

Filippo Barbera, Marco Santoro

An Introduction

(doi: 10.2383/25955)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, novembre-dicembre 2007

Ente di afferenza:

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An Introduction

by Filippo Barbera *and* Marco Santoro

doi: 10.2383/25955

Putting Narrative into (Historical) Sociology

Since the Nineteenth century, since the founding fathers, the relationships between sociology and history have been strong, but never easy.¹ In order to be accepted as a discipline, sociology had to define itself as autonomous from other more consolidated disciplines dealing with social life. History was central among them, and sociologists worked hard in order to show that it was possible to find an analytical level proper to an inquiry into more permanent, structural features of social life, even if its typical objects and research materials – from systems of work organization to religious ethics, to forms of suicide – were historically bounded and temporally situated manifestations of human life.

This search for general patterns of social development, held to be valid for every historical society teleologically oriented toward progress and civility, reached its apex with the modernization theory of the fifties. As a theory of historical change, modernization theory shows all the faults of a perspective focused on the grasp of a unique set of factors and a unitary logic of development [see Boudon 1983].

Even the renaissance of historical sociology in the sixties and seventies – with people like Reinhard Bendix, Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, Immanuel Wallerstein

¹ This text is a joint product, and presupposes a long-standing dialogue between the two authors, but above all a reciprocal respect for their different positions with regard to the merits of rational action theory, the plausibility of individualistic approaches, and the role of culture and meanings in social analysis.

and Theda Skocpol² – has been characterized by an equally strong bias in favor of structure and macro-inquiry, and accompanied by a general criticism both toward general theories (functionalism and modernization theory above all) and toward more narrative approaches held to be the province of history as a discipline. Looking for middle range empirical generalization about the effects of macrostructural factors on the birth and transformations of macrohistorical phenomena – like the state, capitalism or structures of inequalities – this kind of historical comparative sociology has normally separated the micro level (individuals and actions) as well as the role of contingencies and particularities in social life – a trend accepted in those same years by avantgarde historiography itself with the so called structuralist revolution associated with the success and spread of the Annales school.

These convergences notwithstanding, at the beginnings of the nineties an American scholar could still define the relationship between sociology and history in terms of a “lost synthesis” [Abbott 1991]. Differences in professional organization, institutional heritage, socialization practices, and so on contributed heavily to this intellectual separation of history and sociology, which an influential social scientist like John H. Goldthorpe [2000] has famously accepted and amplified claiming that history will always remain only a “necessary residual category” for sociology. In this way he was reproducing a view as old as sociology itself, and particularly diffused among sociologists committed to a positivistic understanding of the discipline, for which generalization – and therefore scientific knowledge – could be gained only by abstracting theories, data and inferences from historical (that is temporal as well as spatial) contexts [Griffin 1992].

Heralded by one of the best (and still useful) reconstructions of research programs in the field of historical sociology – which is also one of the strongest pleas ever written for the integration of history and sociology [Abrams 1982] – during the Eighties, and still more the nineties, a handful of sociologists have begun to talk and write about the possibilities and the promises of a novel manner of practicing historical sociology. That is, a specifically *narrative* mode, able to merge the claims to generalization and theory-building typical of comparative historical sociology with the sensitivity for temporality, events and contingencies, also encompassing individualities, traditionally at the center of historiography – including social history, where already at the end of the Seventies an authoritative scholar like Lawrence Stone could write about a “return of the event” – but also of social ethnography.

² See Skocpol [1984] for a now classic overview.

There are at least two critical points advanced by the supporters of this narrative sociology against the “old” historical sociology committed to structure and macrocomparison

The first is that temporality of social life has to be taken seriously, recognizing the crucial role of *events*, with their durability and their internal configuration, as well as of conjunctures and sequences in which events happen [see Griffin 1992; Abbott 2001]. William Sewell Jr. [1996; 2005] has explicitly argued for the urgency of building – from the dust of old historical sociology still committed to weak conceptions of temporality as mere context – a truly *eventful sociology*, a label which well captures the program of many scholars working in this direction, even if *narrative sociology* is still the most accepted and common definition.

The second critical point is the epistemological necessity to bring actors and above all *agency* back into sociological research on historical transformations [see Abrams 1982; Kiser 1996; Sewell 2005], focusing on micro-level processes and mechanisms which link macrohistorical causes with macrohistorical effects. As clearly put by Franzosi [2004, 25]: “Actors instead of variables, diachronic time instead of synchronic time, events and event narratives instead of structures, narrative causality, as the position of a specific action in a sequence of actions, instead of statistical causality, as crudely interpreted as a set of independent variables “causing” a dependent variable within multivariate statistical models”.

However, there is a third point, more or less explicit, but foundational in any case, in favor of a narrative sociology, and relevant also beyond the boundaries of historical sociology. The sociologist should in any case be conscious of narrative because most empirical evidence (even if collected through survey) has or presupposes a narrative structure [Sewell 1992; Steinmetz 1992; White 1992; Somers 1993; Franzosi 1998; 2004]. This recognition eventually brings historical sociologists close to ethnographers and in general to those research traditions committed to qualitative methods (from life histories to participant observation) whose matrix has to be found in the so-called Chicago school [Abbott 1999]).

If narrativism has found followers in almost every field of sociological inquiry, it is anyway very probable that this “narrative turn” has produced its most original and provocative effects in the field of historical sociology. Of course, like many others, historical sociology remains an heterogeneous field where scholars carry different conceptions with respect to, at least, five crucial points [Tilly 2004]: 1) genre; 2) ontology; 3) explanatory logic; 4) mechanisms; 5) practical procedures. Hence a substantial number of possible disagreements on *how* to integrate theoretical and methodological considerations arises: “What is an event?,” “Can we detect causes in

history?,” “Do all social processes result from individual choices?,” “Can narrative be understood in rational terms?”³

An episode of particular significance in the recent debate inside historical sociology occurred in 1999 on the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology*. This saw the explicit and harsh opposition between a program of historical sociology research based on an anti-individualistic and culturally-oriented approach – for the occasion represented by Margaret Somers – and that of an historical sociology rationalist and analytical, whose reasons were defended by Michael Hetcher and Edgar Kiser [see Gould *et al.* 2004]. This is a crucial cleavage, we think, which leads to different ways of doing historical sociology, and which presupposes diverse conceptions of sociology itself and more generally of aims and limits of social sciences. Our aim, however, is not to insist upon this. Instead of repeating already well known themes as a consequence of this debate, we thought it more useful to focus the symposium on matters which seem to us still little discussed, or at least worthy of further reflection. All in all, we think there is still room for dialogue among different visions and for a search of points of convergence.

Notwithstanding the differences among, for instance, rational-choice narratives and interpretative approaches [e.g. Kiser 1996], methodological individualism or relational realism [Tilly 2004] or covering-law accounts and mechanisms-based explanations, to evaluate the different streams and branches of historical sociology *barely* by their epistemological virtues and flaws would not be a very insightful choice. If sociology is likely to benefit from a “Ulyssean” strategy of precommitting itself to certain explanatory standards [Hedström 2005, 11], these standards must bear consequences for a better integration of theory and research. So, we would argue that a fourth point which qualifies this “new” historical sociology – as varied as it could be – is a common effort towards a stronger integration between (explicative) theory and (empirical) methods. And it is from here that we would like to move on.

Introducing the Symposium

Our intent in organizing this symposium has been to present, discuss and compare some of the most interesting (for us) paths in contemporary research on the narrative foundations of sociological analysis, chosen in order to represent different epistemological visions, different generations and also distinctive ways of integration

³ On the present state of historical sociology as a research field see Adams, Clemens and Orloff [2005] and Delanty and Isin [2003]. See also the contribution of George Steinmetz in this same issue.

between theory and methods. In our choice of authors and visions we have privileged two issues: the microfoundation of social analysis and the quest for formalization.⁴

All the authors involved in this edition are explicit with respect to the first issue, and all of them exhibit clear preferences for a social research aimed at the modelization of social situations and processes. Nevertheless, the five papers which follow represent distinctive voices: that of Harrison C. White is absolutely the less committed to an individualistic point of view, and it is the more committed with regards to ontological foundations and theoretical innovation; that of Griffin is clearly more linked to a methodological than a theoretical program (albeit a methodological program which is theoretically driven by a sophisticated grasp of social temporality) and espouses a vision of action which seems more ecumenical than the vision accepted by Abell and Kiser, both of them clearly sensitive to the virtues of rational action theory (RAT). But if Kiser works on macrohistorical research, albeit individualistically grounded (and it is from this front he criticizes the program of “analytic narratives” set forth by political scientist Margaret Levi, to whom we have been glad to give the right of reply), Abell privileges the narrative formalization of action sequences in much smaller time period, empirically captured through ethnographic research.

Obviously, not all the research experiences which fit our selection criteria could be represented in this issue, and we have had to make some choices which could seem arbitrary. But we consider this as the first part of a larger symposium on time, narrative and sociology, which we hope to continue in a forthcoming issue of the journal.

As one of our criteria of inclusion has been formalization, it is understandable that narrative approaches strongly oriented in cultural, even semiotic sense – as those by Margaret Somers or William H. Sewell – are not well represented in this symposium. This doesn't mean we are not aware of them, nor that we can't appreciate them. For us, their value stands above all in the clarification of the ontological and epistemological requisites of a social science conscious of temporality more than in the proposal of an explicit narrative methodology, amenable to formalization and standardization. Anyway, the contribution of these authors to the issue of microfoundation of sociohistorical analysis is crucial (as the recent book by Sewell [2005] clearly demonstrates) and shows what can be gained by a bold thematization, empirically based, of system of meanings – grasped in all their richness and complexity through, for instance, procedures of “thick description” – also for the reconstruc-

⁴ But see on this the special issue of *Theory and Society* edited by John Mohr and Roberto Franzosi in 1997.

tion of temporal processes on large scale – above all when that thematization is accompanied by an analytical sensitivity for the specification of the phenomena under scrutiny.

We believe indeed – once this lacuna has been recognized and justified – that the papers here collected can already show what, and how much, research on narrative foundations and dimensions are contributing to a greater sociological consciousness of the historical and temporally situated character of social life, and to the redefinition of the same sociological enterprise also in its relationships with historical research, and other disciplines as well.

The Five Essays

A significant contribution to the methodological edification of a narrative sociology focused on events and temporality has been undoubtedly offered in the last fifteen years by the American sociologist Larry J. Griffin with his insightful reworking and application of Event-Structure Analysis (ESA) as an instrument of historical sociological research [see in particular Griffin 1993]. ESA is a formal analytic procedure aimed at analyzing and interpreting texts, originally developed by David Heise, a social psychologist at Indiana University. As Griffin recalls:

Influenced by intellectual developments in cognitive anthropology as well as by rational-choice theory, Heise developed ESA to study cultural routines and the subjective representations of reality, presenting it as a tool both to impute causality and to interpret meaning in ethnographic data. Its basic purpose is to aid the analyst in “unpacking” an event – that is, in breaking it into its constituent parts, which are sequences of actions – and analytically reconstituting it as a causal interpretation of what happened and why it happened as it did. It differs therefore from much conventional narrative history in that it forces researchers to develop an *accounting* for the event rather than simply an *account* of it.

Notwithstanding its promises, and its substantive results as a rigorous methodological device in assisting the analyst to discover patterns of meaning and causality in the social processes under study,⁵ ESA has not generated a successful program, as Griffin himself recognizes. In his paper he is very subtle in assessing both the merits and the flaws of this device, and explores the possible different reasons of the apparent neglect of its merits and promises by both sociologists and historians. What emerges from this discussion, we argue, is a clear and insightful evaluation also of the typical issues raised by a social inquiry approach which tries to maintain at

⁵ For some examples see Griffin and van der Linden [1998].

the same time interpretivist musicality and explanatory rigor, both combined with a strong sensitivity for the temporal structure of social experience: a claim which could be disappointing in the last instance – for different, even opposed motives – to both humanities oriented historians and scientifically oriented sociologists.

As the case of ESA implicitly recalls, narrative sociology has been deeply influenced by micro-level theories of action. Indeed, among the most interesting developments of narrativism in social sciences there is its merging with both rational action theory and so-called analytic sociology [Hedstrom 2005], the latter sharing with a narrative approach the focus on causal mechanisms and the quest for alternatives to traditional *variable sociology* [see Abell 2004]. The micro-level contributions exemplified here by Kiser-Welser, Levi and Abell – well-known authors of some of the most striking and influential texts in this field – offer original contributions with regard to this convergence between narrativism and a social theory focused on individuals and their choices.⁶ As Goldthorpe argued that a sociological alliance between rational action theory and quantitative data analysis is greatly beneficial for both [Goldthorpe 2000], we could suggest that methodological individualism approaches applied to historical sociology have the same virtue, although with different consequences for theory and methodology than those favored by Goldthorpe.

To begin with, rational choice theory as been accused of being tautological and unrealistic [Green and Shapiro 1994]: in fact, i) it does not specify the scope of its conditions (so it's always true because it can be “redefined” according to the empirical evidence) and ii) it considers human actors as beings who act exclusively or mainly on the basis of instrumental rationality, an assumption that it is empirically untenable. Both these points have been addressed in the rational choice debate, arguing that i) *ex-ante* macro level conditions are crucial in rational choice accounts [e.g. Breen and Goldthorpe 1997] and ii) rational action theory does not provide a comprehensive account of human decision-making, but it is rather devoted to explain macro-level phenomena. Hence rational choice does not require the assumption that all actors act all of the time in an entirely rational way [Goldthorpe 2000].

As Kiser and Welser's paper shows, micro-level mechanisms in historical sociology need a better specification of scope conditions: “*in some conditions, rational choice assumptions are quite reasonable, in others they are not – the important point is to be able to identify which conditions are present in any particular case. In other words, it is essential to be able to specify the scope of rational choice microfoundations, and*

⁶ It should be clear however that neither Kiser-Welser, Levi nor Abell are engaging in a strict rational choice application. Their common point is rather a commitment to a weak form of methodological individualism, as defined by Udehn [2001].

thus the conditions in which strategic game theory will be useful in historical analysis". When uncertainty is high (e.g. radical uncertainty due the uniqueness of situation) – Kiser and Welsler argument goes on – rationality requirements are simply impossible to fulfill.⁷

In this respect, also narrative action theory proposed by Abell is to be considered as a theory in search of “constrained universal” and not of general behavioural laws. In fact, narrative action theory “*descriptively approximates actual cognitive processes – probably better than RAT – in some, but only some, circumstances*”. A point that should be addressed [see Rydgren 2007], is that in situations of high uncertainty human beings use narratives to create *emplotment* [Ricoeur 1990] not only from “past situations” as argued by Abell [2004], but also from collective memory stores and collective actors who are able to present narratives that are particularly tightly constructed (e.g. where earlier states are transformed to later states with a clear syntactic path, in Abell’s terminology). Ethnic conflicts and the social construction of ethnic stereotypes, for instance, is a case in point [Rydgren 2007]. In other words, a closer examination of the scope of its conditions is not only useful to specify “when and how” the theory works, but also to spell out how errors, social biases and mistakes occur in decision-making. As Levi aptly points in her reply to Kiser and Welsler: “*Perhaps the most important mistake decision makers make is to believe the situation is similar to those experienced before and to act as if it is*”.

While historical sociology may be of great help to micro-level narratives in specifying the scope conditions of the micro-mechanisms at work, it’s also possible to conceive the opposite beneficial effect. Historical sociology provides micro-level narrativism with proper *explananda*, that is with sequences of events spatially and temporally situated. In fact, while the “alliance” between rational action theory and large scale data analysis promoted by Goldthorpe is constrained to frequently recurring events which allows systematic comparison and generalization and, thus, the use of statistical reasoning in order to validate any causal claims (see Abell’s paper), historical sociology and narrative analysis find a strong common point in the idea of “event” or, more precisely, in a specific “sequence of events” where the temporal ordering of the events is a central aspects of the analysis, or as Tilly puts it, when things happen within a sequence this affects *how* they happen [Tilly 1984].

Events are the “bread and butter” of historical sociology (e.g. revolutions, collective violence, regime transition) and they are not easily understood using large-N samples. Jack Goldstone [2003, 43] suggested that large-N studies of revolutions

⁷ Along with uncertainty, Kiser and Welsler consider the amount of cost and benefit involved and the type of actor making the decision.

“*have, to date, not been terribly fruitful*” just because sociohistorical macro-events need to be conceived as happening in a territory with substantial *local variation*. In this case, large-N sampling based on the idea of “homogeneous territory” would produce average results that “actually obtain nowhere” [*ibidem*]. *Latu sensu* case-studies methods – with their focus on “wholeness” – seem to be a better tool if the “territory” under scrutiny is far from homogeneous and, for instance, if the same variable has not the same effects in all cases or specific outcomes are not always generated by the same combination of causes. Historical sociology has created many methodological solutions for rigorous case-studies analysis, as before outlined. These and similar proposals [e.g. process tracing, pattern matching and causal narratives, Mahoney 2003] are valuable methods to test for singular causality in a small-N research.

Research programs like ESA, analytic narratives, comparative narratives theory, and narrative mechanism take for granted the coherence and integrity of individual actors. Moving from an economic model of action (in some cases supplemented by findings from cognitive psychology), they accept the vision of social life inscribed in economic theory and methodological individualism – albeit in a weak form. But the focus on narratives and stories could also bring – and has actually brought – a deeper dialogue within sociological research with theories and methods drawn from linguistics and literary theory, even if originally re-elaborated for social analysis purposes [a pioneer in this work has obviously been the Italian sociologist Roberto Franzosi 1999; 2004]. Perhaps more surprisingly, sociological narrativism has also found its sources of inspiration, if not its very analytical instruments, in “harder” natural sciences (such as biochemistry and *computer science*). The methods of *sequence analysis* developed by Abbott and mainly drawn from biological research on DNA are a case in point [see Abbott 2001].

This convergence among social sciences, humanities and natural sciences is well represented in this symposium by the contribution of a champion of the structural sociology of the seventies, Harrison C. White (here in collaboration with the French sociologist, Frederic Godart), whose research focus has progressively shifted during the last twenty years toward the cultural and symbolic structure of social life, grasped above all in its linguistic expression, both semantic and syntactic.⁸ A physicist by formation, among the great pioneers of mathematical sociology and of *network analysis*, White is also an accomplished social theorist [see Azarian 2005]. If his contribution to economic sociology is very well known, less known – or at least less present to contemporary sociological consciousness – is maybe his research on the social trans-

⁸ Attention for culture was indeed also strong in the early phases of White’s research, focused among other topics on arts and (linguistic) systems of kinship.

formations of artistic styles [see White and White 1965; White 1993]⁹ and that on the linguistic dimensions of social organization, and in particular on the role that grammars and stories – intended as discursive formations – have in generating, reproducing and transforming network structures which constitute social organization (or better, “sociocultural” organization, as White likes to say). This is the argument at the heart of the paper here included, which reworks and develops a chapter of his seminal book *Identity and Control* [White 1992] whose second revised edition is forthcoming.¹⁰ In brief, according to White:

Stories, like meanings, are specific to humans. While some sort of social network may be uncovered for other social species besides humans, *netdoms* are found only among humans. One finds pecking orders and control struggles for wolves or monkeys for example (...). These involve communication, but at a simple level that need not rise above the pheromone level of an ant society (...). This suggests that meaning and stories are what set human social action apart. Without stories, social action would have a monotone quality; there would not be all the “colors” that humans observe and use in social settings. And imbibing a formal story or film is so similar to imbibing “real life” that their authors and directors also, like gossipers in ordinary life, must have found effective shorthands for expressing identities and control in social relationships.

As time is for White not in contrast with structure (but is its condition),¹¹ so stories and discourses are not “other” to social ties – which can exist among humans only in so far they frame them in a meaningful way, and this happen through stories. It is only with the mediation of stories that interactions overcome their transeunt and volatile quality gaining durability and the power to produce durable effects. Stories are networks of meanings, and social networks are networks of stories. Far from natural, pregiven entities, persons (or individuals) are emergent effects of stories and networks (which White defines as *netdoms*).

The social theory of Harrison White is far from easy to digest. It is expressed in a very abstract language and is disseminated of original, idiosyncratic concepts. But it is also a theory which clearly opens up new ways not only to sociological modelization but also to empirical research in the field of sociohistorical analysis – as shown for in-

⁹ *Canvases and Careers* [White and White 1965] is usually seen as a founding book in the empirical sociology of arts (and a pioneer text in the production of culture approach), but it is also a clear exemplar of an historical sociology of cultural change. It is noteworthy that one of the first proofs of White as a sociologist had a strong historical tension. But temporality is constitutive of many social objects studied by White, like vacancy chains and market structures.

¹⁰ The paper published here, and written with Frederic Godart, further reworks materials included in the second edition of the book.

¹¹ On the analytic relationships between time and structure see also Sewell [2005], which develops arguments first advanced by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins.

stance in works by White's student Eiko Ikegami [2005]. A point which White could address in the next future is to discuss more directly how stories do organize themselves (or are organized by which identities) in larger – and changing – repertoires, or even in distinctive “orders of justification”, themselves embedded in historical time.¹²

All in all, these five papers show that a historically oriented sociology, that is a sociology conscious of temporalities and narratives, can greatly contribute to the intellectual progress of the social sciences, and that a better integration between theory, method, and empirical research, accompanied by a genuine openness to confrontation with other disciplines (without fear of losing identity) is a crucial factor of this progress.

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¹² This would link his theory of identity and control not only to cultural sociology (*à la* Swidler [2001]) or to pragmatic sociology currently developed by French scholars like Boltansky and Thevenot [2007], but also to a historical sociology more sensitive to issues of politics and morality (like Tilly's, for instance). Strangely enough, even if White was originally a student of Karl Deutsch, the MIT political scientist, he has done very little in the field of political sociology.

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An Introduction

Abstract: During the Eighties, and still more the Nineties, a handful of sociologists have begun to talk and write about the possibilities and the promises of a novel manner of practicing social research. That is, a specifically *narrative* mode, able to merge the claims to generalization and theory-building typical of (historical) sociology with a strong sensitivity for temporality, events and contingencies, also encompassing individualities, traditionally at the centre of historiography and ethnography. The aim of this symposium is to present, discuss and compare some of the most interesting and seminal paths in contemporary research on the narrative foundations of sociological analysis, chosen in order to represent different epistemological visions, different generations and also distinctive ways of integration between theory and methods. In the choice of authors and visions two issues have been privileged: the microfoundation of social analysis and the quest for formalization.

Keywords: historical sociology; narrativism; action theory; social structure; temporalities.

Filippo Barbera is an assistant professor in Economic Sociology at the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Turin. His publications include: "A Star is born? The Authors, Principles and Objectives of Analytical Sociology." *Papers. Revista de Sociologia* 80: 31-50; "Social Networks, Collective Action And Public Policy: The Embeddedness Idea Revisited," in *Networks, Social Capital and Trust: Theoretical and Empirical Application from Europe* edited by S. Koniorodos. London: Ashgate, 2005; "Community and Economy" in *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology* edited by J. Beckert e M. Zafirosky. London: Routledge, 2005.

Marco Santoro (PhD, University of Trento) is associate professor of Sociology at the University of Bologna, where he teaches Economic Sociology, Sociology of Culture, and Methods in Social Research. He is an advisor for the publisher 'Il Mulino' and editor of the series "Cultura in Italia" for the Istituto Cattaneo/Il Mulino. He is co-founder and co-editor of "Sociologica. Italian Journal of Sociology on line" (as of 2007) and of "Studi Culturali" (as of 2003). He edited and introduced the Italian translations of works by influential scholars like Theodor W. Adorno, Talcott Parsons, W.E.B. Du Bois, Pierre Bourdieu, Howard S. Becker, Andrew Abbott, and Jeffrey Alexander.