

The Concept of Historical Temporality: Exploring Heterogeneity and Contingency in William H. Sewell's Cultural Turn

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“Time” and “temporality” are difficult and central notions for historical scholarship. They exist in many varieties, which renders generalizations challenging. An interesting attempt has been made by US-scholar William H. Sewell in his Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation (2005). He qualifies historical temporality as fateful, contingent, complex, eventful, and heterogeneous. It is rare for a historian to be so explicit. Sewell was inspired by discussions with sociologists and anthropologists during his transition from social to cultural history in the 1980 and 1990s. This article examines the question whether and how the change of the intellectual environment impacted the theoretical outcome. Are Sewell’s attributes to historical temporality plausible for historical scholarship in general, or do they reflect the boundary work of a particular group?

Keywords: Time Studies; Historical Temporality; Cultural Turn; William H. Sewell

INTRODUCTION WILLIAM H. SEWELL AND THE LOGICS OF HISTORY

William H. Sewell’s *Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation*, first published in 2005, starts with a conspicuous and telling dedication. The author does not dedicate his book to a family member, a friend, or a mentor, but to anonymous colleagues from about twenty institutions and groups: Social History Workshop, Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) Social Science Seminar, Seminar on Symbolic Anthropology, Seminar on Symbolism and Social Change, and so on. The enumeration includes acronyms, easily decipherable for insiders, but not so much for outsiders. CRSO probably means Center for Research on Social Organization, and CSST might be the Center for the Study of Social Transformations. Sewell thanks his undisclosed colleagues from all these seminars, workshops, and centers of US-American elite universities for friendship, scholarly exchange, and for their “boundless capacity for critical thought”, which made the book possible.

When engaging more closely with the publication and the author, we begin to understand the dedication. William H. Sewell Jr., born in 1940, earned a PhD in history in Berkeley 1971. After holding several positions, he became a professor

of history and political science at the University of Chicago, where he retired in 2007. He was ceaselessly on the move as a participant and speaker at specialized conferences and at annual conferences of scholarly societies: American Sociological Association (since 1971), American Historical Association (since 1971 as well), French Historical Studies Association (since 1975) and Social Science History Association (since 1978). In the latter association he had his most frequent appearances and served as its president in 2011–2012.

The book *Logics of History* consists of ten chapters. Most of them are papers that Sewell presented at such conferences, which he afterwards published in different places, and finally more or less reworked for his book. In an autobiographical passage he underlines the fact that his career and university positions, too, were much less linked to historical departments than usual. Only in ten out of thirty-five years did he hold a position in a purely historical department. Otherwise it included tasks in the fields of interdisciplinarity, sociology, or political science.

Sewell's disciplinary orientation, therefore, is not easily classifiable. In 2002, Jürgen Osterhammel called him a sociologist engaged with history (“historisch arbeitender Soziologe”) and a representative of anglophone historical sociology. This is only partially true. His dissertation examined the working class in Marseille in the mid-nineteenth century, and later—as we will see—Sewell took a decisively historical stance in his historical-sociological-anthropological networks. It was precisely the intense participation in interdisciplinary debates that prompted him to sharpen his identity as a historian and the theoretical premises of the historical discipline. Thereby, he also wanted to convince his “non-historical” colleagues; in this sense, like Osterhammel, one might call him a historical sociologist. We will read him here not least as an ethnographer who provides first-hand reports from the US-American theory labs of the late twentieth century.

The basic observation is clear: “Theory has a strikingly less central place in history than in the social science disciplines.” How can one deal with this difference as a trained historian belonging to both worlds? One possibility is provided by the historical event. The self-detection via mixed group discussions inspired Sewell to reflect upon the phenomenon and concept of the event: “It was only sustained encounters with sociological and anthropological discourse, much of it as a member of an academic sociology department, that made me recognize events as a category in need of theoretical work.” The first reflections on the meaning of events in the historico-sociological field stimulated the author to identify an “eventful temporality” different from other temporalities. Sewell's *Logics of History* deals with the properties and explanations of various temporal concepts and also tries to bring further central notions such as “structure” and “culture” to his historical track.

The book is fashioned with care and elegance and has meanwhile also been published in Italian, Chinese, and Portuguese. Here, I focus on the chapters and passages directly linked to the debate on temporalities and its interdisciplinary context. I will also include critical voices, and the conclusion points to a surprising transformation undergone by the author after this substantial publication.

CRITICISM OF SOCIOLOGICAL TEMPORALITIES

Central to our purpose is the essay entitled *Three Temporalities. Toward an Eventful Sociology* (Sewell 1990). It is available in three processing steps: first as a typewritten paper for a conference on the “Historic Turn” in the humanities 1990; then as a published article in the respective collection of 1996; and finally as the reworked chapter 3 with a postscript in *Logics of History* in 2005. In the beginning, the subtitle was *Toward a Sociology of the Event*, and the author spoke of an “evenemential temporality”, following the example of Marshall Sahlins. Later he considered the adjective to be un-English and used “eventful”. Both versions refer to Fernand Braudel’s “*histoire événementielle*” and aim to revalue it as opposed to the “*histoire structurelle*” and “*histoire conjoncturelle*” of the French scholar. Sewell uses the word temporality and only very rarely the word time. By temporality, he means the way the historical social sciences deal with the temporal dimension, or more precisely: the form of time-use that he is able and willing to read in their writings.

Teleological, experimental, and eventful—these are the three temporalities discerned. The teleological form is the most problematic one, the eventful form is the ideal (historical) temporality. Sewell uses texts from five authors as examples; in the postscript of 2005 he includes a further author. Here I restrict myself to two of them: Immanuel Wallerstein und Theda Skocpol.

“Sociology was born under the sign of teleology”, Sewell observes in a general way. For the theoreticians of the nineteenth century, the direction and meaning of history were determined by transhistorical laws. In the twentieth century, prompted by the vanishing faith in social progress, teleology faded, but weaker forms are still very much alive towards the end of the century. Hence the causes of a historical event are explained by an abstract process directed to a certain future. The future explains the past. One example thereof—Sewell continues—is modernization theory with its dichotomy of “traditional” and “modern”. Even the critics of modernization theory are often subject to the teleological fallacy. The clearest case by far is Immanuel Wallerstein and his work *The Modern World-System*.

The first volume of that work, published in 1974, deals with the origins of the European world-economy in the sixteenth century. Wallerstein embraces the

great debates by Marxist and other historians about the beginnings of capitalism and tries to retrace the main lines of the expansionist move with its consequences. Sewell presents Wallerstein as a “social astronomer” in reference to a brief comparison to that discipline: In astronomy there is only one universe and its formation must be deduced a posteriori. Similarly, the capitalist world-system appeared as a single case and its emergence can only be investigated after the fact. According to Sewell the astronomical analogy is misleading. In human history there are turning points, but not a big bang. “To construct historical arguments on an analogy with astronomy results in a teleology in which some crucial past events are misconstrued as a pure origin that contains the entire future of the social system in potentia and in which the partially contingent events that occur subsequently are robbed of their efficacy and reduced to the status of markers on the road to the inevitable future.” There are surely valid reservations about Wallerstein’s positions, but one should also concede that the astronomical comparison appears on only six lines in the introduction of a 400-page book and does not reappear afterwards. Wallerstein does not speak of a big bang nor of an inevitable future. Furthermore, how can we, strictly speaking, write history in another way than a posteriori, if it is dealing with things past? So much for the teleological temporality. The second—experimental—temporality is outlined by

means of a 1979 study of Theda Skopcol about social upheavals. The author investigates the revolutions in France, Russia, and China and includes further political crises of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. She aims to disentangle the main factors of these big events with a quasi-experimental comparative method. Sewell points to the empirical and logical flaws of the study, but his main criticism is directed at the “unhistorical assumptions about temporality that strict adherence to experimental logic requires”. According to him, this approach presupposes a freezing of history. In order to be considered separate trials of an experiment, the revolutions need to be taken as a uniform class of objects, with single temporalities not embedded in the general flow of time. Sewell points to Marc Bloch who recommended choosing, for comparative purposes, societies not too remote spatially and temporally. The important recommendation further enlarges the gap between true historical comparisons and the experimental logic with separate trials.

Skopcol quickly and vehemently rejected these allegations. Even before the first publication of the essay, she reproached Sewell for inconsistency and confusion. The revolutions under study were never conceived as absolutely identical and exchangeable. With his strange notion of revolution, Sewell reimports the whole Marxist teleology into the debate. It is a bold essay of a newcomer who only recently came from French history to sociology and who aims to roll up the entire discipline.

It is noteworthy that Skopcol’s harangue referred directly to a scholarly group and its hierarchy. Sewell seems to have developed his eventful temporality

not least as a counterpoint: “The eventful conception can be clarified by its contrast with the experimental and teleological conceptions”, he declares in the third part of the essay. Events can be defined as a relatively rare class of incidents that exert a significant effect on structures. Thus, an eventful temporality considers the transformation of structures by such events. While the experimental conception assumes a timeless-uniform causality and a causal independence of each lineage of events, the reverse is valid for eventful temporality: it considers the causal dependence of later from earlier events and assumes that these causalities are always different, i.e., heterogeneous in a temporal sense as well. As for the teleological notion, the main difference lies in the role of contingency: while the scope of hazards is restricted in teleological temporality, radical contingency is basic for eventful temporality. Overall, the essay suggests that heterogeneity and contingency are the main characteristics of a truly historical temporality.

REACTIONS AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Sewell’s *Logics of History* triggered very different reactions. In the “*American Journal of Sociology*”, a reviewer called the work a missed chance. Against the backdrop of his experience in historical research and his interdisciplinary position, the author would have been very qualified to provide new impulses to the dialogue between history and sociology. Unfortunately, he only advocated a one-sided rapprochement of the social sciences to history, moreover in a time-honored form. The journal “*Social Science History*” in 2008 dedicated a forum with several contributions to the work. A sociologist found very positive words for Sewell’s ideas and wanted to use them as a frame for the integration of the social sciences. After clearing up certain points and expanding on some other points, *Logics of History* would be a fully developed theory on a par with the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Niklas Luhmann, and others. In the forum one article proposes a periodization of Sewell’s essays around the “cultural turn” and deserves here special interest. In an early phase—according to the article—social and linguistic-constructivist perspectives were balanced; in the phase of the “high cultural turn” between 1992 and 2000 the weight shifted entirely to the language side; in the “postcultural turn” the pendulum swung back again.

Indeed, Sewell’s theoretical work developed in his transition from social to cultural history, and the latter approach was questioned again after 2000. The second essay of the volume provides a retrospect on research history with autobiographical elements. With a pinch of self-criticism it is called *The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History*, or, *Confessions of a Former Quantitative Historian*. The change from a social historian (operating with “hard

data” and believing in the reality of the uncovered social structures) to a cultural historian (for whom the linguistic construction of reality and the interpretation of texts are central) is depicted as a an experience of conversion: “Making the cultural turn was therefore an exciting but also profoundly troubling step for an adept of the new social history. In my case, and I think in others as well, taking this step amounted to a sort of conversion experience—a sudden and exhilarating reshaping of one’s intellectual and moral world.” Sewell names the places of the conversion and the famous persons accompanying him. Crucial were the promises of anthropology. Its methods should allow it to rehabilitate a side of meaningful humanaction that had been neglected in social history. The new cultural history, inspired by anthropology, appeared as a risky but irresistible intellectual adventure. One could, however, attract considerable hostility from the former social history colleagues. Anything smacking of “idealism” was taken by them as a sign for political and intellectual disloyalty.

Such testimonies of the emotional aspects in scholarly group dynamics are certainly instructive. In my view, however, Sewell’s retrospective account lacks methodological circumspection. In his account the cultural turn appears as a relatively simple paradigm change with a clear start and a clear end. In a short period of time the entire field would have been reversed. In university milieus of the United States and Western Europe, cultural history suddenly would have achieved a hegemonial position. This stylized perspective is permeated with a certain avantgarde feeling and claim: “Because I was a pioneer in the field of cultural history, one might expect me to be thrilled by its rise to intellectual hegemony.” Sewell quotes programmatic statements and opinions, but he does not care much about the circuitousness of the historical discipline which, after the turn, continued to encompass many different forms of economic, social, political, judicial, and (increasingly) environmental history. He makes no effort to estimate the range of change by means of indicators. His tunnel vision focuses on certain developments, and with all the interdisciplinarity, leaves the impression of a relatively narrow horizon.

More interesting than his retrospect of the discipline is Sewell’s political interpretation of the cultural turn already pointing to a fading of his cultural passion. The interpretation deals with the political subtext of the social and the cultural phases. Social history in the form of the American New Social History, with its quantitative, mechanical methodology, had an affinity to the Fordist regime of the postwar period. For Sewell and other scholars, the transition to cultural history began in the 1960s as a political rebellion against that rigid regime. Later on, however, the cultural turn became an accomplice of a new “flexible” form of capitalism. Although Sewell continues advocating cultural history, he finds it problematic to celebrate the plasticity of any social form: “Indeed, such a celebration indicates an unacknowledged and troubling complicity between the cultural turn and the emergence of contemporary flexible forms of

capitalism.” The neglect of socioeconomic forces is an impediment for the analysis of a globalized world in which such forces are of obvious significance.

HISTORY AS IT IS, OR AS IT SHOULD BE

Briefly before 2005, at the end of his intense interdisciplinary outings, Sewell wrote a truly courageous text for the introduction of *Logics of History*. With his collection of essays, he wanted to renew the dialogue between history and the social sciences, and for that purpose summarized the knowledge of historians on a few pages and without bibliographical references: *What Historians Know*. While the social sciences deal with their theories, historians have a rich implicit knowledge of the temporality of social life. Their common theme is the unfolding of human actions in the course of time. The knowledge is not explicit, and historians do not think of having a theory of social temporality. “Yet I am convinced that most historians actually share a set of assumptions about how time is implicated in the organization and transformation of social relations and that these assumptions can be stated abstractly.” Compared to the clumsy temporal assumptions of social scientists, the unspoken historical assumptions are subtle and sophisticated. Their wealth of temporal experience should be expressed in words and brought into the theoretical debate. Sewell realizes this desideratum along five main points and general characteristics that should distinguish the historical temporality: (1) fateful, (2) contingent, (3) complex, (4) eventful, and (5) heterogeneous. Several of these keywords are of old acquaintance in his essays; others are newer and have arisen recently.

1. **Fateful:** This is the most fundamental characteristic. Time is irreversible. An action once taken, or an event once experienced, cannot be nullified. They are anchored in the memory of the affected persons and thereby irrevocably change the situation in which they occur. I can retract a promise, yet the retraction does not undo it totally. For me and for others, I am now a different person—a person who made a promise and then retracted it.

2. **Contingent:** Historians think that actions and events can only be understood when embedded in a time sequence. Their effects depend on the particular, complex sequence in which they occurred, and are, therefore, largely accidental or contingent. The contingency refers both to a wide spectrum of other actions, trends, and events and to the position in the respective temporal sequence. This implies that history is extremely difficult to predict.

3. **Complex:** Historical events combine processes with very different temporalities such as gradual or long-term trends, punctual happenings, sudden individual decisions, volatile swings of public opinion, medium-term political strategies, and oscillating economic or climatic conjunctures. They encounter each

other at specific places and times producing a diversity difficult to disentangle analytically.

4. **Eventful:** Historical temporality is eventful. As shown above, this argument belongs to the earliest elements of Sewell's theoretical concept. He posits that general social relations, or structures, and events relate to each other. Events are incidents which transform structures. Inversely, events are co-determined by structures.

5. **Heterogeneous:** Historians work with a heterogeneous notion of time. They assume that the elements of the social world, and their effects and meanings are subject to fundamental temporal changes. While the social sciences look for timeless, universal laws, the historical discipline focuses on uneven, chronologically variable causalities. This implies that social practices cannot be understood or explained without contextualization.

According to Sewell, historical scholarship is defined and qualified by its careful use of archival material and primary sources, by its insistence on chronological accuracy, and by its mastery of narrative. The sketched points could facilitate the discussion with the theory-conscious social sciences and are formulated in the name of the discipline. Its general outline would be shared by the great majority of historians, although certainly many of them would contradict specific statements. For us the question arises: how descriptive or prescriptive are the five points? In other words: do they deal with history as it is, or as it should be? In order to answer the question, we will look at the method and at the interdisciplinary field to which the approach was addressed.

INTERDISCIPLINARY OPENING AND CLOSING

In 1990, when Sewell launched his historical temporality against social science forms of time use, he did not yet have at his disposal an elaborate theory of historical events. He tried to draw up such a theory in the following years inspired by the approach to Hawaiian history of the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. Sewell's respective essay, however, dealt extensively with structure and culture, and in a less detailed way with events. In an article on the beginning of the French Revolution he offered a definition. According to him, a historical event "is (1) a ramified sequence of occurrences that (2) is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that (3) results in a durable transformation of structures". Events in this sense happen infrequently and have a certain duration. The storming of the Bastille in Paris occurred on 14 July 1789, yet the event under that label, according to Sewell, lasted from 12 to 23 of July: from the popular reaction on the dismissal of a minister by the King to the sanctioning of the storming by the "Assemblée nationale", that turned it into a patriotic act of the sovereign people and a legitimate revolution. On the example of these famous occurrences the

author reflects about the general characteristics of historical events and returns to the question of definition. Ultimately, the precise delimitation remains arbitrary. One could also call single phases of a sequence “events” and speak of complex overlapping.

These explanations did not meet with much appreciation in the “*American Journal of Sociology*”. The reviewer called them confusing and surprisingly little informed, without reference to the rich sociological and philosophical literature on the subject. He illustrated his view with occurrences that should reasonably pass as “events”, although lacking contemporary attention (criterion 2) or the transformative effects (criterion 3). The localization of car production in Detroit and of movie production in Hollywood, for instance, fulfills criteria 1 and 3 but not criterion 2. The reviewer considered it a big mistake to restrict the notion of event to rare, extraordinary occurrences. On the part of historical scholarship one could see this differently. However, whatever the case, Sewell conspicuously develops his theory of events virtually single-handedly. Except for Sahlins he does not engage with other authors who deal with events in a general way. Such authors are enumerated in the first footnote and not mentioned anymore. One misses especially true historians, in Europe particularly Reinhart Koselleck und Andreas Suter. A theory-affine scholar like Sewell certainly knew that a theory has to stand the test of competition with other approaches. This was perhaps the reason leading him to call his presentation of events “radically open and unfinished” as late as 2005.

Fifteen year earlier, when he castigated the teleological and experimental temporalities of historical sociology, his theoretical assumptions were still much less elaborate. What motivated Sewell to insist on the historical event at the interdisciplinary conference of 1990? The issue was hardly illuminated, but the difference to other protagonists of the interdisciplinary group seems to have increased. In the transition to the high cultural turn, for Sewell anthropology was gaining in attraction, whereas sociology lost its earlier exemplary status. What was an interdisciplinary opening on one side, equated to a closing on the other side. The shift required new boundaries and contrasts. In fact, the mentioned arguments for the distinction of the temporalities are barely pertinent. The “teleology” with which Sewell wanted to excommunicate the theory of Immanuel Wallerstein turned into a boomerang quickly returned to the addresser by Theda Skocpol. In that period, the expression had become a buzzword, generously used in theoretical debates. The “frozen” history of the experimental, comparative logic missed the mark as well. Nobody seriously assumed that the revolutions under study were all uniform copies. Doing comparative history was also rewarding on a pragmatic level.

Thus, there is a lot to suggest that the theorization of the ideal historical temporality was an exercise in “boundary work”, i.e., an active effort to delimit a territory where new networks could establish their competence. In my view, this

strategy impacted also on the theoretical statements. Is historical temporality really “heterogeneous” and “contingent”, or is this an inappropriate qualification of the fugitive phenomenon of time? As for the role of contingency in history, we can recall the smart and amusing remarks made by Edward Hallett Carr under the heading of “Cleopatra’s nose” (alluding to an interpretation of the battle of Actium in 31 BCE that Antony would have lost because he was bewitched by Cleopatra’s beauty). In essence they lead to a constructivist argument. It is the historian himself or herself who decides about the acceptance and necessity of certain chains of cause and effect in the framework of the particular study, and it is he/she who leaves other chains out and rejects them as accidental. It might be similar with homogeneity and heterogeneity. It is largely a question of perspective and research design. In colloquial speech this contrastive couple, anyway, seems to fit less to temporal phenomena than other distinctions (such as continuous-discontinuous). Sewell also uses heterogeneity to problematize the notion of “path dependence”. Originally conceived by economist, path dependence focuses on the potential effect of earlier happenings on later ones, similar to the eventful temporality. In contrast to the latter, however, it does not consider chronologically varying effects and only refers to causal relations between earlier and later phenomena as a whole.

Ultimately, the characterization of temporality depends on how large the circle of admitted historical approaches should be. In his culturalist period, Sewell often associated with anthropologist, but seldom with economists. In his eyes, economics was the social science most subject to mathematics and quantification. For a narrow circle of cultural historians and their entourage, the five aforementioned criteria of historical temporality might have been adequate. They corresponded to their self-image. When we want to include a larger circle of scholars dealing in some way with historical time (for instance the economists and political scientists of the path dependence approach), we come to a different result. Sewell’s first criterion, then, seems to be the only one left: fatefulness and irreversibility. Actions once taken and events once experienced cannot be obliterated. This might be generally valid, provided we do not assume with a radical constructivism and presentism that ex post interpretations factually change what happened before.

CONCLUSIONS: NEW HORIZONS

William H. Sewell Jr. dedicated his book of essays *Logics of History* 2005 to a network of small discussion groups with a warm thanks for their “boundless capacity for critical thought”. In this specific milieu, composed of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and scholars from other fields of the humanities, he was looking for a new identity as a cultural historian. His book offers a rare

candid and theoretically consistent account of experiences in in the cultural turn of the late twentieth century. It is courageous and instructive to put the “logics of history” and the “historical temporality” in a few words: fateful, contingent, complex, eventful, and heterogeneous. However, these attributes reflect above all the mottos and convictions of a certain group within a scholarly field which is much larger and encompasses all those persons who, mainly or partially, deal with historical time. Seen like this, Sewell’s cultural turn proved to be limiting.

There are several possibilities for interdisciplinary exchange. A group can set itself apart and try to export the group-specific rules in order to convince others. The group, however, can also consider persons working on similar problems elsewhere, in other groups, and try to find solutions for everybody. They will necessarily be more general and less specific. Sewell decided for the first option—until 2005. After having put down *Logics of History* he discovered new—old horizons: In a paper about the temporalities of capitalism, published in 2008, he discussed the question how the eventful temporality which in the past he had “recklessly claimed to be universally true”, fitted the capitalist economy. The repetitive business cycles, the endless accumulation of financial means and the real abstraction of commodity exchange (Karl Marx, *Capital*, first chapter) suggests that in spite of the enormous dynamics, no eventful temporality is at work. Indeed, one could nearly say that its most fundamental characteristic—irreversibility—is annulled. In an essay on different temporalities he earlier attempted “to expose and to root out” teleology in historical sociology. Yet, ultimately one should be thankful to historians of the *longue durée*, such as Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, once under suspicion of teleology, for enlightening the immense developments of global capitalism.

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