

Chapter 1: The Case for Social Science

History

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History is too important to be left to the historians.

– Donald E. Osterbrock (2002: 221)

1.1 Introduction

Social science history is an interdisciplinary approach. It focuses on historical events and developments and draws on empirical insights gained by historians and theoretical and methodological perspectives from the social sciences. As such, it combines the nuanced description and interpretation of specific events and contexts and the explicit construction of general theories and empirical analysis based on formal methods.

However, social science history is also distinct from history proper and social science proper, as studies within this research tradition attempt to offer a *systematic and theoretical* understanding of *historical* events and trends by unravelling the complex and dynamic interactions between agency, institutions, culture, and structure (Brettell 2002). In the next chapter, we define social science history and map the major approaches we find under this umbrella term. The aim of this chapter is mainly to make the case for social science history in a general sense.

The value of social science history lies in its ability to marshal relevant empirical variation to shed new light on the past and to construct, assess, and contextualize general theories in a

systematic way. By comparing different cases and periods, social science history can help researchers identify patterns, variations, and mechanisms of social, political, and economic change. By situating phenomena in their broader historical contexts, social science history can enrich interpretation and explanation. By testing and refining theoretical propositions with historical evidence, it can enhance the validity and applicability of concepts and theoretical models.

These features enable researchers to address some of the most important and challenging research questions, such as: How and why do societies change over time? What are the causes and consequences of social movements, revolutions, wars, regime change, and other forms of collective action? How do institutions, norms, and values emerge, persist, or transform? How do historical legacies shape the present and the future?

Our argument in this chapter is that we want firm knowledge about the past for two main reasons: because history in itself is interesting to many people and because it can help us understand the present. To gain valuable historical insights, we depend on a community of scholars (historians) with deep understanding of the historical context who focus on the identification and interpretation of primary sources and on other communities (social scientists) who focus on generalization across space and time based on explicit theoretical frameworks and formalized methods.

In this chapter, we first summarize several general reasons for taking history seriously. Thereafter we highlight the core skills that make historians specialists in making sense of the past. We finally outline the more specific advantages of social science history. We demonstrate that historical analysis is important and useful and emphasize how the research traditions of history and social science history have different and complementary strengths in the way they approach the past.

1.2 What is history good for?

Why should we study history? What benefits can we gain from learning about the past?

History is not just a collection of facts and dates, but a rich and diverse source of knowledge that can help us understand ourselves and the world around us (Jordanova 2000: Ch. 6).

According to Lynn Hunt (2018: 1):

Everywhere you turn, history is at issue. Politicians lie about historical facts, groups clash over the fate of historical monuments, officials closely monitor the content of history textbooks, and truth commissions proliferate.

One is tempted to add that the history of most nations is essentially contested. Who did what, when, and why – and what consequences ought to be drawn from these circumstances concerning blame and behavior? Just think about the different interpretations and use of history related to the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel-Palestine. In this section, we identify four different ways in which historical knowledge is valuable, namely, by increasing awareness about diversity and complexity, revealing identities and biases, explaining historical events and processes, and providing lessons from the past.

1.2.1 Increasing awareness about the diversity and complexity of cultures and societies

Insights into history help us to understand the diversity and complexity of human cultures and societies (Stearns 1998; Hunt 2018). As the saying goes, the past is a foreign country. By studying history, we can explore how people have lived in different times and places, how they have adapted to different environments and challenges, how they have created different forms of social organization and expression, and how they have interacted with other cultures and civilizations. In this way, history can enrich our appreciation of the variety and richness of human heritage and foster our curiosity and openness towards other ways of life.

This can be difficult because we need to free ourselves from the shackles of some of our priors to do so. In other words, we must cut our ties to the present that has formed us in order to immerse ourselves into the past. As British historian J.H Elliot (2012: 108) points out about an institution that most of us probably believe we know well, ‘It is not easy for the largely undeferential western societies of today to recapture the traditional aura of monarchy, and it requires a leap of the imagination to enter a vanished world.’¹

1.2.2. Revealing identities and biases

History is also valuable in that it helps us to understand ourselves and others (Loewen 2007: 13-14; Hunt 105-107). By studying history, we can trace how we and others have been shaped by the historical influences and contexts of our ancestors, our states, our regions, our communities, etc. History can reveal how we are connected to the past, how we are influenced by the historical circumstances and experiences of those who came before us, and how we are influenced by the historical legacies and traditions that we inherit, such as laws, institutions, languages, religion, and art. For example, we can learn how national histories and narratives have affected our political and social values and beliefs, how regional histories and cultures have affected economic and environmental conditions and choices, and how community histories and memories have affected interpersonal and group relations and behaviors. In this way, historical knowledge can reveal biases and prejudices and shed light on historical responsibilities and duties.

Moreover, careful historical analysis can be used to assess the correctness of analogies that motivate or justify contemporary actions and predictions. It has been demonstrated that political actors often think in terms of historical analogies, the most famous one being the

¹ Indeed, this logically also require us to understand that the past often surprised those who lived it. Here is Elliot (2012: 215) again: “The recognition that the present is full of surprises requires a similar recognition that the past was equally so in the eyes of those who lived it”.

‘Munich analogy’, according to which brutal dictators cannot be appeased. For instance, according to Yetiv (2011: 61), it was this analogy which made George Herbert Walker Bush decide to liberate Kuwait by force during the First Gulf War in 1990-1991. To the extent that historical analogies are false, one should beware of using them to make sense of the present.

1.2.3 Explaining causes and effects of historical events and processes

History can help us explain the causes and effects of historical events and processes (Evans 2000: 8-9; Carr 1961: 88-89). By studying history, we can examine how historical events and processes are complex and multifaceted phenomena that can be elucidated by a plethora of factors associated with interests, ideas, institutions, and identities. History can help us to understand how these factors have interacted and influenced each other, and how they have created opportunities and challenges for human development and progress.

Knowledge about the past can also help us to evaluate the significance and impact of historical events and processes, and how they have affected different groups and regions in different ways. For example, we can learn how the Mongol invasions and the Black Death changed the course of Eurasian history, how the slave trade and colonization influenced the course of African history, how the spread of Islam had an impact on the MENA region and beyond, and how the Opium Wars and the Meiji Restoration put China and Japan on different developmental trajectories.

1.2.5 Providing lessons from the past

A final reason why history is valuable is that it helps us to learn from the past (McCullough 2005; MacMillan 2009: 3-4). This is possible because ‘Wisdom is not fundamentally altered by changes in technology, growth in population, or specialization of occupations. Wisdom can be found in learning about how people in the past confronted their challenges’ (Hunt 2018: 113). By studying history, we can observe how people have faced various problems

and challenges in the past, how they have solved them or failed to solve them, and how they have contributed or harmed their societies and the world. History offers lessons and models from the past that might help us not to repeat similar mistakes or errors and instead be inspired by the best practices or solutions.

History is not only a source of information about the past, but also a way of thinking about the present. History can help us understand the present by providing us with broader and deeper perspectives by revealing the historical roots and contexts of current issues and problems. In other words, it can place the present in relief and thereby put the challenges that face us today into proportions.

The present is a product of historical development, not a natural or inevitable state of affairs and knowledge about history can help us realize this. History can show us how the present is shaped by various factors, such as social structures, political systems, economic forces, cultural norms, ideological beliefs, environmental conditions, human agency, and contingency. History can also show us how the present is open to change and transformation, as well as to continuity and persistence. Knowledge about history can help us to identify the possibilities and limitations of the present, as well as the challenges and opportunities for the future.

The present is a part of a larger historical process, not an isolated or exceptional phenomenon. History can show us how a certain contemporary phenomenon is connected to the past, how it is influenced by – and influences – other places and times, and how it is embedded in a historical context. It can also reveal how the present is composed of multiple and overlapping histories marked by similarities and differences.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the present is not a given or self-evident reality.

Historical knowledge can increase our awareness about how the present is constantly being

constructed and interpreted by humans. It is narrated and represented in various forms and genres that have certain purposes and effects. Hence, the present is contested and debated by a variety of interpreters, and our understandings often rest on shaky foundations. History can help us to critically examine our own understanding of the present by leading us to question our sources, methods, and representations of reality.

1.3 What are historians good for?

Historical thinking is not a natural or intuitive process, but a complex and challenging one that requires critical analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of multiple sources and perspectives (Wineburg 2001). Historians are professionals who study the past and use their specialized skills and knowledge to make sense of historical sources and evidence. There has been a big debate among historians about whether the knowledge they produce tells the truth about the past or whether they are really inventing this past (Maza 2017; Evans 1997). Social scientists going historical should understand these disagreements as well as their implications for the nature of the data that they enlist from historians. We discuss this point in detail in Part II. Here, we set this debate to the side by emphasizing that there seems to be a minimum understanding among historians – with the exception of the most wholehearted post-modernists – that it is still possible to sort the wheat from the chaff when it comes to descriptions of the past.

How is it possible, if the history written by historians takes the form of ‘interpretations of interpretations, not recitations of “facts”’ (Howell & Prevenier 2001: 149)? In a nutshell, this is done via the systematical use of historical method based on rules of verification, where

interpretations are examined and corroborated or falsified by an appeal to the evidence at hand (Evans 1999[1997]: 109-110).²

By training and experience, historians have a competitive edge over social scientists when it comes to chronological reasoning and historical comprehension, analysis, and application (Jordanova 2000: Ch. 7). They are also normally much more attuned to how new historical evidence affects what we believed we knew about the past (Elman & Elman 2001: 20). In this section, we elaborate on each of these skills.

1.3.1. Chronological reasoning and comprehension

Chronological reasoning is the ability to understand and explain the sequence, duration, continuity and change of historical events and processes, and to use various tools and methods to represent and analyze time and chronology, such as periodization, timelines, and causation. These skills help historians to organize and structure historical information, to identify patterns and trends in history, to establish connections and relationships among historical phenomena, and to explain the causes and effects of historical change.

For instance, chronology is important to avoid misinterpreting what actors did at various stages. A case in point is how Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Ethan Bueno de Mesquita (2023) – none of them historians – mistakenly interpret the ban against usury at the 1179 Lateran Council as testimony to how popes tried to stifle economic development during what they call the “Concordat Period” (CE 1107/22-1309). The 1179 council as well as several other Lateran Councils in this period merely repeated a ban that was already part of Canon

² To quote Evans (1999[1997]: 189, 217) at some length: ‘No historian really believe in the *absolute* truth of what they are writing, simply in its *probable* truth, which they have done their utmost to establish by following the usual rules of evidence ... Through the sources we use, and the methods with which we handle them, we can, if we are careful and thorough, approach to a reconstruction of past reality that may be partial and provisional, and certainly will not be totally neutral, but is nevertheless true.’

Law. Indeed, upon closer inspection the Church was gradually softening its stance on usury in this period, that is, we find the exact opposite development of the one suggested by the two social scientists. But this fact is hidden to those who do not systematically follow the chronology to place, for example, the 1179 ban on usury in context (see Møller 2023). As Marcus Kreuzer (2023: 56) puts it, the tell-tale of what he terms “historical tourism” is ‘indifference of dates that are so central to historical thinking’.

Chronological reasoning also helps historians to understand the present by showing how it is a product of historical development, how it is shaped by various factors, and how it is open to change and transformation.

A main component of historical research is to identify, locate, gather, organize, and cite historical sources that are relevant, reliable, and representative. Historical comprehension is the ability to understand and interpret historical sources and evidence, such as archives, books, artifacts, etc. Historians use various strategies and techniques to read and analyze them, such as sourcing, corroboration, close reading, and contextualization, and they master the relevant languages (and handwriting styles) and can draw on a lot of contextual knowledge about the period and topic in question. A case in point here is the ‘Cambridge School’ of the history of political thought established by J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, which advocates that terms must be understood in their historical context, which requires a deep reading of the writings of the period in question to learn what contemporaries meant when using certain words (see Skinner 2022).

Historical comprehension helps historians to assess the reliability and validity of historical sources and evidence, to extract relevant information from them, to understand the perspectives and purposes of their authors or creators, and to situate them in their historical contexts.

Historical comprehension also helps historians to understand the present by exposing them to alternative viewpoints and values, by showing them the diversity and complexity of human experiences and cultures, and by enriching their appreciation of human heritage.

1.3.2 Analysis

Attempts to disentangle “historical truth” requires attention to fact-finding as well as balanced and careful interpretation:

A fact is inert until it is incorporated into an interpretation that gives it significance, and the power of an interpretation depends on its ability to make sense of the facts ... the truthfulness of any interpretation depends on its coherence and its ability to offer an explanation for the important facts. (Hunt 2018: 30, 41; see also Evans 1999[1997]: 66-68)

Based on carefully selected sources, it is the goal of historical research to analyze and report the results in ways that live up to shared standards about coherence, transparency, nuance, and limited bias. Historical analysis is constituted by the ability to evaluate and synthesize historical sources and evidence, to construct and communicate historical arguments, to compare different interpretations of history, and to recognize and address historical questions.

These aspects of historical interpretation help historians to develop and support their own claims and to engage with other historians’ views and debates. They also support historians in presenting findings in clear and coherent ways and making significant contributions to historical knowledge and understanding. Against this backdrop, historical analysis can be used to understand the present by providing lessons from the past and challenging widespread assumptions and prejudices. Misunderstandings and damages potentially emerging from incorrect, unnuanced, and biased “history telling” call for serious investigation:

Determining historical truth is crucial. Without it, the lies of politicians or Holocaust deniers cannot be countered; monument and textbook controversies will never be resolved; memory wars will continue indefinitely; and the public will have no confidence in the history that is presented to them. (Hunt 2018: 30)

1.3.3 Application

Historical application is the ability to apply historical knowledge and thinking to the present and the future. It captures the ability of historians to identify and analyze current issues and problems that have historical roots or contexts and to evaluate alternative courses of action or solutions based on historical evidence and reasoning. It also refers to the potential of making more informed and ethically justifiable decisions that consider relevant background knowledge.

The present is connected to the past and the future, and what happens in one place is influenced by and influences other places. Embeddedness in a historical context is a basic condition. Against this backdrop, historical application helps historians to use history as a resource for understanding and addressing contemporary challenges and opportunities. This can imply considerations about the historical consequences of their actions and choices, including those that have an impact on the rights and interests of others.

While the individual skills described above can be reached by amateur historians and scholars from other disciplines, it is rare to see the full panoply employed successfully by others than professional historians. This means that they generally have a competitive edge concerning the identification and treatment of historical sources.

1.4 What is social science history good for?

If historians are the best at what they do, and social scientists do something else, what is the rationale for social science history as research tradition? In this section, we discuss whether social science history has potential distinct from what conventional history and social science, respectively, offer on their own. Here, it is important to understand that the purpose of social science history differs from the purpose of history proper. The premise of social science history is that the aim of historical analysis is not to study the past for the past's sake but to generate theoretical insights that advance knowledge about human societies (Elman & Elman 2001: 12). The main contribution of social science history compared to conventional historical research is to reduce complexity and variance truncation, while its main contributions to the social sciences – on top of reducing variance truncation – are to reveal path-dependencies, evaluate generic mechanisms, enlist unique data, develop new ideas, and avoid presentism.

1.4.1 Reducing variance truncation

One of the reasons why social scientists stand to gain from adopting a historical perspective is that they can overcome the limitations of relying on recent data that may not capture the full range and variation of social phenomena. Many social science findings are based on data from the last few decades, which may not reflect the long-term patterns, trends, and causes of social change. According to Kreuzer (2023: 107): ‘The most common mis-description results when extrapolating trends from a short time-scale and assuming that those trends repeat themselves over longer time scale.’ By going historical, social scientists can expand their temporal scope and examine how social phenomena have evolved over longer periods of time, how they have been influenced by different historical contexts and factors, and how they have affected different historical outcomes and consequences.

Going historical in this way does not mean abandoning the methods and tools of social science, but rather applying them in a more rigorous and comprehensive way. Whether using quantitative or qualitative approaches, social scientists can incorporate historical data and analysis into their research designs and strategies. For example, in quantitative analysis, social scientists can use various techniques to account for the effects of historical context on their variables of interest, such as using dummy variables to represent different historical periods or regimes or using more sophisticated methods such as fixed effects models or difference-in-differences estimators.

Kreuzer (2023) calls this kind of temporal extension analysis *Longue Durée* analysis. It aims to identify the enduring and underlying structures and processes that shape social phenomena over time. More generally, a historical study will often challenge the assumptions and generalizations that we make about society based on contemporary data. By comparing different historical cases and experiences, social scientists can assess the validity and applicability of their theories and hypotheses, as well as discover new insights and explanations that may not be evident from a narrow temporal focus.

A narrow empirical focus on the period after World War II has often led scholars to read history backward (see Chapter 4). Many prominent social science studies of this period are based on explicitly or implicitly projecting findings from the period after 1945 backward in time, hence introducing selection bias, something that has been severely criticized.

For example, selection bias in the form of truncated samples has been emphasized as a cause of concern in connection to the relationship between economic development and democratization. Carles Boix (2011) challenges studies that have been unable to a positive, significant association. He points out that these studies are mainly based on data from the period after 1945. This is problematic for two reasons. Many western democracies were

already established and were characterized by high levels of democraticness at this point, which means that only quantitative within-country analyses (country fixed effects models) going further back in time can capture a positive relationship, if such exists.

Boix goes on to show that the Cold War competition between the USA and the Soviet Union from 1949 to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-1991 suppressed the relationship between the level of economic development and democratization in this period. Extending the analysis back to 1800 and taking into account the changing structures of the international system, Boix finds a strong and robust relationship between economic development and the chance of democratic transitions.

Another example is the relationship between economic crisis and political instability.

Krishnarajan (2019) shows that a set of previous null findings about the relationship between economic crisis and irregular leader removal in autocracies owe to an exclusive empirical focus on the period after 1960 where many autocrats have had access to stabilizing funds from natural resources which have allowed them to stave off the negative political effects of economic crisis. Extending the analysis back to 1875, Krishnarajan finds a robust effect of economic crisis on irregular leader removal in autocracies.

1.4.2 Revealing path-dependencies

Another reason for social scientists to conduct historical analysis is that it can account for the role of path dependence in social phenomena. Path dependence is the idea that past events or decisions have significant or disproportionate effects on later events or decisions, through mechanisms such as increasing returns, positive feedback, lock-in, or self-reinforcing processes (Liebowitz & Margolis 1995; Pierson 2000; Mahoney & Schensul 2006). Path dependence implies that social phenomena are influenced not only by current conditions, but also by historical trajectories that may constrain or enable certain outcomes or choices

(Puffert 2008). Path dependence also implies that social phenomena are contingent on specific historical circumstances that may not be easily replicated or reversed (Mahoney 2000).

A path-dependent argument is thus an argument that explains a social phenomenon by tracing its historical origins and development, and by showing how it was shaped by contingent events or decisions that triggered path-dependent mechanisms of reproduction (Mahoney 2000). A path-dependent argument also shows how alternative outcomes or choices were foreclosed or rendered less likely by path-dependent mechanisms. Such arguments often challenge conventional or deterministic explanations that assume that social phenomena are inevitable, optimal, or determined by exogenous factors.

An illustrative example is how the development of welfare states in different countries was influenced by critical junctures and historical legacies. It has been suggested that welfare states emerged from different historical configurations of state-society relations, such as corporatism, statism, liberalism, and social democracy (Esping-Andersen 1990; Korpi 1985; Haggard & Kaufman 2009). These configurations were shaped by contingent events or decisions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the formative moment for the establishment of different kinds of welfare regimes – such as revolutions, wars, democratization, and industrialization, which created opportunities for different actors and interests to influence the design and implementation of social policies. These configurations generated path-dependent mechanisms, including institutional feedback effects, policy feedback effects, and normative feedback effects that reinforced and reproduced the existing welfare regimes over time. As a result, welfare states diverged in their structures and outcomes across countries, despite facing similar challenges and pressures in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This argument challenges the assumption that

welfare states converged toward a common model or responded uniformly to external factors such as globalization or neoliberalism.

1.4.3 Evaluating generic mechanisms

Another reason why social scientists should engage in historical studies is that they can identify and test generic mechanisms that link causes with outcomes. A generic mechanism is a causal process that operates in a similar way across different historical contexts and cases, producing similar effects or outcomes. A generic mechanism is not specific to a particular time or place, but rather captures a general pattern or regularity of social phenomena.

Jon Elster (2009: 10) has termed this “exportable mechanisms”, i.e., mechanisms that operate in different contexts. By comparing different historical periods, social scientists can learn about how such mechanisms unfold and the extent to which the outcomes they produce are conditioned by the context.

An example of a generic mechanism from the social sciences is the diffusion mechanism that Charles Tilly (2006: 423-424) terms the “mobilization-resonance cycle”. According to this mechanism, social movements spread from one place to another through a process of mobilization and resonance. Mobilization refers to the process of organizing and activating people for collective action, while resonance refers to the process of making collective action appealing and meaningful to potential participants. The diffusion mechanism operates in a similar way across different historical contexts and cases, producing similar effects or outcomes, such as the emergence, expansion, and decline of social movements. However, the diffusion mechanism is also conditioned by the context, such as the political opportunity structure, the cultural framing, the network structure, etc., that may facilitate or hinder mobilization and resonance.

Another example of a generic mechanism from the social sciences is the institutional change mechanism that Douglass North (1990) terms the “credible commitment problem”.

According to this mechanism, economic growth and development depend on the ability of political actors to credibly commit to respect and enforce property rights and contracts.

Credible commitment reduces uncertainty and transaction costs and increases investment and innovation. However, credible commitment is difficult to achieve, because political actors have incentives to renege on their promises or to expropriate private wealth. The institutional change mechanism operates in a similar way across different historical contexts and cases, producing similar effects or outcomes, such as the emergence or decline of economic prosperity and political stability (see Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). However, the institutional change mechanism is also conditioned by the context, such as the distribution of power, the nature of ideology, and the degree of competition that may affect the incentives and constraints of political actors.

1.4.4 Enlisting unique historical data

Yet another reason why social scientists can profitably go historical is that they can access data that can offer advantages over contemporary data in assessing theoretical propositions. Historical data can come in various forms and sources, such as archives, documents, artifacts, surveys, and censuses (see Cirone 2023). Historical data is generally much more incomplete than contemporary data (Goldthorpe 1990). Yet, sometimes historical data allows us a glimpse into rooms and discussion that are off limit based on contemporary data, due to files being classified or political actors unwilling to disclose what happened, or it presents advantages due to the very nature of the historical developments.

Beginning with the latter, one type of historical data that can be particularly useful is natural experiments, which are situations where an exogenous event or shock creates a treatment and

a control group that are similar in all relevant aspects except for the exposure to the event or shock (Dunning 2012). A natural experiment approximates the conditions of a controlled experiment, where the researcher can isolate the causal effect of the treatment by comparing the outcomes of the treatment and control groups. A natural experiment also allows the researcher to analyze the long-term consequences of the treatment, which may not be observable in a short-term or artificial setting.

However, natural experiments are not the only type of historical data that can be leveraged. Other types of historical data can also provide valuable information and insights that may not be available in the present, such as classified documents and private diaries that can reveal the motives and actions of historical actors, or censuses that can capture the characteristics and behaviors of historical populations. A case in point is how Kurt Weyland (2016) uses diaries and letters of conservative German politicians to analyze how counterrevolutionaries developed their strategies in 1848. He argues that these sources can be seen as “confessions”, which provide the kind of data on undemocratic elite actors’ preferences and strategies that are normally unavailable to those studying contemporary cases of repression or political reaction (Weyland 2016: 217).

1.4.5 Reducing complexity via explicit theories and formalized methods

Social scientists can also use the social science toolbox (i.e., relatively formalized, explicit social science theories and methods) to increase our understanding of historical events and trends of general interest (McLean 2010; Wetherell 1999). Social scientists can enlist historical data to test and refine their theories and hypotheses, to measure and compare various indicators and variables, to identify and estimate causal relationships, and to generalize and extrapolate their findings. Social science methods often have a competitive edge over historical methods in explaining the causes or consequences of certain historical

developments and exploring the generalizability of specific relationships. Howell and Prevenier (2001: 3) thus urge historians to resort to statistics because it ‘can also help uncover hidden relationships among events, allow scholars to make historical connections, or reveal historical patterns that would otherwise not have been seen.’ J.H. Elliot (2012: 169) meanwhile concedes that ‘systematic comparative history remains the Cinderella among approaches to the past.’

In addition, the strong emphasis on theory and comparisons enables social scientists to reduce complexity and to generalize in more explicit, cumulative, and stringent ways. This feature of social science history sometimes allows scholars to correct descriptive misunderstandings of historians (e.g., Larson 2001), but this issue is more debatable (see Adcock and Collier 2001).

An example where the social scientific approach has provided insights into general patterns that historians have not identified concerns the study of the origins of democracy. Social scientists have been able to increase our knowledge about trends and diversity by using systematic historical data to measure and compare democratic developments (e.g., Knutsen & Skaaning 2022).

Historians have often focused on the specific historical contexts and contingencies that led to the emergence of democracy in different countries, such as revolutions, wars, and social movements (e.g., Friisberg 2006; Keyssar 2009). Social scientists have used historical data to develop and examine more general theories and models of democratization, such as modernization theory, class conflict theory, diffusion, and the impact of geographical conditions (e.g., Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Boix 2003; Acemoglu & Robinson 2009; Markoff 2014; Gerring et al. 2022). Social scientists have also used historical data to identify and estimate causal relationships between democracy and other factors, such as economic growth, human development, social welfare, etc. Social scientists have finally used historical data to

generalize and extrapolate their findings to other countries and regions that may not have experienced democracy yet or may be undergoing democratic transitions or breakdowns.

1.4.6 Developing new ideas and avoiding presentism

Historical studies can help social scientists enhance their creativity and imagination, which are essential for generating new ideas and insights. Historical studies can expose social scientists to a variety of historical phenomena that may challenge their existing theories and paradigms or inspire them to formulate new ones. Historical studies can also stimulate social scientists to think of novel ways of collecting, analyzing, and presenting historical data, using various methods and techniques from different disciplines.

Historical creativity and imagination can be helpful in many ways. They are a core feature of counterfactual reasoning, which is the ability to imagine what might have happened if certain events or decisions had been different. Counterfactual reasoning can help social scientists to evaluate the significance and impact of historical phenomena, to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for certain outcomes, and to explore alternative scenarios or possibilities. Historical studies can help social scientists to construct plausible and rigorous counterfactuals based on historical evidence and logic.

Exposure to historical variation and complexity can also help us reveal the limitations of the tendency to interpret the past in terms of the present or to project the present onto the past. In other words, historical studies can help social scientists to avoid presentism. Presentism can lead to anachronisms, biases, or distortions in understanding historical phenomena. Historical studies can help social scientists to appreciate the uniqueness and diversity of historical contexts and experiences, and to avoid imposing their own values, norms, or assumptions on the past (see Chapter 4).

1.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have made the case for social science history as an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical and social scientific perspectives and tools. Cicero (1939 [46 BCE]: 395) once stated: ‘To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?’ In a famous passage, David Hume (1987[1777]: 566) endorsed and reformulated this claim as follows:

we should be for ever children in understanding, were it not for this invention ... A man acquainted with history may, in some respect, be said to have lived from the beginning of the world, and to have been making continual additions to his stock of knowledge in every century.

In line with Cicero and Hume, we have argued that historical research is indeed important, and that social science history complements conventional history and social science in addressing important and challenging research questions.

Social science history can overcome some of the limitations of relying on recent data that may not capture the full range and variation of social phenomena, by expanding the temporal scope and utilizing extraordinary historical data. Moreover, social science history can account for the role of path dependence and generic mechanisms in social phenomena, by tracing their historical origins and development and/or showing how they were shaped by contingent events or decisions that triggered path-dependent or generic mechanisms.

In addition, social science history can reduce complexity and generalize in more explicit, cumulative, and stringent ways, by using relatively formalized, explicit social science theories and methods. Social science history also has the potential to enhance creativity and imagination and avoid presentism. This is achieved through the exposure of social scientists

to a variety of historical phenomena that may challenge their existing theories or paradigms, or inspire them to formulate new ones and increase awareness about the problems associated with imposing their own values, norms, or assumptions on the past.

It is important to acknowledge that social science history is not the only way of studying the past and that there is certainly a case for conventional history as a research tradition that has different and complementary strengths. In the next chapter, we show that social science history is not a simple or straightforward approach but a broad church: a rich and diverse field of inquiry that requires various skills and methods to make sense of the past.

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