

Beverly Silver

9. THE TIME AND SPACE OF LABOR UNREST

I am very inhibited about giving this paper because Hopkins had already read it some time ago. And it had been subjected to what Wallerstein has referred to this morning as Hopkins's characteristic "skeptical support." Hopkins's comments are on his characteristic yellow-lined paper, handwritten comments with a #2 pencil. The first line reads "B.S., It's very good, but" Then comes the "but"—one, two, three, four pages of "but."

There are three characteristic stages of reaction to Hopkins's skeptical support. The first stage is denial, which goes something like: "Well, it's clear that he just wasn't concentrating when he read it; he didn't get it; I don't know what was wrong with him that day." Stage two is when it starts dawning on you that he might have a point. You re-read the comments a little bit later, with a little more detachment. "Oh, o.k., actually and unfortunately, he has hit on what should be done to improve the paper." Finally, there's the third stage, which probably we never reach or we may only reach when we are 93; that is, when all the comments make sense. Until then I've got a section of my file cabinet labeled "Hopkins comments" where they are kept; and

from time to time I pull them out and see if any of the ones that didn't make sense a few years ago now make any sense.

This paper originated as an effort on my part to prepare something on the World Labor Group research project for *American Sociological Review*, a "career move." But, as I read the published articles on labor and world-systems analysis, I was drawn more and more into writing a methodological critique of these works, drawing very much on Hopkins's writing and teaching. As a "career move," the paper may have little utility. But it brought me back into touch with several of Hopkins's "truths": his insistence that the substance of research not be subordinated to statistical method, that research be concerned with expanding/deepening substantive knowledge rather than "testing" general hypotheses, and that "theory" should be seen as but one-half of a theory/praxis relationship.

"Relational processes" is a phrase Hopkins's students heard over and over again. And in Hopkins (1982a, 1982b) I found great clarity on the importance of the narrative structure of explanation, and the time and space connectedness of events. In a critique of attempts to use statistical techniques to explain world-systemic processes, he emphasized that these techniques generally require that we turn units (parts) into fixed categories for the purposes of the analysis. As a result, the relations among the units—that is, the very process that is theorized to be of prime explanatory importance—drops out of sight in the analysis. With respect to the fate of the core-periphery relations construct in such analyses, Hopkins writes:

[U]nfortunately, the end terms "core" and "periphery" all too often become themselves respective foci of attention, categories in their own right, as it were. And the relation which the joined terms designate slips into the background, sometimes out of sight entirely. When that happens the process continually reproducing the relation, and hence the relational categories, also drop from sight, and we are left with only the categories, which, as a result, are now mere classificatory terms, neither grounded theoretically nor productive analytically. (Hopkins 1982b: 151)

This sense of relational processes in space unfolding through time still eludes most of the best methodological writings in historical sociology. The latter tend to grasp the importance of narrative modes of analysis for understanding the causal inter-relationship of events across time, but generally not the conjoined space-time relational process.

I ended one of the main sections of my paper by elaborating on what I thought to be an important insight in Hopkins (1982a: 32). In a combination of quotes and paraphrasing I wrote: If the inter-relationships among actions and events across time and space are essential ingredients in meaningful social scientific explanation, and these relational processes can only be studied directly through narrative modes of analysis, then Danto's (1965: 237) conclusion that "causal explanations do in fact all have the form of stories" makes eminent sense. Narrative analysis becomes the preferred methodology through which we seek to establish or disconfirm general propositions, while statistical analysis "serve[s], not to govern the structure of the design as it now does, but instead, in preliminary work, to help isolate subjects for detailed inquiry, or in summarizing work, to help collate the results of several detailed studies" (Hopkins 1982a: 32).

In the revised version of my paper the phrase "through which we seek to establish or disconfirm general propositions" will be changed to "through which we seek to explain historical social change." For even the Hopkins phrases were not immune to skeptical support. Exhibiting his characteristic penchant for sustained auto-critique, Hopkins wrote in the margins of the paper (near the phrase "seek to establish or disconfirm general propositions") the following: "I wonder about this. I don't think it's a useful objective of inquiry ..." He's probably right. I'll know for sure when I reach stage #3.

I will not subject you to more of the paper. Among the things that Hopkins noted in his four pages of "skeptical support" was that the paper was "elliptical." I think I'm now in the midst of stage #2, and hope to re-write the paper soon, not to his satisfaction, but perhaps a little closer. And a copy of the comments are safely tucked away in the "Hopkins comments" file for when (if) I arrive at stage #3.

In the meantime, Hopkins has given me an easy way out for ending this article. For, as he pointed out about the paper, I've "given the 'middle'; but the 'beginning' and the 'end' remain needed"

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