

The Sociological Use of Historical Data (196?/7?)

By Ernest Manheim (Kansas City, Mo.)

Transliteration und Kommentar von Reinhard Müller¹

The sociological interest in historical subjects may appear at first glance as a regression to the infancy of sociology, for the discipline achieved adult status through its very emancipation from history and the philosophy of history. Yet, the conjunction of the sociological point of view with historical topics does not appear to fade from the scene and we can expect studies of a historical focus to claim attention for some time to come. There are several reasons for the persistence of this retrospective interest. Three of these have played a role in my own use of historical materials.

The first and simplest reason sums up the experience of anyone who has been engaged in studies of change. Social processes under investigation do not necessarily run their course within the period of time available to the first hand observer. The sociologist who is determined to use only primary data whose reliability he can control imposes limitations on the choice of subjects which he can investigate. The limiting factor is the length of time allowed to the social scientist for longitudinal studies. He is rarely in a position to observe a full cycle of change whose completion exceeds a fraction of a generation – say 10 or 15 – unless he combines contemporary data which can pass his scrutiny with records of prior events whose reliability and representativeness he may only guess. One cannot study the institutionalization of a sect or the stabilization of a revolutionary regime without using indicators of antecedent conditions, data which do not owe their origin and assembly to the current research intent. What renders data historical is not their ancient vintage, not the length of time which has lapsed since their originators recorded them, but the fact that their assembly was not designed with a view to the research objective at hand and that no alternative avenue is available for the given inquiry. In this sense a record may be historical although the event it relates is recent. To exclude such sources from sociological use and to confine the inquiry to primary data is tantamount to letting the methodological preference prescribe the choice of the subject instead of adapting the method to the nature of the subject and to the data available for its study.

A second rationale for the sociological use of historical data points to the conditions under which the recollected experiences of preceding generations play a role in the patterning of contemporary institutions.

The sociologist is tempted to exclude from consideration these data which are not contemporary with the situation in which the action to be explained takes place. The functional interpretation of institutions, in particular, is often regarded as a cross sectional type of analysis for which historical data have no relevance. It is said that knowing the antecedent behavior of institutions does not advance the understanding of their current functions. The following argument is presented in support of the assumption that remembered occurrences of the past can be indispensable to a functional inventory of contemporary action situations.

The manner in which actors pursue their goals depends on their perceptions of the circumstances in which they act. These perceptions are influenced by previous experience in comparable situations in which similar pursuits succeeded or failed. The time span of previous experiences which are relevant to a current pursuit varies with the nature and goal of the pursuit. The time span of previous experiences can be short if the pursuit is of a routine type, if it is repetitive, and if it takes place under controlled and predictable conditions. Stable and repetitive conditions reveal their pattern in a relatively short span of

observation. The behavior of gases under pressure shows a pattern after a limited number of tests. The newcomer to an assembly plant quickly learns the work routine and the role he is to play. No previous experience is needed for making decisions whose outcome can be predicted with a high degree of confidence. When, however, the attainment of objectives depends on uncontrolled or unpredictable conditions the actor requires a longer span of observation in which to perceive a pattern and to define his role. He will need an extensive record of the relevant past to discover a design in the uncertainties of his action situation. The high degree of randomness in the changes of weather makes its statistical prediction dependent on a cumulative weather record over a considerable period of time. Past experiences of varying lengths have a similar bearing on the writing of insurance policies, on the planning for traffic safety, and on the prevention of diseases, accidents and floods. This is the locus at which historical perceptions become factors of contemporary behavior.

The period of observation in which the pattern of action conditions becomes apparent varies with their degrees of uncertainty. It is such contingencies which have a bearing on the social function of recollections and traditions. Why traditional modes of behavior survive or change cannot always be understood in the context of contemporary interaction, and the concepts which actors form of one another do not always originate in the situation in which they interact. The provisions which individuals and groups make to safeguard the continuity of their routine pursuits depend on what they know, or believe to know, of previous interferences. The greater the felt uncertainty of a condition is the more relevant will be the remembered past interferences to the efforts to secure and stabilize the desired condition. Politics itself is a field of contingencies and political institutions bear the imprint of remembered and anticipated contingencies. The current equilibrium of pressures and counterpressures does not completely explain the modes of allocating power. The emergency provisions which are built into most constitutions, as in most power structures, reveal both pertinent recollections and corresponding anticipations.

In short, the response to a present set of contingencies involves judgments about their past and future incidence. Without knowing of these implicit judgments and without an assessment of their accuracy the sociologist cannot offer an adequate account of the ways in which institutions evolve their patterns.

The third rationale for the sociological attention to historical subjects concerns the process of theory formation. The testing of hypotheses is the most highly formalized phase of the process in which theory evolves from an imaginative guess to a codifiable generalization. But testing hypotheses is one thing, arriving at them is another. Formalized procedures are, by their very nature, not highly productive of substantive hypotheses. Historical accounts, on the other hand, can provide a measure of condensed sociological experience and insights into the behavior of complex structures. Such insights may be readily translated into working hypotheses whose scope is not limited to the particular space and time in which they originate. Moreover, even historical data permit some checks on the validity of explanatory schemes. To be sure, the social scientist who chooses his subjects for their maximum yield and not for maximum rigor of the findings must be prepared to pay the price of theorizing on a relatively low level of probability. In place of the more exacting criteria of verification which are applicable to experimentally contrived conditions he has only available the most modest of all tests, the criterion of close fit. By this test a theoretical model proves efficient if it consistently applies to the relevant data for which it is construed. As all criteria of verification do, this test, too, can suggest correctives for error. They usually take the form of a qualifying adjunct which modifies an earlier theoretical construct and limits its range of application in much the

same manner as the theory of relativity limits Newtonian physics to phenomena of low velocity. The following case in point may serve as an illustration.

In an earlier study² I attempted to account for certain changes in the ideology of German traditionalists of the 18th century. The original coterie of traditionalists – primarily land owning noblemen and some Protestant ministers – expressed to one another their disaffection with bureaucratic encroachments on their traditional prerogatives in legitimistic terms. They held that the conduct of human affairs must follow the guide lines which are inherent in tradition and usage; departure from established ways affront the moral order and sow the seeds of revolution and anarchy. The opposition of the traditionalists remained ineffectual as long as it was confined to groups of like minded individuals. They did succeed eventually in swaying segments of public opinion, but only after they gave up their isolation and learned to address diverse elements of society with messages which had more appeal to a heterogeneous public than they legitimistic creed. It was the birth of German political romanticism in which the current liberal vocabulary merged with a conservative image of the polity. Historical change was no longer rejected and the supremacy of the state over the individual was at last acknowledged but reinterpreted in organismic terms which challenged the political concepts of the rationalists. The public response to these expressions changed the identity of their communicators. They were no longer the original coterie of like minded individuals, but a loose coalition in which elements of the middle class began to play an active role.

In my initial attempt to explain the change I sought to apply the hypothesis of the sociology of knowledge, namely that ideologies express the common experiences and cognitive perspectives of individuals who share a social situation. This hypothesis offers a retrospective account of train of thought by seeking to demonstrate the relevance of previous exposures (upbringing, acquired or ascribed positions, social aspirations or blockages) to the way in which individuals and groups conceptualize some aspect of reality. Accordingly, particular positions entail particular perspectives in which reality is experienced. The data at hand were only partly consistent with this hypothesis. It appeared for instance that members of the same strata perceived similar experiences differently and groups of persons modified their views without an apparent change in their social situation.

This is not to say that the hypothesis of 'existential knowledge' proved altogether inapplicable, but it became evident that the crucial instances which this hypothesis does not explain suggest necessary qualifications. In an attempt to find the correctives I shifted the focus of the inquiry from the expressive aspects of meanings, which the sociology of knowledge helps to elaborate, to their communicative functions. An act is expressive in so far as it reveals a state of mind. The communicative function of an utterance, on the other hand, consists of its intended effect on those to whom it is addressed. Meanings become data only in a communicated form. As such they reveal not only modes of conceptualization but also action orientations. More simply, communicated ideas tell not only how the communicator sees certain things, but they also disclose how he wishes his audience to view those things. Thus, expressed meanings are not only mirrors and reflexions of shared positions, but they are interdependent with three variables: 1. The cognitive horizon of the communicator, 2. his goal orientation, and 3. the particular audience which he addresses or believes to address. This modified construct provided a better fit for the source material than the original. It appeared for example that when the coterie of the traditionalists succeeded in the pursuit of their political aims in reaching new audiences through new channels, they not only communicated different messages but adopted correspondingly new cognitive perspectives for themselves.

The original hypothesis of existential knowledge attempts to explain socially relevant meanings in a two member relationship: the position of the communicator as the independent variable, and the concepts he forms as the dependent variable. The modified hypothesis construes the same meanings in a four member relationship in which all members are interdependent and none is independent. This construct appeared to fit the data more consistently and therefore to offer a better explanation of the mentioned ideological shift. Now, the explanation of a particular event becomes sociologically relevant if it entails a generalization which transcends the historical context from which it is derived, or, put it more correctly, if the explanation demonstrates a particular instance of a generalization. One of the generalizations which my data suggested is this: goal seeking actors who gain access to new channels of communication and to new and different audiences will tend to alter their message and ultimately re-define themselves and their goals. In this abstracted form the generalization may be adapted to an experimental situation and subjected to a more exacting test than the original data of the historical case permit.

The weakness of generalizations derived from historical data lies in the fact that their predictive power is unknown. It is only under experimentally contrived conditions that specific levels of probability can be assessed. But, the sociological use of historical data provides a favorable condition of discovery. It is a simple fact of life that questions, seeking answers, and hypotheses which stimulate inquiry are born of exposures to complexity. The wider range of variables which an uncontrived situation makes available for conceptualizing involved processes offer advantages which the laboratory setting lacks.

A final word of caution for those who have a taste for historical explorations. There may be many and varied reasons, other than those I mentioned, for cultivating historical subjects.

But sociological studies of past events do not constitute a special discipline and they are not governed by a methodology which is peculiar of them and not applicable to others. One should be cognizant of the techniques which historians have developed for the judicious use of sources, but the sociologist who attempts to explore recorded events and fits explanatory hypotheses to them travels on the same highway which bears the common traffic of all others who share his discipline.

1 Das Original befindet sich im Archiv für die Geschichte der Soziologie in Österreich, Graz, Nachlass Ernest Manheim, Signatur 31/5. Zuerst abgedruckt in: Ernő – Ernst – Ernest Manheim. Soziologe, Anthropologe, Komponist. Zum 100. Geburtstag. Katalog zur Ausstellung anlässlich des 100. Geburtstags an der Universitätsbibliothek Graz vom 3. März bis 14. April 2000. Herausgegeben von Reinhard Müller. Graz: Universitätsbibliothek Graz [2000], S. 95-98. Handout für seine Studenten an der University of Kansas in Kansas City, Mo. Anm. R.M.

2 An aspect of this study was reported in the chapter "The Communicator and His Audience" in W[erner] J[acob] Cahnman and Alvin Boskoff, Sociology and History, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1965 [recte 1964; Anm. R.M.].

Werner Jacob Cahnman (d.i. Werner Jakob Cahnmann; *München 1902, †New York 1980), amerikanischer Soziologe deutscher Herkunft; emigrierte 1939 nach Großbritannien und 1940 in die USA. Alvin Boskoff (*Brooklyn, N.Y. 1924), amerikanischer Soziologe. Anm. R.M.