Sociological studies of diffusion:
is history relevant?

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The question of increasing similarity of forms and ideas is an important one in the social sciences in general. There are two main—and strikingly different—ways to account for increasing social similarity. The first is through an evolutionary or modernization type of argument, where increasing similarity reveals parallel but discrete processes of fit and adaptation. The second is through a diffusionist kind of argument, where forms and ideas circulate and spread across many different kinds of borders. Comparing three variants of the diffusionist argument, this article explores the different notions of time and history that these three variants reveal and express. While history always seems relevant, the way in which it is understood and plays out clearly varies across types. In conclusion, we suggest that recent developments in sociological studies of diffusion call, beyond history, to genealogical or archaeological research strategies.

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1. Introduction

The existence of social similarities and regularities across diverse contexts has always puzzled sociologists.[1] There are two main—and strikingly different— ways to account for similarity or convergence. The first is through an evolutionary or modernization type of argument, where increasing similarity reveals parallel but discrete processes of fit and adaptation. The second is through a diffusionist kind of argument, where forms and ideas circulate and spread across many different kinds of borders.

Naturally, the mapping of similarities and regularities can be done as a snapshot—comparing static images across contexts. This, however, will lead

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[1]Obviously, a related but complementary puzzle is that of persistent differences and social diversity.

the social scientist only so far—the description might be rich, but the explanatory leverage is less obvious. The claim that similarities reflect a process and mechanisms of diffusion will, in particular, be difficult to document and sustain in this way. A more complete exploration of social similarities and regularities and of how they might be accounted for thus requires, we propose, the inclusion of a time dimension.

Having said that, there are different ways to approach time. We are very much used to a reading of time as evolution and linear progression. A long time ago, it was already recognized by Cratylus, in his interpretation of Heraclites, that 'you cannot step into the same river twice' (Jeannière, 1996). This particular reading of time often comes together with a progressive and teleological bent and in fact little historicity (Spencer, 1970 [1851]; Marx, 2002 [1848]; Durkheim, 2004 [1893]). It leaves, to a greater or lesser degree, space for a 'vision of evolutionary engineering' and hence for the possibility of 'intervention in history' (March, 1994, p. 49). Quite in contrast, time can also be seen as cyclical or circular—forever repeating and replaying itself at least in its major structures. Instead of time being 'the measure of change' (Aristotle, 1999, Ch. 12), time would be that which never begins, moves, changes nor stops (Parmenide, 2006). A third perspective on time is seeing it as powerfully structuring heritage, strongly constraining our choices and moves. There is linearity, progress and action, but all are strongly pre-structured and constrained. Marx expressed it powerfully:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please. . .
> The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare (an Alp)
> on the brains of the living. (Marx, 2004 [1852], Ch. 1)

The contemporary notion of path dependency builds on the same idea (Sewell, 1996; Mahoney, 2000). Contemporary behaviours are constrained and structured by the aggregation of past actions and decisions; innovation is 'bounded' (Weir, 1992).

Those different conceptions of time point, in turn, to different perspectives on history. The mapping of social similarities will likely vary with the perspective on time and history that is adopted. Starting from a reading of social similarities as revealing processes of diffusion, this article precisely intends to explore how the use of different conceptions of time and history reflects upon sociological studies of diffusion. The first section considers epistemological debates not only among historians and among sociologists, but also across the disciplinary divide. The following section then brings in sociological studies of diffusion and considers how they account for increasing similarities. We contrast here the diffusionist argument from the often dominant alternative: the modernization story. The third section explores the relevance of history for sociological studies of diffusion, looking in turn at three different types of sociological studies of diffusion.

Each type is exemplified through a small number of representative contributions. Although history always seems relevant, the way in which history is understood and plays out clearly varies across types, with important methodological and theoretical consequences. Finally, the conclusion suggests that recent developments in sociological studies of diffusion call, beyond history, to genealogical or archaeological research strategies (Nietzsche, 1964 [1867]; Foucault, 1984; Koselleck, 2002; Palonen, 2002).

2. History and sociology

While probably less consequential than the *Methodenstreit*, the debate between history and sociology is also an old one that has gone, through time, in different directions. A key question in both disciplines has been that of the nature of the studied reality. Interestingly, there have been parallel discussions on this question in each discipline as well as discussions across disciplinary boundaries.

2.1 The nature of historical reality and epistemological questions

In History, an important fault line separates a traditional positive history (*histoire méthodique*) from different forms of *nouvelle histoire*. Simply and schematically put, positive history allows for the objective reading of historical situations *through* texts and other relics. Texts and relics are relatively transparent mediators allowing us to attain an underlying historical reality, provided we deploy critical tools systematically and methodically (Monod, 1876; Langlois and Seignobos, 1898). The historian can reach, in the process, 'scientific impartiality' (Monod, 1876, p. 37). Historical facts can be objectively identified and collected. Their linear and causal, if not law-like, connection is a key target of the analysis (Hempel, 1942).

We use the label *nouvelle histoire* in the broad sense here to refer, in contrast, to several schools that share a common type of critical stance towards positive history and its epistemology. We put under this label the *Ecole des Annales* (Burguière, 2006), the *nouvelle histoire* in the narrow sense of the term (Le Goff and Nora, 1974), the Anglo-Saxon post-linguistic turn history (Clark, 2004) and even the broad currents of international history (Tachtenberg, 2006). There are differences between these schools, but altogether they represent a serious challenge to positive history. The key to this challenge is a common claim that there is no such thing as historical *Reality* or historical *Facts*—understood as objective, discrete events. First, history is 'thick' and continuous. Historical eras need to be studied in their completeness and in their *longue durée* with a view to understanding the deep structures (including intellectual ones—*les Mentalités*) that frame historical situations and constrain all

individuals—the 'Great Dead Historical Men' included (Bloch, 1953; Le Goff and Nora, 1974; Burguière, 2006). Second, texts and other historical relics are not mere media allowing us to approach historical *Reality*. They are a multitude of particular narratives that also need to be studied in and for themselves (Le Goff and Nora, 1974). Historical reality explodes, in a very post-modern way, into a multiplicity of (hi)stories (and even *herstories*) or perspectives that all equally deserve to be told (Clark, 2004). Third, the myth of scientific impartiality is given up. History simply can no longer be seen as a distanced but objective mirror of the past. The historian is inescapably caught up in an interpretative enterprise. The historian cannot erase himself or herself completely from his or her reading of the past or escape fully from his or her own preconceptions. The art of history is the generation of a contemporary narrative from historically embedded narratives. Ultimately, history gets close to being a literary enterprise (Clark, 2004).

Naturally, those different conceptions of history come together with different kinds of questions and research frames, with a focus on different sources and the use of different methods (Langlois and Seignobos, 1898; Bloch, 1953; Le Goff and Nora, 1974; Clark, 2004).

2.2 The nature of social reality and epistemological questions

In sociology, we find a debate parallel, on the whole, to the one described above, but with a different inflexion. This time, the starting point is the nature of social reality. On one side of the debate, social reality is conceived of as a collection of discrete 'social facts' that can be objectified and are 'external' to the observer and the actors themselves (Durkheim, 1997 [1894]). Social reality and social facts can, in other words, be abstracted from their context—and in particular from their historical context. In essence, social reality does not differ from natural reality, and sciences of society should be searching for causal regularities if not outright 'laws'. Sociology, from this perspective, vies for scientific status, and the sociologist for scientific impartiality (Comte, 1972).

On the other side of the debate, another perspective among sociologists has been that social reality is by nature contextual and reflexive (Weber, 1978). A social situation cannot be detached or abstracted from the particular context—historical, cultural, institutional—that frames it. This context represents the deep structure from which actors construe meaning for their actions and behaviours (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The double level of embeddedness and self-reflexivity (that of the actors and that of the observer) means that the model of hard sciences simply does not fit. All social science—and sociology for what concerns us here—is in part interpretation (Weber, 1959). Getting at social situations implies understanding (in the sense of *verstehen*) meanings and their embedding structures. At the

same time, a descriptive narrative or interpretation cannot be the ultimate project/objective of the sociologist; the sociologist is also looking for patterns and regularities (Weber, 1978). Obviously, the kinds of questions, research design and methods associated with this perspective will differ quite significantly from the questions, design and methods associated with positive sociology.

2.3 Remaining boundaries between history and sociology

From the description of the parallel debates in History and Sociology, we can draw three main conclusions. First, key debates in both disciplines have been framed in similar ways—with a clear opposition between two kinds of epistemologies. The debate takes place essentially between positivists and interpretativists—and this in both disciplines. Positivists believe that there is a historical/social reality out there that an impartial and scientific observer can reveal objectively. Interpretativists claim that this is a hopeless project and that readings of historical/social reality always imply interpretation. Naturally, this debate is not over and is likely never to be solved.

Second, we can point to interactions and influences across the boundaries of the two disciplines. Marc Bloch and the *Ecole des Annales* were strongly influenced, for example, by the sociology of Émile Durkheim (Burguière, 2006). Bloch, like Durkheim, construed social structure as a comprehensive entity that changed very slowly, with economic, social, cultural and psychological dimensions (Bloch, 1953). Influences in the other direction have been significant too. Essentially, they have been of two kinds. On the one hand, sociologists can take historical analyses or data as material to test grand theoretical constructions (Goldthorpe, 1991). This would seem to suggest a form of hierarchy between both disciplines. Spencer put it starkly, but his non-politically correct statements do clearly point to the problem:

> . . .sociology stands to works of history much as a vast building stands related to the heaps of stones and bricks around it. (Spencer, 1904, p. 185)
> . . .the highest office which the historian can discharge is that of so narrating the lives of nations as to furnish materials for a Comparative Sociology. (Spencer, 1911 [1861], p. 29)

This strategy also means that sociologists tend to use secondary data and hence in fact deduct 'historical facts' from bounded and necessarily partial narratives (Goldthorpe, 1991, p. 221). On the other hand, and in line with a Weberian heritage, sociologists can integrate a historical orientation into the framing of the questions and research design. The idea is that sociologists can derive theoretical statements from a properly designed historical study. Between grand theory and its oversimplification of social reality and undertheorized historical or ethnographic narratives, sociologists could take a middle path, building 'middle range'

or 'grounded theory' (Glazer and Strauss, 1967; see also Weber, 1978, on ideal types). To make possible this type of middle-range theory construction, the chosen methodological approach should be able to take in, at the same time, general patterns of causes and outcomes—or generalizable regularities—and historical or contextual singularities.

Third, even though there is fluidity and reciprocal influence between history and sociology, the two disciplines remain distinct. In broad strokes, the distinction is still well captured by the opposition between nomothetic and idiographic sciences (Windelbland, 1980 [1894]). Nomothetic sciences are those sciences that have a tendency to generalize and search for regularities if not laws. Idiographic sciences are those sciences that tend to have as their goal the specification and understanding of the meaning of phenomena understood as contingent, contextual, accidental and thus unique. These categories are ideal types and, as we have shown above, there are nomothetic temptations in history and idiographic temptations in sociology. Still, to this day, the ultimate *raison d'être* of history remains the quest for a reading of unique configurations, and the ultimate *raison d'être* of sociology is the quest for patterns and regularities. We should not forget this profound, and in a sense essential, difference, even if attempts to create bridges are to be commended. Having explored the differences, similarities and reciprocal influences of history and sociology, we now turn to the question of the place and role of history in sociological studies of diffusion.

3. Diffusion studies and the question of social similarity

The question of increasing similarity of forms and ideas is an important one in the social sciences in general. The identification of similarities can be done across many different boundaries (organizational, national, industrial, regional and professional, among others). There are two main, and strikingly different, ways to account for increasing social similarity and its possibility: one takes a modernization argument, the other suggests diffusion. Our focus in this article is the diffusionist argument and its different variants. We start, however, by contrasting the diffusionist argument and its modernization counterpart. This allows us to underscore some important features common to all diffusionist variants beyond the differences that will be outlined in the next section. In particular, the very notion of diffusion suggests the structuring importance of time and hence history, whereas the modernization argument, in contrast, can be abstracted from any time dimension.

3.1 Modernization arguments

From a modernization perspective, increasing similarity across borders reveals parallel but discrete processes of fit and adaptation (Rostow, 1960; Spencer,

1970 [1851]; Ohmae, 1990; Friedman, 2000). As they reflect common pressures (often ecological, technological or market pressures), transformations go in the same direction, generating partial convergence over time. This type of argument is quite prevalent in economics and business studies and often comes together with a belief in progress and 'best practices'.

Explaining increasing similarity through a modernization argument has several consequences. First, the 'objects' (organizations, structures, institutions, etc.) that go through transformation can be studied in isolation from each other. Developments are 'discrete' and independent. They reflect the strength of underlying pressures and their parallel impacts, despite apparent differences, across situations and cases. Second, those objects and their transformation can be easily decontextualized and isolated, in particular, from their historical backgrounds. The social scientist is searching for common, law-like regularities and pressures beyond the peculiar form they may take in each case.

Third, such a perspective naturally reduces the role and the importance of individuals and networks. Transformations reflect structural pressures that are independent of and more powerful than any configuration of actors. Actors and networks may intervene—they can create obstacles or, on the other hand, encourage a particular evolution. Ultimately, though, this intervention has only marginal impact. Fourth, this perspective allows, potentially, for real and full convergence. As isomorphism reflects common, powerful pressures, transformations could be both significant and parallel. Differences will likely reflect either temporal disconnects or a contextual intervention which slows down or accelerates the process. On the whole, modernization arguments are functionalist with a teleological tint. They suggest continuous progress and efficiency.

3.2 Diffusionist arguments

A second way to read increasing similarity is through a diffusionist viewpoint. In 1895, Gabriel de Tarde put forth the provocative claim that similarity and regularity in social life, including across national borders, were the consequences of imitation.

> All social similarities are the direct or indirect consequences of imitation under its various guises—imitation through custom or fashion, imitation through affinity or obedience, imitation through education or socialization, spontaneous and irreflexive or else self-conscious imitation. . . . (Tarde, 2001 [1895], p. 74)

Forms and ideas were said to diffuse across borders in a process where dominant actors or countries were the main providers of models. Tarde used the term 'imitation', while contemporary sociology talks about 'diffusion', which, however,

includes imitation ('through affinity or fashion') as one mechanism. A century or so later, the proposition that diffusion might explain similarity in forms and ideas has gained legitimacy, including in the study of economic and business processes (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Scott *et al.*, 1994; Abrahamson, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). From this perspective, similarity stems from the emergence and increasing density of channels, which allow transfer, imitation and alignment. Economic and social logics are closely intertwined, and the expected consequence is not necessarily progress or the diffusion of 'best practices'.

The use of diffusionist arguments to explain similarity has a number of important consequences. First, the 'objects' themselves become less important than what happens in the space that connects them. Diffusionist arguments suggest that similarity and regularity stem from connectedness. Hence, 'objects' are construed as interdependent, and transformations in object B could have something to do with transformations in object A. The social scientist should thus focus on a constellation or system of 'objects' and on the various kinds of interactions, which potentially allow for diffusion and isomorphism. Research designs should be more than comparative and should allow us to grasp interactions between the units compared.

Second, decontextualization is impossible. Understanding similarity through diffusion calls for (more or less in-depth) comprehension of the unique features of the constellation or system where diffusion takes place. This includes the need for an historical perspective since the process of diffusion writes itself in time. Tarde already suggested the use of 'the excellent contemporary method, which accounts for ideologies or institutions by tracing their history' (Tarde, 2001, p. 74). A diffusionist perspective is likely to beg the questions, at some point, of the nature, origins, dynamics and concrete workings of diffusion channels. These questions all have an important historical dimension.

Third, diffusionist arguments are compatible with the idea of bringing actors and networks back in (Haas, 1992; Djelic, 2004). Sociological studies of diffusion should not reduce diffusion to interpersonal networks and purely relational patterns. One should not forget the role of normative and socialization logics, of 'disembodied' institutions and theorized scripts carried around by immaterial 'others' or mediators (Strang and Meyer, 1993; Drori *et al.*, 2003). Forms and ideas can spread as they are broadcasted from one mediating source to a wide set of possible users, generally in an abstract and universally applicable format (Strang and Meyer, 1993, p. 137). Still, the existence and workings of institutionalized diffusion channels point to individual decisions and actions—connections between individuals superimpose upon, conflict with or reinforce institutionalized channels. Rich studies of diffusion imply an exploration of this interplay. Certain forms or ideas could become popular and widespread

not due to their intrinsic properties but because of how they were formulated and packaged, because of who transports and champions them (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996).

Fourth and finally, diffusionist arguments do not necessarily embrace convergence—either as a reality *really* in the making or as a 'good' development. There is variation here, but diffusionist arguments tend to allow for a degree of associated interpretation. Tarde already believed in 1895 that 'imitations get transformed as they pass on from one race or nation to another' and as they encounter pre-existing forms or ideas (Tarde, 2001, pp. 82ff). More recently, Czarniawska and Sevón (1996) propose that the 'travel of ideas' is an active social process of translation. Ideas are picked up, packaged and framed, projected and translated as they are embedded into new settings (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996). Carriers are active in structuring diffusion patterns. They also translate the ideas they carry, reflecting in the process their interests and purposes (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). Terms such as hybridization (Djelic, 1998), performative process (Sevón, 1996), editing (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) or creolization (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002) refer to similar notions of activity. Diffusionist arguments are, finally, often agnostic when it comes to the 'progressive' nature of transformations. At the very least, they decouple the issue of diffusion from the issue of its results. Diffusion could lead to more efficiency even if the initial motivation was different. Alternatively, the search for efficiency could be the main objective with ultimately a disappointing result in this dimension.

4   Diffusion studies—the role and place of history

Within the broad category of sociological studies of diffusion, there is significant variation. This variation reflects different epistemological convictions and translates into different methodological choices. From the existing body of contributions, I identify three main types of diffusion studies. For each type, I present a small number of representative contributions and explore the ways in which they understand and use history.

A caveat is necessary at this point. The first two types are well established in the literature and have dealt in a direct manner with the question of history and with associated methodological issues. The third type is still very much 'under construction'. The claims that can be made are, consequently, more impressionistic.

4.1   *Diffusion as epidemiology*

A first type of diffusion studies traces the spread of norms or ideas across large populations. The term 'epidemiology' is used to characterize this type of diffusion studies, in the simple and original Greek sense of 'study upon populations'.

The term suggests proximity with a certain tradition of diffusion studies in medicine (Patterson, 1986; Pyle, 1986). More relevant, though, is the affinity with classical studies on the diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 1962).

In sociology and organizational science, this type of diffusion studies is often framed, theoretically, in the population ecology or early neoinstitutional traditions (Hannan and Freeman, 1977; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Aldrich, 1979). We focus here on two representative contributions for this category. A first contribution is the article by Tolbert and Zucker (1983) on the diffusion of civil service reform, a classic of its kind. The second contribution is more recent: a paper on the international diffusion of insider trading rules by Bach and Newman (2007). Those are only two contributions among many as this vein of research has been quite prolific (e.g. Brown and Philliber, 1977; Knoke, 1982; Frank, 1997; Meyer et al., 1997; Drori et al., 2003; Polillo and Guillén, 2005).

In their article, Tolbert and Zucker (1983) trace the diffusion and institutionalization of civil service procedures across American states and cities between 1880 and 1935. Civil service procedures implied organizational and policy transformation and a rationalization of local administration to make it more independent of political influence. Tolbert and Zucker plot the rate of adoption of these reforms, across cities and through time. They also attempt a partial re-contextualization of adoption and identify different contextual patterns. They show, in particular, contextual differences between cities that were early adopters and cities that moved later. In the process, they confirm the broad idea of institutional diffusion, while still pointing to different kinds of diffusion logics through time and place.

Bach and Newman (2007) plot the worldwide spread of rules and practices banning insider trading over the period from 1977 to 2003. There were less than 10 countries with such rules and practices by the late 1970s, while there are more than 90 today. In conjunction, Bach and Newman also follow the spread of implementation and prosecution. They propose several hypotheses to explain this spread and test them using event history analysis (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, 2004). Findings confirm the logic of institutional diffusion over the logic of modernization. Here again, though, the mechanisms with an effective impact differ through time and space.

Both contributions claim that an historical perspective is necessary to understand the spread of practices. What kind of historical perspective? First, in both contributions, history is reduced to 'chunks' of data that can be objectified and measured. History is a succession of events or 'points' in time that can be plotted. History is also a partial attempt at contextualization; a contextualization that remains broad and general, and quite theoretical. This is due in part to the large number of cases considered.

Second, history provides 'stones and bricks' that social scientists gather (rather than construct) to feed their projects. To generate hypotheses on the spread of civil service reform, Tolbert and Zucker explore the contributions of different historians, quoting them explicitly but also only partially (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983, p. 23). Certain explanations are isolated and used as discrete and decontextualized 'bricks' that are then tested. There is no discussion of the representative character of selected 'bricks'. Why those and not others? What about the subtext and the context behind those bricks?

Third, history emerges as subservient to existing theories. In both contributions, the social scientists start from strong pre-existing theoretical frames. History provides the data that will make it possible to test those frames and in the process validate or invalidate them.

All in all, diffusion studies of the epidemiological type build on a quite traditional (positive) understanding of history. 'Historical facts' can be isolated and even measured. The issue is not discussed, but the assumption seems to be that social scientists can achieve an objective reading of history by plowing through secondary material. Finally, in these studies, history is clearly at the service of a broader and more ambitious social scientific project. Existing theories drive the construction of the research framework, and history is one dimension of the methodological toolkit that is deployed to test and refine those theories.

4.2 Diffusion as encounter with embeddedness

We turn now to a second type of diffusion studies—those that explore the encounter between a form or an idea and a rich, complex and unique context. The focus here is on contextualized reception rather than on patterns of diffusion at the population level. The assumption is that the peculiarities of the context of reception have an impact both on the diffusion path and on patterns of appropriation. This tradition often claims a Weberian inspiration. We focus, again, on two representative contributions—Westney's classic *Imitation and Innovation* (1987) and Djelic's *Exporting the American Model* (1998). This tradition has also been lively, and these are two contributions picked from a much broader lot (e.g. Guillén, 1994; Valdés, 1995; Campbell and Pedersen, 2001; Kleiner, 2003; Frenkel, 2005).

In *Imitation and Innovation*, Westney explores the diffusion to Japan of organizational models and practices during the Meiji period. Between 1859, when Japan opened up to the rest of the world, and 1912, major transformations took place. The Japanese willingly picked up foreign models and transferred them to Japan (*imitation*). The transfer process was more than mere cut-and-paste, though. It involved an important dimension of interpretation and adaptation (*innovation*). In her book, Westney compares different spheres of activity—the

police, the post and the media (newspapers). She identifies pre-existing organizational patterns, traces the path to particular foreign models (French, British, or more broadly Western), the steps of the transfer and parallel processes of transformation. The exercise takes the form of a collection of detailed historical case studies that are then systematically compared to provide, at the end, theoretical leverage.

In *Exporting the American Model*, Djelic sets out to understand why and how organizational and institutional 'objects' with a clear American origin were transferred to Western Europe in the period after 1945. Comparing France, Germany and Italy, Djelic looks for commonalities that can explain parallel diffusion patterns and for peculiarities that can explain differences. The exercise takes the form of three detailed case studies—each case corresponding to a country. Djelic points to pre-existing legacies in each case and to the historically specific paths of transfer and transformation. Diffusion was more or less successful and the 'objects' transferred not always the same. The extent of associated adaptation and transformation also varied (what Westney calls innovation).

Both Westney and Djelic claim that an historical perspective is deeply constitutive of their projects. What is their understanding of history? First, both authors view history as thick, continuous and essentially an interpretative enterprise—a collection of 'points' or 'events' will not do. This perspective is only compatible, naturally, with a research design that includes a limited number of cases.

Second, both authors understand history as the generation of complex and multidimensional narratives. Those narratives attempt to bring together several (hi)stories, and they search for the 'meat' of historical situations. They explore the role of actors and networks as well as the meaning systems in which those actors and networks are set. As a consequence, the multiplication of sources—secondary but also primary—and their readings 'in context' become key. The social scientist does not simply use history as 'prefabricated bricks'. He or she attempts to construct his or her own narrative from a multiplicity of existing narratives—some stemming from the actors themselves, others from historians.

Third, while history is taken very seriously, the aim is not history for history's sake; rather the objective is to generate theoretical propositions. History is not subservient to pre-existing theory. Instead, historical narratives and their confrontation through systematic comparison are a powerful motor of the analysis. They drive middle range theory making (Skocpol and Somers, 1980; Djelic, 1998, p. 14).

4.3 *Diffusion as mediation and construction*

The type of diffusion studies we now turn to is compatible with the idea of embedded encounters. The focus, though, is more on the 'construction' of the diffused 'objects'. At all stages of the process, diffusion is understood to be not

only about 'mediation' and 'translation' but also, and importantly, about 'construction'. There are already interesting contributions within this category of diffusion studies (e.g. Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Scott, 2003; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). Still, a lot remains to be done. We need a lot more empirical work if we are to better understand those processes of mediation, translation and construction that generate, in our global world, isomorphic pressure.

Building upon Serres (1982) and Latour (1987), Czarniawska and Sevón propose to replace the term 'diffusion' with the term 'translation' (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, p. 6). Taking a step further, I propose here to use the term 'translation' in three related ways. First, 'translation' is about the construction of an identifiable and attractively 'packaged' form or idea. This construction can build from and upon a local 'object' or experience. It can also take place in broader negotiation fora structured for that purpose—including those of a transnational scope (e.g. Botzem and Quack, 2006; Engels, 2006). Second, 'translation' is about mediation—and our world is characterized by a dense ecology of carriers and mediators of all kinds (e.g. Alvarez, 1998; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). Third, 'translation' still needs to be understood in the more classical and habitual sense of local adaptation and transformation (see above).

I focus here on some representative contributions—several chapters in the volume edited by Czarniawska and Sevón (2005) and a contribution by Botzem and Quack (2006). Hwang and Suarez (2005), like Powell *et al.* (2005), look at carriers and their important role as mediators. Building from the same empirical base—a broad study of the San Francisco Bay Area non-profit sector—those two chapters explore the role of a thick ecology of providers and packagers of ideas, consultants and/or commentators. Those carriers or mediators are instrumental in the process through which the non-profit sector in that region has come to deeply transform some of its key processes, practices, forms and cognitive frames—and to model itself increasingly on patterns developed originally for and by the private sector (Powell *et al.*, 2005, p. 238; see also Scott, 2003). All in all, 'both the number of providers of new ideas and the volume of talk have greatly increased' (Powell *et al.*, 2005, p. 234).

In the same volume, Solli *et al.* (2005) explore what is 'in a name' or a label. Starting from the acronym NPM (New Public Management), they explore the progressive construction of the 'package' associated with this label. They point to an aggregation of multiple steps, a collection of developments in different parts of the world that together outline a set of practices and ideas summarily rendered by the acronym NPM. Korneliussen and Panozzo (2005) follow, through time, the cultural construction of the *Cod*. From a piece of nature—a particular kind of fish—the Cod generates through its geographical and historical peregrinations action and cultural nets. Through time and multiple interfaces, a simple fish becomes a cultural construct.

Botzem and Quack (2006) detail the progressive construction, through time, of international accounting standards (IFRS). In 1945, accounting practices and standards were national. The last 40 years or so have seen the progressive structuration of a transnational negotiation field, where a package of common rules, an international standard, has progressively been constructed. Botzem and Quack (2006) identify different historical phases. They point to actors and networks, interests and convictions, and trace the interaction of all these dimensions. The interesting observation here is that the process of diffusion is not distinct from the process of construction. The two are tightly intermingled. What the chapter by Botzem and Quack shows is that we cannot understand diffusion without understanding historical construction.

On the whole, existing studies under the label of diffusion as mediation have not been directly preoccupied by the question of history and its associated methodologies. Tracing the role of carriers and following a process of mediation is likely to call for an historical perspective if we are to understand the succession and articulation of multiple steps and interactions. The detailed understanding of translation and diffusion *qua* construction also implies an historical breadth and scope. The type of historical methodology deployed will vary. Tracing the historical emergence of carriers and of their connections and interactions can be done through a quite traditional (positive) form of history (see above). Focusing on the qualitative impact of carriers as mediators or builders of packaged practices probably means instead the need to fall back onto a more interpretative understanding of history. Moreover, the detailed understanding of translation and diffusion *qua* construction will imply the thick reading of a complex and dense context.

We suggest that the notion of path generation (Djelic and Quack, 2007) and its associated understanding of history fit particularly well those thick studies of broad and lengthy translation and diffusion *qua* construction. Path dependency has become a frequently used concept in social sciences, pointing to the structuring impact of past events. In its soft version, path dependency suggests merely that past events affect future ones (Sewell, 1996). In its strong version, path dependency characterizes historical sequences where contingent events set into motion institutional patterns with deterministic properties (Mahoney, 2000). Path dependency arguments tend to focus on those mechanisms that anchor and stabilize trajectories. Less attention has been paid to the sources and mechanisms of change (for notable exceptions see Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Schneiberg, 2007). The concept of *path generation* appears to be complementary to that of path dependency. Path generation refers to the creation of a new path or to significant deviation from an existing path through the succession of small, sometimes apparently inconsequential steps, through the aggregation of multiple decision points and critical junctures. Path generation is a process, and

potentially a long-drawn and slow one at that. Path generation needs time. The narratives on the development of NPM or of International Accounting Standards described briefly above point, for example, to a succession of critical junctures and moments (Solli *et al.*, 2005; Botzem and Quack, 2006). These cases tell of multidirectional struggles, of an aggregation of decision points and of multiple critical junctures. They show a complex accumulation of small, sometimes apparently inconsequential steps, each of those steps having partly unintended consequences. The resulting paths could never have been precisely charted at the beginning of the process; they could only be identified and ascertained *post hoc*. The cases also suggest, more than demonstrate, a multiplicity of (hi)stories, of perspectives and narratives on the same construction process (Clark, 2004). The actors who are more or less directly involved all have different interests and a different take on the process. The exploration of those multiple (hi)stories would naturally be an important dimension of an in-depth, historical, understanding.

5. Challenges for the future

We argue in this paper that history is relevant for sociological studies of diffusion. It is relevant either as a provider of empirical material and/or as a methodological orientation constitutive of the research design. We also show that different conceptions of history are represented within diffusion studies. In fact, classical epistemological debates and discussions that have marked both the communities of historians and the communities of sociologists are found, in a remarkably parallel way, within the broad category of sociological studies of diffusion. As concluding remarks, we would like to point to important contemporary challenges. Two recent developments in sociological studies of diffusion make it necessary to rethink the role and place of history in those studies. In fact, the very conception of history may need to be reconsidered.

First, the understanding of diffusion as construction often comes together with a complex, multilayered and multilevel frame. Diffusion as construction increasingly takes place in transnational, partly virtual, arenas (e.g. Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). And a great multiplicity of actors, interests, cognitive frames and (hi)stories are involved. As we have argued above, furthermore, the process of construction is a lengthy one. It generally takes place through different stages—with possibly highly different logics and constellations of actors and interests at each stage. From such a perspective, the definition of empirical studies naturally calls for the inclusion of an historical dimension—or should it be in fact the inclusion of multiple historical dimensions? The way in which history should be integrated into the research design for such studies is still a matter for exploration. We have proposed that the notion of path generation

(Djelic and Quack, 2007) is a possible starting point. But a lot more work remains to be done before diffusion *qua* construction studies become associated with a clear methodological programme that includes and integrates an historical dimension.

Second, an increasing share of diffusion *qua* construction studies are focused on ideas, ideologies, concepts or cognitive constructs (e.g. Ferraro *et al.*, 2005; Djelic, 2006; Fourcade and Healy, 2007; Hodgson, 2007; Beckert, 2008). We propose that we may then and there reach the limits of classical history—in its various guises as presented above. Instead, we suggest that we may have to turn to archaeological or genealogical strategies (Nietzsche, 1964 [1867]; Foucault, 1984). The premise of the archaeological method is that systems of thought and knowledge (*epistemes* in Foucault's terminology) are governed by rules that operate beneath the consciousness of individual subjects and determine the boundaries of thought in a given domain and period (Foucault, 1969, 1994). The rationale behind such an approach is the conviction that social activity is contextual and that a naturalistic and a-historical use of concepts places major limits on our understanding of a particular social reality, leading in particular to problems such as theoretical vagueness and inadequacy, confusion in levels of analysis and the dubious validity of concepts used. A deeper understanding 'presupposes knowledge [. . .] about the alternative interpretations of concepts that the historical agents had in their hands' (Palonen, 2002). But mere archaeological analysis could say nothing about the causes of the transition from one way of thinking to another. For that we need a genealogical strategy. Conceptual genealogy is a 'history of interpretations, the history of words, ideals and metaphysical concepts'. It is not so much the pursuit of origins as a 'study of descent and emergence' (Foucault, 1984, pp. 91–93). The integration of archeological and genealogical strategies into diffusion studies will likely be, in the coming years, one of the more interesting frontiers for the community of scholars working in that area.

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