



**HAL**  
open science

## Historical sociology and the renewal of the social sciences

Elizabeth Picard

► **To cite this version:**

Elizabeth Picard. Historical sociology and the renewal of the social sciences. Roger Heacock, Edouard Conte. Critical Research in the Social Sciences. A Transdisciplinary East-West Handbook, Bir Zeit University, pp.109-131, 2009. halshs-00741579

**HAL Id: halshs-00741579**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00741579>**

Submitted on 16 Oct 2012

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Historical sociology and the renewal of social sciences

Elizabeth Picard

When the social sciences resort to compound words, there is good reason to worry that the object or concept thus designated is imprecise in the mind of the speaker or will give rise to misunderstandings. We have a rather clear idea of what social history consists in: in contrast to the event-centered approach of traditional political history, which tends to concentrate on governing elites, social history is a sub-discipline that opens up the study of the past to processes and events concerning a population in all its diversity. Similarly, we know that social history is the privileged historical domain of historical sociology, that is, the field from which the latter draws its documentation and its questions. But what is historical sociology?

It is in these terms that we refer to an ambitious and prolific renewal of the social and human sciences that focuses on the historical origins and diachronic trajectories of processes and phenomena and examines the present in the light of the past. Moreover, historical sociology becomes comparative – and is thus referred to as ‘comparative historical sociology’, or CHS – when it situates its object of investigation relative to other objects, identifying points of similarity and difference in order to better understand its particular characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

Although historical sociology represented a far-reaching revolution within the social sciences, the character of this “revolution” must immediately be qualified. As we will see when we turn to consider the historical turn taken by the social sciences in the 1970s, the origins of this movement are in fact to be found in the great works of 19<sup>th</sup>-century social science. Indeed, a critical reading of these works – and of Tocqueville, Marx and Weber, in particular – reveals the extent to which they already attributed a critical role to history. We will also see that, rather than offering a (new) theory of the social sciences, historical sociology brought about a major methodological change: it drew the attention of the social sciences to the link between long-term considerations and

---

<sup>1</sup> I leave aside the comparativist dimension of CHS, which is discussed in another chapter.

particular events (including accidents and crises) as well as to the interaction between inductive and deductive approaches. These two dimensions today occupy a central place in social scientific practice. Next, we will look at how, twenty years after the historical turn, a series of challenges to historical sociology, grouped together under the generic term the ‘cultural turn’, opened up new perspectives on the use of history in the social sciences. This critical opening nevertheless posed new problems – in particular, that of the distinction between history and memory in the comprehensive analysis of contemporary social facts.

### **Diverging Perspectives: History and Social Theory**

For students and young scholars in the social sciences, taking history into consideration may today seem like it goes without saying. Yet it was not always so: while the social sciences made a tremendous leap forward in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s on the strength of foundational works published in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, they showed themselves to be particularly skeptical towards historical inquiry. Indeed, they were swayed by a passion for theory and a desire to conceptualize, which led them to posit rigorous but a-historical general explanatory laws. While asserting their disciplinary specificity, the various branches of the social sciences latched on to similar modes (a reflection of their mutual influence) for identifying and classifying reproducible models of the operation of human societies. Whether set against one another, as was often the case, or conjoined, as sometimes happened, structuralism and functionalism established themselves as legitimate conceptual “toolkits” for the social sciences. “Grand theory” thus seized upon the linguistics inherited from Ferdinand de Saussure. In sociology, the functionalist mode of inquiry and functional synchronic analysis imposed themselves, reducing the operation of social groups to that of closed systems inspired by cybernetics.<sup>2</sup> Structural anthropology sketched geometric models of social organization and did not shy away from transposing its postulates onto contemporary societies or generalizing its methods at the risk of dissolving man in a universal determinism.

---

<sup>2</sup> The emblematic work of systemism in sociology is Talcott Parsons (1960).

In studying the societies of the High Atlas in central Morocco, for example, Ernest Gellner (1969) sought to theorize an anthropology that was simultaneously inspired by the segmentarity identified by E. Evans-Pritchard among the Nuer of Sudan (1940) and the Bedouins of Cyrenaica (1949) and by the renewal cycles described by Ibn Khaldûn (2005) among the *'asabiyyat* Bedouins. The success of his structuralist approach came at a price: systematically applied to Arab societies and even to distant Muslim societies such as that of Afghanistan, it was and still is used as a universal interpretive framework for explaining a collection of codified relations between groups and individuals which are said to share the same meaning (within a family as between governments and governed). Given its attachment to the reproduction and identity of a nearly perfect model, structuralism ignored the specificities of field work and resisted taking change into account. What's more, this approach only looked for (and thus only found) an explanation for the operation it described in immediate – and therefore unchanging – causes and data.

An example of this penchant for “grand theory” can be found in contemporaneous analyses of the critical situation in Lebanon beginning at the end of the 1960s and the first years of the civil war (1975-1979). Lebanese Marxist intellectuals produced explanations of the war in terms of a crisis of capitalism and proletarian revolution: driven by poverty to quit the rural region of the Jabal Amil and Hermel and supplying a labor force that was exploited in the rapidly growing, deregulated economy of Beirut, Shiite populations were portrayed as the actors of a class struggle pitting them against large rural landowners and the entrepreneurs of a rapidly growing Lebanese industrial sector. The uprising of Shiite agricultural workers and semi-proletarians was exclusively understood as an expression of relative frustrations due to their under-development (the standard of living in south Lebanon was five times lower than in Beirut) and the community's under-representation in positions of power relative to its demographic weight (Nasr 1997). By the same token, the mobilization of Shiites by sectarian parties that granted a central place to religion and morality (Amal beginning in 1974 and Hizbullah after 1982) was interpreted as evidence of their “traditional” attachment to a sectarian culture (Ajami 1986). Here, culturalist analyses met up with Marxist analyses in their timeless perspective. They even gave rise to a semantic invention that captured the

ahistorical amalgam of Marxist and culturalist analyses: the Shiites were described as a “class-community”, thereby postulating a structural equivalence between sectarian membership and social class (Ibrahim 1984; Nasr 1978).

Yet even in the triumphal period of “grand theory”, history was not totally absent from the horizon of the social sciences. Yet it was a linear and teleological history marked by the evolutionary ideology of the theory of modernization. Far from attending to the actual and factual causes of change, it interpreted social change by using general causes and trends to explain concrete instances of change (Hamilton 1984, 90). Each society, it was believed, passed mechanically and in a linear fashion through successive steps resembling the stages of life (from childhood to maturity): from the first hunter-gatherers to the agricultural economy and industrialization; from the rural world to that of cities; and, above all, from under-development to development. The European (or “Atlantic”) world thus became the teleological goal towards which all human groups tended. Moreover, the social sciences contributed to identifying the indicators of passage from tradition to modernity: urbanization, formal education, industrialization and mass communication. Indeed, a seminal book from the 1950s sought to prove the “passing of tradition” (Lerner 1958) by means of a large survey of these indicators across several Middle Eastern countries.

Simplifying somewhat, the vision of history that the social sciences offered can be described as dichotomous: it set tradition against modernity, the internal against the external, the passive against the active and showed a tendency to draw a line between the past (the object of history) and the present (the object of social science), thereby ignoring continuity. A particularly striking illustration of this dichotomy was the ideologically overburdened representation of the Ottoman Empire in the five hundred years up to its collapse in 1918 as chronically decadent, incapable of reforming itself, economically backwards and comprised of conservative populations that, confronted with “European modernity”, succumbed both militarily and politically. Indeed, on this view of history, only an external break in the form of Western occupation and colonization could bring modernization to the Middle East by breaking the continuity between past and present. Needless to say, such a vision owes more to caricature than to critical historical examination.

In the case of Palestine, a developmentalist approach to history saw the collapse of Ottoman power in Palestine in 1918 as a radical turning point that opened a passive and submissive local society up to technological, intellectual and institutional modernity. Even historical works claiming to objectively analyze the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – Kimmerling and Migdal’s book, for example (2003) – focused on external events such as the advent of Zionism and the British occupation.

In reaction against such dichotomization, historical sociologists work to tease out continuities by studying the historically silent majority and seek to rediscover the underlying connections between Palestine’s present and its Ottoman past (Doumani 1992 / 1991). For example, while reminding us that the emergence of a market in land and the rise of a large landowning class were rooted in long-term transformations that preceded the Tapu promulgation, Bishara Doumani has emphasized the role played by regional differences in the implementation of the Ottoman land code of 1858 in determining the pattern of Zionist settlements and the borders of the 1947 partition plan (Doumani 1992, 12). The need to “write Palestine into history” is all the more pressing given the intifadas of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Understanding key issues in the history of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Palestine such as nationalism and class relations requires detailed investigation of social, economic and cultural change in Palestinian society during the Ottoman era (Doumani 1992, 6).

### **When the Social Sciences Rediscovered History**

It was historians themselves who first reacted against this drift in their discipline. They sought to overcome the nearly exclusive interest accorded to the center of power and elites together with such narrowly political events as changes of regime, military battles and institutional acts (treaties, constitutions, laws and so on). They criticized the construction of an historical account that was restricted to the events that gave it meaning. Historical periods are not made by dynasties or the rise and fall of empires but rather by “civilization” (that is, the conjunction of a variety of factors specific to each type of society and period) and the work of generations. History cannot be limited to a simple recital of human actions; it must be understood in a context of forces and

conditions. Studying the structures of human action entails looking into more than the chronological succession of recorded events.

Beginning in the late 1940s, a new approach emerged that consisted in studying events from a longer term perspective, that is to say, over several decades and even several centuries. By turning historians' attention towards the economy and the "thickness" of a given society – its practices, beliefs and dynamics – this approach sought to go beyond the surface examination supplied by political history in order to arrive at a deeper understanding. Together with the *Annales*, a French history review founded in 1929, Ferdinand Braudel's vast dissertation, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (1972), gave an impetus to this renewal and won followers for it across the world. These latter included the Egyptian-American historian Charles Issawi, author of a remarkable economic history of the Middle East in the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries (1982). Having redefined its objects of investigation and relationship to time, history emphasized change and called into question the social sciences. The latter did not fail to respond.

For all that, it must not be forgotten that the founding fathers of the social sciences had already shown that the facts and processes they observed and analyzed were formed at the confluence of heritage and encounters. Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) developed a theory of continuity by using history to understand how the French Revolution emerged from the *ancien régime* (Tocqueville 1998). He left the study of events behind in order to examine everyday life, written correspondence, documentary archives and the questions that cut across the emerging modern society of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century: individualism and the place of the state in a nascent democracy. Karl Marx (1818-1883), a prodigious historian, wrote in the first pages of the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past (Marx 2005, 6)." Max Weber (1864-1920) began his career by participating in the debate over the origin of capitalism and intermingled universal history with economics and sociology in his work. In *Economy and Society* (1978), for example, he examined the history of Roman feudalism and the Middle Ages in order to analyze various forms of domination. What's more, he reflected extensively

on the respective roles of history and the human sciences and posited that the work of the historian was not qualitatively distinct from “scientific” work because, like the sciences, history dealt with concepts and rules. In this respect, Weber prefigured the conclusion formulated by Anthony Giddens (1979, 230): “sociology and history have a ‘common project’.”

The historical turn in the human sciences affected a large range of disciplines, from new historicism in literary theory to historical linguistics (lexical change by borrowing and naturalization: mixing and cross-breeding of lexemes), ethno-history (the interest shown by Marshall Sahlins (2000) in the way different cultures understand and make history and in their conception of time) and, above all, historical geography (change in the landscapes of social activities) and historical sociology (phenomena of urbanization, urban development, migration from rural areas). What they all had in common was a desire to anchor their respective subjects in the history of specific contexts in recognition of the restricted range of historical possibilities defined by a given historical legacy. Thus the notion of *path dependency* (today’s events are *muta’alīqa bil-mâdhî*), which delimits the choices available to actors.

One of the foremost figures of CHS described this paradigmatic shift as follows:

“Broadly conceived historical analyses promise possibilities for understanding how past patterns and alternative trajectories might be relevant, or irrelevant, for present choices. Thus excellent historical sociology can actually speak more meaningfully to real-life concerns than narrowly focused empiricist studies.” (Skocpol 1984, 5).

Historical sociology prefers to work on themes in political economy and the connections between political dominance and economic power. In order to do this, it seizes upon objects studied at the macro-level, such as the correspondence between the distribution of land ownership and existing forms of political regime (Anderson 1973)<sup>3</sup>, the relationship between war, taxation and the growth of the state (Tilly 1990)<sup>4</sup> and that between the existence of a large peasantry and the advent of revolution (Skocpol 1979;

---

<sup>3</sup> Anderson uses a narrative historical method to explain differences in economic development among European countries since the Middle Ages.

<sup>4</sup> Tilly argues that different combinations of coercion and capital created diverse types of states. As the demands of war increased, the power blocks which rulers depended on gained more and more advantage over them.



Skocpol 1982).<sup>5</sup> It examines their trajectory in order to identify major trends. It gives itself three principal objectives: (1) to identify macro (“big”) processes of change that apply to more than a single series of events in order to demonstrate that particular cases are variations of a general process; (2) to distinguish recurrent or constant aspects of the social order across time and space from those that are subject to cumulative change; and (3) to draw a distinction between structurally constraining factors and deliberative-purposive actions.

Turning once again to consider the manner in which the Lebanese civil war was treated by the social sciences, we see what historical sociology contributes to deepening understanding, going beyond and often refuting what are ideologically rather than theoretically driven analyses. In order to understand the mode of identification and mobilization among Lebanese Shiites during the civil war, the sociologist Waddah Sharara (1996) carried out a genealogical study of the Shiite *umma* (not exactly synonymous with the *milla*) from 1908, the year that the Committee of Union and Progress in Istanbul carried out its coup, through the inter-war period. He argues that the marginalization of the Shiites in Bilâd al-Shâm under Ottoman rule was to determine their fate for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century – from the period of Faysal’s government in Damascus to the French Mandate, Lebanese “independence” and the creation of the Israeli state. While the *a’yan* lost the formal coherence they had enjoyed in previous centuries and the Shiite *‘ulama* struggled to formulate ideas and aspirations on behalf of the community, capitalist penetration and the commercialization of land shattered the weak social fabric of the populations in the Hermel and Jabal Amil, opening up the field for new forms of mobilization (Sharara 1997). This analysis is strengthened by the fact that it is inscribed in the genealogy of the Lebanese state – a state based on the sharing of political power and land wealth between the *zu’ama’* of various regions and various communities at the expense of the *‘amma*, who were simultaneously submitted to and in solidarity with their community leaders. Understanding the alliances and lines of conflict that emerged during the civil war – alliances and conflicts that perfectly corresponded neither to political cleavages nor to community divisions – requires knowledge of the

---

<sup>5</sup> Skocpol approaches revolutions from a structural perspective. In her view, the form of the prior regime determines whether the state will be able to resist pressing social demands.

status of the property tax, the creation of large landholdings (those of the beyks of Akkar, the Maronite monasteries, the Druze leaders and Shiite notables) and the financial dependence of landless farmers towards them. A colloquium held at the American University of Beirut in 1983 (Khalidi 1984) shed light on the dynamics of the 1858 peasant revolt in Mount Lebanon (which involved land scarcity, demographic pressure and disputes between landlords) and the rejection in the 1970s of the dominant position that the *zu'ama'* had acquired under the Ottomans and consolidated under the French thanks to capitalist relations arising from the production of cereals for the market.

### **A Precious Methodological Contribution**

It is this shift in emphasis and change of method that has made CHS precious for students and scholars. Although it has contributed to critiques of the tyranny of grand theory – and structuralism and functionalism, in particular – CHS is not a theoretical subject matter but rather a sub-discipline defined by a cluster of techniques and approaches. It introduced new methodological principles to the social sciences that have since become indispensable. The first of these involves the recognition that, since history consists in reconstructing and imposing an order on the past, it is crucial to choose relevant timeframes and divide them in ways that clarify the present. The second has been to ensure that scholars become aware of the connection between historical perspectives and theoretical frameworks.

#### *The Uses of Time*

CHS is characterized by putting facts into context – in particular, historical context – by taking the past of these facts into account. As we saw above, this is not a matter of constructing a linear history that inevitably concludes with today as its result. On the contrary, it is a matter of shedding light on the complex processes from which the present resulted – in a word, its genesis – by restoring event series, exploring alternative hypotheses and giving attention to the processes of its transformation.

The principal innovation of CHS has been to introduce a complex vision of time as something that moves at different speeds, inviting us to take account of historical temporalities that vary either objectively or subjectively: the time of human generations is different from that of agricultural production or of civilizations; each type of human and social activity has its own temporal rhythm, with violent episodes sometimes succeeding decades or centuries of slow and subtle change. To put it somewhat schematically, one can say that the CHS has taught us to consider history as the dynamic interaction of three temporalities: (1) long stretches of time corresponding to the slow, almost imperceptible rhythm of demographic and economic processes, their repetition and cycles (Braudel 1984); (2) social and cultural time, that is, the time of social groups, empires and civilizations. Change at this level allows a particular pattern of structures and functions to be identified (Touma 1972; Manna 1986; Pamuk 1987); and (3) the short-lived time (events, politics and people) of battles, revolutions and the actions of great men. This is the ideal temporality for observing social actions and transformations.

Jean-François Legrain (1999) thus based his study of a political event – the Palestinian legislative elections of January 1996 – on a minute examination of the legal framework established after the Oslo Accords, the preparations for elections (electoral lists, voting procedure, the division of districts), candidacies and candidates and, finally, the vote and its interpretation by means of a factorial correspondence analysis. In order to make sense of the result of this vote, Legrain turned to the “middle” time – that of the political history of occupied Palestine since 1967, competing political forces and the constraints of the occupation, above all since Oslo and the arrival to power of the PLO. But in many cases, this history does not supply the explanatory key for the defeat or success of a political faction or candidate. Indeed, at first glance, certain results even seem illogical.<sup>6</sup> Yet a deeper examination showed beyond any doubt that “the candidate’s geographical origin... accounts for the vote” and led Legrain to sketch “a map of the spaces of solidarity that constitute Palestine today” on the basis of election results. The example of Nablus, which revolted in 1834 and then again, a century later (1936-9),

---

<sup>6</sup> “The voters of 1996 nearly ‘disregarded’ the policy line, both their own and that of the candidate” (Legrain 1999, 105).

against the British mandate, thus illustrates the permanence and trajectory of a local heritage.

In order to find the key to the system of solidarities that governs electoral preferences, the scholar thus had to travel back over five centuries of history. He concludes:

“In spite of the very profound political, demographic and economic upheaval that has taken place since the beginning of the century, the January 1996 vote found its coherence, and this to a very high degree, in the aggregation of candidates according to their family’s place of origin and in poll stations according to geography, all of which reflected the Ottoman map of the *nâhiyya*-s of the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries. [...] Far from having fastened an administrative system onto a stubborn human reality, the Ottomans in Palestine took the contour of profound solidarities shaped since the Mamelouk period into account. By means of centralization, the Porte and the powers that succeeded it had since the 19<sup>th</sup>-century sought to break these primary solidarities. None of them succeeded in doing so.” (Legrain 1999, 103-4).

The epilogue to Legrain’s book on the 1996 elections is very brief (Legrain 1999, 409-14) but it discusses the fact that a social scientific question (in this case, that of electoral behavior and the creation of spaces of solidarity) can only be answered by combining observation of the present with that of the short term (the Israeli occupation) and above all the long-term (the formation of localisms). Researching the genealogy of contemporary social facts implies no claim concerning the “permanence of traditional society”. On the contrary, it reveals the processes by means of which networks of allegiance adapt to statist modernity and clarifies the relationship of neo-notables (politicians) to the present center of power (the Palestinian Authority) in the light of the relationship of Ottoman era notables with the Porte (Hourani 1993). In short, this approach inscribes today’s social facts in a thick layer of historical meaning.

In its attention to complexity, CHS privileges moments of uncertainty, conflict and disorder as well as contradictory currents and outcomes, the study of which is of great heuristic value. In particular, it encourages a reevaluation of ruptures and continuities by giving attention to their interaction and overlap.

The combination of a long-term perspective with attention to critical junctures (e.g., the conquest of Bilâd al-Shâm by Ibrahim Basha in 1830) thus offers historical sociology the possibility of bringing out independent variables and tracing the patterns of

processes while fully recognizing the importance of the events and accidents that constitute the specificity of each historical trajectory. It is up to the scholar to strike the right heuristic balance between taking account of the past and theoretical ambition.

### *Between Deduction and Induction*

This balance requires combining the method of deductive analysis traditionally advocated by the social sciences with the inductive method characteristic of the historical approach.

Conducting social scientific research initially entails identifying the problem under investigation in the light of concepts (e.g., freedom, interest, values), analytical categories (e.g., gender, age, professional activity) and theories (e.g., realism, Marxism, diffusionism) in order to select and organize the empirical data under investigation. The social scientist thus undertakes deductive analysis: he sets about conceiving a model from the outset of his research, an *ideal-type* with which he will compare and evaluate the empirical data. On this basis, he will deduce similarities and differences between the observed cases, measure discrepancies with the model and seek to identify the independent variables (e.g., external intervention) that are at the origin of these discrepancies as well as the dependent variables (e.g., electoral choices) that allow these discrepancies to be observed, described and analyzed. Yet, as the pioneer of this method, Max Weber, points out (1997, 88), the ideal-type is never a real observable case but rather a theoretical construct the aim of which is to help understand the operation of the social.

This is where the inductive approach proposed by historical sociology comes in. The use of history serves: (1) to investigate a theory in a variety of historical contexts in order to demonstrate that various particular cases are different modalities of a general process; (2) to interpret contrasting events that occur in the same or similar contexts; and (3) to analyze causalities at the macro level by comparing the various effects produced by a given cause across different cases (Deflem 2007). In order to avoid naturalizing the social objects under investigation – that is, in order to avoid seeing them as somehow “timeless” or “given” – one must examine how they have been historically constructed.

CHS entails setting up a system of inquiry that allows one to diachronically observe an object under various historical contingencies as well as synchronically observe it in its context dependency. Each situation (historical and contextual) in which the sociological object is observed constitutes a specific *framework of action* requiring that the initial analytical categories be adjusted and the relevant variables be identified in various contexts (Goffman 1974). As the research progresses, adjusting the analytical categories becomes particularly important since newly acquired empirical knowledge may challenge the hypotheses of the problematic adopted at the outset.

Thus, a major difference between the inductive and deductive methods is that the former does not appeal to a rigorous theory or methodology but is rather devoted to producing a coherent descriptive narrative, using a loose conceptualization to formulate analytical propositions based on empirical evidence. Its primary aim is to make sense of historical patterns, along the way drawing upon whatever theoretical resources seem useful and valid, which means being critical of overly abstract and single-factor determinist theories.

For the social scientist, it is thus not a question of opposing induction and deduction but rather of going back and forth between historical contextualization and experimental reasoning and of adopting an approach that is at once theoretically well-informed and eclectic: “Concepts function as bright threads that, when woven into the fabric of historical narrative, allow [...] general patterns [to be identified] while at the same time preserving a sense of historical particularity (Bonnell 1980, 169).”

An example drawn from both the sub-discipline of international relations and that of the shared (or connected) history used in post-colonial studies in order to compare two sociological objects and their interactions (Stoler, Cooper 1997) illustrates the approach of historical sociology as well as the understanding that it offers thanks to this combination of deductive and inductive analysis.

The subject of relations between Lebanon and Syria became a matter of urgency in the period following the Lebanese Civil War (after 1990), with tensions between the two states culminating in the crisis provoked by the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. From 1990 to 2005, the Syrian military presence in Lebanon, which had had the tacit consent of the Great Powers and Israel

since it began in 1976, became the object of international condemnation, with a growing number of Lebanese political actors also speaking out against it. The “legitimate problematic”<sup>7</sup> that would henceforth shape the understanding of Syrian-Lebanese relations was twofold, involving, on the one hand, the principle of state sovereignty over a particular territory and population and equality among states on the international scene (in keeping with what internationalists call the Westphalian system<sup>8</sup>), and, on the other, criticism of authoritarian regimes (in this case, Syria’s Baathist regime) and the promotion of democracy, which has since the fall of the Soviet Union been seen as a universal aspiration (with Lebanon serving as a model for the Arab Middle East). Seen from the perspective of a rigid (and, indeed, normative) theoretical framework, Syrian-Lebanese relations could thus be understood in terms of the military, economic and political balance of power between two statist actors in this sub-region of the Near East, with both of them enjoying support from other states in the region and on the international scene.

In taking account of middle-term history – that is, the period extending from Lebanese and Syrian independence (1943-46) and the First Palestinian War (1948-49) till the first decade of this century – the observer is led to change perspective and describe in a different manner the configuration of the environment in which these two state actors were involved. The ideal typical model in which one state is dominated by another is thus no longer relevant to the analysis. Indeed, since the creation of the state of Israel and the First Palestinian War in 1948-49, relations between Lebanon and Syria were just those of two small, recently independent states, neither of which had undergone significant development or possessed a strong military due to their common colonial heritage. Neither was in itself particularly important or crucial for the other. By introducing the historical long-term, the analysis of relations between Lebanon and Syria must thus be placed in a much larger context and explained by variables that exceed bilateral considerations. In order to understand the state of these relations today, one must turn to consider the macro-regional balance that emerged from 1940 to 1960 between “radical

---

<sup>7</sup> According to Pierre Bourdieu, the “legitimate problematic” is the “space of possibilities bequeathed by previous struggles, a space which tends to give direction to the search for solutions and, consequently, influences the present and future of production” (Bourdieu 1996, 206).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the end of the world order established by the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), see Richard Falk (2002).

republics” allied with the Soviet Union around the Egyptian pole and “conservative monarchies” allied with the United States around Saudi Arabia. Since radical nationalists believed that unification among the Arab states was a necessary condition to moving beyond under-development and liberating Palestine from Israeli occupation, ideology – and in particular the opposition between socialism and liberalism – played a key role in popular mobilizations and in the strategy of ruling elites. For those who study Syrian-Lebanese relations since 1990, the interests of identity politics at first glance seem to have delegitimized the ideologies of the period between 1940 and 1960. Despite the fact that violence was often substituted for law and the fact that Lebanese society remained under the domination of political bosses, who had set themselves up as indispensable mediators between the state and the population and imposed their authority along sectarian lines, the majority of Lebanese people in the first decade of this century felt like they were still living in a liberal framework. By contrast, Syrian society had yet to feel the effects of the economic liberalization that picked up steam from 2000 onwards and continued to suffer from the overbearing power of the state (Wedeen 1999).

Yet one must not neglect the representations inherited from the nationalist period, the memory of which has been preserved – if at times only unconsciously – by local societies. Liberal, socialist, Lebanese-nationalist and Arabist ideologies have contributed to shaping the social habits and practices that have survived and been transmitted from one generation to the next, either through the affective channel of family relations or via the intellectual channel of activism. These habits and practices, for example, drove the anti- and pro-Syrian mobilizations of 2005 in Lebanon. The Baathist government in Damascus, for its part, fomented nationalist indignation in the Syrian population and provoked a patriotic backlash against Lebanese leaders who had appealed to Western powers. In short, the posture adopted by Lebanon and Syria in the confrontation that has pitted them against one another in the first decade of this century depends on the institutional path that history has taken over the preceding decades. The trajectory of each state is particular and stretches back to its origins and forward to the present. Initial differences beget later differences. Awareness of this path dependence consequently leads the observer to revise the conceptual framework and theoretical tools of his analysis.



## When Historical Sociology Embraces Culture

As we have seen, historical sociology was promoted and developed by social scientists who were sensitive to underlying dynamics, fundamental change, economically-based explanations and the logic of the rational actor. Moreover, many of them were Marxists or Marxist-influenced in the 1970s. Two or three decades later, the cultural turn of social scientific studies gave a new impetus to historical sociology. Above all, it opened up new horizons for it, giving rise to a third generation (following that of the founding fathers and that of socio-economic macro-comparisons) – a generation more interested in the manner in which present actors saw their past than in an improbable historical *reality*. The new attention devoted to the interpretation of processes and the subjectivity of social actors (including the subjectivity of research scholars in the social sciences) meant, not just that contemporary societies should be examined in the light of macroscopic transformations in the economy and political institutions (land ownership, the tax system), but also that the social representations and cultural universe of the past – the origin of the web of meaning in which today’s social actors are suspended – must also be studied.<sup>9</sup> This because historical actors (rational actors included) react to objective situations, or rather to the subjective perceptions that have been formed by their worldviews. In order to understand the phenomena and the processes of today, research scholars in the social sciences must thus interpret them in the light of the cultural and social foundations of the situations being studied.

Consider once again the example of relations and interactions between Lebanon and Syria. On the one hand, let’s examine them from a long-term historical perspective – that is, by taking into account the sedimentation and structuring of processes that began in the Ottoman period and continued up through the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries. On the other hand, let’s take account of the experiences accumulated over the long-term by the various categories of society – not just the elites but subaltern categories as well (young people,

---

<sup>9</sup> “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be [...] an interpretive [science] in search of meaning.” (Geertz 1973, 5).

women, economically dominated categories). These accumulated experiences determine the present for these categories and even, to follow Reinhard Koselleck (2002), construct their expectations of the future (Halbwachs 1992).

For many decades, Middle Eastern societies (and thus contemporary Lebanon and Syria) lived in an open space dominated by the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. International borders were lacking while the administrative borders of provinces (*wilâya*), districts (*sanjaq*) and sub-districts (*qadhâ*) fluctuated.<sup>10</sup> Collective groups organized themselves on the basis of family membership (in an extended sense that included tribal membership) and locality. In public space, they identified themselves as members of a religious (e.g., Islam) or sectarian (e.g., Maronites, Druzes) community. Communities were organized as networks rather than on a territorial basis and were centered around a spiritual leader who was himself contractually subordinate to the Ottoman administration in Istanbul. In this respect, one notices solidarity and intense interactions among community members (particularly expressed by a high rate of endogamy) as well as similar socio-economic dynamics (professional activities and social hierarchies). For example, the Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch had spiritual as well as cultural and legal authority over all members of the largest Christian community of the Bilâd al-Shâm present from southern Anatolia to the banks of the Red Sea.

Yet other characteristics of Middle Eastern societies in the Ottoman period included the mobility of persons and goods as well as the circulation of cultural and symbolic goods and social models between the towns of the region. Among the urban elites, in particular, professional careers, educational trajectories and matrimonial exchanges wove dense networks that served to create ties between certain geographically distant cities. Thus, the rapprochement between Homs (located in present-day Syria) and Tripoli (in Lebanon), a hundred kilometers distant from one another, is explained by their similar community composition (a Sunni majority, a large Orthodox minority) and their complementarity (the first is situated in the heart of the Orontes, a rich agricultural region, the second is a large Eastern Mediterranean port). More surprising at first glance but just as important are the ties that unite Beirut to the great metropolis of Aleppo, situated 300 km to the north on the Taurus piedmont. Aleppo is not just an artisanal

---

<sup>10</sup> The cantons (*nâhiyya*) that corresponded to an ecological space were more stable.

center and leading regional commercial crossroads. It is also a center of Christian monastic life and Muslim Sufism, whose believers are spread from Aleppo to the mountains and the coast of Lebanon. These dense exchanges and the ties of solidarity to which they give rise between members of the same communities – and Maronites, in particular – attest to the depth and tenacity of the transversal historical constructions that have upset and recomposed bilateral relations between Lebanon and Syria to this day.

Let us now return to our initial examination of the effect that the end of the Syrian military presence in 2005 and the opening of bilateral diplomatic relations in 2008 had on relations between the two countries (that is to say, between the states *and* between the societies). It is now clear why the themes of international sovereignty and democratization are not relevant – or at least not sufficient – analyses for understanding the persistence of cross-border exchanges, circulations and collaborations or the overlap of spaces and identities. Often denied at the level of state power and by the political elites of both countries, their extensive overlap and interpenetration has been internalized by this complex society and constitutes a *habitus*.<sup>11</sup> Family and religious institutions and the memory of a shared past thus all contribute to our understanding of the apparent paradox of rivalry and shared inheritance in Syrian-Lebanese relations.

### **Memory, History and the Analysis of the Present**

Although it shed light on a number of areas and contributed new analyses, the critical opening of CHS gave rise to many questions. Indeed, drawing the observer's attention to questions rather than supplying him with answers is a distinctive feature of the social sciences. One of these new questions, provoked by the resurgence of the past into contemporary political culture in the MENA region, is that of the relationship between memory and history, and the role to be given them in the framework for analyzing contemporary events.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Habitus* can be defined as a system of durable and transposable “dispositions” (lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action). The individual agent develops these dispositions in response to the determining structures (class, family, education) and external conditions (“field”) he encounters (Bourdieu 1977, 17-8).

Memory refers at once to the psychological ability of individuals and groups to remember and the cultural production of an organized representation of memories. It is at once absolute, non-negotiable and constantly changing since it is adapted to the interests of the social group. Memory is a source of self-identification and a means for legitimating one's self in the present. As a consequence, it is susceptible to being exploited for political ends (Halbwachs 1992).

Anja Peleikis' study of the conflicting memories of Joun confessional communities (2006) sheds light on the importance of the origin and construction of collective memory in the formation of Lebanese political processes today. Before the civil war, this little town located between the Druze mountain of Shuf and the Sunni port of Sidon had a population that was nearly equally divided between Christians (Maronites and Greek Catholics) and Shiites. Subtle customs of conviviality such as reciprocal participation in ceremonies, celebrations and rituals had for centuries organized the "shared life" (*aysh mushtarak*) of the communities and made for mutual respect. The Israeli invasion of 1982 exploded this delicate balance since the control of Joun was then confided to the Christian militia of the Lebanese Forces, who expelled a large number of Shiites from the town. But when the Israeli army retreated from the region in spring 1985, the Druze militia of Shuf routed the Lebanese Forces. Since then, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1985 has been commemorated by the Christians of Joun as *yawm al-tajhîr* (the day of flight) because many of them had to leave the village together with the expelled militia under dramatic circumstances and threat of reprisal. The same day is celebrated as *yawm al-tahrîr* (liberation day) by the Shiites despite the fact that, until 1991, Joun lived under Druze control, with its inhabitants paying taxes to Druze leader Walid Junblatt's "Administration of the Mountain".

The rift that opened between the two communities in this period has not been repaired. Neither the November 1989 accord signed in Taef between parliamentary elites nor the reconciliation ceremonies (*sulha*) organized by the Ministry of Displaced and financial compensation have sufficed. Very few Christians returned to Joun, a village that is today 90% Shiite. They preferred to move to the majority Christian regions north of Beirut and only visit to Joun to vote (because they are registered on local electoral lists) or on the occasion of religious ceremonies (burials in native soil, in particular) –

ceremonies in which their fellow Shiite fellow citizens no longer participate. What's more, the division between the two main religious communities is fed by a conflictual transmission of the memory of the *harakât*, the inter-community quarrels that bathed the Mountain in blood between 1842 and 1860, thereby imposing a redefinition of inter-sectarian relations through violence (Makdisi 2000). A particular memory of the "events" (*hawâdith*) is entertained "intra-communally", reciprocally exacerbating the perceived otherness of both groups.

In contrast to these socially constitutive memorial productions, the Lebanese state has attempted to impose a narrative of consent and national cohesion since the adoption of the Taef Accord that brought the civil war to an end in 1989.<sup>12</sup> It implemented a strategy of oblivion, a general amnesia, on the grounds that speaking the truth represented a threat to coexistence. A very generous amnesty was granted to former warlords, who had since turned into ministers and law-makers and would have been the first to be prosecuted in the event of trial (Picard 1999). Since 1994, a commission of academics assembled by the Ministry of Education has sought in vain to write an official history of the country in which there are neither victors nor vanquished ("*lâ ghâlib wa lâ maghlûb*"). But because it is impossible to incorporate the civil war into an optimistic, forward looking master narrative, the official history tends to replace "history" with "culture" (landscapes, food, folklore) and nostalgia for idealized ancient times, imposing a selective vision of the past purged of socio-political guilts (Haugbolle 2005; Volk 2008).

CHS teaches us to give a central place to origins and processes in the study of social facts and thus to take history into account. In this approach, however, history is neither the controversial *transmission* of a past intended to keep faith with the memory of long dead ancestors nor the *persistence* of an atavistic memory of immutable laws and determinant cultural structures. Rather, it consists of the *appropriation* of a past that has been assigned meaning thanks to the historical imagination of authoritative social actors who thereby frame a dominant definition of social reality by suppressing alternatives (Prakash 1990, 406). By means of distance and objectivization, history creates a place for

---

<sup>12</sup> A comparable case is that of Algeria, where President Abdelaziz Bouteflika imposed the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation in 2006 in an attempt to bring closure to the civil war by offering an amnesty for most violence committed since 1992 (Arnould 2007).

itself distinct from myth, prejudice, the misrepresentation of collective memory and false consciousness. This is why, even as he takes account of the conflicting heritages of contemporary society as sources of social narrative and an integral part of the formation of society's *Weltanschauung* and ethos, the social scientist must nevertheless carefully study written and oral documentary sources and take the modalities and contexts of their transmission into account in order to approach historical truth. In addition to the methodological precepts of CHS noted above, three rules in particular are to be observed by the social scientist: (1) the search for objectivity is to be accompanied by reflexivity because the facts studied by the social sciences always involve prior selection and the meaning that is assigned them depends on the subjectively constructed relations between the various components of the object under investigation. (2) If one is to avoid postulating a fixed identity for social groups, attention must be given to fundamental or apparent interpretive contradictions and the transformations of memory over time. (3) The way in which representations of an object have changed over time and the actors involved in this process must be taken into consideration.

It is impossible to draw conclusions concerning a scientific approach that is still very much alive and continues to enlarge its purview, with different and sometimes rival "schools" laying claim to it. It is not, however, too early to suggest that the contribution of CHS has constituted a profound revolution in the social sciences and humanities. Past facts and their development over time are now solidly part of the way we construct knowledge about the present and narrative has been rehabilitated as a central feature of the analytical approach.

Some object to this revolution as a regression from the universal explanations once supplied by "grand theory". Does this mean that we will never be as scientifically rigorous as the disciplines of the "hard" sciences? Perhaps. CHS invites us to take a humble, humanist approach to our studies. It helps us understand phenomena and processes through the elaboration of fragile and ephemeral paradigms rather than the construction of explanations, fixed theories and reproducible schemas. It recognizes that the object of our research – man and society – is singular and exceptional, a conscious being who remembers the past and imagines the future.

## Bibliography

- Ajami, F., 1986, *The vanished Imam. Musa Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
- Anderson, P., 1973, *Lineages of the absolutist state* (London: New Left Books).
- Arnould, V., 2007, "Amnesty, peace and reconciliation in Algeria", *Conflict, Security & Development* 7 (2), pp. 227-53.
- Bonnell, V., 1980, "The use of theory, concepts and comparison in historical sociology", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22 (2), pp. 156-73.
- Bourdieu, P., 1977 [original in French 1972], *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge: University Press).
- Bourdieu, P., 1996 [original in French 1989], *The Rules of art: Genesis and structure of the literary field* (Stanford: University Press).
- Braudel, F., 1972 [original in French 1949], *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (New York: Harper & Row).
- Braudel, F., 1984 [original in French 1979], *Civilization and capitalism* (New York: Harper and Row).
- Deflem, M., 2007, *Comparative and historical sociology: Lecture notes*, available online at [www.mathieudeflem.net](http://www.mathieudeflem.net)
- Doumani, B., 1992, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into history", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 21 (2), pp. 5-28 / 1991, "Al-tarikh wa i'adat al-tarikh li-Falastin al-'uthmaniyya wal-intidabiyya", *Afaq Filastiniyya* 6, pp. 5-22.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E., 1940, *The Nuer, a description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people* (London: Clarendon Press).
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E., 1949, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Falk, R., 2002, "Revisiting Westphalia, discovering post-Westphalia", *The Journal of Ethics* 6 (4), pp. 311-52.
- Geertz, C., 1973, *The Interpretation of cultures: Selected essays* (New York: Basic Books).

- Gellner, E., 1969, *Saints of the Atlas*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson).
- Giddens, A., 1979, *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis* (London: Macmillan).
- Goffman, E., 1974, *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience* (London: Harper and Row).
- Halbwachs, M., 1992 [original in French 1925], *On collective memory* (Chicago: University Press).
- Hamilton, G.G., 1984, "Configurations in history: The historical sociology of S.N. Eisenstadt" in Th. Skocpol (ed.), *Vision and method in historical sociology* (Cambridge: University Press), pp. 85-128.
- Haugbolle, S., 2005, "Public and private memory of the Lebanese civil war", *Comparative Studies of South Asia and the Middle East* 25 (1), pp.191-203.
- Hourani, A., 1993, "Ottoman reform and the politics of notables", in Hourani, A., Ph. Khoury and M. Wilson (eds.), *The Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris), pp. 83-109.
- Ibrahim, M., 1984, *Al-Harb wa tajribat il-harakat il-wataniyya l-Lubnaniyya* (Beirut: Bayrut al-Masa).
- Ibn Khaldun, 2005 [1958], *The Muqaddimah: An introduction to history* (Princeton University Press) / 2005 [15<sup>th</sup>-century], *Kitab al-Ibar. Muqaddima* (Casablanca: Bayt al-Funun wal-'Ulum wal-Adab).
- Issawi, Ch., 1982, *An economic history of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Columbia UP).
- Khalidi, T. (ed.), 1984, *Land tenure and social transformation in the Middle East* (Beirut, AUB).
- Kimmerling, B. and J. Migdal, 2003, *Palestinians: The making of a people* (Cambridge: Harvard UP).
- Koselleck, R., 2002 [original in German 1979], *The practice of conceptual history: Timing history, spacing concepts* (Stanford: University Press).
- Legrain, J.-F., 1999, *Les Palestines du quotidien: Les élections de l'autonomie, janvier 1996* (Beirut : Cermoc).
- Lerner, D., 1958, *The passing of traditional society* (New York: The Free Press).



Makdisi, U., 2000, *The culture of sectarianism: Community, history and violence in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Manna, A., 1986, *'Alam Filastin fi awakhir al-'ahd al-'uthmani (1800-1918)* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-dirasat al-filastiniyya).

Marx, K., 2005 [original in German 1852], *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, (New York: Mondial).

Nasr, S., 1978, "The crisis of Lebanese capitalism", *MERIP* 73, pp. 4-6.

Nasr, S., 1997, "Roots of the Shi'i movement in Lebanon", in Beinun, J. and J. Stork (eds.), *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 355-369.

Pamuk, S., 1987, *The Ottoman Empire and European capitalism, 1820-1913: Trade, investment and production* (Cambridge: University Press).

Parsons, T., 1960, *Structure and process in modern society* (Glencoe: The Free Press).

Peleikis, A., 2006, "The making and unmaking of memories: The case of a multi-confessional village in Lebanon", in Makdisi, U. and P. Silverstein (eds.), *Memory and violence in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 133-50.

Picard, E., 1999, *The demobilization of the Lebanese militias* (Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Studies).

Prakash, G., 1990, "Writing post-Orientalist histories in the Third world", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, pp.383-408.

Sahlins, M., 2000, *Culture in practice: Selected essays* (New York: Zone Books).

Sharara, W., 1996, *Al-Umma al-qaliqa* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar).

Sharara, W., 1997, *Dawlat Hizb Allah* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar).

Skocpol, Th., 1979, *States and social revolutions: A comparative analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: University Press).

Skocpol, Th., 1982, "Rentier state and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian revolution", *Theory and Society* 11 (3), pp. 265-83.

Skocpol, Th. (ed.), 1984, *Vision and method in historical sociology* (Cambridge: University Press).

Stoler, A.-L. and F. Cooper, 1997, "Between metropole and colony: Rethinking a research agenda", in Stoler A.-L. and F. Cooper (eds.), *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp.1-56.

Tilly, Ch., 1990, *Coercion, capital and European states, AD 990-1990* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Tocqueville, A. de, 1998 [original in French 1856], *The old regime and the revolution* (Chicago: University Press).

Touma, T., 1972, *Paysans et institutions féodales chez les Druses et les Maronites du Liban, du 17e siècle à 1914* (Beirut : Lebanese University).

Volk, L., 2008, "When memory repeats itself: The politics of heritage in post-civil war Lebanon", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, pp. 291-314.

Weber, M., 1978 [original in German, 1906], *Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Weber, M., 1997 [original in German 1917], *The methodology of the social sciences* (New York: Free Press).

Wedeen, L., 1999, *Ambiguities of domination: Rhetoric and symbols in contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University Press).