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The Historical Logic of *Logics of History*

Language and Labor in William H. Sewell Jr.

How does the logic of language combine with the logic of labor to explain historical change? This article suggests that William H. Sewell Jr.'s work can be divided into three periods, each characterized by a different answer to this question. In the work of the early cultural turn, labor and language codetermine historical change; in that of the high cultural turn, the logic of language becomes dominant; and in that of the postcultural turn, labor returns to a more central position. The article argues that these shifts result from tensions in Sewell's account of historical change and suggests a comparison with Jürgen Habermas's account of work and interaction.

The essays in *Logics of History*, because of their diversity and complexity, defy easy summary. Much of what is most interesting and useful in them concerns the logic of historical explanation.[1] Yet Sewell's book also provides a theory of historical change based on the combination of two types of human practice: language and labor (Sewell 2005: 360). One of Sewell's main projects is to explain how the combination of these forms of practice account for structural change.

Sewell specifies the relationship between language and labor differently in various periods of his intellectual development, and *Logics of History* well documents these shifts. The initial publication dates of the substantially revised and updated essays in the volume span 17 years, from 1988 to 2005. The earliest essay, on the dockworkers in Marseille, shows how cultural schemas governed by the logic of language can inflect developmental trends, governed by the logic of labor, to produce events—or structural change. The

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central essays of the book, stretching from 1992 to 2000, give the logic of language more importance. In these pieces Sewell argues that the transposition of cultural categories onto new factual situations explains structural change. The last two essays, chronologically speaking, demonstrate a growing dissatisfaction with this account. In these essays Sewell returns to the logic of labor but this time in a more explicit way than in his earlier work. The pieces collected in the book thus describe an arc from an early attempt to synthesize labor and language (the early cultural turn), through a middle period in which Sewell attempts an explanation of events virtually exclusively in terms of the logic of language (the high cultural turn), to a final period in which a more explicit synthesis is sketched (the postcultural turn). One might, then, periodize the essays, and some of Sewell's other major work, in the following way:

The Early Cultural Turn
1980—*Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*
1988—"Historical Duration and Temporal Complexity: The Strange Career of Marseille's Dockworkers (1814–1870)"

The High Cultural Turn
1992—"A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation"
1996—"Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology"
1996—"Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille"
1997—"History, Synchrony, and Culture: Reflections on the Work of Clifford Geertz"
1999—"The Concept(s) of Culture"
2000—"A Theory of the Event: Marshall Sahlins's 'Possible Theory of History'"

The Postcultural Turn
2001—"Refiguring the 'Social' in Social Science: An Interpretivist Manifesto"
2005—"The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History; or, Confessions of a Former Quantitative Historian"

Sewell's intellectual development, if one accepts the above scheme, describes a trajectory punctuated by two key turning points: one around 1990 and a

second around 2000. In the remarks that follow I first substantiate this periodization of Sewell's work by documenting the shifting position of language and labor in the essays from the three periods. I then discuss some of the reasons for this shift, emphasizing how a combination of shifting polemical emphases and theoretical problems drives Sewell's project forward largely according to internal dynamics. I close by calling for a more explicit synthesis between the two logics and suggesting similarities with Jürgen Habermas's reconstruction of historical materialism.

The Early Cultural Turn

Sewell's (1974: 78; 1980: 1; 2005: 274–76) early work investigates the connections among industrialization, class formation, and class consciousness. His main target in this period is a narrative of linear development in which "the rise of capitalism meant the growth of the factory system of production, and the growth of factories meant the expansion of the factory proletariat and therefore the development of radical and class-consciousness labor movements" (Sewell 2005: 275–76). He challenges the linear narrative in two ways. First, he shows that in nineteenth-century France the development of factory labor strengthened the position of artisans and thus did not lead directly to proletarianization (Sewell 1974: 78; 1980: 155–57; 2005: 291–93). Second, he shows that the persistence of artisan labor was a precondition for class consciousness rather than an obstacle to it (Sewell 1980: 213; 2005: 315). Not only does industrialization not lead to proletarianization, but class consciousness does not develop among the industrial proletariat. In sum, the linear narrative misstates both the link between industrialization and class formation and the link between class formation and class consciousness. To explain the links among industrialization, class formation, and class consciousness, Sewell introduces the notion of transposition: the application of preexisting routines and schemas to new circumstances. The reproductive routines of culture in combination with the linear logic of industrialization explain the persistence and growth of artisan labor and the decisive role that artisans play in the articulation of working-class consciousness. The most general problem with the linear narrative, then, is not that it is a narrative but that it does not adequately recognize that human activities have distinct temporalities (Sewell 2005: 9, 277). In these early essays, however, despite their sharp criticisms of linear narratives, developmental trends play a crucial

role. For they are precisely the source of the new realities to which the old cultural categories refer.

The High Cultural Turn

Sewell's analysis of structural change shifts in the second period covered by the essays in *Logics of History*. In this body of work he replaces the interaction of language and labor with a much more single-minded focus on the logic of language. This has important consequences for his theory of structural change.

The essays from the "high cultural turn" are all deeply influenced by structural anthropology, particularly the work of Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins. Following Geertz, Sewell (ibid.: 186) holds that "culture, or systems of symbols, provide a supplementary source of information that is not just a convenience to humans but a physiological necessity of our biological endowment." Human beings are signifying animals because their brains are so complex that external stimuli do not produce automatic behavioral responses. Instead, symbols mediate the external environment and are thus crucial for securing appropriate adaptive responses (ibid.: 187). Thus culture is what distinguishes the human from the nonhuman. It is unsurprising, then, that history making is virtually equated with symbolic mediation in the essays of this period.

Perhaps the key question in this phase of Sewell's work is, what is the connection between social structures and events? He argues that they are doubly linked. First, events can be defined only in relation to structures because they are a subclass of happenings that transforms structures (ibid.: 100, 102, 137, 199, 218, 227, 261, 273). To identify an event, therefore, it is necessary to be able to compare a prior structural situation with a subsequent one. The concept of "event" in Sewell's conceptualization is therefore closely wedded to the concept of structure. But this is not the only connection between them. Sewell (ibid.: 221) also suggests that events should be explained primarily in terms of "the conjoining in a given situation of structures that previously either had been entirely disjoint or had been connected only in substantially different ways."

Obviously, the central term in this argument is *structure*. What does Sewell mean by it? He defines structures as combinations of schemas, sets of formal and informal rules and conventions that govern social life, and

resources, human and nonhuman objects that can be used to enhance or maintain power. Sewell understands schemas as virtual and resources as actual. Events, structural changes, are possible for two reasons: because schemas are *transposable* and because structures are multiple (ibid.: 208). Sewell's model of historical change rests heavily on Sahlins's conception of culture as a "gamble played with nature" in which there is an inherent and double mismatch between "things" and "signs." Singular objects, happenings, or persons in their singularity can never be fully and successfully signified, while signs in their generality can never be fully and successfully objectified (Sahlins 1985: ix). In a sense, the reproduction of structures, since it must occur through transposition, is intrinsically eventful. Sewell, however, goes beyond Sahlins by stipulating the multiplicity of structures as a universal condition. For Sewell (2005: 140), then, it is both the inherent mismatch between things and signs and the plurality of structures that make events possible. Multiplicity of structures is the general condition for historical change, while the transposition of schemas is the creative act of history making. As Sewell (ibid.: 342) puts the general point, "Slippages in the articulation of semiotic practices seem to me an important source of historical change." In the elegant essay on Sahlins, he writes even more forcefully, "I believe Sahlins has uncovered *the* fundamental mechanism of structural change: the necessary but risky application of existing cultural categories to novel circumstances, the action of culturally marking things in the world that, at least occasionally, transforms the meanings of the cultural markers and thereby reorients the possibilities of human social action" (ibid.: 219). Thus events, or structural change, are the outcome of a conjunction of structures allowing actors to transpose schemas to new schema resource relationships, thereby altering the preexisting structure (ibid.: 222, 242).

Sewell's essays from the high cultural turn extend theories of culture from structural anthropology to account for historical change. The transposition of existing cultural categories to new circumstances produces events. It is important to note that Sewell's argument in the essays of this period shifts in two crucial and related ways with respect to his arguments in the early cultural turn. First, he argues that the transposition of schemas across structures, rather than the combination of different types of practice operating according to different temporalities, drives structural change. Second, he introduces the concept of a plurality of structures. These two moves are connected. Sewell's claim of an intrinsic plurality of structures is a consequence

of the increasing importance of transposition as the mechanism of structural change. Before I establish this point, however, it is necessary to indicate the emergence of a third period in Sewell's thinking: the postcultural turn.

The Postcultural Turn

The chronologically final two essays in the book, "Refiguring the 'Social' in Social Science: An Interpretivist Manifesto," and "The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History, or, Confessions of a Former Quantitative Historian," return to the style of argumentation in the essays of the early cultural turn because both are centrally concerned with the relationship *between* the logic of construction and the logic of language. Transposition remains an important mechanism of structural change, but Sewell includes it in a much richer discussion of human practices. This return to the arguments of the first period is not a simple repetition. In the early cultural turn the logic of labor remains in the background. It is presumed in Sewell's references to industrialization. By the postcultural turn Sewell more explicitly discusses labor as a form of human practice.

This is clearest in "Refiguring the 'Social' in Social Science: An Interpretivist Manifesto," an eloquent, if somewhat implicit, critique of the argument developed most systematically in the 1992 essay "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation." Sewell provides in this "manifesto" two somewhat contrasting social ontologies. He first suggests that society is like a set of different language games. Historical transformations are produced by "slippages in articulations between different types of semiotic practices" (ibid.: 342). This is not unlike the main argument from the essays of the 1990s that historical transformations arise from transpositions made possible by a multiplicity of cultural structures. A plurality of language games is another way of specifying a plurality of structures.

But Sewell (ibid.: 361) registers reservations about this formulation: "Semiotic innovations are in themselves fleeting and logically reversible; they only have the power to impose lasting transformations on preexisting semiotic codes when they are somehow built into the world, when they have continuing worldly effects that matter to actors." Transpositions thus must be converted into transformations if they are to constitute history making. It is for this reason that Sewell (ibid.: 360) supplements this linguistic social

ontology with the metaphor of "construction." Construction requires the "sustained labor of human actors" (ibid.). This vision of the social builds in a directionality and irreversibility that the language of transposition lacks because acts of construction are not reversible in the same sense that semiotic innovations are. The task of historically oriented social science, then, is to wed the analyses of these two types of human activity: to investigate the "dialectical interrelationship between language and the built environment" (ibid.: 366). But what is this dialectical interrelationship?

There are strong reasons to hold that the connection between language and construction is dialectical not primarily in the sense that these logics are mutually reinforcing but in the sense that they tend to come into conflict. Construction, by transforming the external environment, tends to subvert the synchronic structure of language. This leads to "anomalous acts of reference" in which the "organized set of categories that make up the initial paradigm, are subject to redefinition" (ibid.). Sewell develops this argument further in the chronologically latest essay, "The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History; or, Confessions of a Former Quantitative Historian." Like "Historical Duration and Temporal Complexity," the logic of construction plays a central role in this analysis, structured as it is according to the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism as a form of capitalist regulation. But what is most interesting is Sewell's account of the intersection between the logics here. For in several places he emphasizes the paradox that the cultural turn occurred at the very moment when the dynamics of capitalism became more important to most people's lives as the Fordist mode of regulation disintegrated (Sewell 2005: 52, 60, 77, 137). This is clearly a case not of a structure in which schemas and resources are mutually reinforcing but of one in which they are at odds.

All of this points to a rather different theory of structure from that presented in "A Theory of Structure." For the later essays depart from the observation that there are two *logics of history*: a logic of language, which operates through transposition, and a logic of construction, which operates through transformation. Events are produced by structures because of the ever-present tension, in Sewell's (ibid.: 359) words an "uneasy relationship," between them. While the logic of construction possesses directionality, the logic of language does not. Instead, it operates through the creative transposition of existing cultural categories to the new factual situations.

Conclusion

What explains the shifts in Sewell's account of the connection between language labor and structural change? Within the scope of these remarks it is impossible fully to confront their external determinants. It is clear from the essays that they are connected to Sewell's attempt to provide an adequate explanation of structural change. The essays of the early cultural turn presume the existence of a logic of labor signified by the process of industrialization. The dramatic transformation of the built environment of France in the nineteenth century is the context in which Sewell's analyses of events unfold both in *Work and Revolution* and in his essays on the dockworkers of Marseille. But the polemical thrust of this early work, against the standard narrative of labor history, pushes Sewell away from an explicit theorization of this process and more generally of labor as a form of practice. The essays of the high cultural turn develop a general theory of social change as the consequence of the transposition of cultural codes onto new circumstances. What are the effects of this shift?

One of the most remarkable differences between the essays of the early and high cultural turns is that in the early essays long-term developmental trends play a crucial role in explaining structural change. In the essays of the high cultural turn developmental trends play little role. Sewell suggests a reason for this disappearance. Language does not develop in the same sense that economies and built environments do (ibid.: 360). It is therefore understandable that as Sewell's account of structural change shifts toward language in the high cultural turn, the place of developmental trends decreases. Initially, this might seem to be a gain. The notion of development seems to be freighted with nineteenth-century teleology. But the shift away from developmental trends has costs.

These are clearest in "A Theory of Structure," where Sewell (ibid.: 143) argues that "agency arises from the actor's knowledge of schemas, which means the ability to apply them to new contexts." But the "new contexts" themselves, the contents to which the transposed categories are applied, remain unexplained. Sewell is deeply aware of this issue and confronts it by stipulating the multiplicity of structures as a universal condition of human societies. The notion of a multiplicity of structures plays the same role as the concept of trend in Sewell's earlier formulation. It provides the new contents to which the transposed categories are applied. Yet this solution, attractive

and elegant as it is, risks undermining one of Sewell's central points: that events are relatively rare. For if structures are always multiple, and if it is their multiplicity that allows for event-making transpositions of schemas, then why would events cluster at particular moments? On the logic of Sewell's argument, one would expect events to be smoothly distributed across historical time: a view that Sewell rightly rejects. Thus to stipulate that events are relatively rare while structures are always multiple seems contradictory.

Further, as a general theory of structural change, the transposition argument is open to serious objections, because it cannot adequately account for one fundamental condition of the possibility of events: the new contents to which existing cultural schemas can be applied. These new contents must be explained in terms of human practice, not stipulated as universals.

In response to these problems, Sewell returns to a richer vision of human practice in the third period of his work, the postcultural turn. In this body of work Sewell displaces the concept of transposition across structures from its central explanatory role and introduces the notion of the tension-filled relationship between the logic of language and the logic of labor.

In short, Sewell's book traces a development unfolding in three stages, each characterized by a dominant solution to the problem of the relationship between the logic of language and the logic of labor. The early essay on Marseille dockworkers contains an implicit synthesis, but it breaks down in the second period as Sewell shifts his attention to the logic of language. While he never loses sight of the importance of nonlinguistic elements, these become less important than in the earlier essays. The main mechanism of historical change is now *transposition*. Yet the theory of transposition proves inadequate. Unable to explain the emergence of new objective circumstances to which existing cultural categories refer, Sewell stipulates the multiplicity of structures as a universal condition of human societies. But this surprisingly ahistorical claim stands in tension with Sewell's claim that events are rare. These inadequacies therefore lead Sewell to a third position, an *explicit* rather than implicit attempt to wed the two logics of history running through the essays. In this attempt structure is conceived not as a mutually reinforcing set of schemas and resources but as a contradictory unity between the logic of construction and the logic of language. The distinctive and attractive feature of Sewell's final solution to the problem is that it throws the differences between the two logics of history into sharp relief and focuses on their conflict as a source of event production. As a result, it opens the way for a

truly dynamic conception of structure: one in which events can be understood not as the product of multiple structures but as the consequence of the development of structures themselves. The central mechanism of historical change in this final formulation is neither construction nor transposition but, precisely, their tension-filled relationship. Events could then be understood as the product of the synchrony of language and the diachrony of construction: the intersection of the two logics of history in the title (ibid.: 360).

Sewell's "third period" in particular provides a much more satisfactory solution to the "Bourdieu problem" than "A Theory of Structure" does. Sewell sees the basic weakness in Pierre Bourdieu's sociology as an inability to grasp the multiplicity of structures and therefore to account for historical change. In one sense, this criticism is slightly unfair. For Bourdieu's concrete analyses of historical change involve the very kinds of mechanisms that Sewell discusses. Especially in his analysis of the crisis of May 1968 in France, Bourdieu (1988: 153–56) tries to develop an explanation in terms of the application of old schemas to a new situation. But Sewell's (2005: 139) deeper point, that Bourdieu cannot "explain change as arising from within the operation of structures," seems to me valid. When remaining within the logic of language, however, Sewell's own account is vulnerable to exactly the same objection. For Sewell, like Bourdieu, cannot explain the origin of the new contents or objective situations to which agents apply preexisting cultural schemas. The multiplicity of structures is a *false solution to this real problem*. However, by reconceptualizing structure not as schemas and resources but as the *dialectical interrelationship* of different forms of human practice with contrasting temporalities, Sewell builds a dynamic into structure. It would be interesting to see this conception of structure elaborated more systematically and pressed into the service of the theory of events.

One way forward for Sewell would be to develop a more explicit general statement about the main forms of human practice and their temporalities. It is surprising that he does not more systematically discuss Habermas (1971: 113), one of the few major contemporary social theorists to have had scant influence on his work. For Habermas's reconstruction of historical materialism in terms of the development of work and interaction is close to some of Sewell's main concerns. In particular, Habermas (ibid.: 115), like the Sewell of the third period, focuses on the uneven temporality of forms of human practice as a mechanism of structural change. Although one might question Habermas's attempt to reintegrate language and interaction in a

single developmental narrative, his reconstruction of Marxism as a theory of contradictory human practices seems extremely useful. Without returning to the philosophically and empirically untenable distinction between "base" and "superstructure," Habermas effectively recaptures the idea of "combined and uneven development" as the theoretical core of Marxism as a theory of history. His central point, after all, is that in contemporary capitalism scientific-technical progress rooted in purposive rational action has outstripped the rationalization of goals through communicative action (ibid.: 118). This is the foundation of Habermas's reconstruction of the Marxist theory of crisis. In short, he provides the beginnings of a theory of structural change based on the combined and uneven temporality of human practice that seems similar to Sewell's. It would be interesting to see Sewell position himself more explicitly in relation to this synthesis.

Logics of History, to conclude, contains a major social theory whose merits are substantial. Sewell proposes a synthesis of practice and signification, of structure, agent, and event, every bit as general, ambitious, and complex as those of Marx, G. W. H. Hegel, and Bourdieu. Indeed, there are few other living social theorists whose work combines the same level of theoretical systematicity, historical sensitivity, and intellectual range. Sewell's book makes a decisive contribution to the project of social theory as a theory of history.

Note

1 For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Steinmetz's commentary in this issue.

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