

History and Sociology in Britain. A Review Article

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Practice and Progress: British Sociology, 1950–1980, edited by Philip Abrams, Rosemary Deem, Janet Finch, and Paul Rock (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981).

Historical Sociology, by Philip Abrams (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982).

Historical sociology flourishes in both Britain and the United States. In Britain, however, nearly all the practitioners call themselves historians. No historical research tradition has been established within sociology. There are no established exemplars like Barrington Moore, Reinhardt Bendix, Immanuel Wallerstein, or Charles Tilly. Norbert Elias stands almost alone among senior figures, and he was very much of an outsider for most of his active career—employed away from the major Ph.D. programs, his masterwork untranslated for more than forty years.¹ Some comparative, development-oriented sociologists have written historical works of substance, but these remain largely compartmentalized away from the rest of the discipline.² A few younger figures are taking up the trade, but the professional establishment shows few marks. The British Sociological Association is far from resembling the American Sociological Association with its new Section on Comparative Historical Sociology ranking as one of the largest.³

I should like to thank Martin Bulmer of the London School of Economics for his comments on an earlier version of this article, which does not cover works published since 1984.

¹ See Dennis Smith's recent review article, "Norbert Elias—Established or Outsider?" *Sociological Review*, 52:2 (1984), 367–89. Smith himself is one of several younger British sociologists originally trained in history. J. A. Banks should also be mentioned as a senior British sociologist who has done noteworthy historical work (see *Prosperity and Parenthood: A Study of Family Planning among the Victorian Middle Class* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954); and *Marxist Sociology in Action* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1980).

² No doubt the geographic remoteness of these studies has contributed to their compartmentalization. A large number focus on peasants; see, e.g., T. Shanin, *The Awkward Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

³ Except for Elias, none of Abrams's major exemplars of historical sociology is a British sociologist; American sociologists and British historians loom large in his account. Similarly, T. Skocpol, ed., *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), a very helpful recent survey of major lines of work in the field, finds no British sociologist worthy of attention, though it shows how the work of several British historians and both Continental and American scholars has contributed to the emerging research tradition.

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Some reasons have little to do with intellectual or professional choices. British sociology fell under the axe of severe, largely politically motivated budget cuts during the late 1970s and 1980s, precisely the period when comparative and historical research became an accepted speciality in American sociology. But even the earlier, thinner flow of historical research in the United States was not matched in British sociology. Continental sociologists continued virtually uninterrupted in traditions of historical research stemming from Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. In Britain, by contrast, a struggle to create sociology as a profession was under way, and little room was found for historical work.⁴ This quest for professional respect led to an emphasis on work that could more readily be justified in terms of its contemporary utility or "relevance." Even the Marxist and other critics who followed on the heels of the professionalizers had little interest in historical research. Marxist sociologists spent most of their time assimilating and analyzing Continental Marxism. During the 1970s, the "anti-empiricist" impact of Althusserianism was great, though home-grown British Marxism was and is distinctively empirical and has long supported a major branch of historical research.⁵ Explicitly feminist work, more prominent in British than American sociology, is a partial exception, having maintained continuously an historical perspective on reproduction though it produced few sustained historical research efforts.⁶

British sociologists were often sensitive to the importance of establishing an historical context for their contemporary researches, but few seemed to think that historical research was their business. Perhaps the inordinate disdain that British historians showed for the social sciences was partly to blame. Perhaps offering theory as a complement to the research of others seemed a wise strategy for the budding profession, a matter of playing to its strength. Both historians and sociologists issued calls to more and better interdisciplinary relations, with E. H. Carr's perhaps the most famous:

... the more sociological history becomes and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both. Let the frontier between them be kept open for two-way traffic.⁷

But the border was crossed mostly in one direction.

British historians, after some halting earlier attempts, established social

⁴ See J. Barnes, "Professionalism in British Sociology," in Abrams *et al.*, *Practice and Progress*.

⁵ See L. Sklair's review of "Sociologies and Marxisms: The Odd Couples," in Abrams *et al.*, *Practice and Progress*. As Abrams himself notes, "it is difficult now to appreciate just how remote from one another sociology and Marxism were until the 1960s. ('The Collapse of British Sociology?'" in *ibid.*, 65).

⁶ See M. Stacey, "The Division of Labour Revisited or Overcoming the Two Adams," in Abrams *et al.*, *Practice and Progress*.

⁷ E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

history as a central part of their field.⁸ It is not clear how securely their leads are followed in mainstream British historiography, but E. P. Thompson, Perry Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Keith Thomas, and other scholars have become international role models of enormous stature. Though not all have drawn explicitly on sociology, their works are unquestionably in the forefront of historical sociology today.

British sociologists lagged behind in the development of historical sociology for institutional reasons that shade over into matters of intellectual substance. British sociology developed under the triple shadows of British social anthropology, Continental social theory, and American empirical sociology. The relationship with anthropology was close enough that a number of British Sociological Association presidents and holders of major chairs began their careers as anthropologists—John Barnes, J. C. Mitchell, Peter Worsley. While in America anthropology departments often had to squirm out from under the domination of larger, more powerful sociology departments, the reverse was the case in Britain. Moreover, though British anthropology was more sociologically developed than American, it also had a much stronger anti-historical bias.⁹ The strength of anthropology has been one of the reasons why British sociology has been insecure about its niche in the universities. On the one hand, we witness Oxford's failure to establish a department until the 1970s, and its continued failure to fill a chair at its head; on the other hand, we note that Cambridge initially filled its chair with an anthropologist. August Comte's claim that sociology is the queen of the sciences is frequently mocked by the charge that sociology is an intellectual parasite without a true subject matter.¹⁰ Sociology is often dismissed in British academic circles—especially by historians—as merely one of the intellectual fads of the 1960s, or rather, as a collection of second-rate academics rushing to follow a whole range of fads.¹¹

British sociology, as is often observed, never had its Weber or Durkheim.¹²

⁸ See P. Burke, *Sociology and History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), 23–27.

⁹ Especially at Oxford and Cambridge, politics departments have played something of a similar older-sibling role, sheltering an immature sociology (providing jobs for some sociologists when there were no sociology departments) but inhibiting the formation of an autonomous identity for the younger discipline. See A. Heath and R. Edmondson, "Oxbridge Sociology: The Development of Centres of Excellence?" in Abrams *et al.*, *Practice and Progress*.

¹⁰ John Urry argues that this presumed failing is in fact sociology's central virtue. See "Sociology as a Parasite: Some Vices and Virtues," in Abrams *et al.*, *Practice and Progress*, 25–38.

¹¹ This partial slander is perhaps developed most famously in Malcolm Bradbury's novel *The History Man* (1975; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976). See also the venomous, if largely uninformed, comments of G. R. Elton in his Cambridge inaugural lectures: *The History of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), where the invective is extended to the social sciences en masse.

¹² P. Anderson, "Components of the National Culture," *New Left Review*, no. 53 (1969), 7; M. S. Hickox, "The Problem of Early English Sociology," *The Sociological Review*, 32:1 (1984), 1–17. It is arguable, of course, that neither did American sociology, though it developed a thriving profession on the shoulders of lesser giants.

But it overflows with commentaries on the Continental classics. Anthony Giddens, the most prominent theorist in British sociology today, made his most influential contributions largely through synthesizing and commenting on Continental European social theory.¹³ Others have done the same for modern American sociology's only theory of "classical" stature—Parsonian functionalism. Though British sociologists have offered significant new insights, the weight of theoretical work has been on critique, not positive construction.¹⁴

Similarly, when British sociologists looked to America for an empirical tradition, they more often challenged than adopted the quantitative techniques they found. They had good reason. At the time this exchange began, in the 1950s, American sociologists were just entering the high phase of their infatuation with quantitative techniques. They offered a ripe target for what has become a mainstay of British sociological writing ever since—the critique of positivism. One of the strange features of this long tradition of critique, as Jennifer Platt notes, is its fallacious assumption that there was once a time when positivism clearly dominated *British* sociology.¹⁵ In fact, its proportionate prominence (to the extent that the label describes any coherent body of work) has remained relatively constant and never approached the clear dominance its critics imagine. Though criticism never altogether displaced empirical research in the British journals, it certainly occupied a good deal of their space through the 1960s and 1970s; it was at the heart of common-room debates. The 1980 British Sociological Association conference, which forms the basis of the volume edited by Philip Abrams *et al.*, devoted a major part of its attention to the theme of "positivism and after." More than a third of the articles in the collection attempt the enterprise—extraordinary to contemplate from the western side of the Atlantic—of a "rehabilitation of data."¹⁶

British sociology, like sociology in general, had to struggle to free itself both from the narrowness of an American research tradition which by the 1960s had come to be driven by technical advances as much as substantive concerns, and from the extraordinary ethnocentrism of 1950s-style American

¹³ It is interesting to compare the role of the *New Left Review* during the 1960s and 1970s, when it set itself the task of bringing the British Left into a European Marxist discourse.

¹⁴ P. Abell remarks on the "calamitous" state of postgraduate sociological studies in Britain, where, in his opinion, an enormous disproportion of Ph.D. students is distracted "into the second-order activity of criticising established theorists/methodologists rather than trying to solve empirical problems for themselves" ("Whither Sociological Methodology?" in Abrams *et al.*, *Practice and Progress*, esp. 123–24). The critiques, I think it is in the vein of Abell's argument to say, tend to be of epistemological premises and abstract concepts, not of substantive empirical analyses, a more frequently productive enterprise.

¹⁵ "The Social Construction of 'Positivism' and Its Significance in British Sociology, 1950–80," in Abrams *et al.*, *Practice and Progress*.

¹⁶ The phrase is borrowed from the title of the article by M. Cain and J. Finch. See also those by C. T. Husbands ("The Anti-Quantitative Bias in Postwar British Sociology"), P. Abell, and J. Platt.

functionalism. Only in a few cases, unfortunately, did this struggle take the form of systematic comparative research showing the extent to which sociological generalizations purporting to reflect “the world” reflected only the United States society of the period. The customary line of attack was abstractly theoretical, often epistemological, and empirical research was seldom focused on such large theoretical questions.¹⁷

Historical (and comparative) sociology grew in the United States largely as a part of this struggle to find the limits within which generalizations might hold. It stepped precisely into the breach between “abstracted empiricism” and “grand theory” described by C. Wright Mills.¹⁸ The field began to develop in its modern form in the 1950s. Early entries were largely concerned with assimilating foreign cultures and past times to a universal model of social functioning and/or change. Neil Smelser’s study of the nineteenth-century British cotton industry was one of the most distinguished contributions.¹⁹ It was also unusual in being an attempt to use historical sources (both primary and secondary) to study a course of social change. More common at the time was the attempt to arrange contemporary societies in a hierarchical model of putative stages of modernization.²⁰

Modernization theory gave double impetus to the development of modern historical sociology. First, beginning in the 1950s, it sparked a number of research projects which themselves produced findings of some significance. From Robert N. Bellah’s re-examination of the “Protestant ethic” thesis in Japan to more general, comparative studies like S. N. Eisenstadt’s work on empires, modernization theory produced major research (much of which might be called historical sociology even when not done by professional sociologists).²¹ Modernization studies also tied historical sociology to the older tradition of economic history. But modernization theory had an equally

¹⁷ British sociology never rivaled American, it should be said, in production of purely trivial and theoretically irrelevant research. But understanding “large” as a matter of analytic scale, not profundity, one notes that ethnomethodology (though of American origin) and related broadly phenomenological approaches found a place nearer the center of Britain’s sociological stage. They have been complemented by an active, often philosophically oriented, tradition of research on language. See M. Phillipson, “Sociological Practice and Language,” in Abrams *et al.*, *Practice and Progress*.

¹⁸ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (London: Macmillan, 1959). See also the argument for “middle range theory” developed by Mills’s Columbia colleague Robert K. Merton: *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968).

¹⁹ Neil Smelser, *Social Change and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968).

²⁰ See T. Skocpol and M. Somers, “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22:2 (April 1980), 174–97; and T. Skocpol, “Emergent Agendas and Recurrent Strategies in Historical Sociology,” in *Vision and Method*, Skocpol, ed., on this “illustrative” use of history in sociological theory building.

²¹ Robert N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957); S. N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1963); R. P. Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), is a distinguished British contribution to this literature.

substantial *indirect* impact on historical sociology. By the late 1960s and early 1970s it had sparked an intense reaction among researchers concerned to show the possibility of other paths of change, the autonomy of other cultures, the different external and internal circumstances facing postcolonial and other currently less-developed countries as compared to the archetypical cases of Western development. Modernization theory made a major contribution to historical sociology by proving a very stimulating foil for critique and new research during its collapse.

Here, where institutional history merges with intellectual substance, we can see clearly the divergence of British and American sociology. The theoretical critiques of functionalism in general and modernization in particular were nowhere more vociferous or insightful than in Britain. But in British sociology (unlike British history) no new research tradition developed comparable to those engendered by Wallerstein's world-system theory, Tilly's studies of collective violence and state formation, or Moore's studies of the social bases of political structures. The only candidate in British sociology was the growth of Marxism. Here too, however, theoretical work strikingly predominated over research. Especially under the influence of Althusserian structuralism, a generation of British social theorists regarded historical research as a variety of empiricist heresy.²²

At the very "conjuncture" when sociological theorists turned their attention to French structuralism (and large numbers of more empirically minded British sociologists turned to ethnomethodology and other ahistorical and often extremely "micro" sociologies), there was a resurgence of sociological writing on the part of British (as well as American and European) historians. During the 1960s the "new social history" sought the recovery of a lost past in as much detail as possible. One faction of this thrust turned towards American sociology and demography, econometrics and statistics, using computers to analyze records from parish registers and censuses to property-holding and voting patterns. Slaves became objects of cliometrics and rioters of "the statistical analysis of contentious gatherings."²³ This quantitative group was largely American.²⁴ At the same time, another faction, more often British and otherwise European, turned to anthropology rather than statistics

²² Asked whether historical research might not contain answers to some of the questions he and Barry Hindess were raising at the time (*Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), Paul Hirst once told an Oxford seminar that history was only so much story-telling, good for bedtime reading and as well written by Jean Plaidy as by the professors. To their credit, Hindess and Hirst soon abandoned most of the Althusserian orthodoxy they had helped to popularize in Britain.

²³ R. W. Fogel and S. L. Engerman: *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York: Little, Brown, 1974); C. Tilly, L. Tilly, and R. Tilly, *The Rebellious Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

²⁴ The Cambridge historical demography group is a major exception. Alan Macfarlane, one of its younger members, also notably crosses the boundary I have artificially constructed between anthropological and statistical approaches.

for inspiration. Its efforts aimed at the recovery of past cultures, of people's ways of life seen from their own perspectives and as much as possible reported in their own words. Respect for those studied and a refusal to turn them to mere "objects of research" were central tenets from the work of E. P. Thompson through to the *History Workshop* group. Both statistical studies—perhaps the truest approach to Marxism's masses—and historical ethnography could claim to be "history from the bottom up."

The achievements of what Bernard Cohn has called "proctological history" have been undeniably great.²⁵ A wide range of source materials has been used to produce an enormous body of information. But the new social history often has yielded to an illusion of the pure resurrection of the past, forgetting the essential constitutive role of theory.²⁶ The best studies, as always, have gone beyond mere discovery to analysis, explanation, and interpretation. Whatever the debates and disciplinary ideologies, as Abrams says,

the really significant development of the past twenty years has been the publication of a solid body of theoretically self-conscious historical work which has progressively made nonsense of earlier conceptions of history as somehow, in principle, not engaged in the theoretical world of the social sciences (p. 300).

That British sociology did not demonstrate a comparable interest in empirical history is not for want of theoretical effort, as Abrams makes clear in his nicely written survey of and argument for historical sociology. Most prominently, Giddens's idea of structuration (which Abrams recasts as structuring) suggests a transcendence of previous dichotomies of action and structure as objects of analysis in favor of attention to a multiplexity of structuring tendencies occurring in all action, vying continuously with each other.²⁷ Giddens calls for a complete integration of history and sociology:

What history is, or should be, cannot be analysed in separation from what the social sciences are, or should be [and] there simply are no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history—appropriately conceived.²⁸

Fernand Braudel has similarly argued that history and sociology are "one single intellectual adventure," and has perhaps done more than anyone else to

²⁵ Bernard Cohn, "History and Anthropology: The State of Play," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22:2 (April 1980), 198–221.

²⁶ See D. Selbourne, "On the Methods of the History Workshop," *History Workshop*, 9 (1980). Even where the value of theory was remembered, many of the new social historians in Britain had a much more antipathetic relationship to sociology than did their American counterparts. See G. S. Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History," *British Journal of Sociology*, 27:3 (1976), 295–305; R. Samuel and G. S. Jones, "Sociology and History," *History Workshop* (1976); and, for an extreme case, E. P. Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," *Midland History*, 1:3 (1972), 41–55.

²⁷ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1979); see also Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology*, xvii.

²⁸ Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, 230.

exemplify that unity in his work.²⁹ Abrams seems to be in full agreement with both authors:

I hope by the end to have established . . . that a long collective tussle with immediate matters of historical explanation has also been a way of discovering the problematic of structuring and realising its capacity to integrate history and sociology as a single unified programme of analysis (p. xviii).

Abrams does indeed go some way toward this goal, largely in several chapters that show major exemplars as primarily involved in the analysis of substantive problems. Historical sociology, Abrams argues, is not a new school at all, but the heart of much of the best of classical sociology—Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. In this view, historical sociology is not a matter of introducing sociological theories or methods to historians or historical data; neither is it sociology as usual but practiced on subjects long dead. Rather, historical sociology is sociology *as* history.

Abrams's program for historical sociology is based largely on incorporating Giddens's ideas of structuration and other "processualizations" of hitherto static terms. How much impact this sensible effort to place historical work in the heart of sociology will have is likely to depend on how much purchase Giddens's theory proves to have in concrete historical analysis. This raises important questions, some of which Abrams fails to confront, about the adequacy of social theory in historical work, rather than its legitimacy. Gareth Stedman Jones, for example, surveyed the relationships between sociology and history in Britain in 1976 and found them good in principle but largely misconceived and fruitless in practice. Too many authors accepted the existing state of each discipline and thought their problems could be solved simply by merger. Others considered close relations impossible or dangerous because of the fundamental differences between nomothetic and idiographic approaches. Both were quite wrong, wrote Jones:

. . . there is no distinction in principle between history and any of the other "social sciences." The distinction is not that between theory and non-theory, but between the adequacy or inadequacy of the theory brought to bear.³⁰

Jones's suggestion of an adequate theory is Marxism, crucially because it provides for rigorous historical periodization. For better or worse, Abrams is committed to a much more general and eclectic theoretical approach:

Historical sociology treats history as the way social action and social structure create and contain one another. Its method is necessarily dialectical, reflecting the endlessly moving interplay of fact and meaning that constitutes, decomposes and reconstitutes social experience (p. 108).

²⁹ Fernand Braudel, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 69.

³⁰ Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History," 295–305. Eric Hobsbawm makes a somewhat similar argument, though with more optimism, in "From Social History to the History of Society," in *Essays in Social History*, M. W. Flinn and T. C. Smout, eds. (1971; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1–22.

Though Braudel's simultaneous analytic movement on innumerable levels may be his best modern exemplar of historical sociology so defined, Abrams is happy to claim exemplars as consistently structural in orientation as Theda Skocpol and as deeply cultural and psychological in their focus on meaning as Norbert Elias. Abrams, in short, is after a synthesis. Much of the (quite considerable) strength of his book lies in its attempt to claim a very broad center for historical sociology, and by implication for many of the classical concerns of social theory. But at the same time the book's greatest weakness is its failure to confront the extent to which the great theories of our heritage and the best of modern research do *not* converge.

Abrams's chapter on Durkheim ends with the suggestion that the deficiencies of Durkheimian sociology (too much attention to the division of labor, too little to anomie and inequality) are balanced by the strengths of Marxism (p. 32). A chapter later, his discussion of Weber begins by treating Weber's interpretative sociology as the obvious complement (and remedy) to both Marx's and Durkheim's tendency to treat the subjective world of the individual as the least important problem to be investigated. Abrams is much softer on Marx in this regard than on Durkheim.³¹ The merits of combining the best of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are evident, but the task cannot be accomplished by fiat. Unfortunately, Abrams offers a generally sensible argument for why the strengths of all *should* be combined in place of either a theory or an historical analysis that *does* combine them. His book is left in an ambiguous status between exhortation and textbook. His suggestions are often wise but given too general a formulation to have much purchase in actual research.

Abrams has commendably little interest in quarrels over turf; it is delightful not to see more space wasted on the matter of the proper division of labor between history and sociology. Amity among disciplines does not, however, resolve questions about how to relate theories (grand, middle, and miniscule), narratives, quotations, computations, and interpretations. Faced with the intractability of questions about how, and in what proportion, to describe and explain the past (never mind predict the future on that basis) Abrams, like

³¹ Abrams never cites *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, *Primitive Classifications*, *The Moral Education*, or even *Suicide*—all of which, in varying ways, approach the issues of subjectivity, if not always as the world of individuals. His treatment of Durkheim is still more subtle than Tilly's use of the great French sociologist as a stand-in for 1950s and 1960s functionalism—and only in caricature at that. See "Useless Durkheim," in Tilly's *As Sociology Meets History* (New York: Academic Press, 1981). Difficulties with Durkheim seem to be one of the ideological legacies of historical sociology's roots in reaction against functionalism and modernization theory. See also C. Ragin and D. Zaret, "Theory and Method in Comparative Research: Two Strategies," *Social Forces*, 61:3 (1983), 731–54; Ragin and Zaret divide sociology more or less completely into a Durkheimian majority and a Weberian minority, with the latter including all of the "good guys" of historical sociology. As Skocpol objects, that claims commonality for some very diverse lines of work, and dismisses a great many of the long-standing central concerns of sociology ("Emergent Agendas," 360–61).

nearly everyone else, must fall back on suggestions of a division of labor. His early declaration of interdisciplinary unity and of loyalty to a Giddensian theory of structuring do not save him. Historical sociology, he considers, can “mediate” between theory and history (pp. 187–89). This is not a novel position; Skocpol and Margaret Somers are quoted approvingly, and good studies like Skocpol’s on revolutions are held to show that Weber exaggerated the split between sociological theory with its precise concepts and concrete historical reality in the fullness of its content.³² But Skocpol’s case studies are carefully constructed *abstractions* based on a thorough reading of secondary sources; they are designed to serve comparison, not the evocation or interpretation of particularities. By implication at least, there must somewhere be underlaborers of history, writers of innumerable monographs and dissertations as grist for the sociological mill. And, conversely, if less clearly implied, grand theorists must somewhere still speculate in armchairs and elaborate perspectives or logical systems.³³

This account accepts too readily the conventional split between a presumably abstract theory and concrete empirical history. As Abrams (pp. 302–4) goes out of his way to argue, the notion of theory-free or nonanalytic narrative is little more than a self-delusion popular among some schools of historians. Monographs are not just compilations of facts; explicitly or implicitly, they are arguments. As we are now acutely aware, there are no unproblematic, simply given accounts of actual historical reality in its fullness of content. Descriptions may be more or less rich, of course, but even the most straightforward narrative is a construct, an interpretation. Conversely, the best theories, including most of those that Abrams takes up, are empirically rich, full of observations, wrought not with hollow words but with dense concrete reference. There are no helpful sociological theories that are wholly abstract, deductive formulations.³⁴ In particular, macrosociological theories depend (as Abrams’s review helps to show) on an historical specificity that can only be concrete. Oddly, Weber, historically the richest of great social theorists, is famous for his neo-Kantian comments on the essential distance between abstraction and empirical reality.³⁵ What did his great familiarity with history

³² Skocpol and Somers, “Uses of Comparative History”; Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (1921; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

³³ Though note Skocpol and Somers’ argument for a cycle in which historical research is used first inductively to construct or expand and then later in various fashions to test or illustrate abstract theories (“Uses of Comparative History”).

³⁴ Even a theorist who attempts to base his work on formalization and abstraction as completely as Peter Blau in *Inequality and Heterogeneity* (New York: Free Press, 1977) must induce the substantive definition of the “parameters” of his theory, either explicitly or implicitly, from empirical research or experiential hunches. Of course, sociologists do attempt explanation rather than description, and use deduction rather than induction more than do historians. The difference, however, is one of degree, not categorical distinction.

³⁵ Weber, *Economy and Society*, I, 19–20.

make him consider so essentially different about his own major sociological tasks? Logic? Typification or generalization? If we are forced forever to split form from content, can historical sociology ever really mediate the two?³⁶

Abstraction does not distinguish sociological or theoretical writing from historical writing. Nor does any other major, systematic distinction hold. Reference groups are somewhat different, and there is a variety of family resemblances within each discipline:³⁷ Historians write better; sociologists are more statistically sophisticated. Historians write more books; sociologists write more articles. Fewer sociologists treat particular individuals as more significant than structural patterns, but then the resurgent discipline of social history, far from being simply “history with the politics left out,” is a reaction against political history treated as biography. Fewer historians engage in explicit and systematic comparative research; more resist efforts to generalize beyond specific cases. Sociology has no monopoly on studies of large-scale change, and history has plenty of practitioners producing static snapshots. None of these represents an essential differentiation or definition, and none is intellectually very important. The important lines of difference all cross disciplines (though disciplinary ideologies do not always make it easy to admit it). The important differences among researchers are substantive: They lie in the arguments the researchers put forward, which are inescapably, if not always systematically or explicitly, theoretical.

Historical sociology does not mediate between pre-existing theory and history. It is, in Stedman Jones’s phrase, “theoretical history.” In Abrams’s words, it is “sociology as history.” A research tradition must thrive on substantive issues. These are neither given by the inert historical record nor conceived wholly in the abstract by pure theorists. They are developed in ongoing research, especially at those points where argument can be neither settled by facts nor conducted without them.

³⁶ Cf. T. Skocpol’s (*States and Social Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 39) and Abrams’s (*Historical Sociology*, 187–89) suggestions that it can.

³⁷ There are also differences within each discipline as great as those between them, as M. Bulmer (“Sociology and History: Some Recent Trends” *Sociology* 8:1 (1974), 138–50) and others have observed.