

Jiří Šubrt

**Time, Memory,
and the Processual
Approach in
Historical Sociology**

edited by
Lucy Císař Brown

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Editor's note	11
1. Long-term social processes from the perspective of historical sociology	13
1.1 What is historical sociology?	14
1.2 Conceptualising the civilising process of Norbert Elias	20
1.3 Time and discipline: The monastery as a model	27
1.4 Norbert Elias' theory of civilisation as an example of temporalised sociology	33
2. Time, memory, and history	43
2.1 The problem of time from the perspective of the social sciences	44
2.2 Durkheim's conception of time as a social category	57
2.3 Social time: Fact or fiction?	62
2.4 Memory as a sociological problem	70
2.5 The metamorphosis	80
3. Theoretical questions and dilemmas	85
3.1 How to overcome the dualism of the individual and society	86
3.2 Institutions: How to understand and examine them from a sociological perspective	93
3.3 Long-term developmental processes as an unintended consequence of human action	98
3.4 The project 'Homo Sociologicus' revisited	103
4. Contemporary societies, how to grasp their transformations	109
4.1 The society in systemic perspective	110
4.2 Modernisation in post-socialist societies	116
4.3 Functionally differentiated society	121

4.4 The end of ideologies?	127
4.5 Reflections on the concept of crisis	131
4.6 Where has the future gone?	137
Editor's concluding remark	141
References	143

Introduction

The study of historical sociology is, by its very nature, a boundary-crossing endeavour which rewards its proponents with both the breadth of sociological insight and the depth of historical understanding. By removing the pitfall of temporal relativity in mainstream sociology, the historical sociologist is able to consider contemporary modern society through the long-term social processes which have guided its evolution into the present. Jiří Šubrt is one such researcher whose investigations into the development of society have been distinguished by the adoption of such a long-term sociological perspective.

In recognition of his long-standing contribution to historical sociology, this selection of his English-language texts has been compiled to celebrate Jiří Šubrt's 65th birthday. The intention is to present a thematic appraisal of Šubrt's research, which has been extensively published in the Czech language, to a wider international audience interested in the problems of time, memory, and long-term developmental processes. This book represents a compilation of some of the author's unpublished contributions (which have been presented at various international conferences), along with selected papers that have been published in professional journals. As the texts were produced in a variety of contexts during a variety of time periods, the collection illustrates the development of sociological theory (through recent decades) with the addition of a distinctly central European perspective.

Born in Czechoslovakia in 1958, Jiří Šubrt received the majority of his education at Charles University in Prague where he studied sociology at the Faculty of Arts. A seven-year stint at the Office for Federal Statistics led him to explore the issue of public opinion which in turn formed the

basis for his doctorate dissertation on the theoretical aspects of this topic. Since 1990, Šubrt has lectured at Charles University, initially at the Faculty of Arts and later at the Faculty of Humanities where he founded the Department of Historical Sociology. Inspired by the historical perspectives of the founding fathers of sociology, such as Comte, Spencer, Marx, and Weber, the primary focus of Šubrt's research has been on developing a long-term perspective through a sociological and theoretical lens. Within the Czech context, Šubrt, along with his colleague Jóhann Páll Árnason, successfully brought the study and acceptance of historical sociology to Czech academia, broadening the horizons of its many students.

During the last three decades, Šubrt has taken part in a number of professional research stays around the world including Vienna, Tübingen, Paris, Berlin, New York, Nuremberg, and Constance. A prolific writer in the English, Czech, and Russian languages, the number of his publications has reached one hundred: thirty of which are books for which he is the author or editor. In more recent years, Šubrt has turned his attention to the problem of the sociology of time and temporalized sociology, which has culminated in his 2021 book *The Sociology of Time: A Critical Overview*. The book takes on the ambitious task of addressing the 'labyrinth' of questions and answers surrounding the concept of time in sociology and provides the reader enough guidance through the complex theoretical considerations.

However, this text is not intended as a cohesive interpretation of Šubrt's entire oeuvre but rather a selection of papers and conference proceedings intended to provide an overview of the ideas he has grappled with during his long academic career. As a compilation of texts, this book reflects not only the changing theoretical perspectives of the author but also how such ideas have been presented to audiences across the years. It is therefore not a comprehensive exploration of all of Šubrt's endeavors but rather a celebration of their diversity.

Throughout the various texts presented within this volume, the influence of Norbert Elias can be seen as a unifying figure within Šubrt's theoretical perspectives, with long-term processes at the core of his intellectual engagement.

The first part of this book looks at the development of historical sociology, taking a particular interest in its place within higher education. Šubrt finds that the central idea for such a focus is the processual approach of Norbert Elias, which he tries to develop further within the temporalized sociology. Time is then explored in depth through the

subsequent chapters with critically examining the problem of the conceptualisation of time and memory in the sociological sense. The next section deals with fundamental questions in sociological theory such as the dilemma of individualism and holism. The final part of the book presents reflections on how the characteristics of contemporary societies are captured in sociology.

Overall, we can conclude that the book provides a partial summary of the work of a contemporary Czech sociologist who has contributed much to the field of historical sociology and continues to play an active role in the dialogue surrounding the subject. The hope is that this collection will be of interest to readers not only in marking this anniversary but also to the wider academic community interested in theoretical approaches to the social sciences.

Lucy Císař Brown

Editor's note

To avoid any duplications of ideas, some published texts have been abridged and edited for clarity. Citations within papers that have previously been published in academic journals are not included in the bibliography: where references to other literature are found in such texts they are bracketed by slashes (‘//’).

1. Long-term social processes from the perspective of historical sociology

This first chapter introduces Jiří Šubrt as the founder of the study programme Historical Sociology which has been taught at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague since 2009. The organic development of the historical sociology program represents a key moment in the expansion of the field in the Czech Republic and offers insight into the possibilities open to those who pursue this approach to research. Šubrt himself understands historical sociology as a research perspective focused on long-term developmental processes. His path to this sociological concept was prefigured by his interest in Norbert Elias' seminal theory of civilisation. He sees this not as dogma but as an approach through which it is possible to conduct a dialogue and which may also be creatively developed.

(L. C. B.)

1.1 What is historical sociology?

The paper “What is Historical Sociology?” was presented at the round table discussion Knowledge and Teaching of Sociology in Brasília and Prague at the Universidade de Brasília on August 4, 2015.

In the last four decades, we have witnessed the dynamic development of the field known as ‘historical sociology’ or ‘historical comparative sociology’ in the international academic scene. The roots of this field go back to the 19th century. In principle, it can be stated that all the great founders of sociology—Comte, Marx, Spencer, Weber, and Durkheim—were historical sociologists because they considered the past to be an integral part of sociological research. A radical turn occurred during the 20th century when, for a long time, the prevailing opinion was that sociologists should only focus on the present and leave the past entirely to historians. Since the 1960s, a new historical sociology has been forming in opposition to this idea, based on the assumption that the present cannot be understood without knowledge of the past.

Historical sociology is a field that has its classic authors (Weber, Elias, etc.) as well as important figures of contemporary research (Eisenstadt, Tilly, Skocpol, Mann, and Wallerstein). During the above-mentioned period, a large number of new and often extensively discussed findings and ideas were published. The field now has various professional periodicals (the *Journal of Historical Sociology* has been published continuously since 1988), professional forums, and representation within the International Sociological Association (Research Committee 56, Historical Sociology). The field now contains

extensive scientific literature along with a number of textbooks [Abrams 1982, Skocpol 1985, Smith 1991, Szakolczai 2000, Bühl 2003, Schützeichel 2004, Romanovskij 2009] and encyclopaedic works [Delanty and Isin 2003].

It must be emphasised that historical sociology cannot be understood as a hybrid combination of history and sociology. It is a field based on the assumptions that the general subject of sociology is historical and that social reality is spatially and temporally determined. Acceptance of this ontological assumption has consequences for both social theory and sociological research strategies, as both should be oriented not only towards analysis of the present but also of the past. In accordance with this premise, historical sociology cannot be defined as a separate sociological discipline, but as a specific theoretical and methodological perspective that is relevant both for general sociology and for specific sociological disciplines. It is a field that strongly focuses on long-term social processes, as well as on the analysis of differences and similarities in different historical periods.

History and sociology are both disciplines which deal with people and their social lives. Therefore, in this respect, they could be considered similar; however, in reality, this is not the case. There is a certain communication barrier between the historical sciences and sociology, which results from divergence in the development of the two disciplines since their inception in the 19th century. In addition to theoretical and methodological differences, the prejudices and stereotypes—believed by the representatives of both sciences—also play a non-negligible role. Sociologists often think of historians as collectors of historical curiosities with no general relevance to today, while historians may think that sociologists try to make generalisations at all costs, thereby lacking a sense of detail and the uniqueness of human events. Within its approach, historical sociology tries to eliminate such prejudices and create space for establishing a dialogue between history and sociology. However, this does not mean that its representatives believe that the border between the two disciplines should be completely erased. Social reality is so complex that each of the mentioned sciences has justified the importance of its own particular knowledge. At the same time, it is also true that, as a result of this developed and deepening specialisation, moats and boundaries arise between individual scientific fields which must be bridged in order to obtain a comprehensive rather than fragmented picture of reality.

A major theme of historical sociology is the problem of modernisation, the formation of modern societies and the paths that lead to their formation. What do modern societies have in common, how and in what ways do they differ, and how will they develop – these issues cannot be sufficiently understood if we do not look at the problem from a historical-sociological perspective; if we do not ask ourselves what their historical path has looked like so far, what traditions they follow and what assumptions they have and will develop.

The investigation of modernisation is approached on the basis of three assumptions: 1) modern societies and modernisation processes are embedded in long-term history, i.e. they are influenced by certain traditions and heritage, 2) the character and development of modern societies are influenced, sometimes even decisively, by the character of specific historical constellations, 3) modernisation must be viewed processually (that is, within long-term socio-historical processes) and comprehensively through the multiple variants of its paths (not just as the enforcement of certain abstract regularities).

Other topics within contemporary historical sociology include issues of social change, civilisational analysis, religious and cultural pluralism, the formation of states and nations, the formation of the world system, integration and disintegration processes, and globalization trends. These themes are monitored through extensive comparative analysis involving broad geographical perspectives and very long periods of time.

Today, historical sociology represents a very diverse and internally differentiated field which not only tries to develop a general theory but also contains a number of specific theories, subject specialisms, and empirical research. These various branches of historical sociology are not narrowly focused nor are they even based on any single theory or method. Within the theoretical aspect, the multi-paradigmatic nature of the field is emphasised, while in the research aspect, the plurality of methodological approaches is emphasised. Interdisciplinary overlap into fields such as (primarily) history is a typical avenue for research; however, anthropology, political science and economics are also frequently employed.

The current position of historical sociology as a field may be considered stable in the Czech Republic. Within recent history there have been several monographs published at Czech institutions which provide overviews of the subject (Šubrt 2007, Arnason 2009, Havelka 2010, Šubrt and Arnason 2010, Arnason 2010). The field is also

represented within 'Masaryk's Czech Sociological Society' (the Historical Sociology section), and has its own specialised magazine, *Historical Sociology*.

Since 2009, the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University in Prague has been offering a master's degree study program in historical sociology. This program aims to provide training for specialists with a focus on long-term social processes and trends in relevant research activities. The study program lasts for two years and applications are accepted from those with bachelor's degrees following a written entrance examination. In the academic year 2012/2013 the teaching of this program in English commenced and at the same time a doctoral studies program opened in Czech and English. At the time of writing, this study program is the first of its kind in Central Europe and, presumably, on the continent.

The newly formed study program has been conceived in order to reflect the contemporary state of its field, react to ongoing academic controversies, and monitor current research trends. It was originally shaped through discussions that were often highly polemical and sometimes had rather escalating tendencies. Just as there is no consensus about the nature of the subject of historical sociology among world experts, there is also no consensus in the understanding of this field among Czech researchers. The original ideas about the subject of this specialisation, from which the final version of the study program gradually crystallised, were very diverse. Among them was the idea that the study of historical sociology should be a kind of hybrid of historical and sociological subjects and that historical sociology is substantively identical to the social history. However, gradually the notion that historical sociology is a sociological way of thinking (rather than a mix of sociology and history) prevailed. This belief is based on the assumption that the general subject of sociology is historical, time-space determined social reality.

The courses taught at the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University can be divided into three basic blocks. The first, a theoretical-historical block, offers courses dedicated to general theoretical concepts of historical sociology, the 'civilising' analysis, as well as perspectives offered by historical sociology on the issues of knowledge, culture, religions, nations, nationalism, economics, politics, law, democracy, and everyday life. The second, a methodological-research block, familiarises students with the basic approaches and problems of sociological and, to an extent, historical methodology. The explanation of research