

PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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May 1987

CRSO #344/CSST #1

Program in Comparative Study of Social Transformations

A Grant Proposal Funded by the Presidential Initiatives Fund of the University of Michigan
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January 1987

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Some of the most exciting contemporary research in the fields of history, sociology, and anthropology is converging on a new approach to the study of social transformations. We believe that this convergence makes possible potentially dramatic breakthroughs in theory and research that could significantly reconfigure all three disciplines, and perhaps other social science disciplines as well. We also believe that by properly coordinating, supplementing, and orchestrating existing faculty and intellectual resources at the University of Michigan, we could become the pre-eminent center for interdisciplinary work in this new area. Support for our interdisciplinary project on social transformations would, in our opinion, be an uncommonly fruitful use of Presidential Initiative Fund money. It would result not just in the publication of a few books and articles -- as is the case for most research projects, whether interdisciplinary or not -- but in the launching of a continuing enterprise of real intellectual vitality and enormous scholarly significance.

We propose establishment of a three-year interdisciplinary project on the comparative study of social transformations. Its participants would include some thirty faculty from the departments of history, anthropology, and sociology. The program would center on year-long interdisciplinary faculty seminars, but would also include lectures and seminar presentations by visiting scholars, conferences, publications, development of new team-taught interdisciplinary graduate courses, and research support for promising graduate students working in historical social science. This project would be housed in the Center for Research on Social Organization. By the end of three years, we expect: (1) to have developed a core of faculty capable of moving freely across the disciplinary boundaries that now divide scholarship in history, anthropology, and sociology, with a consequent increase in the power and sophistication of our research; (2) to have established a unique interdisciplinary graduate program that will make the University of Michigan the prime choice of graduate students interested in comparative historical social science; (3) to have established in the larger academic community, by means of scholarly visits, conferences, and publications, the well-founded impression that Michigan is at the epicenter of a major reconfiguration of historical social science; (4) to have launched a variety of new individual and collective

research projects by both faculty and graduate students; and (5) to have secured outside funding to continue the project beyond the initial three years.

The Opportunity: Convergence between Social History, Historical Sociology, and Historical Anthropology

Although the disciplines are not fully aware of the fact, the past decade or so has seen a major convergence in the work of social historians, historical sociologists, and historical anthropologists. The nature of this convergence can best be explained by brief descriptions of recent intellectual developments in the three fields.

Social History The idea of forging interdisciplinary connections between history and other social sciences is itself hardly novel. The highly successful construction of a "new social history" in the 1960s and 1970s was accomplished largely by systematic borrowing from the social sciences -- mainly from sociology in the 1960s, with increasingly prominent borrowings from anthropology in the 1970s. The borrowings from sociology were centered on systematic quantitative methodology, and were applied above all to questions of demography, family structure, urban ecology, social stratification, and social mobility. When, in the 1970s, many social historians found that quantitative methods could not answer some of their most important questions, they began to import notions of culture, myth, ritual, and symbol system from cultural anthropology. The combined impact of these twin borrowings has been nothing short of a historiographical revolution. The adoption of sociological and anthropological methods has enabled historians to incorporate into their histories the previously excluded experiences of masses of ordinary people -- women, slaves, peasants, children, workers, etc. The rise of social history has displaced high political narrative from its central position in historiography; it has established the transformation of social and cultural structures, not the deeds of statesmen, as the dominant problem of historical scholarship. Indeed, the triumph of the new vision of historical scholarship is nowhere clearer than in the recent revival of interest in politics and the state: in this new literature the deeds of statesmen are utterly overshadowed by structural features of states, systems of administration, disparities in social power, linkages between states and classes, the ideological and political mobilizations

and demobilizations of populations, and the like. Over the past quarter century no other field in the social sciences has been transformed so profoundly and fruitfully as history, in its subject matter, methodology, and underlying theoretical assumptions.

But the very success of social history has limited historians' curiosity about more recent trends in sociology and anthropology. Major history departments now have cadres of social historians large and sophisticated enough to thrive on their own, without further nourishment from sociology and anthropology. New borrowings have slowed to a trickle, with the unfortunate consequence that sociological and anthropological ideas used by historians are increasingly out of date. Social historians have in fact significantly modified borrowed ideas when they have put them into practice. But they have rarely reflected out loud about the import of such modifications, let alone attempted to communicate their critiques and theoretical innovations to sociologists and anthropologists. (Historians in the Michigan department are, happily, something of an exception to this rule.) Social historians' increasing sense of intellectual self-sufficiency, combined with their discipline's traditional disinclination for explicit theorization, has resulted in a failure to sustain, let alone to deepen, the initial contacts with sociology and anthropology. Consequently, social historians are only dimly aware of the growing ferment of convergent and creative historical thinking that their very successes have helped to bring about in sociology and anthropology.

Historical Sociology The past decade has seen a remarkable renaissance of historical sociology. One important inspiration for this development has been the the transformation of historical scholarship just described. Such leading sociologists as Charles Tilly, Barrington Moore, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Theda Skocpol have challenged sociology's traditional theoretical agenda, insisting that the prime goal of sociology should be to explain long-term, cross-national, and irreducibly historical processes, such as the emergence of capitalism and the nation-state, the development of global inequality, the genesis of dictatorship and democracy, or the occurrence or failure of social revolutions. Inspired by the social historians, historical sociologists of the current generation have ceased to rely exclusively on secondary works, and instead are venturing into the archives themselves to test their explanations of large scale historical processes with carefully designed case studies and comparative projects. Central to all this

work is a concern with disparities of social power, and with the struggles and conflicts that arise from such disparities. This ferment has resulted in a sharp expansion of research in historical sociology, clearly visible in the pages of the professional journals and in panels at annual meetings of the American Sociological Association.

But the challenge of historical sociology is not merely quantitative; potentially, at least, it goes to the core of the existing disciplinary paradigm. Historical sociologists have come to question the discipline's traditional task -- the discovery of universal social laws -- and they have dismissed out of hand the notion that such laws could be discovered by exhaustive quantitative study of contemporary American society. Their work implies that sociology's proper goal is to analyse the reproduction and transformation of historical societies, rather than to elaborate and test putatively transhistorical laws. This in turn implies that sociology's core concepts must be historicized -- that, as Anthony Giddens has claimed, social structures must be understood not only as determinants of action, but also as outcomes of action, that is to say as partially contingent products of history. It also implies that sociology's essentially synchronic quasi-experimental model of explanation will have to be modified by introducing notions of sequence, timing, conjuncture, and event -- in other words, by taking into account the historical ordering and reconfiguration of causal patterns. But if the new historical sociologists tend to reject the discipline's search for social laws of the Durkheimian or Parsonian transhistorical type, they continue to insist that sociology's task is to make causal generalizations applicable to broad categories of social contexts -- not to all societies perhaps, but to bureaucratic agrarian empires, premodern cities, economies in the capitalist era, or state socialist societies. Along with this generalizing mission, historical sociologists have also maintained their discipline's careful attention to method. Their work has typically been marked by an explicit application of comparative and quantitative methods and by a rigorous specification of formal causal arguments.

Historical Anthropology

If historical sociology has as yet posed only an incipient challenge to the reigning disciplinary paradigm, the "crisis" in anthropology is openly recognized and much discussed. The anthropological concept of culture has always been an essentially synchronic notion. Developed as a means of understanding profoundly alien societies, the concept of culture has emphasized the internal

coherence of indigenous belief systems and specified how these systems fit with existing social practices. But this synchronic conception of culture has been undermined by a number of recent developments. Most importantly, the post-World-War-Two revolution in communications and transportation has brought new technologies, ideas, political organizations, and economic pressures to even the most remote of tribes, making the ethnographic illusion of pristine timelessness ever harder to sustain. And while this accelerated pace of change was taking place before the ethnographers' eyes, anthropologically inspired social historians were busily documenting the striking reconfigurations of seemingly stable and coherent cultural systems in the past.

The anthropologists' response to this dual challenge has been a radical rethinking of the idea of culture. This new style of anthropological theorizing stresses not the coherence but the multiplicity and contradictions of cultural meanings, and instead of asking how cultural beliefs generate behavior that will enhance social equilibrium, it asks how cultural beliefs can be manipulated, reinterpreted, and transformed by differentially situated social actors. As in historical sociology and social history, power disparities and social conflicts have moved to the top of the anthropological agenda. Yet even when demolishing the distinction between constantly changing or "hot" modern societies and timeless or "cold" primitive societies, the new historical anthropologists have maintained their discipline's traditional insistence on the radical otherness and distinctness of non-Western societies. Such ethnographers as Marshall Sahlins and Renato Rosaldo have shown how the very trajectories of a given society's transformations follow distinct and culturally informed patterns. Rather than dissolving culture into a mass of self-interested atomistic (implicitly Western) actors, the new historical anthropologists are working toward a new formulation of the concept of culture that would cast it simultaneously as shaping and constraining, yet as contested and transformable.

Interdisciplinary Convergence Although historians, sociologists, and anthropologists occasionally talk to each other and read one another's works, these developments in the three fields have taken place more or less independently. Thus far, the most important systematic pursuit of interdisciplinary connections between these fields has been history's borrowings from quantitative sociology and cultural anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s -- and that enterprise, for all its successes, was always conceived precisely as a

one-way borrowing, not as an interchange. It is our sense that the time is ripe for a far more intensive and systematic three-way interchange. We believe that the fields have in fact been converging on a common problematic, which might be stated as follows: How do groups of actors constituted and constrained by social and cultural structures act so as to transform the very structures that constituted them? To be sure, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians engaged in social historical research come from different theoretical, methodological, and rhetorical traditions, and also typically study different kinds of societies. But given the convergence in problematic, these very differences become exciting intellectual opportunities. Historians and sociologists can learn from the anthropologists' knowledge of a vast range of exotic pre-literate societies, from their ingrained holism, and from their characteristic epistemological self-consciousness. Historians and anthropologists can learn from the sociologists' rigorous attention to method, habitual concern for macro-structures, and insistence on trenchant causal argumentation. Sociologists and anthropologists can learn from the historians' mastery of narrative thinking, experience of archival research, and superior knowledge of long historical sequences. And scholars in all three fields can benefit from systematic comparison across a greatly widened temporal and geographical range of cases. It is our sense that intensive intellectual interchange between social history, historical sociology and historical anthropology has the potential to radically restructure existing disciplinary paradigms in all three fields -- to fundamentally change and invigorate our modes of thinking and styles of research.

We believe that not only the time, but also the place, is right for such a venture. The University of Michigan has a strong history of interdisciplinarity and a distinguished tradition in historical social science -- one thinks, for example, of the legacy of Eric Wolf and Charles Tilly, and of the continuing vitality of Comparative Studies in Society and History, one of the leading journals in historical social science ever since its foundation in 1958. Moreover, Michigan has exceptionally strong sociology, history, and anthropology departments -- all are ranked in the top five nationally -- and probably the best collection of scholars working at the confluence of social history, historical sociology, and historical anthropology of any university in America. The combined faculty from the three departments commands an enormous range of comparative cases -- societies on all continents, at all levels of development from pastoralists to advanced capitalism and socialism, covering a time span from ancient

Mesopotamia to contemporary Poland, Japan, and Central America. The necessary faculty is already in place; what is needed is an institutional framework that actively encourages cross-disciplinary collaboration in thought, research, and teaching. A genuinely interdisciplinary attack on the comparative study of social transformation will not take place without the provision of significant resources. Otherwise it will be impossible to overcome the built-in material and institutional incentives favoring conventional single-discipline scholarship.

The Pattern of Activities

We envisage the activities of our project as taking place in three overlapping cycles of faculty seminars, visiting lectures, conferences, and graduate courses. Each cycle will focus on a single, broad, theoretically defined problem, which will be the subject of the core faculty seminar, of jointly taught graduate courses, of visiting lectures and seminar presentations, and, after a year's interval, of a conference from which a selection of the papers will be published in a collective volume. We believe that the most significant convergence of our three fields is taking place not at the level of specifiable empirical objects (social stratification, states, gender relations, political ideologies, etc.) but at the deeper level of theoretical problematics. Consequently we will also define the topics of each cycle theoretically, with the expectation that faculty, graduate students, and visitors will address these theoretical issues from the perspectives of their particular empirical concerns. This strategy has the advantage of making it possible to harness the exciting range of empirical work in which we are already engaged to a common, comparatively based, rethinking of the problem of social transformation. We plan to devote the first cycle to an exploration of the fundamental theoretical and methodological issues. The second will focus on macro-historical structures and the third on face to face relations.

1987-88. Theory, Methodology, and Rhetoric. Historians, sociologists, and anthropologists approach the problem of social transformation from differing disciplinary perspectives, with differing conceptual vocabularies, differing canons of evidence, and differing modes of argument. It therefore makes sense to begin this project by thinking through and arguing out basic problems of theory, method, and rhetoric.

One element of the 1987-88 program is already in place: during the Fall 1987 term, Sherry Ortner and William Sewell are scheduled to team-teach a cross-disciplinary graduate course in anthropology and sociology entitled "Culture, Action, and Social Change." This course will in fact address one of the central concerns of our proposed project: how to develop a concept of culture that can systematically accommodate and account for historical transformations. A bi-weekly faculty seminar will run more or less parallel to this course, but will continue through the Winter 1988 term. The activities of the faculty seminar will include reading and discussion of theoretical texts (some of which might also be readings in the Ortner/Sewell course) and occasional presentations of theoretically relevant research by regular seminar members and visitors. Meanwhile, a first cohort of graduate research assistants will be introduced into social historical research by their faculty mentors. Visitors will also give lectures and colloquia open to the general public, with some grouped into more intensive miniconferences.

The first term's topic, in keeping with the theme of the Ortner/Sewell course, will be "Theories of Social Transformation: Structure, Discourse, and Action." We will confront the major theoretical issues at the confluence of our disciplines, such as the nature and relationship of social and cultural structures, the socio-cultural constitution of capable but structurally constrained actors, the sources and consequences of disparities in social power, and the ways in which existing structures shape and limit transformations. In the Winter 1988 term we will focus more on method and rhetoric, under the heading "Causal Argument, Comparative Method, and Narrative." If theoretical developments in the three fields have been strongly convergent in recent years, their reflections on methodology and rhetoric have remained sharply distinct. Anthropologists have been highly self-conscious about the epistemological difficulties of their trade, and some have turned to literary theory for insights about how ethnographic narrative serves to constitute anthropological knowledge and authority. Social historians, meanwhile, have been far less reflective, but have been remarkably creative in inventing narrative forms -- constituting collective protagonists, shifting from narrative to analytical modes, building parallel or comparative accounts. Sociologists, generally far more self-conscious about causal argument than about literary form, have nevertheless been driven by the very austerity of their methodological scruples to develop highly original types of comparative causal narratives. We believe that systematically confronting more literary and interpretive modes of thinking about the constitution of knowledge with

more causal and methodological modes will significantly enrich all three fields' conceptualizations of social transformation.

Toward the end of the Winter term, we will plan a final conference, to be held in the Spring of 1989, that will draw together what have by then emerged as the critical themes and interventions of the year's activity. The papers prepared for the conference will presumably include both elaborations or refinements of presentations made during the year and new papers suggested by the year's work. They will include work by faculty associated with the project, by visitors, and by graduate students. The end result will be a highly focused volume broadcasting to the wider scholarly public the outcome of our collective reflections.

1988-89. Macro-Structures of Inequality and their Transformations: Classes, States, and Ideologies.

The activities of our second cycle will follow a similar pattern. They will begin in the summer of 1988 with the preparation of two new jointly-taught cross-disciplinary graduate courses and will continue during the Fall and Winter terms of 1988-89 with the teaching of the new courses, the induction of a new cohort of graduate research assistants, the continuation of the faculty seminar, and the presentation of visiting lectures and miniconferences. The cycle will conclude with a conference in the spring of 1990 and the eventual publication of a second volume.

The topic of the second cycle will be the transformation of macro-structures. This topic arises out of the recent renewal of interest in structures of power in all three of our disciplines, and more particularly out of the much-heralded "rediscovery of the state." The abundant new theoretical and empirical work on this problem has radically recast relations between states and societies, rejecting a view of classes and social groups as essentially static "givens" and of states either as "arenas" where their interests are fought out or as "instruments" for their domination of society. It has insisted that states and classes must be seen instead as collective actors, conditioned by, but relatively autonomous from, socioeconomic development, and it has focused on the historical formation and transformation of states and classes -- on their changing capacities for action, and on the contests between classes and between classes and states for economic and political hegemony.

This lively scholarly discourse has been based mainly in sociology, history, and political science, and has been concerned mainly with Western states since the seventeenth century and Third-World states in the twentieth. We would like to enlarge the conversation in two dimensions. First, we would like to introduce broader comparative framework, looking at a much wider range of state and state-like institutions, including both earlier European examples and a wide array of "traditional" non-Western states, from ancient Mesopotamia to pre-modern Burma, Japan, China, Madagascar, and Tibet (to mention only some cases about which our associated faculty are experts.) And second, we would like to examine the roles of cultural and ideological constraints and resources in the transformation of states and classes, and of structural inequalities more generally. The recent literature typically has seen states and classes as acting in pursuit of interests, but has had relatively little to say about the cultural and ideological structures -- concerning gender, rank, hierarchy, race, merit, etc. -- that define these interests, or about how historical changes have transformed their definition. We want to trace out the role of cultural and ideological structures in the transformation of social inequalities and power disparities, and to investigate such structures' linkages to and autonomy from states and classes.

During the course of this second cycle, the faculty seminar, the visiting lectures, the conferences, and at least one of the new cross-disciplinary courses, would be concerned with the formation and transformation of states, classes, ideologies, and social inequalities. Graduate students supported by the project's research assistantships would be expected, under the guidance of faculty mentors and in the framework of new interdisciplinary graduate courses, to initiate relevant research projects and, where possible, to present their findings at the program's intermediate or final conferences.

1989-90. Inequality and Transformations in Face to Face Interaction: Communities, Families, Organizations, and Persons. The cycle of activities for this topic will follow the pattern established for the other two: it will begin with new course preparation in the summer of 1989, proceed to faculty seminar discussions, faculty and graduate student research, lectures, miniconferences and teaching of new courses in the Fall and Winter terms of 1989-90, and finish with a conference in the spring of 1991 and eventual publication of a third volume.

In this final year of the project, we will bring our focus down to the micro-social level. Having already established a larger theoretical agenda and having already examined macro-structures and their transformations, we will be in a position to look at small-scale processes and structures from a particularly fruitful perspective. Some of the most creative recent work in historical anthropology and social history has been on villages, tribes, occupational groups, families, neighborhoods, firms, gender systems, voluntary organizations, communities, and local social movements. It is in such face-to-face settings that macro-structures are actually effected, contested, and transformed -- by the actions of gendered, differentiated, and stratified persons pursuing their ideal and material interests, conforming to and subverting cultural expectations, working and playing, forming and deserting alliances, exploiting and being exploited -- in short, reproducing and transforming the structures that simultaneously constrain and enable their social lives. Our discussions will focus on the relations between macro- and micro-structures and transformations, and between the various spheres of face-to-face interactions -- e.g., how global transformations of political structure affect interactions and power structures in families and workplaces, how the rise of local social movements affect local gender relations, or how the cumulation of small-scale changes in the organization of rural labor affects the national or international balance of class forces.

By the end of the third year of the project, we expect to be able to obtain sufficient funding from external sources to be able to continue the program for subsequent years. We also expect to have created a cross-disciplinary graduate program of the highest quality and originality, to have developed a sizeable and committed core of uniquely qualified faculty and graduate students, to have launched new funded and non-funded faculty research projects, to have three important collaborative volumes published or in preparation, and to have made the University of Michigan the world's pre-eminent center for the study of social transformation. Unlike normal funded research projects in the social sciences, which typically produce a book or two and a handful of articles and then quietly disband, this project has the potential for continuing scholarly outcomes of the greatest importance.

Organization of the Project

This project will be housed in the Center for Research on Social Organization, which will provide us with office and seminar space and with assistance in administering this and any other grants. William Sewell, Professor of Sociology and History, will serve as director on 1/4 salary. There will be a steering committee of seven, consisting of the director along with two sociologists, two anthropologists, and two historians. The director will administer the project; coordinate the faculty seminar, the visiting speakers program, and the conferences; oversee the development of the collaborative graduate program; and make efforts to find outside funding. The steering committee and director will set policy for the program, and will determine the internal allocation of funds (e.g. summer stipends for preparation of new courses, graduate research assistantships, support for conferences and visiting lecturers). The total number of associated faculty will vary from year to year depending on interest in the yearly topic, leaves, and so on. We expect about 20-25 active associates in any given term. Associates will be expected to participate regularly in the faculty seminar, and to participate as appropriate in preparing and teaching new courses, organizing and/or preparing papers for conferences, editing conference volumes, and mentoring graduate research assistants. Research assistantships will be used both to recruit first-rate graduate students into the program and to support more advanced students already working on comparative historical topics.

The new team-taught graduate courses will include a balance of theoretical, topical, and methodological courses. New offerings might include such courses as the following. (1) Theory courses: Culture, Action and Social Change, Causation and Narrative, or Power in Social Transformations. (2) Topical courses: Transformation and Reproduction of Gender Relations, Comparative Revolutions, or States and Classes in Comparative Perspective. (3) Methodological courses: Community Studies, Comparative Historical Method, or Integrating Field Work and Archives. Course development will be planned so that courses will fit, wherever possible, into the existing degree requirements of the three departments. The goal is to combine already existing courses with the new courses to produce a coherent cross-departmental graduate program in the comparative study of social transformations.