

Dylan Ryley

**Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens and Ann Shola Orloff, "Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology". Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005**

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## Recensioni

**Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens and Ann Shola Orloff, *Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005, 612 pp.**

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*Remaking Modernity* is both a good and useful book. The high quality essays provide an effective survey of what has become a sprawling sub-field. The introduction and conclusions are major contributions providing rigorous, comprehensive and stimulating overviews of historical sociology over the last half century. But the book's most striking achievement, because it is an edited volume, is that it makes an argument: that "a third wave" of historical sociology has now emerged displacing two previous post-war waves. The authors argue that first wave historical sociology (modernization theory) was Weberian, second wave historical sociology predominantly Marxian, while third wave historical sociology is post-Marxian and post-Weberian [Adams, Clemens and Orloff 2004, 6; Clemens 2004, 494]. More specifically the editors suggest that the rise of the third wave is characterized by a substantive shift away from political economy, a broadening of discussions of agency, and skepticism toward grand narratives of historical evolution. The analysis that follows asks: "To what extent do the essays document the shift that the editors argue is occurring?"

### Substantive Foci

The editors argue that religion, ethnicity, gender, and culture have displaced the previous dominance of political economy in historical sociology. On the evidence of the collection this seems true. But the claim raises two questions: "Does it make sense to speak of the second wave as dominated by a substantive interest in political economy?" and "What is the place of the political economy in the third wave?" The second wave was concerned primarily with the connections among the emergence of capitalism, revolution, and State formation. These problems unified most of the major works from *Passages-Lineages* to *Coercion Capital and European States*. Is this usefully described as a focus on *political economy*? In retrospect, especially if we accept the view, which seems reasonable enough, that Marxism dominated the second wave in terms of its problems, it seems striking that the period produced no major analysis of the historical dynamics of capitalism itself (as opposed to works explaining its rise). Yes there were analyses of class formation, yes there was a huge outpouring of work on the question of the emergence of capitalism, yes there were analyses of the welfare State, and descriptions of the class structures of contemporary capitalism (although these tended to be surprisingly unhistorical). But no one attempted to revisit the central issue of *Capital*: the contradictory reproduction of capitalism as a system of exploitation. Indeed I think it would be fair to say that the body of *Capital* remained largely a closed book to second wavers. The major Marxist texts of reference were the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, the *Civil Wars in France*, and

the *Peasant Wars in Germany*. This observation, I think, becomes an important issue in periodization. For it might be better to say the scholars of the second wave presumed a view of political economy rather than taking it as their object of analysis. Further, it seems to me that this situation is now in flux. From this volume itself Carruthers' examination of the growing interpenetration of economic history and sociology suggests a renewal of interest in political economy, as well as Emigh's review of recent work on the transition to capitalism, both suggest a return to "first-wave" levels of engagement with economic history. Outside the confines of the volume there is evidence as well as is shown by a number of important works seeking to track the development of contemporary capitalism [Arrighi 1996; Brenner 1998; Krippner 2005]. In other words, my sense is that there is a return to political economy, after a rather long period in which States were the central object of analysis. Why would it be that the second wave was relatively uninterested in the *dynamics* of capitalism, while the third (or perhaps an emerging "fourth wave") seems to be putting this at the center of its program? This question is all the more pressing given the dominance of Marxism in the second wave, and its relative weakness in the third wave. I would suggest the following hypothesis: the *Second Wave*s found capitalism boring, because in the Seventies and Eighties it *was* boring. By the late Eighties and early Nineties capitalism ceased to be boring. One provisional answer, then, to link up with Steinmetz's article [Steinmetz 2005], is the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. If post-Fordism means anything it means the retreat of the State from certain forms of macro-economic management, and perhaps then the "return of the repressed," that is the return of capitalism as an economic system as a central determinant of modern life. If I am correct, then we should expect a major flowering of historical sociology focused on the dynamics of capitalism in its core regions in the coming years. As I have suggested there is some evidence that this already occurring.

## Actorhood/Agency

The editors suggest that "structuralist Marxism" characterized the second wave's account of group formation. This had two main results. The first was "class reductionism." The historical actors that mattered for the second wave were "classes." As the editors put it, "Certain subjects – in the double sense of both topics and actors – tended to be marginalized or excluded" [Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005, 8]. Now class reductionism in the sense of the claim that the "history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles" has been effectively put to rest. Historical sociologists are rightly suspicious of theories claiming that one kind of conflict characterizes societies in all times and places. As Lo [2005, 404-405] shows in her contribution, different structural basis of identity can compete; indeed establishing what a dominant basis of social division is surely a major stake in social struggle. In addition to class reductionism, second wave historical sociology was characterized by essentialism. On this view groups have real interests that can be imputed to their structural location. For example "women's interests" in second wave feminism were understood as identifiable by feminist vanguards in "(...) the classical Marxian-Lukácsian fashion found throughout second-wave historical soci-

ology” [Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2004, 48]. Third wave historical sociology is characterized by both a broadening of the subjects of inquiry, the types of groups analyzed, and a rethinking of the connections between social structure and group formation. But there is more continuity here than the editors imply. I refer particularly to the use of critical Marxian methodological principles, originally developed for the analysis of class, for understanding non-class group formation. To illustrate what I mean, let me take the example of Rogers Brubaker’s fascinating contribution, *Ethnicity Without Groups*. Now this argument makes strong claims to non-reductionism. Brubaker attacks “groupism” that is “the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed” [Brubaker 2005, 471] arguing that ethnicity is instead a categorical schema that may, but need not, attach to real groups of human beings. Empirically, Brubaker [2004, 485-492] argues that an ethnicity project “failed” in Romanian town of Cluj but succeeded in Targu Mures. Thus Brubaker explains how ethnicity “happened” on the basis of events that made actual a set of ethnic possibilities that inhered in the overall historical situation. Note that the general form of this kind of operation is exactly what characterized the post-Lukácsian Marxist tradition – it is telling that Brubaker approvingly cites Thompson [ibidem, 475]. While being skeptical of the “realism” of the group, the tradition also argued that the number of potentially existing groups is in some general sense constrained by the social structure. (Of course here is an important difference because for Brubaker the limit is primarily given by a structure of categories). As Lukács put the point, the *objective theory of class-consciousness is the theory of its objective possibility*. We might say that for Brubaker *the objective theory of ethnic consciousness is the theory of its objective possibility*, or more generally *the objective theory groups is the theory of their objective possibility*. From this perspective what becomes analytically significant are precisely those historical moments that turn potential groups into bases of action and experience. The idea of groups as “potential” basis of action, rather than “fully existing” strikes me as an *extremely* fruitful way of preserving a basic commitment to the idea of social structure, with an appropriately “constructivist” understanding. But of course this entire approach to group formation was not only hinted at by the Marxist tradition but lies in its main line. In short, what I’ve tried to suggest is that one of the ways that thinking about actors had advanced in historical sociology is by returning the critical tradition, and extending it innovative ways.

### **Actors as Individuals**

So far I have focused mostly on the issue of the social bases of group formation. But the editors also draw a second main contrast. Second wave sociology, they suggest, adopted implicitly or explicitly a “goal oriented” or more narrowly “utilitarian” conception of the “individual.” Third wave historical sociology, in contrast tends to try to underline how individuals have been constituted historically. On the evidence of the essays in the book third wave historical sociology is characterized by two moves. One is a radical rethinking of general accounts of agency [Biernacki 2005]. The second is an attempt to historicize the emergence of modern forms of agency [Gorski 2005]. These strike me as different, although compatible projects. Biernacki’s elegant essay suggests a radical

revision in the historical conception of “actor-hood.” We should not interpret action in terms of means oriented to some overarching goal. Rather action should be understood as problem solving in its context. As he puts it: “The felicitous interplay between a puzzle and its solution, not the free commitment to a transcendent goal, is agency’s hallmark” [Biernacki 2005, 76]. What should we make of this claim? Biernacki’s empirical material is Piero della Francesca’s attempt to solve the problem of fitting a set of figures into a restricted space while preserving Christ “(...) as a tall central figure” [*ibidem*, 83]. He argues, following Baxandall, that one can understand the picture’s “oddities” without resorting “to meanings or objectives extrinsic to the artist’s challenge of performing well on the immediate work problem” [*ibidem*, 84]. Thus Biernacki’s example of agency is an aesthetic problem. Can this empirical material constitute the basis of a set of general claims about action? In other words does life always imitate art? To what extent is the “problem solving” model of actorhood transposable to other domains, especially the political domain? Further “(...) why do general goals prevail in our commonsense experience of what we and other individuals are doing?” [*ibidem*, 90]. Using the idea of reflection Biernacki solves this problem by suggesting that individuals impute coherence after the action has occurred, and presumably or possibly transforms the structure of subsequent action as a result of this process. If we bring Gorski’s essay in at this point we see the problem even more clearly. For Gorski, following Weber, the modern subject as a rational (and presumably therefore goal oriented) actor may itself a product of ascetic Protestantism. The point I’m trying to make is that that “problem solving” actor and the goal oriented actor, are not *alternative explanations of action*. It may be better to think of them as alternative layers of agency. One type of agency is that which Biernacki describes, but it is not the only way. A second, (higher?) type of agency is achieved when goals are abstracted out from a context, and are “oriented to” for the purposes of action. Lets say that this is the protestant ethic type of agency. A third type is when the goals themselves become consciously *posited* ends of action. I think the kinds of questions that we should be asking are not so much what general theory of actorhood is correct, but under what historical conditions different forms of agency are or not possible.

## Visions of History and Society

The editors suggest that while second wave historical sociology focused on “epochal transitions” generated by contradictions within social systems, for third wavers, the “tempo of history shifts from the sharp alternation of system and contradiction-driven crisis to a more even cadence of contestation and consolidation” [Adams, Clemens and Orloff 2005, 34]. What do the substantive contributions in the volume say? Several contributions in the volume (particularly Gould’s, and in some ways Emigh’s) suggest that this is the case. But other contributions seem to pull in the opposite direction. Gorski, for example, proposes a post-positivist sociology of religion that break decisively with Comtean stages theory of history (religious, metaphysical scientific). What sociologists of religion should instead do is to search for patterns of historical change and causal mechanisms. But this, to me, smacks of false modesty. For Gorski combines this

argument with an *extraordinarily* ambitious periodizing scheme (one that would make Marx and Durkheim, although probably not Weber himself, blush). The trend, suggests Gorski, is not toward secularization, but to a post-Axial civilization. In other words the symbolic doubling that has characterized Western civilization for the last couple of thousand years, is reversing itself in a new process of re-enchantment. Gorski develops this argument through a creative reading of Weber's essay on religious rejections of the world. Instead of ascetic Protestantism paradoxically leading to secularization through a radicalization of the divide between the sacred and the secular, Weber presages the emergence of a "post-Axial" civilization characterized by the rebirth of "(...) religious pluralism, not simply in the banal sense of competing (Christian) denominations, but also in the radical sense of competing visions and levels of transcendence" [Gorski 2005, 182]. I think one would be hard pressed to identify a second wave work that proposed a transition of this scale and scope. Steinmetz's essay as well is a bold "transition" argument, proposing to map the fundamental ontological and methodological stance of sociology onto a periodization of capitalism (the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism). If these are not transitions from one epoch to another what is?

## Conclusion: The Question of Waves

What I have tried suggest is that the current period in historical sociology is difficult to characterize in terms of a transition from a second to a third wave *if this is read in unified and linear way*. Perhaps what needs to be emphasized is that this transition involves a series of returns, as much as advances. Or rather that historical sociology seems to advance by returning. Thus I have argued that there is evidence of a return to political economy *as well as* a broadening of substantive foci. There is evidence of the continuing relevance, at least at a methodological level, of Marxist theories of agency and action, precisely in those areas that focus on non-Marxist groups (like ethnic groups). Finally I've suggested, that there is as much evidence of a return to epochal thinking, as an abandonment of it. Perhaps in the end historical sociology is not unlike Machiavelli's Italy. "This province," wrote the great Florentine, "seems destined to bring dead things back to life." Indeed the rise of the second wave itself was very much characterized by a return to origins. On the evidence of this volume this particular return is likely to be highly fertile.

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Dylan Riley

University of California, Berkeley