CHAPTER 7

Historians and the Study of Protest*

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THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY

In reflecting on the distinctive way in which historians have approached the study of social movements and collective action, we call attention to a number of issues that have been addressed in the literature on history as a discipline. A distinction that has often been made between the disciplines of history and the social sciences concerns the general and the particular. Historians are purportedly more concerned with context-dependent generalizations, offering findings that are relevant only to the particular context they are studying and overly cautious in making inadequately contextualized generalizations based on evidence from a particular time and place. However, historians cannot avoid the use of general concepts, such as revolution or social movement; hence they necessarily generalize. Such concepts select certain instances as “facts” and make their descriptions more meaningful by suggesting causal analogies to phenomena in other times and places that may also be labeled revolutions or social movements. Nevertheless, the types of generalizations and levels of generality with which historians are typically comfortable are those that apply to a relatively limited number of cases delimited in time and space, rather than the decontextualized general laws to which social scientists sometimes aspire. As a discipline, historians are organized along the lines of time and space, and most historians focus their research on a particular place during a delimited period of time. Philip Abrams (1982:194) contrasts the historians’ “rhetoric of close presentation (seeking to persuade in terms of a dense texture of detail)” with the sociologists’ “rhetoric of perspective (seeking to persuade in terms of the elegant patterning of connections seen from a distance).”

In their efforts to offer context-dependent generalizations, historians rely on what Kai Erikson (1970) labels “professional reflexes.” This refers to the distinctive set of working arrangements, vocabularies, and “standards of explanation” to which students are exposed during their professional socialization, and that are enforced by a variety of disciplinary gatekeepers, from journal editors to grant reviewers. Because historians typically work in a

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context of data scarcity rather than data abundance, their working arrangements are less concerned with sampling from a large population and more focused on close attention to matters of texture and detail. Erikson also observes that professional climates and reflexes involve different criteria for what constitutes a plausible explanation. Historians typically explain an outcome by telling a credible story about the sequence of events leading up to it or the motives that impelled it, providing a plausible and persuasive plot that has a sense of dramatic inevitability, rather than viewing an outcome as explained if it is connected to institutions and forces in the surrounding environment. Historians typically see storytelling, or the use of narratives, as a central defining feature of their work, an integral part of writing history that makes possible close attention to actors and events. Narratives, then, are a key vehicle for addressing the relationship between the particular and the general.

Another distinction relates to the nature of the evidence that historians typically use. Historians usually rely on documentary evidence available in archives, residues of the past that are filtered down to the present, typically through the operation of large-scale organizations, such as churches and states (Tilly 1970: 434–466). Unlike social scientists, most historians do not go out and generate their own data, but rely on already existing data. Although social scientists sometimes adopt a critical approach to their sources, historian’s reliance on archival sources has meant treating sources as suspect and paying greater attention than is often the case among social scientists to questions concerning the social construction of knowledge, that is, to why, how, and under what conditions documents were created and their authenticity. A reliance on archival sources requires interpretation, that is, the processing and evaluation of data by the individual researcher, whose reconstruction of the past is inevitably shaped by her language, culture, values, and historical location.

A final distinction that observers have made between the disciplines of history and the social sciences concerns temporal scopes. The focus of social scientists on the present often means a narrow concern with short-term causes and short-term consequences. Historians’ focus on the past provides an opportunity to study not just short-term sequences but also the long durée and long-term processes of change, such as industrialization, urbanization, or demographic transitions. Many historians do not seize this opportunity and most historical research tends to focus on the in-depth study of relatively short periods of time, but an attentiveness to long-term processes of change and to the temporal boundaries demarcating different historical periods can help to ascertain the scope conditions, or boundaries, of theoretical generalizations and to identify key turning points in processes of change.

Are these features simply disciplinary stereotypes or are they actually reflected in the work that historians do? The extent to which historians of social movements actually do develop context-dependent generalizations, highlight temporal rather than lateral connections, take long-term rather than short-term approaches to the study of social protest, utilize the connotative vocabulary of the narrative, and rely on archival data is an empirical question that we address in our subsequent analysis of historian’s research on social movements. Our concern is not with whether historical and the social scientific studies of movement should merge as a common endeavor or the benefits that each side might derive from such a marriage, but the actual disciplinary practices of historians who study social movements.

1 Although the so-called “historic turn” in the social sciences (McDonald 1996) and the rise of an event-centered historical sociology have blurred this distinction, these disciplinary reflexes still appear to be dominant, at least in the major journals of the disciplines. In recent years, social scientists have rediscovered narrative and argued for the importance of analytic narrative in social science explanations (Abbott 1990; Abrams 1982; Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005; Aminzade 1992; Griffin 1993; Hart 1992; Kiser 1996; Stryker 1996).