To study history, one must know in advance that one is attempting something fundamentally impossible, yet necessary… To study history means submitting to chaos and nevertheless retaining faith in order and meaning. It is a very serious task…and possibly a tragic one.

Herman Hess, *The Glass Bead Game*

Power in Narrative and Narratives of Power in Historical Sociology

Using history to make sociological arguments has been integral to the discipline from the start. This tradition never abated, but was often contested, sometimes submerged, by methodologies hoping to make sociology more scientific by making it less historical. Perhaps this is why *historical sociology*, as a research program, was born with a chip on its shoulder, always fending off accusations of reducing sociology to storytelling. Historical research, it defensively insisted, can provide causal explanations as scientific as those of structuralism, rational choice, and purely quantitative methods. Historical sociologists were not amateur historians trying to figure out the what, when, where, and who of history. They pursued the question historians tend (or pretend) to avoid: *why*.[1]

Sociologists construct narratives around a causal chain of events to reveal the social power driving it through. And whereas many historians avoid explicit theorization, sociologists are guided by one of various theories of causality to identify that power, whether economic class, cultural currents, social identity groups, state institutions, geopolitics, or a combination thereof. This commitment to locate *power in narrative* made sense methodologically. Unless the narrative is anchored to a specific power (or set of powers) that cause it to unfold in an explicable (perhaps predictable) way, it might drift into a narration of accidents and contingencies.

But the way sociologists perceive modernity strained this method to the limit. Few theorists today would draw a fixed boundary between traditional and modern societies. Yet it does seem that power is becoming more diffuse. Tocqueville made this point emphatically. He was not the only nineteenth-century author to start his analysis with the breakdown of old hierarchies. But his contemporaries believed fluidity would lead, through polarization, to new forms of social consolidation: vigorous class struggle working its way to the dictatorship of the proletariat and its withering away into classless society (Marx); stratification along class, party, and status lines gradually overshadowed by hyper-rationalized bureaucracy (Weber); the teething problems of transitioning from traditional to modern society easing with the development of organic solidarity (Durkheim). Tocqueville, however, envisaged a perpetual proliferation of power. Power players were multiplying as new sources of power were becoming available and more social positions were opening up for competition. In this fervent condition, power relations could only spiral upwards towards higher levels of complexity. And as they get hopelessly entangled, narratives with clear lines of causality become terribly difficult. Pierre Bourdieu and Andrew Abbott subscribed to this view. While not spinning their theories out of the old Tocquevillian yarn, they still produced remarkably systematic accounts of society as a nexus of ever more intricate power relations.

So how can we deal with this methodologically? Most historical sociologists went for multi-causal narratives, placing causality at the crosscurrent of several power streams. Michel Foucault despaired of nailing down specific power players and opted for a genealogy of power itself. What I propose instead is an entirely different type of narrative – not narrative as a form of causal explanation, but a heuristic for capturing complex social interactions. In other words, shifting from narrative as a means of uncovering a determinative power in action to *narratives of power* representing power relations as experienced by social actors.

This requires modifying how we study power. Sociologists start with a given definition of power. The alternative is to dispense with scholarly definitions and consider how social actors

[1] "History tells us *what*, but if we ask her *why*, she can only answer by giving us more of the *what*" (Cobban 1961; p. 4). Hence, the sociological caricature of historians as "theory-dreading, fact-worshiping, data-collecting antiquarians, concerned with just about everything but the question 'Why do human beings behave as they do?'" (Nisbet 1999; p. 91).

themselves comprehend and measure power; how they exercise it and for what purpose. Do they believe power operates through coercion or consent? Is it competitive or cooperative? Concentrated or constantly circulating? People seldom care to formally disentangle this bundle of meanings. Yet their understanding of power reveals itself in action. A sociological account can therefore begin with this array of perspectives and practical dealings. It can swap a single causal narrative for a finely textured fabric of social narratives.

A good place to start is Carl von Clausewitz. Often pigeonholed as a theorist of war, Clausewitz was a keen historian with original reflections on method. Among those was his concept of "narrative as reenactment." Narrative here is a pedagogical tool that replicates rather than explains reality. It educates readers not by telling them *why* things happened, but by allowing them to experience *how* reality unfolded for themselves. This requires an exhaustively detailed knowledge of the facts. But above all, it demands an extraordinary amount of empathy with social actors, and a lyrical sensibility in recounting their interactions. The key for Clausewitz is to internalize the practical experiences of others faithfully enough to be able to reproduce it. Among contemporary sociologists who struggled with this quest were Robert Nisbet in his *Sociology as an Art Form* (1976), Abbott in *Processual Sociology* (2016), along with Bourdieu's piercing insights into the epistemological breaks necessary for scholars to access reality and represent it with some fidelity.

Let us first lay out the logic behind causal narratives, which still dominate historical sociology, and discuss their limitations as power becomes more diffuse, before exploring the possibility of an alternative sort of narrative, better suited to a society constantly in flux.

The Reason Why: Narrative as Explanation

Historical sociology owed it resurgence to the pioneering works of sociologists committed to historical research, and historians adopting a sociological approach – a broad church with scholars as diverse as Perry Anderson, Michael Mann, Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, and later Jack Goldstone, Philip Gorski, and James Mahoney. Institutionalized in the 1980s with edited books, like the landmark *Vision and Division in Historical Sociology* (1984), specialized publications, including the *Journal of Historical Sociology* (founded in 1988), and a section at the American Sociological Association. A critical onslaught followed. Sociologists eager to deduce generalizable laws that uphold the scientific credentials of their discipline dismissed those travelling in the opposite direction. Historical sociologists reminded them that sociology was always historically grounded, but accepted their detractors' basic premise: that sociologists must produce causal explanations.

Skocpol famously treats history as a data pool for testing causal hypotheses. She distinguishes sociologists from historians by their commitment to "why" questions.[2] The agenda-setting *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (2003) seconds that. Historical sociology is essentially concerned with explaining causal configurations.[3] Narratives are only important because causality relies on sequence. And sociologists are no mere narrators. They build causal narratives using sophisticated techniques, such as methodical comparisons, process tracing, path dependence, and event-structure analysis.

Even less methodologically anxious historical sociologists still adhere to causal narratives. Tilly's work demonstrates the effect of structural variables on society. Anderson, a master at delineating empirical variations, is keen to uncover structural laws. Mann's highly pluralistic model operates through refining casual hypotheses in repeated skirmishes with historical data. Indeed, he complains, "I find historians far less sophisticated when generalizing about the societies they are studying. I also find annoying the…piling on [of facts] without trying to arrange their evidence in more systematic ways." Sociologists, in contrast, find causal chains that historians miss because

[2] Skocpol 1984b, pp. 365-85.

[3] Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003, p. 11.

"theory leads us to ask questions of the data which historians have not asked".[4] And when society proves messier than our causal models, we must devise more flexible ones "suited to dealing with the mess".[5]

Doubtless, seeking causal explanation is a worthy endeavor that remains central to historical sociology. However, there are good reasons to add a new form of narrative to our arsenal. Society has not only become extremely complicated, but presses onwards in that direction.

The Age of Power Diffusion

One of the founding views of sociology is that people seek power for ideal or material aims. Mann restates that with a practical twist, "human beings are restless…striving to increase their enjoyment of the good things of life and capable of choosing and pursuing appropriate means for doing so." And if this might not apply to everyone, "enough of them do this to provide the dynamism that is characteristic of human life".[6] These are not philosophical musings on human nature. Sociologists believe behavior is conditioned by society, not inherent or immutable.[7] So, let us consider how people responded to one of the most sweeping changes to their reality.

The overriding concern of early sociologists was the breakdown of traditional communities due to historical trends that came to fruition during the nineteenth century. As hierarchies gave way to fluctuating groups, there was a release of long-pent-up energy and a dispersion of power. Freed from old communal settings, unanchored individuals sought new associations. And the banishment of formal barriers to advancement whetted their appetite. This scrambling for better positions made modernity essentially an arena for "unending and agonizing competition among individuals".[8]

This was, at least, how Tocqueville comprehended the changes he lived through. Modern societies might not be that different from traditional ones. However, one of their central preoccupations is the leveling of ranks. And liberation from traditional authority drove individuals into more complex power relations. The same equality that obliterated the privileges of the few opened up society to universal competition. All now faced each other as equals desiring the same things. Uniformity overcrowded the field, leaving individuals little room for maneuver, while giving free rein to their aspirations. Each individual now "tries to insinuate himself into the sphere above him, [and] fights relentlessly against those working up from below".[9] Rivalries as old as time intensified. Ironically then, the same modern equality that drew people closer together gave them fresh reasons to resent each other "so that with mutual fear and envy they rebuff each other's claims to power".[10] It is impossible to improve upon Tocqueville's depiction. Hunger for power intoxicates those without it, and the dread of losing it torments those who have it. It is never attained without strain; never enjoyed without apprehension. People feel equal but never to the extent they desire. Their ambition "retreats before them without getting quite out of sight, and as it retreats it beckons them on to pursue. Every instant they think they will catch it, and each time it slips through their fingers. They see it close enough to know its charms, but they do not get near enough to enjoy it, and they will be dead before they have fully relished its delights".[11]

Abbott conveys the same effect by inverting our customary concern with scarcity and arguing that "excess and overabundance" are also problematic. In our attempt to alleviate poverty, we often forget the downside of a society of plenty. Excess of options inspires an excess of

[4] Mann 1994, pp. 37-43.
[5] Mann 1986, p. 4.
[6] Ibid., p. 4.
[7] Nisbet 1966, p. 88.
[8] Ibid., pp.180-83.
[9] Tocqueville 1969, p. 566.
[10] Ibid., p.15.
[11] Ibid., pp. 531-38.

aspiration – the ancient verity that the more you have, the more you desire. Chateaubriand called it *le mal de l'infini*. What intensifies conflict, obviously, is not excess in itself, but the type of uniformity that steers everyone in the same direction – paradoxically, creating scarcity.[12]

For Nisbet, conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. It drives social change. "Sometimes this conflict is passive, awakening only vague sensations of tension… At other times it may be fierce and overt, reflected in widespread mass upheaval… Such conflicts, small and large, do not…resolve themselves inevitably into systems of new coherence and order".[13] This is because modernity shifted the axes of social conflict. While traditional communities knew conflict between institutions or other well-defined groups, modern society is dominated by power contests on all levels. In a socially mobile, impersonal settings, where traditional authority has been successfully subverted, the burden of securing status falls upon individuals, creating a permanent condition of status anxiety.[14] This is why Abbott highlights the fact that an ordered society is one with working traditions – an inconvenient fact to those who relish subverting tradition.[15]

Bourdieu takes a similar view, attributing the relative stability of traditional community to the "quasi-perfect coincidence between…expectations and the objective chances of realizing them".[16] And like Tocqueville, he knows there is no way back. Power no longer inhabits particular loci: the absolutist monarchy, the ecclesiastical order, the feudal dominion. It spreads continuously through society, producing networks of interlocking power fields, both autonomous and interdependent, competitive and complementary. Individuals belong to one or more fields, and their ceaseless interaction reproduces, subverts, or totally destroys these fields. The subordinated wish to rise; the dominant hope to persist; and the ferment extends across fields – as even the dominant quarrel over "the dominant principle of domination and the 'exchange rate' between…different kinds of power," and their strife creates opportunities for usurpers to replace them and rewrite the rulebook.[17]

Corresponding to Bourdieu's fields are Abbott's ecologies. An ecology is composed of social actors located in specific spaces and interacting with others in neighboring ecologies. Each ecology is the ground for competition and collaboration amongst members, and a springboard for similar interactions across ecological boundaries. The various ecologies constrain and contest each other. Society is basically a codification of linked ecologies that struggle, overlap, merge, divide, and build alliances.[18]

Nisbet, Bourdieu, and Abbott – like Tocqueville – are therefore primally concerned with the diffusion of power, in itself a reason to transcend the narrow focus on why certain actors are dominant to a wider inquiry into how it all happens.

From Why to How: Narrative as Reenactment

When historians think about re-enactment, it is R. G. Collingwood that comes to mind. For Collingwood, re-enactment is less a method than a philosophy. Realists insist the past is what really happened. Collingwood disagrees. The past is unknowable. Historians have no direct knowledge of it. They can only re-enact it in their mind.[19] Slightly carried away by his anti-realism, Collingwood identifies re-enactment of the past with "*the past itself*" because it is all we can know about it[20]– hence, the accusation of relativism.

[12] Abbott 2016, pp. 123-44.
[13] Nisbet 1999, pp. 189-93.
[14] Ibid., 1999, p. 123.
[15] Abbott 2016, pp. 217-18.
[16] Bourdieu 2000a, p. 147.
[17] Bourdieu 2000b, pp. 102-103.
[18] Abbott 2016, pp. 35-50.
[19] Collingwood 1993, p. 282.
[20] Ibid., p. 450.

But what is being re-enacted? It is the *thought* of social agents. Collingwood accepts that historians investigate actions. However, he declares that action has an exterior and interior: outside the concrete conditions; inside the mental aspect. Historians commence by detailing external aspects, but the crux of their work is "to discern the thought of the agent." It is not enough to determine the circumstances under which Caesar crossed the Rubicon. Proper history requires rethinking what went through Caesar's mind.[21] And Collingwood is quite exacting. Copying or imitating will not do; "to know another's act of thought involves repeating it for oneself".[22] How is that possible if the scholar inhabits a different context from the subject? Collingwood believes we can have similar thoughts without experiencing the same situation. We can "rethink the process of thought by which Archimedes reached his famous discovery" without feeling the bath water rising or his sense of elation.[23] In other words, historians do not have to replicate the emotions or sensations of agents to access their thoughts.

Collingwood's re-enactment may be invaluable to intellectual history. After all, he announced, in another rhetorical flourish, that "all history is the history of thought".[24] But his application diverges sharply from what is proposed here. Actions are indeed the object of study. And some are expressions of thought, although a great many remain pre-reflective. However, rethinking thoughts is infinitely more speculative than reimagining lived experiences. Most scholars know what it is like to be afraid or angry. They are familiar with pain and pleasure, hunger and sleep deprivation. They can conceive these feeling in amplified form. With a stretch of the imagination, they can simulate those emotions and sensations within themselves to empathize with social actors. This requires reconstructing material circumstances: the weight of a soldier's backpack, the length of the march, the harshness of terrain and weather, the frequency of ambushes. Such tangibles help approximate a soldier's condition. Inhabiting his consciousness and rethinking the same thoughts is murkier business, especially when it comes to evidence. Of course all historians contend with the unreliability of memory and testimonies. But corporeal experiences rank higher than retrospective reasoning. In war memoirs, an account of how an officer reached a certain decision might be greeted with skepticism. Descriptions of how panic loosened his bowls, or how frost paralyzed his limbs are more readily accepted.

More important, Collingwood is again concerned with causality. He makes the controversial claim that ascertaining people's thoughts, explains their actions. "When the historian knows what happened, he already knows why it happened".[25] It was a bit too much even for a sympathetic reader like William Dray. Collingwood's "equivalence of the 'what' and 'why', although accepted by many of his apologists, I find quite indefensible".[26] Fortunately, Clausewitz offers an alternative approach to re-enactment.

Two-thirds of Clausewitz's work is historical studies. *On War*, which takes up the rest, is a theoretical meditation grounded in history. His approach emphasizes *how* rather than *why* things happen. He has little patience with the "plain narrative of a historical event, which merely arranges facts one after another, and at most touches on their immediate causal links." But he also worries that those fixated on locating causality may overstretch facts. Outcomes result from concurrent causes, some unknown, others difficult to assess. His proposition is to dig deeper. Without recovering the specific circumstances surrounding an action, it becomes "like an object seen at a great distance…it looks the same from every angle".[27] Only by "painstakingly assembling the specific details of certain episodes" can we "re-create the events for…readers".[28] A Clausewitzian

[21] Ibid., pp. 213-15.
[22] Ibid., p. 288
[23] Ibid., p. 297.
[24] Ibid., p. 215.
[25] Ibid., p. 214.
[26] Dray 1999, p.38.
[27] Clausewitz 1984, pp.156-74.
[28] Clausewitz 1992, p. 104.

narrative, in other words, attempts "to approximate, if not replicate, actual experience." This *historical reenactment*, the recreating of past reality in all its practical details, is meant to substitute for experience. It bestows upon readers a certain "sensibility rather than a form of knowledge".[29]

There are affinities with Tocqueville, according to one Clausewitz scholar. Not only did they both write comparative-historical sociology, but their literary styles moved from abstract analysis to realistic portraits that captured complex social interactions.[30] History, for Tocqueville, did not impart lessons. But immersing readers in particulars allows them to develop a sense of how things work.[31] Almost all chapter titles of his *Ancien Régime* start with *how*. Craig Calhoun is sympathetic. Those who explain things by showing how they work, rather than just what caused them, move beyond explaining to understanding. They delineate the "practical orientations" of social actors rather than "external causal linkages".[32]

Bourdieu never attempted such narrative himself but prescribes it. Criticizing those who pursue single lines of causality, he urges sociologists to "track multiple lines and levels of causation to whatever extent is practically possible" in order to "reconstruct a web of causal interdependence".[33] And like Clausewitz, Bourdieu does not believe in causal laws, only sensitizing concepts, or thinking tools that render complex sequences intelligible.[34] Yet he comes closest to Clausewitz in declaring that: "My entire scientific enterprise is indeed based on the belief that the deepest logic of the social world can be grasped only if one plunges into the particularity of an empirical reality…with the objective of [re]constructing it"[35]– described elsewhere as the actualization or reactivation of social reality.[36]

Abbott ploughs deeper still. He compares causal and narrative accounts to two paths through the same garden. You see the same things but from different angles. In the causal view, variables govern society. "Variables do things" to social subjects.[37] From a narrative perspective, the social world is constituted of social actors who do things to each other. Their interactions are the building blocks of narrative. So while causal analysts might dress up their arguments in narrative style to make their variables appear livelier, narrativists believe the social process itself can only be revealed through narrative.[38] For example, a causal account concludes that a revolution was caused by a structural variable like class struggle, or shifts in the international power balance, and then tells it like a story. Narrativists, by contrast, attribute revolution to a series of interactions whose inherent logic could only be captured by a carefully constructed narrative. Those who rely on casual variables protest, rightly, that "reality is too complex to do otherwise." Abbott admits as much, yet urges them to embrace complexity, not shun it through abstraction. Society consists of actors who interact in complicated ways. Causality exists, but it flows differently depending on the type and order of their interaction. Consequently, some causal factors might count in one situation but not others; they remain "bubbling in the background." The effect of education on income, for instance, cannot be generalized. It depends on how interactions occurred in real time. In the narrative approach, therefore, reality is not directly produced by causal variables, but social interactions that alter the value of these variables. "Such a view directly contravenes the views of

[29] Sumida 2008, pp. 189-195.
[30] Paret 1992, pp. 143-53.
[31] Winthrop 1981, pp. 88-89.
[32] Calhoun 1998, p. 864.
[33] Gorski 2013, pp. 356-57.
[34] Ibid., p. 328.
[35] Bourdieu 1998, p. 2
[36] Bourdieu 2000a, p. 88
[37] In Calhoun's vivid image, causes are like doctors treating patients. People are objects not actors (1998, pp. 851, 864).
[38] Here is how Calhoun puts it (1998, p. 857): causal narratives are constructed by first identifying causal factors that then intrude into and direct the narrative.

most social scientists," Abbott concludes. "The physical science model on which social scientists try to operate makes no allowances for causes that appear and disappear".[39]

Not only that. Causal studies are only concerned with events that happen. Good narratives are not equally restricted. Just because we know how the tale ends does not mean we forget that most events do not occur – though they could have. Narratives preserve those counterfactuals. Social interactions are open to various realizations, not just the one that occurred. For readers to fully comprehend reality, they must "hear the whisper of possibility and the sigh of passage".[40] They must feel how in the "succession of presents…everything in the social structure is at risk," everything is on the brink of change.[41] Actors here are no longer the unwilling servants of structure. They are not simply reflections of social forces beyond their control: class, identity, institutions. They might be shaped or constrained by them but still make moment-to-moment choices that either reproduce or modify these structures.

The focus on social actors owes something to Tocqueville's preference for methodological individualism in explaining history over structural entities, such as class (Marx) or social facts (Durkheim), which have autonomous explanatory power.[42] But these are not the rational individuals of economics or game theory, rather ones involved in concrete social settings. Not atomized, abstract individuals, but kinfolk, workers, politicians, soldiers, intellectuals, and people who wear several hats at once. Neither does the readmission of individuals into history, as Abbott puts it, a return to the Great Man theory. It is rather a rejection of the view of the world as a place where "large social forces push little individuals around." Individuals are not clean slates on which social structures inscribe their logic. They are the nexus of the historical connection between past and future. They carry the past literally in their bodies and memoires as they move towards the future. And they do it better than structures or even institutions, where tradition and experience are scattered in thousands of minds, written documents, and half-forgotten rituals.[43] This conception of social actors resolves the byzantine debate of agents versus structure. Here agents embody structure.

Tocqueville was an early advocate of this two-way interaction between what sociologists call micro- and macro-levels of society. The micro does not shape society from the bottom up. Nor does the macro act in reverse. The micro embodies the macro.[44] Bourdieu calls it structured agency. Outcomes result from the meeting of two histories: the objective factors of social structure (field), and the particular dispositions of social actors within those structures (habitus). Social interactions reflect both an actor's "feel for the game and the game itself." Causal factors, such as economic or cultural hegemony, count only if and to the extent that they impinge upon social actors with specific dispositions. And these dispositions, in turn, "do not lead in a determinate way to a determinate action; they are revealed and fulfilled only in appropriate circumstances".[45] In other words, only through social interactions in practical situations does causality reveal itself. Like Bourdieu, Nisbet is interested in people making choices. Action is based on people's knowledge of their social world. And the essence of this knowledge is practicality. Not academic knowledge *about society*, but common-sense knowledge gained through trial and error and direct experience *of society*.[46] Casual relations cannot be found outside the realm of social interactions.

Events are where these interactions occur. Society is a flow of events, made and navigated by people, who are themselves lineages of events. People experience their lives narratively through the stories they tell about who they are, what happened to them, why they behave this way. And

[39] Abbott 1990, pp.140-47.
[40] Abbott 2007, pp. 86-90.
[41] Abbott 2016, p. 14.
[42] Elster 2009, p. 6.
[43] Abbott 2016, pp. 3-7.
[44] Elster 2009, pp. 182-83.
[45] Bourdieu 2000a, pp. 149-51.
[46] Nisbet 1986, pp. 30-32.

these events are knotted into bundles of social relations, which in turn present new constraints and opportunities. As Abbott eloquently says, just as "Personalities are made up of shreds of social life. So also is social life itself merely the interaction of shreds of persons".[47]

No wonder why Abbott is among the few singled out for praise by William Sewell's otherwise disparaging exposé of historical sociologists. Embarrassed to confront their scientifically minded discipline with something as contingent as events, they seek sturdier scaffolding for their historical research. One is teleology – adhered to in spirit long after the term became anathema. Here narratives are propelled by underlying processes, such as state building or progress towards social justice. Another is experimental induction, a favorite of comparativists, whereby fragments from one historical narrative are carved up for comparison with fragments from another, allowing the testing of the determinative power of structural factors like class struggle, military competition, or political institutionalization. Sewell exhorts sociologists to shed their timidity and embrace an *eventful sociology*. Social life is a series of interactions. Most reproduce existing patterns. Some modify, subvert, or transform them. These are the events worth studying. "An eventful historical sociology," he concludes, "would come to resemble history ever more closely".[48]

Indeed, sociologists distinguish themselves from historians based on how they treat events. According to Nisbet, sociologists are interested in events as signifiers of change. Historians, meanwhile, see events as building blocks of the past not milestones to the future. But sociology can become historical, without losing its preoccupation with change, by reorienting its research from structural forces that cause change to how disparate events come together to render several options for change possible. Nisbet is not asking historical sociologists to apply the same narrative framework of historiography. They just need to focus on specific events rather than built-in determinants of change.[49]

It is events that show which social relations had weight and which remained irrelevant; which choices were determined by rigid structures and which demonstrated a degree of flexibility. The narrative approach is therefore not just historical, but fundamentally empirical. Society is not an abstract space governed by causal laws. It is always a specific time and place, always historically contingent. This should not reduce events to a laundry list of contingencies. Well-crafted narratives allow for patterns to emerge. Not general laws, but causal mechanisms at work here and there. This is how Clausewitz understood war. Not as a social phenomenon governed by universal laws, but the realm of shared mechanisms, such as friction, that feature somehow in most wars. Some of these mechanisms are exportable, enabling sociologists to draw on knowledge acquired in one setting to understand another. Hence, Tocqueville's study of democracy in America shed light on contemporaneous tendencies in France.

A narrative can therefore go beyond *why* democracy succeeded in America, or Waterloo ended in French defeat, to *how* social interactions coalesced in actual events to make this happen. And the knowledge generated therefrom can prove generally useful in studying other democracies and wars. However, it is not a matter of mastering a new research technique. This type of narrative requires changes in the researcher's attitude towards the subject and purpose of research.

Breaking with Scholastic Fallacies

In *Recollections*, Tocqueville contrasts intellectuals with practical folk, "the former see general causes everywhere, whereas the latter, spending their lives amid the disconnected events of each day, freely attribute everything to particular incidents and think that all the little strings their hands are busy pulling daily are those that control the world's destiny. Probably both of them are mistaken".[50] Scholars cannot bridge the gap, Tocqueville continues, by spinning out theories and fitting

[47] Abbott 2016, p. 246.
[48] Sewell 2005, p. 111.
[49] Nisbet 1999, p. 92-98.
[50] Tocqueville 1987, p. 62.

everyday practices into them. Practice must come first.[51] Clausewitz is similarly put off by great minds with "much intelligence and cultivation, but wholly ignorant of real life." To transcend "false conflicts between theory and practice," he urges them to discard "artificial and learned theorizing" and "empty phraseology," and allow themselves to be "stimulated by the force of immediate circumstance," just like their subjects.[52]

Empathy is therefore the key: internalizing other logics of action than our own. Calhoun presses sociologists to pursue empathetic understanding of their objects of study because social practice cannot be sufficiently explained in terms of causal conditions.[53] But empathy presents a moral challenge. It demands that most elusive of research goals: impartiality.

To get around this problem, W. G. Runciman recommends a multitiered attitude to understanding. Reporting actions accurately furnishes primary understanding. Explaining why actors acted this way elevates that to secondary understanding. A third level still is to appreciate what it was like for them. And this understanding triad stands separate from evaluating the merits of action, morally or otherwise.[54] Runciman is quite clear on the distinction between reportage and explanation. Reports must be plain enough to be "accepted as factual by rival observers, even from different theoretical schools" and not preclude alternative explanations.[55] Describing, however, is trickier. It can get lost in the "ill-chartered territory between matters of palpable fact and of palpable value".[56] When referring to illiterate voters, are we reporting their lack of education, describing what their lives are like, or scorning their intellectual inferiority?

Still, impartial understanding is achievable. Impartiality is often confused with objectivity, and the latter is indeed beyond the pale. In tracing the history of both concepts, Lorraine Daston, distinguishes between impartiality, which means not taking sides, and objectivity, which implies value-neutrality. Impartiality is not indifference. "On the contrary, the aim of historical impartiality was to reach sound conclusions…much as the aim of judicial impartiality was to reach a just verdict".[57] Like Runciman, she accepts that passing judgement must succeed evenhanded understanding. Sociology provides many early examples.

It was remarkable of a dry methodological analyst of Tocqueville's work to praise him so passionately for fairness.[58] Indeed, Tocqueville writes in a letter to his slightly biased English translator, "I beg you earnestly to struggle against yourself…to preserve my book its character, which is a veritable impartiality".[59] He reminds his brother that: "Personal opinion adds nothing to the strength of reasoning, and can harm it to the extent that the perfect impartiality that inspires confidence is no longer seen in the author… The reader must be allowed to judge." His ambivalence grew from a deep-seated conviction that searching for certainty in a world of approximations was a disease that intellectuals must cure themselves from. Suspending judgment during research is more becoming of a scholar than applause or condemnation.[60] And he does not achieve this in the pedantic fashion of presenting conflicting views on every topic. Instead, he unsettles readers by conveying how perplexing reality appears to social actors, taking them behind the scenes, exposing them to irresolvable paradoxes, and circumstances alien to their own.[61]

[51] Winthrop 1981, pp. 96-97.
[52] Clausewitz 1992, pp. 104-15, 134-35.
[53] Calhoun 1998, p. 852.
[54] Runciman 1983, p. 1.
[55] Ibid., p. 95.
[56] Runciman 1972, pp. 380-88.
[57] Daston 2015, p. 28.
[58] Smelser 1973, p. 40.
[59] Tocqueville 1969, p. xi.
[60] Adler 2019, p. 54.
[61] Smelser 1973, pp.46-47.

Clausewitz also stands out for his attempt at impartiality. Like Tocqueville, his critical analysis of his own society was so fair-minded, it sometimes felt cold.[62] Even in histories of military campaigns he personally participated in, his tone is "detached and impersonal." In fact, one of the reasons why Wellington agreed to respond to his study of Waterloo was because his friends described Clausewitz as "an honest writer seeking the truth, rather than one with a personal or national ax to grind," a writer free from "prejudices and nonsense".[63] Clausewitz is invariably empathic to his subjects. When considering the actions of Napoleon, his bitter enemy, he often repeats, "But we must also consider matters as they appeared from Bonaparte's perspective".[64] His analysis of the 1812 Russian campaign, through which he personally suffered, is notable for trying to reconstruct the circumstances of various actors, from princes to army privates. Clausewitz is convinced that understanding practices requires one "to recapture the way things appeared at the time, rather than impose retrospective judgments or values".[65] He tells readers, "my entire merit will perhaps be found in…the eradication of prejudices…to allow you a clear view of the issue so you will soon be in a position to draw your own conclusions".[66]

By contrast, many contemporary sociologists fall below par. In surveying recent sociological writings, Abbott finds far too many infused with indignation, disgust, moral outrage. Their aim is to rub noses in repugnant or otherwise offensive actions rather than place them in perspective.[67] And this inspired his drive for a more humanist sociology.

Regardless of method, topic, or normative views, a researcher must treat social actors with *humane sympathy*.[68] Abbott invokes the golden rule. "We too will be studies in our time, and it behooves us to study others as we would be studied".[69] "Any subject I study is a human being, deserving the same dignity and care I would take in understanding myself." Sociology as a vocation strives to grasp how people behave when caught up in the force of immediate circumstances and the merciless flow of events. "A humanist sociologist is hesitant." It does not brandish weapons like false consciousness and hidden biases to imply that scholars know people better than they know themselves. Sociologists can code variables and classify actors for analytical purposes. But they must remain mindful of the how this violates their subjects. Just as sociologists modify their methods to make them more scientific, they should also make them more humane. People must be understood on their own terms, not reduced to the plaything of presumptuous researchers.[70] "I've always been struck by the incoherence reigning in one and the same soul," Tocqueville remarks in a letter, on September 26, 1840, "And I've often heartily laughed seeing historians force themselves to make a single piece out of a being completely composed of retrieved bits".[71]

Naturally, sociologists blink when they encounter behaviors they disapprove of, even "strange and frightening things." Nonetheless, they ought to remember that these form part of a social reality that must be "humanely understood in order to be avoided".[72] Bourdieu also endorses the search for the "*raison d'être* of the seemingly most illogical or derisory human behaviors…rather than condemning or mocking them, like the 'half-learned' who are always ready to 'play the philosopher'".[73]

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[62] Paret 1976, p. 256.
[63] Bassford 2015, pp. 6-8.
[64] Clausewitz 1992, p. 204.
[65] Moran 2015, pp. 240-45.
[66] Clausewitz 2015b, p. 20.
[67] Abbott 2007, pp. 93-94.
[68] By sympathy Abbott actually means empathy. "Sympathy here has the literal sense of 'feeling with' another, not the common modern one of 'providing emotional support for' another" (Abbott 2016, p. 286).
[69] Abbott 2016, p. 231.
[70] Ibid., pp. 287-89.
[71] Tocqueville 2018, p. 149.
[72] Abbott 2016, pp. 287-89.
[73] Bourdieu 2000a, p. 2.

Humane sympathy is certainly not: to understand all is to pardon all – like sociological approaches that shift responsibility from individuals to social structures. It simply prioritizes understanding the world over changing it. This is where Abbott parts way with Michael Burawoy and other campaigners for public sociology. He rejects what he sees as their narrowminded belief that moral people must change society. Understanding society is an "inherently a moral project, whether we go on to exercise our undoubted political right to urge change or not." Either way, sociology must begin with understanding, "itself based on humane sympathy, and not on any particular judgment." Otherwise, the author is "a politician masquerading as a scientist." Or a peddler of "ideology masquerading as truth".[74]

Abbott, in short, abolishes the distinction between politically committed sociologists and detached, professional ones, arguing that these are different types of "sociological encounters with the normative side of the social process: the political one, which emphasizes attempts to change a social process perceived as unjust; and the moral or humanist one, which emphasizes the attempt to understand the complexities and varieties of the social 'for themselves', as they are".[75] Improving knowledge is itself a great moral project. Indeed, Nisbet describes the discovery of what was previously unknown or scarcely imaginable as a "marvelous tonic to not only university professors but people in all walks of life".[76]

This does not appeal to many academics who, as Bourdieu caustically remarks, relish the illusion that their writings are some sort of political action. Indeed, Bourdieu was often repelled by heroic postures, rolling with every new fad. The sociologist's duty, he writes, "is to tell about the things of the social word…the way they are".[77] He might have found solace in Clausewitz's assertion that "critical analysis exists only to discover the truth, not to sit in judgment".[78]

It probably helps that Clausewitz and Tocqueville are realists who distrust ideology.[79] So is Bourdieu, who knew his colleagues found his social realism disenchanting. Scholars, who are overwhelmingly idealistic, "will be quick to denounce the cynical realism of a description of how things really work." Nonetheless, Bourdieu continues, if one is not to "indulge in an irresponsible utopianism, which often has no other effect than to procure the short-lived euphoria of humanist hopes, almost always as brief as adolescence…it is necessary…to return to a 'realistic' vision of the universe".[80]

But the challenge to empathy is not just moral but also scientific attitudes. The typical epistemic posture of social scientists is to rise above reality to see it better; to gain perspective through distance. The scholar occupies a fixed and higher position. Subjects down there in the muddle are cut out of the dense texture of their lives using analytical frames – interchangeable props representing whatever causal forces being projected onto them. Scholars then pour their theories into the heads of actors, explaining practices according to whichever causal model is currently in favor.[81] People become figments of our scientific imagination.

The problem with this all-too-common procedure is that, unlike social actors, researchers do not have skin in the game. They are as sheltered as their subjects are exposed. And this inhibits their ability to come to terms with the practical logic of those whose bodies, emotions, livelihoods, reputations are at stake, and are therefore forced to take life seriously. Social actors feel "at home in the world because the world is in [them]." Scholars, on the other hand, inhabit a transcendent

[74] Abbott 2016, pp. 279-90.
[75] Ibid., p. 268, fn. 7.
[76] Nisbet 2013, p. 211.
[77] Bourdieu 2000a, pp. 2-5.
[78] Clausewitz 2015a, p. 123.
[79] Paret 1992, p. 153, fn. 22.
[80] Bourdieu 2000a, p.127.
[81] Bourdieu 2000a, pp. 51-54.

universe, observing social life from afar.[82] Bourdieu, in fact, identifies the scholastic situation or *skholè* by freedom from real-life urgencies.[83]

Scholars, moreover, do not just observe subjects from a safe distance, but also operate in a different time zone. The social actor is *in* time, constantly caught up in the immediate present or, at most, the imminently forthcoming. Researcher approach time from the outside. Actions under study are either in the past or recent history.[84] Abbott notes how sociologists treat events as markers of the flow of time towards a preconceived outcome. Actors embedded in time experience events as open-ended.[85] This is why Tocqueville distinguishes between time in the objective sense and as perceived by social actors, always prioritizing subjective time in explaining behavior.[86] Abbott goes farther. Research should not be orientated towards outcomes because the "social process doesn't have outcomes. It just keeps on going".[87] Historical sociology erroneously "envisions a timeline and slides a window of investigation along the line, cutting out a segment for investigation." It then uses narrative to create the illusion of self-contained events with a beginning and an end. In reality, "Any moment can be an end; any moment can be a beginning. Outcome is simply the state of affairs in some arbitrary time period".[88] Socially authentic narratives must be attuned to the continuity of social life: how past interactions determine present relations, setting the stage for future rounds – how everything remains in transit.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize how the moral and scientific elements of the scholastic attitude are related. It is only because researchers and their subjects occupy parallel realities, the motionless and transcendent one versus the fluid here and now, that they are tempted to judge them. The "abstracted sociologist outside the situation" can neither appreciate nor "recreate for the reader" the immediacy and tensions engulfing social actors. Crafting such narratives requires scholars to cross the chasm between their reality and those of their subjects. To stretch their sociological imagination to comprehend the lives of others. Abbott wishes them to be "curious without exoticism, sympathetic without presumption, and thoughtful without judgment".[89] Bourdieu's remedy is quite similar. Acknowledge the repressed distinction between the scholarly and ordinary worlds, then "reverse the movement…return to the world of everyday existence…armed with a scientific thought that is sufficiently aware of itself and its limits to be capable of thinking practice without destroying its object".[90] To be able to place yourself in the position of those immersed in situations alien to your own is the necessary first step towards understanding the world. And then comes the problem of communication.

On Artistic Style

"Hitherto you have experienced truth only with the abstract intellect. I will bring you where you can taste it like honey," wrote C. S. Lewis. Clausewitz has little faith in the ability of language to convey meaning; "words, being cheap, are the most common means of creating false impressions".[91] Rather than explaining things to the intellect, language should transmit a mental and emotional state. It should embody experience and invite readers to relive it. And this acquired sensibility, Clausewitz believes, is the basis of sound knowledge. One interpreter speculates that the Prussian theorist might have been influenced by the Passions, musical reenactments of the

[82] Ibid., pp. 140-51.
[83] Ibid., p. 1.
[84] Ibid., pp. 206-207.
[85] Abbott 2007, p. 85.
[86] Elster 2009, p. 184.
[87] Abbott 2016, p. 4.
[88] Ibid., pp. 181-86.
[89] Abbott 2007, pp. 93-95.
[90] Bourdieu 2000a, p. 50.
[91] Clausewitz 1984, p. 202.

final days of Christ that provide listeners with intuitive understanding of suffering. Clausewitz and his wife were involved in Mendelssohn's campaign to revive Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* after half-a-century of neglect. It was performed in Berlin in 1829 as Clausewitz honed his views on narrative.[92] Clausewitz wants language to stimulate readers by simulating reality.

A student of Tocqueville, Judith Adler, attributes the longevity of his influence to style as much as content. The pallid language of contemporary social science contrasts poorly with his "vivid, dramatically gripping vocabulary that invites intimate identification and…private introspection." Without affectation, he treats writing as an art, refining its rhythm, emotional tone, variation on themes, borrowing devices from music and the visual arts. A jot on the margins of one of his manuscripts reminds him to convey a certain idea using "a precise and particular image." In another, he notes that "the pace should be quickened." When circulating drafts, he often solicits advice on how to make his prose "sensible to the imagination." He wants to endow readers with "a sense of intimate mimetic participation" in the reality being described through "bodily participation in the text: seeing, breathing, vocalizing, hearing." And indeed, in one Wagnerian paragraph, he breaks sentences into clauses "cut to the measure of a human breath…breathing slows as the clauses ascended, in a series of suspended aspirations, before coming to rest." This is how he diverges from most sociologists today. "Tocqueville aims to *move* his readers," Adler concludes, "*not* as an expert, critic, preacher, or opinion writer but as a courteous conversant".[93]

Nonsense, Skocpol scowls on behalf of sociologists. These narratives, "like a good Flaubert novel," convey through colorful detail an "impression of fullness much more readily than works of historical sociology".[94] However, sociologists persuade by revealing causation not recreating the past.[95] Bourdieu, that great admirer of Flaubert, returns the complement. Sociological interpretations that claim to be more scientific than rich narratives remind him of bad novels where heroic forces control events – a "totally unrealistic representations of ordinary action".[96] He also frets about widening the gap between scholastic and practical logics by substituting everyday language with the "socially neutralized and controlled language that prevails in scholastic universes".[97] Perhaps this is why Tocqueville insists on employing "everyday words of self-evident, stable meaning".[98] Runciman dares go further, permitting sociologists to use "terms so unscientifically elastic that they can be stretched" because description is particularly hard. Runciman invokes Wittgenstein's challenge to underline the difficulty: Can anyone describe the aroma of coffee? The success of a description hangs on its communicative effect. It does not inform or solicit approval, rather makes readers feel how things were like. A good pastoral symphony is the one that transposes listeners to the idyllic countryside.[99]

Indeed, none of this is alien to classical sociology. It is true that Tocqueville's analytical accounts are not presented in the form of sustained historical narration, yet they are peppered with snippets of portraits, metaphors, and vignettes. So are many classic accounts. Marx's portrayal of factory life is positively Dickensian. Simmel's stranger comes alive on the page as much as that of Camus. And few watch Puccini's *La Bohème* without recalling Tocqueville's depiction of nineteenth-century intellectuals.

Nisbet and Abbott famously champion artistic style in sociology. Nisbet's mentor, F. J. Teggart, notes that the reconstruction of reality requires a sensibility "which is the very essence of art".[100] Nisbet first broaches the topic in his presidential address to the Pacific Sociological

[92] Sumida 2008, p. 197.
[93] Adler 2019, pp.47-55.
[94] Skocpol 1984b, p. 371.
[95] Skocpol 1987, p. 27.
[96] Bourdieu 2000a, pp. 137-38.
[97] Ibid., p. 32.
[98] Adler 2019, p. 52.
[99] Runciman 1972, pp. 380-88.
[100] Teggart 1916, p. 123.

Association in 1962, later publishes it as an article, followed by a book in 1976. Sociology is both art and science. For its scientific findings to amount to more than a "sandheap of empiricism," it should draw on artistic forms and modes of discovery.[101] Nisbet distinguishes between science, as the systematic study of something, and its reduction to causal hypothesis-testing, which he calls *scientism* not science. Sociologists labor under the misconception that science uncovers reality and art beautifies it. Yet both strive to understand reality by capturing its chaos in a lucid representation.[102] And indeed, forms of representation, such as portraiture, landscaping, and techniques conveying motion, can be employed in sociology, as much as in painting, musical composition, and literature.[103] A portrait of a soldier relays features common to an entire social group, making the universal concrete. In contrast, an urban landscape distills in a single snapshot a multitude of social variations.[104] Literary pace and musical tempo transmit the dynamic buzz of social life.[105]

Likewise, Abbott's advocacy of *lyrical* sociology is not about embellishing explanatory narratives to render them more pleasing to the eye. He echoes Nisbet's belief that sociology is concerned with scientific knowledge, but its roots and aims lie in the humanities.[106] Abbot, however, is also interested in what style tells us about authors not just subjects. Style restores the process of discovery that begins when a sociologist is overpowered by the dazzling complexity of a certain social situation, then tries to "awaken those feelings in the minds – and even more the hearts – of his readers." He offers the example of an urban sociologist of Chicago who transmutes with his subjects: socializing with elites, feeling lonely with urbanites, wistful with bohemians, listless with immigrants. Lyric here is not about elegant prose. It sets the mood. In E. P. Thompson's classic on the working class, one glimpses both the workers' passionate radicalism and the author's reaction to it. This is how lyricism differs from its "avatar in the social sciences – explanation." Causal narrators explain outcomes through causally arranged events. Lyrical ones relay their powerful reaction to events through tone and images that sweep the reader along.[107]

To conclude, discovering and ascertaining facts is the point of departure for any historical research. But where do we go from here? Historical sociologists commonly provide causal explanations of *why* things happened. And they do so by identifying one or more powers that determine social outcomes, and construct a narrative around that. This is usually an abstract variable: class, culture, social identity groups, state institutions, geopolitics, or a mixture. However, the diffusion of power in society continues to muddy the waters. An alternative method begins with understanding social interactions through the accounts that people give of themselves and how they recognize and practice power. For whatever else it may be, power is a relational phenomenon that reveals itself in action. Re-enacting narratives that capture how reality unfolded from the viewpoint of social actors might be preferrable to neat chronologies with a solid line of causation shot right through. Pre-requisites for weaving these bottom-up narratives of power are two: an empathetic sensibility that internalizes other people's experiences, and a literary style that vividly portrays their situation. Above all, a scholarly disposition that embraces social complexity rather than settle for the simplification of underlying processes and structural factors.

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[101] Nisbet 1962, p. 67.
[102] Nisbet 2017, pp. 3-15.
[103] Ibid., p. 110.
[104] Ibid., pp. 68-70, p. 43.
[105] Ibid., p. 6.
[106] Abbott 2016, p.277.
[107] Abbott 2007, pp. 70-82.

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