

## Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

A. L. STINCHCOMBE. — *Theoretical Methods in Social History*. New York: Academic Press, 1978. Pp. x, 130.

The title of this book, as its author himself concedes, is bound to raise false expectations. Its subject is not the application of social theory to social history; it is the proper use of history in the construction of social theory: "how generality can be wrested from historical facts" (115). A recurring theme is that the theorizing of the social sciences has been seriously deformed and rendered unfruitful both by positivist notions of general hypotheses as the deliverances of a mysterious "synthetic reason", whose only encounter with the details of social reality is through the search for possible counter-instances, and by old-fashioned views of history which find the intelligibility of a narrative in the largescale "epochal" organization it succeeds in imposing on its subject-matter. Misgivings are also expressed about the tendency of quantification to degenerate into a "numerology" in which anything countable, and nothing else, is regarded as a fact; but these appear to be peripheral to the main argument. The alleged positivist error — which might perhaps have been more pointedly discussed with reference to what is presumably its latest incarnation: the *logik der forschung* of K. R. Popper — is traced, at rather long range, to Kant. The mistaken view of historical narrative is traced, at equally long range, to Nietzsche. The cure in both cases is said to be the realization that it is from a study of particular historical interpretations, and from the details of the latter, that the general concepts and hypotheses of the social sciences must come if they are to be empirically powerful. They must be extrapolations of "deep analogies" discerned between causal processes which have been independently investigated.

According to Stinchcombe, the best social theorists have always understood this — a contention for which he presents evidence in the form of a comparative analysis of Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Neil Smelser's *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution*, and Reinhard Bendix's *Work and Authority in Industry*. His comparison of Trotsky and de Tocqueville is the most carefully worked through, and is of interest quite apart from the theory of social inquiry which it is intended to reinforce. What Stinchcombe argues is that, despite their different "epochal" views of history, and despite the vast difference between their Marxist and conservative theoretical orientations, their encounter with the facts of the revolutionary processes they studied so perceptively drives them into theorizing about authority and its demise in ways which are remarkably alike. Both draw heavily upon such commonsense notions as that authority tends to be accepted only so long as it is believed either to promote accepted social purposes effectively or to be irresistible (hence the significance de Tocqueville rightly attributes to the defection of a minority of the French aristocracy), and that, in general, men's situations will not motivate them to act in abstraction from their changing perceptions of the possibilities open to them (which allows Trotsky to follow without surprise the rapid shifts of policy of the Petersburg garrison or Kerensky).

In all this there is more than a hint of two doctrines which, while characteristic enough of much traditional historiography, have been matters of great controversy among methodologists of the social sciences: that the ultimate understanding of social processes must be found in what makes individual human beings

decide to act as they do (methodological individualism), and that what normally makes them act as they do is their view of the means they need to adopt to achieve their ends (rationalism). Thus Trotsky is praised for showing us "sensible men calculating whether they can get what they want out of the Social Revolutionaries or out of the Bolsheviks" (121). Unfortunately, since Stinchcombe neither considers, nor even shows much awareness of the well-known difficulties of both doctrines, his claims in this connection cannot but appear rather dogmatic. Disappointing also is his failure to offer any analysis of the notions of causal process and causal explanation which are so central to his concerns. He does tell us that causation "does not operate at the grand level of 'Why did the Russian Revolution lead to Stalinism?', but on the segmented level of 'How do revolutionary legislatures legitimate coups d'etat?'" (17). In fact, it often seems to be his contention that it "operates" only at the level of 'How did *this* legislature legitimate *this* coup d'etat?' What we need, then, is a clear account of how such particular causal claims are vindicated, and how, in this connection, the "post hoc" fallacy is avoided. Stinchcombe implies, at one point, that they are established by means of theory — by reducing opaque connections to "theoretically understandable bits" (14): however, this can hardly be the theory that is to emerge from perceiving "deep analogies" between the particular causal connections themselves. Elsewhere he appears content to represent social theory as dependent, in the end, on "pretty good guesses" about what caused what in particular cases (122). It may be that such a procedure is in fact defensible: historians have long been accused of indulging in it. But it is strange to find it stated with so little supporting argument in a work on social science methodology.

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CHARLES TILLY, ed. — *Historical Studies of Changing Fertility*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978. Pp. ix, 390.

Unlike most of the drivel which is published as the "proceedings" of academic conferences, unconnected snippets of interest to no one save the authors and their tenure review committees, the conference on changes in fertility which the National Science Foundation sponsored in Princeton in 1972 has resulted in a volume that everyone interested in this sort of thing will probably wish to acquire. Whether the papers would have been published anyway, and been just as good even had no conference taken place, is beside the point: they are important guides to an increasingly tangled literature and conveniently assembled in paperback for anyone who wants to catch up on the latest in historical demography.

Charles Tilly's introduction summarizes the main debates touching the fertility decline: why does illegitimate fertility drop at the same time as legitimate? Why do all these interesting demographic phenomena seem to erupt just as a massive pauperization of Europe's population (which he calls "proletarianization") begins, and so forth? The piece is lucid and literate, and deserves to be made accessible to undergraduates in pamphlet form. The other contributions are more for specialists.

Richard Easterlin's paper, for example, requires some understanding of mathematical economics to be comprehensible in its entirety, but even for those who don't want to pause too long over the equations and "demand model" graphs,