

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Richard Lachmann, *What is Historical Sociology?* Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013. 160 pp., \$21.95, paper (978-0-7456-6009-7)

W*hat is Historical Sociology?* addresses the methods and central suppositions of historical sociology by placing it in the context of sociology's development as a discipline. Lachmann argues that contemporary sociology is locked in "small-bore" research, the nature of which is often presented in introductory textbooks, and which "dominates" academic journals (p. 4). Such a renewed focus on the analysis of past social change can better equip the discipline (and presumably the student audiences of sociological textbooks) to uncover the origins and consequences of our shared present. The central proposition of *What is Historical Sociology?* is that human enterprise of the transformative kind, and its effects, causes, and consequences, must be placed within a sequential temporal schema. According to Lachmann, failures to identify the origins of social change, and to base theoretical claims on empirically supported accounts of how temporal sequences come into being and are made to matter necessarily invalidates sociological attempts to grasp the meaning and significance of social transformation.

Lachmann begins by positioning the familiar characters of sociology's disciplinary origin story in relation to history as a discipline. Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, according to Lachmann, united by their attempts to explicate the unprecedented alteration of social arrangements in their time, took the work of historians out of context or left the work of historians woefully ignored. Thus Weber and Durkheim in particular were consigned to the trash heap of History (as a discipline), as it were, whereas Marx is saved from such a fate because he has never fully been regarded as a sociologist. This move allows Lachmann to explore the uneasy relations shared between history and historical sociology while using Marxist conceptual frameworks, debates, and organizing concerns to thematize the rest of the book. The chapters that follow illuminate the contributions of historical sociology to debates and broader understandings of the origins of capitalism, empires, states, social movements, inequality, and much else.

Some chapters include instructive lists that would be useful to any student trying to design a research project. For example, in his chapter

on Revolutions and Social Movements, Lachmann lays out three steps according to which historical sociology should be brought to bear on the subject. In a chapter on States, Lachmann draws on Mann (1993) to suggest a clear plan for comparative historical sociological research on social benefits. The formulae that he includes serve to effectively link his situated readings of historical sociological work to the epistemological suppositions that underlie this distinct form of inquiry. Foremost among these, according to Lachmann, is that historical sociology is a “way of doing sociology that recognizes change as the true subject of the discipline” (p. 140).

Lachmann performs an exposition of well-known contributions to these central sociological debates through situated readings of “exemplary” works of historical sociology. This choice plays out in unexpected ways, since he is careful to include as “exemplary” those works which are, in his view, exemplary for their limitations and failings. Weber’s argument is “theoretically elegant” but “factually wrong” it is argued, and both he and the “historically ignorant sociologists who read him uncritically” (p. 17) fail to take into account that Luther and Calvin were preceded in their critiques of medieval Catholicism by earlier theologians and that libertarian communism *and* repressive capitalist ideologies were both born of English Protestantism. Durkheim, for his part, failed to provide fine-grained analysis across time and space it is argued, taken as he was with “epochal transformations” (p. 116) and a “single era in a single nation” (p. 116). This opening line of argumentation serves to situate the holy trinity of our disciplinary genesis story in relation to historical sociology more generally, without taking up the modes of problematization that treated matters of life, liberty, economy, security, and morality as observable regularities subject to sociological analysis before sociology and its “forefathers” existed, not as idiosyncratic or individual. The self-titled central question of *What is Historical Sociology?* is approached from the premise that sociology itself originated in the analyses — flawed as they may be — brought to bear by a few individuals who created theoretical vantage-points from which to view social and cultural changes related to capitalism and industrialization.

The readings of exemplary historical sociology performed in the rest of the book are informative and instructive, but mostly confined to the contributions of structuralist thinkers — Tilly plays prominently, so too do Wallerstein and Skocpol. Readers will have to look elsewhere for accounts of contributions to historical sociology that address social transformations and conflicts without using the state as a central organizing concept and without focusing on epochal changes such as revolutions, which for Lachmann are “the most momentous in world history” (p. 31).

The author does not address — nor does he promise to — the many nuanced studies within historical sociology that have not sought to place “momentous events” within a temporal sequence of cause, beginning, middle, and end. Foucauldian scholars will find Lachmann’s proposition that historical sociology must view historical transformations according to this temporal logic unconvincing. That historical sociology should seek origins, and that it should determine once and for all the causes and effects of events deemed “momentous” enough to warrant investigation will also seem outdated. Lachmann leaves out of his account the many works of historical sociology that have sought rather to begin with the question of how particular ways of problematizing social relations have generated new possibilities for human agency while foreclosing others. His focus on “momentous” events and structural changes ignores the question of how seemingly minor events occurring outside of the framework of the modern state give rise to new ways of thinking and acting on human affairs, lend shape to dispersed administrative practices and programs of political action, and delimit the proper relations between subjects. More importantly, it does not address the question of how these dispersed activities contribute to social change. Reservations aside, this book would be a suitable introduction to new sociology students and graduate students who are looking to acquaint themselves with historical sociology as it has been practiced at various sites and moments in our disciplinary history.

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