

Richard E. Lee

6. THINKING THE PAST/MAKING THE FUTURE:
METHODS AND PURPOSE IN
WORLD-HISTORICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

Within the community of world-systems scholars, questions of method have constituted a personal *réserve chassée* for Terence K. Hopkins. In what follows, I want to show how his work moves issues of method from technical and practical considerations to substantive concerns. In 1983 he wrote that, given the trends of the preceding three decades, it was “increasingly apparent” that “we are but a portion of a worldwide reconstruction of social scientific work, only one locus, as it were, of a redivisioning of social scientific labor into a world-historical science” (1983: 2). He goes on to spell out the four matters he considers the “nub of the ‘question of method’”:

- That the construction of defensible explanatory accounts of the historically singular, sometimes the historically original, is what “historical science” (in contrast to “experimental science”) is all about;

- That, hence, the direct confrontation of general ideas (theories or hypotheses) with selected matters of fact is but a preliminary or intermediate effort of “historical science,” not its abiding *raison d’être*;
- That the task of method (in “historical science”) is to articulate procedural rules for integrating (i) a received or produced “abstract” with (ii) a received or produced historically specific depiction in the construction of (iii) an original “concrete”;
- And that “historical science” advances through more and more, and increasingly well done, narratively-organized explanations of historically specific, and so singular, long-term, large-scale social changes (1983: 4).

Finally, towards the end of this short text, Hopkins makes a statement which indicates the importance of his thought in the present conjuncture, that is, that “*the problem of method*’ [is,] ... namely, the construction of defensible explanatory accounts of singular long-term, large-scale (hence ‘historical’) social change, which accounts set the scene for the activists, whether actually or imaginatively, by restricting the range of realistic historical alternatives open, both as modes of intervention and as forms of intermediate outcomes.”¹

The issues raised are those that have come to dominate contemporary debate: “science” and “history” as terms of systematic knowledge and their relationship to the role of the intellectual articulated in normative values. The statement is structured, direct, and concise. It contains a legacy and that legacy is a set of procedures to think the past in a specific critique of the received standards of nineteenth-century social science as they came to be perfected and practiced in the post-1945 period. It also contains an invitation explicitly linked to the critique, and that invitation is to participate in the making of the future.

First of all, the question of (social) science: The immediate

1. (1983: 6-7). This statement is contained in an unpublished manuscript. I wish to acknowledge that it is impossible, at least for me, to treat Hopkins's work as anything but inextricably bound up with that of Immanuel Wallerstein, and basing my gloss on this text is, I realize, an imperfect solution.

post-1945 period witnessed the ascendancy of U.S. social science on a world scale. It was premised on a positivist ideal of a universal law-driven, deterministic science founded on the neutral, reversible time of Newtonian dynamics, the Cartesian independence of subject and object, and Aristotle's law of the excluded middle which allowed for the construction of exhaustive, mutually exclusive classification systems. Science was associated with regularities, with ordered system. It was constructed in opposition to the chaotic humanities, thereby furnishing a linear development model of reformist liberalism, one based empirically and epistemologically on the assumption of independent units.

Since the 1960s this empirically verifiable, historically constructed conception of science, this grounding of "experimental science," has been imploded from within science itself. Scientists find that only a small minority of natural systems may be described by "laws" and that our naturalized ideas of both time and space as neutral parameters are unwarranted. Time must be reconceived as irreversible and thus historical; both natural and mathematical forms inhabit space in ways Euclid or Aristotle never imagined; and the existence of independent units now appears quite mythical.

By the end of the 1960s, as the trajectory of what has come to be called cultural studies moved out from the original consideration for working-class culture, the concerns for values, agency, and historical time came into conflict with the anti-humanist and atemporal tendencies of structuralism which seemed to announce the demise of any possibility of constructing totalizing narratives. However, the anti-essentialism, the anti-foundationalism, and the demise of the subject as theorized by poststructuralism, have also nullified the Cartesian dualities on which the ascendancy of science was premised.

As science rejected the simplicity and universality of general laws based on reversible time and independent units in dynamical systems research and the humanities called into question any simple idea of value neutrality, objectivity, or individual agency, Hopkins was embracing the complexity of an "historical science" (ostensibly mutually exclusive terms) of social change. The historicity of social

systems, forming unique “worlds” unfolding as the single spatio-temporal unit of analysis, expresses quintessentially irreversibility. And the delimitation of such “worlds,” defined by the extent of the relational processes generating their structures, repudiates the existence of the primordial units dear to the postwar comparativists, liberal apologists, and philosophical existentialists alike. Thus were addressed two of the outcomes of the nineteenth-century *Methodenstreit*, the exclusion of phenomenological time and the reliance on case comparative method in social research. The ideological ramifications of the choice between embracing a theoretical, ahistorical economics or scientific behaviorism and maintaining an axiological dimension in interpretative studies based on equally de-contextualized and ahistorical ideal types have become obvious.

For Hopkins, narrative was the preferred mode of presentation of complex interpretative accounts, running contrary to the trend of taking the story out of history to move it closer to science (as was the tendency even of *Annales* school). However, the construction of narrative accounts opens up the possibility of different “concretes,” of “many histories.” And the social embeddedness of the observer who imaginatively reconstructs the relational settings which produce the observations suggests the stake the observer has as participant in the long-term “change” he or she is describing and interpreting. If “our observations in world-system studies are not only *products* of definite social relations, but also *of* definite social relations” (Hopkins 1982: 34), then the reinstallation of phenomenological time and relational thinking in social research (the articulation of evolving hierarchically organized structures supported by *longue durée* processes) represent a significant push in the direction of restructuring those very social relations which fostered and were legitimated by the structure of knowledge of which world-systems analysis is an explicit critique, so apparent after 1968 explicit critique of both the nomothetic social sciences and idiographic history. This also suggests that the long-term processes of the modern world-system are reaching their limits and therefore emerging social relations may well call for, beget, a new conceptual baggage. This is, of course, one of the themes of *The Age*

of Transition (1996).

Now, here lies the challenge to working scholars as participants in the world to think the past with the purpose of making the future, that is, Hopkins's invitation to "set the scene for activists ... by restricting the range of realistic alternatives open" (1983: 6-7). If indeed the defining processes of the modern world-system are reaching their asymptotes, then the fluctuations we observe are those associated with bifurcation—transformation—and our actions, even small ones, can have enormous consequences. The 25-50 year window for action with long-term systemic consequences has probably already opened.

In the area of knowledge formation, over the long term, knowledge and values have been progressively separated and segregated, first with the secularization of knowledge and the establishment of two cultures and then deepened with the outcome of the *Methodenstreit*. This hierarchical structure (with science at the privileged pole of this antinomy and the humanities at the other) has been naturalized, shorn of its history, and enforced institutionally in the universities and deeply rooted in commonsense. In relation to Hopkins's work, describing and interpreting this process, and resistance to it, by observing the trajectory of the structures of knowledge which is its outcome, is also a way of making the future, of tipping the balance towards modes of knowledge formation structured in other ways. The world of nature, like the human world, has now been shown to bring order out of chaos. It is creative, scientists are saying. The future is an open future, rather than a predictable Newtonian one, determined only by creative choices and contingent circumstances. This is a realization which some from the humanities would say restores the semiotic disposition to an equal footing with the symbolic dimension and reunites pleasure and play with rationality and linear thinking.

As world liberalism proves unable to deliver on its universalist message, science now provides us with alternative models of physical reality—relationally constituted self-organizing systems and fractal geometry; models of change, complexity theory; and models of transition, chaos theory. In the humanities, that social construct, the independent, self-interested but responsible individual of liberalism,

the “subject,” has been stripped of his/her ideological underpinnings and now declares overlapping allegiances. Concomitantly, the unique object—and the individual creator, the hero of modernism—has also expired. Epistemologically, the status of “history” itself is uncertain; after all, in its present incarnation it is no more than a cultural product, a naturalized representational form, of the past 500 years. For instance, our conception of “time,” on which any theory of history depends, no longer need legitimate a conception of “other worlds” as necessary end-points of a chronology. By conceiving time as rhythmic, a function of position belonging to a figure, then other worlds surround us always, to be chosen or rejected, subjugated or resuscitated.

All of this, not insignificantly, may signal the need for rethinking in terms of new and expanded methodological categories, born of, and appropriate to, transformed social relations; but the subtext of that magnificent modesty which permeates the work of Terence Hopkins as scholar and teacher, and student of students, as I read it, has always been to go beyond established modes (methods are simply “what scholars do”). Defensible, intersubjective interpretations of relationships among constituent parts of concrete wholes suggest a realizable mode of scholarly participation in the creation of a world where “social” is no longer forced to serve as the qualifying adjective for a dubious branch of “science.” The vision of methods Terence Hopkins has offered includes this invitation to a special sort of imaginative social action: think the past to make a past with the purpose of making the future by thinking a future.

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