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Notes on the Method of World-System Biography

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Abstract

C. Wright Mills boiled the social sciences down to one sentence: "They are attempts to help us understand biography and history, and the connections between the two in a variety of social structures." This special issue considers biography as an fruitful entry point into macro-historical sociology. With lineages from Marx and Weber to Wallerstein and Bourdieu, the sociology of the individual can produce a clearer path between the muddy oppositions of structure and agency or the longue durée and the event. This special issue unbinds biography from methodological nationalism and the teleology of great men tales. Instead, we aim to show how individuals are "a world within a world," an acting subject structured within world-historical time and place.



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C. Wright Mills boiled the social sciences down to one sentence: “They are attempts to help us understand biography and history, and the connections between the two in a variety of social structures” (1959:31-32).¹ Judging by the nonfiction shelves, biography is usually associated with histories of “great men” unchained by their surroundings and destined for either eminence or infamy: presidents, CEOs, dictators, celebrities, dissidents, or some combination therein. Yet the use of biographical methods, as well as prosopography (group biography), has produced some of the field-defining works of 20th century social science. Think of Charles Beard on the economic interests of the U.S. founding fathers (1913), Pitrim Sorokin on the social mobility of families before and after the Russian revolution (1927), Robert Merton on the Protestant orientation of English scientists (1938), C.L.R. James on Caribbean cricketers during British decolonization (1963), Daniel Bertaux on networks of artisanal breadmakers in Paris (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1997), or Jeffrey Paige on the elite dynasties of Central American coffee production (1998). These works conceptually and empirically cut the Gordian knot of the agency/structure divide. This method should be distinguished from the more common approach of history “from below” which takes as its target the elitist hagiographies of great men but can lack the theoretical scaffolding that Mills championed for a critical and emancipatory social science. In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills is quite explicit: “No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey” (1959:6).

Covering this ground has never been an easy task. Most scholarly biographies, even implicitly, raise the fundamental social scientific question of the seeming contrast between the covering laws of general theory and the descriptive analysis of the particular. Every generation of academics rediscovers for themselves the supposed antagonism between Anglo-American empiricism and the interpretive traditions of Continental thought, the *Methodenstreit* (conflict over methods) between the methodological individualism of Austrian economists and the social particularities of the German historical school, or the opposition between phenomenological subjectivism which privileges experience and the structural objectivism that breaks with surface reality to unearth deeper relations. Or to put it more biographically: Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe as universal *homo economicus* or as slave-trading exemplar of British mercantile capitalism (Friedman 1962:12-13; Hymer 1971). Such divisions, as Pierre Bourdieu (1973) and Immanuel Wallerstein (2000) teach us, are false antimonies.

¹ This special issue was a long time in the making. It began with a series of conversations about Georgi Derluguian’s work in 2010 and a panel at the Eastern Sociological Society in 2012. We thank Jackie Smith and *JWSR* editors for their encouragement.

A historical sociology of the individual may produce a clearer path through these flawed oppositions. Max Weber, for instance, looked to Neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert. For Rickert, scholarship should be concerned with identifying “historical individuals.” The term should be literally understood as a critique and sociological upgrade to the “great individuals” around which world history supposedly pivots (Ringer 2004:28; Oakes 1987:117). Rickert argued that individuals are relevant to historical inquiry when they make real choices in the face of stark conflicts between social values of a bounded time period, ascribe meaning to events, and provide momentum to an epoch. The scholarly object of the historical individual “is a construct, not a concrete person or collectivity, although its description is meant to point up its distinctive qualities, not those of its traits that lend themselves to generalization” (Ringer 2004:28).

These reflections became central to Weber’s sociological methods. Weber argued that any social fact is related to the values of the time and, as such, the work of a historical individual (1949:79-81, 155-159). In the opening sentences of Chapter two in the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber drew from Rickert to explain that his object of analysis, the set of values he labeled with the “somewhat pretentious phrase” of the “*spirit* of capitalism,” constituted a “historical individual, i.e., a complex of elements associated in historical reality which we unite into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of their cultural significance” (1958: 47).² In other words, the most famous sociological book ever written is a biography, of sorts.

As neither the rational actor idealized in liberal thought nor an automaton programmed by social structure, a historical sociology of the individual can overturn our common sense. It is too crude to state that the individual is both a product of the social forces that engender a particular historical moment and an active agent who internalizes, embodies, and enacts history through social relations. Individuals and their constitutive environment are interpenetrated social phenomena. It is necessary to confront both in order to seriously reckon with either.

Toward a World-System Biography

Mills’ challenge to the social sciences requires a well-defined explanatory framework to make sense of the social structures that surround the individual—how fate and fortune are embedded in history. Here, Wallerstein’s explanation of Fernand Braudel’s path to the top of the intellectual world is apt:

² This is the English translation by Talcott Parsons, who was surely aware of Rickert’s influence.

Were all these turning-points mere luck? Surely not. Surely, Fernand Braudel has been a man to seize *fortuna*, not once but each time it was offered him. One does not become a towering figure in world social science by luck. But to seize *fortuna* requires not only the will to seize but the *fortuna* to be seized. The *fortuna* to be seized is located within the *conjuncture*, and to assess the *conjuncture* we must place it within the structure (1982: 107).

One suitable starting point for joining up fortunes, conjunctures, and structures is the patterned evolution of historical capitalism over space and time. This actually existing capitalism often stands in stark opposition to the neat and tidy capitalism of social scientists, whether Marxist or liberal (Sewell 2014). The essential feature of historical capitalism over the long term is the organizational flexibility and institutional eclecticism of forms of capital accumulation (Arrighi 1994:4-5). While many scholars mark capitalism within the economic containers of the nation-state or by the sole presence of wage-labor exploitation, scholars in the world-systems tradition argue that capitalism subordinated and incorporated various modes of labor control into a global social system. This particular world-system, in which we all live, is characterized by the logic of endless pursuit of capital accumulation and the increasing commodification of all forms of human and ecological activities. There are cycles in historical capitalism which rhyme but do not repeat: economic waves of expansion and contraction, the construction and reconstruction of an interstate system through the rise and fall of hegemonic powers, and the making and unraveling of social compacts and anti-systemic unrest (Arrighi and Silver 1999).

Although historical capitalism is a “social system in which the scope of these rules (the law of value) has grown ever wider, the enforcers of these rules ever more intransigent, the penetration of these rules into the social fabric ever greater” (Wallerstein 1983:19), it would be a mistake to reduce everything to an economic logic. Historical capitalism is also internally shaped by clashes between liberal ideas of universal scientific and moral progress and the harsh reality of amassing inequality over spatial, racialized, or gendered divides (Wallerstein 1991; Quijano 2000).

If there is a single criticism of world-systems analysis that has stuck over the past three decades, though unfairly, it is the charge of reductionism. In experiences with young scholars in U.S.-based graduate programs in sociology, history, or politics, we have observed that world-systems analysis is mentioned in the same timbre as a Lincoln Town Car: impressive a few decades ago but irrelevant today. Critics protest that a world-systems approach flattens social action to economism, and “assum[es] that individuals would act in a manner consistent with what we today call economic rationality” (Denemark & Thomas 1988: 53). The accusation is not

without merit. All too often world-system analysis is reduced to a rigid and sclerotic set of concepts, the so-called world-systems *theory* coarsely and perfunctorily sketched to students or celebrated as revolutionary cookbook.³ This is the predicament of unanticipated intellectual success during the cresting of post-1968 radical social movements and then again in the post-1989 stupefaction with globalization. Indeed, the heterodox provocations of world-systems analysis are appreciated outside of North American academia to a substantial degree, though perhaps not surprisingly so in semi-peripheral countries (e.g. Harris 2014). Yet here we should take care to avoid the Procustean tendencies of second-generation scholarship. Our discussion of world-system biographies should be not be seen as an application of a theory or a new paradigm. Instead, it is “a call for a debate about the paradigm” (Wallerstein 2011: xxx).

Historicizing Individuals and Individualizing History

To renew this call for debate, this special issue considers the historical sociology of the individual. Despite the “cultural turn” in world-systems analysis, projects such as “the coloniality of power” associated with Anibal Quijano or Richard Lee’s world-historical sociology of knowledge do not directly deal with the dilemma of individual practice and social structure. The innovative research on the role of household production by Joan Smith and Immanuel Wallerstein broadly deals with the hidden micro-structures of capitalist reproduction but does not trace out the path of single families through time and space. The concept of commodity chains, arguably the most successful export of world-systems analysis, has tangentially inspired a whole genre of popular and scholarly biography, but about goods, not people: cotton instead of Cromwell, rubber instead of Reagan, salt instead of Sartre. At its best, such as Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (2014), this segment of the expanding field of “global history” is producing work with which world-systems scholars should be in close dialogue. In less capable hands, however, commodity history becomes commodity fetishism, placing “its

³ What Braudel wrote of Marxism now applies to world-systems analysis in its more unbending forms: “Marxism is a whole collection of models. Sartre protests against the rigidity, the schematic, inadequate nature of models, and he does so in the name of the particular and the individual. I shall protest, as he does, not against the model, but rather against the use to which people have thought themselves entitled to put it. The genius of Marx, the secret of his enduring power, lies in his having been the first to construct true social models starting out from the long-term. These models have been fixed permanently in their simplicity; they have been given the force of law and they have been treated as readymade, automatic explanations, applicable in all places to all societies. Instead, by submitting them again to changes wrought by time, we should reveal their true structure, which is strong and well-knit and would always recur, with subtle variations, blurred or brightened by the proximity of other structures, themselves definable in terms of other rules and models. In this way has the creative power of the most powerful social analysis been shackled...present-day Marxism seems to me to be the very image of the danger facing any social science devoted to the model in its pure state and for its own sake” (1972:462).

chosen commodity to a position of overwhelming historical centrality and supreme self-determining agency” (Burke 2012:480).

Of course, the recent “global turn” among professional historians should be praised, since our increasingly interwoven global society demands that scholars approach their questions from the perspective of the world. The recent wave of global histories from Jürgen Osterhammel and his colleagues, for example, synthesizes an incredible amount of material with an array of theoretical approaches (Osterhammel 2014; Rosenberg, Osterhammel & Iriye 2012; Iryie & Osterhammel 2012; Reinhardt, Iryie, & Osterhammel 2015). Nevertheless, these works also demonstrate “how difficult it is to write in an engaging manner about such a vast and amorphous subject, and to develop convincing overall explanatory frameworks.” When the time comes for the argument to get specific, global history often retreats into ill-defined and unsatisfying claims about interrelated influences and networks, or an infinite regress into a larger and increasingly opaque synthesis of lists (Bell 2013). C. Wright Mills knew quite well that history is too important to be left to the historians (Kumar 2013:35).

Here we come to the strange notion of world-system biography. Georgi Derluguian coined the phrase a decade ago, in *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography*. Derluguian's work emerged via an accidental encounter between a student of Immanuel Wallerstein and a Kabardino-Balkarian sociologist-turned-warlord with an affinity for Pierre Bourdieu. Derluguian was not simply being coy with his title. He aimed to show how “comprehensive interpretation of specific micro-interactions necessarily requires articulating their relational position within macro-contexts; but by the same token, an account of global trends will have no force or substance unless its observations and analyses are rooted in empirical situations” (2005:10).

Derluguian used the figure of Yuri Shanibov to tell the story of Soviet modernization. Shanibov's biography seems exceptional. A dissident intellectual who waited out the Brezhnev years, he eventually adopted the once prohibited language of nationalism and re-emerged in the 1990s as Musa Shanib, the leader of Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the North Caucasus. Yet Derluguian's approach sets the biographical arc of Shanibov in relief with the shared experiences produced by the Soviet developmental state: the children of Stalin-era rapid growth became the Soviet *soixante-huitards* who demonstrated the limits of Khrushchev's reforms and then outlived the USSR to face the uncertain opportunity and chaos of the post-socialist era.

The book produced a suggestive but preliminary *via media* for overcoming the agency/structure dilemma. To this end, Derluguian drew on world-systems analysis to examine the structural contradictions of semi-peripheral modernization, Charles Tilly's “alternative political science” to rethink the obfuscating labels of regime type for the USSR, and Bourdieu's field theory to trace the structured embeddedness and historical constraints observable within

individual practice. Objects of study, Derluigian wrote, “should be situated in their extended environments and analyzed by locating them within pulsating and slowly evolving webs of relations” (12).

This approach offers an alternative to the overburdened explanatory device of charismatic authority. As Bourdieu noted, most social scientists adhere “to the ‘charismatic ideology’ of autonomous ‘creation’, forgetting that the creator too has to be created” (Burawoy and von Holdt 2012:13, citing Bourdieu 1996). As an alternative, world-system biography historicizes individuals as products of their world-historical place and time and individualizes history as sets of resources embodied and enacted by concrete agents. This can be, and has been, done through methodologically nationalist formula. If we unbind biography from nationalism, however, Bourdieu’s concept of the individual as “a world within a world” is quite apt:

The *habitus* - embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history - is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate present. This autonomy is that of the past, enacted and acting, which, functioning as accumulated capital, produces history-on the basis of history and so ensures the permanence in change that makes the individual agent a world within the world. The *habitus* is a spontaneity without consciousness or will opposed as much to the mechanical necessity of things without history in mechanistic theories as it is to the reflexive freedom of subjects “without inertia” in rationalist theories (1990:56).

Bourdieu’s habitus is akin to Weber’s expanded notion of the “historical individual.” It is an integrated account of individual and social worlds that goes beyond the false boundary between ideographic and nomothetic methods.

Placed within a world-historical perspective, the habitus provides “a radical redefinition of “context.”” As Dale Tomich writes, “rather than the external ‘background’ against which the short term unfolds, the *longue durée* and the *conjoncture* are actively present as structuring agencies shaping constraints and possibilities.” This approach “allows us to contextualize acting subjects at the intersection of multiple spatial and temporal levels and establish the specific conditions and relations that form actors and actions. It thereby gives specific content to Marx’s dictum that men make history but only such history as it possible for them to make” (Tomich 2012:28). Such is the promise and potential of world-system biography.

Contents of the Issue

The papers in this special issue build from Derlugian's methodological formulation and develop it through a series of cases. In the opening article, David Huysen considers Alfred Winslow Jones, the socialist inventor of the hedge fund, as the human connection between the cyclical crisis of interwar capitalism and structural transformations of postwar capitalism. Brendan McQuade's essay explains George Orwell's towering cultural presence in relation to his acknowledged role in the fragmentation and exhaustion of the Old Left.

Roberto Ortiz considers Ruben Darío, the master poet of the periphery, in order to map the construction of a Latin American literary field and identify the continuing dilemmas of peripheral intellectuals. Similarly, Ana Candela analyzes Chen Da's internalization and transformation of sociology during the crises of social and political life in early 20th century China.

Şahan Savaş Karataşlı sifts through the career of Turkish prime minister Turgut Özal to unpack the heterodox path of neoliberal Turkey. Kevan Harris looks to the rise of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad as a harbinger of 21st century forms of political struggle. Finally, Georgi Derlugian closes with a reflective essay on the method and explores what a world-system biography would look like for none other than Immanuel Wallerstein himself.

Together, these articles, often relying on primary sources, provide suggestive examples of the individual as means through which explain macrostructural processes. These essays make explicit what is usually implicit in good biography. Indeed, we believe that some of the finest world-systems analysis currently being produced is completely unaware of itself. It is our task to weave together these threads into a coherent pattern. As Robert Caro, who spent his entire life writing the biographies of two people - Lyndon Johnson and Robert Moses - put it, "I came to see that I wasn't really interested in writing a biography to tell the story of a famous man. I realized that what I wanted to do was to use biography as a means of illuminating the great forces that shape the times" (1999).

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