History, Agency, and Political Change

Victoria Hattam
New School for Social Research

Agency Through History

Many political scientists have turned to historical research as means of clarifying the constraints shaping contemporary political action. Polsky's self-identified pessimism in this forum captures this view of political history elegantly when he identifies notions of "path dependence" and "policy legacies" as key contributions of historical research. The focus for many historically oriented political scientists has been on identifying the ways in which political institutions and policies have provided a distinctive set of incentives and constraints that have, in turn, structured subsequent political choice.[1] Although I agree with much in this line of argument, my own interest in history, and in historically grounded political research, stems from a quite different impulse. I turn to history precisely to gain a sense of political agency by expanding the set of political possibilities available in contemporary political debate. History, from this perspective, serves as an agent for, rather than a constraint on, political change. If political actors and activists were to read "our" work, I hope they would leave it with an extended sense of political possibilities as the very best political history, as I see it, ought to broaden the cultural and political horizons we use to frame contemporary political debate.

There are at least three ways in which history acts as a source of agency and change; first history denaturalizes the present; second it is a source of alternative visions and practices; and finally, it helps to specify contemporary political topography. All three dimensions of agency can be found in most political histories. Unfortunately there is no room here to survey the field, thus a few instances of each will have to suffice. Let me briefly outline and illustrate each of these mechanisms for expanding our sense of agency and political change through historical research and conclude with some remarks on questions of presentism in political history.

One of the most important impulses and effects of political history has been to denaturalize the present. That is to unmask the taken for granted, or common sense, nature of our current political institutions and practices.[2] Historical research

1. See James G. March and Johan Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," *APSR* 78 (1984): 734-49; Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Reuschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Paul Pierson, "When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change," *World Politics* 45, 4 (July 1993): 595-628; Margaret Weir, *Politics and Jobs: The Boundaries of Employment Policy in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Polsky in this forum.

2. For a fascinating account of common sense, see Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense," in his *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983): 73-93.

quickly puts our everyday assumptions about politics into question as we encounter very different understandings and assumptions in earlier eras. The sense of difference provided by history often has opened up questions of social and political organization that may not have seemed in need of interpretation without the historical contrast. Historical research has been especially important, I believe, in the sub-field of American politics where, given the cultural familiarity of the objects of study, it is all too easy to take our current political practices for granted. Historical research has brought many of us face to face with very different political orders, thereby underscoring the contingent status of a whole variety of contemporary political arrangements. Historical comparison, thus, provides a point of contrast that helps to problematize aspects of American culture and politics that otherwise might have been left unexamined. Scholars working in the subfield of comparative politics often can obtain a sense of analytic difference ***geographically*** by comparing a range of political outcomes across national boundaries at a single point in time. Americanists, by contrast, rarely have such an opportunity and thus many have sought this point of difference ***temporarily***, by turning to history for a point of comparison. In short, history has provided a much needed comparative dimension to American politics which has, in turn, opened up contemporary political arrangements for further analysis.[3] Stephen Skowronek's conceptualization of the early American state as a "state of courts and parties" has played such a role in opening up questions of the nature and limits of state capacity in the U.S. Similarly, Karen Orren's work on the persistence of Feudalism into the early twentieth century has turned our notions of liberalism and labor's relation to it upside down, thereby calling into question many assumptions about the nature of American politics past and present.[4]

Second, many scholars have gained an increased sense of political agency through the recovery of alternative political visions and modes of organization uncovered through detailed historical research. History, for these political scientists, has been a process of recovering the countercultures embedded within the dominant culture that have been obscured by all too Whiggish an understanding of the past. Reconstructing these lost alternatives has expanded the range of social and

3. Of course, many comparativists have engaged in extensive historical research. What I am arguing is that historical research has a particular methodological import in the subfield of American politics, not that it does not exist elsewhere. For fine examples of comparative historical institutionalist research, see Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*; Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen, and Frank Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Peter A. Hall, *Governing the Economy: The Politics of State Intervention in Britain and France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Colleen Dunlavy, *Politics and Industrialization: Early Railroads in the United States and Prussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Ellen Immergut, *Health Politics: Interests and Institutions in Western Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

4. See Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Karren Orren, *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law, and Liberal Development in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

political outcomes that might be considered in contemporary political debates. Accounting for the alternatives' demise is critical if we are to assess the relevance and political viability of such alternatives for contemporary political debate. Gerald Berk and Gary Herrigel's accounts of the competing forms of corporate organization during American and German industrialization are fine examples of such work; Gretchen Ritter's and my own work might be seen as instances of recovering alternative visions of economic organization and politics on the labor side, while Anne Norton has explored alternative forms of culture and politics in the American South.[5]

Third, political history might be used to empower rather than constrain political choice much as Smith argues in this forum. I think of this as the topographical account of history in which we lay bare past political settlements not so much to establish the set of current political choices, but rather so that we might know the terrain on which we are operating and thereby wage the most effective campaign to bring our various political visions to fruition. Put simply, in order to be politically effective we must know where the bodies are buried and political history is one of the key means of identifying their location. Mapping the political terrain will not, of course, predict the outcome; nor will it, or should it, lead to agreement over what our course of action ought to be. Rather it simply makes apparent the conditions under which we seek to specify and work toward our respective social visions. Ira Katznelson's *City Trenches* seems a classic work in this vein, in which he identifies a central political fault line running through American politics after the onset of industrialization in which American workers identify and mobilize politically on the basis of residence rather than employment. Understanding the nature and origins of this division is essential for any political actor who would wage an effective urban political campaign.[6] Rogers Smith's recent work on American civic ideals and the multiple traditions which inform them also exemplifies this approach, as Smith argues that the particular weight given to the competing traditions shaping our citizenship requirements ultimately is determined by the balance of political forces at any given historical moment. The outcome can never simply be read off of past political settlements; rather, the historical record ought to alert us to the forces to be reckoned with in our own time.[7]

---

5. See Gerald Berk, *Alternative Tracks: The Constitution of American Industrial Order, 1865-1916* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Gary Herrigel, *Industrial Constructions: The Sources of German Industrial Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Richard Locke, *Remaking the Italian Economy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Gretchen Ritter, *Goldbugs and Greenbacks: The Anti-monopoly Tradition and the Politics of Finance, 1865-1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Victoria Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power: The Origins of Business Unionism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Anne Norton, *Alternative Americas: A Reading of Antebellum Political Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989).

6. See Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

7. See Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

Let me illustrate these dynamics of history as a source of agency and change by drawing on my current research on ethnicity and American racial politics. The point is not to suggest its exemplary nature but rather to provide some flesh for the skeletal arguments advanced above.

Ethnicity Then and Now

We are living through an historic era of immigration into the United States, the high levels of which have only been matched twice before in American history, first during the 1850s and again at the turn of the century during the Progressive era. Many observers both inside and outside the academy are asking how these post-1965 immigrants will align culturally and politically. Where, many want to know, will the principal social cleavages be drawn in the early decades of the twenty-first century? My own sense of how immigration politics will play in the decades to come is principally an argument for the relevance of political history for contemporary politics. That is, my own sense of how contemporary immigrants will align politically is shaped in crucial ways by the past. Only by recovering the Progressive era settlement between second wave immigrants and elites can we begin to decipher the contours of immigrant politics today. But this much almost all can agree on; the rub comes when one begins to specify more precisely the *particular* ways in which the past remains relevant to contemporary politics. One quickly finds that several quite different arguments can be used to link the Progressive era with the present. I find myself, again, on the agency end of the path dependence-agency continuum in which historical research becomes a means of imaging and facilitating political change.[8]

One of the most striking comparisons between the Progressive era and contemporary immigration politics is the very different languages used for the respective debates. During the Progressive era, the language of ethnicity was only just being "invented" and had not yet become the principal discourse for describing immigrants' experience.[9] Rather, a quite different discourse dominated discussions of difference during the nineteenth century in which the principal classificatory scheme compared "the natural" and "historic races."[10] The nineteenth-century language of "historic races" drew heavily on Lamarckian notion of the heritability of acquired characteristics in which climate, geography, and even social arrangements were

8. This section draws on my current research on ethnicity and American racial politics. For a preview of the larger argument, see Victoria Hattam, "Ethnicity, Racial Discourse, and Coalition Politics," paper prepared for delivery at the APSA meetings in Atlanta, GA, September 1-5, 1999.

9. For the invention of ethnicity, see Werner Sollors, ed., *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), intro.

10. For fascinating discussions of eighteenth and nineteenth century racial discourse, see George W. Stocking, "Lamarckianism in American Social Science, 1890-1915," in his *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968); and Nicholas Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, 3 (1996): 247-64.

thought to provide the basis of racial difference over long periods of time. Most nineteenth-century elites did not distinguish sharply between notions of race and nation, nor between notions of race and ethnicity; rather the term "historic races" was used to refer to all of the above. Confronting these quite different languages of race quickly highlights the historical specificity of our own notions of race and ethnicity. I immediately want to know when the discursive shift from "historic races" to ethnicity occurred? What was at stake in this change in discourse? How did the different linguistic framings of difference shape immigrants' interests and alliances? Answering these questions has taken me back to the Progressive era where I find myself again turning to history as a source of agency and change.

Turning to the Progressive era quickly denaturalizes our twentieth-century notions of race and ethnicity and places questions of social and political construction center stage. Our twentieth-century conceptions of race and ethnicity now are revealed as historical particularities rather than being seen as transhistorical systems of human classification. Recovering the different languages of race that dominated nineteenth-century discourse, thus, serves to repoliticize notions of race and ethnicity in our own time. Moreover, tracing the shift in racial discourse from a language of "historic races" to that of ethnicity not only denaturalizes the present, it also helps to clarify the particular meaning of our twentieth-century racial discourse. Identifying or mapping the contemporary discursive topography, however, does not mean that we are destined to repeat it; nor must our current political choices be determined or limited by this historically constructed terrain. On the contrary, contemporary immigrant politics, as I see it, is engaged in reworking the Progressive era settlement. Narrowly conceived notions of race and ethnicity, many have argued, no longer capture the full range and heterogeneity of the American population, especially given the enormous demographic change that has taken place during the last three decades.[11] Distinctions between race and ethnicity that were carved out during the Progressive era are currently under attack from many quarters; whether, or in what ways, our languages of difference will be reconfigured in the twenty-first century is not yet clear. But both identifying and articulating the Progressive era legacy helps to clarify the terrain on which the current struggles are being waged. Again, I do not see, nor would I expect to find, agreement over how questions of race and ethnicity *ought* to be reworked; many very different visions currently are being advocated. What I am suggesting, however, is that all advocates would do well to understand the Progressive era legacy so that they can more effectively identify the various changes needed to realize their particular vision.[12]

---

11. Many have pointed out the liminal location of Asian Americans, and Hispanics within American ethnic and racial classificatory schema. For example, see Peter Skerry, *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Claire Jean Kim, "The Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics and Society* 27, 1 (March 1999): 105-138.

12. For a brief review of contemporary arguments over contemporary immigrants' cultural and political identification, see Hattam, "Ethnicity, Racial Discourse, and Coalition Politics," 5-10.

Politics and Presentism

Students of history often are reminded of the dangers of presentist arguments about the past. In order to understand any historical era, many claim, we must suspend our present day categories and assumptions and recover instead the distinctive languages and world views of other historical periods. Only after understanding the past on its own terms, so the argument runs, will we be able to assess the historical dynamics with any degree of subtlety and without simply imposing our own values and assumptions onto the past. My view of history as a source of agency outlined above leaves me in an ambiguous position in relation to the dangers inherent in presentism. On the one hand, the importance of history as a means of denaturalizing the present hinges on our ability to rediscover different worlds in the past, and as such is very much in the anti-presentist camp. Recovering the different languages of class and ethnicity that prevailed during the nineteenth century has been essential in my own work and has been the key vehicle through which I have identified the dynamics of political history. Yet, my claim that history provides a means of opening up contemporary political choice points in a rather different direction. Namely, that historical research is inevitably shaped by our own contemporary political concerns. Perhaps it is a mistake, especially for political scientists, to diminish the links between the present and the past. Indeed, I think a case can be made for historically oriented political science making a virtue of their presentist concerns. This would require that we give a more explicit account of our contemporary assumptions and concerns and that we readily acknowledge their motivating force in our historical work. Framing historical research as a self conscious response to issues in own times would, I think, help foreground questions of agency and political change as key to even the most antiquarian projects of historical research and might help focus more sharply the *distinctive project* embodied in the historical turn within political science.[13]

13. My thinking on presentism has been influenced by three essays: Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, 4 (Summer 1991): 773-97; Ira Katznelson, "The State to the Rescue? Political Science and History Reconnect," *Social Research* 59, 4 (Winter 1992): 719-37; and Anne Norton, "95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method," manuscript.