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Of Time, Space, and the History of Sociology: Methodological Rules in Archives and Archival Research

Introduction

The “archival turn” that characterizes much new and recent work in the disciplinary history of sociology is institutionally situated and replete with professional obligations and scholarly expectations, some less visible than others. Unlike our colleagues in academic departments of history, we are relative newcomers to archives and their riches. Pandora-like, enough sociologists have now opened the archival door to make this a propitious moment to reflect methodologically on what we are doing when we ask archival questions and report archival discoveries. This essay invites our corporate consideration of three vital features of archival research into the history of sociology: (1) the status of our purchase on empirical reality; (2) the tension between exclusivity and inclusiveness in the disciplinary patterns we document; and (3) the moral imperative to be reflexive about — and responsible for — the future consequences of research into our past disciplinary activities.

Our collective experience in the archives is now sufficient to initiate conversations — seriously and at length — on the prescriptive aspects of archival research. Such issues as I have in mind reach beyond the specifically mechanical standards that mark the work of competent historical scholars *per se*. As sociologists, we bring our unique disciplinary perspectives and social scientific expectations to the archival reading room. Our new archival turn is an exciting project brimming with intellectual promise, scholarly challenge, and novel opportunities to explore previously untapped worlds of empirical data. To have enduring value, however, our archival research must meet not only rigorous mechanical standards but also reach for the highest levels of professional responsibility.

Archives and archival research procedures provide sociologists with data and techniques with which to study, reconstruct, and reflect on past social interactions and organizational patterns that are no longer observable via direct observation or recoverable through interviews with former participants. Unpublished letters, telegrams, diaries, memoranda, transcripts, legal documents, budgets, minutes of meetings, memoirs and other manuscripts, together with newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, old class notes, souvenirs, invitations, photographs, mailing lists, sound recordings, and myriad other types of items are the raw data from which, together with published materials, archivally astute qualitative sociologists reassemble and discern the social structures, processes, and perspectives of former times. The purely mechanical aspects of archival research typically involve following a host of institutionally-prescribed rules for requesting, reading, photocopying, and publishing archival data (Hill 1993). The canons for organizing, weighing, and interpreting archival discoveries are, however, not so well codified — and are much more open to idiosyncratic practice. This essay specifically examines three of the latter complex and often problematic practices with a view to critically improving the results of archivally-based qualitative research conducted by sociologists.

The mechanical aspects of archival research are widely recognized. The day-to-day routine of research in thousands of archival repositories in the United States (National Historical Publications and Records Commission 1988) and in many other nations is guided by well-established norms designed primarily to preserve unique, often fragile, and sometimes extraordinarily valuable materials. Researchers who ignore those rules do so literally at their peril. Abusers should expect, at the least, immediate expulsion and denial of future access. The resulting quiet calm that characterizes the reading rooms in most repositories conceals, however, a surprisingly wide range of research agendas, disciplinary foci, and intellectual expertise. Academic historians — currently the most numerous users of archival repositories — frequently sit cheek-by-jowl with amateur genealogists, lawyers, documentary film producers, literary biographers, and local history buffs as well as scholars from any number of recognized academic disciplines, including English literature, modern languages, political science, anthropology, geography, sociology and so on. The peculiar passions, frustrations, and biases that separate these disparate researchers are not obvious to the uninitiated. For the purposes of this essay, suffice it to say that historians, on the one hand, and qualitative sociologists, on the other, are not doing the same thing when they utilize archival resources and repositories — the seeming uniformity of reading room appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.

The sociological explication of social movements, cultural change, organizational structure, disciplinary history, and sociobiography — indeed,

any social pattern or process extant in past eras — is approachable by qualitative sociologists who turn to archival repositories for data. Compared to historians and biographers (who excel in drawing minutely-documented portraits of specific events and breathing life into the exploits and accomplishments of significant individuals), sociologists approach archival data with very different sensitivities, theories, and systems of relevance (Schutz 1970). For sociologists, archival repositories are warehouses overflowing with trace evidence accruing and sedimenting in practically endless rows of acid-free Hollinger boxes. These materials can, of course, be approached quantitatively as well as qualitatively, and substantive quantitative analyses has been done, for example, by demographers using cemetery records and archived census returns. I focus here, however, on the qualitative use of archival materials — the applications I know best involve using archival data to reconstruct organizational patterns and intellectual networks during the formative period of sociology as a disciplinary enterprise in the United States.

The practical and epistemological ramifications of archival inquiry into the founding era of American sociology are no small matter, at least for sociologists, and are sufficiently important not to be left in the hands of historians alone. Professional historians, by and large, have little patience or appreciation for sociological theory or its modes of explanation and understanding. Nor do historians appreciate the impact that disciplinary myth, uncorroborated oral tradition, and prestige mongering have had on theoretical, empirical, and methodological discourses within sociology as a field. The actual origins of American sociology bear little resemblance to the historical synopses presented in most introductory texts and theory books in sociology today. This is not surprising given the conforming and distorting function of textbooks that Thomas Kuhn (1970) documented among the paradigmatic sciences. The damage for sociology is done when new generations of students (and not a few novice instructors) unwittingly consume, believe, and internalize false understandings of their chosen professional field (for discussion of this process in the cognate field of geography, see Hill 1981). This is why it is so very important for sociologists (rather than historians) to excavate and document our own disciplinary histories, to grasp the political realities involved in writing the sociology of sociology (Reynolds and Reynolds 1970), and to clarify the alternate futures (Giddens 1987) that become available to us when we have the genuine option of grounding our vision of sociology in the actual accomplishments and dreams of the discipline's pioneering scholars and thinkers.

The empirical, epistemological, and prescriptive import of disciplinary history in sociology looms huge and heavy, and thus suddenly the potential contribution of archival discovery and interpretation to sociology *as a whole* — including the relative statuses of quantitative and qualitative

research, and of action-oriented vs. politically abstracted research — becomes enormously consequential. Recovery of professional models long forgotten and new life for alternative visions long suppressed are actual outcomes of the new archival turn in American sociology. Along these lines, Joe R. Feagin (2000), President of the American Sociological Association, recently asserted: “The first full professor of Sociology at the University of Nebraska, E. A. Ross, once said that we cannot afford a great deal of abstract sociology; we need to develop a critical sociology that is related to the problems of the future. I think Ross was right. In American sociology we need to come back to our roots and develop much more critical and activist sociology that pays close attention, both in terms of its research and policy suggestions as well as its action and reform impulses, to these problems”.

The new history challenges old myths, rehabilitates long lost sociologists, and celebrates the personal courage, creative insight, and compassionate intelligence demonstrated by so many of our discipline’s early leaders (see, for example, Deegan 1981, 1988a, b, 1992, 1995, 1996a, b, 1998a, forthcoming; Deegan and Podeschi forthcoming; Deegan and Rynbrandt 2000; Gilman 1997, forthcoming; Hill 1988, 1993, 1999; Hill and Hoecker–Drysdale forthcoming; Hoecker–Drysdale 1992; Keen 1999; Keith 1988; Lengermann and Niebrugge–Brantley 1998; Martineau 1989; McDonald 1994, 1998; Mead 1999, forthcoming; Rynbrandt 1999; Warner 1989; and Williams forthcoming).

Archival research can radically and systematically challenge sociological sacred cows, create new heroes and heroines, open alternative futures, and install new nominees in our disciplinary canon. Archival research, however, involves much more than simply getting the facts right or setting the record straight; it is more than a matter of telling an engaging or convincing narrative. Beyond the mechanical rules to be observed in archival reading rooms, archival research in disciplinary history requires: (1) a healthy respect for empirical reality, (2) sociological sensitivity to pattern and process, and (3) the capacity to learn reflexively from our individual and collective mistakes. The remainder of this essay addresses each of these general methodological prescriptions in turn.

Of Space, Time, and Respect for Empirical Reality

Sociology is an empirical discipline and — postmodern sensibilities notwithstanding — it should be axiomatic for sociologists that historical reality *per se* is unproblematic. That is to say, what happened did *happen*, what was said *was said* — reality cannot be altered by wishfully

imagining or hoping that things might have been otherwise. Knowing, understanding, and interpreting past reality, whatever it was, is obviously quite another matter. Nonetheless, we cannot divorce our interpretations from historical reality, and we are obliged to estimate the extent to which our interpretations rest upon the bedrock of empirical fact. It is a fundamental premise that archival documents provide researchers with intersubjectively verifiable data that intersect — in varying degrees of specificity, accuracy, and relevance — with historical reality (Hill 2000).

The groundwork for productive archival research begins often with the compilation of long lists of names, places, and events — lists whose accuracy and completeness can frequently be corroborated, in whole or in part, using trace evidence found in archival repositories. A list, Anthony Giddens (1985: 44) observed, is a significant social invention: it “is a formula that tallies objects or persons and can order them relative to one another”. For disciplinary and departmental histories, requisite preliminaries include making lists of students, graduates, faculty, religious affiliations, courses taught, books and articles published, dissertations and theses, American Sociological Society members, committees, conferences attended, papers presented, elected office holders, journal referees, editors, and so forth. Lists based solely on tradition, heresy, or faulty memories are prone to errors of omission and commission and must be cross-checked and double-checked whenever possible. The questions raised here are not matters of “political correctness”, but of empirical accuracy. It is not, for example, a matter of “perspective” or “point of view” whether Jane Addams, the Nobel Laureate, was or was not a member of the American Sociological Society. In fact, she was (Deegan 1988) — and I am comfortable in asserting, as a colleague in the company of other empiricists, that we can accept not only the fact of Addams’ membership, but also whole classes of similar facts, when corroborated, as empirical certainties.

Empirical certainty, intersubjective verifiability, triangulated data, and classificatory precision can be surprisingly frequent events in archivally-based disciplinary study. The bureaucratic, temporal, and spatial locations we all occupy at any given moment are potentially recorded, often redundantly, in the records and documents that find their way to archival repositories. Obviously, lists do not tell us everything; the roster of an American Sociological Society committee does not inform us who attended meetings or who contributed substantively to the work of the committee — but the list does reveal the ideal constitution of the committee and provides important clues concerning whose letters and diaries to examine if we want to answer questions beyond the purely technical matter of membership. It must be our charge, as empiricists at work in the archives, to intersubjectively nail down as much historical reality in real time and real space as we can. To do less shortchanges our disciplinary understanding of ourselves; and to

overreach our data, for example: to imply committee *participation* when only committee *membership* can in fact be documented and corroborated, is equally regrettable. Of course, archival research and disciplinary history involves much more than establishing mere temporal chronologies and spatial locations, but such work — when carefully completed — provides solid empirical foundations on which to build. As sociologists, we are enjoined to move cautiously, empirically, and intersubjectively.

Documenting and Confronting Patterns and Processes

One of our intriguing and important projects, as disciplinary historians, is to document, discern, and frame (Goffman 1974) the structural patterns, social processes, and ritual tapestries that characterize the earlier temporal horizons of our discipline (see, for example, Deegan 1981, 1988a, b, 1991, 1995, 1996a, b, 2000). This project is not easily accomplished, however. Patterns, processes, and their interwoven tapestries are often hidden, neglected, or passed over in silence. We cannot reasonably expect the core codes (sex, class, bureaucracy, and time) which, together with myriad multiple minority statuses (Deegan 1985), structure American society and permeate the intimate reaches of our day-to-day lives (Deegan and Hill 1987; Deegan 1989, 1998b) to leave professional sociology, as an organized social project, unscathed and unaffected. When documenting the disciplinary organization, behavior, and work of American sociologists, we must be ever mindful that sociology, past and present, is neither socially exceptional nor magically exempt from the same critical and searching lens that we so often apply to instances of racism, sexism, classism, and other varieties of institutionalized oppression and interpersonal discrimination.

One might presume that empirically-grounded, archival studies of past patterns in American sociology would be exempt from the discriminatory opprobrium of one's sociological colleagues today. After all, are we not all empiricists, subscribers to the rules and ethics of scientific and scholarly discovery? Facts are facts, are they not? And, further, how can all those "dead white guys", about whom disciplinary historians so often write, make any trouble for us today? Herein lies a key methodological dictum that students of past sociological eras must confront: our writing about the past is situated in the present and has implications for the future. "What's past is past;" "Don't stir up old scandals", "Who cares anymore?" These and dozens of similar deprecatory quips are the interpersonal salvos leveled at disciplinary archival researchers by sociologists who have vested interests in maintaining the *status quo*.

The results of this situation are clear to anyone who browses the shelves of the sociology sections in our university and college libraries. Most sociologists who write about our corporate past not only stick to “safe” subjects (e.g., Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, and so on), but also write about them in accepted, non-threatening ways — even though this frequently involves selectively ignoring inconvenient facts in the empirical record. Patterns of sexism, class privilege, racism, and religious bigotry are rife in American sociology. To study these patterns fully, we must open the archival files of women, African-Americans, and many others, including practitioners outside the academy, who have been too long excluded from our corporate story. Powerful institutional processes embedded in bureaucratic organization, hierarchical position, and non-democratic decision-making authority have shaped, and continue to shape, the “received” or standard account of sociology’s history. It is a difficult and sometimes professionally costly methodological prescription to follow, but the archival researcher who documents discriminatory patterns and powerful institutional processes in sociology’s early years must also be prepared to confront them in the present.

Reflexivity and Responsibility

It is an easier professional path to leave the history of sociology to the historians (who do not understand it) or to sociological sycophants (who write to please the gatekeepers of the *status quo* rather than to inform), but doing so injures sociology’s reflexive mandate and impairs our professional morality. Sociology provides feedback to society at large, and our scientific mandate is to contribute pictures and reports that are comprehensive, accurate, and robust. Dare we trust the products of a discipline that cannot unblinkingly look itself in the eye? The general failure of American sociology to carefully examine and explicate its past casts a long shadow on its pretensions to professionalism in the present.

Harriet Martineau, the English sociologist who, in 1838, wrote the first comprehensive treatise on methods, *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, noted that social observers ought to be persons of high moral standing: “An observer, to be perfectly accurate, should be himself perfect. Every prejudice, every moral perversion, dims or distorts whatever the eye looks upon... We cannot suddenly make ourselves a great deal better than we have been..., but... we may put a check upon our spirit of prejudice, and carry with us restoratives of temper and spirits which may be of essential service in our task” (Martineau 1989: 51–52).

That is to say, we cannot expect plagiarists, racists, sexual harassers, or violators of other professional norms — not to mention any number of additional moral shortcomings of a more personal nature, including pride, avarice, lechery and lying — to write sympathetically or believably about the experiences, challenges, and accomplishments of our sociological founders, their colleagues and students. Sociologists and other social scientists have an obligation to evaluate their personal and collective values (Hill 1984, 1996; Nebraska Sociological Feminist Collective 1988). Moral perfection is not an easy or unproblematic methodological standard, but we can reflect on our values and work toward developing a personally workable sense of moral equilibrium.

The process of accepting personal responsibility for our lives and the moral stature of our profession underlies the work of disciplinary historians in the archives. Professionally, we have an obligation to help sociology reflexively examine its past. We also have a moral obligation to respect the highest ethical standards of the society in which we labor, to narrow the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of equality, tolerance, and fair play. The disciplinary record is populated by exciting, insightful, creative, sometimes colorful, often courageous sociologists — and many of them did their utmost to make our society a better place in which to live and grow. In discovering, documenting, and telling their stories, can we do less?

Conclusion

The hushed, dignified composure of qualitative scholars at work in archival reading rooms is deeply cut by major and consequential methodological concerns beyond those of a merely mechanical nature. At issue are the discipline's reflexive understandings of itself and the ability of sociologists to look critically at their own behavior. The task of excavating and documenting our corporate history remains always an open project, subject perpetually to new findings, necessary revisions, and new questions. The reports we compile must always be working hypotheses (Mead 1899) presented for the reflexive edification of our students and our sociological colleagues. To produce the most useful reports, archival researchers face three significant methodological prescriptions: (a) ironclad respect for empirical reality, (b) recognition that writing about the past is situated in the present and has implications for the future, and (c) undertaking the unending personal quest for an acceptable moral ideal.

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