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Comment on Jean-Michel Chapoulie/4. Utopian Historiography

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Comment on Jean-Michel Chapoulie/4

Utopian Historiography

by Alan Sica

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The first and most important response to Professor Chapoulie's argument must be to thank him for having concerned himself with the history of sociology, especially the so-called Chicago School, when so few other senior colleagues in the discipline have, especially in the U.S. His publications over the last 25 years that bear on historical matters have motivated younger scholars to pursue similar concerns – have in essence “given them permission” to do so. There is no major sociologist in the U.S. whose primary scholarly persona revolves around the history of sociology or the social sciences, especially if this subfield is distinguished from “the history of social theory,” as Chapoulie insists that it should be. Like all similarly minded scholars, he has been swimming against a stubborn current.

Consider these “data:” The ASA Employment Bulletin has never, to my knowledge, advertised for an opening that included “the history of sociology” as a required field of expertise. Of the 26 authors who wrote chapters for *Sociology in America: A History* [Calhoun 2007], none who are still working could be classified principally as historians. A few now retired were known for this kind of work, but it did not constitute their main scholarly identity. No graduate program requires a “history of sociology” course for its doctoral candidates (as does psychology). And because I was financially unable to continue editing and publishing the journal, *History of Sociology*, in the 1980s, we still lack an outlet for scholarship specifically of this kind. (Chapoulie never refers to this journal, perhaps because it is scarce in France, though it existed for eight years and offered much material that speaks to his interests; 92 U.S. academic

libraries own copies, including the University of Chicago library, where Chapoulie has done important research.) Rather sadly, teachers of social thought might smuggle into their lectures random bits of historiography, while sociologists with historical interests must publish their work in journals that usually cater to psychologists, historians proper, or scholars from other fields. In short, Chapoulie is one of a small band of dedicated researchers who carry out serious historiography in a discipline whose self-conception is famously ahistorical, even anti-historical, by its very nature. It exists in the distorted world of “tempero-centrism” or “hodiecentrism:” an historically suffocating addiction to the immediate present.

That said, I have many responses to his suggestions for the “proper way” of filling out sociology’s incomplete historical record, only a few of which I can express in this short comment. Taking his cue from Everett Hughes by way of our mutual friend, Howie Becker, Chapoulie rejects the common conflation of the discipline’s history with the development of its theories. He therefore balks at the approach personified, so he claims, by Lewis Coser in his notable theory textbook, *Masters of Sociological Thought*. Of course, Coser never aspired to be an historian of sociology, and the “potted histories” he included in his treatment of various theorists were highly readable, but derivative by design. Coser did no original archival research regarding sociology’s past so far as I know [Sica 1995], yet his textbook was very popular among theory teachers nevertheless. They liked his exposition of ideas and “context” and would not have expected him to offer a reliable historical record, since their students, imitating the discipline at large, had no interest in these matters.

Why was Coser’s book so warmly received? Because it is still possible to excite undergraduate or graduate students with the ideas of Hegel, Comte, Marx, even Spencer and Sumner if properly taught, up through Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel since *ideas* can be reshaped to fit the contemporary condition in ways that the sheer historical record cannot. For example, many articles in the popular press have recently “rediscovered” Marx’s theory of global capitalism, for obvious reasons. But who wants to teach the intricacies of Marx’s (or Comte’s or Durkheim’s) actual labors as social and political actors, their day-to-day lives of remarkable discomfort and sacrifice, as they created modern social science? To do so would require tremendous time, dedication, and archival laboring, none of which is in rich supply in today’s college classrooms. Thus, Chapoulie’s belief that the history of sociology should be constructed around “institutional and financial aspects in the production of research,” “publics to whom research” was aimed, or “argumentation styles,” i.e., the role of rhetoric, is excellent advice for the historically dedicated European scholar, but almost wholly useless in the U.S. academic scene. Unlike Europe, the U.S. has very few

research centers where sociological scholars can pursue those many topics of interest that have no place in the classroom. To present oneself as primarily an historian of sociology is therefore impossible, quite unlike researchers who identify themselves as, say, historians of science. There is very little if any sociological funding for this kind of research, so it must be done “on the side” and “out of pocket;” the archival materials are concentrated in a few institutions, but even there, are “spotty” in nature, with the vast majority of sociological work lacking any archived documentation; and “rhetoric” is not a word that has yet entered the sociological vocabulary except as a dismissive slogan. Chapoulie’s prescription for producing a hardy history of the discipline is plausible in an idealized sort of way, but in practical terms, not very “doable” at present unless one is lucky enough to win a year at the centers at Stanford or Princeton where such pursuits are encouraged.

As I said, Chapoulie has brought up many issues that one would like to pursue were there adequate space, but I will limit myself to a few. What he calls “my exteriority to this sociological tradition” [note 5] *vis à vis* the “Chicago School,” but also to American sociology at large, has enlarged his sense of how a proper history should be composed. He understands that a “conventional” history written from within the field fails to exploit the full range of concerns that an “exteriorly” oriented record might include. He meanwhile hypothesizes that “the conserved archive documentation is probably richer for the Twentieth century than it is for the Nineteenth” [note 13]. One wishes that our archives were indeed “rich,” but they are not. Aside from the collections at Harvard and Chicago – and even these are in no way complete, since, e.g., Sorokin’s papers are not at Harvard, but 2300 miles away, at the University of Saskatchewan! – the sociological record is very thin when compared to those of business organizations, labor unions, churches, universities, and other major institutions. The recently established American Sociological Archive at Pennsylvania State University is growing constantly, however, and will eventually become the premier site for research of this type. (Chapoulie’s reference to the Luther Bernard papers is apt).

That said, some of Chapoulie’s suggestions, as I suggested, remain unrealistic. He hopes that not only the work of famous sociologists will be studied, but also “those which remain unfinished or unpublished must also be added to the list subject to investigation, as should the authors who have had wholly or somewhat obscure careers.” Where these materials might be found is anyone’s guess. Thirty years ago I accidentally found in a janitor’s closet the intellectual “remains” (including diaries and letters) belonging to Seba Eldridge, a nationally known sociologist at the University of Kansas during the 1920s and 1930s, and wrote about him [Sica 1981], but this sort of work relies on luck, and the results are seldom publishable. I also find that Chapoulie’s use of the word “concrete” (e.g., “concrete research practices,”

“concrete cases”) is reminiscent of Althusser and his followers in the 1970s. They highlighted the “*concrete* relations of production” against the “*abstract* ideological apparatus of the state.” When one considers what “concreteness” usually means in social research practices, it boils down to some form of social interaction. The word itself heralds solidity, and Chapoulie believes that too much “presentist” attention to the history of ideas leaves out the “actual” practices of sociology “as a going concern” (to quote Everett Hughes). I could not agree more in principle, yet moving from principled argument to actual historiographical practice is not easy, nor in many cases even possible.

He refers to Lucien Febvre’s masterpiece on Rabelais [Febvre 1982], as well as to a 1933 encyclopedia article by Febvre and Henri Berr, as “an unsurpassed model” and inspiration for a “correct” and full-bodied historical method. (His bibliography also includes the greatest modern historiographical theorist, Arnaldo Momigliano, but the text contains no reference to him). Such an implied lineage for Chapoulie’s favored methodology is puzzling since Febvre’s Rabelais study, wonderful as it is, has nothing to do with “concrete” practices, but instead is almost fantastically text-centered, and hermeneutically inspired. Also, Febvre had at his disposal entire libraries of archival materials, and historians of sociology simply do not. In the revealing and informative footnote 31, Chapoulie summarizes the recent history of French sociology, and one can easily see why his proposed method for pursuing American sociology’s history might well have been modeled on the French experience. There are severe limits, though, to this kind of cross-pollination when it comes to historical work, as interesting as they may be to consider tangentially.

Finally, I despair when reading Chapoulie’s prescription for adequate historical labors in the future: “To understand the activities of a discipline’s members, it is necessary to acquire a sort of ethnographical knowledge of the behavior in this environment, of the action and career logics, of the norms in use (...) even for aspects as simple as the deference between successive generations. Here the main documentary resources are provided by personal archives and correspondence and, secondarily, by the accounts of people concerned.” As all archivists now know, with the advent of email and electronic document storage, future historians are going to have a very hard time finding such materials to analyze, or being able to read them as technological “advances” occur ever more quickly. (I have asked Howie Becker for his “papers” so that they could be deposited in the ASA Archive, and he reports that he has none, due to his embrace of electronic technology.) I myself have dozens of “floppy disks” in my own archive which are no longer readable on conventional computers, and this has occurred in the space of five years. Imagine what a century of technological change will do to the efforts of historians wish-

ing to follow Chapoulie's well-meant advice. It will be by then far easier to study Mead's or Durkheim's or Everett Hughes' career than it will be to study Howie Becker's.

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Comment on Jean-Michel Chapoulie/4

Utopian Historiography

Abstract: Critical against conventional disciplinary history of social science, this essay presents an analytical framework stemming from historical research of the author on Chicago sociology and french sociology after 1945. The proposed point of departure for research in the history of social sciences is similar to the basic perspective of history (as proposed by Lucien Febvre) or sociology of work in Everett Hughes' style: social sciences are to be considered as social practices whose primary ends are the production of texts, with historical and thus changing properties. Investigations must look at every categories concerned directly or indirectly (or even in abstentia) with the production of social sciences: researcher, concurrent researcher of other specialties or disciplines, scholarly and learned institutions, those who finance research, general audiences, etc.). Heterogeneous elements must be taken into account: the documentary sources, the way of processing documentation, the rhetoric, the categories of analyses and questioning, the social contexts in which the research is carried out, the biographical experience of producers, the contexts of publication and reception. As an illustration of the possible extensions of this approach, a rapid presentation is given of the use made in research on the Chicago tradition of certain distinctions to analyze the diffusion of works and the relations between generations of researchers.

Keywords: history of sociology, historical documents, archives, Lewis Coser.

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