

# Guest Editors' Introduction: Comparative-Historical Sociology as Antidote to the 'Crackpot Realism' of the Twenty-First Century

[Volume 6, Issue 2](#): *Comparative-Historical Sociology as Antidote to the 'Crackpot Realism' of the Twenty-First Century*, September 2017

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0006.201>



[Permissions](#)

*'To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child' – Cicero*

*'People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors' –*

*Edmund Burke*

*'Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it' – George Santayana*

*'The past is never dead. Actually it's not even past' – William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun*

*'I ... always wished I had read history rather than law at university' – Tony Blair (Blair and Schama 2007).*

The common theme of the articles in this special issue of *Human Figurations* is to argue, contrary to against the predominant outlook of contemporary sociology, that comparative-historical perspectives are both indispensable and *useful* in sociological research.

In its origins, sociology was comparative-historical sociology. It no longer is. In the modern neo-liberal university, money flows to present-centred (or 'hodiecentric') research, which politicians, policy-makers and administrators believe to be useful – immediately useful, that is, in the present and the short-term future – a belief in which a large proportion of mainstream sociologists find it advantageous to share. Both sides, the funders and the funded, may also share the common belief in radical discontinuity: that the late modern/postmodern/digital/globalised world has changed and is changing everything. Society today being so new in character, studying the past or long-run patterns of change is irrelevant: as Henry Ford put it so pithily at a pivotal stage in industrialisation, 'History is bunk' (Anon. 1921, p.1).

Contemporary data-accumulating research is not without value, but it is not sufficient: the contributors to this issue of the journal reflect on how sound comparative-historical knowledge of human society has the capacity to improve the human means of orientation and

possibly to improve political decision-making. If placed in long-term perspective, human interdependencies today can be viewed as a higher scale of integration. However, the nature of this process is often obscured by language that is meant to reveal its inner workings: globalisation, connectivity, flows, fluidity, networks and nodes. Unplanned social processes give rise to emotional fantasies of runaway globalisation, dangerous outsiders or technological determinism that either bewail or idealise new fears, threats and possibilities.

Such fantasy images are bolstered by what C. Wright Mills 60 years ago termed ‘crackpot realism’. Mills was referring to the blind drift of political, media, economic and military managers, the ‘power elite’, reacting to foreshortened time horizons and shifting events that threaten to overwhelm:

The view that all is blind drift is largely a fatalist projection of one’s own feeling of impotence and perhaps, if one has ever been active politically in a principled way, a salve of one’s guilt. The view that all of history is due to the conspiracy of an easily located set of villains, or of heroes, is also a hurried projection from the difficult effort to understand how shifts in the structure of society open opportunities to various elites and how various elites take advantage or fail to take advantage of them. To accept either view – of all history as conspiracy or of all history as drift – is to relax the effort to understand the facts of power and the ways of the powerful. (1956: 27)

Comparative-historical sociology provides an antidote to the hodiecentric crackpot realism of the twenty-first century.

These articles, with the exception of that by John Lever and Ryan Powell, arose out of the International Sociological Association’s Forum of Sociology held at the University of Vienna, 10–14 July 2016. The overall theme of the Forum was ‘The futures we want: Global sociology and the struggles for a better world’ – a title that reflected the highly involved and politicised, not to say insurgent, ethos that widely prevails in the discipline. It also seemed likely to represent the continued long march of sociology into a concern almost exclusively with the present and future, as Norbert Elias (2009) bemoaned.

On the other hand, the Forum marked the moment when the ISA promoted its former Working Group 02, Historical and Comparative Sociology, to the full status of Research Committee 56, under the title of Historical Sociology.<sup>[1]</sup> Markus Schulz, the ISA Vice-President for Research, organised a series of ‘Common Sessions’, in which representatives of the ISA’s now 56 Research Committees were to speak briefly about why their own specialities should be of interest across the discipline to sociologists in general – a brave, if probably vain, attempt to demonstrate that sociology still has some common intellectual core. Stephen Menzell, as RC 56’s outgoing President, spoke on its behalf; he later expanded his remarks on why ‘History is not bunk’ for a meeting of RC 33, Logic and Methodology in Sociology, held at the University of Leicester on 11–16 September 2016, and it is a slightly revised version of this that is included in this issue of *Human Figurations*.

For RC 56’s own programme, Menzell also organised a session posing the question ‘In what ways can comparative-historical sociology help to improve the workings of the modern world?’ In his first paper, Menzell outlines the unrealised value of historical-comparative sociology and the self-limiting ambition of hodiecentric sociology in the face of pressing and complex tension balances at all scales of human integration. The articles by Behrouz

Alikhani, Nina Baur and Linda Hering, Fernando Ampudia de Haro, Eric Royal Lybeck, and Alex Law, as well as the second paper by Mennell, are all revised versions of papers accepted for that session. Taken together they underscore the utility of a comparative-historical perspective at different, though inter-related, scales of human integration: local, national, continental and global.

At the scale of the financial system as a global figuration, Ampudia de Haro argues that not only historically-constituted civilising, but also decivilising, trends are present within lengthening chains of interdependencies in the form of more pronounced unequal power ratios, a tension balance Mennell (2007: 311–14) succinctly termed ‘functional de-democratisation’. Alikhani also demonstrates the value of ‘functional de-democratisation’ for getting to grips with large-scale problems of political crisis in the case of the ‘European project’ among citizens who remain strongly embedded in their respective national habitus. For his part, Mennell returns to the post-war sociology of democracy, specifically the now forgotten study by William Kornhauser, to account for the unexamined assumptions that blindly steer the efforts of Western regimes to impose ‘democratic’ norms by superior force.

In terms of the national habitus, and in the context of an apparently sudden upsurge of political nationalism in Scotland that came within a hair’s breadth of destroying the 300-year-old political unity of the UK state, Law sets out a longer-term perspective on the spiral processes of challenge and compromise of sub-state nationalism, a tension-ridden process that is far from finished. In a fine-grained comparative-historical study of national sociology, Lybeck develops an original process study of German and American university systems, arguing that sociology shed its professional roots in policy analysis and practice owing to the rise of methodological specialisation and excessive scholastic detachment and forcing us to rethink involvement–detachment tensions as an inescapable paradox.

Below the level of the nation, Baur and Hering illustrate the value of adopting longer-term perspectives in their comparative study of the differential local mediation of global crises through the residue of useable urban ‘imprints’ inherited from the past.

We later added John Lever’s and Ryan Powell’s article to our special issue because, like Lybeck and Mennell, while also arguing for the relevance of developmental, processual sociology, they set out to reassure figurational sociologists that by engaging with contemporary social problems they are not (necessarily) betraying some ethical ideal of relative detachment.

Alex Law  
Stephen Mennell  
Guest Editors

## Notes

1. The absence of the word 'Comparative' from the title did not mean that the comparative element in 'comparative-historical sociology' had been dropped; it was merely a consequence of there already existing RC 20, Comparative Sociology, within the ISA.

## References

- Anon. (1921) 'Henry Ford says "History is Bunk": What difference does it make, he asks, how many times "Greeks flew kites"?' , *New York Times*, 28 October 1921, p.1.
- Blair, Tony and Simon Schama (2007) 'Simon Schama interviews Tony Blair'. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20071104143713/http://number10.gov.uk/page11325>, accessed 6 June 2017.
- Elias, Norbert (2009 [1983]) 'The retreat of sociologists into the present', in *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 16], pp. 107–26.
- Mennell, Stephen (2007) *The American Civilizing Process*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Mills, C. Wright (1956) *The Power Elite*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.