

Feature Article 【專題論文】

Problematizing Comparative Historical Studies 比較史學探索

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Keywords: theory and methodology of history, grounded theory, paradigmatic gap, posthumanist framework

關鍵詞：歷史理論與方法論、接地理論、典範的差異、後人文架構

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Abstract

In this text I am going to argue that unless it opens itself to discussions that dominate contemporary social and human sciences, and unless protection of the specificity of historical research is undertaken, there is a real risk that history might be reduced to the status of an auxiliary science of other human and social sciences that have thus far been more successful in interpreting contemporary events and phenomena which have traditionally been consigned to the field of history. I claim that the weak points of contemporary historical studies are methodology and theory separated from empirical research in such a way that they are unable to capture complex phenomena which have emerged with the advent of modernity. In order to link practice and theory, I propose to appropriate for historical research what has been called "grounded theory" — theory developed out of data, and which uses comparative approaches and case studies as its main methods. The text contains two parts: in part one, I indicate ways in which theories in contemporary human and social science have failed to deal with historical change and in part two, I sketch a methodology of grounded theory.

摘要

本文提出以下論點：我們必須主導當代社會及人文學科的諸種討論保持開放的心態，並重視歷史研究的特殊性，否則真正的危機會是歷史學的地位很可能淪為其他人文與社會學科的輔助學科：迄今為止其他人文與社會學科對於當代事件與現象的詮釋更為成功，儘管對於當代事件與現象的詮釋在傳統上均交付給歷史領域。本文主張：當代史學研究的弱點在於史學的方法論和理論與實證研究分離，以致於難以面對因現代性的來臨而出現的複雜現象。為能連結理論與實踐，本文作者建議在歷史研究中挪用所謂的「接地理論」——根據數據所發展出來的理論，並採用比較的途徑與個案研究為其主要方法。本文包含兩部分：在第一部作者指出當代人文及社會學科所提出的理論，何以未能支應歷史的變化；在第二部分作者草擬了「接地理論」的方法論。

In this text I am going to argue that unless history opens itself to discussions that dominate contemporary social and human sciences, and unless protection of the specificity of historical research is undertaken, there is a real risk that history might be reduced to the status of an auxiliary science of other human and social sciences that have been far more successful in interpreting those contemporary events and phenomena which are usually ascribed to the field of history. I claim that the weak points of contemporary historical studies are methodology and theory separated from empirical research and unable to capture complex phenomena that have occurred since the advent of modernity.

My training as a historian was in methodologies of historical knowledge, the principles of historical research, and historical narrative. However, my work in historical studies has led me to believe that we need a methodology derived from empirical research of historical data and created to meet its present needs. In historical studies, there is an urgent necessity to learn *how* to generate theory. Thus, in order to link practice and theory, I propose to appropriate for historical research the so-called "grounded theory" that is developed out of data, and which uses comparative approaches and case studies as its main methods.

The text contains two parts: in part one, I indicate inadequacies of contemporary human and social science theories (theory of history included) to the changes that happen in the world and in part two, I sketch a methodology of grounded theory.

Current Revaluation of Historical Studies

In the face of global capitalism, terrorism, migrations, ecological crisis, and biotechnological progress (genetic engineering, genomics, biomedicine, psychopharmacology), which transforms the concepts of the human being, human

identity, and the relation between the human and the nonhuman, history as a specific approach to the past has to redefine itself and find new ways of legitimizing its practices. Traditionally understood as the science of men in time (Marc Bloch) or the study of human nature and what it means to be human (R.G. Collingwood),¹ present-day history needs new goals, new research problems, a revised understanding of its cultural function, and a new understanding of what history actually is. Traditional historical research is often irreducibly fractured by reality, since its theory and methodology are inadequate to the indicated above changes that happen in the world.

Gabrielle M. Spiegel in her January 3, 2009 presidential address to the American Historical Association observed that the influence of poststructuralist and postmodernist trends on historiography was decreasing. Identifying transnationality and transnationalism, diaspora, the "deteritorialized subject" and "postconventional identities" as problems of major importance to history, she declared: "the new historiography doubtless will also require a revised understanding of subjectivity as something more than the discursively constituted "subject positions" framed in poststructuralist theory, but also something other than a wholly re-centered humanist subject."²

This inadequacy of current theories to existing around us problems has been recently indicated by a well-known scholar in the field of postcolonial studies and a representative of the so-called subaltern school of historiography — Dipesh Chakrabarty. His recent article "The Climate of History. Four Thesis" (2009) manifested a spectacular and a very telling shift of his scholarly interests. Chakrabarty defines himself as "a practicing historian with a strong interest in the nature of history as a form of knowledge."³ In this article, he is reflecting on the

1 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, translated by Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 23; R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 10.

2 Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "The Task of the Historian," *American Historical Review*, 114, 1 (February, 2009), pp. 3, 13.

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry*, 35, 2 (Winter,

collapse of the old humanist distinction between Natural History and Human History. Chakrabarty claims that we might trace the beginning of the collapse of this distinction back to the Industrial Revolution but only recently, in the second half of the twentieth century, we became "geological agents" meaning humans became a force of nature having a tremendous impact on the planet on a geological scale. He proposes that historians should speak more about species (and their mass extinction), about a problem of our collective self-recognition and "we should think of humans — he claims — as a form of life and look on human history as part of the history of life ... on this planet."⁴ Certainly Chakrabarty is well aware of dangers of universals that postcolonial studies were fighting against, but he is not nevertheless afraid to call for a "negative universal history."

For my argument presented here, of special importance is the fact that he is explicit about the inadequacies of present approaches and theories in dealing with various ecological crisis. Thus, Chakrabarty confesses:

As the crisis [the current planetary crisis of climate change — ED] gathered momentum in the last few years, I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today.⁵

2009), p. 198.

4 Ibid., p. 213.

5 Ibid., p. 199. See also: p. 212 where Chakrabarty says: "The problematic of globalization allows us to read climate change only as a crisis of capitalist management. While there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital, a critique that is only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged and the Anthropocene has begun to loom on

This honest statement is just a sign that theoretically oriented scholars are becoming more and more aware that after THR postmodernist turn to fragmented reality, micronarrative (microhistory), and local histories, there is a need to reconsider "big picture questions."

Cultural and social determinism, the Euro- and anthropocentric character of knowledge also have been criticized by historians themselves, especially those specializing in environmental history. For example, Ted Steinberg and Richard C. Foltz addressed those issues in *The American Historical Review* and *The History Teacher* respectively, emphasizing the need to replace fragmentary knowledge with an integrated view of the relations between humans and nonhumans, as well as the importance of redefining the concept of agency to encompass the historical agency of nonhuman agents.⁶

These changes are doubtless under way. The so-called new material culture accommodates the rapidly developing fields of thing studies, animal studies and plant studies.⁷ The study of history increasingly concentrates not only on humans and their dominant role in the world, but also on the human being as a species, approached in the context of the deep history of life on earth⁸ and seen as one of its forms. Is it paradoxical that in the geological epoch referred to as the

the horizon of our present. The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history."

6 Ted Steinberg, "Down to Earth: Nature, Agency, and Power in History," *American Historical Review*, 107, 3 (January, 2002); Richard C. Foltz, "Does Nature Have Historical Agency? World History, Environmental History, and How Historians Can Help Save the Planet," the *History Teacher*, 37, 1 (November, 2003). See also Foltz's extensive bibliography of historical books addressing these problems.

7 See, e.g., Marjorie Spiegel's comparative study *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (New York, NY: Mirror Books, 1997); Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Paolo Palladino, *Plants, Patients and the Historian: (Re)membering in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

8 The term deep history refers to the genetic and cultural changes which over the course of millions of years led to the emergence of humankind. See Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). (Esp. "Introduction: Toward Reunion in History.")

anthropocene, characterized by the growing human impact on global climate and environmental change,⁹ the avant-garde debates in the contemporary humanities center on such topics as the critique of anthropocentrism, posthumanism, species identity, and interspecies relationships? History as human self-knowledge (Collingwood) gains new importance in these circumstances, as long as it can approach the human critically.

Indeed the future of thinking about the past will depend on whether and how scholars manage to modify their understanding of the inhumanity of the human, of how a non-man (the slave, the barbarians, the foreigner) is produced within mankind as well as of non-human agents: things, animals, and plants. Questions concerning the status of non-human agents in the past, relations between the human and the nonhuman, the organic and the inorganic, between people and things and between things themselves are of fundamental importance for reconceptualizing the study of the past. Therefore an important challenge is to rethink the non-human aspect of the past in a context other than semiotics, discourse theory or representation theory, with a special focus on the materiality, concreteness, and so-called presence of the past.¹⁰

Scholars in a variety of disciplines have recently called for research that addresses the so-called "big picture questions" (questions about the future of the earth and the human species). Historians, too, should begin to approach the past from the vantage point of the future rather than the present. Our choice of research problems and research methods, our way of constructing knowledge about the past ought to be guided by this future-oriented perspective. Thus a big question for "future friendly" human and social sciences would be: "what kind of research questions, research materials, theories and approaches we — as social

9 The concept was formulated by chemist and Nobel prize winner Paul J. Crutzen, who argues that we live in the geological epoch of anthropocene, which began in the late 18th century with the invention of the steam engine. The use of this term is justified by the fact that the human being is now not only a social agent, but also, and perhaps primarily, a biological and geological agent. Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature*, 415 (January 3, 2002), p. 23.

10 Cf. "Forum: On Presence," *History and Theory*, 45, 3 (October, 2006).

scientists and intellectuals — should promote?" Which of the cognitive categories used by us should be turned into normative categories? What categories should be established as normative? What kind of knowledge of the past we will need in a transnational, diasporic, or even posthuman world?¹¹ Individual answers to these questions depend on what problems are regarded as the most important by particular scholars. Some will give priority to global capitalism, neocolonialism, transnationalism, or migration; others, to global warming; others still, to justice, tolerance, equality, dignity, human rights and/or animal, thing or nature rights.

We — as historians — need "ontologization" or "materialization" of concepts meaning grounding them in the "material language," "sticky narrative," that would help us to propose alternative foundations for the theory of human and social sciences. I use the word foundation on purpose, since it is one of those "gothic concepts"¹² that was forbidden for many years and together with such banned terms as essence, structure, strong subject — should be rehabilitated for strategic purposes. Certainly, there is no return to structuralism after the lessons we learned from deconstruction, textualism and poststructuralism but I think, we might use a strategy of rehabilitation and get rid of the pejorative usage of these terms.¹³ Besides, I would rather treat the word "foundations" as Quentin Skinner did it in his *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought* as a metaphor while "trying to identify the most basic concepts out of which we ... construct the legitimizing theories"¹⁴ (such as power and knowledge in Foucault's theory,

11 Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

12 While referring to the writings of John Rawls and Robert Nizick, Skinner uses a metaphor of "the 'gothic' vision of liberty" that they try to revive; liberty as "natural right, of coercion as the antonym of liberty, and of the duty to maximalize individual liberty as the chief (perhaps the sole) duty of enlightened governments." Quentin Skinner, "Machiavelli on the Maintenance of Liberty," *Politics*, 18 (1983), p. 3.

13 For example, quoted before Chakrabarty is rehabilitating the Enlightenment idea of reason. "in the era of the Anthropocene, we need the Enlightenment (that is, reason) even more than in the past. There is one consideration though that qualifies this optimism about the role of reason and that has to do with the most common shape that freedom takes in human societies: politics." Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," p. 211.

14 Quentin Skinner, "On Encountering the Past. An Interview with Quentin Skinner by Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki 4.10.2001," *Finish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 6 (2002),

violence and the sacred in Girard's, tropes and figures in White's approach, trauma in LaCapra's writings or actor-network-theory in Latour's). This is all required since there is a need to change metalanguage in order to build an alternative interpretative framework for historical considerations.

Methodology of Grounded Theory

I have attempted to conduct the present argument not in the framework of the theory of history, but of what I have dubbed "the comparative theory of the human and social sciences." It can be tentatively defined as an approach that examines the theories of various disciplines, especially in the human and social sciences (such as anthropology, archaeology, sociology, art history, literary studies, political science), focusing on their study of the major problems of the contemporary world (e.g., the growth of capitalism, globalization, ecological crisis, genetic engineering, institutionalized cruelty). This definition stems from a conviction that what connects various disciplines today are research problems rather than methods or theories.

On the base of research conducted in the field of the comparative theory of the human and social sciences, I came to the conclusion that methodology and theory are the weak links in historical studies. As I noted above, in historical studies, there is an urgent necessity to learn *how* to generate theory out of research material. Such a lesson is necessary if we want to grasp the specificity of new historical phenomena and propose innovative interpretations of them. This approach is meant to contest an often used strategy when existing, currently "fashionable" theory (developed for example by Bourdieu, Foucault, Geertz, Goffman) is seen as the beginning of research and projected upon material being

analyzed. Such strategy is limited since theory indicates what and how to see analyzed phenomena, thus it usually prevents us from seeing it in a ground-breaking light.

We need to become more empirical, focus on building theory from the bottom up and avoid using a theory as a "box of tools" that uses research material and data in an instrumentalist way to justify itself. At issue here is not "a theory's extension over ... data, but the data's capacity to extend our theoretical imagination" — as Patrick Joyce quotes Martin Holbraad.¹⁵ Joyce's/Holbraad's "grounded approach" meets my suggestions as expressed above. However, I would propose to *appropriate* for historical research the idea of a "grounded theory" as developed by two sociologists: Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss in their book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967) and elaborated by Kathy Charmaz in *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2006).¹⁶ They suggest that researchers should neutralize preconception and let analytical/interpretative categories emerge from data. Certainly we cannot free ourselves from acquired knowledge while approaching research material ("the development of theory is necessarily always already theory guided" — as the authors indicated in their later works in 90s) but as the basic rule of grounded theory proclaims: "do not force preconceived categories on the data, but let the categories emerge from data."¹⁷

15 Patrick Joyce, "What is the Social in Social History?" *Past and Present*, 206, 1 (February, 2010), p. 216.

16 Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967). Cf. also: Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006).

17 It is stressed by Udo Kelle in "Different Approaches in Grounded Theory," in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, edited by Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (Los Angeles, etc.: Sage, 2007), p. 197. Certainly, this approach is not new and anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, sociologists are using bottom-up approach, comparative perspective and case study method on regular bases, however a poststructuralist moment in the theory of the human and social sciences has as its characteristic an instrumental usage of theory. Cf. a textbook that is teaching students how to use theory: Anne D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History*, London: Laurence King Pub., 2005.

This is indeed an important directive since if we want to change metalanguage which I think is needed in the contemporary human and social sciences, so the process of concept-formation, meaning to invent concepts that are in keeping with the empirical challenges and problems of our time, is absolutely crucial at present. Concepts and categories should be rooted in the material being analyzed. We should ground categories — as scholars working on grounded theory would say. In order to do so, excellent research skills, theoretical sensitivity (meaning analytic temperament and competence) and interdisciplinary erudition are required. The skill of the grounded theory is to abstract concepts by leaving the detail of the data behind, lifting the concepts above the data and integrating them into a theory. ... The result of grounded theory study is not the reporting of facts but the generation of probability statements about the relationship between concepts; a set of conceptual hypotheses developed from empirical data."¹⁸

The next step is the process of coding meaning, the process of conceptualizing the empirical substance of the analyzed phenomena, to classify analytical categories (while preserving their high empirical content) and by constant comparisons between them, finding similarities and differences among the various features of the phenomena under study. It would allow the structuring of relationships among them, push the analytical process to a higher level of abstraction, to generate hypotheses and finally create theory.

Conclusion

The aspects of the proposed comparative approach seem especially valuable: its interventional character, its critical edge, and its integrative

¹⁸ Judith A. Holton, "The Coding Process and Its Challenges," in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, p. 273.

potential. Not only does it attempt to embrace the work of various disciplines as they struggle to understand a given phenomenon, but also, showing the differences and similarities between various approaches to contemporary issues, it points to the limitations of particular disciplines and potentially draws them into dialogue. Moreover, a comparison that focuses on finding similarities makes it possible to discover universal aspects of the phenomenon in question, moving beyond the fragmentary knowledge fostered by postmodernism. Through its inherent cosmopolitanism and universalism, the comparative perspective enables researchers to pose "big picture questions" and construct integrated knowledge. Perhaps the interdisciplinary character of history, which openly acknowledges its indebtedness to other human sciences, marks a stage in the emergence of comprehensive history, which will also utilize the findings of the sciences. I leave open the question of whether and to what degree the comparative theory of the human and social sciences can help create the integrated or comprehensive humanities.

The main method of the comparative theory of the human and social sciences is the study of cases, which belong to the fabric of experience and engage the empirical aspects of historical research. The case study proceeds in the following order: first, the case is selected, described and thoroughly analyzed by means of selected research methods and interpretative strategies. On the basis of the description and analysis, the key concepts of the case are generated out of material being analyzed. The next step is a comparative study with another, similar cases. The results of the comparative study are presented in the form of a theory that introduces new concepts. I believe that a comparative approach that involves formulating new concepts can help reinvigorate the theory of history, which has reached a standstill (as have most theories of the human sciences except those drawing upon the sciences). Not only does it offer a way to bridge the gap between theory and research practice, but also promotes a "vertico-horizontal" mode of research, combining extensive knowledge necessary for comparative studies (horizontality) with the detailed focus of the case study

(verticality). The breadth of the comparative approach prevents case studies from lapsing into reductionism, while the depth of the case study helps the comparative approach avoid superficiality or overgeneralization.

I would also propose, that whenever we begin a new project, let's ask ourselves not only what we want to study and how we are going to do that, but first of all — why?

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