

Descriptions of the Reading History Sideways Method (the Comparative Method) by Scholars of the 1700s, 1800s, and 1900s

by

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Unfortunately for scholars in the 1700s and 1800s interested in describing societal change, there was a dearth of reliable information concerning the actual histories of social institutions in any society. Scholars of this era, like those of today, often complained about the deficiencies of the historical record. Faced with the difficulty of describing social change in specific societies using historical records, many of these scholars turned to the experiences and institutions of contemporary societies that they judged to be less developmentally advanced than England, France, or Germany and used these societies as proxies for the European past. This is what I call reading history sideways (see Thornton 2005a).

Adam Ferguson, one of the first scholars to explicitly advocate the use of information from less developed contemporary societies to proxy for the missing information about societies of the past, suggested that this methodology was used in ancient Greece. He said that “Thucydides, notwithstanding the prejudice of his country against the name of Barbarian, understood that it was in the customs of barbarous nations he was to study the more ancient manners of Greece” (Ferguson, 1980/1767: 80).

By the 1600s, Western European scholars were clearly using information from contemporaneous societies they believed to be less developed to proxy for the European past. As Teggart argued, they believed that “...the states of culture discovered to exist in America, Asia, and Africa were similar to the states of culture known, from historical evidence, to have existed in ancient Palestine, Egypt, Greece, and Rome” (Teggart, 1925: 91). Because of this assumed similarity, they believed that these contemporary societies outside of Europe could proxy for the Western European past. This procedure became

very widespread in Europe by the end of the eighteenth century, and Marvin Harris suggested that it was used “...by every eighteenth-century social philosopher who believed that European civilization represented an advance over an earlier and ‘runder’ condition” (1968: 152).

The idea that history was revealed in cross-sectional data was specified fairly clearly as early as the 1720s by the French scholar Montesquieu who was traveling in Central Europe. Apparently, Montesquieu was planning a large trip in the region but only went as far east as Hungary when he returned back to his departure site, Venice. “I wanted to see Hungary,” he wrote, “because all the states of Europe were once as Hungary is now, and I wanted to see the manners of our fathers” (quoted in Wolff 1994, page 205).

Another French traveler who took a similar point of view in the 18th century was Count Louis-Philippe de Segur who was appointed as minister plenipotentiary and envoy extraordinaire of Louis XIV to the court of Catherine II at St. Petersburg—he left for Russia from France in 1784. Segur reported on his trip through Prussia and Poland as follows:

“In traversing the eastern part of the estates of the king of Prussia, it seems that one leaves the theatre where there reigns a nature embellished by the efforts of art and a perfected civilization. The eye is already saddened by arid sands, by vast forests.

But when one enters Poland, one believes one has left Europe entirely, and the gaze is struck by a new spectacle: an immense country almost totally covered with fir trees always green, but always sad, interrupted at long intervals by some cultivated plains, like islands scattered on the ocean; a poor population, enslaved; dirty villages; cottages little different from savage huts; everything makes one think one has been moved back ten centuries, and that one finds oneself amid hordes of Huns, Scythians, Veneti, Slavs, and Sarmatians.”

Count Louis-Philippe de Segur (quoted in Wolff 1994, page 19)

Another relevant Frenchman who described the reading history sideways method in the 18th century was Turgot. Turgot applied the biological metaphor of development to societies, with all nations following the same basic path, but at very different speeds. He believed that “By this infinitely varied inequality the actual state of the universe, in presenting at the same time all the shades of barbarism and of civilization, shows us in some sort under one view the monuments and vestiges, and all the steps of the human mind, the reflection of all the degrees through which it has passed—in short, the history of all the ages” (Turgot, 1895/1750: 160-161; also see Manuel, 1962: 33-36).

Adam Ferguson, a Scottish scholar provided more details about the approach in 1767. He wrote that by studying the present condition of an Arab clan or any American tribe “...that we are to behold, as in a mirrour, the features of our own progenitors; and from thence we are to draw our conclusions with respect to the influence of situations, in which, we have reason to believe, our fathers were placed.” Ferguson went on to say “If, in advanced years, we would form a just notion of our progress from the cradle, we must have recourse to the nursery, and from the example of those who are still in the period of life we mean to describe, take our representation of past manners, that cannot, in any other way, be recalled” (Ferguson, 1980/1767: 80-81).

Ferguson’s Scottish contemporary, John Millar, explained why inquiries into the natural history of mankind required the use of cross-sectional data. He noted that “...the reader, who is conversant in history, will readily perceive the difficulty of obtaining proper materials for speculations of this nature. Historians of reputation have commonly

overlooked the transactions of early ages, as not deserving to be remembered; and even in the history of later and more cultivated periods, they have been more solicitous to give an exact account of battles, and public negotiations, than of the interior police and government of a country. Our information, therefore, with regard to the state of mankind in the rude parts of the world, is chiefly derived from the relations of travellers” (Millar 1979/1771: 180-181).

Early nineteenth century attitudes toward substituting contemporary data from one place for historical data from another can be further illustrated by a comment made by Nassau Senior in an 1828 lecture at the University of Oxford. Discussing historical changes in population and economic well being, Senior asked, “what is the picture presented by the earliest records of those nations which are now civilized? or, which is the same, what is now the state of savage nations?” (Senior, 1831:47). Senior quite clearly viewed as equivalent the earliest conditions of now civilized nations and the current state of savage nations.

The methodology of using contemporary cross-sectional data to provide information about the natural histories of social life was further systematized later in the nineteenth century. Auguste Comte, the man who named the discipline of sociology, played a significant role in the codification of the procedures. He also labeled this procedure for describing historical change from cross-sectional cross-cultural data the “comparative method,” the name by which it was to be known in subsequent decades (Comte, 1858/1830-1842; Bryson, 1945: 91). It is the same procedure that I label reading history sideways (Thornton 2005a)

Comte's codification of this comparative method for describing historical change was clear, powerful, and influential. He wrote:

To indicate the order of importance of the forms of society which are to be studied by the Comparative Method, I begin with the chief method, which consists in a comparison of the different coexisting states of human society on the various parts of the earth's surface,—those states being completely independent of each other. By this method, the different stages of evolution may all be observed at once. Though the progression is single and uniform, in regard to the whole race, some very considerable and very various populations have, from causes which are little understood, attained extremely unequal degrees of development, so that the former states of the most civilized nations are now to be seen, amid some partial differences, among contemporary populations inhabiting different parts of the globe...This kind of comparison offers the advantage of being applicable both to statistical and dynamical inquiries...In the second place, it exhibits all possible degrees of social evolution to our immediate observation. From the wretched inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego to the most advanced nations of Western Europe, there is no social grade which is not extant in some points of the globe, and usually in localities which are clearly apart. In the historical part of this work, we shall find that some interesting secondary phases of social development, of which the history of civilization leaves no perceptible traces, can be known only by this comparative method of study; and these are not, as might be supposed, the lowest degrees of evolution, which every one admits can be investigated in no other way. And between the great historical aspects, there are numerous intermediate states which must be observed thus, if at all. This second part of the comparative method verifies the indications afforded by historical analysis, and fills up the gaps it leaves: and nothing can be more rational than the method, as it rests upon the established principle that the development of the human mind is uniform in the midst of all diversities of climate, and even of race; such diversities having no effect upon anything more than the rate of progress. (Comte, 1858/1830-1842: 479-480).

Frederick Le Play, a contemporary of Comte, also provided a description of his approach to reading history sideways, with his approach emphasizing cross-sectional differences within Europe (also see Thornton 2005b). In 1855 he wrote:

If we want to recapture the mentality of the past and thereby gain a comprehensive understanding of the present situation of the working classes in the West, the best way to proceed is to study conditions in the countries where the agricultural and industrial techniques, the organization of labor, and the mutual relations of the various social classes remain like those which existed in France in past centuries. A summary of such observations is offered... [by my reports] dealing with Russia, the Scandinavian countries, Turkey, Hungary, and the countries of Central Europe. These studies offer some very useful preliminary findings. They show that although the old institutions were less favorable to the growth of industry and the rapid advancement of gifted individuals than the institutions recently established in the West, they did offer security to all social classes. A lack of security is keenly felt today, especially among lower-class persons and the improvident classes. A methodical comparison of these two social systems—one designed for stability and the other for progress—will provide a wealth of information... (Le Play 1982/1855:161-162).

Further elaboration on the idea of using cross-sectional data to reveal historical change was provided by John Ferguson McLennan. McLennan wrote:

None of the usual methods of historical inquiry conduct us back to forms of life so nearly primitive as many that have come down into our own times. The geological record, of course, exhibits races as rude as any now living, some perhaps even more so, but then it goes no farther than to inform us what food they ate, what weapons they used, and what was the character of their ornaments. More than this was not to be expected from that record, for it was not in its nature to preserve any memorials of those aspects of human life in which the philosopher is chiefly interested—of the family or tribal groupings, the domestic and political organisation...

For the features of primitive life, we must look...to tribes...of Central Africa, the wilds of America, the hills of India, and the islands of the Pacific...These facts of to-day are, in a sense, the most ancient history. In the sciences of law and society, old means not old in chronology but in structure: that is most archaic which lies nearest to the beginning of human progress considered as a development, and that is most modern which is farthest removed from that beginning.

The preface of general history must be compiled from the materials presented by barbarism. Happily, if we may say so, these materials are abundant. So unequally has the species been developed, that almost every conceivable phase of progress may be studied, as somewhere observed and recorded. And thus the philosopher...may draw a clear and decided outline of the course of human progress in times long antecedent... (McLennan, 1886/1865: 1-4).

We now turn to the methods of John Lubbock who wrote The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man in the last half of the 19th century.

Lubbock was very clear about the reading history sideways methodology that he used in his research. He explains this approach in the first paragraph of his preface:

In my work on 'Prehistoric Times' I have devoted several chapters to the description of modern savages, because the weapons and implements now used by the lower races of men throw much light on the signification and use of those discovered in ancient tumuli, or the drift gravels; and because a knowledge of modern savages and their modes of life enables us more accurately to picture, and more vividly to conceive the manners and customs of our ancestors in bygone ages. (Lubbock, 1889/1870:V).

Another user of the reading history sideways methodology was Herbert Spencer, one of the leading scholars of the late 19th century. Spencer was quite specific in laying out his strategy for studying social change. He identified four stages of societies in his scheme of social evolution: simple societies which he identified as uncivilized; compound societies; doubly compound societies; and trebly compound societies, which he identified as the "great civilized nations" (Spencer 1897/1876, pages 549-555). Spencer wrote that "from the lowest the transition to the highest is through these stages" (page 595). Interestingly, all of the societies at the first two stages of Spencer's evolutionary scheme are from outside Europe, the societies at the third stage come from

both Europe and outside Europe, and the societies at the fourth stage—that Spencer calls the “great civilized nations”—come from both the past (such as ancient Mexico, the Assyrian Empire, the Egyptian Empire, and the Roman Empire), and the present (Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia). From this conceptual scheme for documenting societal trends from cross-sectional data, Spencer reached numerous conclusions.

Another description of this approach to understanding history is provided by Lewis Henry Morgan. He wrote:

The latest investigations respecting the early condition of the human race, are tending to the conclusion that mankind commenced their career at the bottom of the scale and worked their way up from savagery to civilization through the slow accumulations of experimental knowledge.

As it is undeniable that portions of the human family have existed in a state of savagery, other portions in a state of barbarism, and still other portions in a state of civilization, it seems equally so that these three distinct conditions are connected with each other in a natural as well as necessary sequence of progress...

It may be further observed that the domestic institutions of the barbarous, and even of the savage ancestors of mankind, are still exemplified in portions of the human family with such completeness that, with the exception of the strictly primitive period, the several stages of this progress are tolerably well preserved...

Each of these periods has a distinct culture and exhibits a mode of life more or less special and peculiar to itself. This specialization of ethnical periods renders it possible to treat a particular society according to its condition of relative advancement, and to make it a subject of independent study and discussion. It does not affect the main result that different tribes and nations on the same continent, and even of the same linguistic family, are in different conditions at the same time, since for our purpose the condition of each is the material fact, the time being immaterial...

Consequently, the Aryan nations will find the type of the condition of their remote ancestors, when in savagery, in that of the Australians and Polynesians; when in the Lower Status of

barbarism in that of the partially Village Indians of America; and when in the Middle Status in that of the Village Indians, with which their own experience in the Upper Status directly connects (Morgan, 1985/1877:3-17).

Another description of the use of the reading history sideways or comparative method is provided by Edward Westermarck (also see Thornton 2005c). He wrote in the beginning of his 1891 *The History of Human Marriage*:

It is in the firm conviction that the history of human civilization should be made an object of as scientific a treatment as the history of organic nature that I write this book...

Descriptive historiography has no higher object than that of offering materials to [the science of Sociology]. It can, however, but very inadequately fulfil this task. The written evidences of history do not reach far into antiquity. They give us information about times when the scale of civilization was already comparatively high—but scarcely anything more. As to the origin and early development of social institutions, they leave us entirely in the dark. The sociologist cannot rest content with this. But the information which historical documents are unable to afford him may be, to a great extent, obtained from ethnography.

The admirable works of Dr. Tylor, Sir John Lubbock, and Mr. Herbert Spencer have already made us familiar with the idea of a history of primitive civilization, based on ethnographical grounds. This new manner of treating history has, since the publication of their writings on the subject, gained adherents day by day. Immeasurable expanses have thus been opened to our knowledge, and many important results have been reached (Westermarck 1894/1891:1-2).

More than a half century after Westermarck two prominent American sociologists, Ernest W. Burgess and Harvey J. Locke (1953/1945) described history as having “three chief historical stages in the evolution of the family”, with the three historical stages being: the large patriarchal family characteristic of ancient society; the small patriarchal family which had its origin in the medieval period; and the modern democratic family which to a great extent is a product of the economic and social trends

accompanying and following the industrial revolution” (page 18). Burgess and Locke devote considerable space to the discussion of the large patriarchal family they describe as characteristic of ancient society. They report that it was prevalent in China, India, and Japan. In addition, they provide examples from the family characteristics of Hindus, the Roman republic, the ancient Greeks, and the Hebrews under the Law of Moses. They go on to say that:

“The large-family system, where three or more generations live together, is still (sic) found frequently in parts of China, India, Japan, Persia, and Turkey. Our greatest familiarity with the large-family system comes from descriptions of it in the literature of ancient Israel, Rome, and Greece. Most people in the United States are unaware that their ancestors—the ancient Celts, Teutons, and Scandinavians—all lived in this type of family” (Ernest W. Burgess and Harvey J. Locke, page 34)

Some family scholars explicitly used the comparative method to reconstruct the entire natural history of human marriage. Others explicitly used the comparative method to reconstruct certain life cycle transitions in the natural histories of societies—usually the transition that they believed had resulted in Western European societies attaining their current positions. Yet others utilized the comparative method without explanation and with no interest in grand developmental theory. Finally, others were affected by the assumptions and methods of social developmental thought while diligently trying to proceed from a purely empirical approach that eschewed theoretical assumptions.

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