas on this question of practical agency is that offered by Pierre Bourdieu in his theory of "habitus". Here is how he describes action and habitus in Outline of a Theory of Practice (1972):

The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus. (78)

In practice, it is the habitus, history turned into nature, i.e. denied as such, which accomplishes practically the relating of these two systems of relations, in and through the production of practice. (78)

What I understand by this concept is a more fluid conception of thinking-experiencing-doing on Bourdieu's part than is characteristic of a more Aristotelian conception. There is a suggestion of a sort of tacit knowledge underlying activity, with action looking as much like the smooth, intelligent motions of a soccer player as a deliberative chess master. It is a less epistemic view of the human condition -- less a concoction of explicit beliefs and reasonings than a smooth coordination of tacit understandings and movements in the situation. It is less about deliberation and decision and more about intelligent doing.

This interpretation is born out in a cryptic passage a page or so later:

If witticisms surprise their author no less than their audience, and impress as much by their retrospective necessity as by their novelty, the reason is that the *trouvaille* appears as the simple unearthing, at once accidental and irresistible, of a buried possibility. It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know. (79)

There are many uncertainties about how to think about this most intimate of human facts -- the ways our thoughts process our needs and movements. And it seems to me that the choice of ontology surrounding action -- the concepts and entities we use -- is important and difficult, and worthy of careful attention.

Philosophy of social science today

Monday, May 30, 2011



A sign of arrival for a sub-discipline is the appearance of a handbook for the field. By that criterion, the philosophy of social science has passed an important threshold with the appearance of Ian Jarvie and Jesus Zamora-Bonilla's SAGE Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences. The 750-page volume offers 37 main articles, as well as an extensive reflective introduction by Ian Jarvie and an epilogue by Jesus Zamora-Bonilla. A majority of the contributors are European, confirming an impression that the most active research networks in this field are currently in Western Europe. Germany and the Scandinavian countries are particularly well represented.

Ian Jarvie's extensive introduction does a good job of setting the stage for the volume. He is in a unique position to offer this perspective, having served as editor of the key journal *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* for many years. He begins by noting the heterogeneity of the field:

As a set of problems, the philosophy of the social sciences is wide-ranging, untidy, inter-disciplinary and constantly being reconfigured in response to new problems thrown up by developments in the social sciences; in short, disorderly. (1)

The orientation to the philosophy of social science represented in this volume is largely grounded in the analytic philosophy tradition. By this I mean an emphasis on rationality,

an interest in generalizations and laws, a commitment to empirical methods of inquiry, and an over-arching preference for conceptual clarity. (Paul Roth describes the analytic approach in his contribution to the volume; 103ff.) But David Teira also offers an interesting contribution on "Continental Philosophies of the Social Sciences." He begins the article by writing,

In my view, there is no such thing as a continental philosophy of the social sciences. There is, at least, no consensual definition of what is precisely *continental* in any philosophical approach. (81)

Among these approaches he highlights Marxist, phenomenological and Foucauldian philosophies and theories of the social sciences. His finding is one that I agree with -- that one of the particularly valuable aspects of the continental traditions is the fact that thinkers in this tradition have offered large, insightful conceptual schemes for thinking about social life -- whether historical materialism, ethnomethodology, or the rhetoric of power. He writes, "I guess that if continental philosophies seem attractive to many social scientists, it is because they offer the prospect of a somewhat radical reconstruction of current research practices" (96).

Particularly interesting for me were contributions by Alban Bouvier ("Individualism, Collective Agency and The "Micro-Macro Relation"), Daniel Steel ("Causality, Causal Models, and Social Mechanisms"), Joan de Marti and Yves Zenou ("Social Networks"), Peter Hedstrom and Petri Ylikoski ("Analytical Sociology"), Chris Mantzavinos ("Institutions"), and Jeroen Van Bouwel and Erik Weber ("Explanation in the Social Sciences").

What is particularly valuable in this collection is the fact that most of the essays are not dogmatic in their adherence to a "school" of philosophical thought. Instead, they get down to the serious business of understanding the social world, and understanding what is involved in achieving a scientific understanding of that world. Chris Mantzavinos's essay, "Institutions," is a good example of this intellectual pragmatism. His contribution is a careful study of the new institutionalism and the variety of theoretical challenges that the concept of an institution raises. The essay is very well grounded in the current sociology and political science literatures on institutions, and it goes on to make substantively interesting points about these debates. "Only a theory of institutions that increases our information about the structure of social reality can provide us with the means of reorienting this reality in a direction that we find desirable" (408-9).

Many of the contributors -- probably the majority -- have taken seriously what I think is a particularly fundamental requirement for productive work in the philosophy of an area of science. This is the need for the philosopher to take up the particular theories and controversies of some current research in the social sciences as a framework and stimulus to their philosophical analysis. The philosopher needs to gain a significant level of expertise in a particular field of social science if his or her work is likely to find traction with conceptual issues that really matter. The topics for the philosophy of social science should not derive from apriori speculation about society; instead, they should be selected on the basis of careful engagement with serious empirical and theoretical attempts to explain the social world.

This is the kind of book that would benefit from a simultaneous digital edition. An affordable Kindle edition would help; but more radically, an online, hypertexted and cross-linked version would be fantastic. It would be fascinating to see a concept map linking the articles by theme or keyword; it would be illuminating to see some analysis of the patterns of citation across the articles in the volume; and it would be great for the reader to be able to click to some of the references directly. (Jarvie provides something like a map of themes in his tables representing "Principal Problems in Philosophy of the Social Sciences" and "Problematics in 14 Selected Anthologies"; 7-8.)

Making structures

Wednesday, June 01, 2011

John Levi Martin's Social Structures (2009) takes an innovative approach to the question, "where do structures come from?" His approach is aggregative: he wants to see how institutions and structures accrete from features of individual relationships. (Here is an earlier post on Aggregation Dynamics.) He writes in the Preface:

More generally, the structures we see around us -- up to and including the state organizations that first inspired analogies to organismic structures -- in most cases also developed from smaller components. These components in turn may be residues of a shattered former large-scale structure, or, more interestingly, they may have been generated from even smaller units, namely interpersonal relationships. Could we reconstruct the process, at least analytically, whereby individual relationships combine to form structural units, and these structural units then aggregate to form large-scale structures? (kindle loc 71)

This book is thus an attempt to begin an analysis of the structural tendencies inherent in certain forms of relationships, and their eventual consequences up to and including some of the structures that first impressed Spencer and the other organismic thinkers. (kindle loc 113)

There is a cumulative logic to L-M's account of structures, from local (cliques, pecking orders) to meso (patron-client systems, serfdom) to macro (command army, political party). In this way L-M attempts to deliver on the promise of giving an aggregative account of social structures at every level, stemming from patterns of individual interaction. Like Thomas Schelling, he wants to show how important features of macro social structures emerge from features of individual agency and interaction; and further, he wants to derive some of the dynamic properties of these higher-level configurations.

Here is how Levi Martin characterizes an institution:

An institution exists when interactants subjectively understand the formal pattern in terms of the *content* of the relationships. (kl 167)

In other words, an institution (in this sense, anyway), codifies and formalizes individual relationships, with a recursive effect backwards onto the participants. He illustrates this concept through a brief discussion of "marriage" as an institution. "This content my be seen as the translation of the formal characteristics of marriage as a set of dyads into a subjective sense of what marriage 'is all about': trust, commitment, exclusivity, and so on" (kl 167).

This is a somewhat atypical conception of institutions. His conception of social structure is also somewhat unique:

To preserve such a distinct sense of "structure," I propose that we begin by considering social structure simply as regular patterns of interaction, and leave to the side the question of why these patterns exist. (kl 248)

Here the operative words are *patterns* and *interactions*: interactions invoke particular human relationships, and patterns invoke the idea of a level of intra-social similarity among some kinds of interactions and relationships.

Levi Martin's approach takes inspiration from Simmel's idea that social structures are the

"crystallization" of individual social interactions (kl 127). In its most abstract version, Levi Martin wants to discover the topologies of relationships that are implied by certain kinds of social interactions -- friendship, marriage, fealty, dominance. These relationships have formal properties such as symmetry, equality, and transitivity and their opposites that have topological implications for the aggregates of individuals bearing these relationships. L-M demonstrates that the agglomerates begin to look like identifiable social arrangements -- cliques, patron-client systems, and mass political parties.

This part of the theory is formal and mathematical. What is particularly original here is L-M's ability to conjoin this style of analysis with detailed historical examples exemplifying the emergence of the type of social structure hypothesized by the formal analysis. The abstract logic of a command army is exemplified by a careful analysis of the organization of the Roman and American armies and the imperatives of coordination and effectiveness in conflict that led to these organizational features.

In short, both empirically and methodologically, this is a pathbreaking book that repays close attention.

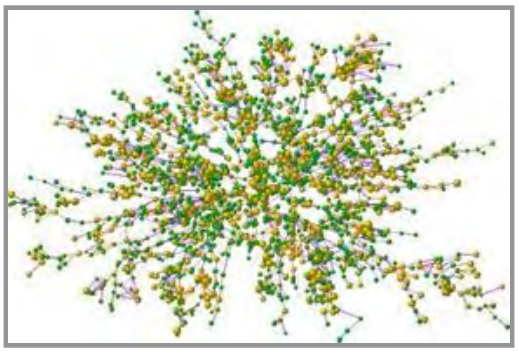
Aggregation dynamics of conditional psychological dispositions

Sunday, June 05, 2011

We can use computational modeling techniques to aggregate individual behavior into collective patterns. A simple version of this is Thomas Schelling's segregation model (Micromotives and Macrobehavior).

Most commonly these tools have been used to model the results of rational choices by the actors involved, often using the tools of game theory. But the approach is more general; any common behavioral feature at the individual level can be aggregated through similar modeling techniques as well if we can specify our assumptions about conditionality plausibly.

Here is a hypothetical example illustrating the feasibility of modeling non-rational social dynamics. Suppose individuals have a social behavior disposition that is variable depending on the behaviors of other individuals in their acquaintance spaces. Examples might include: cooperative behavior, racist behavior and intolerance, abuse against women, or philanthropy. Assume individuals exist in an extended social graph of "acquaintance", so each has a specific list of immediate acquaintances (for example along the lines of the Framingham Heart Study graph below). And assume a contagion rate: the probability of switching when one acquaintance switches is p, the probability of switching when two acquaintances switch is p', and so forth.



Now we are in a position to do some interesting modeling based on recursive calculation of each individual's state based on the states of individuals within his/her acquaintance space. (This is analogous to Schelling's segregation model.) Calculate each individual's state based on the states of his/her acquaintances in the previous iteration. And run this recalculation through the whole population as many iterations as you like. The series of full iterations will represent moments in time as this dynamic system moves to a new equilibrium. Each represents a frame in an animation of the spread of intolerance through the population. (It should be possible to embody this simulation in a spreadsheet. Models like these are sometimes referred to as cellular automata.)

Now we can do a number of interesting things. We can observe the spread of racist attitudes and behavior. We can introduce disturbances in various parts of the graph and observe the transmission process. We may be able to document path dependency: perhaps it matters where the disturbance occurs.

After performing a large number of iterations, four large possibilities exist: everyone intolerant, everyone tolerant, stable neighborhoods within the graph of tolerance and intolerance, and no equilibrium at all.

(Actually, based on the assumptions outlined so far, it is inevitable that the graph will eventually go 100% "infected" with intolerance, since there is no recovery mechanism at the individual level. So we would probably want to incorporate some influence that turns individuals from intolerant to tolerant once in a while. We could also introduce more complexity into the model by postulating multiple states for the actor -- perhaps high, moderate, low intolerance. Individuals moving up or down the scale could infect their neighbors in the same direction. And we might attribute different infection rates to different individuals, to see how this affects the outcome.)

This example also creates the possibility of strategic intervention by outsiders: knowing how these dynamics work affords both the state and activist organizations to undertake actions designed to alter the outcome by strategically "seeding" the graph with intolerant individuals. Racist anti-immigrant organizations in western Europe appear to be doing exactly this at present.

If actors are wired this way (i.e. their social dispositions are a function of those of the individuals in their acquaintance space), then racism, philanthropy, and violence against women will behave like a communicable disease and the tools of social epidemiology will be applicable. And the consequences are great: some societies will have a stable anti-racist population and others the opposite, depending on contingent events, the nature of the network, and deliberate actions and policies.

This example is framed in terms of behavioral dispositions of social psychology. But it is equally pertinent to any individual characteristic that is variable in response to social contacts: slang, manners, social perception, ... Any psychological, cognitive, or emotional state with behavioral consequences that is responsive to context in this way is amenable to the same kind of modeling.

This is an example of social aggregation dynamics that is not grounded in strategic rationality but rather in features of conditionalized social psychology. The example is fully compatible with the requirement that macro-outcomes need to be explained on the basis of mechanisms with microfoundations. And it does not depend on the assumptions of rational actor theory or game theory.

Abbott on mechanisms

Monday, June 06, 2011

Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg's Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory (1998) announced to the world the power of social mechanisms as a foundation for social explanations. It was based on a conference on this approach in Stockholm in 1996, and the volume includes contributions by outstanding authorities such as Thomas Schelling, Jon Elster, Aage Sorensen, and Arthur Stinchcombe (among others).

One person whom it does not include is Andrew Abbott. Abbott did indeed participate in the conference, but his contribution was not included in the volume when it appeared in 1998. The article did appear subsequently, however, in a special volume of *Sociologica* in 2007, with discussions by Delia Baldassarri, Gianluca Manzo, and Tommaso Vitale. (Here is a link to Abbott's essay and to his reply to discussants.) And the whole debate is worth reading. Abbott's piece is a serious challenge to the ontology of mechanisms. And each of the discussants in the *Sociologica* volume bring important criticisms and perspectives to the table.

Essentially Abbott takes issue with the mechanisms approach because it attempts to analyze the social world into fixed "atoms" of causal events (mechanisms and actors) rather than a more contextual ontology of relations and actions.

I shall consider the mechanisms movement from the viewpoint of a different theoretical tradition, one that focuses on the processual and relational character of social life and that traces its roots to pragmatism. (2)

By the relational view I mean the notion that the meaning of an action is comprehensible only when it is situated in social time and place. A fundamental assumption of the mechanism view as set out here is that the meaning of a certain activity is given in itself. By contrast, the relational view assumes that the meaning of an action arises from its relations to other actions – both temporally, as a successor and a forerunner in coherent sequences of social events, and structurally, as a vertex in a synchronic ensemble of actions. Beneath this lies a more profound assumption that actions, not actors, are the primitives of the social process. The substratum of social life is interaction, not biological individuals who act. (7)
Abbott agrees with the CM approach in its rejection of a positivist search for statistical regularities among social characteristics -- what he refers to as the variables paradigm --

but he isn't persuaded by the ontology of mechanisms. He prefers actions to actors, and he prefers relationships linked to their contexts in time and place to portable mechanisms.

The most important part of Abbott's article is his positive argument for the primacy of a relational approach and actions-in-context instead of unitary actors. Much of this line of thought comes down to Abbott's view that actors and agency are deeply socially constructed; so it doesn't make sense to take the actor as a given who then deliberates about options.

Making interaction primitive makes it possible to give an account of the self. By making the self be continuously recreated in the flow of interaction we bring it out of the realm of assumptions and into that of investigation. At the same time, by making interaction primitive we allow for the endless interplay of cross-individual structural definitions of the flow of action, an interplay that is an evident fact in social life. (8)

For the relational account defines an act as a making of relations within a scene.... Social actors are cobbled together by actions that turn existing potential boundaries into actual ones. (9)

I am arguing the stronger point that the acting self is continuously remade in interaction and that the environment of possible endowments and contrasts--the environment of others and past experiences--provides the ground whence comes this remaking. (12)
Another central thrust of Abbott's critique of the mechanism approach is that it is "reductionist" and depends on a rational-choice model of the actor. Essentially his line of argument is this: the mechanism approach requires microfoundations for macro-causal mechanisms; microfoundations presuppose rational actors; and therefore macro-facts are being reduced to facts about rational individuals. Each of these links is debatable, however, and in fact several of the discussants in the *Sociologica* volume question each of them. Essentially, many advocates of microfoundations (including me) insist on a richer theory of the actor than narrow economic rationality. And others -- for example, Dave Elder-Vass -- maintain that microfoundations don't imply reductionism either. (He prefers the idea of supervenience; I prefer explanatory autonomy; link.)

Delia Baldassarri highlights this issue in her comment, when she talks about the strengths and weaknesses of methodological individualism:

This approach has been quite successful in explaining "macro-phenomena that are emergent effects of the interdependent but uncoordinated actions of many individuals" [Mayntz 2004, 250]. The same approach has been less effective, however, in accounting for dynamics of identity construction, interest formation, boundary definition and institutional change, and in general, for social processes where macro-level states cannot be considered as given. (2)
Gianluca Manzo's comment is the most extensive of the three in the *Sociologica* volume. His careful assessment leads him to conclude that Abbott overstates the incompatibility between "mechanisms" and "relations," and overstates as well the degree to which the analytical sociology perspective is "reductionist". Manzo advocates for what he calls "complex methodological individualism", and concludes that:

The "relational sociology" that Abbott defends is inconceivable without the "mechanismal sociology" (AS) he critiques.
One feature of Abbott's article gives it its own particular relationality: he illustrates his

meaning by describing a prolonged disagreement he had as a dean with the president of the University of Chicago over admissions recruitment strategies. His point, seemingly, is that the strategy chosen by the president presumes a rational-actor theory of college choice, and it further misunderstands the true priorities and considerations that motivate prospective UC students.

More important, we might phrase the difference by saying that the relational model is interested in how a student becomes a person who matriculates at the University of Chicago. (15)
The inference: if UC is to continue to recruit the edgy, intellectual and quirky undergraduates it has been famous for, it will need to have a more nuanced understanding of the whole process. Or in the context of mechanisms versus relations: it won't do to think a marketing can pull the lever on a strategy (mechanism) and expect to get the desired result. Rather, we need a more contextualized and relational approach. There is no recipe of mechanisms -- grounded, moreover, in a rational expectations theory -- that will do the job. Instead, Abbott advises a relational, processual approach to college marketing: figure out the kinds of identities the desired segment of high school students are trying to make for themselves, and construct a series of experiences around that.

In many ways I find Abbott's essay more original than several in the original Hedstrom-Swedberg volume. So it's unfortunate that it wasn't included. It could have influenced the subsequent discussions very fruitfully.

Readers will also be interested in a recent collection edited by Pierre Demeulenaere that serves as a valuable follow-on to the original Hedstrom-Swedberg volume, Analytical Sociology and Social Mechanisms. It includes a piece by a German philosopher and sociologist whose work on this subject I admire, Michael Schmid, as well as contributions from Dan Sperber, Raymond Bouton, Jon Elster, Robert Sampson, and others. Schmid's *Die Logik mechanismischer Erklarungen* (2006) isn't available in English, which is unfortunate. The causal mechanisms approach has been picked up internationally, including an interesting book on the subject by the Italian sociologist Filippo Barbera (*Meccanismi Sociali; Elementi di sociologia analitica*; 2004).

Dissecting the social

Thursday, June 09, 2011



The past dozen years or so have witnessed the emergence of a distinctive approach to

the social sciences that its practitioners refer to as "analytical sociology." Peter Hedström's Dissecting the Social: On the Principles of Analytical Sociology (2005) serves as a manifesto for the approach, and Pierre Demeulenaere, ed., Analytical Sociology and Social Mechanisms, and Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology provide substantive foundations for several areas of research within this approach. And the European Network of Analytical Sociologists provides an institutional framework within which research approaches and findings can be shared (link).

Hedström describes the analytical sociology approach in these terms:

Although the term analytical sociology is not commonly used, the type of sociology designated by the term has an important history that can be traced back to the works of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sociologists such as Max Weber and Alexis de Tocqueville, and to prominent mid-twentieth-century sociologists such as the early Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. Among contemporary social scientists, four in particular have profoundly influenced the analytical approach. They are Jon Elster, Raymond Boudon, Thomas Schelling and James Coleman. (kl 113)

One important characteristic of the analytical approach is that it aims to gain understanding by dissecting the social phenomena to be explained. To dissect, as the term is used here, is to decompose a complex totality into its constituent entities and activities and then to bring into focus what is believed to be its most essential elements. (kl 65)
And here is how Hedström and Bearman describe the approach in the *Handbook*:

Analytical sociology is concerned first and foremost with explaining important social facts such as network structures, patterns of residential segregation, typical beliefs, cultural tastes, common ways of acting, and so forth. It explains such facts not merely by relating them to other social facts -- an exercise that does not provide an explanation -- but by detailing in clear and precise ways the mechanisms through which the social facts under consideration are brought about. In short, analytical sociology is a strategy for understanding the social world. (3-4)

Two interrelated aspects are of particular importance: the explanatory principles guiding the approach and the type of explanatory factors being evoked. Analytical sociology explains by detailing mechanisms through which social facts are brought about, and these mechanisms invariably refer to individuals' actions and the relations that link actors to one another. (4)
In my assessment, AS rests on three central ideas.

First, there is the idea that social outcomes need to be explained on the basis of the actions of individuals. This position is referred to variously as methodological individualism, methodological localism, or microfoundationalism. It is often illustrated by reference to "Coleman's Boat" in James Coleman, Foundations of Social Theory (1994:8) describing the relationship that ought to exist between macro and micro social phenomena:

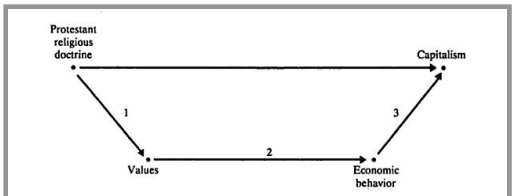


Figure 1.2 Macro- and micro-level propositions: effects of religious doctrine on economic organization.

The diagram indicates the relationship between macro-factors (Protestant religious doctrine, capitalism) and the micro factors that underlie their causal relation (values, economic behavior). Here are a few of Hedström's formulations of this ontological position:

In sociological inquiries, however, the core entity always tends to be the actors in the social system being analyzed, and the core activity tends to be the actions of these actors. (kl 106)

To be explanatory a theory must specify the set of causal mechanisms that are likely to have brought about the change, and this requires one to demonstrate how macro states at one point in time influence individuals' actions, and how these actions bring about new macro states at a later point in time. (kl 143)
Further, Hedström is drawn to a broad version of rational-choice theory -- what he calls the "Desire-Belief-Opportunity theory".

Desires (D), beliefs (B) and opportunities (O) are the primary theoretical terms upon which the analysis of action and interaction will be based. ... The desires, beliefs and opportunities of an actor are here seen as the proximate causes of the actor's action. (kl 507)
This is a variant of rational choice theory, because the actor's choice is interpreted along these lines: given the desires the actor possesses, given the beliefs he/she has about the environment of choice, and given the opportunities he/she confronts, action A is a sensible way of satisfying the desires. It is worth pointing out that it is possible to be microfoundationalist about macro outcomes while not assuming that individual actions are driven by rational calculations. Microfoundationalism is distinct from the assumption of individual rationality.

Second is the idea that social actors are socially situated and socially constructed; the values, perceptions, emotions, and modes of reasoning of the actor are influenced by social institutions, and their current behavior is constrained and incented by existing institutions. (This position has a lot in common with the methodological localism that I've defended.) Practitioners of analytical sociology are not reductionist about social behavior, at least in the way that economists tend to be; they want to leave room conceptually for the observation that social structures and norms influence individual behavior and that individuals are not unadorned utility maximizers. (Gary Becker's effort to explain much of social life on the basis of the premise of maximizing utility is an example of the reductionist tendency of purist rational choice theory; Uncommon Sense: Economic Insights, from Marriage to Terrorism.) In the Hedström-Bearman introduction to the *Handbook* they put the point this way:
Structural individualism is a methodological doctrine according to which social facts should be explained as the intended or unintended outcomes of individuals' actions. Structural individualism differs from traditional methodological individualism in attributing

substantial explanatory importance to the social structures in which individuals are embedded. (4)

This is a direction of thought that is not well advanced within analytical sociology, but would repay further research. There is no reason why a microfoundational approach should not take seriously the causal dynamics of identity formation and the formation of the individual's cognitive, practical, and emotional frameworks. These are relevant to behavior, and they are plainly driven by concrete social processes and institutions.

Third, and most distinctive, is the idea that social explanations need to be grounded in a hypothesis about the concrete social causal mechanisms that constitute the causal connection between one event and another. Mechanisms rather than regularities or necessary/sufficient conditions provide the fundamental grounding of causal relations and need to be at the center of causal research. (This is a position developed and discussed many times in this blog; thread.) This approach has several intellectual foundations, but one is the tradition of critical realism and some of the ideas developed by Roy Bhaskar (A Realist Theory of Science). Hedström advocates for a theory of causal explanation that is grounded in the idea of a causal mechanism:

The position taken here, rather, is that mechanism-based explanations are the most appropriate type of explanations for the social sciences. The core idea behind the mechanism approach is that we explain a social phenomenon by referring to a constellation of entities and activities, typically actors and their actions, that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about the type of phenomenon we seek to explain. (kl 65)

A social mechanism, as defined here, is a constellation of entities and activities that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome. (kl 181)

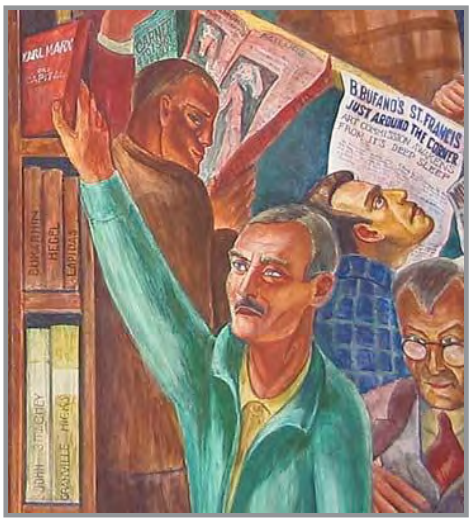
In addition to these three orienting frameworks for analytical sociology, there is a fourth characteristic that should be mentioned. This is the idea that the tools of computer-based simulation of the aggregate consequences of individual behavior can be a very powerful tool for sociological research and explanation. So the tools of agent-based modeling and other simulations of complex systems have a very natural place within the *armoire* of analytical sociology.

In short, analytical sociology is a compact, clear approach to the problem of understanding social outcomes. It lays the ground for the productive body of research questions associated with the "aggregation dynamics" research program (link). There is active, innovative research being done within this framework of ideas, especially in Germany, Sweden, and Great Britain. And its clarity permits, in turn, the formulation of rather specific critiques from researchers in other sociological traditions who reject one or another of the key components. (This is the thrust of Andrew Abbott's article on mechanisms, discussed previously.)

(An earlier post described John Levi Martin's effort to show how social structures come to be as the result of the accretion of patterns of individual social interaction. Where Levi Martin proceeds from micro to macro through aggregation, Hedström proceeds from macro to micro through disaggregation (or dissection, in his words). But both are fundamentally interested in analyzing the micro-macro link.)

Marx an analytical sociologist?

Saturday, June 11, 2011



In an earlier post I gave a brief sketch of the emerging field of analytical sociology, and summarized its foundations around three premises: microfoundations, rational social actors, and causal mechanisms.

Marx is often thought to be a "structuralist" thinker, highlighting large social processes and entities such as the mode of production, the economic structure, and social class (for example, by Althusser and
Balibar in Reading Capital). However, I argued in The Scientific Marx (1986) that a careful examination of Marx's economic writings reveals something quite different. I argued, first, that Marx embraced the idea that social explanations require **microfoundations**.

Marxist social science commonly has advanced macro explanations of social phenomena in which the object of investigation is a large-scale feature of society and the explanans is a description of some other set of macro phenomena. Some Marxist social scientists have recently argued, however, that macro explanations stand in need of microfoundations: detailed accounts of the pathways by which macrolevel social patterns come about. These theorists have held that it is necessary to describe the circumstances of individual choice and action that give rise to aggregate patterns if macroexplanations are to be adequate. Thus to explain the policies of the capitalist state it is not sufficient to observe that this state tends to serve capitalist interests; we need an account of the processes through which state policies are shaped and controlled so as to produce the outcome. (127-28)

Consider now a second issue underlying the call for "microfoundations" for Marxian explanations: the gap between the interests of a group as a collective and the interests of the individuals who comprise the group. (John Roemer refers to this as the "aggregation gap.") "Rational-action" explanations depend on identifying an individual's interests and then explaining the person's behavior as the rational attempt to best serve those interests. The model is often extended to account for collective behavior of groups as well.... However, Mancur Olson and others have made it plain ... that it is not sufficient to

refer to collective interests in order to explain individual behavior. (129-30)

In both cases the objection being advanced to macro-Marxism is grounded in a recognition that there are no supraindividual actors in a society. (131)

After examining several examples of Marx's most important explanations, I conclude that his arguments conform to the requirements of the microfoundations principle. His most characteristic explanations proceed from reasoning about the actions of typical individuals within capitalist institutions to an effort to aggregate these individual choices up to the level of larger collective patterns.

Second, I argued that Marx's explanations were almost always grounded in an analysis that highlighted **rational individual decision-making**. But Marx differed from the perspective we would now call "public choice theory" in that he gave much greater attention to the historically specific motives and values of the actor. Marx highlighted what we might now call "political psychology" of the actor -- the socially specific ideas, motivations, and ideologies that the actor acquired through ordinary experience of capitalism. So there is a developed "action theory" present in Marx's writings. It is a theory that gives prominence to means-end rationality. And it gives attention to the social specificity of the actor as well.

Here is how I described Marx's assumptions about the actors within capitalism in TSM:

Marx's accounts depend on an examination of the circumstances of choice of rational individuals. Marx identifies a set of motivational factors and constraints on action for a hypothetical capitalist and then tries to determine the most rational strategies available to the capitalist in these circumstances of choice.... A second part of this model of explanation involves an attempt to determine the consequences for the system as a whole of the forms of activity attributed to the typical capitalist at the preceding stage of analysis. (141-42)

But Marx has a nuanced and socially specific conception of the actor:

Against both these positions -- the nonsocial individualism of political economy and the uncritical holism of speculative philosophy -- Marx puts forward an alternative position. On this account the socialized individual is the ultimate unit of analysis in social explanation. "Individuals producing in society -- hence socially determined production -- is of course the point of departure" (*Grundrisse* 83).... On this account society is not a freestanding entity, and social relations exist only through the individuals who stand within them. At the same time, however, individuals exist only within particular sets of historically given social relations. Consequently, social explanations must begin with a concrete conception of the individual within specific social relations." (150)

These assumptions about social actors conform fairly well to the assumptions incorporated into analytical sociology.

And third, I argued that Marx offered **causal mechanism explanations** based on an analysis of what I termed the "institutional logic" of a particular social setting. So various features of capitalism are explained as resulting from rational actors situated within a particular set of institutions. These accounts serve as descriptions of the social mechanisms through which capitalist dynamics take place.

Marx attempts to work out the institutional logic of these capitalist institutions. What distinctive features of organization and development are imposed on the capitalist economy by its defining structural and functional characteristics? What are the "laws of motion" of the mode of production defined by these conditions? We may call this an institutional-logic analysis of social regularities, and it is significantly different from the construction of theoretical explanations in natural science. Such an analysis is concerned with determining the results for social organization and development of an entrenched set of incentives and constraints on individual action. (34)

Marx's interest in discovering and elaborating the social mechanisms that drive social processes is found within his theory of historical materialism as well. In TSM I argue that Marx's claims about causation between levels of the social and economic structures of various modes of production are best understood as "mechanisms" explanations.

In order to understand fully this view of the relation between the economic structure and noneconomic phenomena, it is necessary to describe the mechanisms through which the lower-level structures constrain or filter superstructural elements. The filtering may occur through a variety of mechanisms, both intended and unintended. (56)

This account of Marx's implicit theory of social explanation -- microfoundations, rationality, and mechanisms -- reproduces Coleman's boat (Foundations of Social Theory). The institutions and structures of capitalism create a local environment of choice for individual capitalists and workers, and their behavior aggregates to a macro-outcome of interest (for example, the falling tendency in the rate of profit). This is a "logic of institutions" argument in a specific sense. The institutions (property relations) create an environment of choice in which actors pursue specific strategies, and these strategies aggregate to a certain kind of macro-level outcome. These are the "laws of motion" of the capitalist mode of production, in Marx's terms. And it is a mechanisms-based explanation in a specific sense as well. Marx is deliberately seeking out the social mechanisms through which the institutional setting produces a set of macro-outcomes, through their influence on the behaviors of the actors. *The Scientific Marx* offers a handful examples of these aggregative explanations. The point here is that this logic conforms very well to the framework of thought associated with analytical sociology.

There is one additional point of convergence between the methods I identified in Marx's writings in 1986 and the current doctrines of analytical sociology. I argued that the covering law model of explanation and the deductive-nomological model of justification did not work at all well in application to Marx's reasoning. The reason? Because the covering law model assumes that explanatory warrant proceeds from laws and regularities, whereas the heart of Marx's explanations rests upon the discovery of particular social processes and mechanisms.

Do Marx's explanations conform to the subsumption theory? ... There are statements of lawlike regularities in Marx's explanations, but these statements are somewhat trivial.... The real weight of the argument lies elsewhere: in the particular details of the circumstances of choice in which capitalists find themselves, and in Marx's reasoning from these circumstances to patterns of collective behavior. (152) [Or in other words, he seeks to uncover the social mechanisms of capitalism and their aggregative dynamics.]

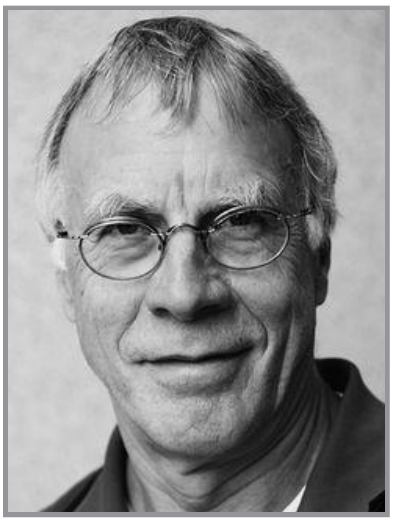
The process of discovering an institutional logic is not merely one of working out the deductive consequences of the theory; it is rather discovering new aspects of the social process. These aspects are perhaps "implicit" in the original theory, but their discovery is a substantive one, not a mere deductive exercise. (153)

Here too there is a strong affinity between Marx's theory of science (as I interpreted it in 1986, anyway) and the philosophy of social explanation developed within analytical sociology.

So it looks as though Marx's analysis of capitalist society -- at least as it is reconstructed in The Scientific Marx -- falls squarely within what we would now call "analytical sociology" with a commitment to microfoundations, mechanisms, and socially constituted purposive actors. What a surprise!

Esser's sociology

Saturday, June 18, 2011



Sociology in Germany seems to be particularly prolific today, and this extends to the contributions that German sociologists are making to the sub-discipline of ***analytic sociology***. One of the leaders who has played a key role in this active field is Hartmut Esser. Esser's Soziologie. Spezielle Grundlagen 3. Soziales Handeln (2002) is particularly important, but it hasn't been translated into English yet. (Here is a link to the second volume of this work on Google Books, and here is a link to *Soziologie Allgemeine Grundlagen* (1993).) So Esser's contributions are not yet as widely known in the US sociology world as they ought to be. (Here is a short Wikipedia entry on Esser in German (link).)

One of Esser's primary areas of empirical research is on the general topic of immigration and ethnicity. Here are a couple of relevant articles in English: "Assimilation, Ethnic Stratification, or Selective Acculturation? Recent Theories of the Integration of Immigrants and the Model of Intergenerational Integration" (link) and "How Far Reaches the “Middle Range” of a Theory? A Reply to the Comments" link). His goal generally is to consider the theories of ethnicity and assimilation that have been developed since the Chicago School and Robert Parks, and to attempt to reconcile the empirical experience of assimilation with a synthetic theory.

Several things seem fairly clear. First, Esser was an early and influential contributor to analytical sociology in two important ways. He advocates for social mechanisms as a foundation for social explanation. And he highlights rational individual actions as the heart of most (all?) social mechanisms. His work appears to be comparable in importance and impact to that of Raymond Boudon, James Coleman, and Jon Elster: rationality, microfoundations, mechanisms. (Here is a contribution by Esser on the topic of "Theories of the Middle Range" in a very interesting volume by Renate Mayntz available online; link.)

Second, Esser is especially interested in topics within the philosophy of science in connection to sociology. He is interested in the logic of explanation, the development of theory, and the role of models in scientific explanation. He is influenced by Karl Popper

and Carl Hempel, and there are occasional references to other philosophers of science from the 1950s and 1960s. There are no references to Thomas Kuhn, W. V. O. Quine, or Hilary Putnam in *Soziologie Allgemeine Grundlagen.*

Another thing seems evident: that Esser is a sociologist in the tradition of Max Weber and interpretive sociology, with particular affinity to the "rational actor" Weber. Along with other German sociologists today, Esser appears to be helping to constitute a "Weber 2.0", more attuned to issues of contemporary interest such as immigration and assimilation, but with a strong sense of the importance of appropriate use of social theory in arriving at explanations of complicated contemporary social processes. (Here is a link to a book chapter by Esser on "The Rationality of Value".)

Here is an example of his use of rational choice theory in his theory of ethnic assimilation ("Assimilation, Ethnic Stratification, or Selective Acculturation? Recent Theories of the Integration of Immigrants and the Model of Intergenerational Integration"):

At the heart of the model are the options for those immigrants who are currently present within a receiving context. Options include activities which are related to the receiving country (receiving context option, in short: rc-option) and those which are related to the ethnic context (ethnic context option, in short: ec-option). Examples are changing or maintaining habits, relationships, or orientations. In order to explain when and why a certain activity occurs, we need a general rule for the selection between options that can be applied to, in principle, all empirical constellations. The model uses the rule of the expected utility theory as such a general selection rule. For each of the possible options a so-called EU weight is computed. The EU weight is the sum of both the negative and positive returns that can be achieved with the selection of a particular option, weighted with the corresponding expectation that the return actually occur with the selected option. Individuals would then select the option with the highest expected value [cfr. Esser 2004, 1135 ff.; Esser 2006, 39 ff. on details of the expected utility theory and also with reference to the model.
Esser has also attempted to find affinities between rationality theory and micro-sociology, including especially the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schütz. Here is the abstract of "The Rationality of Everyday Behavior: A Rational Choice Reconstruction of the Theory of Action by Alfred Schütz" (link):

This article argues that Alfred Schütz, one of the founders of the interpretative paradigm in sociology, developed a theory of action whose basic structure is compatible with subjective expected utility theory (i.e., a specific variant of rational choice theory). Alfred Schütz's view with respect to the characteristics of everyday action—the individual orientation toward routines and structures of relevance—is modeled in terms of subjective expected utility theory. In this perspective, these characteristics appear as the result of an action-preceding rational choice in the process of the cognition of situations, under the conditions of bounded rationality.
Esser is the object of quite a bit of discussion and reflection by other German sociologists. One whose name shows up frequently in these discussions is Rainer Greshoff (Die Transintentionalität des Sozialen. and *Integrative Sozialtheorie: Esser, Luhmann, Weber* (Rainer Greshoff and Uwe Schinank, eds.)).

(For those of us whose German reading knowledge is limited, I'm finding Google Translate to be a helpful source of assistance as I struggle with some of these texts; it helps with vocabulary even though the translations of complete sentences are not ready for prime time.)

Alternatives to analytical sociology

Monday, June 20, 2011

I've now spent a fair amount of time in the past month on the micro-macro link and the foundations of analytical sociology (AS). It is worth taking stock to consider how this approach relates to other important methodologies in sociology and the social sciences more generally.

To start: I've generally found the strictures of "microfoundations" and "agent-based explanations" as representing ontological constraints on sociological explanations rather than guides for empirical research. The constraints require, essentially, that all our explanations of social processes and causal connections need to be **compatible** with providing plausible micro-level accounts of how they work. This is somewhat analogous to the philosophy of atomism in pre-Socratic natural philosophy; atomism postulated that there was a most fundamental level of physical phenomena; that these "atoms" were discrete and indivisible; and that all natural phenomena are composed of atoms and their aggregations. But this philosophy doesn't prescribe how to pursue the science of chemistry.

So these constraints don't necessarily provide guidance about what social phenomena to study or how to study it. In particular, they don't imply that sociological research needs to flow from bottom up, and they don't imply that the content of sociology should derive from features of individual agency and psychology.

But it seems that advocates of AS believe that the framework goes beyond this; that it leads to research strategies and areas of empirical inquiry that are distinctive from those adopted by other approaches to sociology. Research needs to fit into one of the struts of Coleman's boat. It needs to provide an empirical understanding of some of the micro-micro linkages or the micro-macro linkages; and it needs to offer rigorous techniques for establishing causal connections from micro to macro. Hedstrom puts the point this way early in Dissecting the Social: On the Principles of Analytical Sociology:

To be explanatory a theory must specify the set of causal mechanisms that are likely to have brought about the change, and this requires one to demonstrate how macro states at one point in time influence individuals' actions, and how these actions bring about new macro states at a later point in time. (kindle location 139)

This brief summary of the central dogmas of AS provides one reason why AS theorists are so concerned to have adequate and tractable models of the actor -- often rational actor models. Thomas Schelling's work provides a particularly key example for the AS research community (Micromotives and Macrobehavior, Choice and Consequence, Strategies of Commitment and Other Essays); in field after field he demonstrates how micro motives aggregate onto macro outcomes. And Elster's work is also key, in that he provides some theoretical machinery for analyzing the actor at a "thicker" level -- imperfect rationality, self-deception, emotion, commitment, and impulse (Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences, Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality, Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitment, and Constraints, Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions).

This summary also shows why agent-based modeling and simulations are so attractive to AS researchers: these techniques offer tractable methods for aggregating the effects of lower-level features of social life onto higher-level outcomes. If we represent actors as

possessing characteristics of action X, Y, Z, and we represent their relations as U, V, W -- how do these actors in social settings aggregate to mid- and higher-level social patterns? This is the key methodological challenge that drives the Santa Fe Institute, and it produces very interesting results (link). (Here is an interesting recent paper on agent-based simulations for the social sciences by Dirk Helbing and Stefano Balietti called "How to Do Agent-Based Simulations in the Future: From Modeling Social Mechanisms to Emergent Phenomena and Interactive Systems Design" (link).)

There certainly is intellectual power in this approach -- actors in social relations and the aggregation of their actions; but it isn't the whole of sociology. So let's quickly consider a few examples of sociological research that seem fairly distant from AS and consider how they might relate.

We might consider such fertile social scientists as Jack Goldstone, Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, Andrew Abbott, Emmanuel Wallerstein, Pierre Bourdieu, Stanley Lieberson, George Steinmetz, Douglas Massey, and Erving Goffman, with respect to these questions:

- To what extent do their theories rely on "mechanisms" as a foundation for social explanations?
- Are their theories compatible with the requirement of microfoundations at a local actor level?
- Do they have a theory of the actor?
- And do they make use of social ontologies that presuppose large social causes and macro causal relationships?

In many instances some but not all answers to these questions will be affirmative. Goffman and Bourdieu have a theory of the actor; Tilly and Lieberson appeal to social mechanisms; and in different ways I would say that each of them offer theories that are compatible with the requirement of microfoundations. At the same time, the explanatory logic that these authors provide is rarely "aggregative"; they are not interested in showing how a macro phenomenon is the aggregate result of local actors' choices. Moreover, several of them make specific and deliberate use of macro factors as central explanatory constructs: Goldstone, Skocpol, Wallerstein, and Massey. And Tilly explicitly criticizes the individualism that is characteristic of rational-actor theories, preferring a relational understanding of social phenomena. So there isn't an easy translational relationship between AS and a number of other important and productive research traditions in sociology today.

One interesting data point on this question of the relationship between AS and other approaches to social explanation can be examined in Kathleen Thelen's contribution to Renate Mayntz, *Akteure – Mechanismen – Zur Theoriefähigkeit makro-sozialer Analysen*. (The book is very interesting and is available as a PDF download; link.)

Thelen is a brilliant scholar within the new historical institutionalism perspective (How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan), and her contribution to the Mayntz volume ("The Explanatory Power of Historical Institutionalism") implicitly aims at tracing out some of the points of contrast between AS and historical institutionalism. She highlights several key methodological and theoretical assumptions underlying current research in historical institutionalism: attention to the formation of collective interests (92), attention to context (93), attention to meso- and macro-causal analysis (95), and sensitivity to the temporal dimension of social processes (96). Here are some representative passages:

Thus, historical institutionalists have consistently drawn attention to the way in which institutional configurations »foster the emergence of particular definitions of mutual interest« (Immergut 1998: 339), and how they also often shape political outcomes by facilitating the organization of certain groups while actively disarticulating others (e.g., Skocpol 1992). (92)

A good deal of historical-institutional scholarship shows that the impact of institutions is often heavily mediated by features of the overarching political or historical context, a point that Charles Ragin's work has repeatedly emphasized and underscored (Ragin 1987; also Katznelson 1997). (93)

However, beyond that, the emphasis on timing and sequencing in historical institutional research is also motivated by the insight, borne out in a number of studies, that when things happen, or the order in which different processes unfold, can itself be an extremely important part of the causal story (Pierson 2000c). (97)

Thus, for example, a number of authors have suggested that rational choice institutionalism applies best to understanding the strategic interaction of in- dividuals in the context of specific, well established and well known rules and parameters (e.g., Bates 1997; Geddes 1995). By contrast to this, the strength of historical-institutional approaches is precisely in the leverage it provides on understanding configurations of institutions (Katznelson 1997) and over much longer stretches of time (Pierson 2001). Historical institutionalism is concerned not just with how a particular set of rules affects the strategic orientation of individual actors and their interactions, but also with the broader issue of the ways in which institutional configurations define what Theda Skocpol has termed »fields of action« that have a very broad influence not just on the strategies of individual players but on the identities of actors and the networks that define their relations to each other. (103-4)

My takeaway from Thelen's thinking here and elsewhere is that there is a pretty significant methodological divide between her way of thinking about social processes and that of AS. She highlights a handful of characteristics of HI research. Historical institutionalists are inclined to focus on the meso level -- the settings of rules, norms, and processes through which social life is mediated; and they are sensitive to the crucial variations across time and place that these arrangements illustrate. Nothing in this construction is antithetical to the requirement of microfoundations and the recognition that socially situated actors constitute the social world; but the emphasis of the research is not on the discovery of the aggregation dynamics from the level of the individual actor.

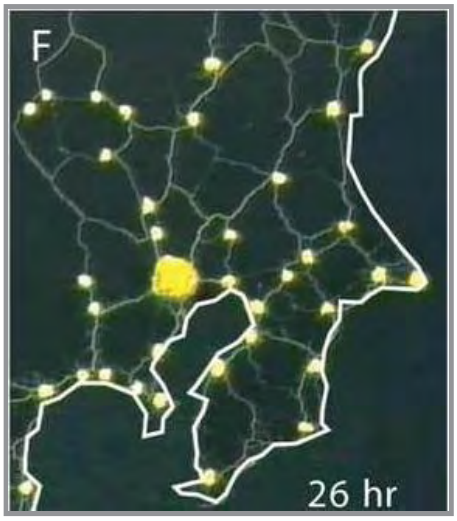
So I'm inclined to judge two things: first, that the methodological requirement of microfoundations is indeed a universal requirement on valid sociological research; but second, that the program of aggregation from micro to macro is only one way of conducting sociological research and explanation. So we shouldn't expect other areas of sociological thinking and research to simply fold into the framework of analytical sociology -- any more than a common commitment to natural selection as the causal mechanism underlying species change dictates the content and methods of the various areas of biology.

This is a place where the ontological framework of social structures that Dave Elder-Vass provides in The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency seems methodologically useful. It provides a rigorous basis for conceding the point that context, institutions, moral ideas, and value systems have a causal role to play in social explanation. In E-V's view, these social structures supervene upon facts about individual

actors; but their causal properties do not need to be reduced to features of the actors.

Mental illness, big pharma and agent-based simulation

Saturday, June 25, 2011



The *New York Review of Books* has an absorbing two-part piece by Marcia Angell on mental illness, psychiatry, and big pharma (link, link). (The NYRB Facebook page provides a good way of following the NYRB.) Angell provides an in-depth discussion of books by Irving Kirsch, Robert Whitaker, and Daniel Carlat. There has been an explosion in the numbers of patients diagnosed with a list of mental disorders, and there has been an explosion in the profits associated with the drugs prescribed in treatment of these disorders as well.

It seems that Americans are in the midst of a raging epidemic of mental illness, at least as judged by the increase in the numbers treated for it. The tally of those who are so disabled by mental disorders that they qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) increased nearly two and a half times between 1987 and 2007—from one in 184 Americans to one in seventy-six. For children, the rise is even more startling—a thirty-five-fold increase in the same two decades. Mental illness is now the leading cause of disability in children, well ahead of physical disabilities like cerebral palsy or Down syndrome, for which the federal programs were created. (Angell, part 1)

What is going on here? Is the prevalence of mental illness really that high and still climbing? Particularly if these disorders are biologically determined and not a result of environmental influences, is it plausible to suppose that such an increase is real? Or are we learning to recognize and diagnose mental disorders that were always there? On the other hand, are we simply expanding the criteria for mental illness so that nearly everyone has one? And what about the drugs that are now the mainstay of treatment? Do they work? If they do, shouldn't we expect the prevalence of mental illness to be declining, not rising? (Angell, part 1)

To oversimplify, the thrust of several of these books is that the psychoactive drugs *created* the mental illnesses through the profit incentives and strategies of big pharma,

rather than the diseases creating the drugs (through research and development aimed at treating the diseases). This is over-simple, of course, since no one would question that mental illnesses exist prior to drugs. But the explosion of treated disorders like depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and attention deficit disorder in children -- the "epidemic" to which Angell refers -- seems to conform to the reverse order. Deliberate strategies of marketing, influence on physicians, and influence on guiding medical documents such as the DSM seem to have produced a much larger patient base in specific mental disorders, with large profits accruing to pharma as a consequence. (Ian Hacking looks at the degree to which mental illnesses are socially constructed in The Social Construction of What?.)

Here is the main thrust of the interpretation offered by the books that Angell reviews:

First, [the authors] agree on the disturbing extent to which the companies that sell psychoactive drugs—through various forms of marketing, both legal and illegal, and what many people would describe as bribery—have come to determine what constitutes a mental illness and how the disorders should be diagnosed and treated. (Angell, part 1)
A couple of pieces of evidence are especially pertinent in support of this telling of the story. One is the observation that psychiatrists as a profession are the largest beneficiaries of funding by pharma, by a large margin.

As psychiatry became a drug-intensive specialty, the pharmaceutical industry was quick to see the advantages of forming an alliance with the psychiatric profession. Drug companies began to lavish attention and largesse on psychiatrists, both individually and collectively, directly and indirectly. They showered gifts and free samples on practicing psychiatrists, hired them as consultants and speakers, bought them meals, helped pay for them to attend conferences, and supplied them with “educational” materials. When Minnesota and Vermont implemented “sunshine laws” that require drug companies to report all payments to doctors, psychiatrists were found to receive more money than physicians in any other specialty. The pharmaceutical industry also subsidizes meetings of the APA and other psychiatric conferences. About a fifth of APA funding now comes from drug companies.

Drug companies are particularly eager to win over faculty psychiatrists at prestigious academic medical centers. Called “key opinion leaders” (KOLs) by the industry, these are the people who through their writing and teaching influence how mental illness will be diagnosed and treated. They also publish much of the clinical research on drugs and, most importantly, largely determine the content of the DSM. In a sense, they are the best sales force the industry could have, and are worth every cent spent on them. Of the 170 contributors to the current version of the DSM (the DSM-IV-TR), almost all of whom would be described as KOLs, ninety-five had financial ties to drug companies, including all of the contributors to the sections on mood disorders and schizophrenia. (Angell, part 2)
A second piece of evidence is a recounting of the drafting of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) through five editions, especially the third edition. In each case there is a strong suggestion of swaying of medical and scientific opinion through financial incentives.

These efforts to enhance the status of psychiatry were undertaken deliberately. The APA was then working on the third edition of the DSM, which provides diagnostic criteria for all mental disorders. The president of the APA had appointed Robert Spitzer, a much-admired professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, to head the task force overseeing

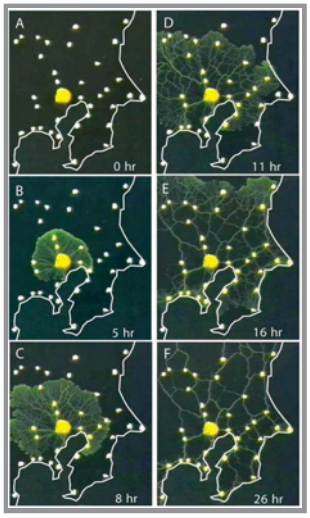
the project. The first two editions, published in 1952 and 1968, reflected the Freudian view of mental illness and were little known outside the profession. Spitzer set out to make the DSM-III something quite different. He promised that it would be “a defense of the medical model as applied to psychiatric problems,” and the president of the APA in 1977, Jack Weinberg, said it would “clarify to anyone who may be in doubt that we regard psychiatry as a specialty of medicine.”

When Spitzer’s DSM-III was published in 1980, it contained 265 diagnoses (up from 182 in the previous edition), and it came into nearly universal use, not only by psychiatrists, but by insurance companies, hospitals, courts, prisons, schools, researchers, government agencies, and the rest of the medical profession. Its main goal was to bring consistency (usually referred to as “reliability”) to psychiatric diagnosis, that is, to ensure that psychiatrists who saw the same patient would agree on the diagnosis. To do that, each diagnosis was defined by a list of symptoms, with numerical thresholds. For example, having at least five of nine particular symptoms got you a full-fledged diagnosis of a major depressive episode within the broad category of “mood disorders.” But there was another goal—to justify the use of psychoactive drugs. The president of the APA last year, Carol Bernstein, in effect acknowledged that. “It became necessary in the 1970s,” she wrote, “to facilitate diagnostic agreement among clinicians, scientists, and regulatory authorities given the need to match patients with newly emerging pharmacologic treatments.” (Angell, part 2)

Another element of the strategy used by the drug companies to promote their products, according to these authors, is the selective way that clinical studies are used in order to establish the safety and effectiveness of a given psychoactive drug:

For obvious reasons, drug companies make very sure that their positive studies are published in medical journals and doctors know about them, while the negative ones often languish unseen within the FDA, which regards them as proprietary and therefore confidential. This practice greatly biases the medical literature, medical education, and treatment decisions. (Angell, part 1)

What this story made me think of was ... slime molds. Here's what I mean. Japanese researchers have discovered that certain examples of optimizing processes can be simulated with slime molds and food supplies distributed across space. Here is an example of this research in the context of rail networks: the researchers found that a colony of slime mold essentially reproduces the configuration of existing rail networks when food is distributed in a configuration mirroring major cities (Tero et al 2010; link, link). Here is the experiment based on the configuration of cities around Tokyo:



After about a day of growth, the slime mold has established a network of tunnels connecting the food supplies, and this network looks strikingly similar to the configuration of Japanese railroads in the region.

So here's the question for consideration here: what if we attempted to model the system of population, disease, and the pharmaceutical industry by representing pharma as the slime organism and the disease space as a set of disease populations with different profitability characteristics? Would we see a major concentration of pharma slime around a few high-frequency, high profit disease-drug pairs? Would we see substantial underinvestment in pharma slime on low frequency low profit "orphan" disease populations? And would we see hyper-concentrations around diseases whose incidence is responsive to marketing and diagnostic standards?

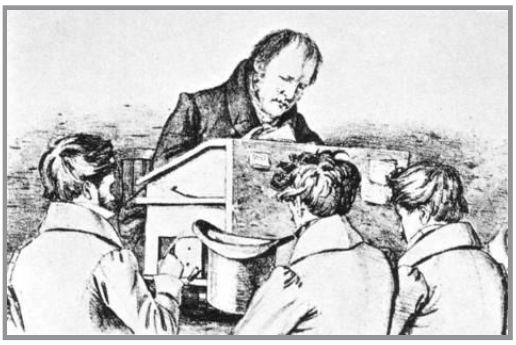
I'm just speculating here, but I'm guessing that a Petri dish designed with these characteristics would produce the outcome described in the books included in the Angell reviews: a hyper-concentration of the slime organism around the "plastic" diseases that display positive feedback from marketing to incidence. Essentially the model would suggest that the pharma industry "grows" into the space of emerging diseases, making investments in research and marketing that allow for growth of revenues around the disease segments of the population.

I suppose that this thought experiment simply supports a dismal but familiar finding: that profit-maximizing firms will aggressively seek out new sources of profits; that they will be particularly interested in opportunities where the possibility exists of strategically increasing the demand market; and that they will find creative ways of inducing other actors to behave in ways that enhance their business interests. Unfortunately, in this case the business optimal outcome seems to have very negative consequences for public health. And it seems to cast some doubt on the ability of professional ethics and conflict of interest policies to keep the medical profession as a whole on the track of placing the patient's health as the highest priority.

(I think this thought experiment could be recast as an agent-based simulation, with similar results.)

What is the philosophy of history?

Sunday, June 26, 2011



When philosophers have written about “history”, they have often had different and even incompatible goals in mind. One tradition of philosophers, generally pre-twentieth century and generally from continental Europe, have wanted to contribute to answers to large questions about the nature of history as it presented itself over time as a compound of individuals, actions, nations, and civilizations: Does history have a direction? Does history have meaning? Is there a plan to history? Do civilizations rise and fall? Is materialism or idealism the better framework for understanding the movement of history? G. W. F. Hegel, for example, wanted to discover the underlying rationality within history. This approach to the study of history is often referred to as “speculative” or “substantive.”

A second group of philosophers, also largely continental, were inspired by the strong connections that exist between individual human life and expression, and large collective events and processes. The theory of hermeneutics attempts to provide an intellectual framework for analyzing and interpreting meaningful human expressions – poetry, actions, thoughts, and motives. Hermeneutic philosophers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries extended this approach to efforts to understand large historical events and processes in similar terms. Wilhelm Dilthey was one of the early exponents of the hermeneutic approach to human affairs. Hermeneutic philosophy of history seeks to understand events, movements, and processes in terms of the meanings that they embody and the meaningful relations they bear to other historical events.

Another group of philosophers, often in the twentieth century and often English-speaking, have focused their attention on the nature of historical knowledge rather than the concrete events of history. Analytic philosophers have wanted to clarify the grounds of historical knowledge and explanation. Issues such as the nature of narrative, the role of general laws in historical explanations, and the objectivity or subjectivity of historical judgment have been taken up by Arthur Danto, Patrick Gardner, Carl Hempel, and others. This approach is sometimes referred to as “analytical”; more generally, we might say that it is epistemological and methodological.

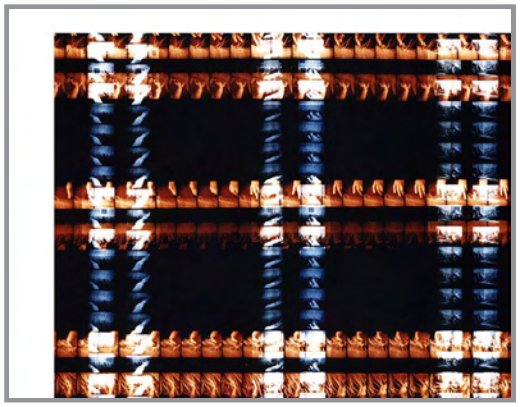
New questions have emerged since World War II within the discourse of philosophy about “history” by philosophers, both analytical and continental. These new areas were stimulated, first, by the atrocities of the Holocaust, and the effort to make sense of this horrendous tear in the fabric of modern civilization. How are we to make sense of the Holocaust? How should we remember it? A second source of new thinking about history by contemporary philosophers is the linguistic and semantic turn that many of the human sciences took in the 1970s and 1980s (Rorty, 1967). A cohort of writers in the 1980s and 1990s undertook to approach history from the point of view of narrative and meaning. In some ways this was a return to the hermeneutic approach to human affairs of the nineteenth century; but it was also original in that it brought new thinking from the philosophy of language into the debate.

There is a valid but limited place for metaphysical research in the area of the philosophy of history. Fundamentally, we need to have a clearer specification of the meaning of key concepts that we use in analyzing and describing historical events and structures. Philosophers can help in probing and refining these concepts. These ontological questions are really about our conceptual schemes rather than about substantive historical facts. What presuppositions are we making when we divide history into epochs or regions? Does it make sense to refer to civilizations as a whole? So we need a more explicit theory of historical ontology, and the philosophy of history can help to provide such a theory. What we cannot hope to achieve is an apriori discovery of the reality of history – its meaning, direction, or foundational causes. This is not a limitation of our ability to discover historical truths, but rather a reflection of the fact that there are no general answers to these questions at all. Kant's critique of substantive metaphysics is decisive here.

As this summary suggests, there are many unanswered questions that philosophers can usefully pose to the discipline and facts of history. For this reason it is timely to consider some new approaches to the philosophy of history. The past decade has seen several contributions that are difficult to classify according to the distinctions provided above. They are analytic but not reductionist; they pay attention to narrative but nonetheless attribute rational warrant to historical accounts; and they are respectful towards the actual practices of gifted historians, rather than assuming that the philosophy of history can proceed as a separate philosophical discourse. Significantly, new contributions to this subject come from philosophers, literary critics, anthropologists, and historians. Perhaps this is a clue for how the field might most productively move forward: by incorporating several philosophical perspectives, by raising new questions, and by reaching across the human sciences as well as philosophy to find some innovative new answers.

Microfoundationalism

Tuesday, June 28, 2011



detail: Lynn Cazabon photo

The philosophy of social science encompasses several important tasks, and key among them is to provide theories of social ontology and social explanation. What is the nature of social entities? What is needed in order to substantiate a claim of social causation? What constitutes an acceptable social explanation?

The concept of microfoundations is relevant to each of these domains. A microfoundation is:

a specification of the ways in which the properties and structure of a higher-level entity are produced by the activities and properties of lower-level entities.
In the case of the social sciences, this amounts to:

a specification of the ways that properties, structural features, and causal powers of a social entity are produced and reproduced by the actions and dispositions of socially situated individuals.
This concept is relevant to social ontology in this way. Social entities are understood to be compositional; they are assemblages constituted and maintained by the mentality and actions of individuals. So providing an account of the microfoundations of a structure or causal connection -- say a paramilitary organization or of the causal connection between high interest rates and the incidence of alcohol abuse -- is a specification of the composition of the social-level fact. It is a description of the agent-level relationships and patterns of behavior that cohere in such a way as to bring about the higher-level structure or causal relationship.

The concept of microfoundations is directly relevant to explanation. If we assert a causal or explanatory relation between one social entity or condition and another, we must be prepared to offer a credible sketch of the ways in which this influence is conveyed through the mentalities and actions of individuals.

Much turns, however, on what precisely we mean to require of a satisfactory explanation: a full specification of the microfoundations in every case, or a sketch of the way that a given social-level process might readily be embodied in individual-level activities. If we go with the second version, we are licensing a fair amount of autonomy for the social-level explanation; whereas if we go with the first version, we are tending towards a requirement of reductionism from higher to lower levels in every case. I am inclined to interpret the requirement in the second way; it doesn't seem necessary to disaggregate every claim like "organizational deficiencies at the Bhopal chemical plant caused the devastating chemical spill" onto specific individual-level activities. We understand pretty well, in a generic way, what the microfoundations of organizations are, and it isn't necessary to provide a detailed account in order to have a satisfactory explanation.

The ontological position associated with microfoundationalism falls in the general area of methodological individualism and reductionism, in that it insists on the compositional nature of the social. However, there is a recursive aspect of the theory that distinguishes it from strict reductionism. The individuals to which microfoundations are traced are not a-social; rather, their psychology, beliefs and motives are constituted and shaped by the social forces they and others constitute. So the microfoundational account of the workings of a paramilitary organization may well refer to the locally embodied effects of that organization on the current psychology of the members of the organization; and their behavior in turn reproduces the organization in the next iteration. This is why I prefer the idea of methodological localism over that of methodological individualism (link).

The theory of microfoundations is also very consistent with the idea of social mechanisms. When we ask about the microfoundations of a social process, we are asking about the mechanisms that exist at a lower level that create and maintain the social process.

One way of motivating the theory of microfoundations is to observe that it is a prescription against "magical thinking" in the social realm. There is no "social stuff" that has its own

persistent causal and structural characteristics; rather, all social phenomena are constituted by patterns of behavior and thought of populations of individual human beings. And likewise, social events and structures do not have inherently social causal properties; rather, the causal properties of a social structure or event are constituted by the patterns of behavior and thought of the individuals who constitute them and nothing else.

The theory of supervenience is often invoked to express the idea that social entities and properties are constituted by individuals. (Jaegwon Kim is the primary creator of the theory of supervenience in the philosophy of mind; Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays.) This basic idea is expressed as:

No difference at level N without some difference at lower level K.

The advantage of the theory of supervenience is that it provides a way of recognizing the compositional nature of higher-level entities without presupposing explanatory reductionism from one level to the lower level.

The explicit idea of microfoundations appears to have been first developed in the domain of microeconomics; there it referred to the necessity of deriving macroeconomic phenomena from the premises of rational economic behavior (Weintraub, Microfoundations: The Compatibility of Microeconomics and Macroeconomics). (Here is an interesting article by van den Bergh and Gowdy on recent analysis of the microfoundations debate in economics.) Maarten Jansen describes the theory of microfoundations in economics in his entry in The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics and the Law:

The quest to understand microfoundations is an effort to understand aggregate economic phenomena in terms of the behavior of individual economic entities and their interactions. These interactions can involve both market and non-market interactions. The quest for microfoundations grew out of the widely felt, but rarely explicitly stated, desire to stick to the position of methodological individualism ..., and also out of the growing uneasiness among economists in the late 1950s and 1960s with the co-existence of two subdisciplines, namely microeconomics and macroeconomics, both aiming at explaining features of the economy as a whole. Methodological individualism, as explained in the entry on the topic, is the view according to which proper explanations in the social sciences are those that are grounded in individual motivations and their behavior.

The idea of microfoundations is now important in many areas of the social sciences, including especially sociology and political science. Particularly important were ideas formulated by James Coleman in Foundations of Social Theory. Coleman doesn't use the term "microfoundations" explicitly in this work, but his analysis of the relationship between the macro and the micro seems to imply a requirement of providing microfoundations as a condition on good explanations in the social sciences. The Coleman boat (link) seems to be a graphical way of representing the microfoundations of a macro-level fact.

A second mode of explanation of the behavior of social systems entails examining processes internal to the system, involving its component parts, or units at a level below that of the system. The prototypical case is that in which the component parts are individuals who are members of the social system. In other cases the component parts may be institutions within the system or subgroups that are part of the system. In all cases the analysis can be seen as moving to a lower level than that of the system, explaining the behavior of the system by recourse to the behavior of its parts. This mode of explanation is not uniquely quantitative or uniquely qualitative, but may be either. ... I call [this] the internal analysis of system behavior. (2)

Coleman's view here is complex, though, and isn't entirely unambiguous. Consider this qualification a few pages later, which refers unexpectedly to "emergent phenomena" and intermediate levels of explanatory mechanisms between the macro and the micro:

Those readers familiar with debates and discussions on methodological holism and methodological individualism will recognize that the position taken above on explanation is a variant of methodological individualism. But it is a special variant. No assumption is made that the explanation of systemic behavior consists of nothing more than individual actions and orientations, taken in aggregate. The interaction among individuals is seen to result in emergent phenomena at the system level, that is, phenomena that were neither intended nor predicted by the individuals. Furthermore, there is no implication that for a given purpose an explanation must be taken all the way to the individual level to be satisfactory. The criterion is instead pragmatic. (5)

Other more explicit advocates of the microfoundations principle are Jon Elster, John Roemer, Adam Przeworski, and other contributors to the theories of analytical Marxism (Analytical Marxism). Here is how I attempted to synthesize some of this thinking in 1994:

Marxist thinkers have argued that macro-explanations stand in need of microfoundations: detailed accounts of the pathways by which macro-level social patterns come about. These theorists have held that it is necessary to provide an account of the circumstsances of individual choice and action that give rise to aggregate patterns if macro-explanations are to be adequate. Thus in order to explain the policies of the capitalist state it is not sufficient to observe that this state tends to serve capitalist interests; we need to have an account of the processes through which state policies are shaped or controlled so as to produce this outcome. ("Microfoundations of Marxism," reprinted in D. Little, Microfoundations, Methods, and Causation, 4)

As noted in a prior post, the idea of microfoundations is also a core constituent of the methodology of analytical sociology (Peter Hedström, Dissecting the Social: On the Principles of Analytical Sociology).

In short, a fairly wide range of social science research today embraces the general idea of providing microfoundations for macro-level assertions. And this seems to be a very reasonable requirement, given what we know about how social entities, processes, and forces are composed.

The safety net in Michigan

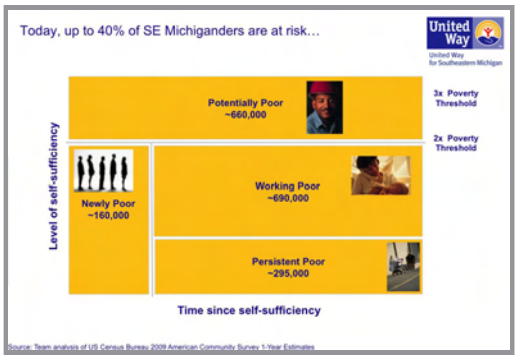
Wednesday, June 29, 2011

Poverty in the United States has increased measurably in the past ten years, and this is particularly visible in the state of Michigan. (Here is a webpage provided by the Michigan Department of Human Services with some basic information on poverty in the state.) State departments of human services and non-profit organizations alike are being stretched by the need for poverty-related services -- food assistance, childcare, heating assistance, job training, and the like. So how good a job are we doing to ensure that poor people in the United States have reasonable access to the necessities of life?

In general, the answer to the question seems mostly to be -- not a very good job. The amount of money available for services to the poor is under pressure in most state legislatures. The processes through which low-income people need to pass in order to apply for assistance are confusing and needlessly lengthy. And the "front doors" for providers are highly decentralized, so the potential recipient of assistance needs to

conduct a lengthy search simply to find a possible source.

The United Way of Southeast Michigan is a highly capable social service agency that is genuinely committed to helping to improve the situation of Michigan's poorest residents (link). Here is a UWSEM report on the status of basic needs of the population in Michigan. The report is worth reviewing in detail. One point stands out very starkly -- a strikingly high percentage of the state's population falls in the status of poor or near-poor. The report provides a very legible description of the composition of the 40% of Michigan's population who are "at-risk":



This is a truly sobering statistic: two out of five residents of Michigan fall within the groups of the persistent poor, working poor, newly poor, and potentially poor.

One of the United Way's current priorities is to do a careful review of the system of assistance as a whole in the state. Generally, their finding is that resources, agencies, and strategies are highly fragmented in the state, so it is easy to guess that the provision of services is somewhat sporadic and inefficient. More importantly, their analysis shows that over a billion dollars of federal assistance to individuals are left unused year after year -- at a time when the need for assistance is greater than it has ever been. (This report should appear on the UWSEM website sometime soon.)

It's worth looking closely at the data compiled by UWSEM. Over $34 billion are expended on assistance to the poor in Michigan, with over 55% of the funds coming from Federal sources ($19.9 billion). The state's own resources represent roughly half that amount ($9.4 billion). Foundations and private resources make up the rest. Second, these $34 billion are expended through a large number of state agencies -- treasury, school aid, public housing, the department of human services, etc. And finally, the funds flowing from these multiple agencies then re-aggregate at the level of the users in a variety of basic categories of need: workforce development, housing, family preservation, food, cash assistance, and healthcare.

There are several key conclusions that emerge from the UWSEM analysis. One is that this is a process that is plainly designed for providers and auditors, not users. The idea that the system of social services should be streamlined in such a way as to allow maximum access for eligible residents is clearly not the guiding design principle.

A second point is that the system is needlessly complex for the user. It should be possible to streamline services and application processes in such a way as to increase the impact of available resources for eligible people.

A third point is that it should be possible to use the Internet to significantly increase the accessibility and transparency of the system. It should be possible for the poor person to enter a single "portal"; enter his/her information into a database; and find out on one screen what programs and benefits for which he/she is eligible.

In short, it would appear that there are significant opportunities for public "safety net" providers in Michigan to increase the efficiency and reach of their services with some intelligent redesign of the delivery systems. And we certainly need to make sure that the billion dollars of unexpended federal benefits find their way to eligible citizens.

(Here is a nice example of how universities and communities can work together to address the issues of poverty that their region faces (link). This collaboration between Western Michigan University and various organizations in Kalamazoo, Michigan is aimed at providing easy access to data about poverty and well-being in Kalamazoo that can help guide programs and resources towards effective reduction of poverty.)

Income inequalities and social ills

Sunday, July 03, 2011

According to Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson in The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger, income inequalities in a society are a source of a variety of social problems in that society, almost without regard to the absolute level of income in the society.
Their basic measure of inequality across countries and states in the United States is the ratio of income from the top quintile to the bottom quintile. (They also sometimes make use of the Gini coefficient.) The quintile income ratio varies across OECD countries from a low of about 4 (Japan) to a high of just under 10 (Singapore). The United States has the second highest ratio, at about 8.5 (figure 2.1).

In order to empirically evaluate the impact of a society's income inequalities on social well-being, they construct an Index of Health and Social Problems for each country and US state. The index incorporates --

- Level of trust
- Mental illness
- Life expectancy and infant mortality
- Obesity
- Children's educational performance
- Teenage births
- Homicides
- Imprisonment rates
- Social mobility

These ten factors are all weighted equally. Here is their most basic graph plotting the index against income inequality among OECD countries (figure 2.2):

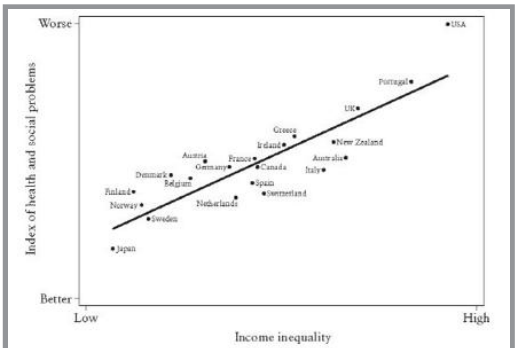


Figure 2.2 *Health and social problems are closely related to inequality among rich countries.*

A similar but looser relationship obtains between these variables for US states; figure 2.4. And they find similar relationships between the UNICEF index of child wellbeing and income inequality; figure 2.7. So their most basic claim is well substantiated: there is a strong negative relationship between social inequalities and social well-being. Most importantly, they maintain that this relationship is causal.

This is indeed a striking hypothesis. Their argument is not that material deprivation causes social harms and high inequality societies have more material deprivation; it is rather that the degree of inequality is itself an important cause of social harms. Further, they maintain that these relationships persist in affluent societies. And they are explicit in accepting that this implies a causal relationship between a structural feature of society and individual outcomes (chap 3).

Some of the most interesting content in the book comes in the form of specific empirical analysis of some of the kinds of social malaise that are rising in society, and some of the mechanisms through which inequalities contribute to this rise. Chapter 3 takes on stress and anxiety. Figure 3.1 documents a generally rising level of anxiety among men and women college students from the 1950s to the 1990s. The authors relate this rise to an increase in social anxieties: feelings of inadequacy, friendlessness, and separation from community (kl 745). And these features of social relationship, they believe, derive from rising hierarchy and inequality.

Another important mechanism of social harm is the erosion of trust that modern societies have experienced. This too the authors attribute to rising hierarchy and inequality and the pronounced separation this creates among members of society. Figure 4.1 illustrates this relationship.

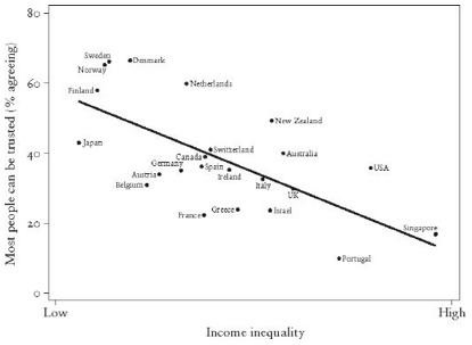


Figure 4.1 *The percentage of people agreeing that 'most people can be trusted' is higher in more equal countries.*

Similar analysis and findings are presented for mental illness (chapter 5), health and life expectancy (chapter 6), obesity (chapter 7), educational performance (chapter 8), teen births (chapter 9), violence (chapter 10), rates of incarceration (chapter 11), and social mobility (chapter 12).

The data presented here are very striking: a standard set of scatter plots demonstrating a positive relationship between inequality and a variety of social harms. In each case the authors attempt to provide an account of a mechanism that plausibly leads from inequality to the higher incidence of the social harm.

It strikes me, though, that all the mechanisms amount to the same sociological idea: that extreme inequality leads to a set of psychological conditions that in turn produce the harm in question. They emphasize status differences on the one hand (inequality) and friendship on the other (equality) as powerful determinants of social well-being and harm (kl loc 2927).

Much of this argument seems to come down to some familiar hypotheses in sociology: that anomie is a social feature that produces social and individual harms (Durkheim) and that the strands of community are favorable to human wellbeing (Tonnies, Putnam). Inequalities are toxic, according to this line of argument, because they undermine the strands of social relationships and community among individuals; they produce a situation of rising anomie and separation among individuals in society. Societies with lower inequalities allow higher levels of trust and community to persist and this gives rise to fewer social problems.

It is an appealing argument, but in the end I find it monocausal and therefore less convincing than the authors would wish. I'm finding it to be "Durkheim on epidemiological steroids". Even if we accept the point that reciprocity and mutual respect are key components of a society's health, there are other factors that undermine these besides economic inequality -- racism, ethnic hatred, sexism, and other kinds of "othering" besides income inequality. I appreciate the book. But I'd like a more multicausal analysis of the findings.

It is also interesting to ask whether the authors think there is a tipping point when it comes to inequalities. Is there a level of income inequality where inequalities are a non-factor when it comes to the social ills that they highlight? Is the level of inequality current

in Sweden just fine as a foundation for social cohesion and reciprocity? Or is the situation more analogous to exposure to second-hand smoke: every level creates a risk? In other words, is it only high inequality societies that create these harms, or does every society north of Babeuf do so to some extent?

More on The Spirit Level

Wednesday, July 06, 2011

There are quite a few interesting comments on my earlier post on *The Spirit Level* on Economist's View. I can't respond in detail to all of them, but here are a few additional thoughts.

A few commentators seem to think I'm unsympathetic to the book, which isn't accurate. So let me be more direct in my assessment of The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger. I find the empirical data presented to be highly suggestive and interesting. Pickett and Wilkinson demonstrate simple trend relationships between the income inequality score of a set of countries and states and a series of social problems. I myself do not have reason to doubt their statistical methods, though other critics have done so, including Lane Kenworthy in a balanced and reasonable critique in 2010. What troubles me about the central argument of the book is what I find to be a flatly unconvincing hypothesis, that the psychological states created in a country's population by status conflict and income inequality suffice to explain the variation in health outcomes for individuals in these societies. There are many determinants of a person's satisfaction with his/her life besides income inequality; and there are many social factors that influence health outcomes for individuals besides their perception of income inequalities and the level of stress that those inequalities create in them.

In my view, a good causal explanation requires an analysis of the mechanisms that bring about the relation between cause and effect. I find only one mechanism underlying their accounts of this relationship – essentially a psychological mechanism linking the individual's perception of income inequalities to health and behavioral outcomes. They flesh this out with a description of the physiology of stress induced by rising income inequalities leading to rising mental illness; perceived status differences leading to decline in trust; stress based on perceived inequalities leading to increased "comfort eating" and obesity; status competition leads to increased violence; etc. This is what I mean by monocausal; there is just one causal process at the heart of their analysis.

The variety of causal mechanisms that seem pertinent to me in consideration of their data include several different kinds. First, as I mentioned in my post, there are serious and systemic sources of separation between individuals within societies that have nothing to do with income inequalities and that might be expected to have the same kinds of psychological and physiological effects on individuals: racism, ethnic hatred, sexism, economic conflicts that do not have to do with inequalities, and so on. For example, in the United States there are credible efforts to explain racial disparities in health outcomes on the basis of the effects on individuals living in circumstances of endemic racial discrimination and prejudice. (See, for example, Arline T. Geronimus, ScD, Margaret Hicken, MPH, Danya Keene, MAT, and John Bound, PhD, ""Weathering" and Age Patterns of Allostatic Load Scores Among Blacks and Whites in the United States"; link.) These effects are unrelated to income inequalities and derive instead from another aspect of social separation. So race rather than income appears to explain this set of health disparities. So perhaps this implies that if we had a way of measuring a "composite

index of non-economic social separation" we might have a similar set of graphs, with societies with a lot of racism and ethnic hatred at the upper right quadrant of the graph. I don't suppose that this index would be highly correlated with the quintile-quintile ratio that the authors use as their proxy for economic inequality.

Second, there are structural influences on a population's health outcomes that do not derive from the degree of income inequalities that exist in a society but are nonetheless highly influential on health status of the population. For example, the quality and accessibility of rural healthcare has a large influence on the health status of rural people; the accessibility of health insurance to inner city residents has a large influence; the targeting of food marketing in favor of "comfort foods" has a large potential influence on the whole population; and differential treatments and discrimination within health systems for different populations of patients have large potential effects. None of these factors derive from the ratio of quintile incomes – the degree of income inequality – in the society; they are independent causes of differential health outcomes across sub-populations.

I'm not an expert on statistical reasoning; but of course every reader knows that evidence of correlation between two variables A and B is not conclusive evidence of a causal relation existing between those variables. There may be a common factor that causes variation in both A and B, or the correlation may be flatly spurious. It is necessary to frame a credible and testable hypothesis about how the putative causal condition leads to the putative effect. On the other hand, finding that a proposed mechanism is not in fact valid does not establish that there is not a causal connection between the variables; it only mandates that we then search further for a mechanism that does in fact obtain. Only if we are ultimately convinced that there is no possible mechanism would we come to the conclusion that the correlation is spurious. So my position in the posting under discussion is simply that the authors have not established a mechanism linking income inequalities to bad health outcomes that satisfies me.

One can be opposed to extreme and rising income inequalities in one's society – as many of the readers of *The Spirit Level* are – without being convinced of the particular causal connections that the authors assert. And this matters quite a bit; if we want to reform society, we need to have well grounded theories of the causal processes that lead to the outcomes we want to reduce or avoid.

Dilthey on the human sciences

Friday, July 08, 2011

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) maintained that the human sciences were inherently distinct from the natural sciences in that the former depend on the understanding of meaningful human actions, while the latter depend on causal explanation of physical events. Human life is structured and carried out through meaningful action and symbolic expressions. Dilthey maintains that the intellectual tools of hermeneutics—the interpretation of meaningful texts—are suited to the interpretation of human action and history. The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences takes the hermeneutic approach to understanding history a step further by exploring the idea of "objectification" – the specific ways in which persons establish their *persona* in the world through concrete actions and relations.

Here is how he introduces his approach in *TheFormation of the Historical World*:

The human sciences form an epistemic nexus that strives to attain objectively engaged and objectively valid conceptual cognition of the interconnectedness of lived experiences in the human-historical-social world. The history of the human sciences shows a constant struggle with the difficulties encountered here. ... The investigation of the possibility of such objective conceptual cognition forms the foundation of the human sciences. In the following, I present some contributions to such a foundation. (23)

The human-historical world as it confronts us in the human sciences is not a copy, as it were, of a reality existing outside it. The cognitive process cannot produce such a copy. It is and remains bound to its means of intuiting, of understanding, and of conceptual thinking. Nor do the human sciences want to produce such a copy. Rather, they refer what happens and what has happened -- the unique, the contingent, the momentary -- to a system of value and meaning. As it progresses, conceptual cognition seeks to penetrate this system ever more deeply. It becomes ever more objective in its grasp, without ever being able to surpass its own essence, namely, it can experience what is only through re-feeling and re-construing, through connecting and separating, through abstract systems and a nexus of concepts. (23-24)

Such conceptual cognition of the processes themselves in which the human sciences develop is at the same time the condition for the understanding of their *history*. On that basis, one recognizes the relation of the particular human sciences to the coexistence and sequence of lived experiences upon which they are founded. (24)

And one last point becomes intelligible. The development of the human sciences must be accompanied by a logical-epistemological self-reflection, that is, by the philosophical consciousness of the way in which the intuitive-conceptual system of the human-socio-historical world is formed on the basis of the lived experience of what has happened. (24)
These are dense, difficult paragraphs, and they are worth spending time on unravelling. What is Dilthey saying here? What is the philosophy of society, history, and cognition that he is expressing?

The first sentence defines two domains: the knowledge system of the human sciences and the dense reality of the social world. Through the knowledge systems of the human sciences we arrive at representations of the social-historical world. The social-historical world is characterized in terms of the inter-connected lived experience of human beings; this implies communication, interaction, and subjectivity as crucial features of social life. The knowledge systems of the human sciences are characterized as being "objective" and "conceptual". The objectivity in question has to do with the fact that there is a reality associated with social life that serves as the object of knowledge; the conceptuality has to do with the fact that it is necessary to arrive at categories in thought in terms of which to organize and represent that reality.

This interpretation of the first sentence sounds rather Lockean or Cartesian; knowledge represents the world. The first sentence of the second paragraph, however, unsettles that naive realism, because here Dilthey insists upon the distinctness of representation and reality. Our knowledge of the social world is not a "copy"; it is an abstract representation. This observation seems to be analogous to the obvious point that a verbal description of an apple is not similar to the apple; rather it is a syntactic construction that attributes characteristics to the features of the apple. The next several sentences in the second paragraph seem to change the subject slightly; Dilthey distinguishes between "copying or representing" and "interpreting and locating in terms of a meaning system." This point is understandable in terms of the hermeneutic method: discover the meaningful

relationships among elements of the text (or ensemble of actions). The "re-feeling and re-construing" seems to be an expression of the method of *verstehen*: to reconstruct the meaning of an action by placing oneself as fully in the position of the actor as possible. And the final two sentences seem to suggest a refinement of knowledge through the discovery of finer detail in the interconnections among events and their connections to a system of meaning in the world of lived experience.

There seem to be three high-level features of this conception: first, that human reality is relational and meaningful; second, that the knowledge of human reality involves refined interpretation of actions and interactions in terms of the meanings attributed to them by the actors; and third, that the knowledge enterprise itself is a meaningful activity that requires critical self-reflection. And, finally, there is a respect in which Dilthey's method is empirical rather than idealist. The objectivity that he seeks in these paragraphs seems to have at least in part to do with the idea of evidence-driven discovery.

W. H. Walsh's philosophy of history

Tuesday, July 12, 2011

English-speaking philosophers have often made a hash of the philosophy of history. Either they have had such disdain for continental philosophy that they could not get their minds around the thoughts of a Hegel or a Dilthey, or they became pre-occupied with certain minor linguistic or logical issues and therefore couldn't get to the more serious problems. W. H. Walsh was a surprising exception in the British environment of the 1950s. His Philosophy of History. An Introduction, first published in 1951 and revised in 1960, is an open-minded and very well grounded effort to provide an in-depth presentation of the field.

The book attempts to treat both major aspects of the philosophy of history: the nature of historical knowledge and the possibility of gaining “metaphysical” knowledge about history. An Oxford philosopher evidently trained in modern philosophy, Walsh was strongly influenced by Collingwood and was well aware of the European idealist tradition of philosophical thinking about history, including Rickert, Dilthey, and Croce, and he treats this tradition in a serious way. He draws the distinction between these traditions along the lines of “critical” and “speculative” philosophy of history. Walsh’s goal for the book is ambitious; he hopes to propose a framework within which the main questions about history can be addressed, including both major traditions. I find the book to be an excellent piece of work on the subject, and very enjoyable to work through. Here are a couple of large groups of questions that he poses in the book in order to formulate a structure for thinking about the philosophy of history.

I
Walsh lays out the field of the philosophy of history along the following lines.

First, he offers some ideas about the subject matter and knowledge content of history. He describes the goal of historical inquiry in these terms:

[The historian] aims ... at a reconstruction of the past which is both intelligent and intelligible. (32)

What every historian seeks for is not a bare recital of unconnected facts, but a smooth narrative in which every event falls as it were into its natural place and belongs to an

intelligible whole. (33)
The historian is presented with a number of events, actions, and developments during a period. How do they hang together? The process of cognition through which the historian makes sense of a set of separate historical events Walsh refers to as "***colligation***":

Colligation: to locate a historical event in a larger historical process in terms of which it makes sense (23). This process of reasoning serves to establish the "inner connections between certain historical events" (24).
Walsh fundamentally accepts Collingwood's most basic premise: that history concerns conscious human action. Collingwood's slogan was that "history is the science of the mind," and Walsh appears to accept much of this perspective. So the key intellectual task for the historian, on this approach, is to reconstruct the reasons or motives that actors had at various points in history (and perhaps the conditions that led them to have these reasons and motives). This means that the tools of interpretation of meanings and reasons are crucial for the historian -- much as the hermeneutic philosophers in the German tradition had argued.

II
One of the central questions that Walsh identifies is whether history is a part of "science," or whether it is a *sui generis* kind of knowledge. Here is Walsh's summary definition of the key features of a field of scientific knowledge:

We may sum up the results of this brief attempt to bring out the main features of the common conception of science and scientific knowledge as follows. We apply the term "science" to knowledge which (i) is methodically arrived at and systematically related; (ii) consists of, or at least includes, a body of general truths; (iii) enables us to make successful predictions and so to control the future course of events, in some measure at least; (iv) is objective, in the sense that it is such as every unprejudiced observer ought to accept if the evidence were put before him, whatever his personal predilections or private circumstances. (36)
And he argues that history satisfies (i); probably not (ii); not (iii); and qualified yes to (iv). In other words, according to Walsh, history is not a science in the paradigmatic sense of physics or chemistry.

If history is not "science," then what kind of knowledge is it? The main alternative is what Walsh characterizes as the idealist conception of historical knowledge. Here is what Walsh refers to as the "***standard idealist account of historical knowledge***":

History, because it offers a body of knowledge methodically arrived at, is a science; but it is a science of a peculiar kind. It is not an abstract but a concrete science, and it terminates not in general but in individual truths. 43

Nature we must look at from the outside, but thoughts and experiences are accessible to us from within. We can grasp them in a unique way because we can re-think or re-live them, imaginatively putting ourselves in the place of the persons, past or present, who first thought or experienced them. (44)

The idealist theory of history, we may begin by remarking, consists in essentials of two propositions. **First**, that history is, in a sense which remains to be specified, properly concerned with human thoughts and experiences. And **second** that, just because of this, historical understanding is of a unique and immediate character. (48)
These characteristics recall German historicism and interpretivism. (See this post on the

methodological crisis in German thought around 1900; link.)

III

Walsh suggests that the philosophical content of the philosophy of history falls naturally into two different sorts of inquiry, parallel to the distinction between philosophy of nature and philosophy of science. The first has to do with metaphysical questions about the reality of history as a whole; the latter has to do with the epistemic issues that arise in the pursuit and formulation of knowledge of history. He refers to these approaches as "speculative" and "critical" aspects of the philosophy of history. And he attempts to formulate a view of what the key questions are for each approach.

Speculative philosophy of history asks --

- What is the meaning and purpose of the whole historical process? (25)
- Can we "write such an account of the detailed course of historical events that its 'true' significance and 'essential' rationality are brought out?" (25)
- What is the main driving factor in history? (Marx: economics) (26)
- "We may summarize by saying that if the philosopher can be said to have any specific concern with the course of history, it must be with that course as a whole, i.e., with the significance of the whole historical process." (27)

Walsh take a supportive or or at least agnostic position on these questions; he asserts that they are meaningful questions and can meaningfully be considered. This is in contrast to the position of the verificationist end of the analytic philosophy spectrum, which would deny the meaningfulness of these questions (and proposed answers).

Critical philosophy of history asks these four key sets of questions:

- "What sort of thing is history and how does it relate to other studies?" (16)
- Are there "facts" in history? What makes a historical statement "true"? (18)
- Is historical knowledge "objective"? (19) [historian's bias; rational decidability]
- What is the nature of a historical explanation? (22)

Critical philosophy is what we now refer to as "analytic" philosophy; it is the equivalent for history of what the philosophy of science is for nature.

The book is divided into two large discussions. Chapters II-V treat these four major groups of questions for critical philosophy of history. Chapters VI-VIII focus on the issues and theories offered by Kant, Herder, Hegel, and a few others on "metaphysical" questions about history.

IV

It is interesting to consider the intellectual origins of innovative philosophical insights. So where did this philosophical perspective and methodology come from in Walsh's own development? Walsh is plainly an expert on the history of modern philosophy, including especially German philosophy. This means that he has read, and thought about, the tradition from Kant and Schleiermacher and Herder to Hegel and Dilthey, and is able to make philosophical sense of their theories. He authored a number of articles on Kant, Hegel, and other German philosophers, and was the author of a book on Kant's metaphysics (Kant's Criticism of Metaphysics). What does this imply about his training and his development within British philosophy? He entered Merton College, Oxford, in roughly 1930, and took his first professional post as a philosopher at Merton College in 1947 through 1960. The bulk of his academic career was spent at the University of Edinburgh as a professor of logic and metaphysics. So here is the interesting question for me: to what extent was Walsh an analytic philosopher, in the mold of Russell, Ayer, and Ryle, and to what extent was he an idealist philosopher, in the pattern of Collingwood or

Bradley? (He refers several times to Ryle's The Concept of Mind.) His comments in the first chapter of the book suggest that he positions himself separately from both camps, while understanding the philosophical perspectives and methods of both. The evidence of this book suggests that he had an admirably pluralistic approach to the problems of philosophy.

Here is a bibliography of some of Walsh's published articles and reviews (link), and here is a reconsideration of his philosophy of history with regard to "facts and truth," published in 1977 in *History and Theory* as a review of Leon J. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing* (Austin, Texas and London, University of Texas Press, 1976). In the course of the review he considers how the discipline of analytic philosophy of history has developed since 1951, and he finds that three of his four questions have come in for very extensive discussion.

(I discovered along the way, an amazing bargain as a Kindle book, Marnie Hughes Warrington's Fifty Key Thinkers on History, Second Edition ($14). The book has 3000-word discussions of fifty important historians and philosophers -- Bloch, Collingwood, Dilthey, Hempel, Obsbawm, Oakeshott, Ricoeur, Vico -- and is well worth having on the Kindle. The essays are concise and informative, and they generally raise the big issues that were important to the various thinkers. There is an entry for Walsh as well.)

Idealist philosophy of history

Wednesday, July 13, 2011

In a previous post I commended W.H. Walsh's approach to the philosophy of history for Walsh's sympathetic effort to understand both traditions in the field, including what is called "speculative" philosophy of history (An Introduction to Philosophy of History). And Walsh is to be commended as well for his analytical ability to formulate and explicate these positions. This is in fact what we want from good historians of philosophy -- a detailed, text-based explication of the theories of difficult thinkers such as Hegel and Dilthey.

So the fact that Walsh offers an extended and nuanced interpretation of the efforts by Hegel, Herder, and Dilthey is to his credit as an exegetical scholar. But a key issue remains: do the positions that he explicates stand up to criticism? Is there in fact an intellectually credible place for speculative or idealist philosophy of history?

Walsh's position seems to be ambiguous on this question. On the one hand, he seems sometimes simply to be saying that there is a meaningful and philosophically intelligible program of thought associated with the speculative school -- which is consistent with an ultimate finding that this program fails in execution. And at other times he seems to go further and to assert that Hegel or Herder actually succeed in providing something of a substantive speculative philosophy of history that adds to our knowledge. Here is how he describes the intellectual work Hegel seeks to complete:

To accomplish this task the philosopher must take the results of empirical history as data, but it will not suffice for him merely to reproduce them. He must try to illuminate history by bringing his knowledge of the Idea, the formal articulation of reason, to bear upon it, striving, in a phrase Hegel uses elsewhere, to elevate empirical contents to the rank of necessary truth. (143)
Here is part of Walsh's assessment of the success of Hegel's project:

We must now try to estimate the adequacy of this defence. As regards the first point, it is surely successful. I have tried to stress throughout this chapter and the last the metaphysical and moral context within which speculative philosophy of history arose and was pursued. As we have seen, those engaged in these enquiries were concerned to divine the meaning or point or rationality behind the historical process as a whole, and they took up this question primarily because of its metaphysical relevance. (148)

My own assessment of idealist philosophy of history as presented by Walsh is measured. First, Walsh includes the centrality of action and ideas within history as a central tenet of idealist philosophy of history. This is Collingwood's central idea, and it seems to be Dilthey's as well. And in my opinion, it is a credible and empirically suitable hypothesis. Even if we conclude in the end that there is more to the historical process than deliberation and action, we can agree that action is a highly important component. And therefore an explication of the ways we investigate and interpret meanings and actions is a valid exercise. It falls in the category of epistemology, with a harmless bit of ontology stirred in (the constitutive importance of action).

But it must be emphasized that this perspective doesn't rule out other important insights into the ways that historical change takes place. In particular, we can also adhere to a limited materialism and structuralism in history, following Marx in holding that "men make their own history, but not in circumstance of their own choosing."

Second, I'm willing to be persuaded that there is a valid object of study for philosophers in the logical-semantic systems that thinkers like Hegel have created; and this extends to their philosophies of history. So the philosophical study and explication of metaphysical philosophy of history is a rationally acceptable enterprise as well.

What I have difficulty in accepting is that such a system can actually succeed. When Walsh writes that the goal of the historian and the philosopher is to tell the story of history in such a way that all the events make sense within the context of a master narrative -- when he proposes that the goal of the philosophy of history is to discover the real meaning and rationality of history as a whole -- I believe he is describing an effort that cannot succeed. There is no single unifying meaning or plan in history. And efforts to "colligate" events in such a way as to demonstrate that they contribute to such a plan seem to be unguided acts of creativity.

It is a commonplace that a series of actual events can be interpreted in different and apparently incompatible ways. We can attribute different motives to the actors and interpret their actions in such a way as to tell very different stories. (This is what we refer to as the "Rashomon effect".) In ordinary settings we can sometimes gain more evidence to choose between them. But when the choice is between interpretation frameworks at the highest level -- a materialist theory of history and a theory based on the unfolding of reason, for example -- we can't possibly provide empirical evidence that would choose between these all-encompassing hypotheses.

So I'm putting my bets on several ideas: yes to the validity of the hermeneutic program, yes to the interpretive task of understanding the great metaphysical systems from a philosophical point of view, and no to the idea of rationally justifiable interpretations of the whole of history. In Walsh's terms this means yes to a limited idealism, yes to the task of the history of philosophy, and no to the aspiration towards a substantive metaphysics of history.

And, indeed, Walsh seems eventually to come to a similar conclusion:

Our speculative philosophy of history must accordingly be a mixed one. In a way, we are forced to characterize it as utterly wrong-headed, since its programme amounts to an attempt to comprehend history from the outside; an attempt which, as Croce made clear long ago, cannot have any appeal for working historians. On the other hand, its most celebrated exponents certainly did make an important indirect contribution to the development of historical studies, as we have just tried to show. Whether there is any future in this type of philosophizing is another question, dependent, it would seem, on what chance there is of anyone's producing a tenable moral justification of the course history has taken. (153-54)

Food and water

Friday, July 15, 2011



It seems likely enough that one of the largest global security issues in the next fifty years will be food and water. There is a brewing food crisis underway already, with prices for staple grains rising world wide, and poor countries are beginning to experience the consequences. But a crisis in fresh water seems not too far in the future as well. Both these necessities depend on inherently scarce resources: arable land and large sources of fresh water. Along with energy, these goods are crucial to every person and every country in the world; and this in turn suggest the possibility of serious conflict over these resources in the future.

So what makes food and water a global security crisis? How does the possibility of dearth at the family level get transformed into the possibility of international conflict? Rising food prices create social unrest at the national level long before they lead to famine or malnutrition. International grain markets have been unstable over the past decade, with periodic upward spikes in prices. And grain riots have occurred as a consequence in a number of developing countries. This piece from DemocracyNow from 2008 documents demonstrations and riots across a range of African countries (link), with an interview with Raj Patel, author of Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System. Here are some updates from the Christian Science Monitor (link) and Energy Bulletin (link), including riots in Algeria in 2011.

The bottom line of several of these reports is fairly simple: the international trade system for grains, including especially rice and wheat, periodically undergoes abrupt and prolonged price rises, and these price increases have dire consequences for urban poor and middle class people in the developing world. When a large population mobilizes in protest against rising food prices, national governments are at risk. And this is where the

security risk comes in: when countries like Algeria or Morocco suffer serious instability, this has the potential of leading to international instability in the region as well.

Here is another, more distant cause of international tension that comes from the food crisis. Governments are interested in taking steps to provide greater food security for their own populations. And this sometimes involves taking actions that are harmful for other countries or for other populations. One symptom of the pressures mounting on the world food system is a widespread land grab of agricultural land around the developing world. Here is a report by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) on this issue (link) and a piece from the *Guardian* that describes the situation a few years ago (link), and here is a FastCompany story about China's land purchases (link). The FAO report documents a significant transfer of land ownership from developing countries to middle and upper income countries; this implies serious future constraints on the development possibilities available to those countries. And it suggests a new form of colonialism -- not direct governance, but substantial absentee ownership. This too has the potential for stimulating international conflict.

So what about water? Here is a recent report by the Council for Foreign Relations on the interconnected consequences of fresh water shortages in different parts of the world (link). In this piece the effects of China's water crisis are traced internationally. Here is an inventory of resources by GlobalPolicy on international conflicts over water (link); it is a long list of potential conflicts. Here is the introduction the editors offer:

As demand for water hits the limits of finite supply, potential conflicts are brewing between nations that share transboundary freshwater reserves. More than 50 countries on five continents might soon be caught up in water disputes unless they move quickly to establish agreements on how to share reservoirs, rivers, and underground water aquifers. The articles and analysis below examine international water disputes, civil disturbances caused by water shortages, and potential regulatory solutions to diffuse water conflict.
Chinese-financed dam projects in Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia indicate how high the stakes are. The great rivers of Southeast Asia now face a major of challenges as a result of plans for hydroelectric dams regulating flow to downriver users. Here is a piece from the *Irrawaddy* on the controversies surrounding the Myitsone Dam in northern Burma; link. Similar issues arise on the Mekong River and other great rivers in the region; link. The problems that have arisen with regard to dams in Southeast Asia include displacement of villages and towns, serious environmental damage, and significant lowering of water levels in many of the great rivers of the region. Here is a background piece in *Global Policy Forum* on China's massive expansion of hydropower; link.

These sources of conflict over the most basic necessities of life suggest the need for serious international planning today to arrive at equitable and sustainable regimes for resolving conflicts over resources in the future.

Academic freedom from Hofstadter to Dworkin

Wednesday, July 20, 2011



Academic freedom is a core value in American higher education. At certain times in our history it is a value that has been severely challenged, including especially during the McCarthy period of the 1950s. But what, precisely, does it entail?

One way of starting on this topic is to consider Richard Hofstadter's writings on the subject. Hofstadter was an historian who did an excellent job of tracking some deep currents in American political culture, including the powerful currents of progressivism, conservatism and paranoia that American politics have embodied over the past two centuries (The Progressive Movement: 1900-1915, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, The Paranoid Style in American Politics). (Here is an informative review of Hofstadter's biography in the *New York Times*.)

One of those currents on the progressive side is the idea of academic freedom. Hofstadter was a champion of the value of intellectual discourse in a democracy, and Development of Academic Freedom in United States (with Walter Metzger, 1955) was a direct response to the attack on the academic freedoms of professors of the McCarthy period beginning in 1953. (The first part of this book was later published as Academic Freedom in the Age of the College (1961), which covers the history of the freedoms assigned to colleges and universities from the European middle ages to American colleges at the time of the Civil War.) The project as a whole is an interesting one. It was funded by the American Academic Freedom Project at Columbia as a response to Joseph McCarthy's attack on universities and professors. Hofstadter's part of the project was to write a history of the evolving idea of academic freedom from the European middle ages through the American colleges of the 1860s. Walter Metzger's contribution analyzed the development of universities and academic freedom in America after the 1860s. Robert MacIver wrote a companion volume, Academic Freedom in Our Time.

What is lacking in *Development of Academic Freedom* is an analytical definition of the idea of academic freedom. Hofstadter is clearest in his defense of the idea of the independent intellectual, whether in the medieval Italian university of the nineteenth century American university. But neither he nor Metzger give a succinct definition of the concept of academic freedom itself.

So what is academic freedom? And how is it distinct from the other kinds of freedoms we have as either constitutional protections or fundamental human rights -- freedom of

association, freedom of speech and thought, freedom of expression? Fundamentally the idea is that the faculty of a university have a more extensive and specialized version of each of these fundamental freedoms, and that their exercise of their academic freedom cannot be used as a basis for dismissing them from their positions within the university. (This is the fundamental justification of the system of faculty tenure.) The employees of a corporation have a right of freedom of expression; but their conditions of employment may set limits on their exercise of that freedom. For example, there are numerous examples of people dismissed from their jobs in the private sector as a result of their comments about the company they work for. The idea of academic freedom is that professors have a special right to think, reason, and express their ideas about subjects relevant to their teaching and research responsibilities without fear of sanction by the universities (or legislatures) that employ them.

A second dimension of the idea of academic freedom is institutional. The university ought to be significantly autonomous from the power centers of society in its internal organization and decision-making. The curriculum, the subjects that are taught and researched, and the processes of appointment and review of faculty should be governed by the processes of the university rather than external powers in society. And most fundamentally, this aspect of the idea depends on the notion that the pursuit of truth should depend on the rational procedures of the disciplines of the sciences and humanities, not on the particular interests of powerful segments of society.

The classical justification for the idea of a form of academic freedom more extensive than the general freedoms that citizens enjoy qua citizens derives essentially from arguments expressed in the nineteenth century in John Stuart Mill's On Liberty: the pursuit of truth requires the untrammeled exploration of and expression of conflicting ideas, so that rational citizens can arrive at a better understanding of the issues. Here is how the 1940 AAUP statement puts the point (link):

Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. It carries with it duties correlative with rights.[1]
The argument is fundamentally utilitarian: Society is best served when it embodies a university system that is fundamentally committed to the the principles of academic freedom.

Here is the classic statement of academic freedom from the AAUP *Red Book*, drafted in 1940 (link).

Academic Freedom

1. *Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties; but research for pecuniary return should be based upon an understanding with the authorities of the institution.*
2. *Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject.[2] Limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment.[3]*
3. *College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and*

officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.[4]

This statement refers to three zones of academic freedom: in research and publication, in the classroom, and in "extramural expressions" by faculty members in the exercise of their ordinary citizens' rights of expression. Essentially this final point comes down to the idea that a faculty member has an ordinary citizen's right to express ideas that are unpopular to the public without punishment, "censorship or discipline" from the university for this expression. Noam Chomsky's opinions about the Vietnam War or the Gulf War were often unpopular with officials and the public; but his academic freedom assured that he would not be censored by his university employer. An employee of Northrup or Krogers would not have had the same protections. (Note that principle 3 is the most qualified of the three, and sets somewhat vague limits on the content and form of extra-mural utterances by the faculty member.)

The AAUP statement does not separately justify its inclusion of the extramural principle; but presumably it goes along these lines. Determining public policy in a democracy requires open debate among well informed citizens. Faculty members are well positioned to develop their knowledge and arguments about important public issues -- welfare reform, desegregation, war and peace. The public and the common good are well served by a set of arrangements that enable faculty members to speak their minds without fear of retaliation from their university employers. So it is felicitous to extend the protections of academic freedom to expressions by faculty members in the public sphere as well as within the university.

The philosopher of jurisprudence Ronald Dworkin provided a pivotal contribution to Louis Menand's The Future of Academic Freedom (1998). Dworkin argues that the issues surrounding academic freedom have shifted since the 1970s, and that they have as much to do with criticisms of faculty speech from the left as from the right. Here is how Dworkin describes the essentials of academic freedom:

We begin reinterpreting academic freedom by reminding ourselves of what, historically, it has been understood to require and not to require. It imposes two levels of insulation. First, it insulates universities, colleges, and other institutions of higher education from political institutions like legislatures and courts and from economic powers like large corporations. A state legislature has, of course, the right to decide which state universities to establish -- whether, for example, to add an agricultural or a liberal arts college to the existing university structure. But once political officials have established such an institution, fixed its academic character and its budget, and appointed its officials, they may not dictate how those they have appointed should interpret that character or who should teach what is to be taught, or how. Second, academic freedom insulates scholars from the administrators of their universities: university officials can appoint faculty, allocate budgets to departments, and in that way decide, within limits, what curriculum will be offered. But they cannot dictate how those who have been appointed will teach what has been decided will be taught. (183)

In addition to the utilitarian reasons for defending academic freedom mentioned above, Dworkin argues that there is also a principled ethical basis for these institutional protections based on his theory of "ethical individualism".

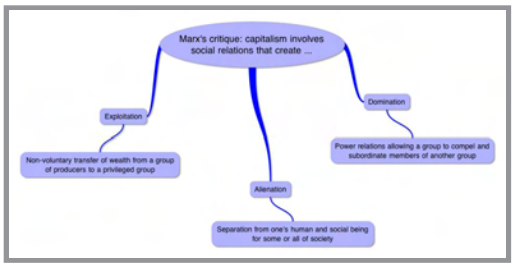
It seems relatively clear that academic freedom is a fragile value that depends substantially on the willingness of the public to recognize its crucial role in securing democratic progress, and legislatures and elected officials who are prepared to resist the inclination to narrow its scope. And it also seems right that Hofstadter's central intuitions about universities are still the strongest justification for the defense of academic freedom: the integrity of intellectuals and scholars seeking and debating the truth and the contribution they can make to a civil democracy. Here is how Robert MacIver puts this point in *Academic Freedom in Our Time*:

The search for knowledge, honestly undertaken, is a moral discipline. With the pursuit of this discipline goes the liberation from intolerance. . . Thus the intellectual mission of the university becomes also a moral one. Men sensitive to experience may learn the lesson in other ways, but the institution of learning is a major training ground. . . . Not knowledge itself but the free search for and the free communication of knowledge distinguishes the open mind from the closed mind, and the open society from the closed society.... The attack on academic freedom is an attack on all these values. (261-262.)

Here is a review of Hofstadter and Metzger, Development of Academic Freedom in United States as well as MacIver, Academic Freedom in Our Time. Here is an article in the *Journal of Philosophy* on MacIver's book, including a fascinating letter by John Dewey to the New York Times in 1949 on the subject of academic freedom. And here is an AAUP piece in *Academe* on what it regards as a different kind of threat to academic freedom -- from commercial and corporate interests.

Marx's critique

Friday, July 22, 2011



Marx was a critic above all else. His most comfortable intellectual stance was criticism -- most of the subtitles of his works involve the word "critique". He was, of course, a critic of other thinkers --Proudhon, Smith, Bakunin, for example. And here, the key to criticism is the unearthing of indefensible intellectual presuppositions. But even more importantly, he was a critic of the society he observed around him. The key here is to uncover systemic features of a given society that are fundamentally inconsistent with important human values. His earliest social criticism took its aim at the German society he inhabited in the 1830s and 1840s. But it is his critique of modern capitalist society that is the most enduring, and this critique took shape through his observations of the society and economy of Great Britain in the 1850s and 1860s.

I think that Marx's critique of 19th-century capitalist society can be summarized in three words: **exploitation**, **domination**, and **alienation**. These are simple ideas, but they invoke large and somewhat separate theories. The first has to do with economic relations in capitalism, in which one group extracts wealth from the work of another group. The

second has to do with political relations in which one group has the power to compel subordination on the part of another group. And the third has to do with consciousness and the social psychology of the members of capitalist society.

You might say that it is the work of Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1 to address the first set of questions. Capitalism depends on free labor and freedom of property; it depends on a system of free exchange; so how can exploitation take place? The exploitation inherent in slavery or feudalism is apparent in the formal legal and political relations of those regimes: slaves and serfs are compelled to transfer part of the product of their labor to the masters through a juridical regime enforcing inequality. But how does this work in the system of free exchange in capitalism? Marx's answer, briefly, is that the privilege of ownership of the means of production allows owners to set the wage at a level that permits the creation of a profit; this profit is a form of surplus value.

Marx's political writings, and his writings about power within capitalism, are less systematic. But in his writings about French politics and the revolution of 1848 he expresses some of his ideas about how domination works through a political system (Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune). And in *Capital* he offers a vivid description of the social power wielded by the capitalist (link).

On leaving this sphere of simple circulation or of exchange of commodities, which furnishes the “Free-trader Vulgaris” with his views and ideas, and with the standard by which he judges a society based on capital and wages, we think we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but — a hiding.

Marx's writings about alienation are among his earliest writings. The most systematic exposition occurs in The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, where he describes the social consciousness associated with the "modern" factory system. The worker is separated from the product; he is separated from the process; and he is separated from his own essence, his creative capacity for invention and creative labor. Here are a few representative passages (link).

We proceed from an actual economic fact.

The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general.

This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor’s product – confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers[18]; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as

alienation.[19]

...

All these consequences are implied in the statement that the worker is related to the product of labor as to an alien object. For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater this activity, the more the worker lacks objects. Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.

...

Estranged labor turns thus:

(3) Man's species-being, both nature and his spiritual species-property, into a being alien to him, into a means of his individual existence. It estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his human aspect.

(4) An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species-being, is the estrangement of man from man. When man confronts himself, he confronts the other man. What applies to a man's relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labor and object of labor.

In fact, the proposition that man's species-nature is estranged from him means that one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man's essential nature.

The estrangement of man, and in fact every relationship in which man [stands] to himself, is realized and expressed only in the relationship in which a man stands to other men.

Each of these theories highlights a different dimension of the social reality of modern society, in Marx's worldview. Each implies a positive theory of a good society; it is one that emphasizes a kind of human equality, and a positive view of society as an environment that enables the full development of each as a condition of the full development of all. So equality and the fullness of human flourishing are the underlying values.

Finally, there are systemic connections among the three areas. It takes power to sustain an exploitative system; so exploitation and domination are interlinked. A specific group of individuals are privileged by both systems; and Marx has a subtle view of the ways in which the propertied classes wield power through a group of power specialists. Alienation, finally, is a predictable consequence of the circumstances of life created by the social relations of exploitation and domination. There is the alienation of the worker; but there is also the alienation of the consumer and the voter, each carried along by a system of activity that frustrates real human engagement and satisfaction.

Does any of this seem relevant in the contemporary world? The inequalities we see in the current economy certainly suggests the idea of exploitation of someone; wealth is being

created and a large proportion of it is flowing to a small privileged group. Power is visibly concentrated in contemporary society -- whether it comes to legislation, regulation, or the influence of the media. This implies a degree of domination on the part of a small segment of society -- a "ruling elite". And few would doubt that there seems to be a growing sense of value-less-ness in contemporary society -- a condition strikingly like what Marx described as alienation. So it certainly seems timely for all of us to sharpen our critical skills and help figure out what we need to do to create the foundations of a more just and more humanly satisfying social order.

This is a short posting about a large subject. Is it possible to argue that these few paragraphs capture the heart of the view? Could Marx have formulated his key ideas in a posting in the *New York Herald Tribune*? Essentially, I'd like to argue yes. Much of Marx's work takes the form of detailed discovery of the facts that make this case and an unconvincing effort to formulate a mathematical economic theory, the labor theory of value. But what is probably of the greatest value today are the dimensions of social criticism outlined here, not the economic theory.

Social explanation and causal mechanisms

Monday, July 25, 2011

To explain a social outcome or regularity, we need to provide an account of why and how it came about; and this means providing a causal analysis in terms of which the explanandum appears as a result.

Having a causal theory of a realm requires having an ontology: what kinds of things exist in this realm, and how do they work? Along with others, I offer a social ontology grounded in the actions and relations of socially constituted actors, which I refer to as methodological localism (link). (This is also the ontology asserted by the programme of "analytical sociology"; link.)

This entails, basically, that we need to understand all higher-level social entities and processes as being composed of the activities and thoughts of individual agents at a local level of social interaction; we need to be attentive to the pathways of aggregation through which these local-level activities aggregate to higher-level structures; and we need to pay attention to the iterative ways in which higher-level structures shape and influence individual agents. Social outcomes are invariably constituted by and brought into being by socially constituted, socially situated individual actors (methodological localism). Both aspects of the view are important. By referring to "social constitution" we are invoking the fact that past social arrangements have created the social actor. By referring to "social situatedness" we invoke the idea that existing social practices and rules constrain and motivate the individual actor. So this view is not reductionist, in the sense of aiming to reduce social outcomes to pre-social individual activity.

We also want to refer to supra-individual actors -- firms, agencies, organizations, social movements, states. The social sciences are radically incomplete without such constructs. But all such references are bound by a requirement of microfoundations: if we attribute intentionality to a firm, we need to be able to sketch out an account of how the individuals of the firm are led to act in ways that lead to the postulated decision-making and action (link).

So, then: what is involved in asserting that social circumstance A causally produces social circumstance B? There are, of course, numerous well developed answers to this question: statistical inference based on correlations of occurrences, conditional probabilities, and necessary-sufficient condition analysis. My view, however, is that there is a more basic meaning of causation: A caused B ***iff*** there is a sequence of causal mechanisms leading from A to B. This approach is especially suitable for the social realm because, on the one hand, there are few strong statistical regularities among social outcomes, and on the other, it is feasible to identify social mechanisms through a variety of social research methods -- comparative analysis, process tracing, case studies, and the like.

The social mechanisms approach (and the scientific realism that lies behind it) goes back at least as early as the late 1980s. An early statement of the view was presented in my Varieties Of Social Explanation: An Introduction To The Philosophy Of Social Science in 1991. Mario Bunge and Jon Elster took similar positions. The view took a large step forward, on the theory side, with the publication of Hedstrom and Swedberg's Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory (1998), and on the empirical research side with the publication of McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's Dynamics of

Contention (2001). There are important differences; theorists within analytical sociology largely favor methodological individualism and mechanisms grounded in rational individuals, whereas Tilly and his colleagues favor "relational" mechanisms. But in each case the model of agent-centered explanations that either require microfoundations or are plainly compatible with such a requirement. (Here is a recent post on causal mechanisms.)

Several social scientists have anticipated this approach through their own concrete analysis of aggregation phenomena. A good illustration is Thomas Schelling. His work presents a large number of examples of mundane social outcomes that he explains on the basis of simple individual-level choices and an aggregation mechanism (Micromotives and Macrobehavior, Choice and Consequence). Features of organized crime, traffic patterns, segregation, and dying seminars all come in for treatment. Schelling demonstrates in concrete terms what sorts of things we can identify as "social mechanisms" and traces them back to the circumstances of action of individuals in social situations.

The framework of social mechanisms as a basis for social explanation raises an important question about the role and scope of generalizability that we expect from a social explanation. Briefly, the mechanisms identified here show a degree of generalizability; as McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly assert, social mechanisms can be expected to recur in other circumstances and times. But the event itself is one-of-a-kind. This is a familiar feature of Tilly's way of thinking about contentious events as well: the American Civil War was a singular historical event. But a good explanation will invoke mechanisms that recur elsewhere. We shouldn't expect to find general theories of civil wars; but our explanations of particular civil wars can invoke quasi-general theories of mid-level mechanisms of conflict and escalation. (Here is a recent posting on general and specific causal claims.)

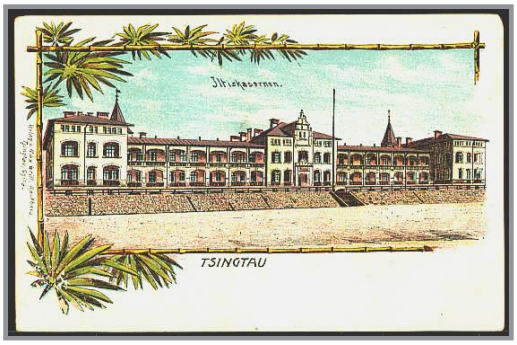
Another important methodological question for this approach to social explanation is the issue of explaining general statistical patterns in social life. What if we want to explain something more quantitative -- say a gradually rising divorce rate or the finding that co-habitants before marriage have higher divorce rates than non-co-habitants? On the social mechanisms approach, we would want two things. First, we would like an agent-level mechanism that explains the statistic; and second, we would like to find a common cause if the phenomenon is similar in several countries.

Finally, the actor-based mechanisms approach invites an area of study which is now being referred to as "aggregation dynamics" (link, link). We need to have theories and tools that permit us to aggregate different micro-level processes over time into meso- and macro-outcomes, taking into account the complexity of causal interactions in a dynamic process. The tools of agent-based modeling are relevant here (link).

Steinmetz on colonialism

Wednesday, July 27, 2011

George Steinmetz offers a comparative sociology of colonialism in The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa. More specifically, he wants to explain differences in the implementation of "native policy" within German colonial regimes around the turn of the twentieth century. He finds that there are significant differences across three major instances of German colonialism (Samoa, Qingdao, Southwest Africa), and he wants to know why. (For example, the Namibia regime was much more violent than the Samoa or Qingdao



examples.) This is a causal question, and Steinmetz is one of the most talented sociologists of his cohort in American sociology. So it is worth looking at his reasoning in detail.

One reason this is interesting to me is that it seems to represent a hard case for the perspective of analytical sociology (link, link), with its goal of providing an overarching model of all valid sociological explanations. On its face, Steinmetz's analysis doesn't look much like Coleman's boat -- identify a macro pattern of interest, look for the actors whose behavior gives rise to the pattern, and try to identify individual-level circumstances that cause the pattern through the individuals' actions. So let's look in a little bit of detail at the explanations that Steinmetz offers.

Here are the guiding research goals for Steinmetz's study.

Social theorists have often treated colonialism as a monolithic object, a uniform condition. Yet even a cursory overview of the historical literature indicates that colonialism is actually an extremely capacious category, encompassing everything from pillage and massacre in the Spanish conquest of the New World to the peaceful coexistence between British rulers and Chinese subjects in late colonial Hong Kong. The colonies that made up the German overseas empire, which lasted from 1884 until the end of World War I, exemplify the enormous variability even within the more delimited category of modern colonialism. This specifically modern variant of European colonialism, as opposed to the early modern (or earlier) forms, is my focus in this book. I have selected three colonies to illustrate the wide spectrum of colonial native policy, which I will argue below, was the core activity of the modern colonial state. These colonies are German Southwest Africa, forerunner of modern-day Namibia; German Samoa, precursor of the contemporary nation-state of Samoa; and Kiaochow, a colony that consisted of the city of Qingdao and its surrounding hinterland in China's Shandong Province. (1)

What I try to account for in this book -- my "explanandum" -- is colonial native policy. Four determining structures or causal mechanisms were especially important in each of these colonies: (1) precolonial ethnographic discourses or representations, (2) symbolic competition among colonial officials for recognition of their superior ethnographic acuity, (3) colonizers' cross-identification with imagos of the colonized, and (4) responses by the colonized, including resistance, collaboration, and everything in between. Two other mechanisms influenced colonial native policy to varying degrees: [5] "economic" dynamics related to capitalist profit seeking (plantation agriculture, mining, trade, and smaller-scale forms of business) and [6] the "political pressures generated by the international system of states. (2)

This book does not attempt to identify any singular, general model of colonial rule. Indeed, general theory and general laws are widely recognized as implausible goals in the social sciences. Historians have always preferred complex, overdetermined, conjunctural accounts, but sociologists and some other social scientists have been reluctant to abandon the chimerical goals of parsimony and "general theory." Rather than attempt to use colonial comparisons to fabricate a uniform model of the colonial state, I will seek instead to identify a limited set of generative social structures or mechanisms and to track the ways they interacted to provide ongoing policies. Even though each

instance of colonial native policy was shaped by a different constellation of influences, the four primary mechanisms named above were always present and efficacious to varying degrees. (3)

Note that Steinmetz proceeds here in a clearly comparativist fashion (three cases with salient similarities and differences); and he proceeds with the language of causal mechanism in view. The comparativist orientation implies a desire to identify causal differences across the cases that would account for the differences in outcomes in the cases. He suggests later in the analysis that all six factors mentioned here are causally relevant; but that the general structural causes (5 and 6) do not account for the variation in the cases. These structural factors perhaps account for the similarities rather than the differences across the cases. But Steinmetz emphasizes repeatedly that general theories of colonialism cannot account for the wide variation that is found across these three cases. "The patterns of variation among these three colonies are as puzzling as is the sheer degree of heterogeneity" (19).

So what kind of account does Steinmetz offer for the four key mechanisms he cites? Consider first factor (2) above, the idea that the specifics of colonial rule depended a great deal on the circumstances of the professional and ideological "field" within which colonial administrators were recruited and served. (Here is a posting on Bourdieu's concept of "field"; link.) "Social fields are organized around differences -- differences of perception and practice. It is difficult to imagine what sorts of materials actors could use in their efforts to carve out hierarchies of cultural distinction if they were faced with cultural formations as flat and uniform as Saidian 'Orientalism'" (45-46). The idea here is that the particular intellectual and professional environment established certain points of difference around which participants competed. These dividing lines set the terms of professional competition, and prospective colonial administrators as well as functioning administrators needed to establish their program for governance around a distinctive package of these assumptions.

Was the colonial state characterized by common perceptions of distinction and stakes of conflict? German colonial administrators did in fact compete for a specific form of cultural distinction within the ambit of the colonial state, and this struggle guided each individual toward particular kinds of native policy. ... The colonial stage thus became an exaggerated version of imperial Germany's three-way intraelite class struggle. (48, 49)

This mechanism is a fairly clear one; and it provides a promising basis for explaining some of the otherwise puzzling aspects of colonial rule and native policy. It derives, fundamentally, from Bourdieu's theories of social capital. Consider an analogy with current military policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Suppose there are two large ideas of strategy in the air, counter-insurgency and state-building. Suppose that each of these frameworks of thought has resonance with different groups of powerful political leaders within the government. And suppose that senior military commanders are interested in establishing their credentials as effective strategists. It makes sense to imagine that there may be a competition for choosing on-the-ground strategies and tactics that align with the grand strategy the theater commander thinks will further his long-range career success the best.

This mechanism is consistent with an agent-centered theory of explanation: actors (administrators or generals) are immersed in a policy environment in which conflicting ideas about success are debated; the actors seek to align their actions to the framework they judge to be most likely to prevail (and preserve their careers). No one wants to be the last Curtis LeMay in Vietnam when the prevailing view back home is "winning hearts and minds." The explanation postulates a social fact -- the prevalence of several

intellectual frameworks about the other, several ethnographic discourses; and the individual's immersion in these discourses permits him or her to act strategically in pursuing advantageous goals.

We can often begin to understand why one strand of precolonial discourse rather than another guided colonial practice once we know who was put in charge of a given colony. (54)

So this illustrates the way that factors (1) and (2) work in Steinmetz's explanation. What about (3)? This falls in the category of what Steinmetz calls "symbolic and imaginary identifications" (55). Here Steinmetz turns away from conscious calculation and jockeying on the part of the colonial administrator in the direction of a non-rational psychology. Steinmetz draws on psychoanalytic theory and the theories of Lacan here. But it remains an agent-centered analysis. Steinmetz refers to elements of mentality as an explanation of the administrators' behavior, and their possession of this mentality needs its own explanation. But what proceeds from the assumption of this mentality is straightforward; it is a projection of behavior based on a theory of the mental framework of the actor.

The fourth factor in Steinmetz's analysis turns to the states of agency of the colonized. Here he refers to strategies of response by the subject people to the facts of colonial rule, ranging from cooperation to resistance.

Resistance is located on the opposite side from cooperation. Colonized peoples were able to modulate and revise native policies. By signing up as a native policeman one might be able to temper colonial abuses of power. More frontal forms of resistance could bring a regime of native policy to an abrupt halt and force the colonial state to seek a new approach. (66)

This aspect of the story too is highly compatible with a microfoundations approach; it is straightforward to see how social mobilization theory can be fleshed out in ways that make it an agent-centered approach.

Here is how Steinmetz sums up his account:

The colonial state, I have argued here, can best be understood as a kind of field, one that is structured around opposing principles and interests and around conflict over specific stakes. Actors in the field of the colonial state competed to accumulate ethnographic capital. This field's internal heterogeneity and the fact that a field is "a space of possibilities" with an "immense elasticity" meant that colonial policy was never a smooth, continuous process but was prone to sudden shifts in direction. The relative autonomy of the colonial government from the metropolitan state and its independence from other fields in terms of its definition of symbolic capital meant that it was, in fact, a kind of state, even if political theorists have paid little attention to it. Just as it is impossible to generalize about the contents of ethnographic discourse or the policies of the colonial state,neither can one characaterize the "mind of the colonizer" in general terms, except to say that it was as complex and internally contradictory as the subjectivity of the colonized. (517-518)

It should also be noted that a great deal of Steinmetz's account is not explanatory, but rather descriptive and narrative. He provides detailed accounts of the history and behavior of the colonial regimes in these three settings, and much of the value of the book indeed derives from the research underlying these descriptive accounts.

So Steinmetz's account seems to have several important characteristics. First, it is interested in providing a contextualized explanation of differences in nominally similar

outcomes (different instances of German colonial rule). Second, it is interested in providing an account of the causal mechanisms that shaped each of the instances, in such a way as to account for their differences. Third, the mechanisms that he highlights are largely agent-centered mechanisms. Fourth, the account deliberately highlights the contingency of the developments it describes. Individuals and particular institutions play a role, as well as historical occurrences that were themselves highly contingent. And finally, there is a pervasive use of collective concepts like field, ideology, worldview, and ethnography that play a crucial causal role in the story. These concepts identify a supra-individual factor. But each of them can be provided with a microfoundational account. So Steinmetz's analysis here seems to be largely consistent with microfoundationalism. It diverges from analytical sociology in one important respect, however: Steinmetz does not couch his explanatory goals in terms of the idea of deriving social outcomes from individual-level actions and relations. Rather, it is for the reader to confirm that the mechanisms cited do in fact have appropriate microfoundations.

(Steinmetz discusses his theoretical approach to colonialism in his interview included in the "interviews" page. Here is an appreciative review of The Devil's Handwriting; link.)

Civil society in a globalizing world

Thursday, July 28, 2011



An important component of western political theory since Locke and Rousseau is the notion of civil society—the idea of a society in which members have a variety of cross-cutting activities and associations, and where the state is not the sole source of social power. On this conception, a civil society is one that is characterized by multiple associations, free activities and choices by individuals, and a framework of law that assures rights and liberties for all citizens. It is a society with multiple forms of power and influence, minimizing the potential for exploitation and domination by powerful elites or the state. And it is a society in which citizens have developed a sense of mutual respect and consideration for each other. The fact of civil association serves to enhance the strength of collective identities among citizens, by building new loyalties and affiliations. Citizenship and unity are built through association with other citizens and the knowledge that they can pursue their interests and values through their associations (Robert Putnam, Better Together: Restoring the American Community, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community). But we can emphasize as well the importance of civil associations as a counterweight to the power of the state. Citizens have greater security when they can be confident that the state cannot act against their interests with impunity.

What is involved in sustaining a civil society? What are the conditions that enhance civility within a community? There are several factors that are particularly important. There is **solidarity**—some degree of shared identity among the individuals who make up the society as groups with interests in common. There is a **sense of justice**—confidence that the basic institutions are fair to all. There is **confidence in the future**, that one's children will have reasonable (and improved) life prospects. There is a **sense of dignity**—of being treated with human dignity, of being assigned equal human worth. And

there is a need for **stable, fair, and predictable institutions** that give citizens the confidence that they can pursue activities, form associations, and engage in civil discourse without fear. When these conditions are satisfied we can have the greatest confidence in the stability and flourishing of a civil society.

Several of these features fall within the concept of what John Rawls calls a well-ordered society. Rawls introduced the concept of a well-ordered society in A Theory of Justice. It is the conception of society "as a fair system of cooperation over time from one generation to the next, where those engaged in cooperation are viewed as free and equal citizens and normal cooperating members of society over a complete life" (Justice as Fairness: A Restatement : 4). Citizens within a well-ordered society respect one another; they have confidence that their most basic interests are fairly treated; and they have confidence that the basic institutions of society permit them fair access and permit them to pursue their conceptions of the good. A well-ordered society is thus a powerful and pervasive foundation for a stable society, and justice is an important causal factor in sustaining and reproducing a society. The underlying hypothesis is that shared moral values, including particularly the values, that determine the terms of social interaction, create the grounds of stability in a society. And profound disagreement about these values creates the possibility of serious conflict. (Here are a few earlier postings on Rawls's views in this area; link, link).

These ideas find their most common application in the context of local or national communities. How does this concept pertain to the idea of a world society? Is there any meaning we can assign to the notion of a ***global civil society***? Or does this concept apply only to connected populations engaged in face-to-face interactions with each other? Is a global civil society feasible? This would be a world in which all persons recognize and respect the human reality and worth of all others—near and far. It is a world in which people are tied together through cross-cutting civil associations—local, national, and international. These may include labor organizations, women's organizations, environmental organizations, or religious groups. It is a world in which persons share a sense of justice—they share a basic agreement on the essential fairness of the institutions that govern their lives. And it is a world in which all people have grounds for hope for the future—that there are opportunities for them to improve their lives, that they will have fair access to these opportunities, and that their children will have better lives than they themselves have had. Such a world has every prospect of sustaining stable, peaceful, and civil social life—both local and international.

How does a theory of global justice relate to this vision (The Paradox Of Wealth And Poverty: Mapping The Ethical Dilemmas Of Global Development)? The connections are profound. Justice requires an urgent commitment to ending poverty throughout the world. It requires a commitment to democracy and human rights—and the effective legal institutions that can secure both. It entails adherence to the values of fairness and human equality, and the importance of reshaping international institutions with these values in mind. And these are precisely the values that are needed to establish the basis of peaceful civil society. If these values are genuinely and deeply embedded in our planning for the future—and if the people of the developing world become convinced that these are real, guiding priorities for the people and governments of the wealthy world—then the potential bonds of international civility will be established. And at the country level the positive institutions of law, democracy, and economic opportunity will reinforce the values of civility and mutual respect.

So the important values that pertain to just global development are arguably critical to a decent future for humanity. A world order that is not grounded in a permanent commitment to human dignity and justice is not only disqualified from the perspective of morality. It is likely to be an increasingly unstable and violent arena for deep and desperate conflict. So for our own sakes and for the sake of future generations we need

to commit ourselves in practical and enduring ways to the establishment of global justice, an end to poverty, and the extension of effective democratic and human rights to all persons in all countries.

Three specific points are particularly central. First, poverty is not simply a problem for the poor or for poor countries. Rather, it is a problem for the world, and one that we must confront with determination and resources. This means that we need to develop plans that have a likelihood of success for poverty alleviation; we need to work toward the political consensus that will be needed in order to carry these plans out; and we need to exercise our democratic rights and voices so as to bring about the large commitment of resources that will be needed. The Millenium Development Goals place this as the first priority (link).

Second, the equality of worth of all persons is an essential moral fact. All persons are equally deserving of attention. And much follows from this fact. The extreme inequalities of life prospects between citizens of the north and the south are inconsistent with this principle. The persistence of anti-democratic and authoritarian regimes throughout the developing world is inconsistent with the equal rights and worth of the citizens who suffer under those regimes. And the inequalities of voice that are present in current international institutions represent an affront to the moral equality of all persons who are affected by those institutions.

Finally, democracy and human rights are critical. It is only through effective democratic institutions for government and decision-making that the interests and concerns of citizens will be aggregated into just policies and progressive social institutions. Democratic institutions permit all citizens to influence the policies that affect the terms of their lives, and they represent a meaningful obstacle to the emergence of exploitation and domination of the powerless by elites.

Are there examples of international settings that embody some of the features of a global civil society? The European Union, and the pan-European institutions and identities that the EU is in the process of forging, offer a promising example of a system that can bring about a just international order. Here we find fledgling experiments in the creation of solidarities that transcend language, religion, nation, or place. And we find an emerging discourse of solidarity that may provide the political basis that will be needed to bring about global justice (and the international transfer of resources and knowledge that this will require). There is a measure of “global thinking” among European citizens that offers a basis for optimism about the feasibility of an engaged world citizenry. OECD institutions have already gone a long way in the direction of giving meaningful priority to the needs of developing countries. The OECD and the Development Assistance Committee represent effective and broadly supported institutional agents of change within the processes of economic development. And surveys of European public opinion suggest an emerging and strengthening public support for global justice (link, link).

Finally, what does the concept of a global civil society imply for the durability of national or cultural identities? Can the Brazilian, Sikh, or Muslim at the same time be a member of a global civil society? This question can be posed at virtually every level of scale—village, region, nation, or global system. And the answer is everywhere the same. One can be both cosmopolitan and Muslim, both Brazilian Catholic and citizen of the world (Martha Nussbaum and Josh Cohen, For Love of Country?), (Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity). In other words, this conception of a just global civil society does not presuppose a process of homogenization of world cultures. Instead, it presumes the development of a cross-cultural consensus about the importance of civility as a necessary context for the many cultural, religious, or national differences that will persist and that constitute one of the positive engines of creativity that are available to the world’s people.

Peter Demeulenaere on analytical sociology

Monday, August 01, 2011

Here is another take on the core features of analytical sociology, this time from Peter Demeulenaere in the introduction to his very interesting recent collection on the subject, Analytical Sociology and Social Mechanisms. The volume includes thirteen essays by leading experts grouped around "Actions and Mechanisms," "Mechanisms and Causality," and "Approaches to Mechanisms," and it is an important further contribution to the framework of analytical sociology. (The volume is also available in an affordable Kindle edition; Analytical Sociology and Social Mechanisms.)

Demeulenaere makes several basic points. First, he holds that AS is not just another new paradigm for sociology. Instead, it is a reconstruction of what valid explanations on sociology **must** look like, once we properly understand the logic of the social world. He believes that much existing sociology conforms to this set of standards -- but not all. And the non-conformers are evidently condemned to being judged non-explanatory. So this sets a claim of a very high level of authority over the whole field -- what Ronald Jepperson and John Meyer refer to as micro-chauvinism (link, 57). Here are several of Demeulenaere's statements of the intended scope of AS:

Analytical sociology should not therefore be seen as a manifesto for one particular way of doing sociology as compared with others, but as an effort to clarify (“analytically”) theoretical and epistemological principles which underlie any satisfactory way of doing sociology (and, in fact, any social science). The social sciences already command a considerable stock of substantive descriptions and explanations; and some of the alternatives to these are either redundant, or resistant to proof, even false or imprecise, quite regardless of their status with respect to one or other established paradigm. Analytical sociology should seek to define a set of sound epistemological and methodological principles underlying all previously established and reliable sociological findings. The aim of analytical sociology is to clarify the basic epistemological, theoretical and methodological principles fundamental to the development of sound description and explanation. (Kindle loc 121)

The most important aspect of the analytical approach should be to clarify the strategy by which we endeavour to separate and conceptualize different elements entering into descriptions and explanations of the social world, so that we might understand their mutual relationships, and in particular the causal links existing among them. (Kindle loc 139)

Second, Demeulenaere provides a long, detailed, and helpful analysis of the doctrine of methodological individualism and its current status. He believes that criticisms of MI have usually rested on a small number of misunderstandings, which he attempts to resolve. For example, MI is not "atomistic", "egoistic", "non-social", or exclusively tied to rational choice theory. He prefers a refinement that he describes as structural individualism, but essentially he argues that MI is a universal requirement on social science.

The two core ideas behind MI, first expressed by John Stuart Mill and Carl Menger, and subsequently by Weber, can be expressed very simply:

-- Social life exists only by virtue of actors who live it;
-- Consequently a social fact of any kind must be explained by direct reference to the actions of its constituents.

These two simple propositions remain central to the analytical approach; we therefore have to address the problem of the relationship between MI and AS. This section is directed to a brief exposition of the problem. (Kindle loc 183)
This is important, because it involves two separate assertions: social things are **composed** of individual actions and nothing else; and "therefore" social outcomes must be **explained** on the basis of facts about individual actions. But the inference doesn't hold -- more in an upcoming post on explanatory autonomy.

Demeulenaere specifically disputes the idea that MI implies a separation between society and non-social individuals. He believes that even the originators -- Watkins and Mill, for example -- recognized that individuals are social organisms. But he believes this recognition can be folded into a consistent elaboration of MI that he describes as structural individualism:

The combination of these two approaches can be called “structural individualism” (Wippler 1978; Udehn 2001). Any serious attempt to reflect on a social situation should deploy both in turn. Their combination is in some respect illustrated by Coleman‘s famous “boat” (1986, 1990). It remains a central aspect of analytical sociology. (kl 246)
That said, Demeulenaere fully endorses the idea that AS depends upon and presupposes MI:

Does analytical sociology differ significantly from the initial project of MI? I do not really think so. But by introducing the notion of analytical sociology we are able to make a fresh start and avoid the various misunderstandings now commonly attached to MI. (kl 318)
Third, Demeulenaere holds that AS depends closely on the methodology of social causal mechanisms. The "analytical" part of the phrase involves identifying separate things, and the social mechanisms idea says how these things are related. Demeulenaere gives a compressed history of the development of this framework over the past decade or so.

Analytical sociology incorporates an affirmation that “social facts” are generated, triggered, produced, brought about, or “caused” by individual actions which themselves are in some sense “caused”, or at least partly determined by, the constraints presented by the social environments and situations in which such actions take place.

Therefore the focus has to be on the causal “process” occurring at the action level. The idea that there are laws directly implemented at a macro level can be easily rebutted, since the effectiveness of the outcome necessarily leads to the “active” level, the level of action. One general implication of the notion of “mechanism” is to move analysis away from an “inactive” level to an “active” level, where effective actions occur. A strong correlation between variables should not therefore be interpreted in causal terms unless a mechanism linking the two dimensions is identified, mechanisms involving effective actions. (kl 378)
So causal mechanisms are expected to be the components of the linkages between events or processes hypothesized to bear a causal relation to each other. And, more specifically to the AS approach, the mechanisms are supposed to occur solely at the level of the actors--not at the meso or macro levels. So this means that AS would not countenance a meso-level mechanism like this: "the organizational form of the supervision structure at the Bopal chemical plant caused a high rate of maintenance lapses that caused the accidental release of chemicals." Both features are meso-level factors or conditions, and it would appear that AS would require that their causal properties be unpacked onto individual actors' behavior.

I, on the other hand, would maintain that this is a perfectly legitimate social mechanism because we can readily supply its microfoundations at the behavioral level. So this suggests that we can legitimately refer to meso-level mechanisms as long as we are mindful of the microfoundations requirement. And this corresponds as well to the tangible fact that institutions have causal force with respect to individuals -- a point Demeulenaere acknowledges here:

Hence we commonly encounter the fact that, one set of actors having at a certain point adopted a norm, or built up an institution, it then become more difficult for actors subsequently coming onto the scene to adopt another norm, or replace the institution. But this is never impossible. (kl 372)

There is quite a bit of the framework of AS that I find appealing and constructive. Moreover, several of the core premises line up well with assumptions I've argued for in my own philosophy of social science -- microfoundations, causal mechanisms, and agent-centered ontology, for example. Where there appear to be a few inches of separation between the views is on the subject of reductionism and explanatory autonomy. I will return to these differences in an upcoming post.

Mapping sociology

Friday, August 05, 2011



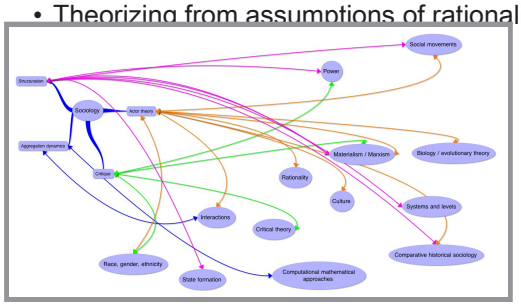
Sociology is now composed of a wide expanse of approaches, theories, methodologies, and paradigms. The American Sociological Association has 49 sections, and even this variation doesn't capture the full diversity of the field (link). In fact, Jonathan Turner refers to the current situation as one of "hyper-differentiation of theories" (1). It is therefore useful to try to map out some of the main dimensions of activity, aspiration, and method that currently define the discipline. One way of doing this is to look closely at some of the handbooks that leaders in the field have compiled over the past fifteen years or so. Several are particularly useful in my opinion, including Craig Calhoun's Sociology in America: A History (2007), Jonathan Turner's Handbook of Sociological Theory (2001), and Julia Adams et al's Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology(2005). What can we learn by examining the structure and signposts that these editors and teams of scholars have chosen to frame their collections?

It is interesting to notice that each volume limits its perspective in significant and different ways. They represent very different intellectual efforts at synthesis. Jonathan Turner's volume references the intellectual diversity of sociology from the point of view of theory. But not all sociological research is theoretical; so the dimensions of variation that we can find among ***theoretical*** orientations to understanding society is unavoidably more limited than the full range of the discipline. There are groups of sociologists who are primarily interested in careful ***descriptive*** work -- either at the macro level or the micro level. And there are sociologists whose primary concern is for providing an empirical basis for policymaking -- again, an exercise that has little to do with theory. Calhoun's volume focuses primarily on the intellectual history of the discipline. And Adams and her

colleagues have tried to work out a narrative of the development and brachiation of the frameworks of comparative sociology over time.

Turner groups the contributions to his collection around these meta-topics:

- Theoretical methodologies and strategies
- The cultural turn in sociological theorizing
- Theorizing interaction processes
- Theorizing from the systemic and macrolevel
- New directions in evolutionary theorizing
- Theorizing on power, conflict, and change
- Theorizing from assumptions of rationality



In other words, Turner's analytical strategy is to identify key topics that have inspired important recent work in the development of sociological theory over the past two decades.

Calhoun's volume takes a different approach. He wants to provide insights into the historical origins of contemporary American sociology -- both situational and intellectual. On the situational side, several essays in the Calhoun volume focus on the effects that large historical developments such as the Cold War, the Great Depression, and World War II had on the intellectual, theoretical, and institutional development of sociology. And on the intellectual side, essays in the volume consider the influence of large currents of thought on the development of American sociology -- for example, Spencer, Comte, positivism, pragmatism, feminism, and critical race theory.

In Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff present a collection of essays that attempt to provide a similar kind of complex unity to one specific sub-discipline within sociology, the field of comparative historical sociology. Their primary locational metaphor is time rather than space; they analyze the history of comparative historical sociology into a sequence of three waves of theory and method from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Their core definition of the subject matter of this discipline es expressed in these terms:

How did societies come to be recognizably "modern"? How did selves come to be understood as individuated, coherently centered, and rationally acting human subjects.... Various lines of theory developed as an effort to understand the processes by which social structures and social actors were created and transformed over the course of the transition from "traditional" or feudal societies to some distinctively modern social life. (3) And a key inspiration for the discipline of comparative historical sociology is that paying attention to history permits us to tease out the causes and processes that have led to specific kinds of social outcomes.

Adams, Clemens, and Orloff also offer some useful thoughts about the nature of the disciplines of the social sciences:

Disciplines -- like any structure -- provide both distinctive constraints and capacities embedded in theoretical and methodological orientations, transmitted through graduate education, hiring, the tenure process, and the gatekeeping of fellowship, research proposal, and manuscript review. (11)

They make the point, however, that these constraints still leave a wide degree of indeterminacy in the development of a disciplines: which topics are foregrounded, which methods of inference are favored, and which implications are pursued are all issues that are underdetermined by the constraints of the discipline.

One of the tasks of philosophy has traditionally been to provide a degree of organization to the fields of knowledge. As this quick review of the diversity of knowledge-products involved in contemporary sociology indicates, it is challenging to provide an ordering of topics, methods, and ontological presuppositions that might permit us to bring the complexity of the trees and undergrowth down to a map of the forest. But perhaps the sketch below begins to suggest some of the ways in which we might try to analyze sociological research into a smaller number of clusters of topics, methods, and assumptions.

The upper left quarter of the diagram represents sociology as a compound of four large meta-topics: structuration, actor theory, aggregation dynamics, and critique. The links in many colors bring this formation into relationship with a large number of topics and approaches within sociology, indicating roughly where topics such as "state formation" or "social power" fit within the framing topics. It would seem possible to work iteratively with a graph along these lines along with a careful reading of the three handbooks mentioned here, and fill out a set of meta-topics that would capture the great majority of the approaches described in the handbooks. Further, it might be illuminating to begin to map the links that exist between first-order topics in the graph -- for example, between "social movements," "materialism," and "culture."

Relative explanatory autonomy

Sunday, August 07, 2011

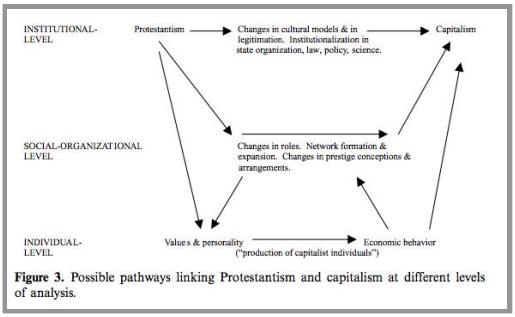


Figure 3. Possible pathways linking Protestantism and capitalism at different levels of analysis.

In an earlier post I indicated a degree of disagreement with the premises of analytical sociology concerning the validity of methodological individualism (link). This disagreement comes down to three things.

First, for reasons I've referred to several times here and elsewhere (link), I prefer to refer to methodological localism rather than methodological individualism.

This theory of social entities affirms that there are large social structures and facts that influence social outcomes. But it insists that these structures are only possible insofar as they are embodied in the actions and states of socially constructed individuals. The "molecule" of all social life is the socially constructed and socially situated individual, who lives, acts, and develops within a set of local social relationships, institutions, norms, and rules. (link)

I believe that the ideas of localism and socially constructed, socially situated actors do a better job of capturing the social molecule that underlies larger social processes than the simple idea of an "individual". Structural individualism seems to come to a similar idea, but less intuitively.

Second, the requirement of providing ***microfoundations*** for social assertions is preferable

to methodological individualism because it is not inherently reductionist (link). A microfoundation is:

a specification of the ways that properties, structural features, and causal powers of a social entity are produced and reproduced by the actions and dispositions of socially situated individuals. (link)

We need to be confident that our theories and concepts about social structures, entities, and forces appropriately supervene upon facts about individuals; but we don't need to rehearse those links in every theory or explanation. In other words, we can make careful statements about macro-macro and macro-meso links without proceeding according to the logic of Coleman's boat -- up and down the struts. Jepperson and Meyer make this point in "Multiple Levels of Analysis and the Limitations of Methodological Individualisms" (link), and they offer an alternative to Coleman's macro-micro boat that incorporates explanations referring to meso-level causes (66).

Third, these points leave room for a meta-theory of *relative explanatory autonomy* for social explanations. The key insight here is that there are good epistemic and pragmatic reasons to countenance explanations at a meso-level of organization, without needing to reduce these explanations to the level of individual actors. Here is a statement of the idea of relative explanatory autonomy, provided by a distinguished philosopher of science, Lawrence Sklar, with respect to areas of the physical sciences:

Everybody agrees that there are a multitude of scientific theories that are conceptually and explanatorily autonomous with respect to the fundamental concepts and fundamental explanations of foundational physical theories. Conceptual autonomy means that there is no plausible way to define the concepts of the autonomous theories in terms of the concepts that we use in our foundational physics. This is so even if we allow a rather liberal notion of “definition” so that concepts defined as limit cases of the applicability of the concepts of foundational physics are still considered definable. Explanatory autonomy means that there is no way of deriving the explanatory general principles, the laws, of the autonomous theory from the laws of foundational physics. Once again this is agreed to be the case even if we use a liberal notion of “derivability” for the laws so that derivations that invoke limiting procedures are still counted as derivations. (link)

The idea of relative explanatory autonomy has been invoked by cognitive scientists against the reductionist claims of neuro-scientists. Of course cognitive mechanisms must be grounded in neurophysiological processes. But this doesn't entail that cognitive theories need to be reduced to neurophysiological statements. Sacha Bem reviews these arguments in "The Explanatory Autonomy of Psychology: Why a Mind is Not a Brain" (link). Michael Strevens summarizes some of these issues in "Explanatory Autonomy and Explanatory Irreducibility" (link). And here Geoffrey Hellman addresses the issues of reductionism and emergence in the special sciences in "Reductionism, Determination, Explanation".

These arguments are directly relevant to the social sciences, subject to several important caveats. First is the requirement of microfoundations: we need always to be able to plausibly connect the social constructs we hypothesize to the actions and mentalities of situated agents. And second is the requirement of ontological and causal stability: if we want to explain a meso-level phenomenon on the basis of the causal properties of other meso-level structures, we need to have confidence that the latter properties are reasonably stable over different instantiations. For example, if we believe that a certain organizational structure for tax collection is prone to corruption of the ground-level tax agents and want to use that feature as a cause of something else -- we need to have

empirical evidence supporting the assertion of the corruption tendencies of this organizational form.

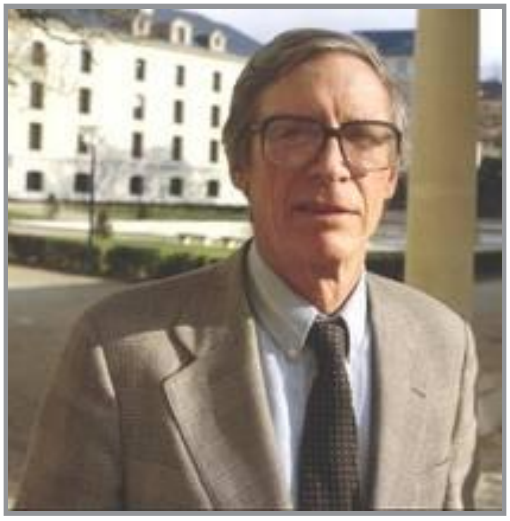
Explanatory autonomy is consistent with our principle requiring microfoundations at a lower ontological level. Here we have the sanction of the theory of supervenience to allow us to say that composition and explanation can be separated. We can settle on a level of meso or macro explanation without dropping down to the level of the actor. We need to be confident there are microfoundations, and the meso properties need to be causally robust. But if this is satisfied, we don't need to extend the explanation down to the actors.

Woven throughout this discussion are the ideas of reduction and emergence. An area of knowledge is **reducible** to a lower level if it is possible to derive the statements of the higher-level science from the properties of the lower level. A level of organization is **emergent** if it has properties that cannot be derived from features of its components. The strong sense of emergence holds that a composite entity sometimes possesses properties that are wholly independent from the properties of the units that compose it. Vitalism and mind-body dualism were strong forms of emergentism: life and mind were thought to possess characteristics that do not derive from the properties of inanimate molecules. Physicalism maintains that all phenomena -- including living systems -- depend ultimately upon physical entities and structures, so strong emergentism is rejected. But physicalism does not entail reductionism, so it is scientifically acceptable to provide explanations that presuppose relative explanatory autonomy.

Once we have reason to accept something like the idea of relative explanatory autonomy in the social sciences, we also have a strong basis for rejecting the exclusive validity of one particular approach to social explanation, the reductionist approach associated with methodological individualism and Coleman's boat. Rather, social scientists can legitimately aggregate explanations that call upon meso-level causal linkages without needing to reduce these to derivations from facts about individuals. And this implies the legitimacy of a fairly broad conception of methodological pluralism in the social science, constrained always by the requirement of microfoundations.

Economic thinking in Rawls's thought

Wednesday, August 10, 2011



John Rawls's (1971) A Theory of Justice: Original Edition (TJ) had a sizable impact on a number of disciplines, including economics and economic policy thought. (His ideas in this original version of the theory are clarified and further developed in his 2005 Justice as Fairness: A Restatement (JF).) Rawls's influence on economics largely derived from one aspect of his theory of justice, the theory of justice in distribution, which has implications for economic inequalities, taxation, and social welfare benefits. Did Rawls actually think about these issues in the ways that an economist would have done?

One of the primary goals of Rawls's theory of justice is directly relevant to economic policy. He specifically wanted to work out the implications of the theory of justice for the justice of fundamental economic institutions:

My aim in this chapter is to see how the two principles work out as a conception of political economy, that is, as standards by which to assess economic arrangements and policies, and their background institutions. (Welfare economics is often defined in the same way. I do not use this name because the term "welfare" suggests that the implicit moral conception is utilitarian; the phrase "social choice" is far better although I believe its connotations are still too narrow.) (TJ, 259)

What is the purpose of this aspect of the theory of justice?

A doctrine of political economy must include an interpretation of the public good which is based on a conception of justice. It is to guide the reflections of the citizen when he considers questions of economic and social policy. (259)

Rawls is explicit in addressing the issue of the relationship between his own theorizing and the theories of the economists:

It is essential to keep in mind that our topic is the theory of justice and not economics, however elementary. We are only concerned with some moral problems of political economy. For example, I shall ask: what is the proper rate of saving over time, how should the background institutions of taxation and property be arranged, or at what level is the social minimum to be set? In asking these questions my intention is not to explain, much less to add anything to, what economic theory says about the working of these institutions. ... Certain elementary parts of economic theory are brought in solely to illustrate the content of the principles of justice. (265)

So what use does Rawls in fact make of current economic theories? Does he think like an economist? Key to thinking like an economist is thinking in terms of incentives, markets, and institutions. Let's start with incentives. Rawls pays attention to the incentives that citizens have within various sets of institutions:

Moreover, the theory of justice assumes a definite limit on the strength of social and altruistic motivation. It supposes that individuals and groups put forward competing claims, and while they are willing to act justly, they are not prepared to abandon their interests. (281)

He also does a good job of articulating and motivating the central insights of public choice theory -- essentially, reasoning about public goods within a democratic public (TJ, 265 ff.). He analyzes the two key features of a public good -- indivisibility and non-excludability. He explains the free rider problem and the prisoners' dilemma clearly and accurately, and reproduces the conclusion that a public of independent citizens will not achieve public goods at an appropriate level without legislation. The discussion is compact, but it is solidly linked to the best available literature on public goods (Baumol, Sen, Buchanan, Olson). Rawls thinks this is a good place to start, because the institutions of the state have a very substantial role to play in establishing conditions in which public goods are achieved. He also addresses a series of reasons for favoring, and limiting, the institutions of the market as determinants of investments and incomes. He refers to allocative efficiency and personal liberty as positive features, while noting the possibility or likelihood that markets by themselves will create economic inequalities in excess of the requirements of the difference principle. "There is with reason strong objection to the competitive determination of total income, since this ignores the claims of need and an appropriate standard of life" (277).

When discussing the role of government in economic activity Rawls refers to four "branches" of fiscal and resource management activity (TJ 275 ff.). The allocation branch keeps the price system competitive and "prevents the formation of unreasonable market power" (276), and actively monitors market imperfections and externalities. The stabilization branch "strives to bring about reasonably full employment". The transfer branch is responsible for managing the transfer of incomes necessary to establish the social minimum. And the distribution branch "is to preserve an approximate justice in distributive shares by means of taxation and the necessary adjustments in the rights of property" (277).

The primary implications of the theory of justice for economics cross several topics: distribution, taxation, and the idea of a social minimum. Rawls thinks about taxation in several places. The topic arises in TJ under "Institutions for Distributive Justice" (277-280):

The taxes and enactments of the distribution branch are to prevent this limit [in the range of wealth inequalities] from being exceeded. (278)

The second part of the distribution branch is a scheme of taxation to raise the revenues that justice requires. Social resources must be released to the government so that it can provide for the public goods and make the transfer payments necessary to satisfy the difference principle. (278)

A parallel discussion of taxation occurs under the topic of "Economic Institutions" in JF (160-162). There Rawls makes several comments on wealth and inheritance taxes:

First, consider bequest and inheritance: we borrow from Mill (and others) the idea of regulating bequest and restricting inheritance. ... The principle of progressive taxation is applied at the receiver's end. Those inheriting and receiving gifts and endowments pay a tax according to the value received and the nature of the receiver.... The aim is to encourage a wide and far more equal dispersion of real property and productive assets.

Second, the progressive principle of taxation might not be applied to wealth and income for the purposes of raising funds (releasing resources to government), but solely to prevent accumulations of wealth that are judged to be inimical to background justice....

Third, income taxation might be avoided altogether and a proportional expenditure tax adopted instead, that is, a tax on consumption at a constant marginal rate. People would be taxed according to how much they use of the goods and services produced and not according to how much they contribute. (JF, 161)

Another important economic idea that emerges from Rawls's theory is the notion of a social minimum -- essentially an income guarantee for low-income people, established through an income supplement system if needed. This principle derives from the difference principle, Rawls's view that inequalities need to be the least system of inequalities consistent with the maximum result for the least-well-off segment of society.

Once the difference principle is accepted, however, it follows that the minimum is to be set at that point which, taking wages into account, maximizes the expectations of the least advantaged group. By adjusting the amount of transfers (for example, the size of supplementary income payments), it is possible to increase or decrease the prospects of the more disadvantaged, their index of primary goods (as measured by wages plus transfers), so as to achieve the desired result. (285)

Here is what seems to come out of Rawls's discussion of economic institutions and

justice. It is a theory of political economy that holds that government has substantial obligations based on distributive justice. It has the obligation of maintaining and correcting the system of economic institutions so as to prevent "unacceptable" levels of inequalities of income and wealth. It has the obligation of providing the resources for securing public goods at an appropriate level. and it has an obligation of collecting taxes sufficient to fund the social minimum for all citizens. It is an account that is well informed about then-current thinking about institutions and public choice. It rests on realistic assumptions about motivation and incentives. And it appears to set the stage for a set of institutions that appear to be economically feasible, along the lines of Scandinavian forms of social democracy.
(Some readers may wonder, as I do, whether the concept of a "proportional expenditure tax" has been seriously explored by economic experts. Here is a review by Michael Graetz in the Harvard Law Review in 1979, arguing that the system is politically infeasible.)

Ethical thinking for global public health

Friday, August 12, 2011



Here is a fine recent book that brings together recent thinking about development ethics with some of the specific issues faced in the field of global public health. Madison Powers and Ruth Faden published Social Justice: The Moral Foundations of Public Health and Health Policy in 2008, and it represents a genuinely interesting extended essay on the topic of justice in global health policy. Here is an early statement of their governing perspective:

Our central focus, only vividly appreciated in hindsight, was in a notion of social justice that went beyond issues of distributive justice, micro-allocational questions of priority setting in medical care, or any number of questions centered on how one individual fares relative to some other individual. Beginning, as we did, with moral questions in public health and health policy, it is perhaps not surprising that our focus in social justice is largely directed at the well-being of people in social communities or groups. (ix)
What is evident here is that Powers and Faden are bringing the perspective of public health into the discussion of issues that have been raised in other contexts (development ethics, bio-medical ethics) without the population-based starting point.

A second important difference in approach taken by Powers and Faden is to take seriously the finding within public health studies that inequalities come into populations' health outcomes in ways other than inequalities of access.

We contend that it is impossible to make progress in our understanding of the demands of justice within medical care without looking outside of medical care to public health and to the other determinants of inequalities in health and indeed without situating an analysis of justice and health policy in the wider social and political context. (x)
This perspective brings Powers and Faden into a degree of connection to Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson in The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger (link).

A third distinctive feature of the project is the authors' rejection of the goal of arriving at a simple, unified theory of health justice.

In place of some single theory of justice drawn from one of the leading contenders for being the "right" account of justice, we argue instead that most of these other contenders have it wrong. Indeed, we use the term 'theory' somewhat cautiously. ... We choose to steer a middle course on the question, and we agree with Thomas Nagel's conclusion that whatever we are likely to attach the label of 'theory' to in the realm of normative inquiry will reflect an aspiration to develop some systematic but noncomprehensive account of some part of the moral landscape. (x)

The job of justice, as we see it, is to specify those background social and economic conditions that determine whether certain inequalities, that may themselves result from the promotion of other indispensable moral aims, should be seen as unfair. Ours is an account of justice that denies that there are separate spheres of justice, within health policy or within social policy more generally. (x)

Ours is a nonideal theory of justice, intended to offer practical guidance on questions of which inequalities matter most when just background conditions are *not* in place. (30)
Their central concern is with justice in health; and this comes down to a theory about inequalities.

The central question we pose in this book is, Which inequalities matter most? The aim of this book is to develop a theory of social justice suitable for answering questions of this kind in a variety of concrete circumstances. (3)
But they insist on the point that theirs is not an "ideal" theory of justice; rather, it is intended to provide the basis for reasoned decisions about the practical, real problems we face in a world of substantial inequalities in life prospects. Moreover, their account does not begin with a principle of distributive justice, but rather with a conception of the human good. They offer Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum as exemplars rather than John Rawls (4).

As Sen correctly notes, a theory of justice of this sort begins with some underlying account of what persons "can do and be" (Sen 1993). Theories in this tradition start with ideals, to be sure, but they are ideals of a very different kind from those that form the starting points of Rawlsian ideal theory. (4)
So their theory is one that begins with a rich conception of human well-being and flourishing, not with a contractual deliberation between hypothetical individuals behind a veil of ignorance. Here is a general statement of their view:

Social justice is concerned with human well-being. In our view, well-being is best understood as involving plural, irreducible dimensions, each of which represents something of independent moral significance. Although an exhaustive, mutually exclusive list of the discrete elements of well-being is not our aim (and may not be possible), we build our account around six distinct dimensions of well-being, each of which merits separate attention within a theory of justice. These different dimensions offer different lenses through which the justice of political structures, social practices, and institutions can be assessed. Without attention to each dimension, something of salience goes unnoticed. (15)
The six dimensions of well-being that they identify include health, personal security, reasoning, respect, attachment, and self-determination (16).

This approach has a lot in common with Amartya Sen's most recent thinking in The Idea of Justice (as well as Sen's earlier work and that of Martha Nussbaum). Here is Sen's description of his work in *The Idea of Justice*:

What is presented here is a theory of justice in a very broad sense. Its aim is to clarify how we can proceed to address questions of enhancing justice and removing injustice, rather than to offer resolutions of questions about the nature of perfect justice. (kl 183)
Here the emphasis is on "enhancing" justice rather than providing a conception of ideal justice. Sen's work here is intended to be practical: it should assist policy makers in their deliberations as reforms are considered. Sen refers to this approach as "comparative justice".

We are engaged in making comparisons in terms of the advancement of justice whether we fight oppression (like slavery, or the subjugation of women), or protest against systematic medical neglect (through the absence of medical facilities in parts of Africa or Asia, or a lack of universal health coverage in most countries in the world, including the United States), or repudiate the permissibility of torture ..., or reject the quiet tolerance of chronic hunger. (kl 225)
In terms of the analysis offered by Powers and Faden, we improve justice by moving a population forward in any one of the six (or more) dimensions of human well-being that were noted.

Inherent in the idea of comparing the justice of several different scenarios, is the idea of reasoning across different perspectives on justice. Sen is committed to the notion that it is possible to engage in reasoned dialogue with people with whom you have deep disagreements about starting points. And this theory of comparative justice is intended to help facilitate those reasoned discussions.

Sen contrasts his approach to justice with that of John Rawls in these terms:

In the approach to justice presented in this work, it is argued that there are some crucial inadequacies in [Rawls's] overpowering concentration on institutions (where behaviour is assumed to be appropriately compliant), rather than on the lives that people are able to lead. (kl 203)
Several things seem important to me in both books mentioned here. First, each is an innovative contribution to issues that are core to what we might refer to as "global justice" -- hunger, health, abusive states, educational deprivation. Second, each is aiming to create a philosophical framework within which practical, real-world issues can be handled in a reasoned way. Third, each seeks to broaden the moral perspective of contractualism that has set the terms for discussions of justice for the past forty years. And, finally, each shuns the goal of formulating a general system or a unified theory on the basis of which to judge all possible social arrangements in terms of justice.

These features make the moral ideas of Powers, Faden, and Sen particularly helpful when we turn our attention to trying to influence international practices and institutions in the direction of greater justice for the people of the world. The arguments are pragmatic, modest in scope, and potentially less bound to a particular tradition of moral thinking. (Sen makes this latter point quite explicitly: "Some of the reasoning of, for example, Gautama Buddha (the agnostic champion of the 'path of knowledge'), or of the writers in the Lokayata school (committed to relentless scrutiny of every traditional belief) in India in sixth-century BC, may sound closely aligned, rather than adversarial, to many of the

critical writings o the leading authors of the European Enlightenment" (kl 268).)

Global justice

Monday, August 15, 2011

There is a clear and reasonably uncontroversial basis for a simple theory of justice that all nations/cultures can accept. This is grounded a few core values about human development and is expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Millenium Development Goals, and other founding documents of the United Nations. This conception emphasizes several key values:

- equal worth of all persons
- value of freedom
- value of democracy and self-determination
- the injustice of hunger, lack of education, lack of healthcare
- the injustice of capricious arrest and state violence (illegality)

These values provide a basis for steering our core institutions and practices in the direction of greater justice: whenever it is possible to reform institutions and practices in ways that enhance one or more of these factors, we should do so. Policy makers and legislators can ask the question, how will this or that change to a set of institutions affect the well-being of individuals and populations affected; how will the change affect the freedoms and opportunities for self-determination of the people affected; how will it work to increase the effective scope of law within various societies?

John Rawls drew a strong distinction between ideal justice and imperfect justice, and noted that his contributions were directed to the formulation of a theory of ideal justice (Justice as Fairness: A Restatement, 13). He did not believe that the ideal theory of justice would suffice to provide a road map for creating a more just society. When we consider the complexity and difficulty of improving the justice of fundamental international institutions and relations, the program of arriving at an ideal theory seems unappealing. Instead, we need to have some plausible and action-supporting principles that allow for practical improvement in the overall justice of the global system. We need to have some concrete ideas about how to get from here to there.

This approach -- the idea that we can improve justice in a piecemeal way -- spares us the heroic pretense of offering a general, universal theory of justice that we hope or expect all people can be persuaded to accept. It works from the point of view that **in**justice is more specific and more widely agreed upon. We don't need to engage in irresolvable debates about whether there are universal human rights in order to agree that the world will be more just if fewer people are forced into famine conditions.

This is the approach taken by Madison Powers and Ruth Faden in their study of the ethics of global public health in Social Justice: The Moral Foundations of Public Health and Health Policy (link), and it has the clear advantage of pragmatism. It is pragmatic on the side of moral agreement, in the sense that it makes no strong claims about abstract moral theories that may be controversial across perspectives. And it is pragmatic on the side of policy, in the sense that it provides an incremental strategy for improving the conditions of justice in the world. And in fact, the premises mentioned above conform fairly closely to the six dimensions of personal well-being that Powers and Faden highlight: ***health, personal security, reasoning, respect, attachment, and self-determination***.

One of the greatest advocates for justice in global development is Amartya Sen (Development as Freedom). Sen's major contribution is the idea of the importance of creating conditions in which people can fulfill and actualize their human capabilities. Sen's most recent work on global justice topics is his The Idea of Justice, in which he offers an alternative to Rawls's approach to the problem. Here he gives primacy to the value of full human development as a benchmark for global justice.

I turn now to the second part of the departure, to wit the need for a theory that is not confined to the choice of institutions, nor to the identification of ideal social arrangements. The need for an accomplishment-based understanding of justice is linked with the argument that justice cannot be indifferent to the lives that people can actually live. The importance of human lives, experiences and realizations cannot be supplanted by information about institutions that exist and the rules that operate. (17)

Tom Pogge's work on global justice provides a good bridge between abstract moral theory and practical, real-world issues of justice in a developing world. Pogge has sought to engage these issues in ways that have real, substantive engagement with the issues of poverty, hunger, and maltreatment that continue to set the stage for the majority of the earth's population today. In an important recent volume, World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms, Andreas Follesdal and Thomas Pogge have pulled together an extended working group of scholars and activists concerned with global justice. The volume took its origin at a conference in Oslo in 2003. (Here is an article by Pogge on global justice and poverty (link), and here is a video interview with Pogge on the consequences of the global economic crisis on poverty; link.) Pogge and his colleagues focus closely on the actual workings of international institutions to attempt to measure the degree to which they disadvantage the people of the less-developed world.

Consider for example a long-term contract concerning the exportation of natural resources which the government of some African country concludes with a rich Western state or one of its corporations. Within the traditional philosophical framework, it is self-evident that such an agreement must be honored: "People are to observe treaties and undertakings" says Rawls's second principle of state conduct, and the third one adds: "Peoples are equal and are parties to the agreements that bind them" (Rawls 1999). But here is the reality. The African government is corrupt and oppressive, and its continuation in power depends largely on the military. The sales it conducts impose environmental harms and hazards on the indigenous population. Yet, most of these people do not benefit, because the revenues are partly siphoned off by the small political elite and partly spent on arms needed for military repression. (These arms are suppled by other rich Western states in accordance with other contracts executed, without coercion, between them and the African government.) (5)

Why should gimlet-eyed policy makers take these arguments about global justice seriously? What does justice have to do with the nuts and bolts of international economic policy reform? Why should self-interested nations and their leaders adjust their policies to the demands of justice? The humanitarian and moral reasons are self-evident. But it is also true that there is a powerful reason to care about justice that is based in self-interest. This is because systemic injustice is itself a threat to national security. Governments are destabilized, insurgencies are supported, cities experience riots, and anti-liberal violent movements flourish in conditions where masses of people are enmeshed in circumstances of injustice. Barrington Moore, Jr. made these arguments in Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt (1978), and his conclusions seem even more compelling in the world today.

Possessive individualism

Wednesday, August 17, 2011

C. B. Macpherson was a political philosopher who placed a genuinely novel interpretation on the history of political thought in The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke when the book appeared in 1962. Macpherson was a Canadian philosopher who influenced quite a few young scholars in the 1970s in North America and Great Britain. Macpherson offered the basis of a strong critique of a certain kind of liberalism -- the liberalism that places essentially the whole normative weight on the value of the individual and his/her liberties, and essentially no emphasis on the social obligations we all have towards each other. A first wave of criticism of narrow liberalism took this form:

The repair that was needed [to liberal theory] was one that would bring back a sense of the moral worth of the individual, and combine it again with a sense of the moral value of community, which had been present in some measure in the Puritan and Lockean theory. (2)

But Macpherson feels the need to go further:

The present study … suggests that the difficulties of modern liberal-democratic theory lie deeper than had been thought, that the original seventeenth-century individualism contained the central difficulty, which lay in its possessive quality. Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. The relation of ownership, having become for more and more men the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their full potentialities, was read back into the nature of the individual. the individual, it was thought, is free inasmuch as he is proprietor of his person and capacities. The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession. Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of exchange between proprietors. (3)

The individualism that Macpherson identifies is of a specific sort; it is "possessive" individualism. What does Macpherson mean by this? Here we have the heart of the theory of possessive individualism: the individual as solely an owner of himself. Here is his formulation late in the book:

1. What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the wills of others.
2. Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those relations which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest.
3. The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society.
4. Although the individual cannot alienate the whole o fhis property in his own person, he may alienate his capacity to labour.
5. Human society consists of a series of market relations.
6. Since freedom from the wills of others is what makes a man human, each individual's freedom can rightfully be limited only by such obligations and rules as

are necessary to secure the same freedoms for others.
7. Political society is a human contrivance for the protection of the individual's property in his person and goods, and (therefore) for the maintenance of orderly relations of exchange between individuals regarded as proprietors of themselves. (263-4)

The core of the book is a set of interpretive chapters on Hobbes, Locke, the Levellers, and Harrington. These chapters are careful, detailed, and closely textual and contextual. The book puts forward a fairly simple theory: the British tradition of political philosophy expresses a rather particular ideology that is pre-philosophical. The ideology (possessive individualism) is a very specific conception of the individual and his/her roles in the social world. The philosophical theories that are built on that ideology give shape to that set of assumptions, but they are ill suited to recognizing or critiquing those assumptions. Macpherson highlights the interpretive challenge of discovering these underlying assumptions: "Where a writer can take it for granted that his readers will share some of his assumptions, he will see no need to set these out at the points in his argument where we, who do not share those assumptions automatically, think they should have been stated to make the argument complete" (5).

What is the social context of this ideology? It is the reality of market society:

These assumptions do correspond substantially to the actual relations of a market society. (4)

One of Macpherson's more indirect goals in his philosophy is to provide an intellectually sound foundation for the liberal democratic state -- a state that recognizes the worth of the individual while also recognizing the social obligations that we all have towards each other and that need to be expressed through the social programs of the state. Fundamentally, Macpherson is interested in helping formulate a political theory that lays a powerful normative base for social democracy.

Macpherson's interpretation of Hobbes's philosophy provides an interesting discussion of "models of society" that is worth drawing attention to. He suggests that Hobbes formulates three models of society: customary or status society; simple market society; and possessive market society (47-48).

The concept of possessive market society is neither a novel nor an arbitrary construction. It is clearly similar to the concepts of bourgeois or capitalist society used by Marx, Weber, Sombart, and others, who have made the existence of a market in labour a criterion of capitalism, and like their concepts it is intended to be a model or ideal type to which modern (i.e. post-feudal) European societies have approximated. (48)

What Macpherson means by a model here needs some careful interpretation. He refers to it as an "ideal type" in this passage. More specifically, a model is a specification of several key structural features of a social order. Here is the model of a customary or status society:

1. The productive and regulative work of the society is authoritatively allocated to groups, ranks, classes, or persons.
2. Each group, rank, class, or person is confined to a way of working, and is given and permitted only to have a scale of reward...
3. There is no unconditional individual property in land.
4. The whole labour force is tied to the land, or to the performance of allotted functions, or (in the case of slaves) to masters. (49)

Macpherson thinks that these four characteristics create a specific form of system behavior for societies that embody them: "From these properties of a status society certain characteristics follow" (49).

The most complex model is the possessive market society, with postulates defining allocation of work, rewards for work, enforcement of contract, individual rational maximizing, individual's property in his labour, individual ownership of land, individuals want more utility or power, individuals have differential energy, skill, or possessions. With these postulates (including institutions and actors), we get a certain kind of social functioning. This is an "aggregation dynamics" argument. In other terms, it is a micro-to-macro argument up the struts of Coleman's boat.

It is worthwhile drawing out the connections between possessive individualism and conservative libertarian political groups in the present. The Tea Party seems to be a contemporary descendant of this ideology. Taxation is theft; the state has no legitimate role beyond protecting individual security and property; government regulation of private business activity is an immoral intrusion on liberty and property; individuals possess liberties and property that the state cannot limit; individuals **deserve** what they own and owe nothing to society or other citizens. Justice is served by simply protecting the possessions of individual citizens. Robert Nozick seems to have represented many of these values in Anarchy, State, and Utopia.

Those who favor a more expansive vision of a democratic society have several core values that conflict with these: Individuals have obligations to other members of society; government has the responsibility of protecting the wellbeing of the least advantaged in society; government has the responsibility of protecting the public good against harmful effects of private activities; decisions about public policies can and should be made through effective institutions of democratic self-determination; inequalities of wealth and power need to be restrained to ensure the political voice of the whole of society. Taxation is legitimate for at least three different reasons: it is a legitimate policy tool for limiting wealth inequalities to levels consistent with democratic equality; it is a legitimate vehicle for redistributing income to satisfy the requirement of providing a social minimum; and it is legitimate as a source of revenue needed to accomplish the public functions of the state, including provision of public goods and regulation of environment, labor, air safety, food safety, and the like. Justice is served by creating a system of legislation and policy that ensures the dignity and democratic rights of all members of society. John Rawls expresses most of these value in Justice as Fairness: A Restatement.

Our political sphere could still use a powerful and unifying theory providing a justification for these social democratic ideas. So Macpherson's voice is still relevant, almost fifty years later.

Here is a review of the book by the great English Marxist historian, Christopher Hill.

The suburbs

Friday, August 19, 2011

There has been lots of work on urban history, and rural life has come in for its own specialized study for almost two centuries as well. But what about the suburbs? Is there anything distinctive about suburban life in the United States that suggests that it needs its own sociology and history? Kevin Kruse and Tom Sugrue think so, and their volume, The

New Suburban History (Historical Studies of Urban America), makes the case. Kruse and Sugrue think that this history is actually crucial to understanding many things about the United States since the 1950s.

In the still-developing history of the postwar United States, suburbs belong at center stage. The rise and dominance of suburbia in America after the Second World War is inescapable. In 1950, a quarter of all Americans lived in suburbs; in 1960, a full third; and by 1990, a solid majority. (1)

This question divides naturally into two tracks. First, has there been a distinctive sociology of suburban life that needs to be tracked? And second, does this social-demographic fact about post-war America have important consequences for larger issues -- electoral politics, race, education, cultural homogenization, and economic competitiveness? Kruse and Sugrue think that suburbanization has implications for each of these topics, and the volume makes the case.

The subject of suburban history isn't a new one. But what is new about the approach taken by the contributors is the fact that they treat the suburbs as part of a system. They treat regions as metropolitan systems including inner cities and multiple suburban places.

[The contributors] take a broader metropolitan perspective, paying attention to the place of suburbs in political and economic relationship with central cities, competing suburbs, and their regions as a whole. (6)
Another distinctive part of their approach is that they look at suburbanization as chiefly a long-running political process. It was the result of many layers of federal, state, and local public policies. Here is how David Freund puts it in his essay:

The modern American suburb is heavily indebted to the federal government. For decades writers have chronicled this debt, documenting how state policy fueled the rapid suburban growth that has so decisively shaped U.S. politics and culture since World War II. ... Meanwhile the nation's cities, and especially the minority populations concentrated within them, were left behind. (11-12)
And it led to a powerful new set of political dynamics of competition.

The history of suburbanization and its consequences is, in large part, a question of power. (6)
In fact, the editors point out that a number of key electoral issues in the past half century have emerged out of the conflicts of interest that arose out of the shift of population to the suburbs and competition between suburban communities -- for example, the anti-tax movement that originated in California. (Robert Self analyzes this dynamic in his contribution, "Prelude to the Tax Revolt.")

Arnold Hirsch picks up the issue of segregation in his essay.

The cumulative effect of federal housing policies ... was to produce a federally sponsored social centrifuge that not only separated black from white but increasingly linked the latter to placement on the economically dynamic fringe as opposed to the crumbling core. (35-36)
It is also interesting to understand in hindsight that these implications of federal housing policy were fairly clearly understood on both sides -- by advocates of a radicalized housing policy and by advocates for the civil rights of African Americans. Hirsch summarizes the prescient views of George Nesbitt:

In 1952, Racial Relations Service officer George B. Nesbitt addressed the meeting of the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials and warned that the programs then being implemented under the rubric of urban redevelopment would establish the spatial and psychological framework within which the civil rights struggle would take place in "decades to come". The racial implications of the program were awesome and could not be avoided. (52)
(Hirsch's own urban history of Chicago is well worth reading; Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960 (Historical Studies of Urban America).)

Kruse and Sugrue and most of the contributors to the volume emphasize the range of variation that has existed in American suburbs. The racial and class homogeneity that earlier historians have highlighted has a realistic core -- Federal housing policies certainly contributed to de facto segregation across metropolitan regions -- but the editors note that there were a fair number of embedded clusters of minority residents and low-income workers as suburbs developed. And these facts of race and class diversity -- and sometimes conflict -- have had large consequences.

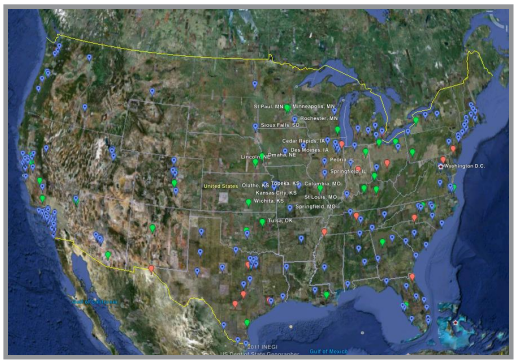
Detroit and its suburbs provide an almost pure case for the processes described in the volume. White flight beginning in the 1950s, the provision of county and municipal governments, and a very strong separation between Oakland County, Wayne County, and the city of Detroit illustrate many of the social and economic dynamics that are described in the volume. This has left a legacy of fragmented governance where it is very difficult to achieve anything like a shared regional perspective on problems that cross over the whole region. The fate of unified mass transit (which still doesn't exist in the region) and the bitter arguments among governments over the fate of Cobo Hall point to the failure of regionalism to date and the sub-par outcomes that are the result for almost all the 4.5 million people who live in the metropolitan region. Tom Sugrue's The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit (Princeton Studies in American Politics)does a masterful job of telling the story of how we got here.

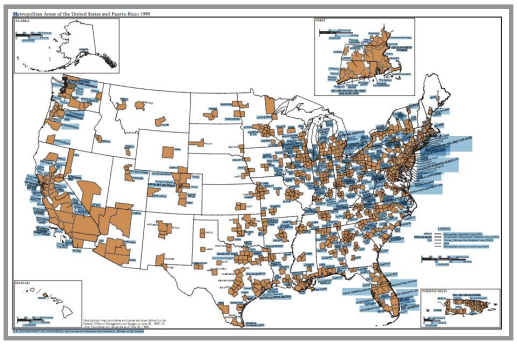
Kruse and Sugrue and the contributors to the volume succeed in establishing the importance of suburban history within American social development and public policy change, and they do a good job of drilling down into the policy choices that were made at all levels leading to this course of development in the U. S. They also demonstrate how the politics and sociology of race relations played an essential role in this history. What the volume doesn't even try to do is to get at the sociological dynamics that this form of residence, work, and socialization created. So plainly there is still a lot to do in the field by sociologists and ethnographers to capture the suburban experience.

(It is interesting to consider that there is a significant slice of the American population who live in places that are neither urban, suburban, nor rural. These are people who live in towns and small cities -- population 50,000 to 250,000. This is small-city America -- Peoria, Youngstown, Grand Rapids, Indianapolis, Orlando. These places often have many of the same challenges as major cities, without the dynamism and opportunity that are part of the scene in Chicago, Miami, Seattle, or New York. It would be very interesting to see data on things like social and geographical mobility, innovative business ideas, and average educational levels for places like these. Richard Florida has made the case for large cities and their inherent dynamism; do any of these effects extend down the scale to Peoria or Syracuse? Take Peoria, Rockford, and Chicago -- what does a detailed history of Illinois electoral politics and public policy tell us about the relations of competition, cooperation, and dominance that these three cities demonstrate over time?)

Small cities

Wednesday, August 24, 2011





A recent post on the suburbs closed with the observation that there is an important "other" social space in the United States beyond the categories of urban, rural, and suburban. These are the small cities throughout the United States where a significant number of people come to maturity and develop their families and careers. I speculated that perhaps there is a distinctive sociology associated with these lesser urban places. Here I will look into this question a bit more fully.

There are about 275 cities in the US with populations 100,000 or larger (Wikipedia link). 201 of these cities are small, with populations between 100,000 and 250,000. There are 30.3 million people living in these cities -- about 10% of the US population. A certain number of these cities fall within the metropolitan areas of larger cities, but a significant number are at least 50 miles from a major city.

Here is a map of 200 cities with populations between 100,000 and 250,000:

View Small Cities in a larger map

And here is a map of 25 cities with population greater than 500,000 (red) and 48 cities with population between 250,000 and 500,000 (green):

View Small Cities in a larger map

Google Maps limits the number of objects that can be placed on a map to 200 items, so it isn't possible to overlay these maps using Google Maps. Google Earth does not have this limitation, and all these points are included on the Google Earth version of the map. Here is what the overlay looks like:

And here is a map of the Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the US in 1999. Wikipedia provides an up-to-date list of the MSAs in the US (link). (Many of the small cities actually constitute an MSA of their own; so determining whether a small city is "metropolitan" really involves the question of whether the place falls within one of the top 25-50 MSAs by population.)

The group of cities I'm interested in here is a subset of the cities on the first map: those that are more than 50 miles from one of the top 25 cities on the second map. This still

leaves well over 100 cities in the United States with a couple of interesting characteristics: they are relatively small, so they can be expected to lack a number of higher-level functions and industries; and they are relatively isolated from other larger cities, so their populations are extensively dependent on the resources of the city itself for employment, social services, entertainment, consumption, education, etc.

So the takeaway question here is this: what is life like in Billings MT, Topeka KS, Norman OK, Pueblo CO, Springfield IL, Knoxville TN, Cary NC, Green Bay WI, Grand Rapids MI, Allentown PA, Shreveport LA, and Killeen TX? What is it like to grow up in these places? Where do young people go for post-secondary education? What percentage of young people leave these places permanently in the course of their careers? Where do the elected officials in these places come from? How are these cities doing, from the perspective of unemployment, neighborhood and business district decline, and social problems?

Further, we can ask whether there are any structural features in common that imply that these places are more similar to each other than they are to larger cities or smaller towns. Are issues of immigration, race relations, drug use, teen pregnancy, or high school dropout rates different in these places?

Finally, we can ask whether growing up in these places gives rise to a specific mentality. Do those of us who grew up in small cities like these -- Peoria, Rock Island, Springfield -- have a different set of values, a different way of looking at the world, or perhaps different ways of relating to people in ordinary social life? Or are regional differences (south, midwest, Pacific Coast) more of a determinant of one's mentality?

(I've placed the lists of cities and MSAs I've used here as spreadsheets at Google Docs; link, link. Both lists come from Wikipedia entries on US Cities and Metropolitan Statistical Areas.)

Causal narratives about historical actors

Friday, August 26, 2011

A common kind of causal narrative employed by historians is to identify a set of key actors, key circumstances, and key resources; and then to treat a period of time as a flow of actions by the actors in response to each other and changing circumstances. We might describe this as "explanation of an outcome as cumulative result of actions by differently situated actors, within a specified set of institutions, resources, and environmental factors."

Individual actions make sense in the context, so we have explained their behavior at the micro level. But we can also "calculate" aggregate structural consequences of these actions, and we can thereby reach conclusions about how change in one set of structural conditions led to another set of structural changes through the flow of situated actors choosing their strategies. The powers and resources available to different groups of actors are different and must be carefully assessed by the historian.

This explanatory logic is illustrated in Emmanuel Wallerstein's account of the development of the so-called absolute monarchy in France (The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century, With a New Prologue). Actors choose strategies based on the circumstances,

alliances, and opponents that confront them. Actors include: king, lord, peasant, merchant, civil servant, bandit, clergy. Most of these actors also have collective organizations that function as actors at a group level. Economic crisis in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries led officials of medieval states to broaden and extend their bureaucracies (134). Kings profited from disorder to extend their wealth at the expense of the nobles (135). Kings set more ambitious objectives for their states (135). Kings needed support from nobles and created parliaments. Kings used a variety of strategies to centralize power.

How did kings, who were the managers of the state machinery in the sixteenth century, strengthen themselves? They used four mechanisms: bureaucratization, monopoly of force, creation of legitimacy, and homogenization of the subject population. (136)
These actions aggregate into a new set of circumstances, a more effective set of centralized state powers, for the next period of play.

Institutions come into this kind of narrative in two ways. First, they are objective constraints and facts on the ground for the actors, leading actors to adjust their strategies. But second, institutions are built and modified through strategic actions and oppositions of the actors during a period of time. The king wants to strengthen the institutions of tax collection in the provinces; local lords oppose this effort. Each party deploys powers and opportunities to protect its interests. The resultant institutions are different from what either party would have designed.

Where do "causes" come into this kind of narrative? Climate change is a good example. Wallerstein considers the idea that climate change caused the emergence of a new set of institutions of land use (33 ff.). The mechanism is through the actions of the various stakeholders, competing and cooperating to adjust institutions to fit their current needs. Let us say the king is in a situation of greater power than the peasant or the lord. The king largely prevails in institutionalizing a new set of land use practices. One of the causes of the new institution is climate change, working through the strategic actions of the several groups of players. Or: Medieval landowners suffer income loss during a period of economic crisis; they recognize an income opportunity in enclosing public lands for private cultivation; peasants resist using traditional forms of protest; landowners generally have a power advantage and are supported by the state; landowners prevail. In this story, economic crisis causes change of land property relations, mediated by the strategic actions of key actors and groups. (Marx and Brenner tell different versions of this story; link, link.)

A different kind of example comes in at the level of the state. Wallerstein holds that the absolutist state caused the extension of the world trading system. What does he mean by this? He means that new state institutions created new powers and opportunities for several groups of actors, and the net result of these actor's strategies was to bring about a rapid increase in trade and associated military strategies. Again -- a macro cause of a macro outcome, flowing through an analysis of the strategies, interests, and powers of the historically situated actors.

This model of agent-based causal narratives seems to fit well into the methodology of agent-based simulations, with adjustments of the conditions of play from one iteration to the next. We would specify the goals and knowledge possessed by the actors. We would stipulate the institutional "geography" of the playing field. The institutions would define the powers possessed by each actor and the resources available for competition. We would represent alliances, competitions, and outcomes as they develop, noting that there is a

stochastic and path-dependent nature to the unfolding of these scenarios.

Essentially the model for explaining social change and stability goes along these lines: actors act according to their interests and psychology. To explain a new outcome we need to identify either:

a structural circumstance or resource that significantly changed the situation of action for one or more groups;
Or:

a change in the conditions of agency in the actors themselves -- ideology, religion, new factual theories and beliefs.
Either of these changes can then account for a persistent pattern of behavior leading to a new social outcome. This framework of explanation fits well into the ontology of methodological localism and also leaves room for meso-level causal factors.

The moral basis for an extensive state

Monday, August 29, 2011

A recent post focused on the conception of society involved in seventeenth and eighteenth English political thinking, the theory of possessive individualism. The post suggested that this conception has a lot of resonance with the ideas and rhetoric of the Tea Party today. I've also posted a number of discussions of the social ideals of John Rawls (link, link), expressing a liberal democratic view of the good society. These posts remind me how important it is to have some fairly specific ideas about how we would want society to be organized in the future, so we can also have some ideas about current reforms that might take us in that direction. And today we don't seem to have a lot of clarity about this kind of vision, especially on the progressive side of the political spectrum.

The ideal that seems to lie behind the conservative Tea Party political philosophy is simple but alarming:

1. Citizens should have maximum possible liberties of activity and use of property.
2. Citizens have no positive obligations to other citizens, beyond those associated with respecting liberties and property rights.
3. The state exists only to secure the liberties and security of citizens; this means the state needs to have funds to provide for national defense, enforcement of property rights, and maintenance of public order.
4. The state has no legitimate basis for creating more extensive regulations on the exercise of liberty and property (FDA, EPA, regulation of banks, …). Such regulations represent an unjustified interference with the exercise of private property rights.
5. The state has no legitimate basis for using tax moneys to provide a social safety net (unemployment payments, welfare payments, food and housing subsidies, …). Such transfer programs represent an unjustified system of redistribution of wealth and income that violates the property rights of anyone who is taxed more extensively than a fair share of the costs of providing for national defense and maintenance of public order.

This political philosophy is familiar from Robert Nozick's Anarchy, State, and Utopia (1974). At the time Nozick's vision was considered extreme from a philosophical point of view; it took to a logical limit the very limited assumptions about individual rights that were

a part of the Lockean tradition of political philosophy, and arrived at what was then a very startling set of conclusions about the limits on legitimate state action. Nozick referred to this conception as the "minimal state". Nozick's philosophy expressed a form of libertarian conservativism, with no inclination towards the "social values" of more recent conservatism.

If this political philosophy were to be enacted through legislation, it would imply a number of things: abolition of mandatory social security, abolition of regulatory agencies like EPA and FDA, abolition of unemployment benefits and poverty-based welfare programs, and dramatic reduction of taxes on the affluent. This is a vision of the minimal state with a vengeance; and it seems rather familiar from much of the rhetoric offered by Tea Party activists and Republican presidential candidates alike.

We could spend time thinking about the deficiencies of this political philosophy from a number of points of view. Here my interest is different; I'd like to consider what components might go into a political philosophy that expresses a moral justification for the more extensive state that a great many Americans would want to have. First, what are the institutional arrangements that might be considered?

A strong alternative to the minimal state is the *Nordic model* -- essentially the political and economic system associated with Scandinavian democracies in the 1960s through the 1980s. Here is an interesting monograph on the economic and social characteristics of the Nordic model: *The Nordic Model: Embracing globalization and sharing risks* (Torben M. Andersen, Bengt Holmström, Seppo Honkapohja, Sixten Korkman, Hans Tson Söderström, Juhana Vartiainen; published by the Research Institute of the Finnish Economy); link. The authors describe the key economic and social commitments of the Nordic model in these terms:

- *a comprehensive welfare state with an emphasis on transfers to households and publicly provided social services financed by taxes, which are high notably for wage income and consumption;*
- *a lot of public and/or private spending on investment in human capital, including child care and education as well as research and development (R&D);*
- *and a set of labour market institutions that include strong labour unions and employer associations, significant elements of wage coordination, relatively generous unemployment benefits and a prominent role for active labour market policies. (13)*

A key goal of the study is to assess the economic performance of the Nordic model over the past fifty years. The study's summary conclusion is very favorable: contrary to anti-tax, anti-government ideology, the Nordic economies have performed very well.

The Nordic countries have, according to many indicators, succeeded relatively well in fulfilling their social ambitions. Recently, this has been combined with a satisfactory economic performance in terms of employment and productivity levels as well as growth of GDP per capita. Also, the macroeconomic balance is good and public finances are strong. There is indeed a Nordic success story in the sense of a favourable combination of economic efficiency and social equality.

True, the Nordics went through a period of low productivity growth in the 1970s (like most other OECD countries) as well as a major financial and macroeconomic crisis with very high unemployment rates and large fiscal imbalances in the early 1990s (somewhat earlier and less dramatically in the case of Denmark). But even so, the Nordics have more or less managed to keep up with the US in terms of PPP-adjusted GDP over the

last 25–30 years, which is more than can be said of most other EU15 countries. The longterm performance is mainly recorded as a high rate of total factor productivity growth. This indicates that technical progress, notably in the area of information and communication technology (IT), has played in important role in growth. More importantly, it also shows that the Nordics – contrary to popular belief – demonstrate a high degree of economic flexibility and capacity of structural change. The macroeconomic crises have helped the process by inducing growth-enhancing changes in structural policies (and, for a while, through the improvements of competitiveness caused by large depreciations in the early 1990s). (15)

These are social and economic arrangements that establish an active state, a state with broad responsibilities to the welfare of its citizens, and a state that calls upon a significant fraction of the wealth of society to do its work. What are the moral principles that might underly such a conception of a good society? Here are a few axioms that seem to be worth considering within such a political philosophy.

1. Society is a system of interdependency and mutual benefit for all citizens. Everyone benefits from being part of a just society.
    1. The moral situation of individuals in society includes several important components: Individuals within society have rights, liberties, and needs for personal security.
    2. Individuals have obligations to each other to help prevent hardship and to facilitate full human development. These obligations derive from at least two sources: (a) the benefits we all enjoy as a result of social cooperation in a functioning society; and (b) the moral recognition we have of the equal human worth and dignity of fellow citizens.
    3. Individuals within society have universal needs to facilitate their full human development and functioning, including education, health care, housing, and adequate nutrition.
    1. Certain core functions for the state follow from these moral ideas: The state is obligated to create a system of law that protects the rights, liberties, and security needs of all citizens.
        1. The state is obligated to serve as one of the important vehicles through which our positive obligations to other citizens are honored. The state needs to ensure that all citizens have access to education, healthcare, and the essentials of life.
        2. The state needs to provide a safety net for citizens whose earnings within the market economy leave them unable to provide for a decent standard of living.
    2. The state is obligated to protect the public from the harmful effects of private activities, including regulations concerning health and safety, conditions of labor, and environmental harms.
    1. A handful of moral constraints surround the policies and laws the state may adopt: The state is authorized to collect taxes to efficiently perform its functions of protecting rights, securing welfare, and regulating harmful activities.
    2. The state is obligated to be procedurally just and economically efficient in its administration of public programs.
    3. The policies and laws of the state need to be adopted through a democratic process in which all citizens have equal voice.

This formulation highlights a cluster of values that can potentially gain wide support within a democracy: the equal worth of all individuals, the importance of liberty, the importance of a range of social obligations all citizens have to each other, and the idea that the state needs to be articulated in such a way as to embody these moral ideas.

If the theory of the minimal state owes much of its content to John Locke, the more extensive state described here owes much of its moral rationale to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau brought the moral perspective of the "individual within community" into the foundations of political philosophy. Josh Cohen's Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals provides an excellent discussion of Rousseau's political theory; link.

(Gosta Esping-Andersen has studied the politics and policies of social democracies through a lifetime of writing. Especially important are The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism and Politics Against Markets: The Social Democratic Road to Power.)

Do organizations have causal powers?

Thursday, September 01, 2011

An organization is a meso-level social structure. It is a structured group of individuals, often hierarchically organized, pursuing a relatively clearly defined set of tasks. In the abstract, it is a set of rules and procedures that regulate and motive the behavior of the individuals who function within the organization. There are also a set of informal practices within an organization that are not codified that have significant effects on the functioning of the organization (for example, the coffee room as a medium of informal communication). Some of those individuals have responsibilities of oversight, which is a primary way in which the abstract rules of the organization are transformed into concrete patterns of activity by other individuals. Another behavioral characteristic of an organization is the set of incentives and rewards that it creates for participants in the organization. Often the incentives that exist were planned and designed to have specific effects on behavior of participants; by offering rewards for behaviors X, Y, Z, the organization is expected to produce a lot of X, Y, and Z. Sometimes, though, the incentives are unintended, created perhaps by the intersection of two rules of operation that lead to a perverse incentive leading to W. For example: a farm supervisor may ask peach pickers to discard the bruised peaches rather than placing them in the basket to be weighed. But if the laborers' salaries are determined solely by the weight of the baskets they present for weighing, they will have an incentive to include the bruised peaches (at the bottom!).

Examples of organizations include things like these:

- the Atlanta police department
- a collective farm in Sichuan in 1965
- the maintenance and operations staff of a nuclear power plant
- a large investment bank on Wall Street
- Certus Corporation (discoverer of the PCR process)
- the land value assessment process in late Imperial China

The organization consists of a number of things:

- a set of procedures for how to handle specific kinds of tasks
- a set of people with skills and specific roles
- a set of incentives and rewards to induce participants to carry out their roles effectively and diligently
- a set of accountability processes permitting supervision and assessment of performance by individuals within the organization
- an "executive" function with the power to refine / revise / improve the rules so as to bring about overall better performance

Let's take the nuclear power plant staff as an example. The tasks of the organization are to control the complex technology and its instruments over an extended time; to conduct inspections of the physical infrastructure of the plant to discover failures before they occur; to conduct routine maintenance of machines and other physical systems; to respond quickly to failures, both large and small; and to sometimes conduct major upgrades on the hardware of the system. We may imagine that there are detailed, written procedures for each of these activities, as well as procedures for action during times of malfunction or breakdown. The people of the plant represent a range of specialized skills and specialized tasks. Wainwrights maintain and repair machinery; computer technicians maintain computer systems; nuclear technicians oversee the measured functioning of the system (pressures, temperatures, power production); safety workers inspect various system; and supervisors assign tasks and monitor performance.

Failures of the system arise for several different kinds of reasons: technical failure (a device fails for unexpected technical reasons, such as a faulty weld); operator failure (an operator disregards or misinterprets a pressure warning, and a pipe explodes before corrective action is taken); training failure (staff are technically or operationally unprepared for performing their tasks routinely or in exceptional circumstances); system failure (two or more sub-systems function as designed, but in an unusual circumstance may interact in such a way as to bring about an explosion, a computer crash, or a release of energy or heat); supervisory failure (procedures were good but supervisors permitted deviation from the procedures); venality failure (individuals in a position to control purchasing decisions authorize bad contracts for faulty materials for their personal profit).

The idea of a principal-agent problem is highly relevant within organizations, at every level. The executive expects the supervisor to faithfully perform his/her tasks of supervision. But since the executive does not directly monitor the performance of the supervisor, it is possible for the supervisor to shirk his/her duties and permit faulty performance by those he supervises. Likewise, the supervisor expects that the operator will continue to monitor and control the machine throughout the day; but it is possible for the operator to keep a solitaire window open on the screen. Each level of accountability, then, requires both formal expectations and a basis for trust in the good faith of the participants in the organization.

Now we are in a position to address the central question here: do organizations have causal powers? It seems to me that the answer is yes, in fairly specific ways. First, the rules and procedures of the organization may themselves have behavioral consequences that lead consistently to a certain kind of outcome.

Second, different organizational forms may be more or less efficient at performing their tasks, leading to consequences for the people and higher-level organizations that are depending on them. For example, two tax-collection systems may be designed for the same goal -- to collect 10% of the grain produced everywhere in the kingdom. If one system is 75% successful in this task and the other is 50% successful, the state depending on the second system will be starved for resources.

Third, the discrepancy between what the rules require of participants and what the participants actually do may have consequences for the outputs of the organization. Police department regulations may require that each piece of physical evidence is separately bagged and catalogued with appropriate information about its collection. If police operatives are careless in the cataloguing of evidence it may be more difficult to convict the accused; this may lead to a rising disregard for the likelihood of conviction

and a rise in the crime rate. Corruption (venal failure to perform one's tasks faithfully) may lead to large consequences: the company is less profitable, the city is discredited to its citizens, the Church is delegitimated by the self-interested behavior of its clergy.

Fourth, the specific ways in which incentives, sanctions, and supervision are implemented differentiate across organizations. We may find that organizations with supervision system X are on average more productive or more effective than those with system Y.

Fifth, the organization has causal powers with respect to the behavior of the individuals involved in the organization. By presenting its rules, sanctions, and rewards to its participants, it changes their behavior in specific ways. Google and Apple have organized their internal procedures and rewards in such a way as to encourage creativeness, teamwork, and confidentiality. These organizations look quite different in their functioning and their products from a steel company or a shoe company.

This means two things. First, we can say with some confidence that the way an organization is structured makes a difference to its performance; this is a causal power all by itself. And second, we may be able to discover that there are broad characteristics that differentiate organizational types, and it may turn out that these distinct types also have different performance characteristics. We might discover, for example, that one system of oversight and employee motivation is significantly more likely to permit theft and corrupt behavior by its agents than another. In that case, we might say that these two systems differ in their propensities for generating corrupt behavior. (This is an argument that Robert Klitgaard makes in Controlling Corruption.)

So far we haven't mentioned the familiar subject of "microfoundations" at all; we have considered an organization as a complex social entity. It is easy to specify the microfoundations of the causal powers we have identified. The organization's performance is determined by the behaviors of the individuals who fall within it, and the aggregate individual behaviors are explained by the rules and procedures embodied in the organization. So the causal powers having to do with efficiency, effectiveness, and corruptibility can be disaggregated into the incentives and behaviors of typical individuals. But here is the key point: we don't need to carry out this disaggregation when we want to invoke statements about the causal characteristics of organizations in explanations of more complex social processes. This is a case illustrating the point of relative explanatory autonomy developed in a prior post, and it also illustrates the point that David Elder-Vass makes in The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency.

These observations lay a basis for concluding that meso-level social entities have causal powers that can legitimately be invoked in social explanations. Significantly, there are clear and convincing examples of sociological explanations that take the causal powers of organizations as fundamental to their explanations of important social outcomes -- for example, technology failure (Charles Perrow, Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies; link), corruption (Robert Klitgaard, Controlling Corruption), and the use of common property resources (Elinor Ostrom, Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action).

Rawls on the EU

Saturday, September 03, 2011

During the final preparation of The Law of Peoples: with "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" John Rawls had extensive interaction with Philippe van Parijs. Van Parijs was particularly interested in the political and legal circumstances surrounding the establishment of the legal structure of the European Union and the obligations states and their citizens would have to each other within the EU. A key question is whether a political body -- a state or confederation -- needs to encompass a single unified "people" (whether by language, traditions, or culture); or if, on the contrary, such a body can consist of multiple peoples who nonetheless have duties of justice to each other.

What turns on this from a moral point of view is the level of moral concern that members of this kind of union owe each other. Are their obligations limited to the domain of "concern" that gives rise to some obligations of charity? Or are they closely enough interconnected that they are subject to the demands of justice towards each other? If the latter then the difference principle applies to them when inequalities of life circumstances are apparent. If the former then only weaker principles of assistance apply.

For van Parijs this question is particularly acute in the case of Belgium, which was even then subject to fissional pressures along linguistic-cultural lines between Flemings and Walloons.

Van Parijs and Rawls exchanged several careful and thoughtful letters on these issues in 1998, and these letters were published in their entirety in Revue de philosophie économique in 2003 (link).

The disagreements between van Parijs and Rawls are very interesting to follow in detail. There is one aspect of the exchange that is particularly intriguing on the subject of Rawls's own assessment of modern capitalism. The passage is worth quoting. Here is an excerpt from Rawls's letter:

One question the Europeans should ask themselves, if I may hazard a suggestion, is how far–reaching they want their union to be. It seems to me that much would be lost if the European union became a federal union like the United States. Here there is a common language of political discourse and a ready willingness to move from one state to another. Isn't there a conflict between a large free and open market comprising all of Europe and the individual nation-states, each with its separate political and social institutions, historical memories, and forms and traditions of social policy. Surely these are great value to the citizens of these countries and give meaning to their life. The large open market including all of Europe is aim of the large banks and the capitalist business class whose main goal is simply larger profit. The idea of economic growth, onwards and upwards, with no specific end in sight, fits this class perfectly. If they speak about distribution, it is [al]most always in terms of trickle down. The long–term result of this — which we already have in the United States — is a civil society awash in a meaningless consumerism of some kind. I can't believe that that is what you want.

So you see that I am not happy about globalization as the banks and business class are pushing it. I accept Mill's idea of the stationary state as described by him in Bk. IV, Ch. 6 of his Principles of Political Economy (1848). (I am adding a footnote in §15 to say this, in case the reader hadn't noticed it). I am under no illusion that its time will ever come –

certainly not soon – but it is possible, and hence it has a place in what I call the idea of realistic utopia.

Several aspects of this passage are noteworthy. The first is a tentative skepticism about the goal of creating a European *community* in a strong sense -- a polity in which individuals have strong obligations to all other citizens within the full scope of the expanded boundaries. Rawls seems to equate this goal with the idea of creating a somewhat homogeneous and pervasive European culture, replacing German, French, or Italian national cultures. And he offers the idea that the traditions, affinities, and loyalties associated with national identities are important aspects of an individual's pride and satisfaction with his/her life.

What is surprising about these views is that Rawls seems to overlook the polyglot, poly-cultural character of the United States and Canada themselves. Both North American countries seem to have created some remarkable solutions to the problem of "unity with difference." It is possible to be a committed United States citizen but also a Chicago Polish patriot, a Los Angeles Muslim, or a Mississippi African American. Each of these is a separate community with its own traditions and values. But each can also embody an overlay of civic culture that makes them all Americans. It certainly doesn't seem impossible to imagine that Spaniards will develop a more complex identity, as both Spaniard and European. So Rawls's apparent concerns about homogenization and loss of collective meaning seem ill founded.

Even more interesting, though, are his several comments about globalization and capitalism. As we observed in a post about the property-owning democracy (link), Rawls has already expressed the idea that capitalism has a hard time living up to the principles of justice. Here he goes a step further and reveals a significant mistrust of the value system created by capitalism. He refers to the world the "bankers and capitalists" want to create -- one based on acquisitiveness and the pursuit of profit -- and he clearly expresses his opinion that this is incompatible with a truly human life.

The goal of perpetual growth expresses this ideology, and Rawls reveals his skepticism about this idea as well. He offers the opinion that the pursuit of growth by this class is no more than the pursuit of greater wealth and more meaningless consumption. And he clearly believes this is a dead-end. Instead, he endorses J. S. Mill's idea of a steady-state (link). (Interestingly, this position lines up well with current thinking of environmentalists; for example, James Gustave Speth and The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability (link).)

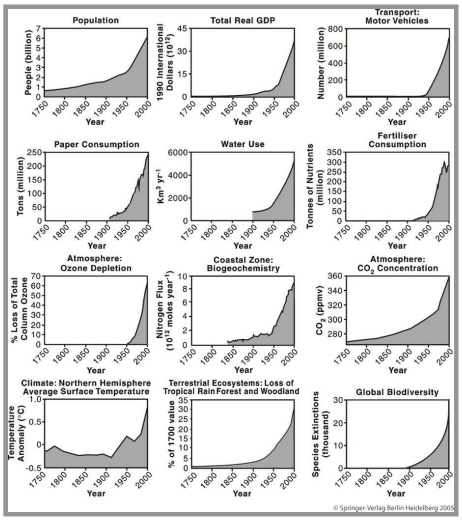
Here Rawls seems to express a cultural critique of capitalism: the idea that the driving values of a market society induce a social psychology of consumerism that overrides the individual's ability to construct a thoughtful life plan of his/her own.

Finally, Rawls criticizes the neo-liberal dogmas about distribution of income that had dominated public discourse in the U.S. almost since the publication of *A Theory of Justice*: the theory of trickle-down economics. That theory holds that everyone will gain when businesses make more profits. And, of course, the data on income distribution in the U.S. since 1980 has flatly refuted that theory (link).

(Van Parijs' most recent book, Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World (Oxford Political Theory), will be published in October. It is highly relevant to this debate with Rawls.)

Low income and wellbeing

Monday, September 05, 2011



source: J. G. Speth, *The Bridge at the End of the World*

A recent post on Rawls's critique of capitalism closed with an intriguing mention of a contrast Rawls draws between economic growth and human wellbeing. He is particularly critical of the consumerism that is enmeshed in the social psychology of a growth-oriented market system. This point is worth focusing on more closely.

We seem to work on the basis of a couple of basic assumptions about income, lifestyle, and community in this country that need to be questioned. One group of these clusters around the idea that a high quality of life requires high and rising income. High income is needed for high consumption, and high consumption produces happiness and life satisfaction. Neighborhoods of families with high income are better able to sustain community and civic values. And symmetrically, we assume that it is more or less inevitable that poor communities have low levels of community values and low levels of the experience of life satisfaction.

All these assumptions need to be questioned. As any social service agency can document, there are ample signs of social pathology in the affluent suburbs of American cities. These suburban places aren't paragons of successful, happy human communities in any of the ways Robert Bellah talks about (Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, Good Society). And there is little reason to believe that the consumption-based lifestyles that define an American ideal of affluence really contribute consistently to life satisfaction and successful community.

But here I want to focus on the other end of this set of assumptions: the idea that non-affluent people and communities are necessarily less happy, less satisfied, and less integrated around a set of civic and spiritual values. So here is the central point: people can build lives within the context of low income that are deeply satisfying and rewarding. And communities of low-income people can be highly successful in achieving a substantial degree of civic and spiritual interconnection and mutual support. It doesn't require "affluence" to have a deeply satisfying human life and a thriving community.

There are many reasons for thinking these observations are likely to be true. One is the example of other societies. Consider village life in Spain or Italy, for example, where many families still live on incomes that are a fraction of American affluence, who incorporate gardens into their regular lifestyle and household economy, and who enjoy admirable levels of personal and social satisfaction. Or think of stable farming communities in India or Africa that have successfully achieved a balance of farm productivity, a degree of social equality, and a strong sense of community. Or consider examples of communities in the United States that have deliberately put together lives and communities that reject "affluence" as a social and personal ideal.

Of course it's true that extreme poverty is pretty much incompatible with satisfaction and

community. Malnutrition, illiteracy, and untreated disease are counterparts of extrme poverty and destroy happiness and community. But "non-affluence" isn't the same as extreme poverty.

What everyone needs, at every level of income, is decent access to the components of a happy life: healthcare, nutrition, shelter, education, dignity, and security. These are what an earlier generation of development thinkers called basic needs. And it is self-evident how these fit into the possibility of a decent and satisfying life. But access to these goods isn't equivalent to the American dream of affluence.

So here is a fairly profound question: what steps can be taken to promote the features of personal wellbeing and robust community relations that can make "non-affluence" a sustainable social ideal? And how can we help poor communities to strengthen their ability to nurture these positive values according to their own best instincts?

This line of thought converges closely with the striking arguments made by James Gustave Speth in The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability. The graphs at the top represent Speth's summary of the environmental catastrophe associated with the idea of permanent economic growth. Much of Speth's critique of consumerism and growth is summarized in this account of a talk he gave at McGill in 2008. Speth argues that a radical rethinking of well-being is necessary if we are to achieve a society that is environmentally sustainable.

More on meso causation

Saturday, September 10, 2011

A recent post considered the question, do organizations have causal powers? There I argued that they do, in a number of ways. Here I'd like to return to these claims and see how they disaggregate onto subvening circumstances, including especially patterns of individual and group activity. The italicized phrases are extracted from the earlier post.

- *First, the rules and procedures of the organization may themselves have behavioral consequences that lead consistently to a certain kind of outcome.*

How do rules and procedures causally affect the behavior of the actors who participate in them? (a) Through training and inculcation. The new participant is exposed to training processes designed to lead him/her to internalize the procedures and norms governing his/her function. (b) Through formal enforcement. Supervisors are institutionally charged to enforce the rules through direct observation and feedback. (c) Through the normative example of other participants, including informal sanctions by non-supervisors for "wrong" behavior. (d) Through positive incentives administered by supervisors and mid-level functionaries. Each of these avenues for influencing the behavior of an actor within an organization depends on the actions and motivations of other actors within the organization. So we have the recursive question, what factors influence the behavior of **those** actors? And the answer seems to be: all actors find themselves within a dynamic system of behavior by other actors, frequently maintaining an equilibrium of reproduction of the rules and roles.

- *Second, different organizational forms may be more or less efficient at performing their tasks, leading to consequences for the people and higher-level organizations that are depending on them.*

Institutions designed to do similar work may differ in their functioning because of specific differences in the implementation of roles and processes within the organization. This is a system characteristic of the particular features and interactions of the rules and

processes of the organization, along with the expected behaviors of the participants. It is also a causal characteristic: implementing system A results in greater efficiency at X than implementing B. The underlying causal reality that needs explanation is how it comes to pass that participants carry out their roles as prescribed--which takes us back to the first thesis.

- *Third, the discrepancy between what the rules require of participants and what the participants actually do may have consequences for the outputs of the organization.*

This causal claim highlights the difference between formal and informal procedures and practices within an organization. Informal practices can be highly regular and reproducible. In order to incorporate their implications into our analysis of the workings of the organization we need to accurately understand them; so we need to do some organizational ethnography to identify the practices of the organization. But in principle, the logic of explanation we provide on the basis of informal practices is exactly the same as those offered on the basis of the formal rules of the organization.

- *Fourth, the specific ways in which incentives, sanctions, and supervision are implemented differentiate across organizations.*

This is one of the key insights of the "new institutionalism." The specific design of the institution in terms of opportunities and incentives presented to participants makes a large difference in actors' behavior, and consequently a large difference to the system-level performance of the institution. Tweaking the variable of the level in the organization's hierarchy that needs to sign off on expenditures at a given level has significant effects on behavior and system properties. On the one hand, higher-level sign-off may serve to restrain spending. On the other hand, it may make the organization more unwieldy in responding to opportunities and threats.

- *Fifth, the organization has causal powers with respect to the behavior of the individuals involved in the organization.*

This factor parallels thesis 1 but is meant to refer to longterm effects on behavior and personality. The idea here is that immersion in a particular organization and its culture creates a distinctive social psychology in the people who experience it. They may acquire habits of thought, ways of responding to new circumstances, higher or lower levels of trust of others, and so forth, in ways that influence their behavior in the broader society. The idea of an "organization man" falls in this category of influence. The organization influences the individual's behavior, not just through the immediate system of rewards and punishments, but through its ability to shape his/her more permanent social psychology.

There are only two fundamental causal paths identified here. The causal properties of the organization are embodied in the patterns of coordinated actions undertaken by the actors who are involved; and these orderly patterns create system effects for the organization as a whole that can be analyzed in abstraction from the individuals whose actions constitute the micro-level of the social entity.

The most obvious causal property of an organization is bound up in the function of the organization. An organization is developed in order to bring about certain social effects: reduce pollution or crime, distribute goods throughout a population, provide services to individuals, seize and hold territory, disseminate information. These effects occur as a result of the coordinated activities of people within the organization. When organizations work correctly they bring about one set of effects; when they break down they bring about another set of effects. Here we can think about organizations in analogy with technology components like amplifiers, thermostats, stabilizers, or surge protectors. This analogy suggests we think about the causal powers of an organization at two levels: **what** they do (their meso-level effects) and **how** they do it (their micro-level sub-mechanisms).

A jobless future?

Saturday, September 10, 2011

Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio wrote a pretty gloomy book in 1994 with the striking title, The Jobless Future. Here is a *Harvard Educational Review* discussion of the book (link). What is most discomforting in reading the book today is the degree to which the factors they identify seem to be today's headlines. What does jobless mean here? In a word, it means that the US and other OECD countries will never recover the number and quality of jobs they need in order to regain the middle class affluence they had in the 1950s and 1960s. The future will involve work -- but not enough jobs to ensure a low unemployment rate. Here is their assessment in 1994:

For there is no doubt that we have yet to feel the long-term effects on American living standards that will result from the elimination of well-paid professional, technical, and production jobs. At the same time, nearly everyone admits that many of these jobs are gone forever. (xi)

The central structural factors they identified in 1994 are still key parts of our economic environment today: technology innovation replacing labor, rising productivity producing persistently flat labor demand, shifts in the structure of the economy towards finance and service sectors, and internationalization of production.

Technological progress and capital accumulation seem to disrupt the social fabric in the United States. A weakened position in the international economy demands that American industry increase its productivity and cut its unit labor cost. As Carl G. Thor, president of the American Productivity Center in Houston, says, "The trick is to get more output without a surge in employment." Technological change and competition in the world market guarantee that increasing numbers of workers will be displaced and that these workers will tend to be rehired in jobs that do not pay comparable wages and salaries. Women and minorities will suffer the most as the result of these changes; the increased participation in an occupational sector by women and minorities is often an indicator of falling wages in that occupation. (3)

The second explanation, more sobering, emphasized the role of huge federal and consumer debt accumulated beween the late 1970s and the early 1990s that has drained public and private investment, inhibiting recovery and growth. (5)

This, in brief, is the context within which a severely reduced job "market" began to take shape, not only for U.S. workers, but potentially for all workers. In this book we argue that the progressive destruction of high-quality, well-paid, permanent jobs is produced by three closely related developments. (8)

The implication they draw is stark: new jobs will never be created at a rate to satisfy rising demand for jobs.

Our first argument—that the Western dream of upward mobility has died and it is time to give it a respectful funeral—may have at long last seeped into the bones of most Americans, even the most optimistic economist. The dream has died because the scientific-technological revolution of our time, which is not confined to new electronic processes but also affects organizational changes in the structure of corporations, has fundamentally altered the forms of work, skill, and occupation. The whole notion of tradition and identity of persons with their work has been radically changed. (15)

They've also got a vision of what the future could look like: satisfying lives with a decent

standard of living, based on a combination of paid work and guaranteed social income.

The aim of this work is to suggest political and social solutions that take us in a direction in which it is clear that jobs are no longer the solution, that we must find another way to ensure a just standard of living for all. (xii)

Accordingly, if unwork is fated to be no longer the exception to the rule of nearly full employment, we need an entirely new approach to the social wage and, more generally, "welfare" policy. If there is work to be done, everyone should do some of it; additional remuneration would depend on the kind of work an individual performs. (353)
They are as interested in the "satisfying" part of the question as the "standard of living" part. They want to know what sources of meaning, worth, and value are possible for a whole civilization in which work and career are no longer the primary focus? It is an existential question as much as it is an economic one -- which takes us back to an earlier post on income and wellbeing.

But here is someone else who has a vision of a jobless future: William Gibson. His pictures of the Sprawl (an urban agglomeration extending from Atlanta to Boston) and the Bridge (the improvised "off the grid" community living on the earthquake-damaged Oakland Bridge) offer a grim picture of life for people scraping by in a cyberpunk world. There is talent, technology innovation, wealth, economic competition in Gibson's world -- but there's nothing that looks like a middle class life for ordinary people. (Here are a couple of the novels: Neuromancer, All Tomorrow's Parties.)

It seems inescapable that the rising inequalities of income and wealth we have experienced for thirty years are strongly linked to the jobless state of 15% to 20% of us (counting discouraged workers and underemployed workers) and the fairly stagnant living standards of another 50%. By tolerating this acceleration of inequality, our society is also silently sanctioning the end of social solidarity and the compact that we've had according to which everyone benefits from economic activity. Our graph seems to be pointing more in the direction of Gibson than Aronowitz. But maybe this is the fundamental goal of right wing rhetoric after all: to decisively break the bonds of social solidarity and mutual obligation altogether and to allow privilege to have its way unconstrained by social obligations. Surely we owe each other more than this.

So far the strategies on the table about employment are either about job creation (Democrats) or providing even more tax relief for business and the wealthy (Republican). None of these voices consider the more radical implication: we may need to consider a dramatically new way of thinking about income, work, social distribution, and lifestyle in the future. And that's what Aronowitz and DiFazio proposed almost 20 years ago.

(Philippe Van Parijs' recent contribution to *Boston Review* on a universal basic income is a really interesting start on some serious alternative thinking (link).)

Social things, kinds and meso causes

Thursday, September 15, 2011

Consider a social entity -- say the IBM corporation -- and consider the group of individuals who currently make up the entity. What is the relation between the social entity and the individuals? There are several things that are plainly true: the entity is composed of the individuals. The behavior of the entity supervenes upon the individuals.

But other issues are less clear. Does the corporation have causal properties of its own? Is this corporation an instance of a broader class of social entities with similar properties? Do we need to explain the corporation by deriving its properties from the properties of its constituents?

There are analogous issues in other areas of the "special" sciences. Take weather, for example. We have a fairly complex vocabulary of weather ontology and causation: El Nino, warm front, high pressure cell, hurricane, windshear, etc. Two things seem evident. First, weather phenomena are composed of lower-level physical components: bodies of water at a range of temperatures, non-homogeneous gases (atmosphere), inputs of energy (sunlight), and the like. Weather phenomena are "nothing but" ensembles of micro-cells of gases, water, land masses, and energy. Weather states might be exhaustively described as a set of micro-states with no reference to weather vocabulary; we could, if we wanted, reduce weather statements to micro physical statements. At the same time, we can legitimately describe weather phenomena at the meso or macro levels -- storms, etc. There is no compelling scientific reason to insist on reduction or elimination. And we can explain weather outcomes in terms of causal statements that invoke other meso factors. The fact that there are no autonomous weather phenomena does not mean there are no autonomous weather explanations.

There isn't much of a problem in defining or identifying **entities** at the level of social aggregates. The IBM corporation is no more ontologically suspect than Hurricane Irene. Both are high-level entities composed of lower level things and processes. What is more problematic is when we consider whether there are "kinds" of social entities; whether there are law-like generalizations that are true of those kinds of things; and whether kinds of social things have distinctive causal properties and processes.

Candidate social kinds might include armies, bureaucracies, and religions. I take the view, however, that none of these concepts identifies a set of social entities that have enough in common to call them a kind. They are heterogeneous in all the ways that have made them intriguing to historical sociologists. Caesar's army, Rommel's army, and Ho Chi Minh's army had some things in common; but they also had enormously important differences at the level of organization, technology, and leadership structure. So it isn't plausible to look at them as constituting a kind of social entity.

This high degree of heterogeneity among the items classified under social concepts also provides the basis for a negative answer to the question about laws as well. Armies are not like metals; they don't have a common set of generating processes, and they don't give rise to significant regularities. We can't say things like "all armies fight to exhaustion within 12 months."

We can, however, identify common processes and challenges that confront all armies, and we can consequently tease out some causal mechanisms and processes that recur across armies in a wide range of contexts. This is the thrust of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly's analysis of mechanisms underlying contention.

This discussion illustrates three rather different points. First, there is the level of descriptive concepts we choose to use. Second is the issue of whether explanations need to proceed from more fundamental to more complex. And third is the issue of the ontological status of composite entities.

These topics have been addressed under the rubric of inter-theoretic reduction for almost

forty years. Jerry Fodor's "Special Sciences (Or: The Disunity of Science as a Working Hypothesis" (1974) (link) and "Special Sciences: Still Autonomous After all These Years" (1997) (link) present core arguments for the autonomy of the special sciences. He distinguishes between token-token identity and type-type identity, pointing out that it might be the case that the first kind of identity obtains while the second does not. His central argument is that the possibility of multiple functional realizability demonstrates that it will not be possible to reduce higher-level laws to lower-level laws.

Jaegwon Kim has addressed the issue of physicalism throughout his career, most recently in Physicalism, or Something Near Enough. He holds that the concept of supervenience provides a basis for finessing the demand for reduction from higher kevel to lower level. Julie Zahle raises some of these problems in her contribution to Philosophy of Anthropology and Sociology: A Volume in the Handbook of the Philosophy of Science Series, "Holism and Supervenience."

My general intuition is that the issue of inter-theoretic reduction and an insistence on a strong version of methodological individualism are much less important to the philosophy of social science than they have appeared to be. Once we have sufficiently understood the ways that individuals, institutions, networks, and values work at the local level, we are in a good position to characterize meso-level social entities like organizations and value systems. And we are intellectually empowered to try to discover the dynamic properties of these systems of actors and social arrangements. So meso level causal properties seem entirely legitimate in the social sciences.

Advertising and making consumers

Friday, September 23, 2011



There is a pervasive feature of modern economic life that never entered into the theories of the economists in the first century of the discipline: marketing, advertising, and the shaping of consumer desires. And yet this activity is itself a trillion-dollar industry, and arguably has greater effect on social values and consciousness than religion, politics, or the workplace. Our culture is flooded by marketing messages that surely have a vast cumulative effect on the ways we think about life and the things we value. And this feature of modern social life is radically different from pre-20th century -- village life in France in the 1880s, city life in 17th-century London, or even life in Chicago in 1920. So it's worth thinking about.

The images above come from of a google image search for "advertising 1900". They are all print ads for products around the turn of the twentieth century. There are several brands represented here that are still with us. Plainly advertising in newspapers and magazines was well entrenched by then.

So what factors made advertising a feature of mass society but not the medieval market town? Capitalism is about selling things. Companies need to generate demand for their products. So capitalism needs effective ways of stimulating new desires for products in consumers.



And this suggests one social factor that led to a dramatic increase in advertising and marketing in the late nineteenth century, the sharp increase in urbanization and modern transportation. These factors implied a strong increase in the density of demand and the circulation of consumers using modern transportation. When you have trolleys and railroads you have large numbers of people moving around, and they can be turned into consumers. This made it worthwhile to invest in marketing and advertising.



These observations take me in two directions. One is historical. I'm pretty sure that cities were much less visibly marketed and advertised in 1861 or 1911 than they are today. There must be some interesting work on the history of advertising, but the bottom line is this -- advertising was a product of an intensive consumer product society, and consumerism didn't really become dominant until the twentieth century. So living in Ghent, San Francisco, Grand Rapids, Stockholm, or New Orleans in 1880 would have involved a dramatically quieter environment when it came to product advertising and posters in public spaces. Here are a few street scenes to give an idea of the limited scope of street advertising at roughly the turn of the 20th century from Brussels, New York, and Manchester.



The other line of thought is more systemic. Why did we invent advertising at all in some fairly recent point in our past? Here a number of points seem salient.

Begin by considering the overall purpose of advertising. One aspect is informational. A goal of advertising is to bring information about products to the purchasing public. If everyone knows about your product, then there isn't a need to advertise it. Second, it is to bring about a positive attitude towards this product in that set of consumers. And third, it is to make the sale -- to give the consumer the emotional push needed to go ahead with the purchase.

Being systematic about advertising means being very specific about the targets of the campaign. What segments of the public does the business want to reach?

First, there are already people who would like to purchase something like product X but are not currently doing so. Here the challenge for the company is to get information about



the product in front of these would-be buyers and induce them to make a purchase.

A second group of potential buyers are people who already consume a related product Y but might be persuaded to switch to X. Here the challenge is to create dissatisfaction with Y, or a new conviction that X is better. Cigarette marketing fell partially in this category when it was legal. The goal was to persuade smokers to switch from one brand to another, by implying the experience was better or the smoker would have greater social status. One brand sells "cool," another sells "masculine," another sells "sexy."



There is a third group that sellers would like to reach: people who currently don't want X at all, but might be induced to do so through appropriate messaging. This means changing preferences and creating new desires in the potential consumer. Tobacco advertising and children's cereals seem to fall in this category. Both have aimed to create new consumers -- children who "want" Captain Crunch and adolescents who want cigarettes.

And how about the golden grail -- whole societies that haven't yet acquired the desire for a category of product? Maybe it's luxury skin products in Nigeria, baby nursing formula in Kenya, Weber barbecue grills in Argentina, or Volkswagens in Indonesia. Here the goal is to quickly grow the consumer public interested in acquiring this product -- and positioning the brand so future competitors will have a hard time breaking into the market.



So advertising is about shaping the information people have, the desires and preferences they experience, and the attitudes and emotions they have towards products and the act of consumption. And it is fundamentally aimed at changing both consciousness and behavior. Seen from this point of view, advertising is deliberately a fundamental cause of the shaping of modern social consciousness.

There is a body of thought which focused on this aspect of capitalism and mass society, and that is the critical philosophy of the Frankfurt School. In Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944) Adorno and Horkheimer laid out an extensive critique of the culture industry and the role it played in modern capitalist society. Here are a few lines particularly relevant to advertising (link). Their interest here is the culture industry more generally, but much of their thinking sheds bright light on the role of advertising in mass consumer society.



Interested parties explain the culture industry in technological terms. It is alleged that because millions participate in it, certain reproduction processes are necessary that inevitably require identical needs in innumerable places to be satisfied with identical goods. The technical contrast between the few production centers and the large number of widely dispersed consumption points is said to demand organisation and planning by management. Furthermore, it is claimed that standards were based in the first place on consumers' needs, and for that reason were accepted with so little resistance. The result is the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger. No mention is made of the fact that the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is greatest. A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself. Automobiles, bombs, and movies keep the whole thing together until their leveling element shows its strength in the very wrong which it furthered. It has made the technology of the culture industry no more than the achievement of standardisation and mass production, sacrificing whatever involved a distinction between the logic of the work and that of the social system.



...



The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. The old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left (because the latter is intent upon reproducing the world of everyday perceptions), is now the producer's guideline. The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen. This purpose has been furthered by mechanical reproduction since the lightning takeover by the sound film.



...

The might of industrial society is lodged in men's minds. The entertainments



manufacturers know that their products will be consumed with alertness even when the customer is distraught, for each of them is a model of the huge economic machinery which has always sustained the masses, whether at work or at leisure – which is akin to work. From every sound film and every broadcast program the social effect can be inferred which is exclusive to none but is shared by all alike. The culture industry as a whole has moulded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product. All the agents of this process, from the producer to the women's clubs, take good care that the simple reproduction of this mental state is not nuanced or extended in any way.

...

The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions. The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.

Here is the first chapter of James Gordon Finlayson's Habermas: A Very Short Introduction, which offers some very helpful explication of the perspectives of the Frankfurt School on this set of issues.

Woodward on mechanisms

Friday, September 23, 2011

Jim Woodward has extended a lot of his philosophical effort towards the task of understanding causation in the sciences (Making Things Happen: A Theory of Causal Explanation). Woodward is a primary exponent of the "manipulationist" theory of causation. He brings a counterfactual orientation to the problem of defining causal relations. If we assert that X caused Y, there is an implication that, if X had not occurred, Y would not have occurred. This implication isn't universally valid, since some events or outcomes are causally overdetermined. (Both X and X' may be a sufficient cause for Y -- in which case removing X still allows for Y through the X' pathway.) Notwithstanding this problem, the counterfactual nature of causal assertions is widely recognized. And this implies the association between causation and intervention or manipulation: if X causes Y, then we should be able to influence the occurrence of Y by manipulating X. This fact in turn underlies the logic of experimental design.

Woodward's treatment of causation deserves fuller treatment than I'll give it here. In this post I will focus on his application of these ideas to the notion of a causal mechanism. He lays this treatment out in a short but influential article, "What is a Mechanism? A Counterfactual Account" (link).

Here is the core idea. He focuses on the Machamer-Darden-Craver (MDC) definition of a causal mechanism (link):

Mechanisms are entities and activities organized such that they are productive of regular changes from start or set-up to finish or termination conditions. (3)

Woodward's contribution is to give greater clarity to the idea of regularity or law by adding the idea of a relationship that is "invariant under intervention". This idea models the notion of experimental testing of a causal hypothesis. We are interested in "X causes Y". We look for interventions that change the state of Y. If we find that the only interventions that change Y, do so through their ability to change X, then the X-Y relation is said to be invariant under intervention, and X is said to cause Y. Here is how he expresses the idea in the article:

I understand this in terms of the notion of invariance under interventions. Suppose that X and Y are variables that can take at least two values. The notion of an intervention attempts to capture, in non-anthropomorphic language that makes no reference to notions like human agency, the conditions that would need to be met in an ideal experimental manipulation of X performed for the purpose of determining whether X causes Y. The intuitive idea is that an intervention on X with respect to Y is a change in the value of X that changes Y, if at all, only via a route that goes through X and not in some other way. This requires, among other things, that the intervention not be correlated with other causes of Y except for those causes of Y (if any) that are causally between X and Y and that the intervention not affect Y independently of X. Thus if A is a common cause of B and S as in the example above, manipulating B by manipulating A will not count as an intervention on B with respect to S since in this case the manipulation affects S via a route (the route that connects A to S) that does not go through B. (369-70)
Here is how he applies this idea to causal mechanisms. A mechanism consists of separate components that have intervention-invariant relations to separate sets of outcomes. These components are modular: they exercise their influence independently. And, like keys on an accordion, they can be separately activated with discrete results.

So far I have been arguing that components of mechanisms should behave in accord with regularities that are invariant under interventions and support counterfactuals about what would happen in hypothetical experiments. (374)
Here is the proposal all of this leads up to:

(MECH) a necessary condition for a representation to be an acceptable model of a mechanism is that the representation (i) describe an organized or structured set of parts or components, where (ii) the behavior of each component is described by a generalization that is invariant under interventions, and where (iii) the generalizations governing each component are also independently changeable, and where (iv) the representation allows us to see how, in virtue of (i), (ii) and (iii), the overall output of the mechanism will vary under manipulation of the input to each compo- nent and changes in the components themselves. (375)
Woodward illustrates his theory of mechanisms with simple physical and biological examples. How does this theory work when we consider social mechanisms?

What seems most evident is that social mechanisms are not commonly as complex as Woodward's examples would suggest. The sorts of mechanisms that crop up in sociology seem largely to be "simple" mechanisms: they don't consist of multiple independent components leading to an outcome.

Here is the way that McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (MTT) characterize mechanisms and processes in Dynamics of Contention:

- *Mechanisms are a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations.*
- *Processes are regular sequences of such mechanisms that produce similar*

(generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements. (24)

These definitions imply that *processes* are compound, whereas typical mechanisms are simple.

Here are examples that MTT offer of mechanisms:

- *resource depletion or enhancement affects people's capacity to engage in contentious politics (25)*
- *commitment is a widely recurrent individual mechanism in which persons who individually would prefer not to take the risks of collective action find themselves unable to withdraw without hurting others whose solidarity they value (26)*
- *Brokerage ... as the linking of two or more previously unconnected social sites by a unit that mediates their relations with one another and/or with yet other sites (26)*
- *Identity shift ... alteration during contentious claim making of public answers to the question: "Who are you?" (27)*

In each case we seem to have a simple relationship between one social or environmental fact and a typical outcome -- not a complex concatenation of "cogs and wheels" of social interaction.

So when we consider typical examples of social mechanisms -- free-riding (Olson), escalation (McAdam-Tarrow-Tilly), identity competition (Horowitz) -- we commonly find that they are all basically one-step mechanisms. So the assumption that a mechanism consists of modular components doesn't fit the social sciences well. There are complex social processes, to be sure, but it seems best to understand these as concatenations of distinct mechanisms rather than as a single complex mechanism. (Why? Because they are all too often unrepeatable.)

This doesn't mean that we can't understand social mechanisms along the lines Woodward suggests, if we are content to acknowledge that it is hard to find *complex* social mechanisms. But in order for even this to be the case, we would have to confirm that these simple mechanisms produce intervention-invariant regularities.

This requirement runs up against a different problem, however. The regularities that correspond to typical social mechanisms are soft regularities, not hard-and-fast laws. Social causation is probabilistic, not deterministic. The regularities corresponding to social causes derive from features of human agency and behavior, and they are deeply exception-laden. The free-rider mechanism tends to give rise to under-investment in the public good -- except when people self-organize, semi-coercive organizations appear, or altruistic religious attitudes take hold. Social mechanisms are productive, in the sense that they "bring about" the associated outcomes. But they are not invariant across all or most cases.

This implies that there are no intervention-invariant relations to be had in the social world. And therefore we need some other analytical foundation if we are to persist in thinking there are social causal mechanisms.

Woodward addresses something very much like this possibility in conjunction with psychological mechanisms. And he draws a prescriptive conclusion: if the "mechanisms" cited in psychology do not have these characteristics of modularity and invariance, then they aren't really mechanisms:

the standard boxological diagrams allegedly describing the operation of psychological mechanisms drawn by psychologists are rarely accompanied by convincing evidence that

the parts corresponding to the boxes satisfy the modularity condition described above. If the argument of this paper is correct, this is a reason for being skeptical that these diagrams describe genuine mechanisms. (377)
It seems likely enough that he would reach a similar conclusion about the kinds of mechanisms offered by MTT.

(Here is an excellent review by Michael Strevens of Woodward, *Making Things Happen*.)

Current issues in causation research

Friday, September 23, 2011

This week's conference on Causality and Explanation in the Sciences in Ghent was an unusually good academic meeting (link). Participants gathered from all over Europe, as well as a few from North America, Australia, and South Africa, to debate the logic and substance of causal interpretations of the world. Among other things, it provided all participants with a very good sense of the ideas about causation that are generating the most discussion today.

A general perception that emerges from the gestalt of papers at the conference is that there are three large focus areas in current research on scientific causation. First, there is interest in specifying what causal assertions and concepts **mean** in scientific explanations. What are the logical, conceptual, and pragmatic issues associated with causal assertions and explanations?

Second, there is a large body of work focusing on the methods we can use to support causal inference in the sciences. Every field of science produces volumes of data about variables and events over time. What methods exist to permit inferences about causal relationships among the observed variables and entities? This includes causal modeling statistical methods, but also comparative methods deriving from Mill's methods of difference and similarity.

Third, there is a group of philosophers and scientists who are primarily interested in the ontology of causation in various parts of the sciences. How do various factors exercise causal powers in ecology, the social sciences, or complex systems? Researchers in these areas need provisional answers to questions raised by the first two groups, but their focus is on substantive causal processes rather than the logic of causal statements.

It is useful to inventory half a dozen approaches that were repeatedly cited. This survey is impressionistic but gives an idea of the current landscape.

The mechanisms approach. The idea that we can explicate causation through the idea of a mechanism has been rising in importance over the past twenty years. The idea here is that the fundamental causal concept is that of a mechanism through which X brings about or produces Y. This is argued to be key to causation from single-case studies to large statistical studies suggesting a causal relationship between two or more variables. Peter Hedstrom and other exponents of analytical sociology are recent voices for this approach for the social sciences, though expositions of this approach don't usually go into the level of detail expected by philosophers like Woodward and Cartwright. An important paper by Peter Machamer, Lindley Darden and Carl Craver, "Thinking about Mechanisms", sets the terms of current technical discussions; their view is referred to as the MDC theory. A common concern is that the approach hasn't been as clear as it should be about what

precisely a mechanism is. James Mahoney made this criticism in 2001 in "Beyond Correlational Analysis" reviewing Charles Ragin, Fuzzy-Set Social Science and Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg, Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory (link), and we still need a more generally recognized specification of the idea. (See an earlier post on this approach; link.)

The manipulability account. Jim Woodward is perhaps the leading exponent of the manipulability (or interventionist) account. He develops his views in detail in his recent book, Making Things Happen: A Theory of Causal Explanation. The view is an intuitively plausible one: causal claims have to do with judgments about how the world would be if we altered certain circumstances. If we observe that the concentration of sulphuric acid is increasing in the atmosphere, we might consider the increasing volume of H2SO4 released by coal power plants from 1960 to 1990. And we might speculate that there is a causal connection between these facts. A counterfactual causal statement holds that: If X (increasing emissions) had not occurred, then Y (increasing acid rain) would not have occurred. The manipulability theory adds this point: if we could remove X from the sequence, then we would alter the value of Y. And this in turn makes good sense of the ways in which we design controlled experiments.

Difference-making. Another strand of thinking about causation focuses on the explanations we are looking for when we ask about the cause of some outcome. Here philosophers note that there are vastly many conditions that are causally necessary for an event but do not count as being explanatory. Lee Harvey Oswald was alive when he fired his rifle in Dallas; but this doesn't play an explanatory role in the assassination of Kennedy. Crudely speaking, we want to know which causal factors were **salient**; which factors made a difference in the outcome. Michael Strevens provides a detailed and innovative explication of this set of intuitions in his recent book Depth: An Account of Scientific Explanation, where he introduces his theory of "Kairetic" explanation.

Contrastive analysis as a theory of explanation. When we seek an explanation of something, we generally have something specific in mind: why X rather than X'? And an explanation that keys off the wrong contrast will fail, even though its premises are correct. Bas van Fraassen (1980), The Scientific Image, is often cited in this context. A conference participant, Petri Ylikoski, develops a contrastive counterfactual theory in his dissertation (link). This body of work seeks to clarify pragmatic issues concerning explanation, including understanding and explanatory relevance. If we ask for an explanation for why X occurred, we are usually presupposing a question like this:

Why did X occur [rather than Y]?

- Why is John carrying his umbrella [rather than not]?
- Why is John carrying his umbrella [rather than his raincoat]?
- Why is John carrying his umbrella [rather than his assistant Harry]?

These all demand different answers:

- Because he expects rain;
- Because it is too warm for a raincoat;
- Because Harry is carrying three heavy suitcases.

Here is a much-cited review article by Nancy Cartwright on van Fraasen's work (link), and here is a discussion of contrastive explanation by Jonathan Schaffer (link).

Causal modeling theory. This topic refers to the large body of statistical theory devoted to identifying potential causal relationships among observable variables in a large data set. Hubert Blalock is a founder of this approach (Causal Inferences in Nonexperimental Research; 1964) with his statistical models for causal path analysis. (Here is a short account of the history of path analysis in genetics.) Judea Pearl has contributed a great deal to the method of structural equation modeling (SEM) in Causality: Models,

Reasoning and Inference and elsewhere. Here is a handbook article in which he explains the method and its causal relevance (link). Pearl maintains a research blog on causality here. **Granger causality** is a specific technique for assessing causal relationships within time series data: X Granger-causes Y if variations in X and Y together do a better job of predicting Y than variations in Y by itself.

Prior foundations of philosophical theories of causation. Two older discussions of causality also received some notice in these papers: J. L. Mackie on INUS conditions and causal fields (The Cement of the Universe: A Study of Causation) and Wesley Salmon on the causal structure of the world (Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World).

Nancy Cartwright's "Causation: One Word, Many Things" provides a very good contemporary review of the varieties of approaches that are currently being taken to the idea of causation (link).

Much of the intellectual vitality of this group of philosophers is captured in the major work recently edited by Phyllis McKay Illari, Federica Russo, and John Williamson, Causality in the Sciences. The book contains a very wide range of disciplines and approaches in its treatment of the topic.

Is justice a security issue?

Monday, September 26, 2011

Most people would probably say they would prefer to live in a more just world to a less just one. There is a strong **moral** basis for preferring justice. But is this a consideration that states and large international organizations need to take into account as they design their strategies and plans for serving their present and future interests? Do national governments have good practical reasons to think about the consequences their policies and actions may have on the circumstances of justice in the world? What about policies and actions through which states attempt to secure their future economic wellbeing -- do policy makers need to pay attention to the social justice consequences of these actions?

There is a strong empirical and historical case for thinking that the answer to this question is "yes." Injustice is a source of resentment, indignation, and conflict. In the long run, the victims of injustice will not be ignored. Justice is a security issue for states and supra-national organizations, and simple prudence demands that policy makers take it into account. To put a simple label on this idea, justice is a security issue.

Here is a European Union statement about its longterm interests that makes this point fairly explicitly (link):

In the context of ever-increasing globalisation, the internal and external aspects of security are inextricably linked. Flows of trade and investment, the development of technology and the spread of democracy have brought prosperity and freedom to many people, while others have perceived globalisation as a cause of frustration and injustice. In much of the developing world, poverty and diseases such as AIDS give rise to security concerns, and in many cases economic failure is linked to political problems and violent conflict. Security is a precondition for development. Competition for natural resources is likely to create further turbulence. Energy dependence is a special concern for Europe.

What are the theoretical and historical arguments for this conclusion? Here are several.

On the side of theory, several points are well established. Chronic and unrelieved poverty

leaves people with low attachment to their own societies and less for the global community. The frustration of very basic human needs is bound to fuel indignation and resistance. So poverty and deprivation are causes of resistance. But there is also evidence that inequality itself has negative consequences for a society's health; this is the central finding of The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger (link). Finally, the social psychology created by a system that is perceived to be unfair and exploitative is likely to breed resistance and lawless action. Barrington Moore, Jr. was right when in Injustice he wrote:
Without strong moral feelings and indignation human beings will not act against the social order. In this sense moral convictions become an equally necessary element for changing the social order, along with alterations in the economic structure. 469
Gareth Stedman-Jones summarizes Barrington Moore's conclusion in these terms: "His argument is that human beings in stratified societies accept hierarchies of authority, so long as these hierarchies are not merely imposed by force, but based upon an 'unwritten' social contract, which binds together dominant and subordinate groups in a set of mutual obligations" (link).

So there are good empirical reasons, based in social psychology and the study of contentious politics, for expecting that injustice breeds conflict.

Are there historical demonstrations of the consequences of injustice for disorder? There are. We have the examples of slave revolts throughout the Americas in the 18th and 19th centuries; anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia following World War II; the sustained resistance of the Burmese and East Timor peoples to dictatorship; and the sustained struggle for equal rights in the United States by African Americans, sometimes punctuated by major urban riots. In each case a set of social institutions had been created that were profoundly unjust for a sizable population, and this population gathered resolve and courage in opposing those arrangements.

So the conclusion seems clear. If we want to have a world in which there is a sustainable level of the rule of law and a low level of social conflict, we need to invest in justice. We need to work to create a system in which all peoples can satisfy their most basic human needs; where everyone can feel that he/she is respected in her humanity; and where no one judges that the basic structure of social life is exploitative.

In other words, states are well advised to actively include the basic requirements of justice in their plans for the future. Otherwise they are simply creating the tinder for future conflict.

Causal-mechanisms theory in Europe

Wednesday, September 28, 2011

The causal-mechanisms theory of social explanation has been influential throughout an extensive network of European philosophers and social scientists, often with a pretty direct connection to the analytical sociology research programme. Peter Hedstrom and his research network are particularly influential in this spread of ideas. It is worth mentioning a couple of books in the past ten years that have brought this approach to non-English speakers.

Philosopher Michael Schmid published Die Logik mechanismischer Erklärungen (*The Logic of Mechanistic Explanation*) in 2006. This appears to be the first full-length



consideration of the "social mechanisms" theory of social explanation in German, and it is an impressive volume. Schmid also has an extensive chapter in English in Peter Demeulenaere's fine collection, Analytical Sociology and Social Mechanisms.

Schmid's book consists of careful analytical expositions of the theories of a dozen social scientists and philosophers who have advocated for this approach to social explanation, including both current and past proponents. Here is the table of contents, in my own non-expert translation, which gives an idea of the topics and authors Schmid concentrates on.

Michael Schmid, *Die Logik Mechanismischer Erklärungen*

1. The logic of sociological explanation

2. Philosophical foundations for an explanatory sociology

2.1 Mechanisms and the "Theory of complex phenomena" (Friedrich A. von Hayek)
2.2 Causality, social system, and mechanistic explanation (Mario Bunge)
2.3 Microfoundations and causal mechanisms (Daniel Little)

3. Mechanisms in sociological theory

3.1 Individual decisions and structural selection (Robert Merton)
3.2 Individual rationality and the interdependence of action (James S. Coleman)
3.3 Bridge principles and the transformation problem (Siegwart Lindenberg and Reinhard Wippler)
3.4 Macro-social phenomena and "rationality située" (Raymond Boudon)
3.5 Generative structuralism and generative mechanisms (Thomas J.Fararo)
3.6 Social mechanisms and the theory of rational decision-making (Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg)
3.7 Process mechanisms and causal reconstruction (Renate Mayntz)
3.8 "Generative mechanisms" and "structural models" (Hartmut Esser)

4.0 The research heuristic of mechanismic explanation

Many of these authors considered here are core to the analytical sociology framework, including especially Merton, Coleman, Boudon, Hedstrom, Swedberg, Mayntz, and Esser.

A second relevant book appeared in 2004 in Italian. This is Filippo Barbera's Meccanismi sociali: Elementi di sociologia analitica. As the title indicates, the book provides a programatic introduction to the social mechanisms approach as expressed within the analytical sociology framework. The contents are descriptive of the focus of the book (again, in my non-expert translation).

Filippo Barbera, *Meccanismi sociali*

Introduction

I. Social mechanisms: history, authors, and objectives

I.1 Introduction
I.2 The Columbia School
I.3 Social mechanisms, theory of action and the crisis of the deterministic paradigm
Summary

II. Analytical sociology in the contemporary scene

II.1 Introduction
II.2 The relation between social theory and empirical research
II.3 Three principles for analytical sociology: causal processes, multi-level schemata, and formal theory
Summary

III. From macro to micro: the logic of the situation

III.1 Introduction
III.2 Interdependence between states: Sour Grapes and Ulysses and the Sirens
III.4 Institutional environments, exchange, and preferences
III.5 Training opportunities
III.6 Effect of social interaction
III.7 Structural effect
Summary

IV. The micro-micro axis: the principle of social action and rationality

IV.1 Introduction
IV.2 The forward-looking model
IV.3 The backward-looking model
IV.4 The cognitive model and framing
Summary

V. From micro to macro: aggregation and emergent effects

V.1 Introduction
V.2 Microfoundations of emergent effects
V.3 Strategic interdependency
V.4 Processual interdependence
V.5 Relational and spatial interdependence
V.6 Dynamic analysis of micro and macro
Summary

VI. Mechanisms in empirical research
VI.1 Introduction
VI.2 The diffusion of pharmacological innovation
VI.3 Individual educational choices
VI.4 Collective violence
Summary

VII. The integration of theory and social research

VII.1 Introduction
VII.2 Building the phenomena to be explained
VII.3 Postulating the generative mechanism
VII.4 Testing the mechanism
Summary

Here is a translation of a few lines from the introduction:

This book presents a theoretical perspective and empirical research that have gained growing acceptance in contemporary sociology. Many terms have been used to identify this perspective: "explanation by social or generative mechanisms", "sociological analysis", "sociology of causal processes", and "analytical sociology". Here we will use each of these expressions interchangeably. The book aims to rebuild from within the core of analytical sociology by isolating the principles and objectives shared, without carrying out a systematic comparison with other trends in contemporary sociology. This systematization had to first try to reduce the heterogeneity that characterizes the internal perspective of the social mechanisms approach, but not completely undo the specificities of the individual authors and the different proposals they put forward. The priority attention given to the objectives of clarification and synthesis of a complex and heterogeneous field has had to overshadow the critical evaluation of analytical sociology. This critical evaluation, incidentally, is not entirely absent, and in any case is made more simple after we have specified the conditions and objectives of the approach. (7)
German philosopher Renate Mayntz also takes up issues on mechanistic explanation in the social sciences. Her 2009 book, Sozialwissenschaftliches Erklären, is a volume of essays on the philosophy of social science and social science methodology that address issues about mechanisms as well as the macro-micro link. Here is a rough translation of the table of contents:

Renate Mayntz, *Sozialwissenschaftliches Erklären*

1. Social science knowledge interests and cognitive capabilities: An Introduction
2. Research methods and cognitive potential: natural and social sciences in comparison
3. Invitation to shadow boxing: sociology and modern biology
4. Rationality in Social Science Perspective
5. Causal reconstruction: theoretical statements in actor-centered institutionalism
6. Social mechanisms in the analysis of social macro-phenomena
7. Individual action and social events: The micro-macro problem in social science
8. Emergence in Philosophy and Social Theory (in English)
9. Embedded Theorizing: Perspectives on Globalization and Global Governance (in English)

Mayntz's critical review article on the mechanisms literature appeared in 2004 in the *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, and is available online here.

Also worth mentioning is recent work by Petri Ylikoski, including his excellent University of Helsinki 2001 dissertation, *Understanding Interests and Causal Explanation* (link). The dissertation is available online and provides an excellent basis for understanding many of the issues concerning causal explanation as they arise within the analytical sociology framework.

Each of these theorists relates directly or indirectly to the framework of analytical sociology and usually to Peter Hedstrom's group directly. Barbera was a visiting fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford, where he worked closely with Hedstrom. Schmid demonstrates a close knowledge of Hedstrom's work and of the analytical sociology perspective more generally, and Hedstrom is one of the philosophers he focuses on in his book (3.6). Schmid also has sections on Mayntz, Boudon, and Esser, key figures in the literature of analytical sociology. Ylikoski has published co-authored papers with Hedstrom following the completion of his dissertation.

Sen on well-being

Saturday, October 01, 2011



In 1985 Amartya Sen published a very short book entitled Commodities and Capabilities. The book was reissued by Oxford after Sen received his Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences.

The topic is at the core of Sen's economic and philosophical work. Most basically, he is asking Aristotle's question -- what is happiness? -- and is putting forward an answer that combines analysis of economic behavior with philosophical analysis of action and purpose in human life. Economists from Mill to Samuelson sought to understand economic choices in terms of subjective utilities and unanalyzed sets of preferences. A consistent theme was that economics can't be concerned with the content or validity of the individual's utility function or preference ordering. Rather, economics is about the rules by which rational agents design their actions to maximize utility or preference satisfaction. Economic rationality has to do with the choice of means, not ends.

This approach to action also unfolded into the formal theory of social choice. Given that citizens have a set of preferences about social outcomes, what rational procedures can be designed to aggregate these preferences into a single coherent social choice preference ordering. Essentially the underlying idea is that the social good is secured when we succeed in aggregating citizens' preferences onto a single social preference ranking. And this is where Kenneth Arrow's famous impossibility theorem comes in: given a small set of reasonable constraints on social choice, there is no social choice procedure that is both complete and transitive (Social Choice and Individual Values, Second edition). Sen's first major book (1970) gave a different formal exposition to this set of arguments (Collective choice and social welfare).

One of Sen's most fundamental contributions in economics is to question the theory of subjective utility and revealed preference. He thinks that we can give a substantive, not formal, account of wellbeing that permits us to analyze the individual's behavior and choices in a more meaningful way. He writes here:

It is fair to say that formal economics has not been very interested in the plurality of focus in judging a person's states and interests. In fact, often enough the very richness of the subject matter has been seen as an embarrassment. There is a powerful tradition in

economic analysis that tries to eschew the distinctions and make do with one simple measure of a person's interest and its fulfilment. That measure is often called 'utility'. (1)
He wants to complicate the issue by drawing distinctions -- that is, by breaking down the austere abstractions about choice that are most comfortable to the economists:

I would distinguish broadly between two ways of seeing a person's interests and their fulfilment, and I shall call them respectively 'well-being' and 'advantage'. 'Well-being' is concerned with a person's achievement: how 'well' is his or her 'being'? 'Advantage' refers to the real opportunities that the person has, especially compared with others. The opportunities are not judged only by the results achieved, and therefore not just by the level of well-being achieved. It is possible for a person to have genuine advantage and still to 'muff' them. Or to sacrifice one's own well-being for other goals, and not to make full use of one's freedom to achieve a high level of well-being. The notion of advantage deals with a person's real opportunities compared with others. The freedom to achieve well-being is closer to the notion of advantage than well-being itself. (3)
This discussion announces his important distinction between capabilities and functionings; functionings are the realized form that capabilities take when they are fully cultivated. "A functioning is an achievement of a person: what he or she manages to do or to be" (7). It is worth noticing that the idea of freedom comes into this formulation in a fundamental way -- fifteen years before freedom becomes central to his thinking about the good of economic development in Development as Freedom.

Sen's argument next moves into another topic that has been characteristic of his thinking throughout his career, the relationship between two or three central components of "satisfaction" or "well-being". There is subjective satisfaction -- the degree to which the individual has accomplished a large portion of his/her preferences. There is the role of commodities and material things in the composition of individual satisfaction -- the bundle of stuff that the individual can call upon in attempting to satisfy basic needs and desires, from grain and clean water to iPads and access to the Internet. And there is the "fit" between the individual's material circumstances and his/her ability to fulfill capabilities and complete an autonomous plan of life.

The key idea expressed in this monograph and subsequently in Sen's work is that well-being is the aggregation of the individual's collection of functionings. "It is possible to argue that the well-being of a person is best seen as an index of the person's functionings" (17).

On what does the claim of functionings to reflect well-being rest? Basically, the claim builds on the straightforward fact that how well a person is must be a matter of what kind of life he or she is living, and what the person is succeeding in 'doing' or 'being'. (19)
And Sen thinks about this formulation in formal terms: the person's functionings are represented as a vector of qualitatively distinct characteristics, and one of the central problems is to assign relative values to the components of the package.

The primary specification of a person's well-being is in terms of a functioning vector *bi*. It can be converted into a scalar measure of well-being only through a real-valued 'valuation function' *vi(.)*, mapping functioning vectors into numerical representations of well-being. (33)
Sen's approach is appealing largely because it replaces "utility" with a more granular conception of "functionings". This permits more concrete discussion of the individual's life activities and, as Sen argues here, a better way of assessing his/her overall well-being.

What has turned out to be enormously important in Sen's framework of capabilities and functionings is its relevance to the topic of economic development. We want economic development to lead to an overall improvement in human happiness. But how should such a goal be assessed and measured? By offering a concrete theory of functionings, Sen lays a basis for attempting to empirically measure changes in functionings over time. Literacy, for example, is an important functioning for the human being. Extremely poor societies invest very little in formal education, and literacy in the population is low. We can make a very concrete argument that a given strategy of development is improving human well-being if we can demonstrate that it is leading to a higher level of attainment of literacy. Health itself is a complex functioning for the human being; here too, it is possible to measure progress in health achievements in different societies. So the functionings approach provides a concrete way of trying to assess progress in economic development processes. The approach is a great improvement over the "average GDP" approach, since Sen demonstrates in numerous places that average income implies something about access to commodities, but it has only a weak connection to the functionings that the population is able to realize.

The Human Development Index championed by the United Nations Development Programme takes advantage of this insight. HDI includes three measures: life expectancy, literacy, and per capita GDP (link). And a very powerful argument can be made that societies that make the most progress in improving their HDI levels have made more progress in improving human well-being than those that increase GDP but fail to improve factors like literacy and health. It will not surprise the reader to learn that Sen's writings and advocacy played a crucial role in the design of the HDI.

What is "history"?

Monday, October 03, 2011



What is "history"? And what is involved in historical research and knowledge creation?

We might begin by attempting to specify the meaning of the word. Consider this: History is the sum total of human actions, thoughts, and institutions, arranged in temporal order. Call this "substantive history." History is social action in time, performed by a specific population at a time. Individuals act, contribute to social institutions, and contribute to change. People had beliefs and modes of behavior in the past. They did various things. Their activities were embedded within, and in turn constituted, social institutions at a variety of levels. Social institutions, structures, and ideologies supervene upon the historical individuals of a time. Institutions may have great depth, breadth, and complexity. Institutions, structures, and ideologies display dynamics of change that derive ultimately from the mentalities and actions of the individuals who inhabit them during a period of time. And both behavior and institutions change over time. "History" is the temporally ordered sum of all these facts.

We are interested in understanding history for a couple of reasons.

We are interested in knowing **how people lived and thought** in times and settings very

distant from our own. What was it like to be a medieval baker or beadle or wife?

We are interested in the concrete **social arrangements and institutions** that existed at various points in time. We would like to know how marriage or tax collecting worked in rural Ming China.

We are interested in the **dynamics of change** -- the reasons for the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, the reasons for a rash of peasant rebellions in 18th-century China, the reasons for the occurrence and characteristics of the Industrial Revolution.

We are interested in **quantitative assembly of historical data** -- population, economic activity, other kinds of social data.
Understanding the first kind of thing has a lot in common with ethnography or interpretive research; we uncover what we can of the circumstances, actions, and symbols of a group of people, and we try to reconstruct their mentality and their reasons for acting as they did.

Understanding the second kind of thing requires careful study of existing records that permit inferences about how basic institutions worked. Examples include bodies of law, charters, manorial records, and the like.

Understanding the third kind of thing has to do with identifying dynamic causal processes of the sort that the social sciences study -- why legislatures tend towards certain kinds of institutions and behaviors, why bureaucracies tend towards rigidity, why people are susceptible to extremism. This second kind of question pays attention to both internal reasons for change and external reasons -- an internal dynamic towards dynastic instability and an external shock imposed by sudden climate change, for example.

Understanding the fourth kind of thing requires discovering data sources in the historical records and archives that permit estimation of things like marriage rates, grain prices, or church membership totals, and then analyzing and presenting these data in convincing ways using established methods in social science quantitative methodologies.

So historians can ask a relatively limited series of questions about time and change:

- Why did actors choose to act as they did during period P?
- How were actors shaped in agency and identity during period P?
- What institutions, structures, and mentalities existed during period P?
- What dynamics of change were inherent in institutions, structures, and mentalities of these sorts during period P?
- What contingent events and actions took place in period P that influenced the mentality, actions, and structures of the successor period P'?

This suggests a fairly simple logic of historical representation:

- Historians discover factual circumstances about conditions of life, action, and thought (mentality) during specific periods.
- Historians identify changes in these conditions from one period to another.
- Historians identify the features of social relationships, institutions, structures, and ideologies during specific periods.
- Historians use a "path-tracing" methodology to discern how circumstances and actions in one period led to specific outcomes in a later period.
- Historians make use of the findings of the social sciences to identify social dynamics associated with specific kinds of social institutions, structures, and ways of thinking.

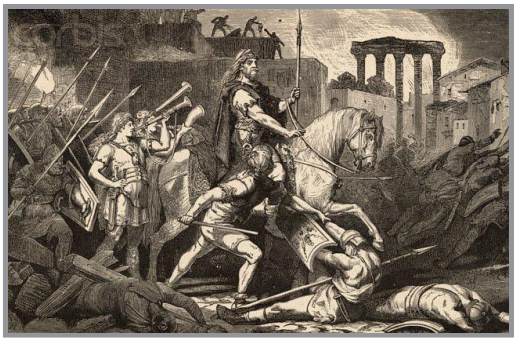
The historian who is primarily interested in the specifics of a particular time and place is

more distant from the social sciences. This work is more particularistic and "idiographic". The historian who is primarily interested in the dynamics of transition and transformation is more closely related to the social sciences, since he/she needs to borrow good theories about how institutions work. This work is more interested in causes and generalizations (usually at a meso level).

This description leaves out a great deal of what historians spend a lot of time on: formulating narratives that make sense, discovering unexpected causes or outcomes of historical circumstances, finding new perspectives on old historical questions, or just figuring out what is going on in an archival source (like the photo above), for example. I've tried to strip away those elements of the historian's work, in order to highlight the logic of the varieties of factual and explanatory claims that historians make. What I've described is abstract, of course, but it seems to capture the main elements of historical cognition. In an upcoming post I will ask how philosophy is relevant to this body of intellectual activity -- why, that is, we might want to have a philosophy of history.

Re-mapping the philosophy of history

Wednesday, October 05, 2011



The prior post offered a schematic description of the tasks involved in arriving at historical knowledge. Here I want to ask a related question: what is the work that we can hope to do with a **philosophy** of history? We don't have a philosophy of office furniture; we do have a philosophy of technology. So what is it about history that supports philosophical inquiry? Why is the enterprise of investigating, documenting, and explaining facts about the past amenable to philosophical study? What makes the effort to arrive at knowledge of facts about the past an area of philosophical concern?

There are a couple of matters that are relatively clear. First, the domain of historical knowledge is a familiar subject for philosophical inquiry. Epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge generally. Philosophy of science is the careful analysis of the methods and justification of scientific knowledge. And philosophy of historical knowledge is likewise an epistemic and methodological domain: How do we know about the past? Are there limits to our possible knowledge about the past? What is involved in explaining a historical fact? Answers to these questions and others in the same vein may be difficult and controversial; but it is clear how they fit into existing conceptions of philosophical inquiry.

If the philosophy of history were limited to these sorts of questions, then it would be a variant of epistemology or the philosophy of science. However, some philosophers have felt that substantive history itself raises questions that do not reduce to questions about knowledge of this domain.

Here is one possibility: perhaps we need a **metaphysics** of history -- an account of the kinds of things, forces, and structures that exist in the realm of history. Perhaps the metaphysics of history can shed light on what kinds of structures and entities travel through history, and what kinds of causal processes and dynamical systems propel change in the structures and entities.

For example: Marx wrote that "history is the history of class conflict." This implies that classes are historical objects -- they exist in the flow of historical events. Other historians have said things like this: classical slavery gave way to feudalism, which was followed by capitalism. This formulation presupposes that large social-economic systems -- for example, social property systems -- exist in history and conform to some set of dynamics. And yet others have tried to analyze world history into a set of more or less distinct civilizations -- bodies of values, ideas, identities, and institutions that differ significantly one from the other.

We might say, however, that none of these questions pertains to a metaphysics of **history**, but rather a metaphysics of the **social world**. History is about change and transformation; but the subject of change is social structures, cultures, and agents that exist within the social world at a period of time. So classes, social-property systems, ideologies, and religions are all **social** arrangements that change over time. If there is such a thing as a "civilization", this is a fact about society at a certain time, not a fact about the structure of history. History has to do with events and dynamic properties; the social world encompasses everything that is happening at a moment in time. We might consider an analogy with fluids -- "history" is the waves, society is the water.

We might be more inclined to recognize a metaphysics of history if we thought there were temporal structures that could be discovered in substantive history -- perhaps the business cycle, the Kondratiev long-wave economic cycle, or the rise and fall of civilizations. In other words, if we thought that events and changes conformed to a higher-level pattern of temporal change, we might want to say that the meta-temporal pattern is a metaphysical characteristic of history. But it would also be tempting to say: these patterns of change too represent nothing more than empirical characteristics of social phenomena over time. They need to be explained using the tools of the social sciences and are not properly the subject of *apriori* investigation.
This suggests two important conclusions: There is no such thing as an historical ontology as such but only a social ontology; and there is no such thing as an historical theory of change as such but only social theories of change. The ontologies and theories that historians employ are strictly speaking features of social science knowledge rather than historical knowledge. So, properly understood, there is no legitimate place for an investigation of the "metaphysics" of history; that space is filled entirely by an understanding of the metaphysics of the social world. tIn this case, the philosophy of history is no more than a component of the philosophy of social science, with no distinctive questions or answers of its own other than the epistemological issues mentioned above.

This discussion suggests a few rather deflationary conclusions about the possible scope of research in the philosophy of history:

- Philosophical work directed towards elucidating the epistemology and methodology of historical knowledge is straightforward but limited.
- Philosophical work directed towards elucidating the metaphysical underpinnings of "history" will be disappointing; those foundations exist within the domain of the philosophy of the social sciences rather than the philosophy of history.
- The dynamics of historical change are properly the subject matter of the social sciences rather than the philosopher of history.
- It is true that some historical investigation requires "hermeneutic" interpretation of meanings; but these efforts always fall at the level of interpreting the meaning of historical actions and cultural settings.

This analysis suggests there isn't a lot of scope for the philosophy of history beyond the function of serving as a counterpart to the philosophy of science. We might say that there are basically three relevant activities in the realm of historical thinking. There is first-order research into facts about the past based on currently available evidence. There is analysis and explanation of those facts, including methods ranging from ethnography to process-tracing to application of findings from the social sciences. These two parts of historical research are guided by ensembles of historical methods and practices (historiography). And there is philosophical reflection on the logic and limitations of these processes of inquiry and inference, the narrowly epistemic version of the philosophy of history. This aspect of the discussion includes as well the conceptual work that philosophers are well qualified for -- posing and answering questions like "What is history?", "What is a cause?", or "What is involved in expressing a meaningful action?". On this scenario there is no room at all for substantive or metaphysical philosophy of history.

The title of Ian Hacking's book, Historical Ontology, suggests that he thinks otherwise, and that there is such a thing as an ontology of history. However, the sense of the title is different: he is interested in the history of ontologies -- the ways that our conceptual systems have changed over time -- rather than the ontology of history.

(I should say that this is a pretty limited view of the scope of the philosophy of history, so it should be taken as provisional.)

Adapting to change

Friday, October 07, 2011



Organizations always have a set of fundamental needs. The organization does something -- it provides a commodity to consumers, it provides services that individuals pay for, it provides charitable services based on foundation funding, it employs specialists to steal credit card information on the Internet. All of these activities consume resources.

For the sake of clarity, let's have two organizations in mind: a mid-size company that produces cigarette lighters and a non-profit organization that provides adult literacy education in a high-poverty environment.

Key to an organization's "metabolism" is its regular access to resources, including especially revenue and people. Generally an organization has an existing model for satisfying these needs. It generates revenues through sale of goods and services or through gifts from foundations, corporations, and individuals who have a commitment to the organization's purposes. It acquires a talent base by hiring talented individuals and by attracting motivated volunteers. Call this a business plan--keeping in mind that profit-based and non-profit organizations alike need a business plan. If the business plan is a good one, the revenues match the expenditure needs of the organization, the talented members of the organization use their time and budgets to produce the organization's "deliverables", and the cycle begins again. The organization is sustainable.

A particularly bad scenario for a non-profit service provider is to begin its work on the basis of a large initial grant which is spent down until the organization expires. The profit-based equivalent is the new business that starts up with a large infusion of venture capital but never develops a revenue stream to support its activities.

What happens when the organization's business environment changes abruptly? Significant changes might include --

- Abrupt change in demand for the organization's product
- Abrupt change in the consumer's ability or willingness to pay for the product at the current price
- Change in the willingness of donors to provide support for this kind of activity
- Change in the costs of inputs necessary for producing the deliverables
- Appearance of a strong competitor who draws off demand and donors

We can easily think of examples of each of these changes. Gasoline prices spiked in summer 2010 and demand for large vehicles plummeted. Rapid increase in unemployment results in a massive decline to demand for mid-range restaurants. Foundations get frustrated about the slow rate of progress in education reform and cut back on funding for education reform NGOs. Digital photography rapidly undermines film companies. The iPod swamps the market for digital music players and other suppliers fail in the marketplace.

The question I'm raising here is a difficult one: what does an organization need to do in order to perceive and adapt to persistent changes like these? If we were asking this question in the field of ecology, the answer would be simple: many local species facing this kind of change simply will not be able to adapt in time and will go locally extinct. Natural selection is not a rapid-adaptation process, in general. Random variation and selection take time and large populations.

But this doesn't need to be the case for organizations. Organizations are led by intelligent and forward-looking people, after all, so in theory it should be possible for organizations to perceive impending change in their business environments and adjust accordingly. However, we also know that many organizations fail to do so. Think of the newspaper industry, the music publishing industry, the film-based photography industry, and some sectors of charitable providers.

So what are some positive heuristics that support effective adaptation? And what are some common sources of failure?

On the positive side:

- Be fact-driven and honest in assessing current conditions in the operating environment. Don't permit wishful thinking to cloud the assessment.
- Be rigorous in analyzing the consequences of these changes. If you are the leader of a non-profit with a great mission in an environment where funders have decisively turned away from this issue, consider the alternatives: downsize the delivery plan, reduce the cost of delivery, change the priorities of the organization, find new revenue partners, or find new sources of funding.
- Be innovative; search carefully for new ways of accomplishing the organization's goals at lower overall cost. A labor union might consider whether its army of organizers might be made more efficient (lower resource cost) by making use of social media.

On the negative side, we can think of a number of psychological and institutional factors that impede successful adaptation. Wishful thinking is at the top of the list. It is very easy

for decision makers to persuade themselves that observed trends will quickly reverse -- "the foundations will soon return to a focus on poverty," "digital photography will never achieve the resolution and color fidelity of film," "the state's support for poverty programs will return after the next election."

Second, decision makers may reason that careful but painful adaptation in the near term may be more painful for them individually than the consequences of eventual failure of the organization in the long term. This may be worsened by CEO compensation packages that create perverse incentives for them. The CEO of our fictional cigarette lighter manufacturer may reason that another 10 years of gradually declining sales, leading to bankruptcy, may be preferable to the turbulence and conflict associated with downsizing, shifting to another product, or introducing a lot of new technology.

Third, institutions have an enormous amount of inertia when it comes to change. Consolidating services within an organization, for example, is almost always met with a great deal of resistance from the various divisions that will need to "share" their IT person, their budget specialist, or their web designer. And rethinking the "deliverable" of the organization, or the way that it is provided, is also often met with a lot of internal resistance. A poverty-focused organization like the United Way may decide that its old model of distributing charitable funds needs to be more focused on a few central priorities; and this shift of delivery is likely to be met with resistance both internally (from existing staff) and externally (from powerful beneficiaries of the earlier system).

Fourth, there are very real limits on our ability to project current information onto future realities. What was called wishful thinking above might well be accurate in some situations: the current dire circumstances do sometimes get better and the existing business plan turns out to be sustainable after all. So there is always a degree of uncertainty associated with efforts to assess the current and future business environment.

No organization wants to be classified as a "dinosaur" -- the perfect embodiment of an "organization" (species) trapped in a period of change that moves more rapidly than its ability to adapt. But many do in fact find themselves in the contemporary equivalent of the tarpits when they run into unfamiliar and rapid periods of change. I have to hope that universities don't allow themselves to slip into that kind of endgame as they face the difficult and changing environment that currently confronts them.

The Racial Equity dividend

Wednesday, October 12, 2011

Racial justice organizations around the United States are struggling to find the resources from the corporate and foundation worlds needed to support their continuing work. One part of the problem seems to be that business leaders simply aren't convinced that racial inequalities are a fundamental and debilitating problem in the United States that presents a concrete threat to their own business activities. The issue has fallen off the first page of the priority list. This suggest that we need to revisit some of the costs that the structures of racial inequity are imposing on regions and cities.

The social costs of persistent racial inequity come in many dimensions. But particularly persuasive is the issue of the actual economic costs that these inequities impose on a region. We might put the point this way: racial inequities are an economic drag on a

region, blocking the production of wealth and income and slowing down economic growth. Is it possible to estimate the magnitude of these hidden economic costs of continuing racial inequity?

Let's think about this problem in the context of southeast Michigan and its major city, Detroit. What would southeast Michigan look like if the racial gaps of the region were erased? The gaps that exist between white and black citizens in the region are well documented. Residential segregation is extreme. Unemployment levels are dramatically higher for African-American youth and adults. Health disparities are large and debilitating. Educational outcomes are significantly worse for African-American young people, including high school graduation rates and college attendance. And, of course, family and individual incomes and wealth levels are substantially different.

So imagine a different scenario: a region in which residential segregation has ended. Schooling outcomes are equal for white and black students. Health disparities have disappeared. Employment rates have equalized. And average incomes, wealth holdings, and employment rates have converged across races. Plainly this would be socially desirable outcome; it would be a great improvement in social justice. But what would the economic effects be? How much new income and wealth would this scenario represent over the present situation?

We might approach this question directly, by estimating the aggregate income created by bringing 40% of the population up to the per capita income of the majority population. Likewise we could estimate the aggregate wealth that would be needed in order to equalize the wealth gap. Nationally black households in 2010 earned only 58% of the income of white households (link). I don't have full data for Wayne County at hand, but if the ratio is roughly similar, this implies roughly a $20,000 gap in Wayne County household income between white and black households, which aggregates to almost $6 billion in lost income as a result of racial inequity. If the social factors leading to this inequity were eliminated, this would add $6 billion to the county's income, consumption, and savings. (These are back-of-the envelope estimates, of course, and should be taken only as illustrative of the magnitude of the problem. Here are some basic demographic and income data for Wayne County based on census results; link.)

This scenario presupposes economic growth and jobs growth, but this assumption is supported by the large increase in the talent and education level of the population. We would also need to estimate the economic benefits associated with improved health status for the African-American population -- likewise a large number that public health researchers have probably already estimated. It is well understood in the field of global public health that improving a population's health status also improves its productivity. (Here is a study sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation that tries to estimate these costs and benefits. Nationally the costs associated with racial disparities in health are estimated in the trillions.)

Another approach to this issue would be to follow the lead of CEOs for Cities in attempting to estimate the "talent dividend" (link): do an econometric study of cities measuring degree of racial difference and per capita income. This would be the "racial equity dividend." I don't know if there is a recognized metric that already exists for measuring racial gaps in metropolitan regions, but it shouldn't be hard to construct. It should include components reflecting segregation, income, schooling, and health -- kind of a Human Development Index for Regional Racial Equity. We could then plot racial inequity against per capita income to see whether there is a relationship between these

variables. I don't know the answer, but I'd bet there is such a relationship. This would be a genuinely interesting piece of social research. And it might help communities realize the core importance of attacking their regional issues when it comes to racial equity. (I would love to know from Richard Florida whether there is any work available on this question in his research on cities.)

This whole line of thought depends on a hidden premise: that the racial gaps that exist in the metro regions of our country derive ultimately from racialized social and economic institutions that systematically produce and reproduce these racialized outcomes. This is what we once referred to as "institutionalized racism", though the term now sounds dated. It represents the systemic ways in which African-American people are tracked into lower social outcomes in health, education, employment, and income and wealth. Justice requires that we at long last dissolve those institutional tracks. But the economic health of the country demands no less as well. And it is in the best interest of corporations and foundations to support these efforts in their home cities and regions.

(Here is a series in the Detroit News on the costs of segregation; link.)

Rawls's framework for global justice

Saturday, October 15, 2011

Rawls's A Theory of Justice was immediately received as a major and progressive contribution to the theory of justice within existing societies. His Law of Peoples (1999) was intended to carry his basic ideas about justice to the international realm. (Here is a PDF of a preliminary version of the title essay of the book as published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1993.) Here is how he defined the goal of a law of peoples in 1993:

The law of peoples ... is a family of political concepts along with principles of right justice, and the common good that specify the content of a liberal conception of justice worked up to extend to and apply to international law. It provides the concepts and principles by reference to which that law is to be judged. (43)

In contrast to the reception *A Theory of Justice* received, his work on the international part of the theory has not had much influence, and was roundly criticized for being too accepting of international inequalities. Philip Pettit put the point this way in his contribution to Rex Martin and David Reidy's Rawls's Law of Peoples: A Realistic Utopia:

John Rawls's work on the law of peoples is notorious for its anti-cosmopolitan stance: roughly, its insistence that those of us in well-ordered societies do not owe to the members of other societies the sort of justice we owe to one another. (38)

This is exactly the critique that Philippe van Parijs offered to Rawls prior to publication of the book (link).

Given that Rawls's intuitions seem to have been solidly progressive in other spheres, it is worth considering why he took this very limited view of the obligations of justice in the global context. Why did he begin with the perspective of peoples rather than persons? (Here I'll make use of the 1993 statements of the view.)

A number of the critics put their cases in terms of Rawls's anti-cosmopolitanism. "Cosmopolitanism" is the view that we are all citizens of the world, and we have positive moral relationships with each other no matter what nation issues our passports. No one would deny that everyone has some kinds of moral relationships to everyone else -- for

example, the obligation not to impose harm on innocent people. But cosmopolitanism extends to the idea of positive obligations -- the obligation to render assistance as well as the obligation to refrain from gratuitous harm. The contrary to cosmopolitanism might be called "nationalism", but this implies assumptions that Rawls would presumably not have accepted. So let's call it "bounded people-ism": the claims of justice that a person has against other persons extend only to other members of his/her people and government.

One deep reason for the direction that Rawls took was the assumption he made about how to make use of the original position and the veil of ignorance in arriving at principles of international justice. If this framework involved all human beings, then the results would have been very similar to the argument made in the case of a well-ordered society: inequalities need to be the least system possible consistent with maximizing the position of the least-well-off stratum of society. However, Rawls chose instead to include "peoples" rather than "persons" in the argument from the original position in the case of international justice. What is a people?

By peoples I mean persons and their dependents seen as a corporate body and as organized by their political institutions, which establish the powers of government. In democratic societies persons will be citizens; in hierarchical and other societies they will be members. (41)
And he directly addresses the question of why it should be peoples rather than persons whose perspectives are represented in the original position for international justice:

Wouldn't it be better to start with the world as a whole, with a global original position, so to speak, and discuss the question whether, and in what form, there should be states, or peoples, at all? ... I think there is no clear initial answer to this question. We should try various alternatives and weigh their pluses and minuses. Since in working out justice as fairness I begin with domestic society, I shall continue from there as if what has been done so far is more or less sound. So I simply build on the steps taken until now, as this seems to provide a suitable starting point for the extension to the law of peoples. A further reason for proceeding thus is that peoples as corporate bodies organized by their governments now exist in some form all over the world. (42-43)
So his reasons for beginning with this premise are, first, we have to start somewhere and there isn't a philosophically compelling reason to favor persons over peoples in this setting; and second, peoples (and states) exist as actors in the world, so it is feasible to begin the analysis at this level. This way of formulating the original position is designed to establish fair terms of interaction between societies -- or in other words,

... fair conditions under which the parties, this time as representatives of societies well ordered by liberal conceptions of justice, are to specify the laws of peoples and the fair terms of their cooperation. (45)
This formulation, of course, immediately precludes certain questions, including all questions of difference in outcomes for the least-well-off in the various societies. The fact that the LWO in country X are worse off than the LWO in country Y cannot be a factor in this deliberation, and therefore there cannot emerge a positive obligation to transfer resources from society Y to X to ameliorate this difference.

Here are the principles that Rawls arrives at through this construction:

1. *Peoples (as organized by their governments) are free and independent, and their freedom and independence is to be respected by other peoples.*
2. *Peoples are equal and parties to their own agreements.*
3. *Peoples have the right of self-defense but no right to war.*

4. *Peoples are to observe a duty of nonintervention.*
5. *Peoples are to observe treaties and undertakings.*
6. *Peoples are to observe certain specified restrictions on the conduct of war (assumed to be in self-defense).*
7. *Peoples are to honor human rights. (46)*

In the final version of the argument in 1997 he adds a final principle:

8. *Peoples have a duty to assist other peoples living under unfavorable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime.*

Later in 1993 he comments on the idea of a human right:

Human rights have, then, these three roles:
1. Their being fulfilled is a necessary condition of a regime's legitimacy and of the decency of its legal order.
2. Their fulfillment is also sufficient to exclude justified and forceful intervention by other peoples, say by economic sanctions or, in grave cases, by military force.
3. "They set a moral limit to pluralism" among peoples. (59)

Several things are evident from these lists. First, the obligations represented here are indeed minimalist; basically, they are limitations on the use of coercive means by peoples (states) to achieve their ends. Even the 8th principle added in the 1997 version creates an obligation only to assist other peoples in achieving a just political regime. Second, there are no requirements of distributive justice in this list of principles. Each society has internal requirements of distributive justice; but there is no inter-society requirement of distributive justice. The fact that there are large inequalities of resources between countries is not a basis for a claim of injustice, according to these principles.

This framework has been strongly criticized by philosophers and others who found that it was far too accepting of global inequalities. Alan Buchanan focuses on the global inequality part of the story in his 2000 contribution in *Ethics*. Buchanan holds that even representatives of peoples would not have overlooked the significant inequalities imposed on peoples by the global economic system. He maintains that the original position concerned with international justice would have to take into account two important facts:

There is a global basic structure, which, like the domestic basic structure, is an important subject of justice because it has profound and enduring effects on the prospects of individuals and groups, including peoples in Rawls's sense.

The populations of states are not "peoples" in Rawls's sense and are not likely to become so without massive, unjustifiable coercion, but rather are often conflicting collections of "peoples" and other groups. (700-1)

The first fact, if recognized, would ensure that the international original position would necessarily take into account the inequalities created by this system for different peoples. He also believes that the second fact raises salient issues for the international original position. Essentially the issue here is this: what happens when the multiple peoples of a single state come into conflict? By making the assumptions that "peoples within unified states" are the agents within the international original position, Rawls makes it impossible to arrive at principles of international justice that would specify just behavior in the face of civil war or secessionist movements. This approach makes it impossible to address intrastate conflict.

Tom Pogge extends his own critique of Rawls's position on international distributive

justice in a *Fordham Law Review* article (link) (also included in Martin and Reidy's Rawls's Law of Peoples: A Realistic Utopia). Fundamentally, Pogge is highly critical of Rawls's failure to arrive at an international theory of justice that provides a basis for critique of global inequalities. In this piece he argues that Rawls's two theories are in fact inconsistent with each other.

As indicated above, much of this body of criticism has to do with the view that Rawls's *Law of Peoples* creates only the most limited obligations across peoples. His view is not "cosmopolitan". But a more fundamental criticism, which Buchanan hints at, is that there is a major strand of injustice embedded within the world system that is wholly invisible within Rawls's formulation of the law of peoples. This is the fact that global institutions may create systematically imbalanced economic relations among states, with the result that some states are in a position to take unfair advantage of other states. This is a form of injustice that would not be accepted within the terms of a domestic society. But there is no basis within the framework of the law of peoples to identify and criticize these types of injustices.

These criticisms are surely correct. As a theory of global justice, the *Law of Peoples* doesn't begin to provide enough of a normative basis to arrive at sound judgments about international arrangements. I began by asking how it came to pass that Rawls presented such a limited theory of international justice. The best answer I can offer is that he was focusing on the wrong issues. He focused on issues of war and interstate violence, and he did not sufficiently bring into his view the empirical realities associated with a highly unequal world economic structure. And this is puzzling, since questions of global inequalities -- of resources, of power, and of self-determination -- were certainly widely debated at Harvard in the 1970s and 1980s while Rawls's thinking on this subject was developing.

(In addition to critics, Rawls has some defenders in this area. Samuel Freeman provides an extensive and reasoned response to many of these criticisms of Rawls's theory of international justice here (link).)

Historiography and the philosophy of history

Sunday, October 16, 2011



The topic of the philosophy of history comes up frequently here. The related domain of

"historiography" has not come up yet, however. What is the relation between these bodies of study about the writing of history?

Let's begin by asking the basic question: what is historiography? In its most general sense, the term refers to the study of historians' methods and practices. Any intellectual or creative practice is guided by a set of standards and heuristics about how to proceed, and "experts" evaluate the performances of practitioners based on their judgments of how well the practitioner meets the standards. So one task we always have is to attempt to identify these standards and criteria of good performance. This is true for theatre and literature, and it is true for writing history. Historiography is at least in part the effort to do this work for a particular body of historical writing.

Historians normally make truth claims, and they ask us to accept those claims based on the reasoning they present. So a major aspect of the study of historiography has to do with defining the ideas of evidence, rigor, and standards of reasoning for historical inquiry. We presume that historians want to discover empirically supported truths about the past, and we presume that they want to offer inferences and interpretations that are somehow regulated by standards of scientific rationality. (Simon Schama challenges some of these ideas in Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations.) So the apprentice practitioner wants to gain knowledge of the practices of his/her elders in the profession: what counts as a compelling argument, how to assess a body of archival evidence, how to offer or criticize an interpretation of complex events that necessarily exceeds the available evidence. The historiographer has a related task: he/she would like to be able to codify the main methods and standards of one historical school or another.

There are other desiderata governing a good historical work, and these criteria may change from culture to culture and epoch to epoch. Discerning the historian's goals is crucial to deciding how well he or she succeeds. So discovering these stylistic and aesthetic standards that guide the historian's work is itself an important task for historiography. This means that the student of historiography will naturally be interested in the conventions of historical writing and rhetoric that are characteristic of a given period or school.

A full historiographic "scan" of a given historian might include:

- What methods of discovery does he/she use?
- What models of explanation?
- What paradigm of presentation?
- What standards of style and rhetoric?
- What interpretive assumptions?

A historical "school" might be defined as a group of interrelated historians who share a significant number of specific assumptions about evidence, explanation, and narrative.

Historiography becomes itself historical when we recognize that these frameworks of assumptions about historical knowledge and reasoning change over time. On this assumption, the history of historical thinking and writing is itself an interesting subject. How did historians of various periods in human history conduct their study and presentation of history? Under this rubric we find books on the historiography of the ancient Greeks; Renaissance historiography; or the historiography of German romanticism. This kind of reflection has a lot in common with literary history or art history; the historiographer is seeking to identify "styles" of historical thinking in various times, as well as recognizing the distinctive contributions of particular historians. Arnaldo

Momigliano's writings on the ancient historians fall in this category (The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography). Here is a tantalizing set of questions that Momigliano raises with respect to ancient history-writing:

If these preliminary considerations are valid there is some justification for asking the following six questions: (1) What have Greek and Jewish historiographies in common and why and to what extent did Greek historiography ultimately prevail? (2) Why did Thucydides rather than Herodotus become the most authoritative historian of Antiquity? (3) What part did the antiquarians play in historical research? (4) How was Greek historiography imported into Rome and what did the romanisation of Greek historiography entail? (5) What is the place of Tacitus in historical thought? (6) Why and in what way has ecclesiastical historiography a tradition of its own? (2)

These six questions become the focus of the six chapters of the book. In a nutshell, Momigliano is looking at the several traditions of ancient history-writing as a set of normative practices that can be dissected and understood in their specificity and their cultural contexts. Here is a description that illustrates some of Momigliano's orienting assumptions:

What I think is typically Greek is the critical attitude towards the recording of events, that is, the development of critical methods enabling us to distinguish between facts and fancies. To the best of my knowledge no historiography eralier than the Greek or independent of it developed these critical methods; and we have inherited the Greek methods. (30)

A second primary use of the concept of historiography is more present-oriented and more methodological. It involves the study and analysis of historical methods of research, inquiry, inference, and presentation used by more-or-less contemporary historians. How do contemporary historians go about their tasks of understanding the past? Here we can talk about the historiographical challenges that confronted Philip Huang as he investigated the Chinese peasant economy in the 1920s and 1930s (The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China), or the historiographical issues raised in Robert Darnton's telling of the Great Cat Massacre (The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History). Sometimes these issues have to do with the scarcity or bias in the available bodies of historical records (for example, the fact that much of what Huang refers to about the village economy of North China was gathered by the research teams of the occupying Japanese army). Sometimes they have to do with the difficulty of interpreting historical sources (for example, the unavoidable necessity Darnton faced of providing meaningful interpretation of a range of documented events that did not bear their meanings on their sleeves). And sometimes the historiographic question has to do with the mode of presentation chosen by the historian (for example, Darnton's choice of presenting the notebooks of Joseph d'Hemery, the police inspector of the book trade in Montpelier, as a sociological source).

For example, there has been substantial disagreement among historians of China about the status of the Chinese rural economy in the 1920s and 1930s. Historians who give credence to travelers' reports conclude that conditions were awful (R. H. Tawney, Land and labour in China). Historians who maintain that only validated quantitative data constitute a relevant way of answering the question come to a diametrically opposed judgment (Loren Brandt, Commercialization and Agricultural Development: Central and Eastern China, 1870-1937). This is a historiographic disagreement, centered on the issue of what counts as credible evidence.

We might ask, finally, what is the relationship between historiography and the philosophy of history. There is a degree of overlap between the two fields in the fact that both are concerned with identifying and evaluating the standards of reasoning that are used in various historical traditions. That said, historiography is generally more descriptive and less evaluative than the philosophy of history. And it is more concerned with the specifics of research and writing than is the philosophy of history.

Levels of politics

Sunday, October 23, 2011

I've focused occasionally on the idea of "levels" of social arrangements, from the local to the intermediate to the higher levels, with the idea that higher levels are composed of structures and activities at lower levels. Generally I've had in mind examples from one specific area of the social sciences to illustrate these points -- sociology. How do these claims look, however, when we consider them in light of political science?

If we wanted to provide a brief definition of "politics", it might go along these lines: the institutions and patterns of behavior through which decisions about public policies and the expenditure of public resources are determined and implemented. This includes study of the personnel of governing institutions; the nature of governing institutions; and the strategies and behavior of all those affected by those institutions.

There is one clear sense in which politics and government contain "levels". This derives from the fact that governance systems have a hierarchical, semi-nested structure of ascending scope of control and authority. In the United States we have Federal laws, state laws, and county and municipal laws. And this differentiation also imposes a criterion of level: higher level means broader jurisdiction over territory and population. Each possesses a set of legislative institutions and officials, along with a bureaucracy focused on implementation and enforcement. These zones of governance authority differ in terms of scope and scale, with units of governance ranging from national to state to county and city.

However, these zones of political governance are not hierarchical in another important sense: the Federal level is not composed of the state or municipal governance systems. Rather, each is independent from the other. Higher-level units have the authority to enact rules and laws (in some instances) that constrain the actions of the lower-level jurisdictions. But the personnel, officials, and systems of the two jurisdictions are distinct and independent. And it is entirely possible, even predictable, that there will be policy disagreements between them.

A second clear interpretation of "levels" of governance corresponds to the formal hierarchy of a large administrative system. The President exercises authority at the highest level within the executive branch. Cabinet secretaries report to the president and manage and direct complex and extensive organizations (Departments) dedicated to specific functions: Justice, Environmental Protection, Education, ... Each department of the executive branch in turn consists of a descending proliferation of bureaus, regional offices, field offices, and the like. The Chicago field office of the XYZ department reports to a regional director, who takes direction from the Secretary. The layers of the organization of government can be referred to as "levels," differentiated by position within a hierarchical system.

It is also evident that the networks of power and influence that operate at the Federal level are distinct from those at the state or local level. The powerful individuals are different, the organizations through which they exercise their influence are different, and the sources of their power are different. The Daley machine in Chicago in the 1960s exercised great power in city politics, middling power in the corridors of Illinois government, and less influence at the Congressional level. So the different "levels" of government correspond to different loci of influence and activism, and the study of Congressional politics may lead to rather different findings from the study of state or municipal politics.

This means that scholars who are primarily interested in the political mechanisms through which various policies get chosen will select carefully the networks of individuals and organizations they study, in order to shed light on the operative level of governance. But it would be misleading to describe these as different "levels" of politics; rather, different people and organizations are at work in similar policy areas with uncoordinated results in Chicago, Cook County, Springfield, and Washington.

So the idea of "levels" of politics doesn't seem to be a particularly valuable conceptual scheme when it comes to analyzing political behavior and organization. It misleads us into thinking that politics has a fundamental structure from low to high. Instead, we are perhaps better served by a view that picks out various arenas of conflict over resources -- politics -- without the orienting language of higher and lower levels.

Wherever we start our examination of the social world, from the situation of particular individuals, to labor unions, firms, and faith organizations, to federal agencies and multinational trading regimes, the logic of the social world seems to be the same: there are groups of actors planning and acting in that locus, there are structures and rules that surround them, and there are organizations and structures that are broader in scope and jurisdiction and there are such at lesser levels of scope and jurisdiction. There is an up, down, and sideways everywhere in social action. And this is equally true in the zone of political action and institution.

Social complexity

Monday, October 24, 2011



Social ensembles are often said to be "complex". What does this mean?

Herbert Simon is one of the seminal thinkers in the study of complexity. His 1962 article, "The Architecture of Complexity" (link), put forward several ideas that have become core to the conceptual frameworks of people who now study social complexity. So it is worthwhile highlighting a few of the key ideas that were put forward in that article. Here is Simon's definition of complexity:

Roughly, by a complex system I mean one made up of a large number of parts that

interact in a nonsimple way. In such systems, the whole is more than the sum of the parts, not in an ultimate, metaphysical sense, but in the important pragmatic sense that, given the properties of the parts and the laws of their interaction, it is not a trivial matter to infer the properties of the whole. In the face of complexity, an in-principle reductionist may be at the same time a pragmatic holist. (468)

Notice several key ideas contained here, as well as several things that are not said. First, the complexity of a system derives from the "nonsimple" nature of the interaction of its parts (subsystems). A watch is a simple system, because it has many parts but the behavior of the whole is the simple sum of the direct mechanical interactions of the parts. The watchspring provides an (approximately) constant impulse to the gearwheel, producing a temporally regular motion in the gears. This motion pushes forward the time registers (second, minute, hour) in a fully predictable way. If the spring's tension influenced not only the gearwheel, but also the size of the step taken by the minute hand; or if the impulse provided by the spring varied significantly according to the alignment of the hour and second hands and the orientation of the spring -- then the behavior of the watch would be "complex". It would be difficult or impossible to predict the state of the time registers by counting the ticks in the watch gearwheel. So this is a first statement of the idea of complexity: the fact of multiple causal interactions among the many parts (subsystems) that make up the whole system.

A second main idea here is that the behavior of the system is difficult to predict as a result of the nonsimple interactions among the parts. In a complex system we cannot provide a simple aggregation model of the system that adds up the independent behaviors of the parts; rather, the parts are influenced in their behaviors by the behaviors of other components. The state of the system is fixed by interdependent subsystems; which implies that the system's behavior can oscillate wildly with apparently similar initial conditions. (This is one explanation of the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown: engineers attempted to "steer" the system to a safe shutdown by manipulating several control systems at once; but these control systems had complex effects on each other, with the result that the engineers catastrophically lost control of the system.)

A third important point here is Simon's distinction between "metaphysical reducibility" and "pragmatic holism." He accepts what we would today call the principle of supervenience: the state of the system supervenes upon the states of the parts. But he rejects the feasibility of performing a reduction of the behavior of the system to an account of the properties of the parts. He does not use the concept of "emergence" here, but this would be another way of putting his point: a metaphysically emergent property of a system is one that cannot in principle be derived from the characteristics of the parts. A pragmatically emergent property is one that supervenes upon the properties of the parts, but where it is computationally difficult or impossible to map the function from the state of the parts to the state of the system. This point has some relevance to the idea of "relative explanatory autonomy" mentioned in an earlier posting (link). The latter idea postulates that we can sometimes discover system properties (causal powers) of a complex system that are in principle fixed by the underlying parts, but where it is either impossible or unnecessary to discover the specific causal sequences through which the system's properties come to be as they are.

Another key idea in this article is Simon's idea of a hierarchic system.

By a hierarchic system, or hierarchy, I mean a system that is composed of interrelated subsystems, each of the latter being, in turn, hierarchic in structure until we reach some lowest level of elementary subsystem. (468)

I have already given an example of one kind of hierarchy that is frequently encountered in the social sciences: a formal organization. Business firins, governments, universities all have a clearly visible parts-within-parts structure. (469)
Here the idea is also an important one. It is a formal specification of a particular kind of ensemble in which structures at one level of aggregation are found to be composed separately of structures or subsystems at a lower level of aggregation. Simon offers the example of a biological cell that can be analyzed into a set of exhaustive and mutually independent subsystems nested within each other. It is essential that there is a relation of enclosure as we descend the hierarchy of structures: the substructures of level S are entirely contained within it and do not serve as substructures of some other system S'.

It is difficult to think of biological examples that violate the conditions of hierarchy -- though we might ask whether an organism and its symbiote might be best understood as a non-hierarchical system. But examples are readily available in the social world. Labor unions and corporate PACs play significant causal roles in modern democracies. But they are not subsystems of the political process in a hierarchical sense: they are not contained within the state, and they play roles in non-state systems as well. (A business lobby group may influence both the policies chosen by a unit of government and the business strategy of a healthcare system.)

Simon appears to believe that hierarchies reduce the complexity of systems; and they support the feature of what we would now call "modularity", where we can treat the workings of a subsystem as a self-enclosed unit that works roughly the same no matter what changes occur in other subsystems.

Simon puts this point in his own language of "decomposability." A system is decomposable if we can disaggregate its behavior onto the sum of the independent behaviors of its parts. A system is "nearly decomposable" if the parts of the system have some effects on each other, but these effects are small relative to the overall workings of the system.

At least some kinds of hierarchic systems can be approximated successfully as nearly decomposable systems. The main theoretical findings from the approach can be summed up in two propositions:

(a) in a nearly decomposable system, the short-run behavior of each of the component subsystems is approximately independent of the short-run behavior of the other components; (b) in the long run, the behavior of any one of the components depends in only an aggregate way on the behavior of the other components. (474)
He illustrates this point in the case of social systems in these terms:

In the dynamics of social systems, where members of a system communicate with and influence other members, near decomposability is generally very prominent. This is most obvious in formal organizations, where the formal authority relation connects each member of the organization with one immediate superior and with a small number of subordinates. Of course many communications in organizations follow other channels than the lines of formal authoritv. But most of these channels lead from any particular individual to a very limited number of his superiors, subordinates, and associates. Hence, departmental boundaries play very much the same role as the walls in our heat example. (475)
And in summary:

We have seen that hierarchies have the property of near-decomposability. Intra-component linkages are generally stronger than intercomponent linkages. This fact has the effect of separating the high-frequency dynamics of a hierarchy -- involving the internal structure of the components-- from the low frequency dynamics-involving interaction among components. (477)

So why does Simon expect that systems will generally be hierarchical, and hierarchies will generally be near-decomposable? It turns out that this is an expectation that derives from the notion that systems were created by designers (who would certainly favor these features because they make the system predictable and understandable) or evolved through some process of natural selection from simpler to more complex agglomerations. So we might expect that hydroelectric plants and motion detector circuits in frogs' visual systems are hierarchical and near-decomposable.

But here is an important point about social complexity. Neither of these expectations is likely to be satisfied in the case of social systems. Take the causal processes (sub-systems) that make up a city. And consider some aggregate properties we may be interested in -- emigration, resettlement, crime rates, school truancy, real estate values. Some of the processes that influence these properties are designed (zoning boards, school management systems), but many are not. Instead, they are the result of separate and non-teleological processes leading to the present. And there is often a high degree of causal interaction among these separate processes. As a result, it might be more reasonable to expect, contrary to Simon's line of thought here, that social systems are likely to embody greater complexity and less decomposability than the systems he uses as examples.

(A recent visit to the Center for Social Complexity at George Mason University (link) was very instructive for me. There is a great deal of very interesting work underway at the Center using agent-based modeling techniques to understand large, complicated social processes: population movements, housing markets, deforestation, and more. Particularly interesting is a blog by Andrew Crooks at the Center on various aspects of agent-based modeling of spatial processes.)

How can justice be causal?

Wednesday, October 26, 2011



Is social justice an empirical characteristic of a set of social arrangements? And can social justice be a causal factor in processes of social change or social stability?

Before justice could be considered an empirical feature of a set of social arrangements, we would need to have a more specific understanding of what we mean by the term. And we would need to be able to "operationalize" this complex concept in order to be able to apply it to different social arrangements. But neither of these tasks is insurmountable; certainly not more so than defining and applying the ideas of fascism, liberal democracy, or welfare state to specific societies.

So let's begin with a simple, applicable definition of justice. Let's focus on just three

dimensions of a society's functioning: distribution of access to society's wealth; the degree of abuse of power and its contrary, reliable legal protections of the person; and the extent of individual freedoms. Injustice involves --

- exploitation and inequality
- unwarranted coercion by the state or private organizations
- the abuse of people's freedoms.

A society is more just when it involves less of any of these features. And each of these dimensions seems measurable.

But immediately a problem arises. Each of these features requires a key normative judgement. Exploitation is the unfair division of the fruits of productive activity among the participants. The qualifier "unwarranted" requires that we supply a normative theory of the state. And "abuse" of freedom isn't simply restriction on freedom; it is the unjustified or unequal restriction on freedom. So in order to measure any of these characteristics in a particular social context it isn't enough to know who gets what or who does what to whom; we need a background set of normative ideas that allow us to judge which kinds of treatment and inequality count as exploitation, coercion, or the abuse of freedom.

This is where Amartya Sen's ideas about capabilities, realizations, and freedoms are practical and useful. We might substitute "capabilities realization deficit" for exploitation. Here we might argue that a society that leaves a significant portion of its population in material conditions where they cannot fulfill most of their basic human capabilities is for that reason unjust. We might measure the gap in human development between the top quintile and the bottom quintile as an estimate of the degree of exploitation that is prevalent in a given society. We may not know in detail how the system of distribution works, but the severity of the gap gives reason to believe that a portion of the society is being treated unfairly. The Human Development Index provides a basis for beginning to assess different countries along these lines (link).

Second, we might measure coercion and legality by the estimating the degree to which a society has effectively implemented a working system of law that is applied equally. The World Bank has made some efforts in this direction through its Worldwide Governance Indicators (link; working paper here). This gives us an empirical measure of the degree of lawlessness and unchecked state power that exists in various societies.

We might measure freedoms by aggregating observable features of democratic participation in various societies. *The Economist* has constructed a Democracy Index that was first implemented in 2006 (link). This gives us an empirical way of assessing the rough degree of involvement citizens can have in public decision-making; or in other words, it is a measure of the degree to which it is possible for citizens to exercise their freedoms in a public space.

So we might imagine a "justice index" for a society that aggregates measures like these into an overall assessment of the degree of justice the society currently demonstrates. It would then be interesting to see how societies differ in this measure, and how other important social characteristics may be correlated with this measure. I haven't done this experiment, but here's what we might expect: higher injustice ratings correspond to greater likelihood of social conflict, lower productivity, and lower community and civic engagement.

What mechanisms might be hypothesized that would originate in these core aspects of a society's justice profile and its various outcomes? Here we can identify a couple of factors

that would support a causal interpretation. For example, absolute or relative deprivation can cause people to rebel as they struggle to create social changes that protect their interests. Further, as Barrington Moore demonstrated in Injustice, the conviction that basic social arrangements are unfair can also move people to activism and resistance -- as we seem to be seeing in the Occupy Wall Street movement. These factors derive from the distributive arrangements of a society: injustice can provoke resistance. Similar statements can be made about state violence and lawlessness. We have seen in Libya, Syria, and Morocco that state violence against protesters can actually have the effect of strengthening and broadening resistance.

So these aspects of injustice can have effects on mobilization and resistance by a population. Are there other effects that injustice can have? As noted earlier (link), Pickett and Wilkinson argue in The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger that inequalities of income have surprisingly strong associations with a variety of social ills. This could be developed into an argument that social justice and injustice lead to behaviors that either promote or undermine social welfare.

Finally, it seems plausible to imagine that the intangibles that accompany a harmonious society -- a population of people who generally feel that they are fairly treated by their basic institutions and their fellow citizens -- will lead to a variety of other social goods, including cooperation, civic engagement, and economic productivity. Conversely, it is plausible to suppose that a dis-harmonious society would give rise to the negatives of these qualities: less cooperation, less civic involvement, and less economic productivity.

So two things seem true. First, it does seem possible to "measure" injustice (supported, of course, by a normative theory of why various kinds of inequality are illegitimate). And second, it does seem plausible that the features of a society that constitute its injustice may also have causal consequences for social unrest, social wellbeing, and social cooperation. And these are certainly significant social consequences.

(Perhaps there is an analogous set of questions at the individual level: Is "virtue" a specific empirical characteristic of a person's character? And can virtue be a causal factor in the individual's life outcomes and level of happiness?)

Theories of the actor

Friday, October 28, 2011



I'm attracted to an approach to sociological thinking that can be described as "actor-centered." The basic idea is that social phenomena are constituted by the actions of individuals, oriented by their own subjectivities and mental frameworks. It is recognized, of course, that the subjectivity of the actor doesn't come full-blown into his or her mind at adulthood; rather, we recognize that individuals are "socialized"; their thought processes and mental frameworks are developed through myriad social relationships and institutions. So the actor is a socially constituted individual.

If we take the approach to social explanation that demands that we understand how complex social processes and assemblages supervene on the actions and thoughts of individuals, then it is logical that we would want to develop a theory of the actor. We would like to have a justifiable set of ideas about how individuals perceive the social world, how they think about their own lives and commitments, and how they move from thought to action. But we have many alternatives available as we attempt to grapple with this task.

We might begin by asking, what work should a theory of the actor do? Here are a set of questions that a theory of the actor ought to consider:

1. How does the actor represent the world of action -- the physical and social environment? Here we need a vocabulary of mental frameworks, representational schemes, stereotypes, and paradigms.
2. How do these schemes become actualized within the actor's mental system? This is the developmental and socialization question.
3. What motivates the actor? What sorts of things does the actor seek to accomplish through action?
4. Here too there is a developmental question: how are these motives instilled in the actor through a social process of learning?
5. What mental forces lead to action? Here we are considering things like deliberative processes, heuristic reasoning, emotional attachments, habits, and internally realized practices.
6. How do the results of action get incorporated into the actor's mental system? Here we are thinking about memory, representation of the meanings of outcomes, regret, satisfaction, or happiness.
7. How do the results of past experiences inform the mental processes leading to subsequent actions? Here we are considering the ways that memory and emotional representations of the past may motivate different patterns of action in the future.

Aristotle guides much philosophical thinking on these questions by offering an orderly theory of the practical agent (The Nicomachean Ethics). His theory is centered on the idea of deliberative rationality, but he leaves a place for the emotions in action as well (to be controlled by the faculty of reason). Deliberation, in Aristotle's view, amounts to reflecting on one's goals and arranging them into a hierarchy; then choosing actions that permit the achievement of one's highest goals.

Formal rational choice theory provides a set of answers to several of these questions. Actors have preferences and beliefs; their preferences are well ordered; they assign probabilities and utilities to outcomes (the results of actions); and they choose a given action to maximize the satisfaction of their preferences.

Ethnographic thinkers such as Clifford Geertz or Erving Goffman take a different tack altogether; they give a lot of attention to questions 1 and 2; they provide "thick" descriptions of the motives and meanings of the actors (3); and they indicate a diverse set of answers to question 5. (Geertz and Goffman are discussed in other posts.)

Other anthropologists have favored a "performative" understanding of agency. The actor is understood as carrying out a culturally prescribed script in response to stereotyped social settings. Victor Turner's anthropology is a leading example of this approach to action (Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society).

Mayer Zald recommends the work of Karl Weick on the first question (Sensemaking in Organizations (Foundations for Organizational Science)). Here is how Weick explains

sensemaking:

The concept of sensemaking is well named because, literally, it means the making of sense. Active agents construct sensible, sensable events. They "structure the unknown". How they construct what they construct, why, and with what effects are the central questions for people interested in sensemaking. Investigators who sensemaking define it in quite different ways. Many investigators imply what Starbuck and Milliken make explicit, namely, that sensemaking involves placing stimuli into some kind of framework. The well-known phrase "frame of reference" has traditionally meant a generalized point of view that directs interpretations. (4) (references omitted)
It's worthwhile addressing this topic, because it would appear that we don't yet have a particularly good vocabulary for formulating questions about agency. As indicated above, Aristotle's theory of the mind has been dominant in western philosophy; and yet it feels as though his approach is just one among many starting points that could have been chosen. Here is an earlier treatment of this question (link).

I'm reminded by my friends that not all sociologists accept the actor-centered approach. Some (like Andrew Abbott and Peggy Somers) prefer what they refer to as a "relational" understanding of the basis of social activity. It is not so much the actor as the action; it is not the internal state of the individual agent so much as the swirl of interactions with others that determine the course of a social activity. This is part of Abbott's objection to the idea that sociology should aim to uncover social mechanisms (link).

Notes from Xi'an

Tuesday, November 01, 2011

People here in Xi'an say: "The Chinese city of the present is Beijing. The city of the future is Shanghai. The city of China's past is Xi'an." This seems to be more than a slogan. People in Xian seem deeply proud of the history and heritage that Xian represents -- the thirteen dynasties that made Xi'an their capital, the extraordinary excavations that the Shaanxi region hosts, and the "forest of stones" that is a remarkable collection of steles conveying calligraphy from the Tang Dynasty (Xi'an Beilin Museum). (The entire collection of the sayings of Confucius are represented on one massive Tang-era stone monument.)

At the same time, the city is not trapped in the past. Since my previous visit in 2007 the city has undergone many of the same changes that are so striking in other great Chinese cities: new skyscrapers and hotels, more traffic, more smog, and more luxury shopping. One of Xian's major universities, Xi'an Jiaotong University, is developing a major new campus. Particularly striking is a newly developed park in the center of the city that memorializes the Tang Dynasty and its emperors with sculptures, monuments, and light shows. Like the rest of urban China, Xi'an is moving forward rapidly.

Particularly interesting for me, though, is the opportunity that a visit to Xi'an creates for talking to people about how they feel about China's rapid changes. A couple of conversations stand out. I asked a very accomplished young historical guide at the Beilin Museum whether Chinese young people found any resonance with the values of ancient Chinese culture -- whether Confucian ideas about the duties of governments and officials or the aesthetic values represented by calligraphy were formative for young people. His response was a reflective one. He observed that middle-aged Chinese men seem to be very interested in these topics, and very interested in practicing calligraphy. He noted that

all of China's top leaders in modern times, including Chairman Mao, took pride in their calligraphy. Young people, by contrast, do not share these interests, and they prefer to use the click of a mouse rather than pen and ink to produce a character. He disapproved of this change in cultural attitudes and indicated that learning calligraphy is learning to think in a particular way.

Another value slipped into this conversation almost unnoticed. The guide informed me that one pagoda contains a Qing-era stele with a text from the Emperor exhorting the suppression of a minority-based rebellion. This pagoda is sealed, he said, because the government wants to create a feeling of national harmony and the message of the stele is contrary to harmony. Even scholars are not permitted to view the text. His ready acceptance of the legitimacy of the government's suppressing information was very striking to my ears. It made me think of the regime's casual decision to make western blogging platforms unavailable on the Internet in China, making a vast domain of information and opinion unavailable here. The idea that the government has the right to select and filter the information that citizens can access is a harmful one to anyone with liberal values; but it is one that is readily accepted and justified by many thoughtful people in China.

Another snippet of conversation that interested me took place with a university staff person. This young man's wife is expecting the delivery of their first (and only) child in the next month. Because he works for a university, he is interested in education. So I asked him about the current situation of the education of Chinese children. He was very passionate on this subject. He talked about the incredible pressure that children are under from the very earliest age, to compete and excel in school. The competition to gain entry into the "best" kindergarten, middle school, and high school pushes parents and children to unbearable effort. He talked about middle school children pushed by their parents and the sense of deeply important competition, to excel in their grades, their violin and piano lessons, their dance lessons, and their other extra-curricular activities. And he talked about middle- and high-school students working on homework well past midnight in order to gain the best possible grades. He observed that this pressure takes a terrible toll on children, even while it produces students who are very, very good at taking competitive examinations. But he doubted whether the other qualities of a well-educated student are coming through -- an ability to communicate well, and an openness to innovation, for example. What was striking to me in the conversation was not only the content of his observations, but the passion and emotion with which he spoke.

One additional observation seems somewhat telling. This has to do with the flying public in China. As I passed through the first class seating area to my own seat in economy flying from Shanghai to Xi'an, I noticed that the first class section was completely filled with young Chinese professionals, their smartphones, laptops and folios in hand, heading off to a day's worth of appointments in Xi'an. This is a sign, of course, of the familiar fact that China's professional service class has expanded dramatically in the past twenty years. This is part of the change that has brought Prada, Jaguar, and Ferragamo to every large city in China. But I also noticed something else in the economy section of the flight from Detroit to Shanghai – a good number of young Americans who have decided to spend some or all their careers in China. The opportunities created by China's growth are drawing a large number of middle class Americans to work in Shanghai rather than Knoxville, Peoria, or Tampa. This isn't the business elite that has done business in China for decades, but a new wave of young engineers, managers, or skilled workers who are following the global opportunities. The young man sitting next to me in economy defined the situation for me: a Kentuckian with a community college degree in technology,

experience in the US in setting up a factory, and now employed in a two-continent job taking him between Shanghai and Louisville working for a Chinese company that is setting up a major chemical plant in Suzhou. He recently married a young Chinese woman who will be returning to Kentucky with him in a month or so.

A final observation about Xi'an: People here seem to be very accepting of China's system of single-party rule. The comment is often heard that "when the central government has decided what to do, it gets done." This comment was made about the rapid and impressive development of the Tang Dynasty Park in Xi'an mentioned above, but it seems to be in the back of mind for many areas of policy and change. And the government seems to get a great deal of credit for its success over the past thirty years in moving China forward: economic growth, world stature, and a sense of Chinese national pride are all achievements that many citizens accord to the government's decisions and policies. A twenty-something professional said to me: "The government is trying seriously to address China's problems. Our leaders are moving in the right direction. It may take two generations to solve some of our problems (like rural-urban inequality)." I haven't yet been exposed -- in this visit or in prior visits -- to a sense of discontent, whether about the state's control of individual liberties and access to information, or about other aspects of political control. Of course there is discontent in several sectors of China's society -- rural people whose economic progress is slow and whose property is subject to seizure; workers whose wages aren't being paid; urban people whose environments are subject to repeated toxic incidents. But those sources of discontent don't seem to have percolated into a more widespread sense of dissatisfaction in the broader urban public.

Signing off from the home of the Tang Dynasty – I have a temple to visit!

Four years of UnderstandingSociety

Thursday, November 03, 2011

Today marks the fourth anniversary of UnderstandingSociety. This is the 613th posting since I began in November 2007 and the 135th in the past year. I continue to find this medium a good way of pushing forward my own learning and thinking about a swirl of topics around the central thrust, making sense of the social realm in which we live. I've been drawn into lines of thought in the past year that I wouldn't have encountered without the intellectual effort involved in writing the blog. And, of course, it is a good way of meeting a reading public all around the world.

Several topics came in for special focus in the past year. First, there is a fair amount of new material on the philosophy of history. Since finishing *New Contributions to the Philosophy of History* last fall (2010) I've continued to think about history and historiography, and I've found some new issues that I need to think about more fully. There is more to come on this.

Second, I've been thinking about John Rawls's work more in the past year. I first read Rawls as an undergraduate in the late sixties. Then I read *A Theory of Justice* when it appeared in 1971 as I was beginning to take courses from Rawls as a graduate student. Truthfully, I like the work better today than I did then, 40 years ago. And I'm finding that it provides support for a much deeper critique of our society than I thought then. One part of this rethinking is contained in a piece on "Property-owning democracy". Another is a reflection on Rawls's later thoughts about the deficiencies of an excessively consumerist culture in his correspondence with Philippe van Parijs.

Third, I've written quite a bit in the past twelve months that is directed at issues in analytical sociology. The key premises of the AS approach are very consistent with my own understanding of the social world (microfoundations, methodological localism, causal mechanisms). But the new rash of books and conferences on the issues AS raises have been very stimulating to me, and I'm finding that there are good reasons to support the idea of meso-level social causation. (See the "analytical sociology" thread for these postings.) I expect to do more on this topic in the coming year, including perhaps some more thinking about the issues raised by agent-based modeling.

And finally, there are more posts than in previous years on the issues of inequality and power that are creating more and more difficulty in our country. I think that is a reflection of real changes our society is experiencing: more inequality, more divisive rhetoric, and more racism. The number 1 post (in terms of direct visits) reflected this theme, "Inequalities and the ascendant right." (Interestingly, the number 1 post for subscribers this year was "Rawls on the EU," which represents the more philosophical side of these current issues.)

A fairly general but perhaps unexpected observation is that I've found myself looking back to classics in the social sciences over the past fifty years, and have found new things in these works that didn't catch my attention the first time I read them. This is true, actually, of the rereading I've done of Rawls. But posts on Chalmers Johnson, Herbert Simon, Steven Lukes, and Fritz Stern led me to think more fully about their ideas, and to see new insights that were probably there all along but not for me.

Readers come to the blog through two channels. Slightly more than half the visits to the blog are in the form of direct visits to the Blogger site itself, through searches, referrals, and direct links. And the remainder take the form of readers who use a blog reader or RSS feed to follow or subscribe to the blog. These views don't show up in the first measure. The first "channel" represents a broad population of occasional readers interested in a particular topic. The second represents a group of readers who have deliberately chosen to follow the blog.

The readership of UnderstandingSociety has continued to rise. There were 220,474 visits recorded directly to the site, and another 193,971 views through the RSS feed. About 50% of visits are from the United States, and the other half come from 194 countries and territories. There are about 2,000 readers who follow the blog automatically through an RSS feed, and there are over 1,600 people who follow on Facebook or Twitter. Thanks everyone!

The top ten posts written during this past year were:

Direct visits to the blog:

1 Inequalities and the ascendant right (2,501)
2 The math of social networks (2,451)
3 A jobless future? (2,051)
4 Diagrams and economic thought (1,992)
5 The history of economic thought and the present (1,850)
6 Rawls on political liberalism (1,788)
7 Quiet politics (1,747)
8 Violent rhetoric and violent behavior (1,734)

9 Income inequalities and social ills (1,417)
10 Bourdieu's field (1,414)

Views and clicks through the RSS feed (subscribers):

1 Rawls on the EU (2,313)
2 The math of social networks (2,170)
3 Democracy and contentious politics (2,152)
4 Hume as historian (2,150)
5 Quiet politics (2,076)
6 Herbert Simon's satisficing life (2,075)
7 Possessive individualism (2,074)
8 Education a leveler? (2,057)
9 Income inequalities and social ills (2,050)
10 Hate as a social demographic (2,041)

Interestingly, there are only three overlaps on the two lists – "The math of social networks," "Quiet politics," and "Income inequalities and social ills".

To the right is a link to a bookmarked PDF of the blog through July 2011. There will be an update after the beginning of January. I've spent some time on this part of the project because it gives expression to the "virtual book" part of my goal in the blog. By using the bookmarks organized into threads it is possible for the reader to look at all the postings on a certain general topic at once.

Thanks for reading, following, and sometimes commenting!

Beijing Forum 2011

Saturday, November 05, 2011

I'm attending the Beijing Forum 2011 this week, and it's a superb international conference. Much of the conference took place at Peking University. Over three hundred international scholars were invited to participate, and there are dozens of interesting conversations going on at any one time. The goal is to stimulate productive dialog among scholars from many nations about the issues of modernity and tradition we currently face, and the setting works. I've had very interesting discussions with scholars from Thailand, China, Angola, Laos, and Mexico, and it is very interesting to get the different perspectives that we all bring.

The focus is on academic perspectives and dialogues around the overarching theme of "The Harmony of Civilizations and Prosperity for All." This year's organizing theme is "Tradition and Modernity, Transition and Transformation." There are seven themes for the Forum's discussions this year:

- Change and Constancy: Historical Perspectives on the Way to Social Transformation
- Economic Growth in the Context of Globalization: Opportunities, Challenges and Perspectives
- Inheritance and Innovation in Education
- Transformation and Stability: Achievements and Challenges in Developing Countries
- Artistic Heritage and Cultural Innovation
- Urban Transformation and the Future of Mankind
- Deliberative Democracy and Social Harmony

Each group contains a distinguished selection of academics from around the world, heavily focused on European, American, and Asian scholars. (There were only six scholars from sub-Saharan Africa, and only two participants from Latin America.)

My paper, "Justice Matters in Global Economic Development," was included in the Economic Growth theme. I argued five basic points: We generally agree about the basics of a just society. The current state of the world badly contradicts those values (poverty, inequality, abuse and coercion). Amartya Sen's writings provide a powerful basis for those commonsense ideas about justice. The greatest impediment to improving justice is the untrammeled power private and state interests have vis-a-vis the poor. And injustice matters because it causes serious social problems. So states need to strive to reduce injustice.

I didn't really have a good sense of how the argument was received by the participants, but there was a fairly clear split between "laissez-faire" growth advocates and economists who took inequalities of income and health very seriously. I assume the latter group was more receptive than the former.

The academic question I received during the formal discussion period came from an American economist. He pointed out that China's 10% annual growth since the 1990s has greatly improved the standard of living for a hundred million people in coastal China, and created job opportunities for tens of millions of migrant workers. He wanted to know if I was seriously advocating a slower rate of growth as the price of greater justice. The question reflects the assumptions of many of the economists in the session: state policies aimed at enhancing equality are highly destructive to economic growth. So, by inference, preferring economic justice is harmful for a society.

My response, in a nutshell, was "yes". Economic development involves choices. And it is possible that a strategy with a lower growth rate would do a better job of bringing all of China up together, rather than creating a broadening gap between rural poor and affluent urban people. I am indeed arguing that it would be best to choose the second strategy. (This might take the form of investing a larger percentage of China's formidable savings and reserves in substantially enhanced public goods for the rural poor -- education, healthcare, and retirement.)

What is equally important, is that the power differential between poor people and propertied interests in China today almost guarantees that the poor will lose out. Property confiscations by businesses and municipal development authorities are a good example. (Coincidentally, the Thai urban planning expert I talked with said this is precisely the case in and around Bangkok, and the Angola urban planner made similar comments about Angolan farmers and the residual white settlers.) So injustice is as much about power as it is about exploitation. And this means that legal and institutional reforms are needed if China's inequalities are to be reduced.

It was striking to me that the thrust of my talk seemed to be most resonant with the Peking University students in the room. A cluster of them came over to talk about the implications of these ideas for China during the break. These young people seemed genuinely concerned about how China might address some of the large issues of social inequality that have arisen since the economic reforms began in the 1980s. (In fact, even some officials I've talked with here in China believe that more serious attention to justice issues is needed in China's future -- for example, with regard to China's rural poor and to migrant workers and their families.)

(The talk is included as a page on the list at right. I plan to post the bilingual PP as well.)

China's role in world history?

Wednesday, November 09, 2011

People sometimes want to make large statements about China's future in the coming fifty years. These range from a Sinocentric paen -- "The twenty-first century will be marked by a hegemonic China on the world stage", to the dubious -- "China's polity will ultimately shatter under the pressures of regional inequalities and competing political interests among elites." Generally speaking all these large claims seem a bit Hegelian to me; I don't think we can make large predictions about the course of world history. So I don't think that China's role is pre-ordained.

That said, a few things seem fairly clear in China's present, and these features have some implications for the future as well.

One is that China has embarked an a remarkable expansion of its university system in the past twenty years, and these efforts have turned the corner when it comes to the production of talented young people and significant, original innovations in science and technology. There are now something like 15 million university students in China, including a significant percentage in the elite national universities. This is something like a 15-fold increase in the past 30 years. China's research centers in many areas of technology and engineering are world-class today, and they are getting better every year. This means that China will have the talent needed to confront almost any large technological problem. Think of the Great Wall, planned and implemented by a million talented new engineering graduates. For example, the concentration on optoelectronics in Wuhan in universities, research centers, and private companies seems to make it highly likely that China will be a leader in this field in the future. So the idea that many in the West have that the universities in Europe, Australia, or North America are of higher quality, or that the research that takes place in the West is more innovative, seem to be based on wishful thinking rather than sober factual analysis. If the West has an edge in any of these areas today, it is one that is likely enough to disappear in the medium-term future.

It is also worth noting that there is a very high degree of exchange of talent between China and the West. Many of the scientists and leaders one meets in universities and research institutes have done some or all of their advanced training in the United States or the UK or have spent time there as post-doctoral students. I'm sure there are "styles" of Chinese research organization that are distinct from Western models. But there seems to be no reason at all to expect that the rate of new discovery in the future will be substantially different in the West and in China. And given that China is establishing a larger base of research resources, this seems to imply that the production of innovation will shift to China.

Second, and related to this first idea, China's leaders and guiding ministries are very deliberately seeking to steer China's economic activities up the value chain. Much of China's growth in the past thirty years was based on low-wage manufacturing. But China's leaders inside and outside of government are very explicit in their goals of shifting to higher-level goods and services -- exactly the areas where European and American leaders hope to dominate. Moreover, China seems to be much more deliberate than

Western governments about the need to invest in the infrastructure that will provide the basis of this transformation. China has invested massively in transportation, research centers, and universities throughout the country. These investments are synergistic: they make the next steps of high-end development multiplicative rather than additive. The coordination and cooperation that are facilitated by high-speed rail and air connections amplify the ability of researchers, planners, and entrepreneurs to bring their projects to completion. And the investment funds made available by further economic growth success in turn amplify the state's ability, and the growing private sector's ability, to make expanded investment in the following periods.

These factors would point us in the direction of expecting China to move to a position of global economic preeminence in a fairly short period of time. However, contemporary China has obstacles to further progress that are fairly large as well.

One of these handicaps is the governing party's fundamental view of the appropriate flow of information within society. The government seems to take the position that it needs to carefully manage the access to information that the public is able to gain. Its willingness to censor the Internet for its citizens is a symptom of this view. Chinese society would be stronger if there were a fundamental rethinking of openness about information. And eventually China's leaders will need to recognize that Chinese society is stronger, not weaker, when citizens can freely express their views and interests.

Second is the fact of persistent inequalities in Chinese society, by sector (rural-urban), by status (resident and well educated / migrant and poorly educated), and by region (coastal-western regions). These inequalities will eventually hold China back -- they reduce the talent pool and they stimulate resentment and disassociation among the disadvantaged groups.

Third, government non-accountability and its cousin, corruption, create serious obstacles to effective forward progress. The apparent problems of accountability and perhaps corruption that came to light in the railroad ministry a few months ago cast a shadow about the integrity of the rapid expansion of high speed rail -- from safety procedures to construction standards to administrative effectiveness. So more accountability and transparency will be needed in the future, or else China's major aspirations will be frustrated by ineffective implementation.

These are fairly systemic factors that seem likely to impede China's progress in the future. Here is a fact that will seem trivial by comparison, but I think it is not. It is the factor of traffic and pedestrian safety. Each city I've visited has a traffic environment that can only be described as barely constrained anarchy. Drivers cross four lanes of traffic to make an abrupt right turn; motor bikes roar up the inner lane in the wrong direction; traffic snarls to a stop when a bus gets sideways at an intersection; pedestrians try to make their way across eight lanes of non-stop vehicles; drivers hurtle towards pedestrians and bicyclists until they scatter. This sounds trivial (until you're caught in the middle of those eight lanes of traffic), but it seems to reflect a more basic and important fact. Doesn't sound urban planning involve careful design of a traffic system that keeps vehicles moving in the same direction; where pedestrians are largely separated from vehicles; and where signals and road design permit safe pedestrian crossing? And yet those rational plans seem not to have been developed in China's cities. One possible reason is that China's planners have simply not given sufficient priority to creating rules and structures that protect the public's interests -- whether in traffic control or in food safety. Build the buildings, stimulate the economic growth, and don't worry too much about the

consequences. If this is correct, it too indicates a feature that will interfere with China's future development.

In brief, contemporary China seems to display dynamic properties that point in contradictory directions. On the one hand, any visitor can see the dynamic, fast-moving creativity and intelligence that are transforming China and its universities and businesses. On the other hand, there are barriers to "business as usual" development that perhaps set limits to how much further China can go without some important reforms. And it's possible that the governing party may find those reforms to be unacceptable for one reason or another.

So the Owl of Minerva still has its wings quietly folded when it comes to China's role in future world history. It remains for China's people and its governing institutions to write the story.

Health disparities in the US and China

Sunday, November 13, 2011

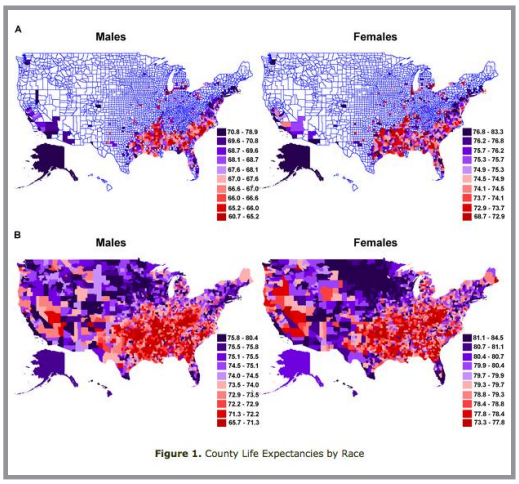


Figure 1. County Life Expectancies by Race

Health disparities across a population are among the most profound indicators of social inequalities that we can find. And the fact of significant disparities across groups is a devastating statement about the circumstances of justice under which a society functions. These disparities translate into shorter lives and lower quality of life for whole groups of people, relative to other groups.

Both the United States and China appear to display significant health disparities across their populations. Here are a couple of studies that draw attention to these facts.

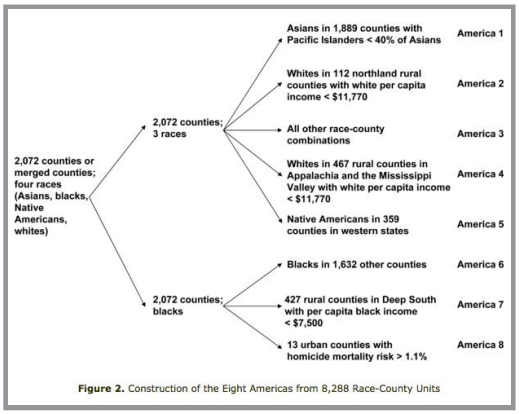


Figure 2. Construction of the Eight Americas from 8,288 Race-County Units

United States

Here is an important new study on the question of health disparities in the United States by public health researchers at Harvard and UCSF. The study is "Eight Americas: Investigating Mortality Disparities across Races, Counties, and Race-Counties in the United States". And the answer the researchers provide to the question above is that the US possesses very significant health disparities across segments of its population. The study is worth reading in detail.

The authors analyze mortality statistics by county, and they break the data down by incorporating racial and demographic characteristics. The data groups fairly well around the eight Americas mentioned in the title:

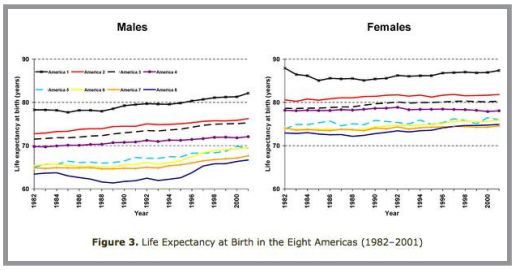


Figure 3. Life Expectancy at Birth in the Eight Americas (1982–2001)

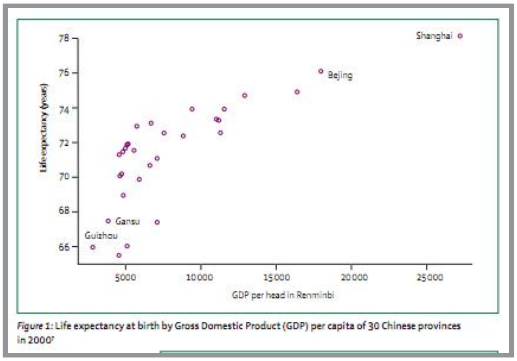


Figure 1: Life expectancy at birth by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of 30 Chinese provinces in 2000[7]

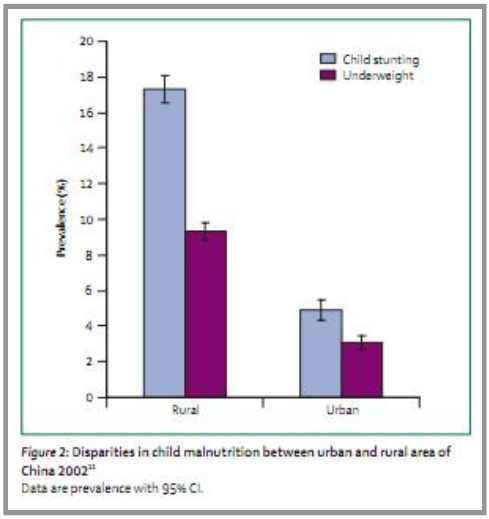


Figure 2: Disparities in child malnutrition between urban and rural area of China 2002[23]
Data are prevalence with 95% CI.

Here is how they describe their findings:

The gap between the highest and lowest life expectancies for race-county combinations in the United States is over 35 y. We divided the race-county combinations of the US population into eight distinct groups, referred to as the "eight Americas," to explore the causes of the disparities that can inform specific public health intervention policies and programs.

And here is their conclusion:

Disparities in mortality across the eight Americas, each consisting of millions or tens of millions of Americans, are enormous by all international standards. The observed disparities in life expectancy cannot be explained by race, income, or basic health-care access and utilization alone. Because policies aimed at reducing fundamental socioeconomic inequalities are currently practically absent in the US, health disparities will have to be at least partly addressed through public health strategies that reduce risk factors for chronic diseases and injuries.

For example, their data show that "the life expectancy gap between the 3.4 million high-risk urban black males and the 5.6 million Asian females was 20.7 y in 2001." This is an enormous difference in longevity for the two groups; and it is a difference that tags fundamental social structures that influence health and risk across these two populations.

Here is a time-series graph of the behavior of longevity for the eight Americas:

So what are the factors that appear to create these extreme differences in mortality across socioeconomic and racial groups in America? They consider health care access and utilization; homicide; accidents; and HIV as primary potential causes of variations in mortality for a group. Most important of all of these factors for the large populations appear to be the health disparities that derive from access and utilization. And here they offer an important set of recommendations:

Opportunities and interventions to reduce health inequalities include (1) reducing socioeconomic inequalities, which are the distal causes of health inequalities, (2) increasing financial access to health care by decreasing the number of Americans without health plan coverage, (3) removing physical, behavioral, and cultural barriers to health care, (4) reducing disparities in the quality of care, (5) designing public health strategies and interventions to reduce health risks at the level of communities (e.g.,

changes in urban/neighborhood design to facilitate physical activity and reduce obesity), and (6) designing public health strategies to reduce health risks that target individuals or population subgroups that are not necessarily in the same community (e.g., tobacco taxation or pharmacological interventions for blood pressure and cholesterol).
These findings are squarely relevant to assessing the justice of our society. The country needs to recognize the severity of the "health/mortality equity" issue, and we need to make appropriate policy reforms so that these disparities begin to lessen.

China

Several research papers address these issues for the case of China. One is a World Bank working paper by David Dollar called "Poverty, Inequality, and Social Disparities During China's Economic Reform" (link). Dollar notes that China has dramatically reduced its poverty rate over the past 25 years, whereas its income inequality measures have increased sharply during the same period. (Albert Park and Sangui Wang review the poverty statistics for this period in China Economic Review; link.) They conclude that these inequalities between rural and urban populations, and between well educated urban professionals and the urban working class, have also resulted in significant inequalities in health status and outcomes for the various sub-populations.

Shenglan Tank, Qingyue Meng, Lincoln Chen, Henk Bekedam, Tim Evans, and Margaret Whitehead review the current evidence available on health equity in China in "Tackling the challenges to health equity in China" (link). "Although health gains have continued, concern for the equitable distribution of social benefits of economic progress has grown" (25). Further:

Disparities in income and wealth between the urban and rural areas, between the eastern and western regions, and between households have widened substantially. In 1990, the richest province had a GDP per person more than seven times larger than the poorest province, but by 2002, the same ratio had grown to 13 times greater.41The Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality,42increased for China as a whole from 0·31 in 1978–79 to 0·45 in 2004. The level of income inequality in China is now similar to that in the USA, roughly comparable to that in the most inequitable Asian countries—Philippines and Thailand—and approaching the notoriously inequitable levels in Brazil and Mexico. (29-30)
The authors quote Amartya Sen on health equity (Amartya Sen, Why health equity"; link):

Health equity cannot be concerned only with health in isolation. Rather it must come to grips with the larger issue of fairness and justice in social arrangements, including economic allocations, paying attention to the role of health in human life and freedom. Health equity is most certainly not just about the distribution of health, not to mention the even narrower focus on the distribution of health care. Indeed, health equity has an enormously wide reach and relevance.
And inequalities in personal income in different provinces lead to highly different levels of ability to fund public amenities in these provinces, with large effects on public health in poor provinces:

Living conditions differ greatly between areas of different affluence. Safe drinking water is available to 96% of the population of large cities but to less than 30% in poor rural areas. Differences in access to effective sanitation are even larger, 90% of residents in large cities have adequate sanitation, compared with less than 10% in poor rural areas (figure 6).

Two graphs capture the big picture:

In figure 1 the data demonstrate a strong correlation between life expectancy and average income for China's provinces and municipalities, from just about 65 years for the poorest regions to 78 years in Shanghai region. Figure 2 demonstrates major inequalities in child health between rural and urban locations. The authors further report that infant mortality also varies dramatically across regions: "Rural infant mortality rates are nearly five times higher in the poorest rural counties than in the wealthiest countries -- 123 versus 26 per 1000 live births, respectively" (26). One important source of data on these issues that these researchers use is the Chinese National Health Service survey of 1998; link.

The most detailed analysis of health disparities in China I've been able to find is a paper published in 2010 by Feinian Chen, Yang Yang, and Guangya Liu, "Social Change and Socioeconomic Disparities in Health over the Life Course in China: A Cohort Analysis" (link). They make use of the China Health and Nutrition Survey to allow for a longitudinal study of health in several segments of China's population. (Here is a description of the CHNS.) Their conclusion:

Using data from the China Health and Nutrition Survey, we find significant socioeconomic status (SES) differences in the mean level of health and that these SES differentials generally diverge over the life course. We also find strong cohort variations in SES disparities in the mean levels of health and health trajectories. (126)
It would appear that studies of health status in China disaggregated by population segments are not yet as fully developed as one would wish. The CHNS appears to have limited data coverage (much more limited than the national census, for example), and none of the studies mentioned in these articles appear to disaggregate down to levels lower than the province. But the summary findings of all three of these articles point in the same direction: it is probable that there are significant inter-regional and inter-sectoral inequalities in health outcomes for the sub-populations corresponding to these segments.

Neil Gross on mechanisms

Thursday, November 17, 2011



Neil Gross offers a friendly amendment to the growing literature on social mechanisms within sociology in "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms" (link). He offers general support for the framework, but criticizes the main efforts at specifying what a social mechanism is. (James Mahoney makes a major effort to capture the main formulations in "Beyond Correlational Analysis"; link. Mahoney identifies 24 statements, all somewhat different.) Gross argues that the existing formulations are too tightly wedded to the metaphor of a physical mechanism -- for example, the cogs, gears, and springs of a clock. And the existing frameworks are too dependent on the assumption of rational actors, rather than a more fluid and relational understanding of social action. In some respects his arguments converge with those of Andrew Abbott considered in an earlier post.

The account of social mechanisms that Gross puts forward is a "pragmatist" theory. Here is how he puts the point in the paper's abstract.

Building on the insight increasingly common among sociological theorists -- that action should be conceptualized in terms of social practices -- I mobilize ideas from the tradition of classical American pragmatism to develop a more adequate theory of mechanisms. (358)

Gross praises the mechanisms approach for its ability to go beyond positivism in the philosophy of social science -- the general idea that social explanations depend on discovering strong social laws. But he finds the literature to be amorphous when it comes to definitions. He identifies five main themes:

1. Mechanisms as not necessarily observable structures or processes
2. Mechanisms as observable processes that do not require the positing of motives
3. Mechanisms as lower-order social processes
4. Mechanisms as triggerable causal powers
5. Mechanisms as transforming events (359-361)

Out of these themes Gross extracts a degree of consensus:

1. Social mechanisms are causal in that they mediate between cause and effect.
2. Social mechanisms unfold in time.
3. Social mechanisms are general, although in varying degrees.
4. Because a social mechanism is an intermediary process, it is necessarily composed of elements analyzed at a lower order of complexity or aggregation than the phenomenon it helps explain. (361-363)

He believes these four points capture the "theoretical consensus" that exists among the main expositions of the idea of a social mechanism. He then identifies several points of difference among these accounts:

1. Methodological individualism versus social ontologism.
2. Formal versus substantive mechanisms.
3. Analytical versus realist models. (363-364)

Now, finally, his own specific definition:

A social mechanism is a more or less general sequence or set of social events or processes analyzed at a lower order of complexity or aggregation by which -- in certain circumstances -- some cause X tends to bring about some effect Y in the realm of human social relations. This sequence or set may or may not be analytically reducible to the actions of individuals who enact it, may underwrite formal or substantive causal processes, and may be observed, unobserved, or in principle unobservable. (364)

A key part of Gross's critique of existing expositions of the social mechanisms approach, largely within the framework of analytical sociology, is the reliance these researchers make on the framework of rational choice theory. Gross believes this is too narrow an understanding of human action, and therefore serves poorly as a foundation for our thinking about real social mechanisms. Gross prefers a "pragmatist" understanding of action and actors, one that is closer to the field of symbolic interactionism than to economics. This approach links action to "practices" and habits more fundamentally than to means-end rationality and goal-seeking behavior. "Pragmatists maintain that instrumental rationality itself, when it does appear, is a kind of habit, a way that some humans can learn to respond to certain situations, and that we should be as interested in the historical processes by which the habit of rationality -- in its various forms -- develops and is situationally deployed as we should be in its effects" (367).

Gross brings these ideas about action and practice into the mechanisms framework with this basic idea.

Pragmatists would view social mechanisms as composed of chains or aggregations of factors confronting problem situations and mobilizing more or less habitual responses. (368)

This approach understands action as more fluid and interactive than deliberative and pre-planned. And it emphasizes the contingency of interactions with other actors that influence the development and unfolding of the swirl of activity and the constitution of the actor him/herself.

Fundamentally Gross's critique comes down to a plea for a better understanding of social action itself, and of the actor, than the mechanisms approach is inclined to offer. And the framework within which to conceptualize action that he prefers is one that derives from inter-action, spontaneity, and adjustment as much as (more than?) the deliberative and calculating processes postulated by rational-actor models.

I think that Gross's approach is fairly consonant with that taken by Chuck Tilly and Doug McAdam in various places. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly emphasize the "relational" nature of social action in Dynamics of Contention. And here is a nice statement of McAdam's summary view of social action in Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970.

One of the virtues of the perspective sketched here is that it is as amenable to the analysis of routine as to that of contentious politics. Too often analysts have reified the distinction between routine politics and social movements, revolutions and the like, and have wound up proposing separate theories to account for the two phenomena. Since I see the latter as almost always growing out of and often transforming the former, I am motivated to propose a framework that is equally adept at explaining both. (xvii)

The account of contentious politics that McAdam favors considers four ideas:

1. Exogenous change processes.
2. Interpretive processes and the collective attribution of opportunity/threat.
3. Appropriation of existing organizational space and routine collective identities.
4. Innovative collective action and the onset of contention. (xvii-xxviii)

This account emphasizes much of Gross's agenda as well: adaptiveness, contingency, a fluid definition of action through inter-action with other actors, and the significance of culture and identity in action.

SSHA 2011

Saturday, November 19, 2011

As always, the Social Science History Association meeting in Boston is brimming with great sessions across a wide range of topic areas. There is evidence of lots of new thinking about the intersections of the social science disciplines and various fields of historical research. Here is the SSHA's description of its mission:

The Social Science History Association is an interdisciplinary group of scholars that shares interests in social life and theory; historiography, and historical and social-scientific methodologies. SSHA might be best seen as a coalition of distinctive scholarly communities. Our substantive intellectual work ranges from everyday life in the medieval world – and sometimes earlier -- to contemporary global politics, but we are united in our historicized approach to understanding human events, explaining social processes, and developing innovative theory.

The term “social science history” has meant different things to different academic

generations. In the 1970s, when the SSHA's first meetings were held, the founding generation of scholars took it to reflect their concern to address pressing questions by combining social-science method and new forms of historical evidence. Quantitative approaches were especially favored by the association's historical demographers, as well as some of the economic, social and women's historians of the time. By the 1980s and 1990s, other waves of scholars – including culturally-oriented historians and anthropologists, geographers, political theorists, and comparative-historical social scientists -- had joined the conversation.

New intellectual directions continue to emerge at the outset of the 21st century. Today's SSHA incorporates a diversity of scholarly styles, with lots of crosstalk among them.

One of the special values of SSHA is the emphasis given to interdisciplinarity. It is a principle of the organization that panels should contain papers by scholars from different disciplines (and different institutions). Why is this valuable? For several reasons. First, every discipline develops a degree of myopia when it comes to the definition of problems and methods. And yet the big questions we would like to address historically do not divide neatly along the domains of the disciplines. Politics, family, culture, environment, markets, warfare -- these all correspond to different disciplines. And yet real historical Burma or France unavoidably involves all of them. So bringing the perspectives of specialists in economics, cultural studies, and population history into productive interaction in connection with a question like "Why and how did France become "France?"" is profoundly creative. It leads us to a significantly broader view of the problem, the processes, and the methods that might illuminate.

The other distinctive feature of SSHA, going back to its establishment in the 1970s, is the conviction that the social sciences are deeply relevant to historical understanding. Sometimes this conviction has led to a cliometric impulse -- an emphasis on quantitative social history. But it has also been very receptive to qualitative and comparative approaches to historical research as well.

Andrew Abbott describes some of the intellectual and institutional currents that led to this emphasis within and around the history profession and historical sociology in *Chaos of Disciplines*.

Another great benefit that derives from participating in SSHA is the renewing exposure it permits to brilliant, innovative young scholars in a variety of fields of theory and research. It is so encouraging to see many young scholars whose work goes significantly beyond existing standard approaches. Sometimes PhD students seem excessively beholden to the ideas of their teachers. In the past several years I've been very pleased to see confident innovation and creative thinking by the coming generation of scholars in many of the fields of social and historical research. A good example is a couple of papers on the subject of processes and temporality by Tulia Falleti ("Decentralization in Time: A Process-Tracing Approach to Federal Dynamics of Change") and Matthew Norton ("Processual and Situational Temporalities in Sociological Explanations"). Isaac Reed is another good example of an innovative young scholar who is offering fresh ideas into debates about theory and social science. His recent *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*, on display at the book exhibit, is a rigorous, fresh approach to post positivist philosophy of social science.

SSHA has been a leader in bringing Geographical Information Systems (GIS) into concrete applications in historical research, and there were a number of panels using this technology with great effectiveness. The Interdisciplinary Consortium for Social and Political Research (ICPSR) is a longstanding partner with SSHA, and there were a

number of sessions that illustrated the value of the large databases and advanced historical methods that ICPSR has championed for years. The current president of SSHA, George Alter, is a distinguished historical demographer and also serves as director of ICPSR at the University of Michigan. I'm looking forward to his address later today, "Life Course, Family, and Community." Historical demography is a longstanding area of focus for scholars within the SSHA orbit.

Some new concepts and methods that are visible in this year's program include application of social network analytical tools to historical topics; new thinking about temporality and events; steady progress on large studies of population history; new thinking about colonialism and post-colonialism; and new ideas about comparative economic history across Eurasia. The language of causal mechanisms is showing up much more frequently across panels than I've noticed in previous years.

The Association's journal, Social Science History, reflects many of the strengths of the organization.

Beyond divergence

Sunday, November 20, 2011

As I've noted in previous posts, there has been a major debate in economic history in the past 20 years about what to make of the contrasts between economic development trajectories in Western Europe and East Asia since 1600. There had been a received view, tracing to Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus, that European "breakthrough" was the norm and Asian "stagnation" or "involution" were the dysfunctional cases. E. L. Jones represents this view among recent comparative economic historians (The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia).

Then Kenneth Pomeranz and Bin Wong challenged this received view in a couple of important books. Pomeranz argued in The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy. that the premises were wrong. He argued that Chinese productivity and standard of living were roughly comparable to those of England up to roughly 1800, so China's economy was not backward. And he argued against the received view's main theories of Europe's breakthrough -- the idea that European economic institutions and property rights were superior, or the idea that Europe had a normative or ideological advantage over China. Instead, he argued that Europe -- Britain, to be precise -- had contingent and situational advantages over Asia that permitted rapid growth and industrialization around the end of the eighteenth century. These advantages included large and accessible coal deposits -- crucial for modern steam technology -- and access to low cost labor in the Americas (hidden acreage). Bin Wong made complementary arguments in China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience, where he addressed the parallel processes of development of political and economic institutions in the two sets of polities. Wong's most fundamental insight was that both processes were complex, and that balanced comparison between them is valuable.

Now the debate has taken a new turn with the publication of R. Bin Wong and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal's Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe. Rosenthal is an accomplished historian of European economic development, and Wong is an expert on Chinese economic, social, and political history. So their collaboration permits this book to bring together into one argument the full

expertise available on both ends of Eurasia.

The book aims to unsettle the debate in fundamental ways. Wong and Rosenthal take issue with a point that is methodologically central to Pomeranz, concerning the units of comparison. Pomerantz wants to compare England with the lower Yangzi region in China, and he gives what are to me convincing arguments for why this makes sense. W&R want to compare Europe with China, making England a special case. And they too have good reasons for their choice.

Second, they disagree with the temporal framing that has generally been accepted within this debate, where economic historians have generally focused their research on the early modern period 1600-1900). Against this, they argue that the causes of divergence between Europe and China must be much earlier. They set their clock to the year 1000, and they examine the large features of political and economic development that started around that time.

Finally, they offer crippling objections to a number of standard hypotheses about Imperial China as a place to do business. They show that there were alternative credit institutions available in Ming and Qing China. They show that the Chinese state was sensitive to levels of taxation, and kept taxes low (generally comparable to European levels). And they show that Imperial social spending (the granary system, for example) was generally effective and well managed, contributing to economic prosperity. So the traditional explanations for Chinese "stagnation" don't work as causal explanations.

They find one major difference between Europe and Asia during the first part of the second millennium that seems to matter. That is the multiplicity of competing states in Europe and a largely hegemonic Imperial state in China and the scale of the relevant zones of political and economic activity. Chapter 4, "Warfare, Location of Manufacturing, and Economic Growth in China and Europe," lays out this argument. Here are the key points.

We believe that the most persuasive explanation for Europe's late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century transformations is best provided by comparing the politics of economic change within China and Europe in the centuries that preceded their visible economic divergence. (6)

To explain these differences in factor prices, we will stress conditions that are the outcomes, we will argue, of more basic differences in the spatial scale of polities in China and Eu rope. In this analysis we parallel Robert Allen's recent work on the progress of industrialization in England (2009a). Indeed, Allen puts special emphasis on relatively high wages and low fuel costs in explaining why the technologies we as-sociate with industrialization were developed and deployed in England. (7)

From the perspective of what individuals choose, we think that some of the most important factors influencing different likelihoods of economic change in the early modern era were unintended consequences of actions taken for reasons largely unrelated to improving the economy. (8)

Instead, we take the contrasting spatial scales of Chinese and Europe an polities as key factors that both let and led rulers in these regions to develop different political priorities and policies. (14)
The competing states of Europe were frequently drawn into conflict; and conflict often

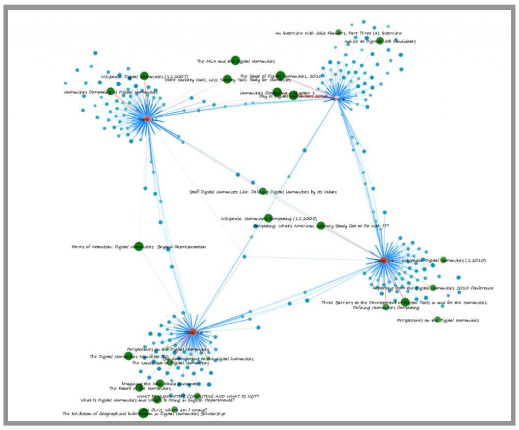
resulted in warfare. R&W argue that this fact of competition had a fateful unintended consequence. It made fortified cities much safer places than open countryside. And this in turn changed the calculation about where "manufacture" could occur at lowest cost. Labor costs were higher in cities, so absent warfare, producers were well advised to pursue a putting-out system involving peasant workers (proto-industrialization; link). But with the threat of marauding armies, European producers were pushed into urban locations. And this in turn gave them incentives to develop labor-saving, capital-intensive techniques. Putting the point bluntly: China didn't have an industrial revolution because it was too safe an environment for labor-intensive production.

Another important feature of *Before and Beyond Divergence* is its use of simple economy models to explore the incentive characteristics of various historical circumstances. For example, they provide a simple representation of the costs of contracting in China (76-77), the costs of warfare on manufacturing (108-109), and a mathematical analysis of credit and interest in China (135). Their perspective is one that essentially presupposes the idea of decision-making based on prudence, or a rough-and-ready rational choice framework. They believe that various historical circumstances change the price and opportunity environment for producers and consumers. So once we can estimate the magnitude of these changes, we can also gauge the approximate magnitude of the change in behavior that results. Or in other words, their approach is one of ***economic*** historians, not simply historians of economic institutions and behaviors. They are reluctant to consider cultural or normative sources of behavior.

Certainly this book too will generate a lot of critical response. It is an important contribution.

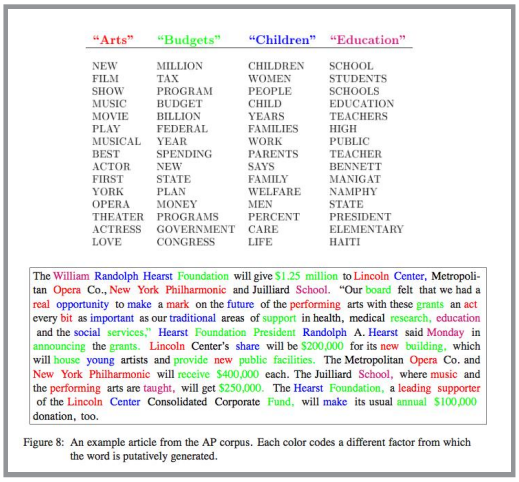
New tools for digital humanities

Tuesday, November 22, 2011



One of the innovative papers I heard at the SSHA last week was a presentation by Harvard graduate student Ian Miller, with a paper called "Reading 500 Years of Chinese History at Once". (In the end Ian apologized for only getting to the last 188 years of the Qing Dynasty.) I won't mention the details, since Ian hasn't yet published any of this work. But it was a genuinely fascinating exploration of emerging tools in the "digital humanities," to apply topic analysis to a 188-year series of Imperial memoranda. Ian's goal was to identify spikes of interest in topics such as rebels and bandits, and the work was really fascinating to hear about. (Here are a couple of interesting pages on digital humanities; link, link.)

The basic insight that is leading to new research in digital humanities is the fact that vast quantities of texts are now available for quantitative analysis. Humanists typically work with texts, and up till now their approaches have largely taken the form of close readings and semantic interpretations. Now that much of the published corpus of humanity is available in digital form thanks to the Google Books project, and now that many archives



"Arts"	"Budgets"	"Children"	"Education"
NEW	MILLION	CHILDREN	SCHOOL
FILM	TAX	WOMEN	STUDENTS
SHOW	PROGRAM	PEOPLE	SCHOOLS
MUSIC	BUDGET	CHILD	EDUCATION
MOVIE	BILLION	YEARS	TEACHERS
PLAY	FEDERAL	FAMILIES	HIGH
MUSICAL	YEAR	WORK	PUBLIC
BEST	SPENDING	PARENTS	TEACHER
ACTOR	NEW	SAYS	BENNETT
FIRST	STATE	FAMILY	MANIGAT
YORK	PLAN	WELFARE	NAMPHY
OPERA	MONEY	MEN	STATE
THEATER	PROGRAMS	PERCENT	PRESIDENT
ACTRESS	GOVERNMENT	CARE	ELEMENTARY
LOVE	CONGRESS	LIFE	HAITI

The William Randolph Hearst Foundation will give $1.25 million to Lincoln Center, Metropolitan Opera Co., New York Philharmonic and Juilliard School. "Our board felt that we had a real opportunity to make a mark on the future of the performing arts with these grants an act every bit as important as our traditional areas of support in health, medical research, education and the social services," Hearst Foundation President Randolph A. Hearst said Monday in announcing the grants. Lincoln Center's share will be $200,000 for its new building, which will house young artists and provide new public facilities. The Metropolitan Opera Co. and New York Philharmonic will receive $400,000 each. The Juilliard School, where music and the performing arts are taught, will get $250,000. The Hearst Foundation, a leading supporter of the Lincoln Center Consolidated Corporate Fund, will make its usual annual $100,000 donation, too.

Figure 8: An example article from the AP corpus. Each color codes a different factor from which the word is putatively generated.

are steadily moving their ephemera to digital versions as well, it is possible for humanities researchers to broaden their toolkit and look for patterns among these published and unpublished texts. Google's NGrams tool allows all of us to do some of this kind of work (link, link), but more specialized tools for statistical analysis and presentation are needed if we are to go beyond compiling of changing frequencies of specific terms.

Statistical techniques for discovering "topics" in documents represent a crucial step forward in this endeavor. As Nelson Goodman noted in a pre-digital time, knowing what a text is "about" requires more than simply knowing what words are included in the document in what frequencies (Problems and Projects). We might have said at that point in the 1960s, that what we need beyond the syntax and the list of terms, is "understanding", an irreplaceably human capability. But a central task for web-based search arises from exactly this issue, and a great deal of research has been done to attempt to do a better job of discovering the "topics" that are central in a given document without invoking a human reader. And surprisingly enough, real progress has been made. This progress is at the heart of the digital humanities. The fundamental problem is this: are there statistical methods that can be used to analyze the frequency of the words included in a given document to provide a compressed analysis of the "topics" included in the document? We might then say that this compressed representation is a good approximation to what the document is "about".

A theoretical advancement, and corresponding set of tools, that is frequently invoked in research projects in this field is a "latent Direchet allocation" (LDA), a statistical technique for using word frequencies in a document to sort out a smaller set of topics. David Blei, Andrew Ng, and Michael Jordan introduced the idea in 2003 (link). (There is a detailed and technical description of the model in Wikipedia; link.) They indicate that this method is similar to algorithms based on "latent semantic indexing". Here is how Blei, Ng, and Jordan describe the approach in the abstract to this paper:

We describe latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA), a generative probabilistic model for collections of discrete data such as text corpora. LDA is a three-level hierarchical Bayesian model, in which each item of a collection is modeled as a finite mixture over an underlying set of topics. Each topic is, in turn, modeled as an infinite mixture over an underlying set of topic probabilities. In the context of text modeling, the topic probabilities provide an explicit representation of a document. We present efficient approximate inference techniques based on variational methods and an EM algorithm for empirical Bayes parameter estimation. We report results in document modeling, text classification, and collaborative filtering, comparing to a mixture of unigrams model and the probabilistic LSI model.

And here is their statement of the goal of LDA analysis:

The goal is to find short descriptions of the members of a collection that enable efficient processing of large collections while preserving the essential statistical relationships that are useful for basic tasks such as classification, novelty detection, summarization, and similarity and relevance judgments. (993)

And here is a summary assessment of the effectiveness of the LDA representation of a set of documents relative to a less compressive representation:

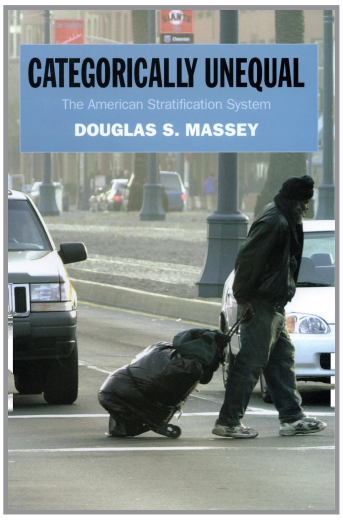
We see that there is little reduction in classification performance in using the LDA-based features; indeed, in almost all cases the performance is improved with the LDA features. Although these results need further substantiation, they suggest that the topic-based representation provided by LDA may be useful as a fast filtering algorithm for feature selection in text classification. (1013)
Here is a table they provide illustrating the kind of topic analysis that this statistical methodology creates:

In some ways the type of application that Ian Miller is making of these tools seems ideal. This kind of statistical methodology can be applied to very large databases of historical texts in order to discover patterns that the authors of those texts would have been entirely unaware of. So methods like LPA seem well designed to uncover historically shifting patterns of topic emphasis by observers and policy makers over time and space.

This is just a first cut for me on the kind of reasoning and statistical analysis that information theorists are employing to do semantic analysis of documents, and I certainly don't have a good understanding of how this works in detail. The power of these frameworks seems very great, though, and well worth studying in greater detail by historians and humanists.

Race and American inequalities

Friday, November 25, 2011



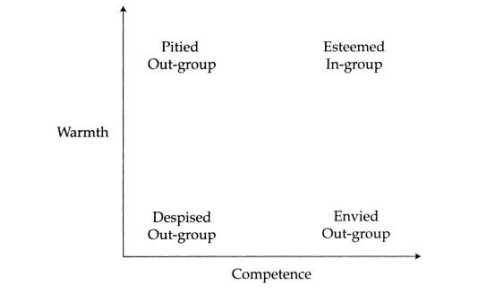
Douglas Massey is a leading US social scientist who has worked on issues of inequality in America throughout his career. His 2008 book (Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System) is a huge contribution to our understanding of the mechanisms producing inequalities in American society, and it amounts to a stunning indictment of racism and anti-poor public policies over a seventy-five year period. And, unlike other interpretations that attribute current racial inequalities to ***past*** patterns of overt discrimination, Massey argues that these inequalities can be traced to current discrimination by individuals and institutions alike. (An earlier book, American Apartheid, co-authored with Nancy Denton, is also very important.)

Massey is interested in a specific kind of inequality -- what he refers to as "categorical" inequality. "All human societies have a social structure that divides people into categories based on a combination of achieved and ascribed traits" (1). The kinds of categories he cites include gender, race, age, and membership in exclusive social organizations. Categorical inequality, then, is defined as inequalities of income, wealth, or influence that vary systematically with membership in social categories.

How does categorical inequality work? Massey has a simple answer to this question:

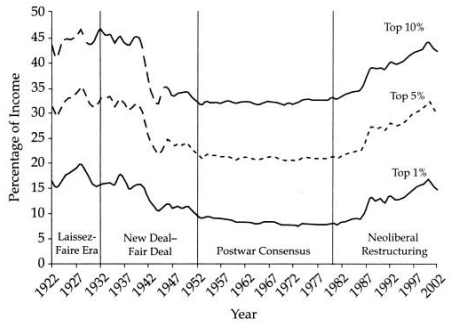
Given socially defined categories and people being distributed among them, inequality is

Figure 1.1 The Stereotype Content Model



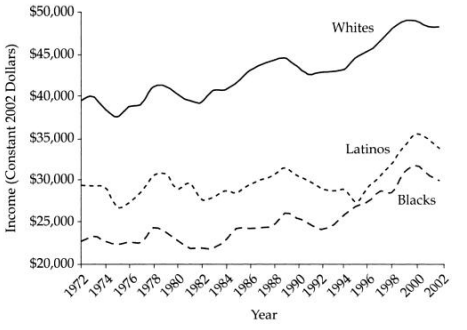
Source: Author's compilation.

Figure 2.1 Share of Income Earned by Top Segments of Taxpayer Income Distribution, 1922 to 2002



Source: Piketty and Saez (2003).

Figure 2.2 Median Household Income, 1967 to 2003



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

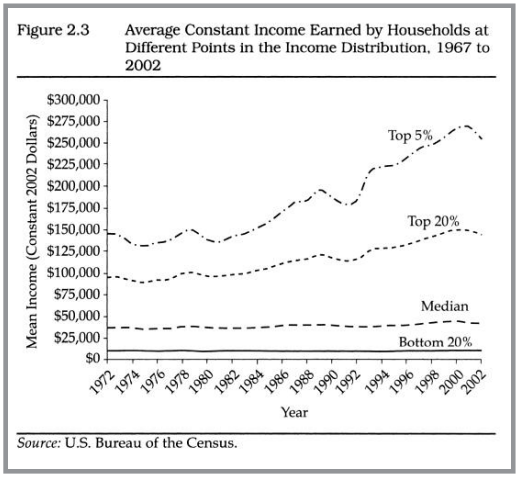
generated and perpetuated by two basic mechanisms: exploitation and opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998). *Exploitation* occus when people in one social group expropriate a resource produced by members of another social group and prefent them from realizing the full value of their effort in producing it. *Opportunity hoarding* occurs when one social group restricts access to a scarce resource, either through outright denial or by exercising monopoly control that requires out-group members to pay rent in return for access. Either way, opportunity hoarding in enabled through a *socially defined process of exclusion*. (6)

Massey leads off his analysis with a theory of the social psychology of racism and discrimination against poor people. He argues that the stereotyping that is inevitably associated with social cognition leads to a pattern of discrimination against African-Americans, immigrants, women, and poor people that deepens and entrenches their unequal shares in American society. The twin mechanisms of discrimination and opportunity-hoarding both flow on the basis of the categories of discrimination created by these mental constructs – hence "categorical inequality". (Visit a recent posting for a related argument about the social psychology of prejudice.)

In a very real way, stratification begins psychologically with the creation of cognitive boundaries that allocate people to social categories. Before categorical inequality can be implemented socially, categories must be created cognitively to classify people conceptually based on some set of achieved and ascribed characteristics. The roots of social stratification thus lie ultimately in the cognitive construction of boundaries to make social distinctions, a task that comes naturally to human beings, who are mentally hardwired to engage in categorical thought (Fiske 2004). (8)

People use schemas to evaluate themselves and the social roles, social groups, social events, and individuals they encounter, a process known as social cognition (Fiske 2004). The categories into which they divide up the world may change over time and evolve with experience, but among mature human beings they always exist and people always fall back on them when they interpret objects, events, people, and situations (Fiske 2004). (9)

Massey hypothesizes two dimensions of mental categorization, leading to four gross



categories of people in one's social category scheme: warm-cold (appealing-unappealing) and competent-incompetent. People who are like us are considered "warm" and "competent". The other three quadrants are categorized as "other": warm but incompetent (pitied), competent but cold (envied), and incompetent and cold (despised). And he asserts that American racism places African-Americans in the final category. This in turn is used to explain the harshly negative tilt that US legislation has shown across lines of race and poverty.

Massey argues that these cognitive mechanisms work at a pre-conscious level, and are operative even in the behavior and choices of people who consciously experience their values as democratic and egalitarian. These patterns of ongoing discrimination reinforce and reproduce social institutions that assign very different outcomes to African-Americans, poor people, and other dis-valued people. This works itself out in employment, advancement in a career, access to healthcare, and public policy and legislation.

A particularly valuable part of the book is the mass of elegant graphs that Massey has assembled. These represent an eye-opening narrative of discriminatory public policy over almost a century of legislation. Here is a series of graphs of income inequality over parts of the twentieth century:

The crux of Massey's analysis here is that inequalities of wealth and income are generated by several mechanisms; but that key among these are the forms of discrimination that find their roots in social psychology and become operative through policy and law. The gap between white and black median household income documented in figure 2.2 begins in the 1970s at about $20,000 and remains roughly that magnitude through 2002. And these household income inequalities are created, he argues, through a complex of institutions (economic and political) that serve to compound discrimination and the disadvantages experienced by "out" groups. Moreover, these institutions work to the benefit of the privileged as strongly as they work to the harm of the disadvantaged; so the institutions are unlikely to change. "In other words, whether whites care to admit it or not, they have a selfish interest in maintaining the categorical mechanisms that perpetuate racial stratification. As a result, when pushed by the federal government to end overt discriminatory practices, they are likely to innovate new and more subtle ways to maintain their privileged position in society (Massey 2005c)" (54). This is a gloomy conclusion, and one that argues strongly for a passionate and sustained commitment to remedying the stark racial inequalities that exist in our society.

(Massey refers frequently to Susan Fiske's 2004 book, Social Beings: Core Motives in Social Psychology. Here is a short article by Mary Wheeler and Susan Fiske that lays out some of their research on racial prejudice.)

David Graeber's reflections on money, debt, and violence

Wednesday, November 30, 2011



David Graeber's Debt: The First 5,000 Years has hit a chord with a lot of people who are concerned about rising inequalities in the United States and elsewhere. Graeber is an economic anthropologist, a discipline that pays close attention to the ways that material arrangements worked in detail in pre-state societies. One of the great works in this field is Marshall Sahlins' book, Stone Age Economics, which paid very close ethnographic attention to how the social arrangements worked in hunter-gatherer societies when it came to gathering and consuming food and other necessities of life. (My main recollection is that Sahlins found that hunter-gatherers worked much shorter days than their successors, the farmers, and had much more time to enjoy the finer things of life, including stories and jokes.) Graeber is also described as one of the intellectual sources of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and anti-globalization activism has been an important part of his life for a long time. (Here is a story in Bloomberg that gives a lot of interesting background.)

The book is difficult to characterize. It's about debt and money through history, but it's really not a work in economic history. It offers a lot of ethnographic detail about borrowing, lending, gifting, and reciprocating, but it's not really a work of anthropology. And it offers morally valenced language to describe debt and credit, but it's not really a polemical critique of the present financial system. It is certainly an engaging, interesting, and thought-provoking book, and Graeber appears to know a great deal about the social and institutional histories of the main civilizations of Eurasia.

One line of thought is perfectly clear in the book: Graeber wants to demolish the myth of the truck-and-barter origins of money. This is the standard story within classical and neoclassical economics. But Graeber thinks it is a complete fiction. He regards this as a just-so story that doesn't make any sense ethnographically, and has never been observed in real pre-state societies.

The story, then, is everywhere. It is the founding myth of our system of economic relations. It is so deeply established in common sense, even in places like Madagascar, that most people on earth couldn't imagine any other way that money could possibly have come about.

The problem is there's no evidence that it ever happened, and an enormous amount of evidence suggesting that it did not. (28)
Graeber's case for this position seems to be a sound one. But why exactly does it matter? It seems to be a bit analogous to literal-minded social contract arguments: that the state is legitimate because it descends from a primordial agreement among all citizens to create its authority. But discrediting the origins story doesn't really tell us anything about the functioning system. We have an economic system today that coordinates activity through money and credit, and it doesn't really matter very much if we

know exactly how it came about. I think that Graeber is focused on the issue because he thinks the myth helps to convey the view that the contemporary economist's view of human activity -- self-serving actions designed to maximize one's own utility -- is in fact an historical universal, applying to pre-modern and non-western social settings as well as to the New Orleans cotton exchange.

It's money that had made it possible for us to imagine ourselves in the way economists encourage us to do: as a collection of individuals and nations whose main business is swapping things. (44)
Graeber's view, by contrast, is that most human activity doesn't conform to this model; that the gift relation and the practice of open-ended reciprocity are much more characteristic of the human condition.

There are many startling facts and descriptions that Graeber produces as he tells his story of the development of the ideologies of money, credit, and debt. One of the most interesting to me has to do with *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

L. Frank Baum's book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, which appeared in 1900, is widely recognized to be a parable for the Populist campaign of William Jennings Bryan, who twice ran for president on the Free Silver platform -- vowing to replace the gold standard with a bimetallic system that would allow the free creation of silver money alongside gold. ... According to the Populist reading, the Wicked Witches of the East and West represent the East and West Coast bankers (promoters of and benefactors from the tight money supply), the Scarecrow represented the farmers (who didn't have the brains to avoid the debt trap), the Tin Woodsman was the industrial proletariat (who didn't have the heart to act in solidarity with the farmers), the Cowardly Lion represented the political class (who didn't have the courage to intervene). ... "Oz" is of course the standard abbreviation for "ounce." (52)
(This is roughly as startling to me as an interpretation of Star Wars as an extended allegory on Reaganism (intervention in Nicaragua, scary military officers in the background, etc.). This doesn't quite work, though, since Star Wars appeared in 1977, three years before Reagan's first election as president.)

One of Graeber's recurring themes is that money and debt are reciprocals of each other. He tells many stories about IOU's being passed around within a community: John promises to give X to Alice; Alice passes on the IOU to Robbie in exchange for a beer; Robbie takes the IOU to the nail shop and exchanges it for a pound of nails from Bert; and Bert eventually comes back to John to redeem the IOU. In this circuit, the statement of debt serves as a basis for folk currency within a local society. But Graeber argues that the establishment of Bank of England resulted in bank notes that were no more or less than IOU's from the state (49).

Another theme that comes into the book is the close connection that Graeber draws between money and currency, and violence and war. He argues that trust and extended credit arrangements work very well during periods of peace; whereas a period of extended warfare puts a premium on the portability and anonymity of precious metals. So warfare pushes societies (and monarchs) towards the use of currency made out of precious metals. He goes further: monarchs needed to pay their armies, in Europe, central Asia, and East Asia; and precious metals (coins) work best for the heavily armed and footloose soldiers who made up those armies.

As a result, while credit systems tend to dominate in periods of relative social peace, or

across networks of trust (whether created by states or, in most periods, transnational institutions like merchant guilds or communities of faith), in periods characterized by widespread war and plunder, they tend to be replaced by precious metal. (213)
And:

The Atlantic Slave Trade as a whole was a gigantic network of credit arrangements. Ship-owners based in Liverpool or Bristol would acquire goods on easy credit terms from local wholesalers, expecting to make good by selling slaves (also on credit) to planters int he Antilles and America, with commission agents in the city of London ultimately financing the affair through the profits of the sugar and tobacco trade. (149)
Graeber has a preferred alternative to a society based on barter, market exchange, debt, warfare, slavery, and peonage. It is what he calls a "human economy":

This is why I developed the concept of human economies: ones in which what is considered really important about human beings is the fact that they are each a unique nexus of relations with others -- therefore, that no one could ever be considered exactly equivalent to anything or anyone else. In a human economy, money is not a way of buying or trading human beings, but a way of expressing just how much one cannot do so. (207)
An intriguing, and somewhat perplexing, part of Graeber's analysis is his effort to link the value systems of Eurasia's great civilizations to the social creation of money, credit, and debt. A central thrust here is his analysis of the "Axial Age" -- the period from 800 bc to 600 ad when there was great creativity in the emergence of new spiritual leaders and movements. There was, simultaneously, extensive warfare; and there was the simultaneous invention of currency in several widely separated places. He illustrates this nexus with the case of China:

The golden age of Chinese philosophy was the period of chaos that preceded unification [during the Warring States period], and this followed the typical Axial Age pattern: the same fractured political landscape, the same rise of trained, professional armies and the creation of coined money largely in order to pay them. We also see the same government policies designed to encourage the development of markets, chattel slavery on a scale not seen before or since in Chinese history, the appearance of itinerant philosophers and religious visionaries, battling intellectual schools, and eventually, attempts by political leaders to transform the new philosophies into religions of state. (235)
So what is the connection he wants to draw between value systems, social violence, and money? It is unclear to me; somehow Graeber weaves together a fascinating narrative involving each of these. He does think there is a connection, but it's difficult to see what is thought to be causal in the story.

In fact, some of the historical connections are so uncannily close that they are very hard to explain any other way. Let me give an example. After the first coins were minted around 600 bc in the kingdom of Lydia, the practice quickly spread to Ionia, the Greek cities of the adjacent coast. The greatest of these was the great walled metropolis of Miletus, which also appears to have been the first Greek city to strike its own coins. It was Ionia, too, that provided the bulk of the Greek mercenaries active in the Mediterranean at the time, with Miletus their effective headquarters. Miletus was also the commercial center of the region, and perhaps, the first city in the world where everyday market transactions came to be carried out primarily in coins instead of credit. Greek philosophy, in turn, begins with three men: Thales, of Miletus (c. 624 bc- c546 bc), "Anaximander, of Miletus (c. 610 bc- c546 bc), and Anaximenes, of Miletus (c. 585 bc- c525 bc) -- in other words, men who were living in that city at exactly the time that coinage was first

introduced. (244)
He pulls out "materialism" as a thread in the philosophical systems that emerged in the Axial Age -- China as well as Greece -- and suggests an analogy between the idea of an abstract fundamental physical substance that is the substrate of everything physical, and the idea of an abstract unit of measure of all commodities, money (245); but it's hard to see a consistent and compelling idea here about the intertwining development of philosophy and economics. Here is the closest he comes to a statement of the nature of the connection he finds:

What we see then is a strange kind of back-and-forth, attack and riposte, whereby the market, the state, war, and religion all continually separate and merge with one another. (248)
Where does it all lead? After a walk through the Middle Ages (major improvement in quality of life over the Axial Age, according to Graeber), we get to capitalism:

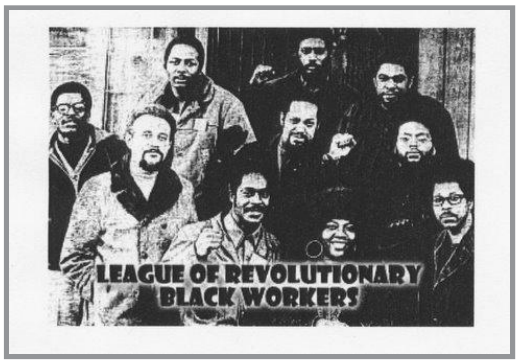
Starting from our baseline date of 1700, then, what we see at the dawn of modern capitalism is a gigantic financial apparatus of credit and debt that operates -- in practical effect -- to pump more and more labor out of just about everyone with whom it comes into contact, and as a result produces an endlessly expanding volume of material goods. (346)
Does he bring this parable to a practical piece of advice? He does, actually:

In this book I have largely avoided making concrete proposals, but let me end with one. It seems to me that we are long overdue for some kind of Biblical-style Jubilee: one that would affect both international debt and consumer debt. It would be salutary not just because it would relieve so much genuine human suffering, but also because it would be our way of reminding ourselves that money is not ineffable, that paying one's debts is not the essence of morality, that all these things are human arrangements and that if democracy is to mean anything, it is the ability to all agree to arrange things in a different way. (390)
As I mentioned at the start, Graeber is also an activist who has been strongly involved in anti-globalization protests in the past fifteen years. His Direct Action: An Ethnography is an interesting cross-over book bringing together his anthropologist's training and his activist experience; it is an ethnography of the anarchist activism movement as he has experienced it. I'll discuss this work in a future post.

Here are two interviews with Graeber that give a pretty good idea of his style and critical views about the present (link, link). Both are very interesting to listen to.

Transnational labor activism

Friday, December 02, 2011



One of the characteristics that observers notice when they consider the anti-globalization protests of the past decade or so is the extent of transnational relationships that exist among activists and activist organizations. Sidney Tarrow provides a scholarly examination of these kinds of movements in The New Transnational Activism, where he tries to understand the organizational and situational circumstances that either facilitate or impede calls to popular action concerning large issues that affect many countries. (Here is a post on transnational activism and an earlier post on anti-NATO protests in Strasbourg a couple of years ago.) This is important work, and transnational activism is certainly an important feature of the world scene today. Our attention, though, is often restricted to the recent past when we think about transnational activism. So it is useful to consider earlier periods in the twentieth century in which movements succeeded at some level at bringing together multi-national coalitions in support of an important social or political cause.

One important instance is the international alliances that emerged in the radical end of the non-Communist labor movement in the 1950s. Nicola Pizzolato's recent "Transnational Radicals: Labour Dissent and Political Activism in Detroit and Turin (1950-1970)" in a recent issue of international review of social history (link) is a great case study in this light. Pizzolata provides a very useful and detailed account of the political and theoretical developments that transpired in Detroit and Turin among activist workers and thinkers during this period. It is well worth reading for that reason alone. But it also provides a concrete instance of a situation in which workers and activists, located within the industrial system in different parts of the world, were able to form their own understandings and strategies concerning those industrial realities, and the degree to which there was meaningful interaction among these groups.

The piece is particularly interesting to me for the light it sheds on the development of an important strand of radical African-American thought during the 1950s and 1960s. (Also because I had the remarkable pleasure of meeting one of the principal players in the story a few years ago, Grace Lee Boggs.) African-American militancy took a different shape within the industrial labor force than it did in much of the rest of America, and it is a story worth understanding. Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin's Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution is a valuable monograph on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Manning Marable provides a thoughtful foreword. Marable provides a quick sketch of the development of the movement:

By 1968, more than 2.5 million African Americans belonged to the AFL-CIO. Yet the vast majority of black workers were marginalized and alienated from labor's predominantly white conservative leadership. In 1967, black militant workers at Ford Motor Company's automobile plant in Mahwah, New Jersey, initiated the United Black Brothers. In 1968,

African-American steelworkers in Maryland established the Shipyard Workers for Job Equality to oppose the discriminatory policies and practices of both their union and management. Similar black workers' groups, both inside and outside trade unions, began to develop throughout the country. The more moderate liberal to progressive tendency of this upsurgence of black workers was expressed organizationally in 1972 with the establishment of the Coalition of Black Trade Unions.

A much more radical current of black working-class activism developed in Detroit. Only weeks following King's assassination, black workers a tthe Detroit Dodge Main plant of Chrysler Corporation staged a wildcat strike, protesting oppressive working conditions.... The most militant workers established DRUM, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. DRUM soon inspired the initiation of other independent black workers' groups in metro Detroit, such as FRUM, at Ford's massive River Rouge plant, and ELRUM, at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant. (ix-x)

Here is how Pizzolato describes the situation:

In Detroit and Turin, these radicals saw the car factories as the key loci for change -- laboratories for a possible "autonomist" working-class activity that could take over industrial production and overhaul the societal system -- and urged workers to develop their own forms of collective organization, beyond existing labour organization. (5)

The "Correspondence" was a post-Trotskyist version of anti-capitalist theory and activism, rooted in the Detroit auto industry and involving names that are still familiar in Detroit: James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, General Baker, Martin Glaberman, Charles Denby, William Gorman and George Rawick (6). (Parenthetically, Wayne State University enters the story at several junctures as a locus for theory and debate.) This segment of politically engaged workers was as critical of organized labor as they were of the companies. A key part of the political activism of the Correspondence consisted in its willingness to confront the racial divisions that existed in society and within the factory. "[Charles Denby's *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal*] took a particularly strong stand in support of both the possibility of interracial co-operation among workers and the necessity of an autonomous black struggle" (10).

The spontaneous discontent breeding in the factories and in the working-class neighbourhoods of Detroit and Turin in the late 1960s was captured by some radical groups that had incorporated into their programmes many of the insights gleaned in the previous fifteen years by the Johnson-Forest Tendency, Correspondence, Quaderni Rossi, and Classe Operaia -- groups that could engage in a dialogue because, notwithstanding local differences, they located themselves in a similar position within a global opposition to capitalism. (21)

Essentially the developments that Pizzolato describes in Detroit and Turin represent a sustained, theoretically powerful attempt by radical thinkers and activists to rethink the role of working people within a progressive vision. There were a number of strands, but core was the "Johnson-Forest Tendency", deriving from C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya. The perspective is "autonomist" -- it rejects the idea that Communist parties, workers' states, or bureaucratic union organizations do a good job of furthering workers' interests. Rather, workers need to self-organize, both in terms of production and in terms of strategies and actions. Pizzolato makes the point that it is anti-Fordist, anti-Soviet, and anti-bureaucratic union. And, like the Occupy Wall Street movement today, its theorists attempted to go beyond existing radical dogma for a new radical diagnosis.

The narrative of theory, publication, and activism that Pizzolato offers for both Detroit and Turin is fascinating in its own terms. But equally interesting, and crucial to his argument, is his documentation of the transnational connections that existed within this period of radical
thinking and action. C. L. R. James was an internationally recognized voice. But the influence of the Detroit radical groups on European and Italian working class activism required more direct linkages. What were they? Here are a few of the specific linkages that Pizzolato cites.

For six months in 1948 Grace Lee Boggs resided in Paris and established a "daily collaboration" with the members of the group[Socialism ou Barbarie]. (12)

In his native Cremona, Montaldi founded in 1957 a group called Unita Proletaria, that distanced itself from the Communist Party and established direct contact with Socialisme ou Barbarie, Correspondence, News and Letters, And European groups that espoused the same line: the British Solidarity for Workers' Power, the Belgian Pouvoir Ouvrier, the Dutch Spartakus and others. (13)
In addition to theoretical debates and developments that extended across these specific transnational networks, the examples of large labor actions in 1967 and 1968 -- Renault in France, FIAT in Turin, and the Big Three in Detroit -- served to communicate strategies, tactics, and a spirit of boldness from one group to another.

It was in this context that the intellectual and personal contacts between Detroit and Turin radicals dating back to the 1950s were rekindled by the almost simultaneous workers' struggles in the car factories. (24)

The Italians were also keen to know about Detroit, as very little leaked out in the Italian press about labour unrest in the American cities. "Everyone is asking [for] information about the auto strikes in [the] States," wrote Gambino to Glaberman in 1970. (26)
African-American activist John Watson soon traveled to several cities in Italy in 1970 (his second trip), to share the news about the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

What is fascinating about this whole story is the light it sheds on the formation of efforts at understanding and challenging a complex social order. There is an emphasis throughout much of this movement on taking workers' experiences within the factory as the starting point. This implicitly challenges the preoccupation of the Old Left on the canonical ideas of Marxism and Leninism -- the structure of capitalism, the vanguard party. But parallel to this independence of thinking is an independence in acting. The activists within this loose transnational community put the emphasis on workers' actions, not the actions of bureaucratized organizations (parties, unions, states). And both aspects of this seem to have some resonance with the anti-globalization movement of the past 20 years.

David Graeber on the anarchist movement

Sunday, December 04, 2011

Progressives seem to be confronted with some real conundrums (or is it conundra?), here in the early part of the 21st century. We want to see a world that is genuinely committed to some basic principles of social justice, equality, and personal freedom. And we generally acknowledge the point that the modern world can only function on the basis of social, political, and economic structures that have a degree of authority over individual



conduct. These two framing ideas are in tension, once we recognize the permanent likelihood of "institutional capture" of social structures by privileged individuals and groups. Capture may result from the access a privileged party has to the sources of wealth and power (the CCP in China) or the astronomically disproportional influence that corporations and private interests have in the legislative and regulatory process (lobbyists in France, the UK, and the US). So is it possible to create a society in which organizing structures exist, but that are genuinely governed by the constraints of justice,equality, and democracy? Can democratic institutions be established and defended that genuinely embody the interests and dignity of poor and working people? In a word, is social democracy actually a feasible outcome in the conditions of the 21st century?

There is a strand of radical thought that answers these questions in the negative. The "autonomist" theories and practices within the labor movement of the 1950s that were described in an earlier post represent one thread in this world. Another is the body of thinking, rhetoric, and action that is involved in the anarchist organizations associated with current anti-globalization activism. David Graeber has done an important service to the rest of us by offering an extended ethnography of this loosely connected movement in Direct Action. The book is the first I've seen to offer a nuanced description of the thinking, practices, and networks that have emerged within this movement over the past fifteen years or so. Unlike much of the journalism that this movement has produced, it resists both caricature and polemic. Graeber is a participant within the movement as well as an observer, and his voice helps to make sense of the thinking and actions that have surfaced in Seattle, Washington, Quebec, Madrid, and London in the past 15 years. And it certainly helps to put voices and faces into the OWS movement. Graeber is, by the way, an unusually appealing writer, so the book is a very engaging read. (It is also very long -- 538 pages of text.)

The first half of the book provides a detailed chronological ethnography of the preparations that several Direct Action groups made to engage in demonstration and resistance at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec in April, 2001. Graeber gives a textured understanding of the personalities and debates that unfolded. (Here is an activist-produced video of the protests; link.) As his description makes clear, this was a transnational network from the start, with alliances and affinities extending from Chiapas to Italy to Spain to Switzerland to the Mohawk Nation spanning the US and Canada border.

The second part of the book is a more analytical exposition of direct action and anarchism. He offers a clear description of what these activists mean by "direct action" (chapter 5), and attempts to capture something of the culture of anarchist activism (chapter 6). Here is an interesting observation about the social composition of anarchist networks in the US, which may also shed some light on OWS:

Speaking broadly, it seems to me activist milieu can best be seen as a juncture, a kind of meeting place, between downwardly mobile elements of the professional classes and upwardly mobile children of the working class. (252)
The groups that Graeber describes include various Direct Action Networks (DAN),

including the one based in New York in which he was involved, NYC DAN. Another is Ya Basta!, also anarchist but with a decided taste for performance. These groups conduct their discussions, planning, and decision-making according to egalitarian, consensual practices: no leaders, no executive committees, no authority. These practices are described in the principles endorsed by one of the oldest Direct Action groups, the Peoples' Global Action (PGA) (link). Here is how Graeber describes the principles of consensus:

DAN employed a formal consensus process with rotating facilitators, an elaborate system of “stacking” designed to ensure no small group of voices dominated the conversation. Smokey and Flamma hated DAN. Like a number of other anarchists in New York—I’ll call them the “hardcores,” for lack of a better name, the sort that were likely to have more experience in Black Blocs, tree sits, or the squatter scene, or anyway used to working in small, intimate collectives—they saw DAN’s formal structure as itself stifling and oppressive. (20)

But the ideal of consensus doesn't imply inability to act as a group. In fact, Graeber describes an extended process of brainstorming, planning, and decision-making leading up to coordination with the Mohawk Warrior Society, Ya Basta!, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), and other sympathetic groups, and execution of complex actions in Quebec. (Graeber and other DAN participants seem to find the socialist ISO activists particularly annoying because of their apparent opportunism and vanguardism; and yet their egalitarian principles make it impossible for them to exclude them.)

The detailed notes about the tactics and actions in Quebec once the demonstrations began read like an urban combat novel: anarchist groups approaching the fence surrounding the core Summit area, police firing tear gas and water cannons, many injuries and arrests, molotov cocktails from a variety of Blocs against water cannon. Graeber's narrative gives a vivid depiction of what must have been similar actions and tactics in Strasbourg, London, and Seattle, with activists learning new tactics (and equipment) from one siege to another. (The horrendous video and photos from UC-Davis of police methodically pepper-spraying seated demonstrators give another current exposure to the potential for police violence in circumstances of protest and resistance.)

I find some interesting affinities between the movements and ideas that Graeber describes and the views of economic development advocated by Arturo Escobar in Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World. Escobar articulates much of the radical critique of globalization and its effects on poor people that lies at the core of the worldview expressed by the anarchist movement Graeber describes. Escobar's position is strongly anti-neoliberal, taking issue with foundational development ideas about growth and the general beneficence of markets. He too favors a view of the future in which people exercise continuing control over the processes that affect them. And he too likes a future built around fairly autonomous communities, cooperatives, and non-market institutions.

Also resonant are new ideas about deliberative and participatory democracy being developed by Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright under the rubric of "empowered deliberative democracy"-- for example, in Deepening Democracy. Here is a representative statement of their view of the challenge facing existing democracies:

As the tasks of the state have become more complex and the size of polities larger and more heterogeneous, the institutional forms of liberal democracy developed in the nineteenth century—representative democracy plus techno-bureaucratic

administration—seem increasingly ill suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century. “Democracy” as a way of organizing the state has come to be narrowly identified with territorially based competitive elections of political leadership for legislative and executive offices. Yet, increasingly, this mechanism of political representation seems ineffective in accomplishing the central ideals of democratic politics: facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and impleenting public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society, and, in more radical egalitarian versions of the democratic ideal, ensuring that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth. (3)

There are quite a few political values and perceptions embodied in the Direct Action movement that many progressive people can relate to. It isn't surprising that OWS has caught the attention of many young people. But are the mini-movements of activists that Graeber describes really a potential solution to the conundrum mentioned above? Can we get to a more just world through this kind of activism? Seattle and Quebec can claim some successes in achieving negative goals -- discrediting the IMF, challenging the World Bank, exposing a latent violence in democratic societies through excessive police force and brutality. And perhaps OWS will be successful in pushing back against over-greedy financial institutions. This kind of effect can plausibly come about through spontaneous popular protest. And as Graeber makes clear, these large anarchist actions are organized and planned, even if they are collective and mass-based.

But this just delays the problem, because it doesn't give a basis for creating institutions and structures that really work from the point of view of social justice and participatory democracy. The kinds of activism Graeber describes might be compared to an "immune system" for the periodic disorders of imperfect democracy: activists and their organizations (lymphocytes) swarm around important causes of distress (infections, inflammation), provoking repair responses within the society. But the movement doesn't contribute to the basic metabolism of society and politics. "Direct Action" isn't really a prescription for organizing society in its routine work; the approval of food and drug safety, the plans that states make for energy production, the creation and maintenance of social safety nets. The voice of the people can demand these protections. But then we need institutions that actually do the work. And the funny suits of Ya Basta! and spokescouncils don't fill the bill for this task. In the end, I am more attracted to the kind of work begun by Fung and Wright, which is aimed at creating sustainable institutions of participatory democracy.

Neil Gross's pragmatist sociology

Wednesday, December 07, 2011

	Origins of beliefs about environment of action	Methods for determining which action to perform	View of the actor
Deliberative	Beliefs based on scientific procedures and inference	Calculation of expected utilities of various interventions	Actor as solitary deliberator
Pragmatic	Beliefs based on socially specific cognitive frameworks	Application of socially specific rules of thumb/habits/repertoires	Actor as member of a social group, shaping actions according to social cues

An earlier post discussed Neil Gross's attempt to understand social mechanisms from the point of view of a pragmatist sociology. Gross's attempt to flesh out a pragmatist theory of action is intriguing and worthy of further exploration. So here I'll look at a subsequent article, "Charles Tilly and American Pragmatism" (2010), in which Gross extends this analysis to an interpretation of Charles Tilly. He makes an interesting case that Tilly's theories share a great deal in common with pragmatist theory. I'm not going to evaluate that claim here, though he makes a strong case, but instead want to pull out the essentials of what Gross seems to believe to be the fundamental assumptions of a pragmatist theory of acdtion.

So what are some of the insights from pragmatism that Gross thinks can help us to formulate a more adequate framework of sociological thinking? Here is a suggestive statement:

I aimed for a way of proceeding that would also accord with the turn toward “practice” in contemporary theory—that is, toward the reconceptualization of action as “forms of doing or ways of acting and interacting that appear within particular communities or groups; depend on shared presuppositions or assumptions...; and unfold in individuals’ lives as a result of active, creative, and less than conscious puttings into play of those presuppositions and assumptions in the context of various and intersecting sociobiographical experiences and exigencies.” (342)

This part of the story falls clearly in the zone of attempting to improve upon the theory of action that much social theory has presupposed for more than a century -- the idea of the rational, purposive agent considering options and choosing outcomes (link). Against that hyper-deliberative conception, Gross (and pragmatism) advocates for a more fluid, interactional, and only partially conscious flow of actions. There is a suggestion here of stylized modes of behavior (scripts) within which persons locate their actions, and a suggestion of the importance of specific cognitive fields embodied in social groups that contextualize and rationalize the person's activities (assumptions, for example, of how a doctor should treat a patient in a hospital).

Another important part of Gross's conception of pragmatist action theory is the way we conceive of the individual. According to the pragmatist theory, the individual needs to be considered within the context of a social group, influenced by norms, emotions, and actions of the others in the group. So action should not be "atomized" into a group of individual actors choosing independently. Gross puts this part of the theory in the form of a comment about Tilly:

The motivating claim of *Durable Inequality* is that analysts should dispense with “individualistic” models that seek to explain differences in the life chances of members of social groups in terms of their experiences, properties, and characteristics, whether these are assumed to be a product of genetic endowments, as in Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) controversial “bell curve” thesis, or social circumstance, as in some versions of human capital theory. (349)

The point emerges in Tilly through his insistence on "relationality" -- his deep objection to attempting to understand actions by individuals without regard to the networks of other individuals whose behavior and thoughts set the context to the actions.

Third, there is the question of how the agent decides what to do in a particular circumstance. The pragmatist view that Gross describes holds that the actor chooses in line with habit and script. Essentially, this is the insight that there are fairly well defined rules of thumb or scripts for how to respond to certain kinds of problems. And the theory holds that the actor generally acts accordingly. When an experienced politician is confronted by a heckler, the play book pretty well specifies how he/she should respond. This contrasts sharply from the deliberativist view of action.

What makes this set of assumptions a "pragmatist" approach? Fundamentally, because it understands the actor as situated within a field of assumptions, modes of behavior, ways of perceiving; and as being stimulated to action by "problem situations". So action is understood as the actor's creative use of scripts, habits, and cognitive frameworks to solve particular problems. (Gross refers to this as an *A-P-H-R* chain: actor, problem

situation, habit, and response; 343.)

How does this compare to the foil of pure deliberative rationality? According to rational choice theory an actor makes a choice in a problem situation by (i) arranging a preference ordering of possible outcomes, including utilities for each outcome; (ii) consulting rational procedures to gain beliefs about the probabilities of various strategies leading to various outcomes; and (iii) choosing that strategy that results in the greatest expected utility (*utility* x *probability*). This account makes choice rational in both aspects: rational acquisition of beliefs about interventions and outcomes, and rational comparison of the relative goodness/badness of the outcomes associated with possible interventions. There is no place in this story for culturally variable cognitive frameworks for perceiving the situation, or for group-specific rules of thumb governing the choice of interventions.

This formulation of the two theories permits fairly direct comparison between them. Consider this table comparing the two theories of action:

So how would we pursue a concrete sociological question differently if we chose one or the other of these theories of action? Let's consider rebellion -- the coordinated activities of resistance of a large population against a powerful ruler. What would a deliberative rationality sociology of rebellion look like? And what would a pragmatist theory look like?

Oddly enough, it seems to me that we have clear illustrations of both approaches in the existing literature on peasant rebellion. In fact, the moral economy debate of the 1970s illustrates both approaches. The protagonists here are Samuel Popkin's The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam and James Scott's The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia. Popkin's analysis of rebellion and revolution in Vietnam is thoroughly grounded in the assumptions of rational choice theory. Popkin tries to understand the actions of each of the players according to their rational behavior in the face of risk and uncertainty and the strategic behavior of others. Peasants rebel when the likelihood of success is great enough to make the discounted rewards of rebellion greater than the discounted costs of failure.

Scott understands rebellion in Southeast Asia in very different terms. He finds that the "moral economy of the peasant" is a powerful source of behavior for villagers as they consider the options of resistance and subordination. He is sympathetic to the idea that peasant perceptions of society, of the power structure, and of the future are powerfully shaped by shared social assumptions and frameworks, here and in other works like Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance and Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. So Popkin's assumptions are an almost pure example of rational-choice social research; whereas Scott's assumptions have a very close match with the premises of pragmatist theory of action, as I've reconstructed it here.

So perhaps James Scott too -- like Tilly, in Gross's interpretation -- has a deeply pragmatist side lurking within his sociological imagination.

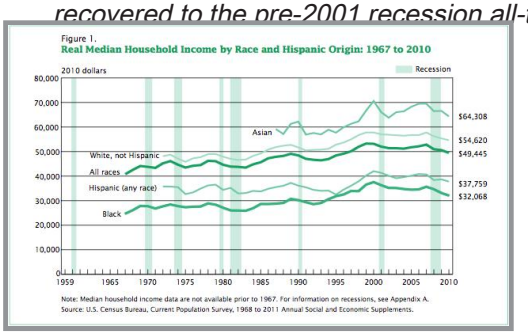
Structural adjustment for the middle class?

Saturday, December 10, 2011

Working people in the US have suffered big economic losses in the past four years. Losses of jobs in the economy have pushed many working people from high-wage to low-wage jobs, and as we all know, many people have been pushed out of jobs altogether. The national unemployment rate was 8.6% in November, and very much higher in urban areas and African-American and Latino communities. Michigan's rate was 10.6% in October 2011 (link). White non-Hispanic households fell from $55,360 in 2009 to $54,620 (-1.3%), while black households fell from $33,122 to $32,068 (-3.2%) (Table 1). These differences in household income across race are stunning: black households started out at only 63% the level of white households in 2009, and they fell by more than double the percentage rate of loss from 2009 to 2010.

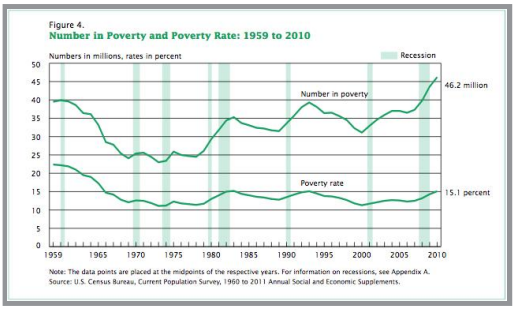
Here is a report from the US Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010,* that sheds some light on the changes of the past several years. Here are a few important summary findings:

- *Real median household income was $49,445 in 2010, a 2.3 percent decline from 2009 (Figure 1 and Table 1).*
- *Since 2007, the year before the most recent recession, real median household income has declined 6.4 percent and is 7.1 percent below the median household income peak that occurred in 1999 (Figure 1 and Tables A-1 and A-2).3*
- *Both family and nonfamily households had declines in real median income between 2009 and 2010. The income of family households declined by 1.2 percent to $61,544; the income of nonfamily households declined by 3.9 percent to $29,730 (Table 1).*
- *Real median income declined for White and Black households between 2009 and 2010, while the changes for Asian and Hispanic-origin households were not statistically significant (Table 1).*
- *Real median household income for each race and Hispanic-origin group has not yet recovered to the pre-2001 recession all-time highs (Table A-1).* (5)



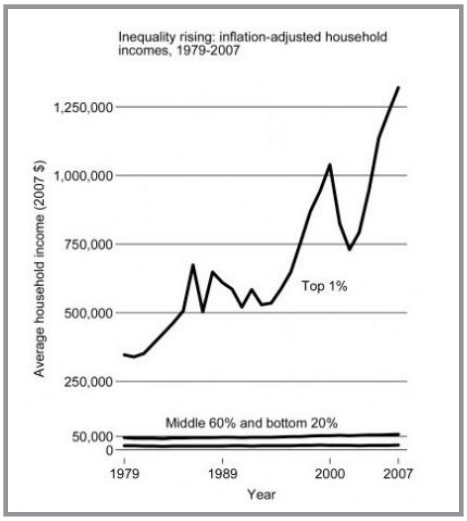
Here is what real median income looks like, broken down by racial group, since 1967.

Now consider the poverty statistics the report contains. Here is a summary graph:



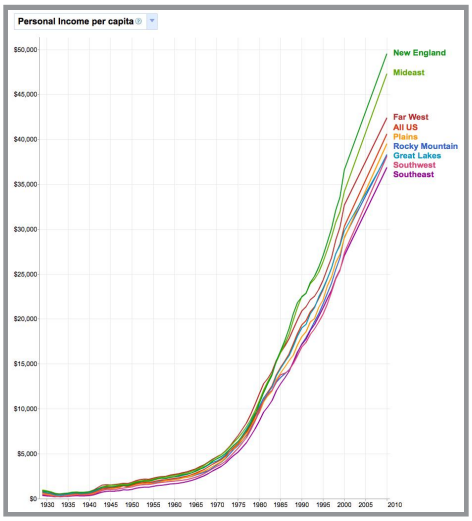
The national poverty rate reached a forty-year low in 2000, at about 12%. Through the decade, however, the national rate has grown to 15.1% in 2010, representing 46.2 million people. Here again there is a stunningly wide gap between white and black populations. The poverty rate in 2010 for white non-Hispanic households is 9.9%, while the rate for black households in 2010 is 27.4% (Table 4).

We've tended to think of this period as a difficult economic time that will eventually come to an end. But perhaps that's too optimistic. Perhaps what we are witnessing is a structural adjustment of the US labor



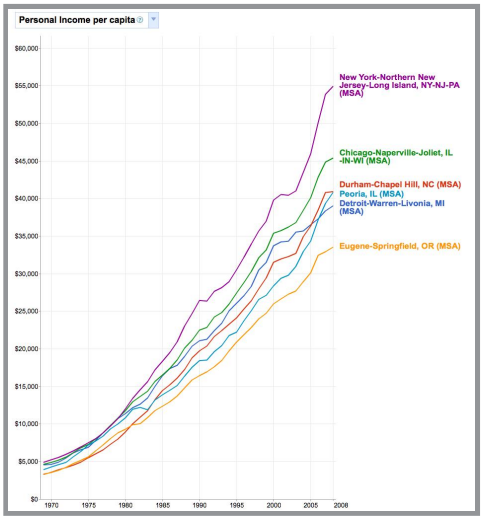
market, with a permanent downward shift in income for middle and low income people. And perhaps these shifts will be most extreme for African-American households. (The past decade seems to bear this out. From 2000 to 2010 white non-Hispanic households had declined 5.5%, while black households declined 14.6% during that same period (8).)

Here the concern is that maybe Bruce Springsteen was right -- "these jobs are going, boys, and they ain't coming back to your hometown." Jobs with decent wages -- manufacturing jobs, union jobs, professional service jobs -- have declined precipitously in the past twenty years (not just since the recession). And that means that the opportunities for many workers to have "middle-class" incomes have become much more restricted. Here is a sober report from Chemical and Engineering News --



The severe national recession of the past several years is having a negative impact on the employment and the starting salaries of chemists and chemical engineers. The latest data from the American Chemical Society on graduates from 2009 found that median starting salaries fell about 5% for those receiving bachelor's and doctoral degrees compared with the previous year. New graduates with master's degrees appeared to have gotten a jump in pay.

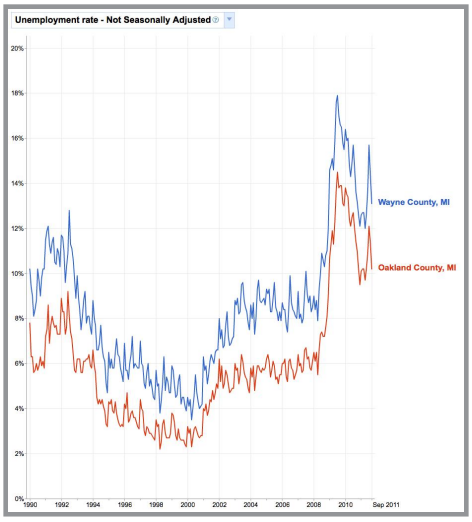
Even the banking and financial sector has contracted (link):



The financial services industry, hammered by job cuts and record losses, is in for an even bigger contraction as the global recession deepens, said Marc Faber, publisher of the Gloom, Boom & Doom Report.

"The financial sector will contract and it will contract much more than we've seen so far," said Faber, who was in Tokyo to speak at an event hosted by CLSA Ltd. Financial professionals have "been in paradise for the past 25 years."

More than 275,000 jobs in the financial industry have been lost in the last two years, according to Bloomberg data, while losses and writedowns at global companies exceeded $1 trillion in the past year. Faber said the contraction could rival declines seen in the 1970s following the collapse of Bernard Cornfeld's Investors Overseas Services



that shook confidence in the industry for a decade.

So the financial industry isn't providing ready opportunities for young MBAs; many of them too will need to find other, less well-paying jobs.

Does this mean that everyone in the US economy is facing downward pressure on wages and salary? Not exactly. There is a segment of the American economy that is doing very well indeed. Here is a graph provided by Lane Kenworthy demonstrating the growth in income of the top 1% (link). (Kenworthy's discussion is very good.) The top line is the median household income of the top 1%. The lower lines, showing virtually no growth, represent the median of the middle three quintiles and the median of the bottom quintile of households.

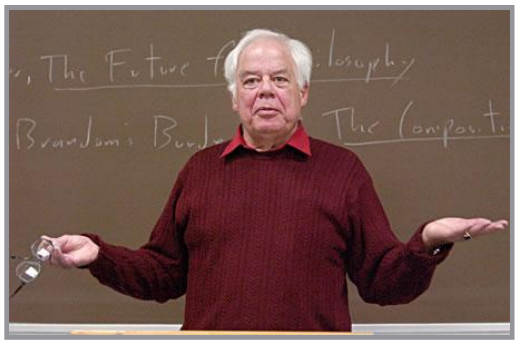
source: Consider the Evidence (Lane Kenworthy)

So here are two important questions. Is the US economy on a path towards a shift to lower-paid jobs for a large segment of its working population? And are there policies that could be chosen that would result in an outcome that looks more fair than this graph of the recent past, with reasonable growth of income for all American workers and less extreme growth at the very top?

(Here is an interesting Google resource, the Public Data Explorer, that provides visualization tools for basic US economic and demographic data. This particular screen shows the growth of personal income per capita since about 1930, across the regions of the United States. (This is money income, not adjusted for inflation.) The second graph shows personal income per capita for selected metropolitan areas. The third graph shows the unemployment rates for Wayne County and Oakland County in Michigan.)

Sociology of ideas: Richard Rorty

Monday, December 12, 2011



Where do new ideas and directions of thought come from? Is it possible to set a context for important changes in intellectual culture, in the sciences or the humanities? Can we give any explanation for the development of individual thinkers' thought?

These are the key questions that Neil Gross raises in his sociological biography of Richard Rorty in Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher (2009). The book is excellent in every respect. Gross has gone into thorough detail in discovering and incorporating correspondence with family and friends that allow him to reconstruct the micro setting within which the young Rorty took shape. His exposition of the complex philosophical debates that set the stage for academic philosophy in the United States

from the 1950s to the 1980s is effortless and accurate. And he offers a very coherent interpretation of many of Rorty's most important ideas. Any one of these achievements is noteworthy; together they are exceptional.

Gross is not interested in writing a traditional intellectual biography. Rather, he wants to advance the emerging field of "new sociology of ideas" through an extended case study of the development of a particularly important philosopher. The purpose of the book is to provide a careful and sociologically rich account of the ways in which a humanities discipline (philosophy) developed, through a crucial period (the 1940s through the 1980s).

My goal is to develop, on the basis of immersion in an empirical case, a new theory about the social influences on intellectual choice, particularly for humanists—that is, a theory about the social factors that lead them to fasten onto one idea, or set of ideas, rather than another, during turning points in their intellectual careers. (kindle location 95)

The argument I now want to make is that the developments considered in chapters 1–8 reflect not Rorty’s idiosyncratic and entirely contingent biographical experiences but the operation of more general social mechanisms and processes that shaped and structured his intellectual life and career. (kl 5904)
Here is how he describes the sociology of ideas:

Sociologists of ideas seek to uncover the relatively autonomous social logics and dynamics, the underlying mechanisms and processes, that shape and structure life in the various social settings intellectuals inhabit: academic departments, laboratories, disciplinary fields, scholarly networks, and so on. It is these mechanisms and processes, they claim, that—in interaction with the facts that form the material for reflection—do the most to explain the assumptions, theories, methodologies, interpretations of ambiguous data, and specific ideas to which thinkers come to cleave. (kl 499)
The goal is to provide a sociological interpretation of the development of thinkers and disciplines within the humanities (in deliberate analogy to current studies in the sociology of science). Gross acknowledges but rejects earlier efforts at sociology of knowledge (Marx, Mannheim), as being reductionist to the thinker's location within a set of social structures. Gross is more sympathetic to more recent contributions, including especially the theories of Bourdieu (field) (Homo Academicus) and Randall Collins (interaction ritual chains) (The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change). These theories emphasize the incentives and advantages that lead strategically minded professionals in one direction or another within a discipline or field. But Gross argues that these theories too are insufficiently granular and don't provide a basis for accounting for the choices made by particular intellectuals.

One does not have to be a methodological individualist to recognize that meso- and macrolevel social phenomena are constituted out of the actions and interactions of individual persons and that understanding individual-level action—its nature and phenomenology and the conditions and constraints under which it unfolds—is helpful for constructing theories of higher order phenomena, even though the latter have emergent properties and cannot be completely reduced to the former. (kl 158)
To fill this gap he wants to offer a sociology of ideas that brings agency back in. He introduces the idea of the role of the individual's "self-concept", which turns out to be a basis for the choices the young intellectual makes within the context of the strategy-setting realities of the field. A self-concept is a set of values, purposes, and conceptions that the individual has acquired through a variety of social structures, and that continues

to evolve through life. Gross emphasizes the narrative character of a self-conception: it is expressed and embodied through the stories the individual tells him/herself and others about the development of his/her life.

The theory of intellectual self-concept can thus be restated as follows: Thinkers tell stories to themselves and others about who they are as intellectuals. They are then strongly motivated to do intellectual work that will, inter alia, help to express and bring together the disparate elements of these stories. Everything else being equal, they will gravitate toward ideas that make this kind of synthesis possible. (kl 6650)
...
There is good reason to believe that such stories or self-narratives are not epiphenomenal aspects of experience but influences on social action in their own right. Indeed, few notions have been as important in social psychology as those of self and self-concept. (551)

Simply stated, the theory of intellectual self-concept holds that intellectuals tell themselves and others stories about who they are *qua* intellectuals: about their distinctive interests, dispositions, values, capacities, and tastes. (kl 6487)
And Gross thinks that these stories are deeply influential, in terms of the choices that a developing intellectual makes at each stage of life. In particular, he thinks that the academic's choices are often inflected by his/her self-conception to an extent that may override the strategic and prudential considerations that are highlighted by Bourdieu and Collins. Bourdieu and Collins offer "no attempt to think through how the quest for status and upward mobility in an intellectual field may intersect and sometimes compete with thinkers' cognitive and affective interests in remaining true to narratives of intellectual selfhood that have become more or less stable features of their existence" (562). In his view, identity trumps interest--at least sometimes.

Here is how he applies this analysis to Rorty:

My central empirical thesis is that the shift in Rorty's thought from technically oriented philosopher to free-ranging pragmatist reflected a shift from a career stage in which status considerations were central to one in which self-concept considerations became central. (576)
Or in other words, Rorty's early career is well explained by the Bourdieu-Collins theory, whereas his later shift towards pragmatism and more heterodox, pluralistic philosophy is explained by his self-concept.

In Gross's telling of the story, much of Richard Rorty's self-concept was set by the influences of his remarkable parents in childhood and adolescence, James Rorty and Winifred Raushenbush. The parents were politically engaged literary and political intellectuals, and they created an environment of social and intellectual engagement that set aspects of Richard's self-concept that influenced several key choices in his life. Gross's depiction of the social and intellectual commitments of James and Winifred, and the elite milieu in which they circulated, is detailed and striking. This "social capital" served Richard well in his course from the University of Chicago to Yale into his academic career.

Gross believes that the key turns in Rorty's development were these: first, the decision to do a masters thesis on Whitehead at Chicago; then his choice of Yale as a doctoral institution, with a Ph.D. dissertation on "The Concept of Potentiality" (a metaphysical subject); his shift towards analytic philosophy during his first several years of teaching at

Wellesley; his deepening engagement with analytic philosophy in the early years at Princeton; his eventual critique of analytic philosophy in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature; and his further alienation from analytic philosophy in the years that followed towards a contemporary pragmatism and a more pluralistic view of the domain of philosophical methods. In other words, he began in an environment where pragmatism and substantive metaphysics were valued; he shifted to the more highly valued field of analytic philosophy during the years in which he was building his career and approaching tenure; and he returned to a more pluralistic view of philosophy in the years when his career was well established.

Rorty's turn to analytic philosophy makes sense in a Bourdieuian way. Gross describes his Wellesley-era and early Princeton philosophical writings in these terms:

They represent Rorty's attempt to make contributions to analytic thought of a piece with those that other bright, young analytic philosophers of his generation were making. They were, in other words, part of Rorty's efforts to position himself even more squarely within the mainstream philosophical establishment. (kl 4642)

Those observing Rorty's career from afar might have interpreted this spate of analytic publications, coming on the heels of *The Linguistic Turn*, as evidence that Rorty had joined the ranks of the analytic community and saw his work as of a piece with that being done by other analysts. (kl 4853)

But eventually Rorty shifts his philosophical stance, towards a pluralistic and pragmatist set of ideas about philosophical method and subject matter. Here is how Gross summarizes Rorty's turn to pragmatism:

On this understanding, a pragmatist is someone who holds three beliefs: first, that "there is no wholesale, epistemological way to direct, or criticize, or underwrite, the course of inquiry"; second, that "there is no . . . metaphysical difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference between morality and science"; and third, that "there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones." (kl 719)

As Rorty went about developing a historicist, therapeutic alternative to the analytic philosophy he saw being practiced by his Princeton colleagues and others, no one's work was more important to him than that of Thomas Kuhn. (kl 5054)

And Gross dates Rorty's impulses towards pragmatism to a much earlier phase of his intellectual development than is usually done:

Far from it being the case, as some Rorty interpreters have claimed, that Rorty's interest in pragmatism arose only after he made a break with analytic philosophy, his earliest work is characterized by a desire to harness pragmatist insights in the service of a revised conception of the analytic project. (kl 4037)

Rorty rode both of these intellectual waves, becoming caught up in the rigorism of the analytic paradigm in the 1960s and then emerging as a leading figure in the antirigorist movement of the 1970s and 1980s. (kl 7058)

The book repays a close reading, in that it sheds a lot of light on a key period in the development of American philosophy and it provides a cogent sociological theory of the factors that influenced this development. It is really a remarkable book. It would be fascinating to see similar accounts of innovative thinkers such as Nelson Goodman, John Rawls, or (from literary studies) Stephen Greenblatt. That's not likely to happen, however, so this book will probably remain a singular illustration of a powerful theory of the sociology of ideas.

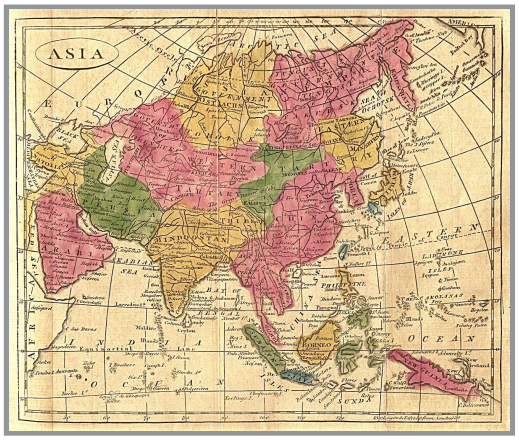
Global history?

Wednesday, December 14, 2011



A question that arises in historiography and the philosophy of history is that of the status of the notion of "global history." I've addressed the topic several times here in a limited way -- often by making the case for Eurasian history rather than French history or Japanese history (post). There the view is that expanding the scope of vision from the separate nation states of Europe or Asia to the broader panoply of multiple peoples, cultures, and structures is helpful when it comes to understanding the past four hundred years. But what are some of the more general concerns that make thinking about global history an interesting or important topic?

One important reason for thinking globally as an historian is the fact that the history discipline -- since the Greeks! -- has tended to be eurocentric in its choice of topics, framing assumptions, and methods. Economic and political history, for example, often privileges the industrial revolution in England and the creation of the modern bureaucratic state in France, Britain, and Germany, as being exemplars of "modern" development in economics and politics. This has led to a tendency to look at other countries' development as non-standard or stunted. So global history is, in part, a framework within which the historian **avoids privileging one regional center** as primary and others as secondary or peripheral. Bin Wong makes this point very strongly in China Transformed.





Second is the apparent fact that when Western historical thinkers -- for example, Hegel, Malthus, Montesquieu -- have turned their attention to Asia, they have often engaged in **a high degree of stereotyping** without much factual historical knowledge. The ideas of Oriental despotism, Asian overpopulation, and Chinese stagnation have encouraged a cartoonish replacement of the intricate and diverse processes of development of different parts of Asia by a single-dimensional and reductive set of simplifying frameworks of thought. This is one of the points of Edward Said's critique of orientalism (Orientalism). So doing "global" history means paying rigorous attention to the specificities of social, political, and cultural arrangements in other parts of the world besides Europe.



So a global history can be expected to be more agnostic about patterns of development, and more open to **discovery of surprising patterns, twists, and variations** in the experiences of India (and its many regional differences), China, Indochina, the Arab world, the Ottoman Empire, and Sub-saharan Africa. Variation and complexity are what we should expect, not stereotyped simplicity. (Geertz's historical reconstruction of the "theatre state" of Bali is a case in point -- he uncovers a complex system of governance, symbol, value, and hierarchy that represents a substantially different structure of politics than the models derived from the emergence of bureaucratic states in early modern Europe; Negara: The Theatre State in 19th Century Bali.) A global history needs to free itself from eurocentrism.

This step away from eurocentrism in outlook should also be accompanied by a **broadening of the geographical range** of what is historically interesting. So a global history ought to be global and trans-national in its selection of topics -- even while recognizing the fact that all historical research is selective. A globally oriented historian will recognize that the political systems of classical India are as interesting and complex as the organization of the Roman Republic.

Another aspect of global history falls more on the side of how some historians have thought about historical structures and causes since the 1960s. History itself is a "global" process, in which **events and systems occur that involve activities in many parts of the world simultaneously**. Immanuel Wallerstein is first among these, with his framework of "world systems" (The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century, With a New Prologue). But the basic idea is a compelling one. An effort to explain the English industrial revolution by only referring to factors, influences, and experiences that occur within England or on its edges (western Europe) is inadequate on its face. International trade, the flow of technologies from Asia to Europe, and the flows of ideas and peoples from Asia, Africa, and the Americas have plain consequences for the domestic economy of England in 1800 and the development of machine and power technologies. And a "globally minded" historian will pay close attention to these trans-national influences and interdependencies. This aspect of the interest of global history falls within the area of thinking about the scope of the causal factors that influence more local developments.

An important current underlying much work in global history is the **reality of colonialism** through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the equally important **reality of anti-colonial struggles and nation building** in the 1960s and 1970s. "The world" was important in the capitals of Great Britain, France, Germany, and Belgium because those nations exerted colonial rule in various parts of Africa, Asia, and South America. So there was a specific interest in gaining certain kinds of knowledge about those societies -- in order to better govern them and exploit them. And post-colonial states had a symmetrical interest in supporting global historiography in their own universities and knowledge systems, in order to better understand and better critique the forming relations of the past.

Then there is the issue of climate and climate change. The "little ice age" had major consequences for population, nutrition, trade, and economic activity in western Europe;

but the same climate processes also affected life in other quarters of the globe. So to have a good understanding of the timing and pace of historical change, we often need to know some fairly detailed facts about the global environment.

A final way in which history needs to become "global" is to incorporate the **perspectives and historical traditions of historians in non-western countries** into the mainstream of discussion of major world developments. Indian and Chinese historians have their own intellectual traditions in conducting historical research and explanation; a global history is one that pays attention to the insights and arguments of these traditions.

So global history has to do with --

- a broadened definition of the arena of historical change to include Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas
- a recognition of the complexity and sophistication of institutions and systems in many parts of the world
- a recognition of the trans-national interrelatedness that has existed among continents for at least four centuries
- a recognition of the complexity and distinctiveness of different national traditions of historiography

Dominic Sachsenmaier provides a significant recent discussion of some of these issues in Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World. Sachsenmaier devotes much of his attention to the last point mentioned here, the "multiple global perspectives" point. He wants to take this idea seriously and try to discover some of the implications of different national traditions of academic historiography. More than half his book is devoted to case studies of global historical research traditions and foci in three distinct national contexts -- Germany, the United States, and China. How do historians trained and en-disciplined in these three traditions think about the core problems of transnational, global history? Sachsenmaier believes that these differences are real, and that they can be productive of future historical insights through more sustained dialogue. But he also believes there are conceptual and methodological barriers to these dialogues, somewhat akin the the "paradigm incommensurability" ideas that Thomas Kuhn advanced for the physical sciences.

The idea that in the future, global history may experience more sustained dialogues between scholars from different world regions leads to deeper theoretical challenges than may be apparent at first sight. Most importantly, there is the question of how to conceptualize "local" viewpoints in today's complex intellectual and academic landscapes. (11)

And he does a good job of articulating what some of these conceptual barriers involve:

In almost all world regions university-based historiography is at least partly an outcome of epistemological discontinuities, outside influences, and shared transformations.... These also had an impact on the conceptions of space underlying world historical scholarship in the widest sense. Prior to spread of history as a modern academic field, forms of border-crossing histories were typically written from a clear perspective of cultural, religious, or even ethical centricity, which means that they tended to be tied to distinct value claims. This situation changed decisively during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when either colonial rule or nation-building efforts had a profound impact on what elements were selected into the canon of academic historiography and many earlier forms of knowledge were rendered subaltern. (13)

Certain hierarchies of knowledge became deeply engrained in the conceptual worlds of

modern historiography. Approaching the realities and further possibilities of alternative approaches to global history thus requires us to critically examine changing dynamics and lasting hierarchies which typify historiography as a global professional environment. (17)

It will become quite clear that in European societies the question of historiographical traditions tended to be answered in ways that were profoundly different from most academic communities in other parts of the world. (17)
So Sachsenmaier's attention is directed largely to the conceptual issues and disciplinary frameworks that are pertinent when we consider how different national traditions have done history. What he has to say here is very useful and original. But he also makes several of the points mentioned above as well -- the need to select different definitions of geography in doing history, the need to put aside the stereotypes of eurocentrism, and the value in understanding in depth the alternative traditions of historical understanding that exist in the world.

Protest in Wukan

Sunday, December 18, 2011



A period of demonstration and protest in the Chinese village of Wukan has caught the attention of world media in the past several weeks (link, link). The village is in Guangdong, the dynamic coastal province. The demonstrations began in September against major land seizures by local government in alignment with developers, and became more intense in the past week when leader Xue Jinbo died in police custody. (Here is a good Wikipedia article on the village.) Land seizures seem to be the most volatile issue in China today, producing a large proportion of the roughly 90,000 civil disturbances the country currently faces a year.

Feature	17th century	Mid 18th century	Late 18th century	Early 19th century		Wukan?
State capacity	Low	High	Low	Low		High
Commercial prosperity	Low	High	High	Low		High
Imperial center's moral legitimacy	Low	High	Low	High		Medium
Protest claim	Reactive	Proactive	Reactive	Reactive		Proactive
Protest action	Violent	Less violent	Violent	Violent		Non-violent
Protesters' identities vis-a-vis local authority	Antagonistic	Filial loyal	Antagonistic	Antagonistic		Antagonistic
Protesters' identities vis-a-vis imperial center	Antagonistic	Filial loyal	Antagonistic	Filial loyal		Filial loyal
Frequency of state-resisting vs state-engaging protest	88%	40%	85%	78%		N/A

Source: Hung, table 6.1, figure 6.1 (final column not from Hung!)

Analysts are interested in probing the causes and dynamics of protest and resistance in contemporary China, including C. K. Lee (Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt) and Kevin O'Brien (Rightful Resistance in Rural China). Here, though, it may also be interesting to compare the current situation with the occurrence of similar incidents during the Qing Dynasty.

Fortunately, it is possible to do so on the basis of a recent relevant study. Ho-Fung Hung's recent Protest with Chinese Characteristics: Demonstrations, Riots, and Petitions in the Mid-Qing Dynasty addresses exactly this issue in historical context. He looks at the period 1740-1839 and finds that the character of protest and resistance varied throughout the period. This is the early modernization period of Chinese history, and Hung believes

that the subject of popular unrest has been overlooked in this period. The grasp of the central power of the state increased during this period, and it also represented a major advance in commercialization of Chinese society.

The main source of data on protests during this period that Hung analyzes is the Veritable Records of the Qing, a compendium of shortened versions of edicts and memorials from the emperor and other officials. Out of the 2,096 volumes of this archive Hung identifies 514 events of popular protest and 450 events of petitions to higher officials (55). His empirical work involves coding hundreds of contentious events during the period, classifying them, and looking for patterns of change over time. But how to categorize? Here is his overview description of his approach:

I classify the documented protest events into different types according to their claims and repertoires. A protest's claim is a set of articulated demands advanced by the participants. The repertoire of a protest is the set of learned or invented acts that the protesters performed to attract the attention of potential participants and the authorities, as well as to persuade or force the authorities to meet their demands. (58)

One distinction between events that he draws from the existing literature on contention and rebellion is between backward looking and modernizing protests. Essentially the former represent demands to secure existing rights (or re-establish recently extinguished rights). The latter take the form of proactive protests aimed at creating new opportunities and rights within an emerging set of economic or social institutions. Hung rightly rejects the idea that European experience can provide a full theory of contentious politics. So he insists on using the evidence of non-western movements as an alternative basis of analysis and theory. China's experience in the mid-Qing provides an ample basis for arriving at such a scheme.

Hung doubts the utility of the concept of "backward-looking" protest in the mid-Qing period. Instead, he argues that protests throughout the period were proactive and aimed at securing better outcomes in the future for the protesters, in light of changing political and economic conditions. The large distinction that Hung favors as a way of categorizing contention has to do with the purpose and style of the mobilization. "Filial protest", or "state-engaging" protest, involves collective action intended to implore the state to honor its obligations. "State-resisting" protest involves action deliberately designed to challenge the authority and power of the state, often with the threat or reality of violence (58). And Hung believes this scheme is valuable for China, in part, because some surprising patterns emerge through these lenses. In particular, he finds the frequency of state-resisting protest varies significantly along this timeframe, from a high point in 1600-44 of 94% to a low in 1740-59 of 40%, rising again between 1776 and 1839 (figure 6.1).

Hung's account highlights several important things about Chinese protest. First is the point that protests exist within a set of material social arrangements that provide the interests that lead to mobilization. So an important dimension of analysis for uncovering the causes of a wave of protests is to analyze the changing economic and political circumstances that created new pressures and opportunities for ordinary people. Second is the point that culture and repertoires of resistance give form to the protests that emerge. Here he gives causal importance to Confucian ideas about the state, but also to heterodox ideas stemming from non-Confucian traditions (for example, White Lotus Buddhism).

A very old feature of Chinese protest involves the delivery of petitions to the central government (emperor) to protest abuses by local officials, tax farmers, or other scourges

of peasant life.

In Qing times (1644-1911), a common remedy for powerless subjects abused by local officials was to travel all the way to Beijing to appeal to the emperor as their grand patriarch, hoping he would sympathize with their plight and penalize corrupt local officials. (1)
And, as Hung points out, this tradition continued through 1989 and beyond.

So what about Wukan? Does Hung's analysis of mid-Qing protest shed any light on the nature of protest there?

Accounts make several things clear. First, the cause of popular unrest that precipitated the first round of protest in Wukan had to do with an important material issue (land seizures) and the actions of potentially corrupt local officials in collusion with powerful developers. Second, the protest intensified dramatically in the past 10 days after security officials took violent action against elected leaders of the protesters, leading to the seizure of Xue Jinbo and his death in police custody. Third, it appears through news reports that protests took the form of non-violent appeals for relief against corrupt officials -- similar to the tradition of filial protest. The tradition of taking the protest to higher officials is also illustrated here, with the stated intention of marching to Lufeng, the local administrative center. Here is an indicative passage from the *New York Times*:

Almost to a person, the villagers are holding out hope that leaders in Beijing will intervene to settle the dispute and to investigate what they contend is widespread corruption in local affairs, including land sales. Saturday's rally, laced with chants like "We love the Communist Party," stressed the villagers' loyalty to the central government. One prominent banner begged the central government to come to their aid. (link)
But the same article raises the possibility that this protest may move from state-engaging to state-resisting as villagers come to believe that they have no recourse from the central government:

"Our original intent was just to get our land back," a 29-year-old homemaker who identified herself only as Mrs. Zhu said as she stood under a Chinese flag, mounted on a makeshift pole at a protesters' checkpoint on the village outskirts. "We never intended that things would get into such a situation."Asked what could be done, she replied: "We have to fight to the end. That's the only way out. If we retreat now, all the hardships the government imposed on us will come true."
Hung provides an interesting tabulation of several important characteristics of protests in mid-Qing China that I've reproduced below. I've supplemented the table in two ways. First, I've included in this table the data Hung reports on the incidence of state-resisting protests, which vary significantly throughout the period he studies (figure 6.1). Second, I've added an additional column of my own indicating how Wukan seems to measure up on these criteria. The finding that I've come to is that Wukan began as a "filial protest" through which villagers sought to engage the state to obtain relief from local officials. The protest has been pushed into a more "state-resisting" posture, however, as a result of the violence and intransigence of local and county officials, and the fact that Beijing has so far ignored the villagers' demands.

A pragmatist action theory

Friday, December 23, 2011

A theory of action is one component of a meta-framework for sociology. It is an organized set of ideas about what individuals are doing when they engage in interactions in the world, and what we think at the highest level of generality about why they behave as they do. Individuals within social interactions constitute the social world; they do things; and they do things for reasons that we would like to understand. A theory of action ought to give us a basic vocabulary for describing behavior in the social world. And it ought to provide some framing hypotheses about the causes or motivations of behavior.

An important aspect of action theory is the idea of "intensionality" and mental representation. This is the conception of the individual as possessing consciousness, purposes, and a mental orientation to the world. He or she "understands" the events that surround him/her -- that is, the individual forms a mental representation of the swirling set of actions and events that surround him or her. And the individual places him/herself within this representation by conceptualizing wants, aversions, aspirations, and intentions concerning what might be achieved through intentional behavior.

This description may seem obvious. Or it may seem to reflect a set of assumptions about how to parse the social world that are substantive, consequential, and debatable. They are consequential because they push our sociological researches in a particular direction: who are the actors that make up a social ensemble? What are they doing? Why are they doing these things?

They are debatable because -- as we've seen in discussions of Abbott and Gross previously -- they privilege the actor over the action, the individual over the interaction. They push us in the direction of a social ontology that is individualistic and perhaps reductionist. Abbott proposes, in contrast, that we begin with the interaction, the flow of moves and responses. Tilly suggests that we start with the relationships and turn to the individual actors only later in the analysis. And Gross suggests starting with the creativity inherent in any complex flow of human activities and interactions.

Each of these thinkers point in the direction of a pragmatist theory of action. So what might a pragmatist theory involve?

One avenue for getting a handle on this question is to turn to the work of Hans Joas, who has contributed deeply to the question of how pragmatism intersects with sociology. His article with Jens Beckert in Jonathan Turner's Handbook of Sociological Theory is a good place to start, since he is specifically concerned there to give an exposition of a theory of action that acknowledges several important sources for such a theory while specifically developing a pragmatist account. (The article covers a lot of the ground presented in Joas's 1997 book, The Creativity of Action. Also important is his Pragmatism and Social Theory.)

Joas begins his account by framing the standard assumptions of existing action theory in terms of two poles: action as rational choice (e.g. James Coleman) and action as conformance to a set of prescriptions and norms (e.g. Durkheim, Parsons). He argues for a view that is separate from both of these, under the heading of "creative action".

However, the alternative that reaches even further beyond the routinized exchanges

between rationalist and normativist theories of action seems to us an action-theoretic conceptualization that focuses on the notion of the creativity of human action. Such a theory can be based primarily on the tradition of American pragmatism that originated in philosophy and psychology but also has a significant sociological tradition. (270)

Common to both traditional views, Joas argues, is the assumption of purposiveness: that action proceeds to bring about explicit pre-articulated goals subject to antecedently recognized constraints. The pragmatist view of action rejects this separation between goals, action, and outcome, and focuses on the fact that goals and actions themselves are formulated within a dynamic and extended process of thought and movement. (Dewey is the chief source of this view.) Tactics, movements, and responses are creative adaptations to fluidly changing circumstances. The basketball player driving to the basket is looking to score a goal or find an open teammate. But it is the rapid flow of movement, response by other players, and position on the floor that shapes the extended action of "driving for a layup." Likewise, a talented public speaker approaches the podium with a few goals and ideas for the speech. But the actual flow of ideas, words, gestures, and flourishes is the result of the thinking speaker interacting dynamically with the audience. Joas puts his view in these terms:

> At the beginning of an action process goals are frequently unspecific and only vaguely understood. They become clearer once the actor has a better understanding of the possible means to achieve the ends; even new goals will arise on the basis of newly available means. (273)

> For the theory of creativity of action the significance of the situation is far greater: Action is not only contingent on the structure of the situation but the situation is constitutive of action. (274)

So what are the features of the situation that intersect with the thinking actor to create the temporally extended action? Joas refers to corporality and sociality. The body is not simply the instrument of the agent. Rather, the physical features and limitations of the body themselves contribute to the unfolding of the action. (This aspect of the theory has much to do with phenomenology.) And the other persons involved in an action are not simply subjects of manipulation. Their own creativity in movement and action defines the changing parameters of the actor's course of action. (Again, think of the analogy of 10 players in a basketball game.)

Joas thinks that this interpretation of action as extended intelligent adaptation to shifting circumstances helps to account for complex social circumstances that rational-actor and normative-actor theories have difficulty with. He illustrates this claim with the extended examples of reciprocity and innovation.

This is a rich and nuanced theory of action, and one that has the potential for offering a basis of a much richer analysis of concrete social circumstances than we currently have. At the same time it should not be thought to be in contradiction to either rational-deliberation or normative-deliberation theories. These creative actors whom Joas describes are purposive in a more diffuse sense, and they are responsive to norms in action. It seems to me that the chief tension Joas offers is between stylized, mono-stranded models of action, and thick theories that incorporate the plain fact of intelligent adaptation and shaping of behavior that occurs in virtually all human activities.

A peaceful world?

Sunday, December 25, 2011



Many people around the world are celebrating Christmas this morning. A central wish around this holiday is "peace and good will for all." Why is enduring peace so difficult to achieve? What are the prospects for us in the twenty-first century?

Peace and conflict are related, but they aren't precise opposites. Conflict between individuals and groups can take many forms, and it is possible to manage or resolve conflicts without violence or hatred. This village uses its pasture and forest for gathering; that village begins to encroach with its livestock herd. The two villages have a conflict over the pasture. This conflict may eventually escalate into violence between the villages, with armed groups from each waging small-scale war against the others. But it doesn't have to work out this way. Leaders of the two villages may negotiate a set of land use customs that do something to satisfy the needs and interests of both villages, and they may be successful in getting their constituents to honor those agreements. Or there may be a state capable of establishing and enforcing property rights that are binding on both groups, while permitting each group to pursue its most important life activities. Or, perhaps, the two groups may have normative and religious bonds of solidarity that lead each member of the group to possess a reservoir of good will that makes resort to violence impossible to imagine.

So conflict of interests and wants doesn't necessarily lead to a breaking of the peace. But these conflicts have the potential to do so. And political theorists in the social contract tradition since Hobbes have held that this is the key role of the state -- to establish an acceptable set of rules for property and person that determine clear rights and obligations for everyone, and clear procedures for punishment if rights are violated. Only through a system of law can we avoid the state of nature which is a state of war of all against all.

Other theorists, notably Elinor Ostrom, have argued that populations have solved the problems of conflict over resources in non-state ways, through "common property resource regimes" (Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action). The conditions under which a CPRR is stable are more complex than those of a state -- essentially, the CPRR needs to be supported by normative and cultural elements that give all participants a reason to honor the rules -- but Ostrom and fellow researchers have documented many successful instances. And, of course, a common property resource regime needs to have some kind of processes for addressing and resolving conflicts among participants -- fishermen who disagree about the catch, water users who disagree about the management of upstream resources.

So what are some of the large causes of breakdowns of peace in populations of people?

A key source of sustained violent conflict on a large scale is perceived unresolved injustice. One party or nation blocks access to resources or opportunities to which

another party believes it has a moral right; demands are made; the situation persists; and violent acts begin to occur.

Another important source is conflict over access to important natural resources -- water, oil, minerals. Conflicts over resources may occur at the local level, or they may rise to the level of inter-country armed conflict and war.

We can't overlook the religious and ideological origins of much conflict in humanity's history. The prolonged conflict, often violent, between Hindus and Muslims over the Babri Mosque in India is a good example. The site has religious importance for both communities; leaders are able to mobilize their followers in defense of their claims; violence ensues.

So what can humanity do to improve the prospects for peace and good will?

Sustained efforts at conflict resolution are a good place to start. People of good will can often enough find the resources they need to bring down the degree of conflict and hostility between groups, and to find procedures that make resort to violence less likely.

Recognizing and addressing injustices between peoples and nations will help. Justice and peace are intertwined.

Promoting the universality of human needs and the value of inter-group tolerance and respect is a very good step. And spiritual leaders of all faiths are sometimes very committed to this work. (Others are not, of course!)

So, this fine Christmas morning in 2011, let us all work for peace and justice for our grandchildren!

Democracy in the mirror

Tuesday, December 27, 2011

Why is democracy something people should strive for? And how are we doing with ours?

Consider first the fundamentals. Why is there a role for democracy in any circumstances? Fundamentally democracy is a form of group decision-making. Political institutions are needed in circumstances in which decisions must be made that affect all members of a group. Each member of a group has his or her own set of preferences about choices that affect the group; so there needs to be a process for arriving at a set of social preferences -- a social choice function. Democracy requires designing a set of arrangements through which each person's preferences will have equal weight in determining the ultimate decision. Otherwise we would have a system in which one person decides (dictatorship) or a minority decides (oligarchy). So democracy represents a set of decision-making institutions that embody respect for the equal worth of all citizens when it comes to making collective choices.

In addition to the aggregation of individual preferences, democratic values consider as well the circumstances under which the members of a group form their beliefs and preferences. Narrow democratic theory takes individual preferences as exogenous. But broader versions of democratic theory attempt to bring democratic values into the social processes through which beliefs and preferences are formed. The theory of *deliberative*

democracy emphasizes in particular the features of civility, mutual respect, and open-mindedness through which debate and critical examination of issues leads to a fuller understanding of issues and a more reflective set of preferences. This aspect of democracy is valuable because it corresponds to a society in which open and uncensored debate leads to the formation of individual and collective preferences and embodies the ideas of democratic equality among citizens. And less-privileged groups can exercise their voices in these forums to attempt to influence other citizens to support more just policies and choices.

There is another reason for cheering democracy: it is possible that democracy is more likely to protect the rights and needs of the relatively powerless in society; democratic institutions can function as a bulwark against the arbitrary power of elites of all kinds. If the powerless have political voice, they then have an ability to advocate for, and democratically support, the policies that favor their perspectives and interests. The fact that otherwise powerless people can express their preferences through democratic means is a substantial form of potential influence for non-privileged groups. (This political power is offset, of course, by the political power and influence wielded by elite minorities in most societies.)

The most fundamental reasons, then, to value democracy are its correspondence to the value of the moral equality of all persons and the capacity it creates for non-elite groups' struggles for fair treatment. Democratic institutions honor the equality of all persons in the fact that each person has an equal voice in deliberating upon and deciding collective policies. A democracy is morally preferable because it best embodies the more basic moral value of fundamental human equality and dignity and it provides a feasible mechanism for pursuing social justice.

So how does the US democracy measure up on these criteria? Take the last point first: the idea that democracy empowers the powerless. The role of money in politics takes a lot of the force out of this point in the US. Corporations and wealthy individuals are able to influence legislation, regulation, and policy in ways that are vastly disproportionate to their numbers (link). It is **possible** for a numerous group to exert political influence through the electoral process to defend its interests; but it is also possible for the powerful to quietly subvert these outcomes as well.

So how about the formative benefits of democracy? Do we find that American citizens are involved in thoughtful debates that bring more facts to the discussion and result in clearer preferences and policies? Here the answer is too often "no" as well. The shouting and vitriol on the media outlets of the right set a tone that discourages or extinguishes respectful debate and clarification. It's hard to see evidence that voters have gotten better at thinking through the issues, the facts, and the underlying values that can subsequently guide their political choices.

And how about the most basic function of democracy, its service as an institution that aggregates individual preferences onto a coherent social preference function? Even here our democracy has challenges. First, we don't seem to be trending towards "coherence" -- instead we have a Congress that mostly serves to block the formation of policy, from legislation to confirmation of appointment out of political opposition to the sitting president. And second, there is only a loose fit between the voting behavior of elected officials and the preferences of their constituents. Constituents have the ability to reject officials of whose voting behavior they strongly disapprove. But election campaigns have more to do with slogans and quick fixes than they do thoughtful efforts to align the

candidate's platform with the diverse preferences of the electorate. Ideology and rhetoric drive electoral strategies, not honest discussion of the issues and the facts that surround them.

Take healthcare reform as an example. The reforms that the Obama administration fought for were plainly advantageous for a very large segment of the American population. Tens of millions of people stood to gain access to health insurance as a consequence of the reforms. And yet the voices of those tens of millions of people played almost no role in the bitter political conflict that ensued. Conservative theories and agendas, widely disseminated falsehoods ("death panels"), and purple rhetoric instead dominated the legislative and electoral process. Eventually a weakened version of healthcare reform became law, of course, but the process did a very poor job of embodying the interests of those most affected by the issue. (Here is a good post by Barbara Ehrenreich that updates her insights in Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America. Ehrenreich makes the importance of healthcare for poor people very clear.)

What American democracy is good at, by and large, is establishing government that is ruled by law. Legal and constitutional protections for citizens are a substantial bulwark against the arbitrary exercise of power by political or social elites. It doesn't need saying that these protections are incomplete, and that various groups in the US have suffered from illegal or unconstitutional treatment. (Consider, for example, the determined efforts being made by some state legislatures to deny partner health benefits to one specific group of citizens.) But by and large, US citizens have justified confidence that their rights will be respected and enforced. They have relatively extensive rights of speech and association, and it is difficult for government to curtail those rights for short term political or individual advantage. Citizens also know that they have the periodic ability to reject the men and women who rule them, which puts some constraints on the behavior of the elected officials.

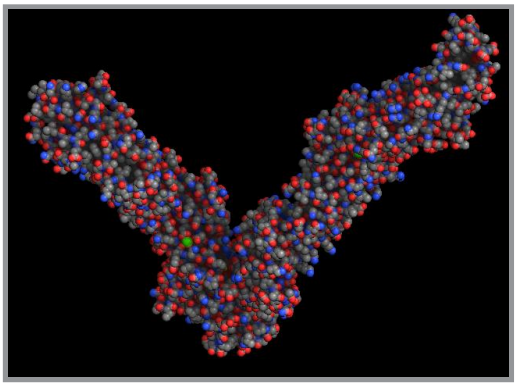
It is possible that this is the most we can hope for from any government in a modern mass society. But it is also possible that a PhD student in comparative politics from Mars might classify our polity as "constitutionally regulated oligarchy with periodic elections of government officials and extensive infrastructures for managing elections to lead to outcomes that satisfy the elites" -- in other words, something rather different from idealized theories of "democracy" and political institutions well designed for establishing the common good.

(See Jack Knight and Jim Johnson, The Priority of Democracy: Political Consequences of Pragmatism, Ian Shapiro, The State of Democratic Theory, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, Why Deliberative Democracy?, and Adam Przeworski, Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America for different aspects of this issue.)

Supervenience and social entities

Friday, December 30, 2011

What is the ontological status of social entities -- kinship systems, police departments, religious movements? And what is the status of causal powers of social entities? Do we need to "reduce" social entities to the compounds of individuals who make them up? And do we need to derive the causal properties of social entities from the characteristics and interactions of the individuals who make them up? In short, do we need to be reductionist



about the social world?

This is a question that arises in many of the "special" sciences, including in particular psychology and neuroscience. A basic premise of contemporary philosophy is that all phenomena are composed of **physical** entities, processes, and systems. The mind-body problem is the most immediate place where physicalism does some important work. Mind-body dualists held that mental states were independent from physical states, whereas physicalists insist that mental states are embodied in physical processes and systems.

It is plain enough that we make use of a vocabulary that doesn't appear to invoke physical states when we talk about people's actions and states of mind. When I **decide** to have tofu for dinner, or when I **experience** the taste of hot sesame oil, I am engaging in a **mental act** or **qualitative state**. "Deciding", "experiencing", and "having qualitative states" all appear to be terms that refer to private mental states. The physicalist takes it as a piece of ontological certainty, however, that these "mental" states are fully and entirely constituted by the physical substrates of the brain and nervous system.

So what do physicalists have in mind when they say that the phenomena to which these terms refer are really physical states? There are several possibilities:

- eliminative materialism: mental states do not exist, and we need to give definitions of mental terms that allow us to eliminate them in favor of physical terms [reductionism]
- non-eliminative materialism: mental states exist, but they are wholly and exhaustively caused by physical states
- epiphenomenalism: mental states are by-products of physical states without causal powers to influence subsequent physical states
- supervenience: mental states depend upon physical states and nothing else, but it is difficult and unnecessary to reduce facts about mental states to facts about physical states

Is there an analogous situation in the social sciences? Is individualism for the social sciences strongly analogous to physicalism for the natural sciences? Is there something ontologically dubious about referring to social entities and causes?

There is nothing peculiar about the idea that some entities are complex assemblages of other, simpler entities. Virtually every entity that we have an interest in is a compound of simpler entities -- genes, enzymes, or the insulin molecule depicted above. A table has characteristics that depend on the physical features and arrangement of the materials that make it up, but those "table" characteristics are very different from the features of the composing elements -- hardness, stability, load-bearing capacity, etc. And there is no reason whatsoever to insist that "tables do not exist -- only bits of wood exist." Tables are identifiable composite objects, and they have causal properties that we can invoke in explanations. So the fact that there are characteristics of the composite that are dissimilar from the characteristics of the elements is not peculiar. And this is entirely true of social entities as well. The efficiency or corruptibility of a tax-collecting bureau is not a characteristic of the individuals who compose it; it is rather a system-level characteristic that derives from the incentives, oversight mechanisms, and physical infrastructure of the

organization.

So composite entities are not suspect in general. However, there are a couple of challenging questions that we need to confront about composite entities. First, can we explain the properties of the composite by knowing everything about the properties of the elements and the nature of their arrangement and interactions? Can we **derive** the properties of the whole from the properties of the components? Take metallurgy: can we derive the properties of the alloy from the physical characteristics of the tin and copper which make it up? Or are there "emergent" properties that somehow do not depend solely on the properties of the components?

Second, can we attribute causal powers to composite entities directly, or do we need to disaggregate causal claims about the aggregate onto some set of claims about the causal powers of the elements? Do we need to disaggregate the load-bearing capacity of the table onto a set of facts about the properties of the elements (legs, table top) and their configuration? It is certainly true that we can derive the load-bearing capacity of the table from this set of facts; this is what civil engineers do in modeling bridges, for example. The philosophical question is whether we ought to regard this causal property as simply a way of summarizing the underlying physics of the table, or as a stable causal property in its own right.

One appealing answer that has been offered to the question of the relationship between levels of entities is the theory of supervenience. This theory is largely the work of philosopher Jaegwon Kim over the past thirty years. Here is a recent synthesis of his views (Physicalism, or Something Near Enough). He summarizes the basic idea in these terms:

It will suffice to understand [supervenience] as the claim that what happens in our mental life is wholly dependent on, and determined by, what happens with our bodily processes. (14)

And here is how Julie Zahle puts the point in her contribution to Turner and Risjord's Philosophy of Anthropology and Sociology:

Social entities, their properties, actions, etc. may be said to supervene upon individuals, their actions, and so on, insofar as: (1) there can be no difference at the level of social wholes, their properties, actions, etc., unless there is also a difference at the level of individuals, their properties, actions, and so on; (2) individuals, their actions, etc. fix or determine what kinds of social wholes, properties, etc. are instantiated. (327)

Does the idea of supervenience help answer the question of the ontological status of social entities? Is it helpful to judge that social entities supervene upon facts about individuals and nothing else? And does this leave room for the idea of social causation and relative explanatory autonomy? Are we able to acknowledge the dependence of the social world on facts about individuals without abandoning the idea that there is social causation and social science?

Perhaps surprisingly, Kim thinks that the theory will *not* assist us in the last two ways, at least when it comes to psychology:

This view [supervenience] provides the burgeoning science of psychology and cognition with a philosophical rationale as an autonomous science in its own right: it investigates these irreducible psychological properties, functions, and capacities, discovering laws and regularities governing them and generating law-based explanations and predictions.

It is a science with its own proper domain untouched by other sciences, especially those at the lower levels, like biology, chemistry, and physics.

This seductive picture, however, turns out to be a piece of wishful thinking, when we consider the problem of mental causation--how it is possible, on such a picture, for mentality to have causal powers, powers to influence the course of natural events. (15) So I am in a quandary at the moment: I favor the idea of "relatively autonomous social explanations" (link), I like the idea of regarding social entities as legitimate compound entities that don't require elimination, and I think of the theory of supervenience as providing some authority for these views. And yet Kim himself seems to reject this line of thought when it comes to the special sciences of psychology and cognitive science. Kim seems to want to argue that higher level sciences cannot claim relative autonomy; in this respect his own view seems to be reductionist.

What seems clear to me can be summarized in just a few points:

- Social entities and facts are determined and constituted by facts about individuals, their beliefs, their relations, and their actions. So social entities and facts do in fact supervene upon facts about individuals.
- Social entities do have causal properties that can be discovered without needing to eliminate them in terms of properties of individuals.
- The requirement of microfoundations is crucial because it establishes the intellectual discipline required by the first point: we must be able to validate that the claims we make about social properties and causal powers can be provided microfoundations at the level of socially situated individuals.
- There is a legitimate and defensible level of explanation at which social scientists can hypothesize social properties and causal capacities; so there is a place for a "relatively autonomous" social science. We are not forced to be reductionist.
- The "social" is not inherently puzzling in the way that the "mental" is. Social entities are more analogous to chairs and proteins than they are to thoughts and qualia: they are complex entities whose system-level characteristics are the ultimate effects of the interactions and properties of the individual elements that constitute them. We often cannot trace out exactly how the properties of the whole derive from the properties of the components; but we don't need to do so except in unusual circumstances.





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