Making Use of the Past: Time Periods as Cases to Compare and as Sequences of Problem Solving[1]

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This article examines methodological issues that arise when using information from one historical period to illuminate another. It begins by showing how the strengths and weaknesses of methods commonly used to compare institutions or regions reappear in comparisons between times. The discussion then turns to alternative approaches. The use of narrative and of path dependency to construct explanatory sequences are strategies that strike a welcome balance between causal generalization and historical detail. But these approaches typically fail to identify either the causal mechanisms or the trajectories that link events in different eras. These gaps can be filled by rethinking sequences of events across periods as reiterated problem solving. Successive U.S. industrial relations regimes since 1900 are used to illustrate this methodological strategy.

Wise parents, lecturers in history, and reflective journalists join historical sociologists in urging us to study our past, the better to understand our present. Parents captivate their children with tales of "when I was your age," drawing cautionary lessons from the old days to guide contemporary youth. Professors continue to invoke Santayana on the perils of ignoring the past, implying that careful study of previous epochs can usefully guide policy today. And journalists draw parallels between current developments—rapacious monopolists, widening income gaps, rogue world leaders, office automation—and their ostensible predecessors, as if previous outcomes forecast future developments.

In more or less self-conscious and systematic ways, these arguments simplify characteristics of different time periods, picking out and high-

lighting some features of one period (e.g., the retreat from Progressive social engineering to laissez-faire in the 1920s) to juxtapose with selected features of another (the 1980s backlash against the welfare state). In this article, I consider *how* our understanding of one period may profit from juxtaposing it with another. Although consideration of the past to shed light on the present is the most familiar example, the question can be posed for any two periods: How do we use information about one to illuminate the other? I have two main goals. The first goal is to explore certain parallels between comparing times and comparing places; the second is to show how the use of narrative and path dependency models to link events between periods can and should be supplemented by attention to sequences of problem solving.

The first goal presupposes the validity of periodization. Sociologists and historians routinely divide the past into temporal chunks, although they often argue about the dates and characteristics that most usefully set one period off from another. These periods can be viewed as separate cases, and comparing them has much in common with comparing social institutions (such as welfare states or religions) or processes (such as revolutions or professionalization) that occur in different places. Although much has been written on the logics of comparing places and institutions, there has been no systematic exploration of how these logics apply to comparing periods. Exploring the parallels between comparing places and comparing times has at least two payoffs. One is simply to show the ways in which familiar strengths and weaknesses of variable-based or interpretive methods reappear in comparisons of different periods. The second payoff emerges as the analogy between comparing places and comparing times breaks down. When dealing with time periods, two cases can be related not only through comparisons and contrasts but *also* through sequences of events. This characteristic presents distinctive opportunities and difficulties and requires alternatives to conventional comparative methods.

The alternatives most commonly recommended rely on a self-conscious use of narrative, including the variety of narrative known as path dependency, to organize events into causal sequences. My second major goal in this article is to assess the separate merits of narrative and of path dependency for the specific tasks of establishing and explaining connections between events in different periods. Recent work urging the use of narrative in historical sociology points in the right direction (Somers 1996; Gotham and Staples 1996; Abbott 1992*a;* Isaac 1997). These studies advocate causal explanations that are sensitive to historical context and contingency, but they offer little guidance on how to develop such explanations. The narrative variant "path dependency" takes us several steps further. It specifies how contingencies steer historical change and what mechanisms "lock in" a given path. Thus, path dependency treats the idiosyncra-

sies of each historical period as resources for, rather than impediments to, causal explanation. But this approach also understates the influence of each historical turning point on later developments, and it obscures larger trajectories across periods.

We can remedy the deficiencies of conventional comparative methods by rethinking the connections between events in different time periods as reiterated problem solving. This heuristic device overcomes the limitations of interpretive comparisons by identifying and making use of continuities across periods, and it avoids certain pitfalls of variable-based comparisons by putting historical particulars to explanatory work. Organizing events into sequences of problem solving that span different periods also has advantages over narrative and path dependency. It provides a plausible way to represent and account for historical trajectories; it builds social actors and multiple causal time lines into the explanatory account; and it offers a richer sense of how earlier outcomes shape later ones. In the final section of the article, I use empirical examples from the history of U.S. industrial relations to illustrate this approach and to differentiate it from rival perspectives. I do not propose reiterated problem solving as a methodological Swiss army knife, handy for all historical chores. No such all-purpose tool exists. Instead, I offer it in the spirit of middle-range theory, as an approach well suited to some—but not all—types of social change.

COMPARING TIME PERIODS

The advantages of narrative, path dependency, and reiterated problem solving for comparing and connecting events in different time periods can best be appreciated against the backdrop of more conventional comparative methods. Most surveys of comparative historical sociology make an ideal-typical distinction between individualizing (sometimes labeled "interpretive") and generalizing (or "variable-based") comparisons (Abrams 1982; Skocpol 1984; Tilly 1984; Ragin 1987). The most widely accepted use of comparison falls in the latter category, seeking to identify causal relationships common across cases. The pursuit of causal generalizations, in turn, requires discounting the individuality of each case, abstracting selected variables from their historical setting, and making relationships among these variables the analytical focus.

In principle, advocates of the generalizing approach would join Przeworski and Teune (1970) in replacing scientifically irrelevant labels like "France" or "Germany" with dependent and independent variables that operate, like the Euro currency, without respect for nationality. In practice, comparativists in this genre differ in the level of generalization they deem appropriate for causal analysis and compatible with the integrity of each case (Skocpol 1984; Goldstone 1997; Goldthorpe 1997). Some limit

themselves to more or less narrowly defined and historically circumscribed phenomena like revolutions or fascism, and they caution against stretching causal findings too far beyond the cases studied (Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 1991; Brustein 1996). Within this narrowed range, however, the goal is still to abstract from particular phenomena (e.g., revolutions) characteristics and causal factors common across cases. Thus, Skocpol highlights the peasant rebellion and state collapse typical of social revolutions, including the Russian one, rather than examining how the peculiar contradictions of Russia's autocratic modernization led to revolution (cf. Skocpol [1979] with McDaniel [1988]). For other comparativists, even this level of generalization shows a deplorable lack of scientific ambition. Kiser and Hechter (1991) argue that sociologists ought to search for *general* causal laws. This requires that they conceptualize variables and causal relations among them at a level of abstraction suitable for universal applicability. State autonomy, for example, should be rethought in terms applicable to any setting in which there are rulers more or less dependent on their subjects for resources and subjects more or less able to monitor and sanction rulers—that is, virtually all known societies. Then, by making simplifying assumptions about rulers' motives, sociologists could develop testable propositions about the general causal relationships between state autonomy and state policy. If this approach results in "some loss of descriptive accuracy" (Kiser and Hechter 1991, 21 n. 45) about the interests of real actors in particular cases, that is merely the price to be paid for science (see also Goldthorpe 1997).

Individualizing comparisons treat idiosyncratic events and cultural nuances as essential *not* just for "descriptive accuracy" but for an adequate explanation of particular outcomes. By their very nature, these studies will yield conclusions of limited applicability.[2] In part, this reflects the practical constraints of labor-intensive research, which allows mastery of, at most, a handful of cases. But the underlying approach of individualizing comparisons also discourages generalization. Where the goal is to identify how social actors make sense of their worlds and to uncover the local cultures that guide them, researchers are likely to insist on the idiosyncratic character of their subject matter. Sociologists concerned with impersonal structural forces and causal determinants may be equally inclined to treat each case as a historical individual, arguing that no other society displays the same precise configuration of causal influences. Why, then, bother with comparison? In this style of comparative historical sociology, juxtaposing cases serves to highlight important differences and to discipline causal analysis. Lamont (1992), for example, pinpoints the con-

[2] The best example is the work of Reinhard Bendix, from *Work and Authority* ([1956] 1974) to *Kings or Peoples* (1978).

trasting languages of social exclusion by playing French and American professionals off against each other; Fredrickson (1988), by comparing American and South African race relations, highlights the causal importance of liberal ideology in the abolition of slavery and Jim Crow. Certain theoretical generalizations are at work here. Lamont frames her study with reference to Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital, while Fredrickson uses ideal-types of racial exploitation. But these are starting points rather than goals for research. The authors do not intend the cultural meanings or causal configurations thus identified to be broadly applicable.

Strategies for using the past to illuminate the present often replicate these generalizing or individualizing styles of comparative sociology. With two periods as two cases, some would use comparison mainly to tease out important contrasts. Others would look for causal patterns that hold across temporal settings. As in the comparison of different institutions or places, these approaches to comparing different time periods have their characteristic virtues and vices. The balance sheet for generalizing approaches is the more complex of the two. I will begin with that.

Different Times, Same Causal Relationships

One way to compare temporal cases follows the logic of Mill's methods of difference and agreement. Ever since Galton's critique of Tylor in the late 19th century, methodologists have pointed out that Mill's experimental logic is inappropriate for proving historical explanations (Lieberson 1987; Burawoy 1989). Yet this logic continues to guide the selection and conceptualization of cases and to provide rules of thumb in the "detective work" (Goldstone 1997) undertaken by many scholars. Lipset (1977, 1986, 1991), for example, loosely periodizes working-class politics and unionization and claims to find the same causal pattern (in which America's liberal culture undermines popular support for statist politics and collectivism) in each. Skocpol applies the method of difference in periodizing the history of American public welfare. Her contrasts between the post–Civil War pension system and the New Deal welfare state highlight differences in critical variables between periods (such as the presence or absence of reform movements well adapted to America's political system). She then invokes these contrasts to support a more general causal account of welfare policy (Skocpol 1992).

Mill's deficiencies for validating comparative causal arguments are no less apparent when scholars seek causal regularities across time periods. In part, the problem is one of oversimplification. *Any* construction and comparison of cases, of course, abstracts some characteristics from complex settings and thus suppresses historical detail. The degree of simplification deemed legitimate is largely a function of intellectual interests and

tastes. But where the goal of cross-period comparison is causal generalization, there is an additional bias against historical particulars. The unique features of each temporal case may offer local color, but they can only be distractions from the explanatory business at hand.[3] A common criticism of Skocpol's theory of revolution targets her assumption that a sound causal account must be applicable to all cases; this assumption leads her to discount sources of revolution, such as Russia's working class, that appear only in single cases (Burawoy 1989). The same assumption applied to cross-period comparisons similarly ignores period-specific influences and causal configurations. Wedded to his encompassing explanation for union weakness in U.S. history, Lipset (1986) attributes union decline in the current period to resurgent individualism. Comparing time periods in this way blinds him to the possibility that recent union decline reflects a conjuncture of long-standing and uniquely contemporary influences—that an interaction between America's distinctive industrial relations and global economic pressures is leading employers to repudiate the New Deal system.[4]

The search for consistent causal patterns across time periods imposes some additional costs, ones that may be less apparent in positivist comparisons of different social units. These are liabilities, I should add, only if one takes seriously the idea that there *are* time periods. Dividing history into meaningful sections involves both historiographical conventions and theoretical judgments about what constitutes a more or less unified "age," how that period differs from others, and where to locate the boundaries between periods. These conventions and judgments are mutable. Still, few students of history would accept the very different convention of treating the past as a series of data points in a seamless and uniform continuum of time. Instead, they organize time into chunks with defining themes, key events, and prevailing constellations of social forces. If it is granted that *some* such periods are useful constructs, then using the past to increase the N available for causal analysis involves two methodological dilemmas. First, period comparisons run afoul of the requirement that successive tests of a causal hypothesis must be both equivalent (approximating a controlled experiment) and independent (the results of one trial must not influence another). Second, period comparisons of this type cannot account for changing causal patterns across periods. Accounting for those changes demands the use of alternative methodological strategies.

[3] Discounting historical detail, of course, makes the historical sociologist's research a good deal easier. Kiser and Hechter, e.g., commend general theories with "high analytic power" for their "low data input requirements" (Kiser and Hechter 1991, p. 10).

[4] This is a historical example of the more general point, made by Lieberson (1987) among others, that the scientific model emulated by many sociologists leads them to rule out different causes for similar outcomes.

As Sewell (1996) points out, in comparative analysis, the independence and equivalence of cases tend to be mutually exclusive. The more independent two cases are in space and time, the less likely they are to be equivalent. The same objection applies with greater force where the cases are two time periods in a single society. The charge that time series analysis is ahistorical (Isaac and Griffin 1989) highlights the lack of equivalence between periods. As social settings change, so do causal relationships. There is no good reason to assume that findings from one period support causal claims for another period. In quantitative work, the perils of this assumption are suggested by Collier and Mahoney (1996), who note how a reliance on any particular time span can lead to selection bias and conclusions that fail to fit a different period. Criminologists who have promoted new or revised causal accounts to fit the recent decline in crime rates, for example, may find their explanatory successes short-lived if the drop in crime proves anomalous.[5] The same lack of equivalence can undermine causal arguments of a more qualitative sort. The relationship between work experiences and class politics claimed by Marx and many of his followers had some clear explanatory value for late 19th-century European and North American industrial societies. But this relationship was fundamentally reconstructed by changes in residence and consumption patterns in the early 20th century and by changes in political economy ushered in by World War I (Haimson and Tilly 1989). The assumption of independence is no less faulty. It would be hard to argue persuasively that later periods are unaffected by earlier ones, even if we disagree about what those effects are. For most of the 1970s and 1980s, for example, cigarette smoking declined among teenagers, suggesting the salutary effects of public health campaigns. Since 1992, teenage smoking has edged back up. A plausible hypothesis, consistent with the assumption of causal regularity, is that cutbacks in antismoking advertising are the culprit.[6] Another possibility, however, is that the very success of ad campaigns and school programs in presenting nonsmoking as the sensible choice has made cigarettes a more attractive vehicle for teenage rebellion. An outcome of the cigarette wars in one period, then, may have not only eliminated the prior effects of antismoking campaigns but also set in motion a very different causal dynamic. A methodology that requires independence

[5] For a comparable gaffe in assessing the relationship between speeding and traffic fatalities, see Campbell and Ross (1968).

[6] This is the flip side of Lieberson's asymmetrical causality. Much as assumptions of symmetry may lead social scientists to rule out a causal factor if its *second* change in value has no impact on the dependent variable, so a reversal in the dependent variable may lead social scientists to mistakenly invoke whatever factor appeared responsible for the initial changes.

between cases can thus be applied to different time periods only by disregarding the influence of the past on the present or by choosing periods so remote in time as to make the comparison dubious.

Causal models spanning two or more periods do not need to deny that these periods differ. Existing differences, however, reflect varying values of the causal factors in the explanatory model, not alterations in the model itself. If strike rates vary with labor market conditions, then periods of labor surplus will have fewer strikes, and periods when jobs go begging will have more. But what of times when this pattern itself does not hold? Here arises a second methodological dilemma for temporal comparisons devoted to causal regularities: given their own standards for what constitutes a causal explanation, they cannot explain a change in pattern between periods. The *effects* of these shifts certainly can be represented in statistical models. Dummy variables can be used to show that period-specific influences do make a difference. This is Skeels's approach. His study of the determinants of strikes (Skeels 1982) includes dichotomous dummy variables for the Wagner Act, Democratic Party power, the Great Depression, and the period 1921–29 (to "capture the effects of the open-shop drive, welfare capitalism, and some other events of the period" [p. 499]). The independent contribution of these dummies to variation in strike rates can then be measured. For those interested in the history of American labor, however, the use of dummy variables is at best a halfway house for recovering positivists. When shifts in employer policies, economic conditions, electoral politics, and labor law are regarded as important parts of the story of *how* strike patterns have changed, it is necessary to explain those shifts, not merely register their impact. A method that relies on abstracting variables from their temporal context in order to discover causal regularities, however, cannot explain events or circumstances specific to one time. Worse, it cannot even represent, much less explain, the links between these events. Skeels's work, for example, cannot engage the ways that employer policies contributed to economic depression, how these two together fueled political realignment, and how all of these factors combined to stimulate labor law reform. Accounting for this sort of historical *trajectory* demands very different strategies for connecting "data" from different periods.

Different Times, Different Stories

Like analyses of causal regularities, individualizing comparisons have their own distinctive strengths and weaknesses. These appear as clearly when the cases are times as when they are places. Comparison in this genre highlights the distinctive features of each period rather than variables and causes common across time. Individualizing comparisons thus

yield accounts that are descriptively richer and that treat historical details as resources for interpretation rather than as obstacles to causal analysis. But this also sharply limits the *explanatory* value of historical studies for the present. Studies of this nature, Sean Wilentz maintains in a recent editorial, teach us "the pastness of the past—and with it the humanizing lesson that people in history, although every bit as intelligent as ourselves, thought and lived in ways very different from our own" (Wilentz 1997). Even Bendix draws broader lessons from the past. Best known for his cautious cross-national comparisons, he applies the same logic to time periods. In *Work and Authority in Industry,* for example, Bendix contrasts managerial ideologies in the 1920s and 1930s with those characteristic of the 1910s. Rather than viewing workers as motivated by shortsighted goals, personnel managers in the interwar years emphasized the need to nurture employees' inner feelings and social needs (Bendix 1974, pp. 293–97). Bendix never denies that some things remained much the same over the two periods. For all their loving attention to worker psychology, employers denounced unionism as belligerently in the early 1930s as they did 20 years earlier. Bendix's research interest, however, lies in the changing justifications for managerial authority. Given that interest, comparison of time periods serves to tease out differences and highlight shifts that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Individualizing comparisons are neither atheoretical nor, necessarily, grounded in historical minutiae. Michael Burawoy sets the stage for *Manufacturing Consent* with an individualizing comparison of feudal and capitalist labor processes. In 10 pages, there is one passing reference to a place (England) and two to times ("prior to the Factory Acts" and "nineteenth-century capitalism"). The comparison nonetheless serves Burawoy's purpose of clarifying an essential dilemma of the capitalist labor process: How do employers simultaneously secure and obscure surplus value (Burawoy 1979, pp. 20–30)? The logic of Bendix's inquiry is similar, although the level of historical detail is not. He begins with Weber's conceptualization of authority relations and the problem of legitimacy, and these guide his historical research. Like Burawoy, the generalizations he does allow take the form of recurrent dilemmas (rulers need to justify their power to themselves and, often, to the ruled), not timeless variables or causal relationships. Finally, the assumption Bendix makes at the outset is that this dilemma will be resolved in different ways at different times, thus leading him back to the particularities of individual cases.

When we use one time period to help explain another, two questions arise: How do we account for the differences we identify? And how did we get from there to here? Individualizing comparisons are poorly designed to answer either. Bendix, of course, has plausible explanations for why human relations management appeared in the 1930s, much as Lamont (1992)

has plausible explanations for why American and French upper-middle-class males draw different kinds of status distinctions. The problem is that in constructing their comparisons of times and places to highlight differences, individualizing comparativists must choose cases that provide them with no leverage for causal analysis. Explanation is still possible, but not through a comparison of the selected cases. Instead, scholars typically recount the history of each single case to explain (or at least to describe) the origins of a given trait or outcome. In methods based on the analysis of causal regularities, by contrast, the characterization of cases and the explanation for similarities and differences are both part of the same logic of comparison, however deficient these methods may be in other respects.

In answering the second question—How are phenomena at time 1 connected to those at time *2*?—individualizing comparisons are no more useful than generalizing ones. They are certainly better suited for *identifying* the differences between two periods. Close comparison of the constituencies and spatial distribution of popular protest in Paris in 1848 and 1871 suggests to Gould (1995) that fundamentally different identities served as the basis for mobilization. In 1848, artisans mobilized as members of a working class; in 1871, neighbors did so as citizens of Paris. The contrast sets up the task of showing how identities were transformed. But at this point, the initial comparison has served its purpose and can offer no leverage for establishing causal claims. It is not on the basis of comparing 1848 and 1871, for example, that Gould chooses to focus on changing social networks as the source of new identities; he has independent theoretical reasons for pursuing that lead. Nor does the comparison itself point to the key steps (urban renovation and the changing geography of industry) that link 1848 and 1871 into a coherent journey. To present and explain these connections, scholars like Gould and Bendix abandon their individualizing comparisons and weave stories.

NARRATIVES, PATHS, AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Much as with the comparison of places, then, interpretive and variable-based comparisons of time periods face tensions between an appreciation for the individuality of each period and attention to regularities across cases. Moreover, neither comparative logic can bring contrasts and continuities together in a coherent explanation of the connections between periods. But here the analogy between comparing times and comparing places breaks down. Both kinds of comparisons can make fruitful use of differences and similarities. Time periods, though, normally can *also* be connected through sequences of events—sequences that may result in one case being transformed into another. This feature of temporal cases creates distinctive opportunities and difficulties for which traditional com-

parative methods are of little use. How do we rethink "cases" when one case becomes another over time? How do we select and organize events into explanatory rather than merely temporal sequences?[7] And how do we validate explanatory accounts once "explanation" is rethought as a matter of demonstrating *how* past events led to later outcomes rather than as a matter of applying covering laws to new cases? By focusing on events, arranging them in temporal order, and asking how sequences are also causal chains, we have an agenda for moving beyond methods that merely compare periods. Accomplishing these tasks would also help answer the call for sociological explanations that recognize historical contingency, multiple and mutable patterns of causality, and the causal importance of temporality itself (Sewell 1996; Somers 1996; Aminzade 1992). It is a compelling program. How can we realize it?

The strategy generally recommended for constructing properly historical explanations treats sequences as narratives. In the following section, I evaluate this alternative, along with one of its variants, path dependency. Narrative and path dependency are valuable scholarly tools. They help impose both temporal and explanatory order on events; they respect historical context and contingency within each period without foregoing causal explanation; and they accomplish both of these ends in part by invoking forms of causality that are better suited to historical change than are the covering laws of Kiser and Hechter or Skocpol (Quadagno and Knapp 1992; Somers 1996). Nevertheless, narrative and path-dependent explanations, as advocated and often as practiced, fall short when confronted with the task of explaining connections between events in different time periods. Advocates of narrative accounts are usually vague about the causal mechanisms that make sequences of events across periods *explanatory* sequences. One major virtue of path dependency is that it specifies some of these mechanisms. This particular form of narrative, however, also impoverishes our understanding of larger trajectories. As an alternative to both the vagaries of narrative and the narrowness of path dependency, I advocate connecting events between periods through sequences of problem solving. Models of reiterated problem solving are a kind of narrative. And like path dependency, reiterated problem solving constructs narratives of historical switch points that are followed by more or less durable social regimes. Both of these approaches, moreover, make

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[7] Sequences in which there are no such explanatory links can occur. T. H. Marshall's (1964) account of civil, political, and social rights arranges these in sequence, but it does not assume that the development of civil rights is one cause of later gains in political rights. Even in classic evolutionism, prior stages do not cause later ones. Instead, some overarching logic (such as "differentiation and integration") is held to explain the succession of stages.

legacies from earlier historical junctures an important part of causal explanation. Where reiterated problem solving differs from path dependency is in the way it links these historical junctures into coherent sequences and in its account of how earlier historical turning points shape later ones.

Connecting Periods through Stories

Narrative has been widely prescribed as a cure for much that ails historical sociology. It promises to rejuvenate the study of class (and other group) formation, calling attention to how social actors construct meaningful stories of individual and collective identities by weaving together interpreted events (Steinmetz 1992; Somers 1992). Narrative is also a useful part of a historical sociologist's tool kit, handy for the construction of temporal and explanatory sequences (Griffin 1992; Maines 1993; Gotham and Staples 1996). The analyst organizes events into a story with a beginning, middle, and end, central characters, and a coherent plot. Once there is a story line, events at one point in time can be "explained" with reference to prior plot developments. The analyst-as-storyteller identifies the "inherent logic" that makes one event follow from another (Abbott 1992*a,* p. 445; Griffin 1993; Isaac 1997). This storytelling approach to explanation, proponents assert, is the best way to represent how causal relations are embedded in particular contexts and enacted over time. Narrative also comfortably accommodates the inescapable contingency of historical sequences, whereby events alter the direction of social change and transform social structures (Sewell 1996; Abbott 1997).

For the purposes of using elements from one period to explain another, calls for narrative are more effective as critiques than as guides. What, besides the seductive charms of a good yarn, persuades us that narrative links are causal determinants? One strategy for testing those links within a single time period is event-structure analysis (Griffin 1993). Event-structure analysis forces observers to be more methodical in identifying which events supposedly "led to" later ones.[8] Further, event-structure analysis helps build the case that these connections are causal rather than merely sequential connections by using counterfactuals to "test" assertions that Y occurred *because of* X. This strategy thus promises to combine causal analysis with attention to unique sequences of events.

But what of connections between events *across* periods? Abbott suggests that narrative can do this job, too. A narrative approach can identify

[8] Stinchcombe's (1978) advice to decompose historical sequences into causal bits discovered through deep analogies represents a similar strategy.

common patterns in sequences of events in two different periods (as in the "natural history" of revolution) or it can treat elements of each period as themselves events in a larger and longer sequence (as in stages of professionalization) (Abbott 1983, 1992*a;* Abbott and Hrycak 1990). The first of these strategies surely adds rigor to impressionistic judgments that certain patterns of events (e.g., careers) repeat themselves. But like the quest for causal regularities, picking out common narrative structures fails to establish connections *between* eras. Formal parallels in sequences of events within two separate periods can tell us nothing about how events in one influence those in the other.[9] If, instead, the contents of two periods are themselves treated as events in a larger narrative sequence, then characteristics of the present may be explained with reference to elements of the past: both are understood as chapters in an ongoing story. Before we accept the claim that one chapter really is connected to and accounts for a later chapter, however, additional work needs to be done. Much as with statistical correlations that aspire to be causal relations, narrators who want to interpret sequential events as parts of a coherent story must identify the mechanisms through which characteristics or events at time 1 lead to or are transformed into characteristics or events at time 2. This is relatively easy when the story begins and ends within a single epoch. In this setting, there are historical actors to help convey the story and link the consequences of events at one time to the conditions shaping events at another time (Hall 1995; Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997). When the narrative spans time periods, however, individual chapters are located in different temporal contexts, making it at once more important and more difficult to pinpoint the mechanisms that transmit the influence of one sequence to the next. Identifying how these transmissions occur is important in order to avoid teleological arguments in which some overarching logic of development, divined by the observer, is all that ties together historical events or supports causal links (cf. Sewell [1996] on "teleological temporality"). The task is difficult because, as the gap between eras widens, causal carriers become less obvious and more difficult to isolate. In adjacent time periods, for example, cohorts may convey the influence of events. Older skilled workers brought memories of shop-floor militancy from the World War I era into the ranks of semiskilled factory workers in the 1930s; similarly, participants in San Francisco's 1934 general strike kept the syndicalist torch burning into later decades (Brody 1993; Kimeldorf 1988). Even as the interval between periods grows, transmission still

[9] Abbott notes one methodological advantage in comparing narrative structures versus comparing relations among variables in different times. The fact that the two periods do not meet the experimental standard of independence compromises causal analysis but not narrative interpretation (Abbott 1992*b,* p. 73).

occurs through human beings. But the analytical focus has to shift from living individuals to social mechanisms that reproduce, for example, "traditions."

Connecting Periods through Paths

Path dependency offers a more rigorous way to identify these social mechanisms. Like other forms of narrative, path dependency organizes events and circumstances into temporal sequences. It makes these into *explanatory* sequences by identifying choices or conditions that foreclosed options and steered history in one or another direction (David 1986; Arthur 1988; North 1990). Path dependency narratives begin with a historical fork in the road; identify the turn taken and emphasize how subsequent developments make that choice irreversible. Piore and Sabel, for example, point to alternative methods for organizing industrial manufacturing in the early 20th century. Once American business adopted mass production rather than flexible specialization, industrial technology followed a developmental course from which departures became increasingly difficult (Piore and Sabel 1984). Voss identifies a turning point in American working-class politics in the late 1880s. At that time, the defeat of the Knights of Labor eliminated the institutional infrastructure and ideological visions that had supported class solidarity. The labor movement subsequently proceeded along tracks laid down by the sectional organization and business unionism of the American Federation of Labor (Voss 1993).

What sets path dependency apart is not so much the way it describes historical change as the way it explains those changes.[10] When accounting for historical turns down one road rather than another, path dependency emphasizes contingency. Roy asserts that in the 1830s, the balance between public and private control of the corporation was still unsettled. Historical accidents, such as the timing of canal construction and railroad development, steered policy toward privatization. And because these contingencies varied from one state to another, so did the details of policy outcomes (Roy 1997). As against causal generalization, such path-dependent accounts thus incorporate period-specific, nongeneralizable causes. In explaining subsequent continuities, by contrast, path dependency offers a much more deterministic account. Compared to most calls for narrative

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[10] The term "path dependency" is often applied loosely to any claim that historical options or causal relations are constrained by prior developments. By this standard, reiterated problem solving is a subset of path dependency. But it is the more specific arguments about turning points and lock-in mechanisms that really make path dependency something more than plain historical common sense. My focus is on these arguments.

explanation, path dependency clearly identifies mechanisms that reproduce the outcome of a historical turning point. Conventional narratives link events at different times by placing them both in a common setting between the beginning and end of a coherent plot. Path dependency, on the other hand, depicts events as stations along a historical track, and it goes on to specify mechanisms that *keep* history on track. In David's (1986) classic account of the QWERTY typewriter keyboard, these factors include sunk costs in human and infrastructural capital. In Roy's (1997) study of the corporation, it is the power of a new corporate elite that ensures that contingent outcomes become durable ones.[11] If at turning points history is full of serendipity, along ensuing paths it becomes a steamroller.

In constructing explanatory sequences, path dependency thus replaces story lines with eventful and underdetermined switch points, on one side, and deterministic "lock-in mechanisms" on the other (Arthur 1988; Róna-Tas, 1998). This alternative to the vagaries of narrative has its costs, however. Advocates of narrative fail to clearly identify the mechanisms that link events into overarching tales. Path dependency identifies some of these mechanisms but fails to provide the overarching tales. In part, this is because discussions of path dependency rarely deal with *multiple* switch points that form more encompassing sequences. More importantly, the very nature of path-dependent explanations obscures larger trajectories across periods. Choices at each critical juncture nudge history down paths that then become difficult to escape. But those choices are themselves more or less accidental and, in North's (1990) account, exogenous. They bear no systematic relationship to subsequent turning points. This explanatory model reflects the original purpose of path dependency: to account for the stubborn persistence of suboptimal technologies or economic arrangements despite neoclassical expectations. But it leaves unappreciated the many ways that history's switchmen come along for the ride. Choices in one period not only limit future options, they may also precipitate later crises, structure available options, and shape the choices made at those junctures.

Connecting Periods through Problem Solving

My discussion thus far has generated a wish list for what should be accomplished when using events in one period to explain outcomes in another.

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[11] Although Abbott continues to use the term "narrative" in his recent discussion of turning points and trajectories, he, too, emphasizes that this way of analyzing sequences is quite different from their interpretation as stories. Compare Abbott (1997) with Maines (1993) or Somers (1992).

As in the comparison of places, a balance should be struck between identifying continuities across periods and recognizing the distinctive character of each. Analysis of events or data from two or more periods should also help the observer *explain* differences between them. This is a task for which both the positivist search for causal regularities and individualizing comparisons between epochs are ill-suited. To be satisfactory, explanations should respect historical time by casting causal analysis in the form of sequenced events, with earlier happenings leading to and accounting for later ones. Explanations of this kind should, moreover, carefully specify the mechanisms through which causal influence is conveyed through time. Advocates of narrative fail to do so. Instead, an abstracted story line is all that connects successive events in an imputed causal chain. Finally, causal processes should do more than enable past events to switch historical directions. They should carry the explanatory weight of the past forward to shape later turning points and critical choices. Analyzing events from different periods in this way would offer a fuller understanding of historical trajectories than models of path dependency can provide.

One way of meeting these needs is to link facts from different periods into larger sequences of problem solving. Periods are demarcated on the basis of contrasting solutions for recurring problems, not different values of a causal variable or diverging outcomes between historical turning points. Continuities across temporal cases can be traced in part to enduring problems, while more or less contingent solutions to those problems are seen as reflecting and regenerating the historical individuality of each period. One of the main explanatory goals is to account for why at a given time human beings pursued one solution rather than another. A solution sets a new historical direction, and that developmental track limits future choices. This basic picture resembles path dependency. Beneath this picture, however, lies a very different explanatory model. A problem-solving approach, unlike a path-dependent account, would attend to the ways in which outcomes at a given switch point are themselves products of the past rather than historical accidents. Solutions may embody contradictions that generate later crises, and they bequeath tools and understandings with which later actors confront those crises.

What sorts of subjects might fall into the category of enduring problems? They may be dilemmas deduced from theory, as Bendix (1970, 1974, 1978) advocates in his methodological essays and in his comparative work on private and public authority. Or, they may be issues embedded in empirical events. Fredrickson (1988), for example, begins with substantive historical interests (such as the aftermath of slavery) and puts at center stage specific social actors (plantation owners) grappling with particular social issues (including the problem of labor mobility). Either way, the

starting point for research is not the formulation of hypotheses. For example, rather than posing a theoretical question about how state autonomy influences government policy in different epochs and then reasoning out testable propositions, the researcher might ask how political elites have coped with the power and defined the rights of economic corporations. After documenting and ordering the various strategies adopted from one period to another, the researcher would explain variations across periods. This task would involve investigating (among other things) contrasts in how social actors constructed the problem and what solutions appeared to be realistic within each historical context (Roy 1997).

How can the "commonality" of problems across periods be defined and delimited? In contrast to the dictates of path dependency and of variable-based causal models, one criterion must be the social actors' own understandings. These individuals may not have defined the problem they confronted in the same terms as the historical sociologist does, but there must be *some* correspondence between the observer's conception of a recurring problem and the social actors' experiences of confronting common obstacles and devising ways to surmount them (whether or not those innovations succeed as planned). This requirement has at least two benefits. First, it imposes a salutary check on sociologists' theoretical imperialism. This is the tendency, illustrated by functionalists and Marxists alike, to define essential social problems with little reference to historical actors' points of view. Second, this requirement compels the researcher to build into his or her methodological strategy the agency of social actors as they define problems, devise solutions, and take action.[12]

What sorts of actors does this kind of approach presume? They need not be rational; that is, their definitions need not be accurate, their solutions calculated, or their actions instrumental. Nor are these solitary or homogeneous actors. It may be easier for the researcher (and the reader) to organize explanatory sequences around particular actors' responses to problems as those actors understand them, thus maintaining a consistent narrative voice. But a problem-solving account should include other actors, with their own definitions of problems and proposed solutions. Practices at particular times will reflect the clash of rival solutions, and one group's initial remedies will be modified in the face of another's backlash.[13] These dynamics will complicate interpretation but not alter the

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[12] This is also Abbott's recommendation (Abbott 1992*a*, p. 429; Abbott and Hrycak 1990, p. 147).

[13] Thus one may "tell the story" of Islamic intellectuals' response to the West in terms of how they balanced a desire for modernization with an insistence on a *non*-Western developmental path, and how and why their strategies for achieving this balance varied from one time to another. The story would obviously be incomplete without close

logic of reiterated problem solving. In any case, the methodological injunction is not to prejudge these issues. Instead, it is to construct explanatory sequences on the basis of how contestants work with problems, tools, and options inherited from the past. Historical trajectories linking events across periods are seen as a matter of successive solutions. Each is to be explained in part by the nature of the crisis, by the way the problems are understood, and by the range of solutions that are open in both subjective and objective senses.

Reiterated problem solving, then, involves a different way of defining cases and constructing explanatory sequences. It also involves a different relationship *between* casing and explanation than exists in generalizing or individualizing approaches. Unlike the latter, reiterated problem solving deploys contrasting cases to develop explanations both for period-specific solutions and for differences between periods. As against variable-based temporal comparisons, historical particularities become resources for identifying the contours and roots of particular solutions. In reiterated problem solving, explanation does not *require* the suppression of each case's individuality. Nor is there any assumption that causal explanations will be found that apply beyond each period—whether in the conventional sense of explaining variance or in Lieberson's sense of deep underlying causes for "the thing itself" (Lieberson 1987). Instead, it is assumed that a *full* explanation for solutions adopted at one time will not be wholly applicable to another.

These characteristics of reiterated problem solving dissolve the tension between continuities and contrasts found in both generalizing and individualizing comparisons of time periods. Studies in the first of these traditions tend to use one explanatory device (covering laws) to account for common patterns across periods and another one to accommodate irrepressible differences between temporal cases (including ad hoc explanations to deal with "historical residuals") (Goldthorpe 1997). Analyzing continuities across and contrasts between periods as part of a coherent sequence of problem solving makes these two explanatory goals part of the same intellectual enterprise. Explanations based on individualizing comparisons are also unable to reconcile contrasts and continuities. Comparisons that are useful for identifying differences cannot also be pressed into explaining the origins of distinctive outcomes. Rethinking those outcomes as divergent solutions for common problems enhances the explanatory value of the comparisons. Period comparisons can now be used to zero in on plausible, period-specific influences on the ways problems are defined and attacked (Does the growing visibility of the homeless make

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attention to divisions among the intelligentsia and conflicts with other social groups within and outside their countries.

us think about the poor in different ways?). Comparison of selected tempo-
ral cases (such as times, like the 1870s, of rising vagrancy) can also help
check our causal hunches.

The weaknesses inherent in generalizing and individualizing ap-
proaches make them easy marks. Path dependency is a considerably more
robust target and one with which reiterated problem solving shares some
common ground. Both path dependency and problem solving offer similar
narratives of history as proceeding from critical junctures to durable re-
gimes, and they both link events from different periods into historical
sequences with explanatory value. But representing continuities as recur-
rent problems rather than as persistent outcomes has other advantages.
One is to provide a richer sense of fate. Solutions at one time may do more
than foreclose future options—their only role in path dependency. They
may also lead to and shape the switch points confronted by later genera-
tions, drawing the fault lines along which later crises will erupt and creat-
ing options for new solutions.[14] Second, by organizing casing and explana-
tion around problem solving, this approach puts social actors at center
stage (as recommended by, e.g., Tilly 1997, p. 47; Sewell 1996). This focus
is recommended neither for sentimental humanistic reasons nor for its
conformity with theoretical fashion. It is sound methodology. Making
actors the strategic pivots of historical sequences provides another way
in which reiterated problem solving, as compared to path dependency,
provides a fuller sense of the past's causal influence.[15] The ways that peo-
ple cope in one period affect both how their descendants diagnose the next
crisis and what remedies they have available. Events in one period thus
play a much larger role in structuring later turning points and choices
than path-dependent models envision.[16] Third, by making the links be-
tween events and temporal cases turn on human problem solvers, reiter-
ated problem solving supplements path dependency, providing a way to
integrate multiple registers of historical time (Abbott 1983; Sewell 1996).
At any given switch point, it is through historical actors that the break-

[14] Here my approach differs from Abbott's. He prefers to methodologically separate
each historical turning point from prior trajectories, although he adds that turning
points *may* be linked by some longer-term, overarching historical processes (Abbott
1997, pp. 93, 101).

[15] Douglass North (1990) is rare among economists in acknowledging that inherited
cultural lenses and ideological commitments shape rational choices. But he then limits
this influence; culture and ideology account only for marginal adjustments in the insti-
tutions that define a path, and they matter only to the extent that markets are imper-
fect.

[16] This emphasis on *sequences* of problem solving also differs from Bendix's approach.
In his work, generic problems of authority are solved in different ways in different
settings, but those solutions do not, in turn, foment or shape later problems.

down of old regimes, the changing social definitions of the problem, and the development of new tools for coping—each with its own historical rhythm—come together.[17]

Reiterated problem solving does not meet all our methodological needs. I advocate it, instead, as a valuable supplement. The usual response to intractable problems in grand theory, after all, is to embrace middle-range theories suited to the research problem at hand. There is a similarly sensible answer to the general methodological dilemmas raised when connecting events and circumstances across periods. Rather than trying to reason out the one true way to resolve these issues across all empirical settings, we can develop middle-range heuristic tools that serve our particular scholarly goals. The strategy recommended here is appropriate where there are *either* theoretical or empirical reasons to treat institutional practices as temporary (and possibly contentious) accommodations for recurrent dilemmas. In these settings, reiterated problem solving is a more useful form of narrative than path dependency for constructing explanatory sequences. If this hardly covers all topics of interest to historical sociologists, it is still widely applicable. McDaniel's (1996) recent account of the pathologies of Russian development, for example, interprets successive epochs of Russian history as reflecting a recurrent tension between the demands of modernization and Russia's enduring cultural infrastructure. In each epoch—including Tsarist, Communist, and post-Communist— "the Russian idea" blends with period-specific developments to yield a distinctive configuration of ideas, policies, and social contradictions.[18] These, in turn, structure the practical problems of governance and modernization that have confronted rulers from Nicholas II to Boris Yeltsin, have shaped the assumptions they bring to these problems, and have defined their opportunities for reform.

A model of problem solving does not, however, require any such assumptions about functional needs or insoluble dilemmas. In surveys of the history of welfare states, for example, scholars commonly organize their accounts around the problem of the dependent poor and construct temporal cases based on characteristic government strategies. They then move on to causal arguments for how state resources, class alignments, and prevailing conceptions of the poor (each shaped in part by differently

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[17] Abbott also notes that social action links different trajectories (or "multiple emplotments"; Abbott 1977, p. 99). However, he uses this point to show how networks of trajectories reproduce social structure rather than as a device for constructing explanatory sequences.

[18] A similar logic has artisanal workers in England, France, and the United States adapting traditions (such as corporatism or Republicanism) inherited from preindustrial epochs to meet new challenges under new conditions. The leading examples are Thompson (1963), Sewell (1980), and Wilentz (1984).

paced historical trajectories) favor specific policies at specific times.[19] As the next section demonstrates, a similar logic can be applied to employer policies regarding "the labor problem."

A CASE IN POINT: FIGHTING UNIONS IN AMERICA

Over the last 15 years, top managers have mounted a campaign of "restructuring" to shift work to temporary or part-time employees, subcontractors (preferably nonunion), and foreign operations. These measures do more than cut wages and benefits; they also give employers the flexibility to quickly slough off or reassign manpower as product markets or production methods change. These are freedoms union contracts often curb (Appelbaum and Batt 1994). As an article in *Business Week* concludes, "America's most successful companies seem to have decided that a workplace compact is necessary only for their most valued workers" (July 10, 1995, p. 22). Even for this core of valued employees, however, the workplace compact need not involve union representation and contracts. Managers who have sought to overcome rigid work rules and adversarial bargaining by broadening job skills and involving employees in "team" approaches to improving productivity and resolving conflicts have often done so without union partnership (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie 1986; Craypo and Nissen 1993).

The most common explanation for this offensive against unions highlights the challenges and opportunities presented by globalization. International product markets are more competitive and volatile, allegedly forcing businesses to cut labor costs and restructure the labor process. Globalized production and capital mobility, in turn, give employers new weapons to wield against organized labor. The steep decline in union density since the early 1970s shows which side is winning. (The literature is summarized in Applebaum and Batt [1994] and Moody [1997]). Analysts with more historical awareness remind us that, in America, antiunionism is nothing new. Business acceptance of collective bargaining and the right to join "outside" labor organizations was unenthusiastic and spotty even during the New Deal. Both before and after that time, union busting has been a popular employer sport. In the hands of a social scientist like Lipset (1986), this argument explicitly takes the form of a variable-based temporal comparison; similar causes (e.g., individualism) in different periods have similar effects (antiunionism). And like temporal comparisons in general, the argument certainly makes use of the past—but not enough use.

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[19] Students of American welfare policy have often applied this logic in their research. See, e.g., Skocpol (1992), Orloff (1988), Fraser and Gerstle (1989), Gans (1995), and Katz (1996).

Highlighting general themes across historical cases offers little leverage for understanding specific contemporary practices. Adequate explanations for the open shop drive in the 1900s or the American plan in the 1920s, for example, cannot be transferred wholesale to the present. The challenges faced by current employers, their diagnoses of the labor problem, and the opportunities open to them in our recent political and economic climate all differ from the past and require a historically specific account of their strategic choices.

Making productive use of the past thus involves not abstracting similarities but asking how solutions have differed and why. Some of the challenges faced by contemporary employers—notably globalization and slowed growth in manufacturing—were little known to their counterparts in the 1920s, when domestic markets permitted rapid expansion. Employers during the World War I era, for their part, perceived unions as a potential threat to industrial government, and they had at least some justification for those fears. Today, management has the luxury of defining the union menace in purely economic terms, and employer strategies for curbing union power carry few political costs. Such differences signal the need for caution in applying lessons from the past. As I argued above, the methodological goal should be to treat outcomes in different eras as parts of an intelligible sequence and recognize that past problems and solutions have cumulative influences on later ones. I also reviewed two narrative strategies for doing so: path dependency and reiterated problem solving. How does each make use of the past to help understand contemporary antiunionism?

Path dependency helps focus our attention on the ways that employers' reactions to contemporary challenges conform to paths laid down long ago. Piore and Sabel (1984), for example, interpret antiunionism as mass production's last gasp: so long as managers remain committed to this model of workplace organization, they will respond to market volatility by further economizing on worker skills and pay. Piore and Sabel's hopes for change also follow the logic of path dependency. Having traveled the Fordist road for over 60 years, U.S. business may finally be pushed by globalization on to the other developmental track, that of "flexible specialization." In this upbeat scenario, it is simply good business to enhance worker skills, participation, and security *beyond* anything that unions could achieve under the old adversarial regime (see also Hirschhorn 1997). These interpretations showcase the two key explanatory devices that underlie path dependency: switch points and lock-in mechanisms. The pessimistic scenario highlights the constraints of past outcomes, while the optimistic one sees the current crisis as a historic opportunity to turn from one production regime to another. In both respects, this narrative of path dependency enriches our understanding of contemporary antiunionism.

Narrating employer policy as reiterated problem solving retains this emphasis on constraining paths and turning points. But it also presents the past as a more complex and potent determinant of contemporary antiunionism. It does so, first, by revealing several ways in which the current crisis is itself the product of prior employer strategies. For path dependency, the past matters because a historical trajectory set long ago still molds business responses to the exogenous stresses known as "globalization." Reiterated problem solving interprets those stresses as in some sense domestic phenomena, expressions of contradictions embedded in the old industrial relations regime. Second, the model of reiterated problem solving represents employer responses to current economic challenges as a complex legacy of *multiple* historical paths and switch points. In the rest of this section, I will illustrate these contributions by looking more closely at successive turning points in U.S. labor relations.

A first step in using past labor policies to shed light on current developments is to highlight the recurrent dilemmas of managerial control over workers and work practices; a second is to construct a sequence of the crises and reforms in industrial relations strategies adopted by employers to cope with those dilemmas. The list, like any periodization, will be open to argument and revision. During the period covered by the last 100 years, I would include the following crises and strategic reforms: the years of experimentation with trade agreements around the turn of the century and the ensuing open shop drive between 1904 and 1914; the upheavals caused by labor insurgency and government intervention during World War I, followed by the 1920s "American plan"; the industrial conflict of the 1930s, ushering in the New Deal system; and the breakdown of the New Deal system in the 1980s and its replacement with a more "flexible," nonunion industrial relations regime. Why not include the 19th century (or earlier)? Before the late 1800s, (1) factory production, unionizing efforts, and a clear differentiation of labor and management were not yet the norm, and (2) employers' understanding of a "labor problem" was ill formed, at best. Making 1900 the cutoff thus provides for more "controlled" comparisons between periods and trains attention on what both observers today and social actors in 1900 would recognize as common dilemmas of management. Were this a self-standing study rather than an illustration of historical methods, these claims for temporal boundaries and periodization would need to be well documented.

Using turning points for periodization is a strategy shared by path dependency and reiterated problem solving, and in both cases it highlights a combination of continuities and contrasts across industrial relations regimes. Reiterated problem solving sheds additional light on contemporary antiunionism by building *multiple* switch points and paths into explanatory sequences and by constructing those sequences in different ways.

Consider the historical dynamic of successive battles over, and designs for, workplace control. Late 19th-century changes in production methods and the scale of industry both fueled unrest and pitted management prerogatives against restrictive craft customs. Indeed, it was in the late 19th century that a recognizably modern "labor problem," including a frank acknowledgment of separate and often opposed interests of labor and capital, became an object of widespread discussion and alarm among employers, politicians, and journalists (Rodgers 1974; Wiebe 1967). We are justified in treating the period as an important switch point not only because of this animated debate but also because employers advanced different diagnoses and championed different solutions for the problem. For example, trade agreements with provisions to regularize relations with unions and subject workplace conflicts to the rule of law were proposed as an alternative to open shops (Barnett 1912; Ramirez 1978). The logic of both path dependency and reiterated problem solving would then have us investigate the historically specific conditions that led most U.S. employers to opt for the open shop. These conditions might include contingent events. A machinists' strike in 1901, for example, caused employers to lose faith in unions as reliable partners in regulating the trade. Nudging industrial relations in the same direction were labor and product markets that gave employers an interest in purging unions, and state policies that gave them the means to do so (Haydu 1988).

Reiterated problem solving and path dependency would also point to mechanisms that sustained this open shop outcome over time, thus establishing a new industrial relations regime. Path dependency would likely highlight sunk costs in open shop management, including the development of generously staffed personnel departments, pressures on individual firms to conform to employer associations' practices, and the ways that open shop techniques became embedded in business school curricula and the profession of personnel management. These are important influences, but they are not the only influences. Putting problems and actors rather than outcomes at center stage reveals additional factors of interest. First, this shift in the narrative focus calls attention to the development of new ideological lenses through which employers viewed the labor problem. One example is the growing conviction that union recognition and an employer's right to manage could never be reconciled. Second, emphasizing problems and actors makes the analysis more sensitive to the ways that short-term accommodations created the tools that other problem solvers would wield in later periods. Open shops did more than deny unionists a collective voice. They also developed unilateral mechanisms for workplace regulation to take the place of craft traditions. Finally, the shift in focus brings into view the less obvious virtues of the open shop for dealing with employers' labor troubles. Insulating workplace labor relations from

unions had the additional advantage of discouraging ties between employees and community-wide labor institutions capable of mobilizing broader identities and action. Open shops in effect balkanized industrial conflict (Kimeldorf and Stepan-Norris 1992; Cornfield 1991; Haydu 1998). These are significant differences in emphasis. They do not, however, suggest sharp differences between path-dependent and problem-solving approaches in the underlying *description* of historical switch points and subsequent trajectories.

The decisive differences between these methodological strategies appear when considering how outcomes around the turn of the century influenced *later* turning points and choices and thus etched a larger trajectory. A model of reiterated problem solving is better suited both for tracing multiple registers of causation and for showing how outcomes not only set new paths but also fomented new crises. Early 20th-century outcomes led to current practices in part by consolidating an enduring language of management prerogatives, with its corresponding stigmatization of unions as illegitimate outsiders and usurpers of employers' rights. Some of the causal chains that link past and present industrial relations practices wind through considerably more devious routes. The victory of open shops after 1900 set in motion a differently paced historical trajectory of management reform. Against the backdrop of open shop orthodoxy, World War I precipitated a new crisis as unions, empowered by economic boom and government intervention, demanded recognition and supported more broadly based worker mobilization.

Path dependency would emphasize how these new forces—most of them external to the workplace—briefly put industrial relations on the New Deal track. This is, indeed, the most common view of wartime labor relations. According to this interpretation, worker mobilization and a more sympathetic and activist state led to government recognition of basic union rights and, in some industries, to a precocious capital-labor accord (Dubofsky 1994; Fraser 1983). Interpreting these developments as instances of reiterated problem solving affords a different view. The wartime crisis may have been sparked by exogenous forces, but it occurred along fault lines laid down earlier. And wartime problem solving was not a premature New Deal, aborted by the armistice. Instead, it updated the prewar status quo and set the agenda for subsequent reforms. Employers had to devise means to make management authority more constitutional and to grant representation rights to mobilized workers. At the same time, they had to erect new barricades between workplace labor relations and community-wide union institutions. As one key strategist of the open shop movement explained, labor organization could be appropriate for modern industry if it were based on "factory solidarity as opposed to class solidarity" and kept open to union and nonunion employees alike. "Intra-factory

organization of employees produces greater loyalty and solidarity between the management and the employees and thereby makes the men less susceptible to the appeal of militancy" (Walter Merritt 1919*a,* p. 1627; 1919*b,* p. 1706). The square deal and employee representation plans—including company unions—met these requirements (Jacoby 1985; Haydu 1997). Explaining the development of this "American plan" in the 1920s thus demands attention to a linked sequence of problems and resolutions. The unique dilemmas of wartime mobilization were critically important, but these dilemmas themselves had been structured by prior open-shop strategies. In turn, the postwar outcomes became part of the repertoire of personnel techniques passed along to later managers. Focusing on problem-solving action rather than on paths reveals how differently paced developments come together in a single turning point and how new paths are themselves charted on the basis of ideological lenses, strategic tools, and pressing problems inherited from prior crises.

There is still more to the causal lineage of contemporary antiunionism. The 1920s solution for workplace control and labor insurgency proved no more enduring than its prewar predecessor. By the late 1930s, the American plan yielded to the New Deal in mass production industries. Collective bargaining under the National Labor Relations Act, most commentators agree, set a new direction in U.S. industrial relations, whether this new direction is labeled the "institutionalization of industrial conflict" or the "capital-labor accord" (Tomlins 1985; Fraser and Gerstle 1989). And the usual explanations for this sharp turn are also consistent with path dependency: the exogenous factors of state intervention and economic collapse finally changed the course of American industrial relations. The Great Depression spurred some employers to begin mulling over the potential virtues of unions for achieving economic stability. Mass mobilization by industrial workers helped them make up their minds (Gordon 1994). More important, new political alignments transformed the state from a reliable business ally into a defender of minimal labor rights (Brody 1980).

Rethinking the New Deal system as part of a longer sequence of problem solving brings to light continuities missing from conventional accounts. For one thing, the 1920s industrial relations regime itself contributed to economic breakdown. A system that insulated labor relations from external influences, however useful for fragmenting industrial conflict, could make no contribution to macroeconomic regulation. The exclusion of mass production workers from industrial governance by craft unions and open shops in the 1920s was also fateful. It ensured that worker mobilization in the 1930s would take the form of industrial unionism and strong labor support for New Deal intervention. The crisis of the 1930s, then, was in part the product of prior problem solving by employers. When

employers finally embraced "workplace contractualism" as their best hope for restabilizing industrial relations, they continued yet another trajectory set earlier. During the 1920s, many larger employers had developed administrative mechanisms and professional staffs to dispense justice and organize representation unilaterally. Under the New Deal, they turned these investments to the purposes of collective bargaining and contract administration, so that even unionized labor relations remained centered on the individual plant or firm. Past history, moreover, gave unionists good reason to assume the worst of management and to rely on contractual protection as the best defense against abuses of authority (Brody 1993; Amberg 1991). Here again, the logic of reiterated problem solving reveals what path dependency obscures: the interweaving of multiple causal sequences.

It is in light of these prior sequences of problem solving, finally, that we can illuminate contemporary developments. Invoking globalization to explain the quest for union-free labor relations obviously misses the historical roots of employer strategies. But even path dependency's use of the past, in which responses to external shocks either follow prior tracks or jump to new ones, obscures key historical legacies. Shifting attention to reiterated problem solving reveals how current employer policies reflect a more complex inheritance. It does so, first, by identifying the *multiple* paths that converge in today's business practices. Pre–World War I battles over technological change made unions appear to be the implacable enemies of management control rather than, as in many European cases, unavoidable allies for codifying work rules and discipline. This early 20th-century perception of unions persists with only minor modifications today. Another inheritance followed a different path. Having repudiated collective bargaining as a way to handle labor relations, employers developed alternative, in-house mechanisms for regulating the workplace, including internal labor markets and welfare capitalism. These techniques have their own history. Over time, they have been retooled by the dynamics of professionalism as well as the needs of capital (Jacoby 1997). But this historical tributary converges with antiunion ideology today, as businesses deploy an inherited repertoire of human resources management to solve current problems.

It is not just employers' responses that have multiple historical roots— so do the challenges they face. Path-dependent accounts of restructuring highlight the exogenous impact of globalization. Reiterated problem solving identifies how contemporary troubles developed out of employers' own past strategies. More competitive and fragmented markets, after all, do not necessarily threaten unionized labor relations. They incite a crisis, and thus a turning point, only because of the specific character of old regimes. Most interpretations of contemporary antiunionism miss the fact

that the basic structure of New Deal labor relations (much of it inherited, in turn, from the 1920s) guarantees that the current quest for flexibility will pit management against unions. Unlike European systems of industry-wide bargaining, plant-level contracts regulate working conditions and job practices in detail, leaving factory managers little leeway for improvisation (Sisson 1991). This legalistic and exacting rule of law (a legacy both of unionists' self-protection in the 1930s and of management's own square deal a decade earlier) also runs counter to flexible and informal approaches to decision making and conflict resolution (Edwards 1993).

Employers do, of course, face unprecedented challenges today. But an explanation for their antiunion response cannot rely wholly on unique features of the present era, as an individualizing comparison would call for. Nor is it satisfactory to treat antiunionism, as Lipset would do, as a resurfacing of a causal constant—America's deeply rooted individualism. Finally, in contrast to path dependency, explanations of contemporary industrial relations must be multilayered and actor centered. Earlier turning points explain why employers define current problems in terms of the need for "flexibility"; many of today's human relations techniques were pioneered in earlier epochs of welfare capitalism; and contradictions between the New Deal system and globalization underlie the crisis that faced employers in the 1980s.

In summary, an identifiable series of past responses to union challenges left a rich causal legacy for antiunionism today. These past sequences both fuel and shape the current labor crisis, set the constraints that contemporary employers seek to overcome, make unions appear the main obstacles to progress, and bequeath models for the nonunion workplace that management can adapt to new conditions. By focusing attention on recurrent crises, problem-solving actors, and multiple registers of causality, the reiterated problem-solving approach provides more concrete guidance in how to construct these explanatory sequences than can be gleaned from most advocates of narrative. For these same reasons, problem solving is better suited than path dependency for putting the multiple legacies of the past to use in explaining antiunionism today.

CONCLUSION

Most historical sociologists recognize the value of dividing time into periods, each with characteristics distinguishing it from others. What those characteristics are, and thus where to draw the line between one period and another, are frequently disputed. But if the value of periodization of *some* kind is conceded, then certain methodological implications follow when information from one period is deployed to help interpret another.

Two ideal-typical strategies for comparing societies are replicated in the ways historical sociologists use the past. One searches for causal regularities across periods, and the other juxtaposes periods in order to enrich our understanding of the historical individuality of each. I have argued that the familiar weaknesses of those strategies reappear when comparing times instead of places, including the characteristic excesses of explanations without histories and histories without explanation. These comparative approaches also share certain limitations—and miss certain opportunities—that are peculiar to the comparison of times. The most important of these constraints is the inability to explain sequences of events over time.

Methods that put sequences of events at the center of analysis, including narrative and path dependency, strike a better balance between historically insensitive causal generalization and idiographic historicism. They are also better able to represent the ways that Henry Ford's "one damn thing after another" is actually historical causation working through time. Connecting events across periods in terms of sequenced problem solving has three additional virtues that distinguish it from narrative and path dependency. First, it provides a better sense than narrative accounts of the mechanisms that conduct causal influence over time. Second, it captures the creative as well as the constraining role of the past at each turning point, as path-dependent models do not. Inherited solutions limit options, but they also precipitate and shape later crises, along with the choices social actors deem viable. Third, it accomplishes these methodological goals in part by making social actors the historical pivots that link "cases" of problem solving. Reconstructing the problem-solvers' understandings and choices—how *they* make use of the past—enables us to account for trajectories across multiple periods.

Most sociologists have come to accept that a single method does not fill all empirical needs. Reiterated problem solving is no exception, even for multiperiod historical studies. Where applicable, however, it is a valuable device for organizing events into explanatory sequences and trajectories across multiple time periods, while still respecting the historical integrity of each of them.

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