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(doi: 10.2383/25961)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, novembre-dicembre 2007

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# The Historical Sociology of Historical Sociology

## Germany and the United States in the Twentieth Century

by George Steinmetz

doi: 10.2383/25961

There has been much discussion in recent years of sociology's "historical turn" [Morawska 1989; Smith 1991; Mikl-Horke 1994]. There has been less attention, however, to the reasons for the historical turn in sociology, or for its unequal development in different parts of the world. Indeed, most of the literature has focused on the United States [Skocpol 1984; Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005], and to a lesser extent on Great Britain.

This article examines the reasons for the shifting fortunes of historical sociology and for the various forms it has taken. To understand the ebb and flow of historical interest among sociologists it is necessary to pay attention to *extra-scientific* changes such as macrosocial crisis and stabilization, as well as *intra-scientific* processes such as the varying relations between history and sociology in different periods and countries and the internal hierarchies within each disciplinary field. Analysis of an international disciplinary field needs to examine patterns of domination and resistance both within fields and cross-nationally (especially the global "Americanization" of postwar social science) as well as national peculiarities and the specific channels of the international circulation of ideas and social scientists, such as the difference between forced emigration and free academic exchange [Bourdieu 1991; Heilbron 2001; 2004].

In the first section of this paper I will define my object, historical sociology. In the second section I will present a theoretical and methodological approach to the sociology of sociology that combines a Bourdieusian theory of academic fields with an analysis of the effect of sociohistorical contexts on intellectual production. In the last section I will turn to the interconnected cases of German and American sociology during the twentieth century.

My “sample” focuses on people who had an academic appointment that was located at least partially in a sociology department. Sociology did exist as a field even in Weimar Germany, and the most important criterion for inclusion in a field is recognition by other participants as belonging to it. The professionalization of German sociology that was initiated by Max Weber in 1909 with the founding of the German Sociological Association meant that people whose work seemed sociological but were outside of the system of universities and academic research institutes tended not to be included in the field (with the paradoxical exception of Weber himself, who resigned from his university post in 1903 and did not begin teaching again until shortly before his death in 1920).

We can quickly outline the main features of the German and American sociological fields and the status of historical research within them. Sociology existed as a name for a certain kind of scholarship in the nineteenth century both in Germany and the US [Maus 1962]. The German Sociological Association was founded in 1909, but there were no university chairs for sociology in Germany until the 1920s, in contrast to the US, where they had existed since the 1890s [Käsler 2002]. By 1933 there were about three dozen chairs for sociology in Germany, many of them joint with economics, but many purely within sociology. There were at least 100 sociology teachers at all levels in German universities and technical universities [von Ferber 1956: 198].

Historical sociology became widespread as a practice during the Weimar Republic, especially after 1925 [Kruse 1994a; 1999a]. It was concentrated above all at the universities at Heidelberg [Blomert 1999], Frankfurt [Steinert 1990], and Leipzig [Üner 2004]. Contemporaries referred to it as *historische Soziologie* or *Geschichts-Soziologie* and saw it as one of the two main poles within Weimar-era sociology [Aron 1935]. Most of the German historical sociologists were forced into exile after 1933, and most ended up in the United States, although a few remained in Nazi Germany.

Some of the exiles returned to Germany after 1945, but historical sociology was unable to regain its earlier centrality. By the 1950s the main “schools” in (west) German sociology were formal theory, whose figurehead was once again Leopold von Wiese, and empirical, quantitative research on contemporary problems, which was concentrated at Münster and Cologne Universities and at the *Sozialforschungstelle Dortmund* [Weyer 1984; Schelsky 1959, ch. 3]. Frankfurt School critical theory was a third, dominated pole beginning in the 1950s, but Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Germany too late to shape the postwar reconstitution of the field, were ambivalent about historical sociology, and were limited in their impact by the vigorous anti-Marxism of the period. Historical sociology seemed to have disappeared altogether or to have migrated into other disciplines such as political science and, somewhat later, social history [Steinert 1990, 32]. Most of the Nazi quantitative sociologists were

able to keep teaching after 1945 or to work in empirical research institutes [Klingemann 1996; Gutberger 1996, 467-473]. A new generation of quantitative German sociologists, born between 1926 and 1930, received training in the US and described themselves as “young Turks” [Scheuch 1990, 42]. These disciplinary “modernizers” claimed to be replacing the old-fashioned traditions of “German sociology” with a more internationalized (i.e., Americanized) variant of sociology “in the Federal Republic of Germany” (*ibidem*).

Nowadays, one reads, historical sociology “does not exist” in Germany [Bock 1994: 184]. Of course this is exaggerated: there is a distinguished though short list of postwar German historical sociologists, starting with Jürgen Habermas. Some of the best historical sociology is focused precisely on the problem of the disappearance of historical sociology [Kruse 1999a]. But the phrase “historical sociology” (*historische Soziologie*) in Germany has become largely synonymous with work carried out in the English-speaking world [Spohn 1996]. The German Sociological Association, in contrast to the American one, does not have a section for historical sociology. Ongoing programs of historical sociology in Germany exist mainly among historians, under the rubrics of *historische Sozialforschung* or *historische Sozialwissenschaft*.

In contrast to Germany, genuinely historical sociology was almost nonexistent in the United States before the late 1970s. Elmer Barnes claimed in 1921 that sociological thinking had been completely dominated until 1900 by what he called “historical sociology,” but he was referring to evolutionary “stages” approaches to history. Nonetheless Barnes [1921, 17, 48] noted that even these evolutionary approaches had been “eclipsed by psychological, biological, and statistical sociology” due to the growth of state activity in this period “(...) and the greater pecuniary advantages of specialization in applied or practical sociology.” Another exception, alongside Barnes, was Wisconsin sociologist Howard P. Becker, who criticized sociologists’ “crippling neglect” of history and rejected the “dogma of rigid sequence in social evolution” [1934, 20, 22]. Barnes and Becker [1938, 760] wrote that the “sociologist should not approach his data with the intention of forcing them, willy-nilly, into a Procrustean bed of ‘timeless’ categories that are *a priori* generalizable.” Preferable, they argued, were Weberian ideal types “constructed through knowledge of the non-comparable (...) particularities of human behavior in those epochs” [*ibidem*: 763; Becker 1934: 26]. They concluded that “American historical sociology” had “every prospect of a brilliant future” [Barnes and Becker 1938: 790]. The future may indeed have been brilliant, but it was necessary to wait another four decades for it to be realized. Becker and Barnes were among the lone advocates of historical sociology prior to the influx of Central European sociologists into the United States [Maus 1962: 158-159].

American sociology in the 1930s and early 1940s was an unsettled field, divided into many camps [Steinmetz 2006]. The first main pole was a naturalistic, usually quantitative positivism, focused empirically on the present-day United States, and was led by Franklin Giddings until his death in 1931 and concentrated at Columbia University. A second tendency was the empirical “Chicago style” case study, which was often richly documented but was also presentist and US-centric. A third emerging camp was “high theory,” led by the young Talcott Parsons.

After 1945, American academic sociology was completely reconfigured due to the influx of new sources of federal funding, new personnel from wartime government organizations, and Fordist patterns of societalization [Turner and Turner 1990; Steinmetz 2005]. But the immigrant historical sociologists largely failed to achieve “theoretical transference” [Sutherland 1974, 91] in the United States. As in postwar Germany, a few isolated sociologists (many of them German immigrants, such as Reinhart Bendix, Lewis Coser, and Guenter Roth) worked historically. But their research was overshadowed until the 1970s by other approaches. Historical sociologist Arnold Bergstraesser [1953, 231-232, 242], who moved back to Germany from his US exile in 1954, argued that there was a “greater openness in the United States for the essential (...) problematics of German sociology,” namely, its “*geisteswissenschaftliche* traditions,” but acknowledged that it was “difficult to predict how far this [American] acceptance” would reach.<sup>1</sup>

Historical sociology began to cohere as a sizable subfield in American sociology only after the 1970s. In many US universities today, historical sociology is a well-structured field, or more accurately, an established subfield, with all of the attributes of a (sub)field: specific stakes and forms of symbolic capital, specific journals and awards, and a division between more autonomous and more heteronomous poles, that is, between a pole that is more dependent on the status criteria of the enviroing field of sociology and a pole that speaks more exclusively to other historical sociologists and to allies outside the discipline, especially in history. Historical sociology is one of a handful of subareas that are included in the rankings of sociology graduate programs by the *US News and World Report*. The creation of a coherent subfield seems to have protected historical sociology and transformed its internal dynamics, while at the same time inoculating the rest of the discipline against any criticism of “mainstream” sociology that it might have to offer.

The best way of framing the question in this essay is to ask when, where, and why sociologists have worked in historical ways, why this form of sociology has prospered

<sup>1</sup> On Berstraesser’s early Nazi sympathies, partly Jewish heritage, and difficulties in the United States, see Oberndörfer [2006], Klingemann [1986: 123-137], and Krohn [1986].

in some periods and withered in others, and why it occasionally becomes a leading contender for dominating the sociological field (Germany before 1933) while at other times it becomes a sequestered subfield (the United States since around 1980). And why has the main location of historical sociology in the twentieth century shifted from Germany to the United States?<sup>2</sup>

## Defining Historical Sociology

How can we define historical sociology? Most would agree that historical sociology involves making theoretical sense of the past. Evolutionary theories from Comte to Spencer, on to postwar modernization approaches, are rarely included under this rubric nowadays, even though they were concerned with macro-historical change and were sometimes referred to as “historical sociology” at the time [e.g. Barnes 1948]. More recently historical sociologists have tended to reject teleological and evolutionary accounts of change.

Historical sociologists argue that history and sociology are both concerned with human social practice in its capacity for willed or unintentional change – its capacity for producing events, writ large, revolutionary ruptures in the existing socio-symbolic order. Sociology and history are both interested in the equally paradoxical *reproduction* of social structures, that is, in the ways social structures are perpetuated such that they appear to be natural and unhistorical. By describing the radical incommensurability of past societies, historians *denaturalize* the present. Similarly, sociologists’ “genesis explanations” reveal the arbitrariness of contemporary social forms and hierarchies [Bourdieu 1998].

Opinions diverge sharply, however, once we try to specify methods and epistemologies. On the one hand are those who explain history in terms of “general laws” [Hempel 1965]. Sometimes this takes the form of a single theory based on a unified mechanism or process, such as the dialectic between forces and relations of production in Marxism, natural selection in sociobiology, or rational choice [Kiser and Hechter 1991]. Since the mid-twentieth century, social science positivism has been amended to allow for *probabilistic* and *multivariate* explanations [Reichenbach 1951], which permit non-quantitative historical sociologists to emulate the research protocols of statistical analysis [e.g. Orloff and Skocpol 1984].

<sup>2</sup> In a future article I will examine the anomalous case of French sociology, where the label “historical sociology” has not been used, but where a vigorous program of archivally-based historical research by sociologists, many of them associated with or influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, has emerged in recent decades.

At the opposite pole from these diverse positivisms are the heirs of nineteenth century historicism, who hold that sociology is closer to the historical sciences of culture, the *Geisteswissenschaften*, than to the natural sciences. The neo-historicists of the Weimar period drew on Max Weber's methodological writings, which were indebted to the efforts of Dilthey [1988], Windelband [1980], and Rickert [1913]. These "neo-historicist" sociologists believed there were fundamental ontological differences between the objects of the human and the natural sciences, insofar as the former are historically and contextually changing and unique and co-constituted by meaning [Freyer 1926; see also von Below 1926]. According to Karl Mannheim [1934, 14, 20], German sociology was characterized by "the awareness that every social fact is a function of the time and place in which it occurs" and that sociology is also a "discipline of the *inner* understanding." Alfred Weber, who was not anxious about disciplinary boundaries (and whom Parsons after 1945 said was not a sociologist at all), defended throughout his life a "historical sociological" approach and what he called *Geschichtssoziologie* ["History-Sociology"; e.g. Weber 1927; 1951; see Eckert 1970, 16-18; Demm 1999].

Volker Kruse, building on the work of the Weimar historical sociologists, defines historical sociology as work that combines "theoretical constructions with historical research," "addresses the great questions of its own era," and "is self-reflexive about the scientific process." Historical sociology understands social reality as "historically produced," as a "historical individual" or "complex macroindividual," in Max Weber's sense, an object that cannot be elided with a universal or transhistorical category [Kruse 2001, 106]. Historical events and practices cannot be explained by general laws or theories but are overdetermined by a *conjuncture* of different forces (or what will later be called mechanisms or *explanans*). The distinction between the natural sciences on the one hand, and the human, cultural, social, or "*Geistes-*" sciences on the other hand means that the latter necessarily has an *interpretive* and therefore historical dimension.

Every definition proposed is also a position taken in a field of forces. In a future article it will be necessary to examine the ways in which contending definitions of historical sociology have been related to positions in this subfield and in the broader social space. I will work here with a definition of historical sociology closest to that proposed by the Weimar sociologists.

## The Sociology of Sociology

There may be nothing in the world of the external objects of study that distinguishes sociology clearly from other disciplines [Stölting 1986], but sociology has nonetheless often cohered as a field [Bourdieu 1993], with its own forms of specific symbolic capital, etc. [Steinmetz 2006]. Many fields are characterized by a struggle between holders of “orthodox” and “heretical” beliefs, and heresy is often associated with a younger generation or the more recent entrants into the field [Bourdieu 1971]. Scientific fields are also sometimes characterized by a proliferation of *subfields*. One criterion for the difference between field and subfield is that all of the subfield’s members *also* participate in the envioning field and have to pass through the same gate-keeping procedures as all other members of the field. But the subfield may revise or even *invert* the values placed on different sorts of activities in the broader field. In the subfield of political theory within American political science, for example, the prevailing views of value-freedom or normativity and of the hierarchy of empirical and theoretical work are directly contrary to the dominant views of the same matters within the overarching discipline [Mihic, Engelmann, and Wingrove 2005]. Within the subfield of poetry in the American literary field nearly all poets hold an extremely negative view of commercial success, whereas that “anti-capitalist” view is typically dominant only at the “autonomous” pole of the broader literary field [Buyukokutan forthcoming]. The creation of a subfield may protect a rare plant like poetry, political theory, or historical sociology, but it may also immunize the rest of the field against the subfield’s heterodox messages.

Analysis of a specific scientific field needs be complemented by attention to the broader array of envioning fields and to the macro-historical level. People move into new fields with holdings of capital generated elsewhere, holdings that they may or may not be able to convert into currencies that are locally valid. Sociologists who circulate between different national fields may not be able to revalorize their scientific capital in the new settings. External allies offer resources to actors inside fields. Practices within a specific field draw on ideologies generated outside the field [Steinmetz 2007a]. Finally, society-wide crises may both erode the relative autonomy of fields and reconfigure the intellectual contents of intellectual production.

## Historical Sociology in Germany: the Disappearing Act

How can we explain the rise of historical sociology in the 1920s? German sociology emerged from a national intellectual constellation that was polarized between the approaches Windelband called “nomothetic” and “idiographic.” These oppos-



ing positions mapped onto the two sides of the main division in Weimar sociology, which pitted “systematic” sociology against “historical” sociology. German historical sociology was also shaped by philosophical phenomenological existentialism and Carl Schmitt’s “decisionism,” which was familiar to sociologists from Schmitt’s publications in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik* and in the Max Weber *Festschrift* [Schmitt 1923]. German historical sociologists during the 1920s and 1930s usually rejected teleological, evolutionary, and single-factor accounts of history, arguing instead that social change was a contingent, and open-ended process driven by deliberate decisions, or as we would say nowadays, by collective human agency [Freyer 1933].

This view of history as radically unique and unpredictable and as being “made” rather than simply “happening” [*ibidem*, 12] was reinforced by the massive, ongoing crisis of the Weimar period. The extreme contingency of sociopolitical existence was difficult for anyone to overlook, as the fate of German democracy hovered in the balance, to be decided upon by the unpredictable combined effects of the decisions of voters, parliamentarians, and politicians [Ermakoff forthcoming]. By contrast, the postwar period in West Germany, at least after 1950, was characterized by a comparative stability that encouraged spontaneous sociologies of the social as a quasi-natural object whose repetitive movements could be captured by general “laws” [Bock 1994; Steinmetz 2005].

External resources also shaped the balance of power within sociology. Left-wing and liberal government officials in the 1920s supported the establishment of sociology, which they saw as being closer to socialism and liberalism than older disciplines like history. The liberal Prussian State Secretary of Education, Carl H. Becker, believed that sociology was capable of giving students a “synthetic orientation toward society” and supported the appointment at Leipzig of Hans Freyer, a friend of Bedcker’s from the German youth movement [Muller 1987, 133; Üner 1994, 7; Lepsius 1981, 11-13]. The Saxony government tried to force the right-wing professoriat at Leipzig University to hire Marxist and Jewish faculty members [Muller 1987, 136-143].

Although struggles within any semi-autonomous field are overdetermined by external forces, these struggles also have an irreducible logic of their own. When Freyer [1926], in his inaugural lecture at Leipzig in 1925, juxtaposed the “French” positivist tradition of seeing sociology as part of the natural sciences to the “German” view of sociology as an interpretive science, he was demonstratively ignoring the presence in Germany of positivists like Andreas Walther and formal theorists like Leopold von Wiese. Freyer’s election as President of the German Sociological Association in 1933 was a political compromise between the liberal sociologists and

those in the Nazi Party, but it also marked a shift of power within the field, since it spoiled the plans of Freyer's most powerful opponent, von Wiese [Muller 1987, 246-255; Klingemann 1996, 140, n. 64]. When Freyer was interviewed by an American sociologist in 1934 he was able to gloat that von Wiese was "of the second rank of German Sociologists" [Käsler 1991, 93]. After 1945 the balance of power tipped back toward von Wiese, who was hoisted into the presidency of the refounded German Sociological Association with the help of American sociologists Edward Hartshorne and Howard Becker, both of whom were part of the US occupying force. Membership in the GSA continued to require sponsorship by an existing member, and von Wiese did not invite Freyer to join. The two main poles of the Weimar field were still present, but their relative power had been reversed, and both would soon be overshadowed by "empirical social research."

Other internal features of the sociology field shaped the fate of German historical sociology. German sociology between 1900 and 1933 welcomed historians such as Alfred von Martin and Andreas Walther ("pure" historians who switched into sociology midway through their careers) and historical economists like Max Weber, Alfred Weber, Werner Sombart, and Franz Oppenheimer [Kruse 1994b; Wassner 1986]. In general, sociology's openness, especially its willingness to recruit historians and historical economists, has strengthened its historical pole. But sociologists with backgrounds in history may also overidentify or overcompensate for their anomalous origins, as in the case of Andreas Walther, who became a missionary for "American-style" sociology, which he defended against charges of "crass positivism," after becoming an *ordentlicher* Professor of Sociology at Hamburg University [Walther 1927]. In 1928 Walther rejected the Habilitation thesis of Siegfried Landshut on the grounds that the author was an "antisociologist" who "wanted to make sociology regress into a historical discipline" [Wassner 1986, 396]. Walther's paradoxical relationship to his own background as a historian speaks against any simple interpretation of sociology's "openness" as being conducive to its historicization. Walther's isolation in German sociology before 1933, when he joined the Nazi party, demonstrates his failure to convert his cultural capital into forms appropriate to his new scientific location.

The simplest and most obvious explanation for the disappearance of Weimar historical sociology is Nazism. As many as two thirds of German sociologists went into exile, the greatest number of them to the United States [Dahrendorf 1965, 112; Lepsius 1983, 6; but compare Wittebuhr 1991, 256-265]. Of the 29 clearly identified academic historical sociologists in Germany in 1933, 22 went into exile and one,

Ernst Grünfeld, lost his job for political reasons. Only a handful came back (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

TAB. 1. *Historical Sociologists in the Weimar Republic*

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* Bergsträsser, Arnold (Germany→United States→Germany; 1896-1964)
Brinkmann, Carl (1885-1954)
* Cahnmann, Werner (Germany→United States; 1902-1980)
* Elias, Norbert (Germany→Paris→Great Britain→Ghana→Amsterdam→Germany; 1897-1990)
Freyer, Hans (1887-1969)
* Gerth, Hans (Germany→United States; 1908-1978)
Grünfeld, Ernst (1883-1938)
* Heberle, Rudolf (Germany→United States, 1896-1991)
* Heimann, Eduard (Germany→United States, 1889-1967)
* Horkheimer, Max (Germany→United States→Germany; 1895-1973)
* Landshut, Siegfried (Germany→Palestine→Germany; 1897-1968)
* Löwe, Adolf (Germany→Great Britain→United States; 1893-1968)
* Ernst Mannheim (Germany→London→United States; 1900-2002)
* Mannheim, Karl (Germany→Great Britain; 1893-1947)
* Marcuse, Herbert (Germany→United States; 1898-1979)
Martin, Alfred von (1882-1979)
Müller-Armack, Alfred (1901-1978)
Mühlmann, Wilhelm Emil (1904-1988)
* Neumann, Franz (Germany→Great Britain→United States; 1900-1954)
* Oppenheimer, Franz (Germany→United States; 1864-1943)
* Plessner, Helmuth (Germany→United States→Germany; 1892-1985)
* Rosenstock-Huussy, Eugen (Germany→United States 1888-1873;)
* Rüstow, Alexander (Germany→Turkey→Germany; 1885-1963)

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<sup>3</sup> This list includes only people who had completed a doctoral degree or its equivalent before 1933 and were employed at a German university as an ordinary (*ordentlicher*), extraordinary (*außerordentlicher*), or honorary professor (*Honorarprofessor*), *Privatdozent*, or institute assistant. Some refugees are not included here because they emigrated before becoming historical sociologists or before completing their degrees, e.g. Lewis Coser, who completed his studies in France and in the US; Reinhart Bendix, who left Germany in 1938 at the age of 22 and did not begin his studies until he reached the United States [Bendix 1990]; and Joseph Ben-David, who was originally Hungarian and had moved to Palestine in 1941, pursuing his studies in Israel after the war [Westrum 1986]. It does not include any historical sociologists who received their doctorate in Germany during or after the Nazi period, such as Guenter Roth. It excludes “sociological” historians like Otto Hintze and Eckart Kehr who neither studied nor taught sociology nor had an appointment as a sociologist. By the same token the list excludes people from other disciplines like law (e.g. Carl Schmitt) or geography (Friedrich Ratzel) who intervened in historical-sociological discussions but without being considered sociologists. Finally, it excludes people working outside the universities even if they had studied and published on sociology, such as Siegfried Kracauer [Koch 2000]. Information in Table One is from Strauss and Röder [1983], Wittebur [1991], *Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie*, and other sources available from the author.

TAB. 1. *Historical Sociologists in the Weimar Republic*


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* Salomon, Albert (Germany→United States; 1891-1966)
* Salomon-Delatour, Gottfried (Germany→France→United States→Germany; 1892-1964)
* Salz, Arthur (Germany→Great Britain→United States; 1881-1963)
Scheler, Max (1874-1928)
* Schelting, Alexander von (Germany→United States→Switzerland; 1894-1963)
* Speier, Hans (Germany→United States; 1905-1990)
Weber, Max (1864-1920)
Weber, Alfred (1868-1958)

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*Key:*

\* = refugee after 1933

In parentheses = location of exile and later countries of residence; dates of birth and death

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To a great extent, then, the disappearance of German historical sociology is due to the emigration of the historical sociologists. Most of the refugees quickly began publishing in English and were only rediscovered in Germany much later, if at all. Nazi sociologists constructed an entirely non-Jewish lineage for the history of German sociology [Pfeffer 1939]. Most of the new sociologists who were trained during the Nazi period conducted empirical research on the assimilation of populations with German ancestry in the eastern occupied countries, agrarian questions, spatial planning, and other aspects of the Final Solution, and they were not historically oriented at all [Klingemann 1996, 2002; Gutberger 1996]. Many of these former Nazis continued to work as sociologists after the war, congregating at the empirical social research institutes and the sociology departments at Cologne and Münster.

Exile and the Nazi legacy in German sociology cannot explain the failure of the historical approach to renew itself, however. Several leading historical sociologists stayed in Germany, including Alfred Weber, Hans Freyer, and Alfred von Martin. Although Weber and von Martin withdrew into a sort of “inner exile,” both kept writing historical works during and after Nazism. But while Alfred Weber emerged from retirement and initially seemed to become influential again at Heidelberg, he was classified by René König [1958, 151] in a widely-read text to “historical and social philosophers” such as Spengler. Von Martin, author of first sociological study of the Renaissance, had taught at Frankfurt from 1919 to 1923 and at Munich from 1924 to 1931 and then moved to Göttingen where he became director of the Institute for Sociology. He resigned his post when the Nazis came to power but stayed in Germany. Von Martin resumed teaching sociology at Munich in 1946, but his deeply historical work made little impact on a sociological discipline now firmly fixated on the present. As for Freyer, his work now had limited appeal among “those

intellectuals who came of age in the years after the war,” even if he had never joined the Nazi party and had distanced himself from it in some respects after 1935. In 1948 Freyer lost his post at Leipzig, which was now in the Soviet occupation zone, and he was subsequently excluded from “positions of influence and prestige within academic sociology and its representative institutions” [Muller 1987, 329, 369-370].

Although none of the émigrés saw the twelve years of Nazi tyranny as “an intermezzo after which one could go back and continue as though nothing had changed” [Krohn 1993, 199-200], some of them did return to Germany after the war. But many now moved into disciplines other than sociology or stopped working historically, or else they returned too late to influence the postwar configuration. Horkheimer and Adorno both had joint positions in sociology and philosophy at Frankfurt, but they stopped working on recognizably historical topics, and in the early 1950s Adorno even joined in the ongoing dismissal of Weimar historical sociology as a form of speculative philosophy [Adorno 1972; but see also Horkheimer and Adorno 1956, 10]. Von Schelting reemigrated to Switzerland and wrote books on Russian history [e.g. von Schelting 1948], but had little influence on German sociology. Heimann did not return to Germany until after his retirement, in 1963; Adolf Löwe returned in 1983, at the age of 90, long after his retirement from the New School for Social Research. Cahnman was invited twice to Munich as guest professor and received emeritus status there in 1968, but he did not move back to Germany permanently. Landshut moved back to Hamburg and helped to establish the new discipline of Political Science, which was created in Germany after the war at the urging and with the aid of the Americans [Nicolaysen 1997, ch. 8]. Bergstraesser moved into the new discipline of political science rather than finding a home in postwar German sociology. His low visibility in German sociology after his return was exacerbated by the historical and cultural style of his work and his emerging interest in the non-European periphery, which did not reemerge as a topic for German sociologists until the reemergence of Marxism after the 1960s. Salomon-Delattre, who had been a student of Troeltsch and a teacher of Adorno, and who defined sociology as “the interpretation of historical processes,” returned to Frankfurt only in 1958. In the early 1960s he was still criticizing ahistorical forms of sociology, but by this time “American style” empiricist positivism had already become dominant in Germany [Stölting 1984, 55; Salomon

1922; Oppenheimer 1964, 350; Henning 2006, 50-51, n. 8].<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Mühlmann [1932], whose work before the war represented a mixture of sociology, ethnology, and history, was unable to get an academic post until 1957 [Michel 1992]. In 1960 he was recruited at Heidelberg, where he headed a new institute for sociology and ethnology [Sigrist and Kößler 1985].

The failure of historical approaches to reassert themselves still cannot be explained by the absence of the émigrés, their late return, or their death before 1945. Their ideas could have played a role in postwar German sociology if they had been adopted by others. Ideas need bearers to become socially effective, but their bearers do not have to be the same people as their originators. Nor can we point to the marginalization of those who had stayed in Germany or the returnees: the question is why they were marginalized.

The reproduction of historical sociology had been interrupted; an entire new generation of sociologists had been trained in a presentist, policy-oriented style. But while these Nazi-trained sociologists continued to play a central role in postwar German sociology, some liberal sociologists like René König and Marxists like Georg Lukács [1981] associated Nazi ideology more strongly with historical-social philosophies and historical sociology. The so-called “civil war” in German sociology in the 1950s seemed to collapse any distinction between historical sociologists and former Nazis, while presentist empirical approaches were associated with liberals and re-emigrants like König and the German branch of the International Sociological Association [Weyer 1986].

Historical research was also avoided after 1945 because it inevitably would have led sociologists to examine their own activities during the Nazi period. Serious investigation of the German sociologists’ involvement with Nazism did not begin until the 1980s. It was almost impossible to explore any period in the German past without touching on Nazism, especially since the newly dominant “exceptionalist” historiographic framework tended to interpret everything from the Reformation to Spengler as leading inexorably to the Final Solution [Steinmetz 1997]. In a lecture to the first postwar meeting of the German Sociological Association in 1946 Leopold von Wiese announced that sociology needed to free itself from “speculative historical

<sup>4</sup> Calhoun and Van Antwerpen [2005: 395] claim that the positivist dispute in Germany was “a curious debate” because “no important figure argued the case for positivism” in Germany. That is unfortunately not the case; one of the most prominent young sociologists at Cologne, which was the most influential postwar West German sociology department, was Hans Albert, who defended the “the positivist revolution” in the leading German sociology journal [Albert 1956: 243]. On Albert’s centrality for the postwar generation and his “‘invisible college’ of students,” see Rueschemeyer [1996: 331-332]. Albert’s importance is indicated, *inter alia*, by the fact that his is the lead essay in a recent collection of autobiographies by postwar German sociologists [Albert 1996].

philosophy,” which was often a codeword for historical sociology. Von Wiese then proceeded to describe the Nazi era as a “pest” that had “descended on the people, who were unprepared for it, from the outside, like a sneak attack.” Nazism, said von Wiese, was a “metaphysical secret that sociology may not touch” [von Wiese 1948, 29]. Of course von Wiese himself had been active as a sociologist during the Nazi period, supervising theses and research projects and spending eleven months in Paris in 1941 as part of a Foreign Office “archival commission” that evaluated seized French documents and wrote a report arguing that President Roosevelt had started the Second World War under pressure from American Jews [Klingemann 1996, 69; Archivkommission 1943, 39]. He had good reasons to direct his colleagues’ attentions away from that era. Another opponent of historical sociology was Helmut Schelsky, who had joined the SA in 1932 and the Nazi *Studentenbund* in 1933; in 1938 he joined the Nazi party. In 1941 Schelsky was an assistant to Hans Freyer while the latter was heading the German Scientific Institute in Budapest, helping him put together dossiers on the “racial” origins and political views of Hungarian professors [Muller 1987, 313; Schäfer 1990, 155]. Schelsky infamously argued that by 1933 Weimar sociology “*selbst am Ende war*” [1959, 37] – that it had reached a stage of terminal decrepitude. This overlooked the fact that most of the sociologists had been actively repressed rather than fading away naturally, and that the years leading up to 1933 were in fact the most exciting period in the history of German sociology.<sup>5</sup>

The end of German historical sociology was also hastened by a cluster of factors we can broadly call Americanization. American occupation officials and foundations played a fundamental role in reshaping German sociology after 1945. Different groups of German sociologists competed for the allegiance of sociologists working for the US military government, including Howard P. Becker and Nels Anderson. Anderson organized and coordinated a “Middletown”-style community survey of Darmstadt, financed by the US military government. The Darmstadt Study provided several dozen budding German social scientists with hands-on experience in empirical social survey methods [Weyer 1984, 323-328; Gerhardt 2007, 232-238; Anderson 1956]. The American occupiers and funders tended to support empirical, statistical methodologies in sociology, even if they were more methodologically open-minded with respect to the newly founded discipline of political science, where “behavioralist” approaches were not always given preference [Plé 2001, 206-207].

<sup>5</sup> Schelsky argued that modern “scientific civilization” had created the possibility for a positivist, objectivist, value-free, and quantitative social science by “stabilizing the basic structures of industrial civilization [Schelsky 1959: 136], which led to “*Sachgesetzmäßigkeiten*” of the social world [Schelsky 1961], which in turn made it possible to identify *constant conjunctions of events* – the holy grail of social-science positivism [Bhaskar 1978; Steinmetz 2005; 2006].

A final reason for the decline of historical sociology was the dampening of economic turbulence and the relative social stability that was codified in Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's famous phrase "no experiments," and that was theoretically captured by the concept of Atlantic Fordism. The welfare state's partial buffering of the effects on the individual of economic downturns and a number of other Fordist state policies lent surface plausibility to positivist models of the social as a regularized, predictable machine [Steinmetz 2007c].

### **The United States: The Creation of a Subfield**

Why was American sociology so unhistorical? As noted, there was some interest in historical topics and epistemologies before 1914, but this largely disappeared after World War One. Many of the founders of US sociology came out of fields like the natural sciences and economics (the latter was not dominated by historicism in the US, in contrast to Germany). Most of these founders took economics or one of the natural sciences as their model. The intellectual resources that that were required in order to imagine sociology as a *Geisteswissenschaft*, so obvious to Germans like Landshut [1929] and Freyer [1926], were missing in early American sociology.

The eventual emergence of historical approaches and sensibilities in American sociology after 1945 was due partly to the influx of central European exiles. The early native-born American contributors to the rise of historical sociology were often closely linked to members of this exile group, or had studied in Germany. Howard P. Becker had studied with Max Scheler and Leopold von Wiese in Cologne in 1926-1927,<sup>6</sup> and he hired Hans Gerth at Wisconsin [Gerth 2002, 146]. Gerth, a student of Karl Mannheim, criticized the ahistoricism of US sociology [Gerth 1959] and encouraged his student and collaborator C. Wright Mills to take an independent path. Barrington Moore, Jr., another founder of US historical sociology, worked as a policy analyst for the Office of Strategic Studies during World War II with Franz Neumann and Herbert Marcuse. Günther Roth emigrated to the US in 1953 and published an important early historical sociology of the German social democrats in imperial Germany and a book specifically on Weber's vision of history [Roth 1963; 1979]. It is thus accurate to say that present-day American or "Anglo-American" historical sociology has at least some roots "in the German cultural space" [Kruse 1999a, 192].

Even though most of the exiled German historical sociologists continued to promote historical approaches in their new home, their work did not attract much attention there [Kruse 2001, 107]. Emigrant Albert Salomon, for example, who taught

<sup>6</sup> See Howard Becker Files, University of Wisconsin archives, Madison-Wisconsin.



sociology at the New School for Social Research from 1934 until his death in 1966, argued consistently “that sociology must become historical sociology,” but interest in Salomon’s work has only arisen in the last few years [Mayer 1967, 221]. Werner Cahnman edited a volume with Alvin Boskoff [1964] called *Sociology and History*, but here “history” as practiced by sociologists was equated mainly with evolutionary theories of “social change.” The exceptions were essays by German and Central European émigrés, including Reinhard Bendix, Rudolf Heberle, Ernst Manheim, and Joseph Ben-David.

The overall failure of the refugee historical sociologists to achieve “theoretical transference” did not mean that it was impossible for immigrants to convert their sociological capital to the new conditions. The most famous example of a highly successful conversion of social-scientific capital was Paul Lazarsfeld, who became one of the dominant figures in US sociology during the postwar decades [Pollak 1979; Neurath 1988]. Some refugees, like Hans Speier, stopped working in a historical manner once they reached the United States. Ernst Manheim (Karl Mannheim’s cousin), whose 1933 book on the historical sociology of the public sphere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [Manheim 1933] anticipated Habermas’ more famous study, published mainly on contemporary problems of youth and crime once he was in the US.

Just as Americans decisively shaped the balance of power among sociologists in postwar Germany, established powerbrokers in the United States sociological field could make or break the careers of refugee scholars. Talcott Parsons in particular “seiz[ed] the leadership in interpreting German sociology,” with his interpretations of Weber, Mannheim, and others and his promotion of some, like Speier and von Schelting, against others, like Gerth and Alfred Weber [Kettler and Meha 1994, 29].

Starting in the mid-1970s larger numbers of US-based sociologists began working in historical ways, writing dissertations on historical topics, and paying attention to historians’ problematiques, concepts, and vocabulary. The mere presence of the émigré historical sociologists cannot explain this shift, however, otherwise historical sociology should have consolidated its presence in the discipline much earlier. The main reasons for the emergence of historical sociology in this period have been explored elsewhere [Steinmetz 2005], but they include the rediscovery of Marxism in US sociology and the destabilization of the Fordist mode of regulation.

## **Conclusion: Explaining waves of historicization in sociology**

There seem to be five main factors that are internal to sociology and to academia more generally, and two factors that are external to science, which help explain the variable presence of historical sociology. It is unclear, however, whether any of these factors is a necessary condition. There are also factors that are completely unique to a given historical situation, such as the putative associations of historical sociology with Nazism and the reluctance to reexamine the recent Nazi past in immediate postwar (west) Germany.

The first and most obvious “internal” factor is purely intellectual, and refers to the presence or absence of ideas supportive of a historical approach. The inherited intellectual culture of Weimar Germany presented sociology with an unimaginably rich body of reflections on historicity and the human sciences. Postwar American sociology profited greatly from the influx of these same currents. French sociology was able to draw on the intellectually rich and heterodox traditions of the philosophy and history of science discussed by Bourdieu, and on certain currents within French Marxism, including Sartre.

A second factor, which I have not been able to examine here, is Marxist culture. Marxism was a crucial intellectual precondition for historical sociology in Weimar, in the US during the 1970s, and in Bourdieusian sociology. Marxism could play both a promoting role with respect to historical sociology, contributing to historical ways of thinking, and a depressing role, to the extent that history is associated with Marxism and Marxism is seen as overly reductionist or rejected on political grounds.

The third “internal” factor relates to the structure of the field of sociology. Sociology is often more open to newcomers and outsiders than other disciplines. This openness may help historical sociology, although we also have some counterexamples, as in the case of former historian Andreas Walther (see above).

A fourth internal factor is the existence of a subfield of historical sociology. As noted, this can protect historical sociology, although it may also inoculate the rest of the discipline against it. Where it is a well-defined subfield, as in the contemporary United States, historical sociology may be better able to protect itself from the antihistorical pressures of the field as a whole. Members of the subfield, especially those located at its autonomous pole, may be more open to cross-disciplinary and transdisciplinary “travelling” [Bourdieu 1991; Herzog 2004; Steinmetz 2007b]. The existence of a “heteronomous” pole of historical sociologists who emulate the dominant research protocols and epistemologies of the discipline may paradoxically protect the autonomous members of the subfield by shielding them from scrutiny.

An important *institutional* factor promoting historical sociology is the creation of institutions conducive to interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research, such as the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Leipzig University before 1933, the New School for Social Research in New York City, the History-Anthropology PhD program at the University of Michigan, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

Two external mechanisms also seem to have influenced the possibility and health of historical sociology. The first of these has been discussed here mainly for the German case: external funders and government agencies. German state officials in Prussia and Saxony sometimes promoted historical sociology in Weimar Germany, while US occupation forces after 1945 tended to back nonhistorical sociology. Historians of American social science have shown how the Rockefeller foundation and federal funding agencies promoted present-oriented, problem-solving research packaged in positivist and usually quantitative formats [Ross 1991; Kleinman 1995].

The final external factor refers to the overall macrohistorical constellation. Highly stabilized socioeconomic conditions, like the “thirty glorious years” of post-war Fordism, may erode sociologists’ spontaneous attraction to historical modes of thinking. By contrast, socio-historical crises may encourage more historical modes of thinking, even if they do not lead directly to historical intellectual work, which always has more or less autonomy from the temporal powers and general social trends. Crises confer greater spontaneous *plausibility* on historical ways of viewing the social, and this may filter indirectly into the fields of sociology and other social and human science disciplines. It does not seem to be a coincidence that the two great eras of the efflorescence of historical sociology, namely the 1920s in Germany and the 1970s in the United States, were periods of intense generalized crisis and great uncertainty about the future. This was felt immediately among academics through intensified competition for a limited number of jobs [MLA Task Force 2007]. Fields other than sociology saw a rise in historical approaches during the same period. Literary criticism, for example, turned away from the New Criticism and the ahistorical, text-bound version of deconstruction that prevailed in the US gave way to the “new historicism,” which led literary scholars into the archives [Gallop 2007; Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000]. As socioeconomic conditions for academics became more stabilized in the 1990s, the new historicism declined as a leading paradigm among literary scholars [Mullaney 2007].

Does this mean that those who favor historical sociology should hope for crisis? That is, should they expect a macrosocial crisis to strengthen the historical orientation of social scientists? Wishing for crisis would certainly be a mistake, and not only on ethical grounds. I have tried to identify some of the causal mechanisms respon-

sible for two remarkable waves of historical sociology and for one equally notable decline in historical sociology. Crisis and its converse, social stabilization, have appeared as important mechanisms in each of these cases. But we should also recall that the 1930s in the United States was also a period of crisis, but not one that led to a wave of historicism in sociology. Nor was there a significant increase in historical sociology in West Germany during the 1970s and 1980s. Historical explanation is not the same thing as prediction [Horkheimer 1933]. One of the epistemological lessons of historical sociology is that social forecasting is impossible except for very short-term projections of some current patterns into the immediate future. If there is one valid generalization about sociohistorical life, is that historical events are complexly overdetermined by an ever-shifting array of causal mechanisms, some of which are themselves quite specific to a given time and place.

*For comments on earlier drafts of this paper I would like to thank audiences in December, 2007 at the New School for Social Research and the University of Michigan Anthropology and History Colloquium. I am also grateful to Reinhard Kössler and the other members of the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute for helping me with research on Bergstraesser in July, 2007.*

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## The Historical Sociology of Historical Sociology

### Germany and the United States in the Twentieth Century

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the reasons for the variable incidence and forms of historical sociology in several different historical periods, with a focus on Germany and the United States, and the flows of social scientists between those two countries due to forced exile from Nazi Germany, American military occupation after 1945, and the voluntary exchange of academics. Historical sociology was one of the main poles of German sociology before 1933, whereas it had only a handful of proponents in the United States at that time. After 1933 the majority of German historical sociologists went into exile, most of them to the United States. In West Germany historical sociology failed to survive the Nazi period. Several leading Weimar-era historical sociologists had stayed in Germany but were unable to reestablish their prominence. The handful of exiled historical sociologists who returned to Germany after 1945 were marginalized, stopped working historically, or moved into other disciplines like Political Science. The explanation of these trends has to be multicausal and conjunctural.

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**Keywords:** *historical sociology, Germany, France, refugees from Nazi Germany, sociology of intellectuals, sociology of knowledge.*

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