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UNDERSTANDING
SOCIAL CONFLICT
The Relationship between
Sociology and History

Edited by
Liana M. Daher

MIMESIS
INTERNATIONAL

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www.mimesisinternational.com
e-mail: info@mimesisinternational.com

Book series: *Sociological Challenges*, n. 1

Isbn: 9788869771613

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P.I. C.F. 0241937030

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LIANA M. DAHER

INTRODUCTION

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIOLOGY AND HISTORY
IN UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT EVENTS

The indissoluble link between sociology and history is not new to the social sciences. In the early 20th century, Weber (1922) saw relationships between history and sociology as based on mutual and essential support and logical priority, according to which, rephrasing Alessandro Cavalli (2001), “sociology without history is blind, history without sociology is mute.”

In fact, following the intentions of its Founding Fathers, the discipline of sociology arose as a “science of connections” aiming at investigating relationships between social life phenomena and events, even those apparently far from each other. According to a strategic interdisciplinary analysis, also the “Annales” lesson confirmed the indissoluble link between history and social sciences. Braudel was a great defender of the view that history and sociology are a single unitary enterprise: «one single intellectual adventure, not two different sides of the same cloth but the very stuff of that cloth itself, the entire substance of its yarn» (Braudel 1980: 69).

Conversely, in his famous book *Sociology and History. Controversies in sociology* (1980), Burke gives a very synthetic definition of this relationship:

Sociology may be defined as the study of human society, with an emphasis on generalizations about its structure and development. History is better defined as the study of human societies in the plural, placing the emphasis on the differences between them and also the changes which have taken place in each one over time (Burke 1980: 2).

He believes in a dangerous narrowing of perspective in which historians tend to perceive the problem as something unique, and not a combination of elements with correspondences in other places and times, while sociologists tend to generalize everything through the lens of contemporary experience, not paying attention to the perspective of long-term historical processes and social changes. He perceives two different

and incompatible positions where sociologists attribute importance to the numbers, recognizing the rules of variations, and historians give priority to the words, stressing the individual and specific (Ibidem: 9-11). He looks at the possible relationships of sociology and history in a very critical way, highlighting a certain resistance to mutual cooperation, even though their mutual interrelations should be fruitful and advantageous to both.

A clear-cut but simplistic answer to the relationship between the two approaches is that: “Sociology is nomothetic, while history is idiographic”, i.e., the historian describes unique events, while the sociologist derives generalizations from the social world¹. While recognizing the above synthetic definition as quite true, the challenge of this book is to go ahead and overcome the mere separation between nomothetic and ideographic knowledge. The differences and similarities of the two disciplines will be investigated in a dialectic way in order to find synthesis and fruitful connections.

History uses generalizations to examine particular sequences of events and, like sociology, often analyzes events through a biographical and hermeneutical lens. Therefore, also regarding the method, historiography and sociology cannot be radically separated: they analyze the same subject matter sometimes from the same point of view and through ways that the two continue to borrow from each other extensively. Works like Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, and Sorokin’s *Social and Cultural Dynamics* show that the line for demarcation between history and sociology can only be blurred.

The analysis of the theoretical and methodological differences and similarities of the two disciplines calls for care and method. The scientific

1 The debate regarding the separation between history and sociology had its origin in classical thought. Even Durkheim (1888), stressing each domain difference based on the fact that historians cannot have a general approach and cannot always formulate laws, recognizes the importance of the scientific work of history as a base to sociological issues, starting from the historical hypothesis of connections and causes in past events. Marx and Weber took human history as their field of inquiry, trying to answer such grand questions as “what are the historical or evolutionary sources of modern society?” (Smelser, Warner 1976: 9). Marx rooted his theory of society in historical materialism and conflict, while Weber (1922) made use of a comparative method based on the ideal type model, on which the solidarity between sociology and history can be based, that can still be applied to the contemporary study of society. To obtain more in-depth explanations about the views of the Founding Fathers of sociology regarding the connections between sociology and history, please see chapter five of this book.

literature is very extensive in this sense². Both sociology and modern historiography had their origin in the 19th century, respectively establishing the concept of historical periods and the notion of historical types of society. The interaction between the two disciplines can be found in their subject matters which are interdependent and overlap to a considerable extent.

On the one hand, historians frequently provide the material employed by sociologists – historical sociology depends upon the data that only a historian can supply, and the comparative method often requires historical data –; on the other hand, sociological research provides historians with several kinds of information, and the subject matter of social history overlaps to a very great extent with sociology, in particular historical sociology.

To summarize: the two disciplines differ in the way of looking at social events, aiming at complementary scientific results. History is mainly concerned with past events, aiming at systematically recording the story of humanity. Past human society and social processes represent their principal objects of study, dealing with past events and studying past social, political, and economic aspects. The investigation of present and complex social phenomena is instead the main interest of sociology. It is concerned with the study of the historical development of societies, investigating various stages of life, lifestyles, traditions, habits, etc., and their organization in social institutions.

According to a widely accepted point of view, a self-respecting sociologist should deal with the present and not with the past. This can be investigated by focusing on the “here and now”, unlike the historian whose focus is the “how it was”, or in a long-term perspective, as will be demonstrated by some of the contributions in this book.

As Weber (1922a) rightly pointed out, causality lies at the core of the relationship between sociology and history:

The sociology of happening needs the historian’s sense of the complex but finally casual phasing of action. The history happening needs the sociology’s sense of the remote but cogent casual weight of structure. Both need an overt, simple and self-conscious capacity both to represent and account for significant sequence which neither as yet fully possesses (Abrams 1982: 315).

Historical and sociological causality are closely connected, both expressing themselves in terms of possibility. The probability issue could

2 Just to recall some challenging contributions to the debate, see Wolff 1959; Means 1962; Prandstraller 1969; Restivo 1970; Crespi 1974; Giddens 1979; Abrams 1982; Skocpol 1985; Cavalli 1989; Goldthorpe 1991, 1994.

be considered a mediator factor between the two disciplines, and between the *freedom* and *necessity* approaches. In fact, the historian usually refers to a number of determining factors in explaining why a specific course of action was chosen among several alternatives; the sociologist adds additional considerations to this analysis based on the model of rational social action, as developed by Weber (1922b), and the social constraints coming from human interaction. In this sense, the actor's choice will be both free and understandable, excluding the *fate* factors from the analysis (Cahnman and Boskoff 1964: 5-6, emphasis added by the author).

Causality and probability issues open the discourse on the common aim of studying social change. History *is* change, and social change theories go in the direction of identifying socio-historical factors to explain/understand specific courses of events (De Nardis 1998: 57, emphasis added by the author). History aims at rebuilding social events in evolutionary processes, while sociology arose as the science that mainly studies social change. The need has emerged to rebuild social processes in a longitudinal direction, through research methods, data, and interpretations characterized by a dynamic relationship between temporal registers: an analysis where it is possible to distinguish between past, present, and future as fundamental and inseparable parts of the temporal flows, but at the same time establishing a narrative continuity among these three temporal spaces in order to understand human action.

Time becomes a crucial and founding element of the relationship between sociology and history. Time, and the perception of it, marks the relationship between the two disciplines, and the two temporally different ways of investigating social reality, albeit in a continuity relationship.

As already highlighted by Park and Burgess:

[History] seeks to reproduce and interpret concrete events as they actually occurred in time and space. [Sociology] seeks to arrive at natural laws and generalizations in regard to human nature and society, irrespective of time and place. [History] seeks to find out what actually happened and how it all came about. [Sociology] seeks to explain, on the basis of a study of other instances, the nature of the process involved (1921: 11).

The idea of process is crucial in order to achieve successful results in sociological work. Facing historical changes, it shaped understanding through reading the experience of those changes (Abrams 1982: 3). The basic assumption is that change is the main feature of human societies. Thus, «Laws of history [...] must be laws of change» (Bock 1964: 23), concerning both historical and sociological knowledge.

We cannot deny that the cognitive interest of historians and sociologists considers reality from a different perspective that mainly concerns the different meanings given to the nature and role of conceptual and theoretical categories. This difference acquires a different meaning at a methodological level, and the difference – and integration – between quantitative and qualitative methods is played on (Cavalli 1989). A possible convergence can be found, as proposed in Chapters 1 and 2, in the biographical approach, that breaks down certain types of barriers artificially erected between the two disciplines (Macioti 1989: 249). Needless to say, making use of the comparative method, following Weber's theory, represents one of the most fruitful encounters between sociology and history.

Borrowing the *bricolage* metaphor from Simmel's theory, it is possible to highlight some connections between the method of sociology and that of history. According to Weinstein & Weinstein (1991: 164), we can see *bricolage* as a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher's understandings and interpretations of the phenomenon/event under analysis. The role of sociology and history researchers is to connect the parts to the whole, to stress the meaningful relationships in the social processes investigated. In addition, it should be highlighted that the historical use of accounts is often something more than the perspective of the individual observer (Luhmann 1986). According to Tuchman (1994: 306), the presentation of ideal types historically and sociologically situated «includes an interpretative framework that implicitly contains some notion of the 'meaning of history'».

As stated by Mills (1959: 145), «Every social science – or better, every well considered social study – requires an historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials»; in this sense, the understanding of a social event requires the use of general propositions that have to be demonstrated starting from historical analysis and comparisons (Busino 1975: 63).

Thus, our challenge concerns the quest for elements of interaction between the disciplines and, at the same time, useful compromises in the interdisciplinary study of phenomena and common fields of research. Taking into account Bourdieu's remark, according to which «The separation between sociology and history is devastating and totally devoid of epistemological justification: every sociology must be historical and every history must be sociological» (Bourdieu and Loïc 1992: 62), we should consider that this does not mean that history and sociology are the same thing (Abrams 1982: X) or that there are no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history (Giddens 1979: 230).

It means instead that history can learn from sociology, and vice versa. As we will see through the different contributions in this book, they work on a common ground of research – the human society – sometimes making use of similar approaches and similar goals, but remaining «two significantly different intellectual enterprises» (Goldthorpe 1991: 225). We should not see them as completely separate disciplines, but try to underline the compromises and differences through concrete cases of empirical research, that is the principal aim of this book.

Social conflict, designed also as social ambiguities and/or ambivalences, will be the subject terrain on which this exchange will be held. Social conflict is a common ground of research both for sociology and history, through which the book aims at providing argumentative issues to the challenge represented by the relationship between history and sociology, and shows meaningful convergences between the two disciplines in order to offer innovative spaces of discourse around the theory and methodology of research, on the one hand, and some areas of yesterday's and today's social conflicts, on the other. Social conflict is a common topic and represents a conceptual framework of issues such as: collective action, protest, social exclusion, cooperation, etc., on which this book focuses.

Looking at human sciences studies on conflict, a key question emerges: is the conflict a positive or a negative (i.e. destructive) force? We cannot avoid recalling Simmel's concept of ambivalence, both historical and sociological, but one cannot also forget how the idea of conflict as a principle of current positive and driving force goes back to the origins of philosophical thought.

As Heraclitus argues: «We must recognize that war is common, strife is justice, and all things happen according to strife and necessity» (58, b80). Going back to Simmel, regarding conflict, two parallel and distinct tendencies of human beings should be outlined: the associative one and the dissociative one, which are more easily separated in abstract analysis than in empirical facts (Turner 1994: 145). Both tendencies concern conflict: conflicting actions are interactions between individuals, and conflict can play an integrative function well (Simmel 1908, Eng. tr. 1956: 23-24).

The above perspective underlines the category of ambivalence as a conceptual pivot useful to effectively achieve an analytical interpretation of conflict. Social phenomena are intrinsically ambiguous and contradictory, and this category can read them both well through the sociological and historical lens; this is even more true in the analysis of explicit conflict events.

The combination of ambivalence and conflict has played a key role since the Hegelian dialectic turn (1812-16), followed by the socio-economic

contribution of Marx (1867-1894), and, as stressed above, in the sociological theory of Simmel (1908), where the “marriage” between ambivalence and conflict takes shape as a category within relational contexts denoted as *sociation*. After finding vital application in the *Sociological Ambivalence* (1976) of Merton, this heritage – concerning theory and scientific knowledge – seems now to have fallen out of use (Levine 1985; Calabrò 1997), at least in the sociological approaches.

The proposal to analyze the different areas in which ambivalence can be used – both as a heuristic interpretation key (*frame*) and means of connection (*bridge*) and to explain social interactions – comes from the assumption that ambivalence is one of the “reflexive hearts” of the human sciences, in particular sociology and history. The *fil rouge* is that by making use of their respective competences, it would be possible to achieve most effective and comprehensive results, even though the two disciplines share different objects of investigation.

The book aims at developing this cooperative field by dealing with two big common research sections: Methodology and Theory Issues, and Social Ambivalences and Conflicts in empirical socio-historical research. The latter is divided into three sub-sections: Ambivalences and conflict in historical process, Cosmopolitanism and Social Conflicts, and Conflict in Education.

The Methodology and Theory Issues section includes several papers addressing the debate on the relationship between sociology and history with regard to several aspects of the fieldwork of human sciences researchers. The topics dealt with are both related to the above relationship and the subjects of ambivalence and conflict, the analyzing methods, and particular perspectives related to the interconnection of the two research areas.

The decision to open the book with the methodological papers has been outlined above. Convergences and meaningful exchange will be possible in sharing a biographical approach even if with different aims. The first two chapters (Bichi, Daher) address their argumentation exactly in this direction; the first presenting the expression “biographical field” as adequate to find homogeneity in the different styles of putting in practice the method, stressing the longitudinal dimension declined at an individual and social level; the second proposing a special combination of biographical methods taking advantage of the sociology-history link in studying social movements as longitudinal processes of conflict, mixing two different temporal lenses of observation. Following this methodological beginning, the theoretical chapters propose different readings of the relationship

between sociology and history. De Nardis identifies in Labriola's works the theoretical innovation able to overcome the separation between nomothetic and ideographic sciences, and the explanatory key to the relationship between sociology and history. Iorio aims to highlight the fact that "social relationships" have been at the basis of sociological study ever since sociology was established as a science of human behavior, and uses this evidence to create a boundary which distinguishes it from philosophy, law, psychology, biology, economics, history, and politics, all of which concern the interpretation of social phenomena. The chapter by Mavica, Nicolosi and Scieri closes the first section, focusing on and analyzing the connections between sociology and history as developed by three of the Founding Fathers of sociology: Marx, Simmel, and Weber, considered among the most significant scholars regarding both the relationship between sociology and history and the subject of conflict.

The *Social Ambivalences and Conflicts in empirical socio-historical research* section welcomes several fieldwork proposals, investigating conflict in sociological and historical research, making use, and sometimes interrelating, the assumptions and methods of both approaches. The reader can find substantial evidence of the debate in this section.

In the three sub-sections of the book, the research works of sociologists and historians follow each other, creating a constellation of proposals. In the first chapter of the first sub-section – Ambivalences and conflict in historical process – Benski provides substantial evidence of the Women's Peace Movement in Israel from 1983 to 2010 through an almost lifelong study, taking advantage of the perspective of triangulation of methods and activists, producing a real exchange between the historical and sociological approaches. Farro and Maddanu attempt to identify a specific form of populism as a historical, cultural, and social phenomenon, that has been appropriated by political actors who have successfully interpreted it to lead a general agenda, while considering specific contemporary and conflicting topics that have arisen in the age of globalization. Through first-hand sources, Frasca analyzes the Carboneria riots of 1820-21 in Southern Italy as an interesting key to understand how clear and unclear conflicts made for socio-political mutation in those tumultuous and important years. On the sociological front, Severino and Cascino propose an historical-sociological understanding of Danilo Dolci's movement that took place through non-violent non-institutional tactics in Sicily (Valle del Belice) in the period between the 1950s and 1970s, highlighting the mutual relationship between biographies and historical events in the social structure. Still on the protests theme, Recca analyzes several episodes of social and

political unrest in Naples (1799) including a revolution involving large sectors of the population and the counter-revolution that followed it. The account is based on how the historical interpretations of these catastrophic struggles was experienced and recorded by important figures, men and women belonging to different social classes. The meaning of the concept of conflict changes in the last two chapters of the sub-section (Raffaele and Costa), taking the sense of ambivalence. The former examines the struggle between homeopathy and allopathy during the Enlightenment in medicine and politics, examining complaints, conflicts, and new theories in a renewed holistic view that looks at sick people *in toto*; the latter focuses on the establishment of new bishoprics in Sicily during the 18th and 19th centuries as an example of State and urban power conflicts and debates comparing Church archive documents to find new methods, perspectives, and historiographical views.

The sub-section Cosmopolitanism and Social Conflicts consists of two chapters, focusing on the longitudinal cosmopolitan perspective in social sciences. Cicchelli and Octobre propose a specific way to analyze the effect of the globalization of culture on the way young people see the world, by examining their seemingly banal consumption for clues to understand how they envision the world, and by introducing a specific approach stemming from cosmopolitanism and the sociology of culture: the aesthetico-cultural amateurship. Gamuzza focuses instead on the relevance of a *cosmopolitan solidarity* to global issues and social change, stressing that when this form of solidarity is translated into biographies and historic/personal trajectories, it implies a conflicting outcome upon the subject's identity.

The last sub-section, Conflict in Education, ends the book with three interesting chapters. Da Molin and Carbone aim to reconstruct some demographic and social aspects of the Italian family in the Modern Age, focusing on households in different economic, geographical, and social contexts, and on the relationships and conflicts within the family. Summerfield shows, through the results of practical activities used in an advanced undergraduate course titled "East Meets West: Sicily, a Case Study at the Crossroads" how history matters and interchanges with other human sciences, including sociology, in understanding specific cultures and habits, and the concepts of citizenship and global citizenship, cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and multiculturalism, and so on. Last but not least, Leonora proposes an exploratory fieldwork regarding education practices that provide an alternative to state schools in Italy, establishing two levels of issues: 1) an up-to-date description of the symbolic elements that surround parental values on the basis of homeschooling and other alternative

education practices, and 2) an original interpretation of the theoretical conceptualization of the homeschooling phenomenology. The two issues are analysed as embedded in an historical longitudinal dimension.

The overview of all the proposals of the chapters recalls all the issues regarding the relationship between sociology and history in studying conflict underlined above. All the contributions take into account the questions posed by the research project titled *Ambivalence and Conflict in Belonging and Sociability Spaces from the Modern to the Actual*³ that gave rise to this book and go beyond trying to find spaces of dialogue and mutual understanding between sociology and history.

A critical reading of this book cannot avoid focusing on the *complementarity* of sociological and historical research because both highlight two fundamental human historicity aspects. History aims at grasping and reconstructing events, while sociology aims at capturing relative social conformities (Abbagnano 1974: 115). As argued before, the arguments on the strict separation between nomothetic and ideographic are not convincing. We can only understand the present by *making it historical*, with the aim of understanding the diachronic dimension in which each social event is embedded; it is the dimension that gives sense to the event. Meanwhile, this dimension can be understood only through proper explanatory constructs and methodological apparatus, i.e., through building a nomological knowledge *whose referent is a more or less long section of diachronicity* (Leonardi 1974: 99). Indeed, the challenge of this book is to give ample exemplification of the above dimension and possible angles of analysis.

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3 The research project was supported by the University of Catania (Program FIRD 2014) and it was concluded by the Conference *Understanding Social Conflict. The Relationship between Sociology and History* held at the Department of Education in December 2016. This book represents in part the output of the research project and Conference. As Principal coordinator of the research and program coordinator of the conference, I want to say thank to all the researchers that have actively and fruitfully cooperated in the project: Silvana Raffaele, Elena Frasca, Augusto Gamuzza and Anna Maria Leonora.

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Printed by
Geca Industrie Grafiche – San Giuliano Milanese (MI)
November 2020

