

## HISTORY, SOCIOLOGY, AND DECISION MAKING

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Many sociologists have noted the interplay between their discipline and history, but C. Wright Mills may have stated it best a quarter century ago in The Sociological Imagination. "the facts of contemporary history," he reminded his readers, "are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women . . . . Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both." Believing that one could not conduct good sociology without being a good social historian, Mills wrote, "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." In short, Mills postulated that having an appreciation of history was prerequisite to having a well-developed sociological imagination.<sup>1</sup> He might well have argued that the contrary was true also; a historian who has a sociological imagination is in a better position to frame insightful questions about the past.

Writing a few years after Mills, Cambridge historian E. H. Carr stated his view of the relationship between history and sociology, "The more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both." Recognizing the theoretical and methodological differences in the disciplines, David Hackett Fischer, author of the influential Historians' Fallacies, added a word of caution.

If sociological history and historical sociology are conceived as a combination of the conceptual sophistication of the best sociologists and the dogged if often undirected empiricism of the best historians, then the prospects are very bright indeed. But one might also imagine an interdisciplinary effort which combined the worst of both worlds--the stupidity of historians and the ignorance of sociologists.<sup>2</sup>

One of the best opportunities for sociology and history to come together in a positive way is in the realm of decision making. Only a few sociologists and historians have the opportunity to give direct input to public policy decision makers, and even fewer still are ever entrusted with the responsibility of actually making such decisions. For whatever it is worth, it is my impression (without any specific investigation of the matter) that professionally trained historians are more likely to turn

politician than sociologists are. Mike Mansfield, George McGovern, and, closer in time and locale, Newt Gingrich come to mind. Historians are fond of pointing out that Teddy Roosevelt and John Kennedy wrote popular works of history before their presidencies, but they were more dilettante than professionals. Whatever the case, a few exceptions notwithstanding, we can stipulate that neither of our disciplines turns out decision makers in the kinds of numbers that the schools of law and business do.

Despite the comparative paucity of attention given directly to decision making, sociologists and historians sometimes find ourselves justifying the considerable amounts of public and private money expended on our disciplines by colleges, universities, and other institutions by asserting that the study of sociology and history will help students to learn to think critically and thereby become better decision makers. To be sure, there are many other sound and impressive reasons for the perpetuation of our fields of endeavor and for their prominent place in a general education curriculum, but the need to train the decision makers of tomorrow is an appealing argument to make to the administrators, politicians and philanthropists of today. Significantly, the argument is not only appealing, it is surely also valid. The knowledge and insights routinely imparted in existing history and sociology courses already hone thinking and deciding skills, but we could serve our students better if we were more rigorous and explicit in our teaching of this intended outcome of general education.

Even though most of them were not trained for the task, we cannot escape the fact that decision makers continually make use of history and sociology both explicitly and implicitly. If our disciplines are going to be used, we have an obligation as both scholars and citizens to see that they are used right--or at least as close to right as possible. This challenge calls for an interdisciplinary partnership between history and sociology. Such an alliance, of course, is not meant to preclude relationships with the other liberal arts as well.

Nothing is more irritating to a historian than hearing journalists, politicians, TV evangelists or some other public figure misuse and mangle history to buttress their own preconceived notions on matters of public controversy. In Historians and the Living Past Allan Lichtman and Valerie French insist, "An understanding of history is required either to recognize or to critique the historical analysis that underlies vital policy decisions". That such an understanding is required does not guarantee that it will be used. Lester Stephens explains in Probing the Past: "When the past becomes history.... then man is in a position to make more carefully reasoned decisions and to act in a traditional way. That he will not necessarily do so is granted, but that he will be able to do so is justification enough for studying his past."<sup>3</sup>



An incident from the spring of this year [1986] will illustrate. In an unprecedented move to defend the integrity of the discipline from an onslaught from one of the best communicators the nation has ever known, the Organization of American Historians overwhelmingly passed a resolution denouncing Ronald Reagan's characterization of the Nicaraguan Contras as the "moral equivalent of the founding fathers." The general body resolved that it "deplores the President's invocation of the historical prestige and legacy of the Constitution's framers in order to promote the Administration's foreign policy and to impugn the patriotism of those who oppose that policy." The executive board called Reagan's analogy "a distortion of history."<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of whether the Reagan policy toward Central America is the appropriate one, the historical analogy itself was factually unsupportable and intellectually deceptive. Yet President Reagan's rhetoric and the image it conjures are powerful and seemingly more important to many Americans than historical accuracy.

To illustrate the pitfalls of a historical decision making, I recently asked a class of about thirty students if they thought that Ronald Reagan's Nicaraguan policy was better than Jimmy Carter's. All but a handful answered yes. I then asked them what Carter's policy had in fact been, but not a single student could answer. The students were confident that Reagan's policy was superior even though they really had no idea what approach of the recent past it was supposedly superior to.

I presume that sociologists get equally miffed when they hear sociological research touted in the media in distorted and misleading ways. For instance, whatever their personal convictions about the proper public policy toward pornography might be and regardless of what particular methodological emphasis they might champion, virtually all scholars would surely agree that the Meese Commission report represented a singularly good example of exceptionally bad social science.

One of the greatest pitfalls in decision making is what might be called the "good old days" fallacy. This sort of thinking is by no means the exclusive province of political conservatives, although they seem especially prone to it. They often long for an idealized past that never really existed. In some cases the historical record is complete enough that we can be reasonably sure that today is, in fact, different than the past. Sexually explicit materials, for instance, are undoubtedly more widely available than they were a generation ago, and, of course, the home VCRs on which much of the material is now displayed simply did not exist then. There is no significant factual dispute involved about the contrast between the old days and the new days in such a case, but whether the old days were

"good," whether they were better than the new days, is as much a question of values as of history.

In many cases, of course, we are not even so sure what the old days were actually like. Historical crime statistics, for example, especially those involving social taboos, are notoriously unreliable because of under reporting and haphazard compilation.

The myth of a safe and secure past in contrast to a lustful and crime ridden present is a powerful one. The image has some elements of historical truth, but it often runs into logical contradictions. For example, many parents long for public policy decisions that could return the country to the Ozzie and Harriet days of the 1950s when mother and dad did not have to worry about sordid things such as child sexual abuse. Meanwhile sociologists and other social scientists continue to find that many contemporary child abusers suffered sexual abuse themselves as children. If that finding is true (and there is every reason to believe that it is), it follows inescapably that many of today's abusers were being abused during the supposedly idyllic 1950s. If the logic is carried back further it would imply that the abusers of the 1950s were being abused in the 1930s and so forth. Something has to give; either the sociologists are wrong about the patterns of abuse or the good old days myth must suffer a severe blow.

I would like to conclude by drawing from one of the most provocative books on the uses of history published in many years. Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers by Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May of Harvard is based on a course they teach, and it draws on their own experience in governmental advisory roles as well as on wide research. Following a dozen case study chapters on such topics as the Cuban missile crisis, Social Security reform, and arms control, they conclude: "That brings us back to history's traditional claim that study of the past in general helps decision-makers in particular. We hope we can strengthen the claim. We think we can; indeed we think we have."<sup>5</sup>



## NOTES

This paper was presented to the Georgia Sociological Association, October 11, 1986.

1. C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination (N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959). [quoted from Warner Modular Pub. reprint, pp. 5-6.]
2. David Hackett Fischer, Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 37 [includes Carr quotation].
3. Both excerpted in Stephen Vaughn, ed., The Vital Past: Writings on the Uses of History (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985), pp. 278, 99.
4. "Footnotes," The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 23, 1986, p. 6.
5. Richard E. Neustady and Ernest R. May, Thinking in Time: The Uses of History For Decision Makers (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 244.