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Link Between History And Sociology

An Essay in Comparative Analysis

By Harrison Akingbade

Definition: History is an attempt to reconstruct past events from documentary sources. It is a way of thinking about the past and of synthesizing changes over a long span of time. History, as a discipline, is also sometimes considered to embrace all social sciences.

Definition: Sociology is the study of society, its structure, functions, and processes. It embraces the study of human actions and relations.

There is an intimate relation between the sociologist and the modern historian in that both see their work as a clear attempt to write the present as history.

From the definition, it is obvious that the historian is typically concerned with the past while trying—unless he happens to be a pure antiquarian—to show the relevance of his findings to the present.

The sociologist, on the other hand, is much more likely to focus his attention upon the present. Just like the modern historian, the sociologist does not become a slave to this self-imposed limitation. He often goes beyond the frontiers of the present or the contemporary. When he does this, he is making use of historical materials.

Some writers, such as Thomas Cochran and Richard Hofstadter, have maintained that history can be divided into two major types—chronicles and monographs. Chronicle, it is generally agreed, is not history because it is not considered scientific. Monograph, on the other hand, occupies a special place among historical writings. Because the historian exhaustively explores a narrow segment of reality in his monograph, his work, in essence, becomes objective, definite, uncontroversial, and scientific. And this is where history and other social sciences that focus on small questions that are carefully and cautiously examined come

closer in scientific precision to the natural sciences.

History is far older than sociology. Being an old discipline, history has acquired some strong traditions that work against drastic innovations. Its traditions are geared toward those of a literary art, with a greater emphasis on the literary than the scientific ideal.

By contrast, sociology or the social sciences are relatively new and can adopt and adapt. The first university to establish a department of sociology was Chicago in 1890. Even today, some English universities have not given recognition to sociology because of their conservative nature and because they see no need in adding a new discipline. But that sociology has become an established discipline cannot be contested. In order to understand the interplay of sociology and history one has to look at both disciplines from a historical perspective.

History is being denied as an object of ordinary rational and positive knowledge by the philosophers who postulate that this discipline is an artistic cognition. While it is true that history maintains a tradition of literary art—an aspect of historical writing—it should not be robbed of its other aspects. For example, historical writing is a distinct contribution to knowledge. History is more than just a series of events cemented by literary semantics. While it is not a mere description of events as is generally supposed, it is interpretive, analytical, synthetical and definite.

There are many sociologists who are inclined to regard historians as primarily gatherers of facts, as scholars without lively theoretical interests, and who are skeptical regarding the applicability of historical materials to present problems. Historians, on the other hand, are likely to see many sociologists as too specified and disinterested in broad synthesis.

Some of the areas of sharp disagreement between history and sociology are in methodology and emphasis. For example, historians are more inclined to think

in terms of records, and to have an irresistible urge to delve into a newly opened collection of important papers without regard to what general social problems they will illuminate. The first task of the historian is to assemble all documents regardless of what he is studying. The sociologist, on the other hand, will tend to think first in terms of challenging problems, without regard to the materials that may provide answers.

In terms of data, historical data are different from sociological data. While historians do not have direct access to their subjects, they do have abundance of documents or material even though their masses of material may not be focused upon a given subject as it is available to modern sociology. The sociologists, on the other hand, can conduct interviews, take projective tests, use statistical techniques, set up apparatus to verify hypotheses, and erect models. In short, they have access to their subjects. This is not to suggest that historians are not interested in hypotheses. Indeed, they are interested in those hypotheses that can be tested by the material at their disposal only. They shy away from constructs that do not lend themselves easily to documentation.

Since historians believe in historical relationism, a concept that stresses that values and ideas change with period of history, that what might be esthetically, politically and morally justifiable at one time may be less so at another, they develop a historical conception of time. For the historian, time is the beginning and the end of everything. Events are put in chronological order in order to examine the similarities and differences between them, and to study the changes over a long span of time. The sociologist's time is very different from that of the historian's. It is far less demanding, less specific and never central to his problems and considerations. In fact, the sociologists as well as other social scientists have found it possible, in general, to push the problem of time into the background. The his-

10 torian cannot escape from the rational use of time. He must discover the ways in which events are interrelated beyond their relations of time sequence or coincidence. Particularly, he must discover how they are related as cause and consequence. To do this will entail the selection of events, their arrangement in logical as well as temporal patterns, and their ordering in rank according to some criteria of significance.

Contrary to the general criticism of history, we see that the historian makes use of concepts and hypotheses in writing his monograph. Some sociologists will argue that the historical use of time does not shed light on knowledge, that it only enables the historian to arrange events in the order in which they occurred. This is utter fallacy. These scholars tend to see history as nothing beyond the chronicle. I have earlier made distinction between a chronicle and a monograph. A chronicle merely gives information but not understanding. It is true that the old historians, most of them not trained in the writing of history, are concerned with just what happened. But the new historians, trained in the art of historical writing and making use of interdisciplinary approach, are not satisfied with a mere chronological catalogue of events. While they deal with what has happened, they also examine its causes, effects and its relevance to other historical events.

In essence, we can say that the inquiry of the historian is diachronic and that of sociologists synchronic. The basic difference between diachronic and synchronic analysis is that in the former time is an essential dimension. It deals with changes over successive points in time. In the latter, the category of time loses its centrality. Synchronic analysis focuses attention on how a thing exists at one point in time. Ely Chinoy makes the distinction clearer by maintaining that "all sociological inquiries refer to persons and action at some specific time and place even though their propositions are not limited by time and place."

Another basic distinction between history and sociology is that history emphasizes the unique while sociology directs its attention to the recurrent. In order for the sociologist to generalize, he needs more than one event. Therefore, he concerns himself with the events that happen again and again in human societies. Generalization is only possible when classes of events are at the disposal of the sociologist. It is only then that he can study the patterns of recurrence, as well as find the functional relationship between one class and its congeners.

Michael Postan, an eminent English economic historian, has argued convincingly that the arguments that history emphasizes the unique and unrepeatable character of historical occurrences and the consequent opposition between the historical descriptions of events and the scientific search for general laws are fictitious and invalid. To Postan, it is a fiction to say that history deals only with unique and unrepeatable events. However, he admits that historians might confine themselves to the study of the unique and stresses that scientific generalization is also possible in history if only historians are willing to subordinate their aberration with the unique in their search for general knowledge.

Another distinction between sociology and history is somewhat related to the one above. Sociology is said to be abstract and history concrete. By concrete it is meant that much of the historical narrative deals with concrete persons and presumably unique events. The sociologist, on the other hand, as noted earlier, is centrally concerned with generalizations. If a historian is going to study a revolution, he usually focuses on a particular revolution. A sociologist, on the other hand, will look at all revolutions and see what is common in order to arrive at some theories. He concerns himself with the social climate. For example, the sociologist is not interested in the English Revolution of 1688, in the American Revolution of 1776, in the

French Revolution of 1789. All these are subjects of historical inquiry; they are useful to the sociologist as data for a sociology of revolution. The same thing is true of wars.

History is also distinguished from sociology in the way it deals with its subjects. History strives for the accurate and precise description of particular events, while the sociologist endeavors to arrive at the statement of general laws. In this sense, history is monothetic and sociology is idiographic. These are new terms. To say history is monothetic and sociology idiographic is the same as saying that history is diachronic and sociology synchronic or that history is descriptive and sociology analytical.

In spite of these differences, most of the eminent historians have asked and answered sociological questions in their books. The same is true of sociologists. In fact, there are many historians who might legitimately be identified as sociologists, and many sociologists as historians. This suggests that one cannot actually draw rigid lines between history and sociology; the two disciplines are so crisscrossed and interrelated that any attempt to over-emphasize their differences will be disastrous and obscurantist. The relationship between history and sociology has been aptly described as an attempt to write the present as history.

The sociologist needs historical materials and content analysis in building up his hypotheses, testing them, and in establishing a general pattern. Historical types are a very important part of what sociologists are studying, and they are also indispensable to the sociologist's explanation of them. For example, most societies differ from each other in the range of variation of specific phenomena within them as well, with respect to the degree of social homogeneity. A sociologist travelling abroad to study some other societies will need to study the historical background of these societies before he can understand the relationships between them. Certain historical phases are often

missing from certain societies. The sociologist should adopt the historical approach to explain what could have been responsible for the omission and the possible implication of such omission.

For example, some scholars have noted the absence of the bronze age in Africa. It is up to the sociologist to attempt a generalization for such conspicuous absence. The knowledge of the history of a society is often indispensable to the sociologist in understanding the different social structures of the society. In Africa today, the need to study migrations and the cultural borrowings of one ethnic group from another and the extent of such borrowings has become a matter of necessity for the reconstruction of African history. Both historians and sociologists are interested in migrations. One can also see the interplay between history and sociology in the area of invention. In dealing with invention, the sociologist must approach his research from historical perspective. Technological change and adjustment, when interpreted by the sociologist, will include subjects that historians normally explore.

The sociologist will make use of history when trying to get comparative data or when trying to trace the antecedents of an institution or of whatever he chooses to deal with. Biography, an important branch of history, cannot be ignored by the sociologist. While he does not deal with the history of a single life, or concern himself with the details of one man's career—as does the historian—the sociologist attempts to discover the functional relationship between eminent individuals on the one hand and the social process on the other. He examines the institutions within which a man's biography is enacted and the milieu that has shaped the personality of the man.

The historian often makes use of sociological method to arrive at better and more accurate conclusions. Thus, he might rest satisfied with the use of the Federal Census in studying the importance of population change while neglecting random samples such as business directories,

which the sociologist will use as aids to historical research.

In describing a historical event, does the historian not engage himself in the description of prevailing attitudes, opinions? When he does this he is working in the realm of sociology. The climate of opinion is especially important in history because it favors some activities and represses others. The historian must study public opinion and attitudes.

For example, the change from a climate in which the basic loyalty was to the State, represents one of the major shifts in history. The details of what happened are known, but not how and why it happened. Hopefully, the increasing use of pollsters and public opinion polls and the study of attitudes by historians will help to remove this kind of problem in the future.

There are many works that have enshrined the place of attitude and opinion research in historical studies. Some of the best books in history, Toynbee's *The Study of History*, Weber's *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and Taylor's *The Medieval Mind*, are those which deal with attitudes, value systems, and prevailing beliefs of the period.

Because of the special relationship between the two disciplines, interdisciplinary cooperation between their practitioners—especially in the reconstruction of the history of the people of the Third World—will yield tremendous effects in improving their research methodology and in expanding the scope of their subjects. Both historians and sociologists should emphasize their similarities rather than their artificially-created differences. □

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