

## **Sociology and History at Interface: Interests in Methodology**

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Sociology is like political science one of the genuine fruits of history. It has a history of nearly two hundred years. Having a history of its own the outlines of the discipline has evolved to develop distinctiveness from history as written. History as a subject dealt with particular historical circumstances whereas sociology was concerned with general laws. Yet this distinction though exaggerated is not without some foundation as the primary interest of all sociologists is to find general laws of society and that of a historian's interest is the reconstruction of the order in which historical events take place. But in reality the sociologist cannot dispense with social facts any more than the historian with historical laws. History deals with human events in so far as they are correlated in time, while sociology studies them from the view-point of the social relationships involved. Thus while historian describes the Napoleonic wars with all the circumstances accompanying them a sociologist would study their impact on the lives of the people, the role that these wars had on the subsequent development of the nationalistic spirit in Europe and the part the convictions and propaganda played in arousing the spirits of patriots against invaders. Thus while the historian may deal with the development of the family in different civilizations the sociologists task is to investigate into various forms of this institution, to trace the morphological similarity between the laws of change and causality that intervenes among these traits and institutions.

### **Situating the problem: Differing points of view**

History refers to simply to an account of the past of human societies. Since that is such a vast subject that it can never be recounted. What history consists of is the study of what can be known (to the historian) through the surviving record. It is what the late historian Louis Gottschalk referred to as *history as record*. Thus he differentiated from the whole history of the past (*what has been called history as actuality*) (1950: 45). The process of critically examining and analyzing the records and survivals of the past is called *historical method*. The imaginative reconstruction of the past from the data derived by that process is called *historiography* (the writing of history) (Gottschalk. 1950: 48). Historical writing always involves a re-creation of the past not a creation. Gottschalk asserts 'these limits distinguish history from fiction, poetry, drama and fantasy' (1950.p.49). It is the blending of the study of written records with interpretation of these materials in the light of other evidence and with historian's own imagination that produces history.

Historians try to enhance our accurate knowledge of unique phenomena of the past, whereas sociologists try to seek information about certain uniformities in social behaviour under specific conditions. This means it is common to identify a historian as he describes unique events, and on the other hand a sociologist to produce generalizations. But this is not always the case. The work of any serious historian abounds in generalization while many sociologists have been anxious with describing and analyzing unique events or chain of events. Probably, it is noteworthy to state that usually a historian sets out to analyze a particular chronology of events, the sociologist normally starts with a generalization which he or she proposes to validate by examination of a considerable number of similar sequences of events. In

brief, their purposes are different. But even this qualified distinction is not fully true. It depends to a large extent on the kind of historiography and the nature of sociology. In a lighter vein, the historian is concerned with the interplay between personality and massive social forces and that the sociologist is mainly concerned with these social forces themselves. It is important to note here that history and sociology cannot be drastically separated. They deal with the same subject-matter, in different points of view and sometimes from the same point of view.

Actually, this in principle is the difference between the two modes of inquiry. However the data of history are also widely used now by sociologists. This is indicative of the assimilative quality of sociological work. But increasingly, now historians have also started using data generated by sociologists for their own writings. Historians, philosophers, social psychiatrists, literary men as well as social scientists use the historical approach as an aid in visualizing society as a dynamic organism and its structures and functions as steadily growing and undergoing change and transformation. Historical approach has taken two forms: the first was approached by the early sociologists, motivated by the philosophy of history and afterwards influenced by the biological theory of evolution. This approach involves a certain order of priorities to take up problems for research and theory and concentrate on the genesis, development and transformation of social institutional arrangements, societies and of civilizations. It is also concerned with the whole span of human history and with major institutional arrangements of society as in the case of Comte, Spencer, or with the whole development of a definite social institution as found in E. Westermarck's *History of Human Marriage* (1891). The work of the evolutionists was tied up with the controversies related with social progress in the eighteenth and nineteenth century has largely given way to ideas on social development. It is now concerned with a particular historical phenomenon and also considers that there are diverse points of departures of the developmental issue, as well as different possible outcomes. However, it is difficult to view that social change under the broad scheme of development. In another form historical approach is recognized by the works of Max Weber and in the work of a number of sociologists of later times influenced by the Weberian model. Criticizing the Marxist scholars of his time, Weber argued that the materialist conception of history or historical materialism as a formula for the causal explanation for historical reality must be rejected. But the advancement of the economic interpretation of history should be taken care of. Here Weber contends for interpretation against causal explanation as a method and opposes the Marxist aim to explain the entire course of social evolution.

### **Theoretical Undercurrents**

Since all groups, social institutions and personalities undergo change to a lesser or greater degree social scientists concern themselves with the process of social change. Historical method has also been employed by Karl Marx in conjunction with dialectical materialism in understanding the human societies. He took this philosophical device and applied it to the materialistic view of society. Accordingly, he believed that the materialistic structure of societies accounts for their changing evolution and development. Applying this to history, Marx delineated the societal dialectic sequence of social development. In this manner dialectic materialism becomes a sociological tool in the historical analysis of social development.

Similarly another historical approach is characteristic of the work of Max Weber and a number of later sociologists influenced by him. Weber argued that so-called materialist conception of history as a formula

for the causal explanation of historical reality has to be rejected. His own historical approach is exemplified especially in his studies of the origins of capitalism, the development of modern bureaucracy and economic influence of the world religions. Weber's historical approach took a comprehensive shape in his studies of the genesis of capitalism, the development of the modern bureaucratic system and economic influence of the world religions. The principal methodological features contained in these studies are that definite changes in social structures and types of society are investigated or examined, investigated and compared in certain respects with changes in other societies. In this manner, both causal explanations and historical interpretations find a place in the social explanation. It is also implicit in Weber's work that the general sociological proposition refers only to trends while their application to particular societies and situations involves historical study in detail. The result of which neither the historian nor the sociologist can predict. A very convincing illustration of this approach can be found in his treatment of the growth of capitalism in Europe.

### **What kind of Methodological Interface does this point to?**

In her book *Scientific Social Surveys and Research* (1973) P. V. Young describes sources of historical data. The social scientists generally confine themselves to three major sources of historical information: 1. Documents and various historical sources to which historian he or she has access; 2. Materials of cultural history and of analytical history; and 3. Personal sources of authentic observers and witnesses. When, how and under what conditions these sources are to be used depends upon the discretion of the student, his interests, the scope of his study, and the availability of the sources. D. D. Kosambi (1907-1966) had a fundamentally new approach to the study of Indian history, scientific methodology, modern technique of interpretation; selection and analysis of basic problems make presentation vivid and absorbing. He explains how to gain insight into the past by examination of monuments, customs and records. For this he uses scientific methods in many fields like archeology, ethnography and philology. Romila Thapar also a historian has also used comparative method to study similar societies with evidence from both literary and archeological sources. Other sources include linguistic, ethnographic and other fields of Indology.

There is currently great interest in oral history that is history based on verbal accounts instead of written records. It is considered especially useful in the study of historical crises of great magnitude and cultural traditions that seem to be disappearing where the likelihoods of finding adequate written records is not considered high. Written records are however still the central sources of historical data. Historical research generally starts with searching for relevant sources and reading them very broadly. Some historians will go directly to the archives others will read widely the secondary sources about the period under study. Historians tend to be *contextualists* that are they try to study or relate to a phenomenon they are studying to as many aspects of social life as possible. The historical approach is somewhat like the approach of a field worker in that its object is usually not to isolate a narrow research topic, a hypothesis to test. Instead the historian tends to put together a multiplicity of contexts to search for a whole set of reasons why an event occurred.

M. Schudson a sociologist wrote social history (1978) of development of journalism in the United States. His particular interest was to explore the extent to which the ideal value of objectivity was realized and altered by comparing newspapers of early nineteenth century. Schudson's sources were varied. He refers to the large body of previous studies on American journalism, biographies of important American journalists, and appraisals of American newspapers by journalists and newspaper articles as well

theoretical articles which address similar issue. He also includes certain quantifiable evidence on the circulation and price of papers but such incidental information is used only to fill in details of the broad picture he draws of this cultural institution. This type of historical research is both selectively descriptive and analytic. Schudson describes certain newspapers and certain journalists more fully— those that best represent the institution he is studying and those who best exemplify the case he is trying to make. There is no attempt to select examples representative of the population of all news papers in United States. Instead by examining the changing structure of certain influential American newspapers as institutions and the changing roles of particular journalists he shows that the values of objectivity which influenced American journalism both reflected and affected the wider values of American society. The belief in the ‘facts’, the relationship of journalism to public relations and propaganda, the growing skepticism about ability to present the facts objectively— these evaluative changes in American journalism are finding of Schudson’s research.

Now let us dwell on what are the components of historical research.

1. Whatever the time of study selected historical research generally requires an appreciation not only of the specific topic but also of the period in which it occurred.
2. Some historical studies include data that may be quantified such as marriage records. When this is the case presentation of the Quantified data is often in tables. So the researcher has to develop his or her own means to quantify evidence.
3. The quality of writing in historical work is of great importance. Ideas and materials must be *synthesised* into a historical narrative that is rich in content and clear in meaning.

There can be serious challenges to the validity of documents. Not only may documents and written records which they use be false, but they may also be highly biased. If one is studying a topic from the past a researcher may need a historical method. To do this one needs a strong foundation of knowledge about the period, have a plan to look at records. What this means is there should be concern in getting oneself grounded and be sure that the materials one is using are authentic. A sociologist if wants to study events of the past he or she has to become a historian and conversely if a historian takes up a method used by sociologist he or she has to learn how to use the method correctly or the research will virtually be impossible to do.

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